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Gendering the Environmental Activism:

Ekofeminisme and Unjuk Rasa of Arahmaiani's Art

EDWIN JURRIËNS

Abstract

This article focuses on Indonesian contemporary art with an activist agenda, meant to create awareness about environmental issues and mobilise a critical or problem-solving response. I examine the work of Arahmaiani, which stands out for providing a gendered perspective on the socio-political dimensions of environmental problems and solutions. In examining Arahmaiani's oeuvre, I use the concepts of unjuk rasa and ekofeminisme, which are derived from Indonesian academic and artistic debates around environmental art and activism. This approach extends the interconnections between creativity, gender and environmental activism beyond the field of contemporary art to include traditional and popular media and platforms of creativity. I argue that Arahmaiani's personalised nomadism has facilitated reconnections with Indonesia's past, alternative interpretations of the homeland and the nation-state, and visions of more just and inclusive forms of community. This includes environmental projects in Java, Tibet and elsewhere of an increasingly practical nature.

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Introduction

Arahmaiani (b. 1961) is one of Indonesia's foremost female artist-activists who has engaged in environmental art and activism around the world. Her work stands out for providing a gendered perspective on the socio-political dimensions of environmental problems and solutions. I analyse Arahmaiani's personal development as an artist, including her work and the socio-political and cultural contexts it has derived from, responded to and impacted. I seek to demonstrate how she has tried to bridge seemingly opposing fields, such as contemporary art and traditional culture, art and popular media, art and environmental activism, feminism and religion, homeland and nomadism, globalisation and nationalism, and the urban and the rural. She not only provides critical insights into the complex intersections between nature, culture and politics, but also facilitates reinterpretations of the notion of Indonesian 'female' or 'feminist' art.

I examine Arahmaiani's oeuvre in the context of emerging Indonesian academic and artistic debates around activism and ecofeminism. These broader debates extend the interconnections between creativity, gender and environmental activism beyond the field of contemporary art, to encompass traditional and popular media and platforms of creativity. A prominent example of the latter are the performative media of predominantly female demonstrations against the environmental impact of the cement industry in the Kendeng karst mountain area in Central Java. Although Arahmaiani has not been directly involved in this specific initiative, she can be considered a member of a larger movement that has made fundamental contributions to intersecting creative genres and socio-political and religious realities, and combining performance art and activist expression in Indonesia.

In contextualising and interpreting her work, I start with a discussion of the intersections between creativity, the environment and the female body in the field of Indonesian contemporary art. This is followed by an analysis of the conceptual tools of *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme*, which are derived from contemporary Indonesian debates about the interconnections between art and activism, and ecology and feminism. I demonstrate how activist movements steered by Indonesian women have adopted specific types of performance art in combination with other creative media in their fight against environmental injustice.

My main focus is on Arahmaiani's work, and the life experiences and artistic influences that have shaped it. This includes her lifelong journey as a 'global nomad', which has contributed to her critical views and alternative notions of global geopolitics, national identity and religion. I discuss her

artistic roots and contribution to the development of *jeprut*, a specific type of performance art in Bandung, the capital of West Java, in the 1980s. This performance art, which is to be distinguished from more general conceptions and practices of the genre, puts the artist's body centre stage for creatively addressing the interrelations between cultural, socio-political and environmental issues. Finally, I discuss Arahmaiani's continuing, more practical forms of artistic activism with community groups in Yogyakarta and Tibet. I argue that these collaborative grassroots projects counter her image as the exclusive face of Indonesian female art on the international festival and gallery stage.

The Female Body, Fertility and Nature in Indonesian Contemporary Art

Within the more specialised confines of Indonesian modern and contemporary art discourses, practices and institutions, there has been a long and diverse history of engagements with the natural environment. It includes idealised representations of the landscape and local communities in the so-called 'Beautiful Indies' style since colonial times,¹ stylised representations of nature and associated spiritual values in abstract paintings and multimedia installations,² protests against environmental destruction in a variety of socially-engaged work, utopian visions of environmental sustainability in collaborative and participatory projects, as well as combinations of any of these.³ A pioneering Indonesian contemporary art exhibition on environmental issues was *Proses 85* (Process 85) in Jakarta, October 1985, organised by senior artist-activists Moelyono (b. 1957), FX Harsono (b. 1949), Bonyong Munni Ardhi (b. 1946), Haris Purnomo (b. 1956) and Gendut Riyanto (1955–2003).⁴ Another relevant art-historical context, specifically for Arahmaiani's gendered approach towards the natural environment, concerns artists who relate the female body to notions of fertility and agency.

Two outstanding examples are Kartika Affandi's (b. 1934) *The moment of beginning* (1981) and *Rebirth* (1981).⁵ Similar to Arahmaiani's *Fertility of the mind*, which will be discussed later in this article, the two paintings establish strong connections between the female body, fertility, agency, resistance against mental and physical suppression, and self-determination. Both paintings show a naked female body in the process of labour. In *Rebirth*, the body gives birth to the shaven head of a woman who looks like an aged Kartika. *The moment of beginning* shows the body using her hands to pull off her face, leaving her head exposed to the skull. One of the two faces is a self-portrait of the artist, arguably showing her new or 'real' self.⁶

Other younger female Indonesian artists who provide bold representations of nudity, sexuality, abuse and self-determination in their paintings and other works include Citra Sasmita (b. 1990), I Gusti Ayu Kadek (I.G.A.K.) Murniasih (1966–2006) and Laksmi Shitaresmi (b. 1974). While these artists provide relevant art-historical genealogies or contemporary contexts for the themes and aesthetics of Arahmaiani's art, they have not been directly involved in activism of a more practical nature. Arguably, Shitaresmi is closest to Arahmaiani in connecting the female body to religion and the natural environment.

Although not including performance as such, Shitaresmi's work in general has a highly performative character, because of the centrality of bodies for self-expression and triggering audience engagement. The majority of her paintings and sculptures consist of self-representations, often in the form of nudes. The nude is a way for the artist to show herself in her most honest, true form.⁷ A telling example was her solo exhibition *Lakon* at the National Gallery of Indonesia (Galeri Nasional Indonesia) in Jakarta, 6–19 November 2012. The title, derived from the word for stories from the wayang repertoire, referred to the story of Laksmi's personal life. The artworks in the exhibition represented how her daily life experiences as an artist and mother were deeply engrained in Javanese socio-cultural and religious traditions. On the one hand, these traditions represent and reinforce strong patriarchal values.⁸ On the other hand, they enable the artist to respond to her surroundings and present and possibly liberate her inner self.

One of the outstanding features of the sculptures in the exhibition was the artist's hybrid self-representations as animal-human. The animal shapes included elephants, cows, geese, mice and snails. In combination with other elements, such as flowers, fruit, scales, ropes and *darmachakra* symbols (representing the teachings of the Buddha), the hybrid creations seemed to express notions of cyclical time, temporal progress, spatial movement, gravity, balance, spirituality, physicality, fertility, struggle, liberation and recreation. The exhibited work also included figurines or miniature versions of the artist, which were attached to larger sculptures or displayed in compartmented wall panels or mounted lightboxes. In a different exhibition, titled *City*, at Canna Galery in Jakarta, 20 February–9 March 2008, Shitaresmi used similar approaches to illustrate the social, mental and environmental impact of urban development in Indonesia.

The titles, themes and presentations of Arahmaiani's work also establish connections with Javanese animist and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, performing arts (such as wayang) and visual culture (such as the reliefs of the Borobudur temple).⁹ Two examples are her early works *Lingga-Yoni* (1994–current) and *Do not prevent the fertility of the mind* (1997–current). Similar to Shitaresmi, Arahmaiani has faced exclusion and intimidation from conservative circles

because of her creative appropriation and juxtaposition of various religious symbols. These groups or individuals may consider the representation of nudity and human-animal hybridity *haram* or forbidden according to Islamic belief.

Turmoil happened during the display of *Lingga-Yoni* at Oncor Studio in Jakarta in 1994.¹⁰ In Hindu iconography, including sculptures, the *yoni* (representing female genitalia) typically constitutes the foundation on which the *lingga* (representing male genitalia) is situated. In Arahmaiani's painting, inspired by a similar representation in stone at the 15th-century Hindu temple (*candi*) Sukuh at the border between Central and East Java, the *yoni* is on top of the *lingga*, suggesting a feminist reversal of the roles of women and men in society. The Malay text in Arabic characters (so-called *Jawi*) around the *yoni* symbol reads: "Nature is a book." This has religious and philosophical connotations of nature as a precious source of inspiration, knowledge and guidance. The lower part of the painting around the *lingga* contains Sanskrit in Pallava script from the so-called Jambu inscription about Purnavarman, the 5th-century Hindu king of Tarumanagara in contemporary West Java. The layering of the scripts and texts suggests historical layering, which has produced the religious, cultural and natural diversity and hybridity that is characteristic of, but also under threat in, contemporary Indonesia.

Islamic hardliners disrupted the exhibition and made death threats to Arahmaiani, because they considered the combination of Malay in Arabic characters with the representation of male and female genitalia disrespectful of the holy script of the Quran. Arahmaiani explained to the protestors that the acrylic painting and rice paper on canvas was not meant to criticise any religion, but to demonstrate that the balance between female and male energies was a universal value, found in many religions including animism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.¹¹

The basic form of the various iterations of *Do not prevent the fertility of the mind* consists of an arrangement of sanitary napkins on a wall, framed by white fluorescent light tubes.¹² In the middle, there is a portrait of Arahmaiani wearing a sanitary napkin in the shape of a nurse's cap, and holding surgical scissors in one hand and an intrauterine device in the other. In front of the wall installation is a white stool with a glass vial containing a blood-like substance. The installation title connects the notion of fertility not only to the biological functions of the female body, but also to the struggle of women to free their minds and take control over their own bodies and other types of decision-making. It is this expression of independence and persistence that has characterised Arahmaiani's life and career, including her determination to work and succeed in male-dominated environments.

Bodily Creativity in Environmental Activism

Arahmaiani rejects, however, being called a feminist artist.¹³ Australia-based art historians Sue Ingham and Wulan Dirgantoro explain that for Arahmaiani, this label connotes a discourse around sexual liberation and individual self-fulfilment in the West that is inadequate for explaining or overcoming the inequalities faced by women in Indonesia.¹⁴ In her work, Arahmaiani demonstrates how these inequalities, which are partially the result of the Dutch colonial legacy, play out at the levels of restrictive government policies, religious doctrines, socio-cultural systems and traditions. In other words, the feminist label, without any further contextualisation, would not encapsulate the multidimensionality of her work, which itself reflects the complex interweaving between class, culture, religion and the natural environment in Indonesia and elsewhere.

A review of the exhibition *Global feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, 2007, in which Arahmaiani participated, demonstrates that expectations about feminist contemporary art may not fully encapsulate the specific dynamics of Arahmaiani's life, art and activism.¹⁵ The reviewer suggests that the curators selected Arahmaiani from the international biennial circuit, representing an institutional stage of feminist art. She also deemed the focus of the majority of the exhibited artists on their (female) bodies as outmoded and repetitive.¹⁶ While the inclusion of Arahmaiani's work in the 'Politics' section of a major exhibition on 'Global Feminisms' may unavoidably put institutional limitations on the presentation and discussion of her art, the expectations about the evolution of feminist art, as reflected in the art critique itself, can lead to further reducing rather than opening up the critical analysis and discourse.¹⁷

This article explores creative and critical ideas beyond broad feminism and performance art labels that can uncover and contextualise other and more specific aspects of Arahmaiani's art and activist practice. For instance, repetition and engagement with social and artistic histories—rather than efforts at innovation—are deliberate and fundamental aspects of her activist philosophies and performative practices. Moreover, her development as an artist-activist goes beyond the conventional festival circuit, through her engagement with Indonesian and international communities and activists circles. Her gallery and festival work and her activism at the grassroots level complement each other.

Both Ingham and Dirgantoro suggest that at least until the mid-2000s Arahmaiani had been the famous, but sole and almost tokenistic, face of the Indonesian female art scene at the international level. According to

Dirgantoro, “it is precisely Arahmaiani’s international fame (or notoriety, depending on one’s viewpoint) that accounts for her failure to inspire more Indonesian women artists to problematize gender issues in their works and to exhibit a more openly feminist approach to art”.¹⁸ However, this critique still comes from within the parameters of contemporary art and its histories, discourses and institutions. If the analysis is opened up to the world of activism and associated discourses such as *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme*, new interpretative possibilities emerge. It can help to demonstrate that Arahmaiani is more than an international celebrity, relatively isolated from Indonesian society and its art scene. In fact, it can show that she has always retained strong ties with her homeland and has, if not inspired, at least been part of a much larger emerging movement of creative female activists.

One of the most prominent environmental campaigns driven by Indonesian women are the creative protests against limestone mining by the cement industry in the karst mountain range of Pegunungan Kendeng on the north coast of Central Java.¹⁹ The mountain range, which is referred to as ‘Ibu’ (‘Mother’) by locals, has crucial ecological importance for holding hundreds of water sources.²⁰ The mining activities impact negatively not only the natural environment, but also women’s reproductive health, socio-economic position and cultural identity.²¹

Women and other local groups have staged public protests in various locations, employing a variety of creative forms including traditional clothing, traditional performing arts and contemporary performance art.²² On 16 June 2014, hundreds of women wearing traditional kebaya blouse-dresses and bamboo farming hats entered the PT Semen Indonesia factory construction site.²³ In another case, in April 2015, nine Rembang women took the protest to Jakarta, using traditional performing arts such as *gejog lesung*.²⁴ Two of the most iconic protests covered in the national media took place in front of the Presidential Palace in Jakarta in April 2016, and the Office of the Governor of Central Java in March 2017. During these events, female activists had their feet set in blocks of cement at the risk of their own health.²⁵

These women literally put their bodies on the line to draw attention to environmental issues. This felt like a performative gesture known from contemporary artists such as Arahmaiani, as in her self-portrait in *Do not prevent the fertility of the mind*. Indonesian academic and activist Diah Kusumaningrum explains two contextual circumstances that make the act by the rural women even more poignant. Firstly, the women stepped up because they knew there was a much higher risk of their husbands being arrested or physically harmed in the demonstrations. Secondly, by being prepared to

momentarily leave behind their domestic and other working duties, which constitute the pivot of village life, they demonstrated the urgency of their cause to the outside world.²⁶

Rachmi Diyah Larasati, academic and performance artist herself, has analysed the performative aspects of the protests by the women from Rembang. According to Larasati, the presentation of female bodies can contribute to deconstructing patriarchal state ideology and speaking the unspeakable:

The bodily discipline in the feet cementing action can be understood as a display of bodies that are unwanted by the dominant forces ... we can conclude that the physical pain constitutes a manifestation of urgency, and the effect of the display of bodies and emotions that cannot be narrated through language.²⁷

She questions, however, whether the contemporary performative gesture of women setting their feet in concrete triggers sympathy for their cause, or rather provides a perverse form of pleasure to an audience watching other people in pain.²⁸ She also refers to the risk of reducing the traditional repertoire of clothing, music and dance to a mere display of 'exoticism', especially when the traditional culture is moved from Rembang to Jakarta and appropriated by professional, urban activists.²⁹

At the same time, the rural women demonstrate that outstanding creative acts can make a difference and draw social and political attention to their cause in times when politicians and ordinary citizens themselves rely strongly on performative self-representations and image-making in mainstream and social media.³⁰ The use of traditional media such as *gejog lesung* function as aesthetic embodiments of their daily experiences in the villages.³¹ Similar to the work of some of the female contemporary artists discussed before, the performativity of the grassroots movement seeks to demonstrate the interrelatedness between gender and the preservation or destruction of the natural environment.

Bodily creativity also underlies other protest movements that have attracted worldwide attention, such as Occupy, Pussy Riot and the Arab Spring. According to Judith Butler, these and similar movements have been exercising "a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity".³² These movements have blurred the lines between conventional artistic media and digital communication technology, and between

professional and amateur artists. For Arahmaiani, a self-proclaimed ‘nomadic’ artist, as explained later, social media posts have also become an essential medium for staying connected with sites and counterparts across the globe, and for bringing visibility to her creative work and activist causes.

Unjuk Rasa

Recent studies have applied the concept of ‘activism’ to grassroots movements that make use of creativity to convey their messages.³³ This concept underlines the inextricable links between art and activism, especially in response to a time when the political field itself is strongly dominated by image-making, overt performativity, digital connectivity and DIY culture.³⁴ Some recent academic and public debates in Indonesia have facilitated a similar, comprehensive approach to the role of creativity in environmental movements. Rather than discussing creativity, environmental activism and feminism as strictly separate categories, they focus on the interrelations between the various fields in terms of *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme*.

A 2018 edited volume, aptly titled *Unjuk Rasa: Seni, Performativitas, Aktivisme* [Demonstration: Art, Performativity, Activism], has explored the intersections between art and activism in contemporary Indonesia, including initiatives driven by women. *Unjuk rasa* is the common Indonesian word for a street protest or demonstration. However, the editor of the volume, Yogyakarta-based researcher Brigitta Isabella, explains that *unjuk rasa* refers not only to protest as such, but also to the creativity that is inherent to the two interrelated components of *unjuk* and *rasa*. *Unjuk*, which literally means to show or demonstrate something, implies visuality, while *rasa* suggests sensory experiences, feelings and embodied knowledge.³⁵

From this perspective, underrepresented groups, including women, come to *unjuk rasa* not merely to make a statement *against* something, but foremost to creatively and critically explore and express the sensory politics that have shaped their feelings, knowledge and self-perception. Performativity here constitutes a medium for bodily presentation and transformation, or a tool for breaking with the hegemonic bio-politics, social norms and discursive practices that discipline people’s bodies and identities.³⁶ In this sense, Indonesian creative activism, including Arahmaiani’s art, embodies opportunities for gendered critique, by “positioning *rasa* again as a knowledge foundation, derived from feminist epistemological critical traditions that reject the hegemony of modern, masculine, positivist knowledge”.³⁷

The *Unjuk Rasa* edited volume is an invaluable and long overdue source for exploring creative activism beyond the established urban art centres of

Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta in Java. It includes fascinating essays by practitioners, curators and scholars on topics ranging from vernacular architecture in Sulawesi to independent film communities in Timor and street art in Maluku. The volume also engages with contemporary art and art history, but does not include studies of Arahmaiani or any of the other female visual artists discussed previously. Using the book as a model, this article seeks to further develop the conversation between art and activism, and art and popular culture, by employing *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme* for the analysis of Arahmaiani's work.

Arahmaiani expresses her activist concerns in performance and other art forms that are simultaneously personal and political.³⁸ In that sense, they can be considered specific manifestations of *unjuk rasa*. She explains that her art only addresses social and political issues with which she has an intimate, personal emotional and/or bodily experience: "I have never produced an artwork about something that I have never experienced myself."³⁹ This is embodied in the notion of *rasa* as personal feelings. At the same time, the discourse around *unjuk rasa* also points to the political connotations of *rasa* as an alternative to hegemonic forms of rational thought that reinforce male dominance and patriarchal hierarchies. Arahmaiani's performativity is not a purely individual expression of *rasa*, but has been shaped by local traditions and contemporary art forms that strongly emphasise the interconnections between individuals and their social and natural environments.

Ekofeminisme

Another gendered approach to activism that has recently emerged in Indonesian academic and activist discourse is *ekofeminisme*. Its subjects of inquiry and action include creative forms of environmental activism. Although *ekofeminisme* has been directly inspired by existing theories of ecofeminism, the Indonesian spelling is preserved in this article. This is to connote that *ekofeminisme* is the preferred word in Indonesian academic and activist discourse, and to mark the local inflections of interpretations and practices of the concept. This is neither to suggest any fixed definitions of or consensus over *ekofeminisme* or ecofeminism, nor to ignore overlaps between debates on either of the two concepts. Rather, it is to demonstrate that ideas and practices evolve through ongoing interlocal and interdisciplinary meetings and discussions. It is meant to create space for the analysis of specific practices at the intersections of multiple social and performative traditions and discourses, such as Arahmaiani's work.

Australian academic Jade Wildy distinguishes two different ecofeminist strands in the international field of environmental art since the late 1960s: cultural ecofeminism and social ecofeminism.⁴⁰ Both strands reinforce the idea of humanity and nature as a whole rather than a duality. They critique the dominance of patriarchal views and social structures that have led to the domination of nature. Cultural ecofeminism seeks to interpret natural earth cycles and revive imagery and ritual around symbols of feminine empowerment, care and interconnectedness, such as the Earth Goddess, Mother Nature and Gaia. Early examples are the land art and public sculptures by US-born artist Nancy Holt (1938–2014) and the performances and videos by Cuban-born Ana Mendieta (1948–85). Social ecofeminism seeks to unite ecology and sociology as a means to heal both environmental and social problems in more direct, practical ways. In some cases, it addresses misogyny as a social problem that also impacts on the treatment of the natural environment. Examples from the US include the remedial architecture by Patricia Johanson (b. 1940) and the rebuilding of wildlife habitats by Lynne Hull (b. 1956).⁴¹

Indonesian literature on *ekofeminisme* draws on aspects of both ecofeminist strands. For instance, it refers to the productive potential of female imagery such as Ibu Pertiwi (Mother Earth) and local symbols of fertility in a cultural ecofeminist way. At the same time, it refers to the danger of such symbolism reinforcing women's restricted positions and roles in patriarchal society, and preventing them from having a voice in political decision-making about key social and environmental issues in a social ecofeminist manner.

The interest in and study of feminism and gender in Indonesia was boosted by the establishment of the Postgraduate Program of Women's Studies at Universitas Indonesia (University of Indonesia), Jakarta, in 1990. This programme was led by Professor Saporinah Sadli, who would also become inaugural Chair of Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan, commonly referred to as Komnas Perempuan) in 1998.⁴² Another milestone development was the founding of the women's studies journal *Jurnal Perempuan* [Women's Journal] in 1996, which has published numerous articles on *ekofeminisme*.⁴³ This was followed by the publication of local books as well as Indonesian translations of standard works on ecofeminism, such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's *Ecofeminism: Perspektif Gerakan Perempuan dan Lingkungan* [Ecofeminism: Perspectives of the Women's Movement and the Environment].⁴⁴

A main impetus for the promotion of *ekofeminisme* has been the publication of a series of four edited volumes (2013–16), all containing in their main title the concept in Indonesian spelling. Some of the book chapters first

appeared as articles in *Jurnal Perempuan*. The book project was initiated by the Interfaith Gender Equality and Ecological Justice programme of the Gender Study and Research Centre of Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Central Java. Some of the pioneering thinkers who inspired the initiators and contributors include Françoise d'Eaubonne, Ynestra King, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, and Karen J. Warren.⁴⁵

According to one of the editors, Arianti Hunga, in many societies in Indonesia and elsewhere, women are close to nature because of the character of the daily duties allocated to them, ranging from collecting water and farming to cooking and cleaning.⁴⁶ As a consequence, they are among the first in their communities to notice environmental disturbances, such as water or soil pollution. Despite their knowledge and resourcefulness, women tend to be excluded from political decision-making about the management of water, land and other natural resources, because of the pervasiveness of patriarchal power structures. This directly impacts on women's social status, cultural identity and self-perception.⁴⁷

Hunga argues that the problems and solutions regarding nature and natural resources are not only environmental issues as such, but strongly related to socio-cultural structures and political processes.⁴⁸ She criticises developmental approaches that ignore the agency of women and the life-sustaining role of nature. Instead, she proposes *ekofeminisme*—at the meeting point between theory and praxis—as a tool for demonstrating and analysing the interconnections between socio-economic justice, gender equity and environmental sustainability.⁴⁹ The aim of this *ekofeminisme* is “to create a change in the social system and structure, which presents people, men and women, as well as nature as an integral-holistic unit”.⁵⁰

Arahmaiani's oeuvre, with its own mix of cultural and social ecofeminist approaches, explores imagery related to fertility and regrowth, such as the *lingga*, *yoni* and *mandala*. Some of her art also engages with environmental restoration in practical ways, as in her projects in Yogyakarta and Tibet. A trademark characteristic and source of interest and controversy across her work is a strong critique of conservative identity politics promoted by state policies and fundamentalist religious groups. Arahmaiani's art demonstrates how these politics limit women's self-determination and agency with regard to urgent social and environmental matters.

Arahmaiani's Nomadic Journey in Performance Art

A major retrospective solo exhibition of Arahmaiani was held at Museum Macan in Jakarta, from 17 November 2018–10 March 2019. Museum Macan,

which opened in November 2017, showcases both Indonesian and international work, and is commonly described as the country's first modern and contemporary art museum of 'world-class' standard. The exhibition title, *The past has not passed*, aptly referred not only to the continuing importance of Arahmaiani's earlier works, but also to the central role of engagements with time, place and mobility in her life and art. Her oeuvre expresses the inherent contradictions as well as creative and critical potential of combinations of repetition and rupture, tradition and modernity, and Indonesian-ness and globalisation. In the context of the growing prominence of relatively narrow nationalist and religious discourses in Indonesian public life, the display of Arahmaiani's work was remarkable.⁵¹ Earlier in her career, inimical responses to some of her other work had landed her in prison, forced her to terminate her studies in Indonesia, and made her embark on an extended nomadic journey outside of her homeland.

Arahmaiani started her painting studies at the Fine Arts department of the Bandung Institute of Technology (Institut Teknologi Bandung, ITB) in 1979, but she soon felt restricted in her development by the patriarchal culture and prejudices against female artists at her educational institution and in society at large.⁵² In her own view, her real artistic growth took place outside the classroom. However, she was arrested for making anti-military chalk drawings with her friends on the streets of Bandung during Independence Day celebrations on 17 August 1983.⁵³ Consequently, she was expelled from ITB. As she felt threatened and with little other study options in Indonesia, she left the country and continued her studies at the Paddington Art School in Sydney, Australia (1983–85). Later, she also received a grant for studying at the AKI (Academie voor Kunst en Industrie) Academy of Art and Design in Enschede, the Netherlands (1991–92). Her AKI lecturers Ad Gerritsen and Uwe Pott encouraged her to study the works of Joseph Beuys (1921–86) and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968).⁵⁴

Various academics have suggested that Arahmaiani's nomadic existence, engagement with performance art and radical gender critique have made her work compatible with the taste of Western curators and critics, but alienated it from Indonesian audiences and fellow artists.⁵⁵ In Indonesia, she has been called *orang di luar pagar* (a person behind the fence) or *orang Indonesia tapi bukan orang Melayu* (an Indonesian but not a Malay).⁵⁶ It is important to reassert, however, that it was sheer necessity rather than free will that turned Arahmaiani into a global nomad. As her nomadism is rooted in forced departure, her life experiences and creative goals need to be distinguished from the contemporary art world's relatively unhindered, *sine qua non* cosmopolitanism of mega-events and globetrotting artists, curators and collectors.

At the same time, her condition is not one of pure exile. She has had opportunities to return to her homeland and to actively steer her wanderings towards specific goals and destinations. If we follow the etymology of nomadism back to ancient Greek, her journeys to and creative collaborations in various corners of the world can be explained by a nomadic desire ‘to roam in search of pasture’. As explained by Claire Lindsay, in poststructuralist thought, nomadism has also come to denote “an active evasion of or resistance to stasis and the fixity of state authority and society” without “any dream or hope of a homeland”.⁵⁷ While Arahmaiani still considers Indonesia, or more specifically Yogyakarta, as her “home”,⁵⁸ her nomadism is directed against any static or fixed notions of homeland, such as those propagated by fundamentalist, male-dominated religious groups in Indonesia. The intercultural and interreligious aspects of her personal nomadism also seem to point to the inherently nomadic history and contemporary condition of the Indonesian archipelago, which has been deeply shaped by centuries of newly arriving and intermixing state and belief systems.

Where possible, Arahmaiani has continued her creative and activist work in Indonesia, while her artistic themes and approaches have been continuously inspired by local cultural traditions and socio-political events. As a result, her performances foreclose any easy, international textbook definitions of performance art or feminism. Her gender critique is fundamentally intertwined with the artist’s environmental, religious and cultural activism. It is more in line with the notions of *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme*, which in the Indonesian literature on the two concepts has also, and predominantly, been applied to grassroots movements such as the anti-cement industry demonstrations by the women from Kendeng.

Although Arahmaiani herself is internationally best known as a performance artist, this label obscures some of the specific characteristics of her work and the social and artistic contexts in which it has emerged. These characteristics derive from a broad range of genres, including both Western and Indonesian creative traditions. As Arahmaiani was not allowed to resume her studies at ITB after her return to Indonesia in the mid-1980s, she continued her informal education in theatre and performance art with the experimental theatre group Teater Bengkel (Repair Shop Theatre) under Indonesia’s leading poet and dramatist Rendra (1935–2009) from 1986 to 1988. She also explored traditional art and culture at the art training centre Sanggar Paripurna, led by the Balinese puppeteer I Made Sidia (b. 1967) in Bona Village, Bali, from 1989 to 1990.⁵⁹

In Bandung, she became active in the experimental art group Sumber Waras (Source of Wellbeing or Source of Sanity, 1988–89) with other ITB stu-

dents and graduates. The creative exploration in Sumber Waras consolidated her development as a performance artist. According to Amanda Rath, one of the few in-depth sources on this foundational stage of Arahmaiani's career,

Systems of regulation and oppression were seen by Sumber Waras as causing a widespread 'mental illness' and deep wounds to the soul. If in the rituals of the everyday, people are expected to act convincingly according to these norms, Sumber Waras, as a new source of sanity, attempted to realize another way of being within the group. It required the individual, alone and/or in a group, to engage her surroundings more intensely and with more intent, and a willingness to loosen the reins of normative behaviors.⁶⁰

Arahmaiani's art and activist projects about environmental issues have, in their own ways, continued Sumber Waras' social engagement, struggle against oppressive social, political and religious structures, and attempts at socio-cultural renewal. Similar to Arahmaiani's work today, Sumber Waras' central medium of creative expression was the artist's body in its interaction with other bodies and inanimate objects.⁶¹ The collective was influenced by Sundanese syncretic religious traditions, modern theatre and neo-avant-garde performance art from Europe and the US, including the 'social sculpture' of Beuys, the activist theatre of Augusto Boal (1931–2009), and contemporary Japanese *butoh* dance-performance.⁶² The syncretic approach of Sumber Waras corresponded well with Arahmaiani's own background, which includes a mix of Islamic, Javanese Hinduist, Chinese and Dutch-Jewish heritage.⁶³

Sumber Waras and similar performance art collectives that emerged in Bandung in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Perengkel Jahe (1991–94), have been categorised retrospectively, since the mid-1990s, under the umbrella of the Sundanese performance art genre of *jeprut*.⁶⁴ Its main exponent has been Bandung-based male artist Tisna Sanjaya (b. 1958), while Ine Arini (b. 1951), Marintan Sirait (b. 1960) and Titarubi (b. 1968) have been the other prominent female performers of *jeprut*. Arahmaiani confirms that her career development is "the result of the seeds that were planted in the *jeprut* era" and that its "development has not only brought personal benefit but has extended to the environment and the community".⁶⁵ Artists come to this type of performance art

when they are disturbed (*terganggu*) both mentally and bodily because of an imbalance between themselves and their social and natural surroundings. [...] The artists need their temporary

separation from society to reach a higher state of mental and bodily awareness. This allows them to reconnect with their cultural roots, and to understand and demonstrate the nature of the imbalance between themselves and their surroundings.⁶⁶

According to Amelia Jones, performance art, and related concepts such as body art and live art, refers to “works that activate a body or bodies temporarily” for an audience.⁶⁷ Central, but not limited to performance art, is the performative or “the reiterative enactment across time of meaning through embodied gestures, language, and/or other modes of signification”. It is the performative that facilitates “invested and embodied engagement by visitors to, participants in, or viewers of the work”.⁶⁸ These definitions emphasise how performance and the performative produce meaning by establishing connections between art and audiences. Arahmaiani’s and other *jeprut* style performances, however, have a special emphasis on the physical and spiritual (dis)connection and (im)balance between people and their socio-political, cultural and material (urban and natural) environments.

In an interview with Gunnar Stange, which sums up the depth and breadth of Arahmaiani’s ideas and practices, the artist confirms, “I don’t want to limit myself to binary thinking.”⁶⁹ Her approach is similar to other *jeprut* artists, such as Sanjaya, who attempt to cross the boundaries of seemingly antithetical fields, such as “performance art and visual art, artistic autonomy and social participation, art and activism, humans and nature, religion and secularity, body and mind, the sublime and the subliminal, newness and repetition, cultural memory and politics, and art and the creative industry”.⁷⁰ The female *jeprut* artists in particular have provided a gendered, *ekofeminisme*-type perspective on the complex and multi-layered interrelations between the various fields.

Arahmaiani explains that her most valuable learning experience—surpassing her formal and informal art education—was her close experience of life on the streets of Jakarta and Yogyakarta in the years between 1985 and 1994. In this period, she interacted with street vendors, buskers, prostitutes, thugs, and drugs users and dealers, and also befriended Jesuit priests who supplied her with books. From these interactions, she learned about the real-life problems and hardship arising from disconnections between Indonesia’s economic and political system and society’s interests and needs. Similarly, during her time in Sydney, she learned about the importance of her own cultural heritage from the local hippie community, and a critical approach towards capitalism and globalisation from a group of British punks. It is this

knowledge from her “school of life” in Indonesia and Australia that underlies her performance and other art practice.⁷¹

Arahmaiani’s oeuvre also contains various live re-enactments and audio-visual recordings of some of her iconic performances, which seem to underline the continuous relevance of, and necessary re-engagements with, social and personal histories. This includes *jeprut*-type repetition of some of her earlier performance themes. Among her most frequently performed and discussed works are *Handle without care* and *Dayang Sumbi rejects the status quo*. *Handle without care* has been performed since the second Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT2) in Brisbane in 1996, often in conjunction with her installation *Nation for Sale*.

In a video recording of one of her live APT2 performances, Arahmaiani, covered in a white bride’s veil on top of a traditional Balinese costume, walked at a ceremonious pace around the gallery space. She lay down on top of a white-light box, resembling a coffin, which was part of the *Nation for Sale* installation. After standing up again, she danced around an inner circle, marked by four cassette players, with a condom-covered bottle of Coca-Cola at its centre. Under a cacophony of sounds, including the sound of *azan*, the Islamic call for prayer, and Balinese gamelan music, the artist, as if in trance, lifted up her veil, donned sunglasses and performed traditional Javanese dance movements. She simultaneously swayed various items, including a Javanese *keris* dagger, a toy gun and a Star Wars lightsabre. Her movements were mirrored by electronic toy soldiers crawling over the ground. After dancing a few rounds, she lay down again on top of the coffin-like box.⁷² The content of other boxes in the *Nation for Sale* installation reinforced the themes of the performance, including toy machine guns, photo-cuttings from women’s magazines, jars with soil and water, and mirrors. A sign with ‘For Sale’ and ‘halal’ in Arabic script was hung above the installation, while the images of slums in Asian metropolises, including Jakarta, were shown on television screens on the sides.⁷³

This can be considered a *jeprut*-style performance, in which the artist, through a combination of bodily movements and material objects, tries to come to a spiritual connection with and physical embodiment of the complex issues that create an imbalance between herself and her socio-political and natural surroundings. Connections are drawn between environmental destruction and female subjugation as the result of aggressive, masculine aspects of tradition (symbolised by the *keris*) and contemporary life (particularly capitalism), including the objectification or commoditisation of female bodies (in marriage and popular magazines), religion (as halal culture), natural resources (of a ‘national for sale’) and even war itself (in the form of toy

FIGURE 1: *Nation for Sale*, 2018, mixed-media installation, from the exhibition *The past has not passed*, Museum Macan, Jakarta, 17 November 2018–10 March 2019, photo by the author.

FIGURE 2: *Nation for Sale*, detail, 2018, mixed-media installation, from the exhibition *The past has not passed*, Museum Macan, Jakarta, 17 November 2018–10 March 2019, photo by the author.

soldiers). At the same time, Arahmaiani's performance also seems to present an *ekofeminisme* mix of femininity, spirituality and nature as a counter-voice or alternative form of agency.

Similarly, *Dayang Sumbi rejects the status quo* (performed since 1999) positions "the feminine as embodied spirituality", which can bridge the gap between nature and culture.⁷⁴ The title of this performance refers to Dayang Sumbi, the female character in a Sundanese creation myth about the origins of the Tangkuban Perahu volcano in West Java. Female characters play a central role in similar creation myths from elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago, such as the Malin Kundang legend from West Sumatra and the Sampuraga legend from Central Kalimantan. The arrival of Hinduism at the start of the first millennium also introduced peoples around the archipelago to Pertiwi, the Goddess of the Earth or Mother Earth, connoting the fertility of the natural environment. In nationalist discourse, Ibu (Mother) Pertiwi has been a gendered reference to the Indonesian nation-state as the motherland.

On the one hand, Indonesian environmental campaigns engage with these deep-rooted stories and metaphors to promote the protection of nature. On the other hand, artists, activists and scholars reflecting the socio-political strand of *ekofeminisme* have pointed to the risk of using and strengthening the cultural stereotype of nature as a nurturing mother, as it may deprive women from voice and agency in political decision-making. According to US-based scholar Sylvia Tiwon,

Although the commonly known expression 'Ibu Pertiwi'—Earth as Mother—seems to offer a valid entry point for the argument that feminist viewpoints should be more included in environmental movements and policies, the larger discourse has already been formed by a flow of deep 'phallogo-centrism', which, with its focus on the birth canal as the main site of female verbal expression, has basically cut off the tongue of women.⁷⁵

In her ongoing *Dayang Sumbi menolak status quo* performances, Arahmaiani literally sheds off the burden of such tradition and phallogo-centrism, by stripping off a traditional *kebaya* blouse-dress, and inviting audience members to write messages on her partially uncovered body.⁷⁶ The performances suggest that stories and socio-political and cultural rules and conventions are written onto women's bodies. At the same time, Arahmaiani rewrites the existing narrative, by staying in firm control of her body in its interaction with other people and discourses.⁷⁷ This rewriting breaks with *kodrat wanita*, literally "the essential nature of women", a socio-political construct dating

back to colonial times that has naturalised the role of women as loyal wives, caring mothers and obedient citizens.⁷⁸ This concept was a prominent part of the discourse of *Pembangunan* (Development) during President Suharto's totalitarian New Order regime and is still common in religious sermons underlining the different positions, roles and expectations of men and women in society. Arahmaiani's performances suggest that narrow forms of developmentalism and religiosity have not only negatively impacted on women, but also justified the endless exploitation and destruction of 'mother' nature. By showing that the fate of women and nature are interrelated, the performances seek to give voice and agency to both.

The Religious Dimensions of Environmental Activism in Yogyakarta

According to Arahmaiani, in her work, art and activism are two sides of the same coin, which cannot be approached in separation from each other. Frustrated by a lack of initiative and support from other parties, including governments, her creative activism covers a full range of activities, from the creation of artworks to community-based projects and practical solutions.⁷⁹ To a large extent, these projects have remained outside of the realms of international art markets, galleries and festivals, as they are less suitable and not meant to be commodified. Instead, they can be considered personalised, *unjuk rasa*-style expressions of the social strand of *ekofeminisme*.

One of Arahmaiani's ongoing environmental projects is in the Bantul regency, south of the city of Yogyakarta in Central Java. Arahmaiani considers Yogyakarta her home in Indonesia, to which she always returns after international travel. Spatially and emotionally, Yogyakarta is removed from the central government in Jakarta as well as the trauma of her detention in Bandung. In combination with its culturally and religiously diverse population, long history of traditional and contemporary art-making, and vibrant scene of art collectives and collaborations, it is the artist's preferred place of living and working.⁸⁰ Her critical construction of and emotional attachment to 'home' has not been deterred, but partially inspired and shaped by, her nomadic lifestyle.

Arahmaiani initiated and participated in environmental projects in Bantul after the region was hit by an earthquake on 27 May 2006, which caused the death of more than 5,700 people. She was part of the Pembaharuan Spiritual or Spiritual Renewal performance art festival in Bantul from 25 to 29 April 2007.⁸¹ Apart from contemporary performances by international and Indonesian artists, the festival presented traditional performing arts such as *gejog lesung*, *jatilan* (trance horse dance), *sholawatan* (Islamic prayer songs) and

zikir (chanted phrases in praise of God). It also had workshops and forums on pollution and other environmental problems; cultural, religious and spiritual values; and herbal medicine and organic farming. The events were organised at people's homes, crossroads, rice fields, bushlands, cow stalls and even grave sites.⁸² The Renewal festival followed an ancient Javanese tradition of *ruwatan*, which consist of syncretic 'cleansing of the earth' rituals on the eve or in the wake of major natural or socio-political disasters, including an earthquake or the fall of a president.⁸³

Arahmaiani has continued collaboration with one of the festival participants, the Islamic boarding school Amumarta in Bantul, led by the religious leader (*Kyai*) Muhammad Djawis Masruri. After the earthquake, the boarding school set up a cooperative with local farmers to extract oil from the fruit of the *nyamplung* (*Calophyllum inophyllum* or Tanamu) tree.⁸⁴ Apart from the socio-economic benefit of providing the school and farmers with a new source of living, the initiators also recognised the potential of this project for enhancing environmental sustainability. The *nyamplung* tree is native to the dry Bantul region, has long fruit-bearing periods, retains moisture and has deep, erosion-preventing roots. The oil can serve as fuel for machinery and cars and provide a clean alternative to fossil fuels. It is claimed the project produced approximately 100,000 litres of oil per month for several years. However, due to the continuing and even increasing government subsidies for fossil fuels, production has stagnated since 2010. While the collective is waiting for the right conditions for a re-start of their bio-fuel project, Arahmaiani has contributed ideas to other small-scale environmental-friendly productions, including organic cosmetics and batik dye from the leaves and fruit skins of the *nyamplung* tree.⁸⁵

It is said that a verse in the Qur'an (Verse 80, Sura 36) about a green tree from which fire can be produced triggered Masruri's interest in ecological sustainability.⁸⁶ This reference is in line with Arahmaiani's interlinking of spirituality and environmental justice, and may explain the continuing collaboration between the artist and the all-male Islamic boarding school. Although the character of the school makes it less accessible for female outsiders, Arahmaiani has been able to adjust and be accepted in her role as advisor by relating to her own upbringing in a family led by an influential *Kyai*.⁸⁷

One of Arahmaiani's ongoing performance projects that started with her collaboration with the Amumarta Islamic boarding school in 2006 is *Flag project*. It interconnects the activities in Bantul with the artist's other major sites of art and activism, including Tibet. The touring and ever-expanding *Flag project* consists of colourful flags, which contain single words or short phrases written in the scripts and languages of the communities that

Arahmaiani has been working with. Included are, among others, the words Freedom, Love, Heart, Courage, Spirit, Culture, Capital, Earth, Water, Air, Food, Resistance, Wisdom, Happiness, Bonding, Intuition and Community in Latin, Arabic, Chinese, Indian and other scripts. The flags are made by one of the artist's collaboration partners, a community of female seamstresses in Yogyakarta.⁸⁸

In one version of the project, *Nusantara flags* (Archipelago flags), Arahmaiani presents key words in Indonesian local languages, including *Guyub* (Javanese, 'harmonious'), *Cai* (Sundanese, 'water'), *Taksu* (Balinese, 'spirit'), *Jianai* (Chinese, 'universal love'), *Tana* (Florenese, 'universe/land'), *Jumpun* (Dayak, 'forest'), *Padusi* (Minang, 'woman'), *Wareh* (Acehnese, 'brotherhood'), *Mapalus* (Minahasan, 'collaboration'), *Kahofa* (Ambai, 'earth'), *Horas* (Batak, 'good day') and *Ewako* (Buginese, 'brave').⁸⁹ The multidimensional nomadic project gives visibility to linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity, putting majority and minority languages on a par, while also highlighting the universal quality of the cultural concepts. At the same time, it suggests the constructed, to some extent arbitrary, nature of nationhood and national(ist) symbolism as well as the make-ability and potentially emancipatory quality of alternative symbols, organisation forms and identities. In Arahmaiani's performances, the community participation in the swaying of the self-created flags in public spaces, including natural landscapes, becomes a means for uniting people from many different backgrounds and creating a sense of place and/or reconnecting with nature.

The Historical Dimensions of Environmental Activism in Tibet

Socio-cultural (re)connection and the (re)creation of a sense of unity is particularly relevant as part of a process of trauma-healing for communities hit by natural disasters in areas such as Bantul and Tibet. In a 2018 solo performance at the Tibetan Plateau, as presented in photo and audience reports, Arahmaiani, clad in grey robes and her face and hair covered in grey clay, waved a yellow flag with the Hindu mantra 'Om' emblazoned in green. The artist carried the flag from the rocky mountain sides and grassland valleys with grazing yaks, to the front of her host monastery. Sidd Joag described the performer "as if being excavated from the earth and shaking off thousands of years of stone and dust". The performance suggested a message of peace from and for the natural landscape and local community.⁹⁰

The Tibetan Plateau is commonly referred to as 'The Third Pole', as it has the earth's largest concentration of ice outside the Arctic and Antarctic. Its

water reserve, also referred to as Asia's 'water tower', feeds ten major river systems, including the Yangtze, Indus, Ganges and Mekong, and provides water for consumption and irrigation to more than a billion people in Asia. This precious eco-system is under threat from climate change, pollution, hydro-damming, mineral extraction and natural disasters. For Arahmaiani, the main incentive to work in this region is to call for local and global attention to these threats and engage in collaborative projects to protect the natural environment.

The artist started to work at the Buddhist Labu monastery in the Kham region of the Tibetan Plateau in 2010, after the area was hit by an earthquake on 14 April 2010.⁹¹ Her collaboration with the Labu monastery was part of a community-based art project with the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum. She was confronted with multiple hurdles, ranging from cultural and linguistic differences to the restrictions by the Chinese government on foreign environmental and other aid to Tibet. Similar to her project in Bantul, after finding acceptance in a male-dominated religious environment, she has been using a combination of artistic and religious approaches to promote environmental awareness and practical solutions.⁹²

Arahmaiani felt she had to study Tibetan Buddhism first, to have the right cultural and religious tools to convey her environmental messages to the monks at Labu. Traditionally, the monks were not supposed to engage with waste. By using creative and religious sources, Arahmaiani succeeded in involving them in garbage management and recycling. During the first five years of regular visits to the monastery, she also facilitated various other environmental projects, ranging from water management and tree-planting to reviving organic farming and nomadic life and culture. After attracting the participation of 16 surrounding villages, the Chinese government eventually decided to join and support the programmes.⁹³

With her projects in Tibet, Arahmaiani also attempts to promote deeper historical understanding about the Buddhist cultural heritage and living traditions in Indonesia, and counter the narrow religious-nationalist causes and discourses of increasingly militant Islamic groups in her home country. She has a special interest in the story of Atisa Dipankara Sri Jnana (982–1054), a Bengali teacher of Buddhism who studied for 12 years in the Sriwijaya kingdom near contemporary Palembang in South Sumatra, before becoming a religious reformer in Tibet. Atisa is still highly venerated by the Tibetan monks today. In their conversations with Arahmaiani, they acknowledge the close cultural ties between Tibet and Indonesia that have grown from the important historical role of Sriwijaya as a centre for the study of Buddhism.⁹⁴

Arahmaiani's installation *Memory of nature* has been inspired by the cultural connections between Tibet and Indonesia, and the links between religion and nature. After its first installation at Art Stage Singapore in 2013, it has been re-installed at various sites in Indonesia and elsewhere.⁹⁵ The installation consists of wood, soil and seeds, shaped in the mandala form of the ground plan of the Borobudur in Central Java, which is the largest Buddhist temple in the world. In performances, Arahmaiani and audience members water the soil and seeds, so green shoots of plants can grow from the low, wooden mandala structure. The mandala shape represents the cosmos with all its components, while the plants symbolise a cycle of growth, fruit-bearing, ripening, decay and regrowth. The plants mirror the religious principles of ascend and descend that are central to the architecture of the Borobudur. Arahmaiani explains that she does not want her environmental activism to be restricted to a materialist approach that merely focuses on forest, water and land conservation, or the promotion of organic food. Otherwise, "the natural will simply be stationed as an object that may be exploited as people please".⁹⁶ Instead, *Memory of nature* proposes a deeper, and more sustainable, *ekofeminisme* type of approach, focusing on "the values and ethics of life that support the harmony and respect for nature and the environment".⁹⁷

Flag project and *Memory of nature*, with their focus on values such as cultural diversity and harmony with nature, provide an alternative to the 'masculine' power and control over social and natural life worlds in a globally dominant system of neoliberalism. Neither of these art projects carries an explicit feminist message, however. Female strength and empowerment are embodied in the figure of the artist herself, who has managed to be accepted in, collaborate with, convince, and to some extent change, the modes of operation of male-dominated religious communities. Arahmaiani seems to have reached a stage in her career where she increasingly puts in practice in real life the militant messages and aesthetics of some of her earlier, more autonomous art works such as *Lingga-Yoni* and *Do not prevent the fertility of the mind*. Her gallery-based art objects and public community projects naturally complement and reinforce each other, and have extended her opportunities to work with different media, creative partners and audiences, for multiple purposes, in a variety of spaces.

Conclusion

This article has sought to analyse Arahmaiani's oeuvre by probing the perspectives of *unjuk rasa* and *ekofeminisme*. This approach is not meant to merely replace the problematic notion of 'feminist artist' with equally limited

FIGURE 3: *Flag project*, 2018, mixed-media installation, from the exhibition *The past has not passed*, Museum Macan, Jakarta, 17 November 2018–10 March 2019, photo by the author.

FIGURE 4: *Memory of nature*, 2018, mixed-media installation, from the exhibition *The past has not passed*, Museum Macan, Jakarta, 17 November 2018–10 March 2019, photo by the author.

concepts and ideas. Instead, it seeks to open up and develop a larger, more comprehensive conversation that crosses the boundaries between contemporary art and activism, in line with Arahmaiani's own combined practice.

The artist shares this broader field with other Indonesian female activists that use creativity, particularly performativity, to empower themselves. The artist-activists express their feelings and ideas in a *unjuk rasa* way, and/or provide gendered, *ekofeminisme* perspectives on problems concerning the interrelations between social and natural environments. While their mutual interactions may be fluid and often indirect, the various individuals and groups are part of an activist movement that promotes sustainable alternatives to destructive, patriarchal forms of social, political and economic organisation, such as capitalism. They do so by exploring female cultural symbols and knowledge sources of the natural environment, and/or by providing more practical, gendered solutions to environmental destruction.

Arahmaiani shares some of these approaches with international artists of the so-called cultural and social strands of ecofeminism since the late 1960s as well as local movements such as the anti-cement protests by the women from Kendeng. Although this makes her less of an isolated figure in both domestic and global contexts, she has a unique and distinctive way of addressing social and environmental issues in her artistic and activist work. Her performance art, which has been shaped by life experiences as well as formal and informal art training in Indonesia and abroad, can be seen as a personal expression of the imbalances between hegemonic political and economic systems on the one hand, and vulnerable social and natural environments on the other. Her personalised nomadism has also facilitated reconnections with Indonesia's past, alternative interpretations of the homeland and the nation-state, and visions of more just and inclusive forms of community. In recent years, she has contributed to environmental projects in Java, Tibet and elsewhere of an increasingly practical nature, albeit never devoid of creative and gendered sources of inspiration and expression.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

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- ² Joseph Fischer, "The Traditional Sources of Modern Indonesian Art", in *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945–1990*, ed. Joseph Fischer (Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS and Festival of Indonesia, 1990), pp. 14–41; Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- ³ Edwin Jurriëns, "Intertwined Ecologies: Environmental Aesthetics in Indonesian Contemporary Art", *Third Text* 33, 1 (2019): 59–77.
- ⁴ Wienardi and Agus T. Dermawan, "Membaca Jejak Langkah Senirupawan Menuju Lingkungan", in *Proses 85: Pameran Seni Rupa Lingkungan*, ed. Wienardi and Agus T. Dermawan (1985), pp. 5–11. See also Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, pp. 215–6; Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art since 1966* (Adelaide: Flinders University, 1991), p. 91.
- ⁵ Kartika is known for using her fingers to paint directly on the canvas. She was taught this technique by her father, Affandi (1907–90), one of Indonesia's most noted painters. Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, p. 136.
- ⁶ Both paintings seemed to be inspired by Kartika's own experience of giving birth to eight children from a husband who had been unfaithful to her from the start of their marriage, and from whom she divorced after a long and painful battle. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ⁷ Wulandani Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 150.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- ⁹ Enin Supriyanto, "Laksmi's Role on the Art Stage", in *Lakon Laksmi Shitareshmi*, ed. Enin Supriyanto (Jakarta: Nadi Gallery, 2012), pp. 6–11.
- ¹⁰ A few years later Arahmaiani sold the painting to a friend in Thailand, while a self-made copy of the work featured in the artist's solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art Gallery in New York in 2014. The original painting only returned to Indonesia when it was bought by Museum Macan in 2017. A. Kurniawan Ulung, "Arahmaiani Stays True to Herself", *The Jakarta Post*, 7 Sept. 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2017/09/07/arahmeiani-stays-true-to-herself.html> [accessed 23 June 2019].
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² This description is based predominantly on the installation for Arahmaiani's *Fertility of the mind* solo exhibition at Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York, 5 January–22 February 2014.
- ¹³ Arahmaiani, personal communication, 15 April 2019.

- ¹⁴ Susan Ingham, "Powerlines: Alternative Art and Infrastructure in Indonesia in the 1990s", PhD thesis, School of Art History and Theory, University of New South Wales, Sydney (2007), p. 355; Wulandani Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia*, p. 187.
- ¹⁵ Wulan Dirgantoro, "Arahmaiani: Challenging the Status Quo", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42 (Autumn/Winter 2016): 25–35, especially 25, 35.
- ¹⁶ Roberta Smith, "They Are Artists Who Are Women; Hear Them Roar", *New York Times*, 23 March 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/arts/design/23glob.html> [accessed 13 May 2020].
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- ¹⁸ Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia*, p. 176.
- ¹⁹ On 15 February 2013, the Regent of Rembang issued a mining licence to the company PT Semen Indonesia, without informing or consulting the local population. Tommy Apriando, "Perempuan Merawat Mata Air Kendeng: Kajian Dampak Tambang pada SRHR" [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights], in *Ekofeminisme III: Tambang, Perubahan Iklim dan Memori Rahim*, ed. Dewi Candraningrum and Arianti Ina Restiani Hunga (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2015), pp. 351–68, especially p. 354.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 355–9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- ²² Many protesters belong to so-called Samin communities. These communities are named after Samin Surontika, who led peaceful resistance against colonialism at the end of the 19th century, including ignoring Dutch land ownership laws. Contemporary environmental movements have appropriated many aspects of Saminism, including organic farming traditions, independent education systems, religious pluralism and egalitarian Javanese language use. Young environmentalist groups such as SuperSamin and anakseribupulau combine Saminist philosophy with the use of creative media, such as rock and punk music, zines, Facebook groups, blogs and online networks. These groups are another example of activism blurring the lines between contemporary art, popular culture and traditional creativity, and combining spirituality with environmentalism. Alexandra Crosby, "Too Precious to Mine", *Inside Indonesia* 98 (Oct./Dec. 2009), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/too-precious-to-mine> [accessed 25 June 2019].
- ²³ Apriando, "Perempuan Merawat Mata Air Kendeng", p. 353.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 365. *Gejog lesung* refers to music made from the rhythmical sounds of a wooden stick for pounding rice.
- ²⁵ Rachmi Diah Larasati, "Gerakan Sosial: Performativitas dan Kontestasi Tubuh di Ruang Publik", in *Unjuk Rasa: Seni, Performativitas, Aktivisme*, ed. Brigitta Isabella (Jakarta: Yayasan Kelola, 2018), pp. 29–40, especially p. 37.

- ²⁶ Diah Kusumaningrum, personal communication, 3 May 2019.
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- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 38.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 35.
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- ³¹ Larasati, "Gerakan Sosial", pp. 34–5.
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- ³⁴ Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), p. 60.
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- ³⁶ Ibid., p. xiv.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. xv.
- ³⁸ Thomas J. Berghuis, "Arahmaiani: More than 'an' Artist", in *Slow Down Bro...!: Arahmaiani*, ed. Kadek Krishna Adidharma (Magelang: Langgeng Gallery, 2008), pp. 10–19, especially p. 11.
- ³⁹ Kadek Krisna Adidharma, "Epilogue: An Invitation to Become a Part of Art", in *Slow Down Bro...!: Arahmaiani*, ed. Kadek Krishna Adidharma (Magelang: Langgeng Gallery, 2008), pp. 109–11, especially p. 109.
- ⁴⁰ Jade Wildy, "The Artistic Progressions of Ecofeminism: The Changing Focus of Women in Environmental Art", *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 6, 1 (2011): 53–65.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 55–6.
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- ⁴³ Clara Ewy, "Transformative Ecofeminism Movement in Empowering Indonesian Women", *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences* 4, 2 (2018): 581–98.
- ⁴⁴ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism: Perspektif Gerakan Perempuan dan Lingkungan*, trans. Kelik Ismunanto dan Lilik (Yogyakarta: IRE Press, 2005). The translation is based on Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1993). For a comprehensive overview of influential publications on ecofeminism and *ekofeminisme* in Indonesia, see Wiyatmi Wiyatmi, Maman Suryaman and Esti Swatikasari, "Developing an Ecofeminist Literary Criticism Model to Cultivate An Ecologically Aware and Feminist Generation", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 21, 4 (2019): 515–31, especially 516–20.

- 45 Françoise d'Eaubonne, *Le Féminisme où la Mort* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1974); Ynestra King, "Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology", *Machina ex Dea*, ed. Joan Rothschild (New York and Oxford: Pergamon, 1983), pp. 118–29; Mies and Shiva, *Ecofeminism*; and Karen J. Warren, "Introduction" [Part 3 Ecofeminism], in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, John Clark, George Sessions; and Karen J. Warren (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), pp. 253–67.
- 46 Arianti Ina R. Hunga, "Ekofeminisme, Krisis Ekologis dan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan", in *Ekofeminisme I: Dalam Tafsir Agama, Pendidikan, Ekonomi, dan Budaya*, ed. Dewi Candraningrum (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2013), pp. ix–xvi, especially p. xii.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., p. xv.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 During the exhibition, I witnessed that visitors were not allowed to take pictures of *Lingga-Yoni*, while no restrictions were in place for Arahmaiani's other works. Although the exhibition organisers were prepared to display *Lingga-Yoni* in public, they clearly wanted to control publicity around the work, especially social media coverage, and prevent any socio-religious turmoil arising from it.
- 52 Arie Dyanto, "Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin: Komik tentang Arahmaiani", in *Politik dan Gender: Aspek-Aspek Seni Visual Indonesia*, ed. Adi Wicaksono et al. (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2013), pp. 165–76, especially pp. 167–8.
- 53 Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia*, p. 178.
- 54 Arahmaiani, personal communication, 7 April 2020.
- 55 Ingham, *Indonesian Contemporary Art*, pp. 8, 13; Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia*, pp. 176, 194.
- 56 Wang Zineng, "Self as Locus of Meaning: Existential Arahmaiani", in *Slow Down Bro...!: Arahmaiani*, ed. Kadek Krishna Adidharma (Magelang: Langgeng Gallery, 2008), pp. 34–8, especially pp. 34–5.
- 57 Claire Lindsay, "Nomadism", in *Keywords for Travel Writing Studies: A Critical Glossary*, ed. Charles Forsdick, Zoë Kinsley and Kathryn Walchester (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2019), pp. 172–4.
- 58 Wang Zineng, "Self as Locus of Meaning: Existential Arahmaiani", p. 36.
- 59 Arahmaiani, personal communication, 28 June 2019.
- 60 Amanda Katherine Rath, "Contextualizing 'Contemporary Art': Propositions of Critical Artistic Practice in Seni Rupa Kontemporer in Indonesia", PhD dissertation, Faculty of the Graduate School, Cornell University (2011), p. 251.
- 61 Ibid., p. 250.

- ⁶² Ibid., p. 252.
- ⁶³ Susan Ingham, *Indonesian Contemporary Art: Book Excerpt*, p. 9, <http://inghaminindonesia.com/pages/excerpt.html> [accessed 23 June 2019].
- ⁶⁴ Rath, *Contextualizing 'Contemporary Art'*, pp. 266, 274–6.
- ⁶⁵ Arahmaiani, “Pentingnya Perioda Jeprut”, in *Jeprut Permanen*, ed. Danuh Tyas, Axel Ramadhan and Elly Kent (Bandung: Yayasan Selasar Sunaryo, 2015), pp. 20–3, especially p. 23.
- ⁶⁶ Edwin Jurriëns, “Art is Capital: Between Cultural Memory and the Creative Industry”, *Art and the Public Sphere* 7, 1 (2018): 43–62, especially p. 48.
- ⁶⁷ Amelia Jones, “The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History”, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), pp. 11–25, especially p. 12.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Gunnar Stange, “‘I Don’t Want to Limit Myself to Binary Thinking’: An Interview with the Indonesian Artist Arahmaiani”, *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 10, 1 (2017): 109–16.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 45.
- ⁷¹ Arahmaiani, personal communication, 7 and 11 July 2019.
- ⁷² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDTsZiznhB8> [accessed 28 June 2019].
- ⁷³ Rath, *Contextualizing 'Contemporary Art'*, pp. 301–4.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 20.
- ⁷⁵ Sylvia Tiwon, “Tanah Wutah Rah: Membongkar Mitos Dewi-Dewi yang Terperangkap”, in *Eko-feminisme II: Narasi Iman, Mitos, Air dan Tanah*, ed. Dewi Candraningrum (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2014), pp. 51–65, especially p. 53.
- ⁷⁶ Dirgantoro, *Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia*, pp. 179–81.
- ⁷⁷ Rath, *Contextualizing 'Contemporary Art'*, p. 307. See also Heidi Arbuckle, “Unveiling Taboo”, in *Slow Down Bro...!: Arahmaiani*, ed. Kadek Krishna Adidharma (Magelang: Langgeng Gallery, 2008), pp. 79–87, especially p. 84.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 316.
- ⁷⁹ Arahmaiani, personal communication, 15 April 2019.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ The festival was the third in a series of annual performance-art events called *Perfurbance* (Performance Art Urban Festival), organised since 2005 by the Performance Klub collective of noted Yogyakarta-based performance artist Iwan Wijono. According to Wijono, the festival made people think about problems that were ‘unearthed’ by the natural disaster, including complex relationships and tensions between international, national and local governments, groups in society, families and individual citizens. Iwan Wijono, “Kata Pengantar”, in *Perfurbance No. 3: Pembaharuan Spiritual, Spiritual Renewal*, ed. Astrid Reza (Yogyakarta: PerformanceKlub, 2007), p. 5; Edwin Jurriëns, “From Early Warning

System to Trauma Healing: Alternative Media and Disaster Relief in Central Java”, in *Disaster Relief in the Asia-Pacific: Agency and Resilience*, ed. Minako Sakai, Edwin Jurriëns, Jian Zhang and Alex Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 147–68, especially p. 15.

⁸² Arahmaiani, “Seni Lumpur dan Kuburan”, in *Perfurbance No. 3: Pembaharuan Spiritual, Spiritual Renewal*, ed. Astrid Reza (Yogyakarta: PerformanceKlub, 2007), pp. 21–3, especially pp. 21–2.

⁸³ Edwin Jurriëns, “From Early Warning System to Trauma Healing”, p. 158.

⁸⁴ Kristina Großman and Arahmaiani Feisal, “Islam-Inspired Renewable Energy”, *Inside Indonesia* 133 (July/Sept. 2018), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/islam-inspired-renewable-energy> [accessed 23 June 2019].

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Arahmaiani, personal communication, 15 April 2019.

⁸⁸ For more info, see http://www.creativecowboyfilms.com/blog_posts/arahmeiani-flag [accessed 23 June 2019].

⁸⁹ Arahmaiani, personal communication, 17 April 2019.

⁹⁰ Sidd Joag, “Curse of Geography: Qinghai-Tibet Plateau”, *ArtsEverywhere* (2019), <http://curseofgeography.artseverywhere.ca/QTP/Tibet.html> [accessed 23 June 2019].

⁹¹ Administratively, the village falls under Yulshul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, southwestern China. The earthquake, which is known as the Yushu earthquake, took a death toll of more than 2,700 people.

⁹² Arahmaiani, personal communication, 12 Dec. 2018.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Other sites of installation and performance included Arahmaiani’s 2018–19 survey exhibition at Museum Macan and the banks of the Elo Progo river, near the Borobudur. For more info, see https://www.creativecowboyfilms.com/blog_posts/memory-of-nature [accessed 23 June 2019].

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

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