

New Trajectories: Arahmaiani in Yogyakarta

A typical Saturday in this year sees Indonesian artist Arahmaiani— self-professed global nomad now settling down in Yogyakarta in Central Java—listening intently and proffering sharp comments and questions in an artists' presentation session that she has convened. The presentations are part of a project centered on the tenth anniversary of May 1998, a month in Indonesian history that saw unprecedented socio-political turbulence resulting in the infliction of horrifying brutalities upon student reformers and ethnic Chinese Indonesians and the collapse of ex-President Suharto's dictatorial New Order (Orde Baru) regime. Arahmaiani celebrated her 37th birthday on the day of Suharto's forced resignation, an event she describes as the "most beautiful birthday present I have ever had in my life." Her unabashed political stance has not subsided over the last ten years, popularly known in Indonesia as the Reformasi era. As stridently critical as ever of political and social systems that suppress human rights and liberties, the key difference between the time she was a student activist and today lies in the more open climate of Indonesian society and artworld, which allows for her increasing visibility as art-activist icon, honest critic, and world wise counselor to emerging Indonesian artists.

Born in Bandung in 1961 and educated at the Bandung Institute of Technology in the early 1980s, Arahmaiani continued her studies at the Paddington Art School in Sydney, Australia and the Academie voor Beeldende Kunst in Enschede, Holland. Her multi-disciplinary practice spans performance art, video, installation, painting, drawing, dance, music and poetry. Opposed to the estrangement of art and life in the academy, her early passage into art practice took place in the streets of Bandung where, together with a group of likeminded friends, she began to make performances with a strong social consciousness—what she termed "easy-art" as opposed to the prevailing academically conservative "difficult-art". Developing from this trajectory, she is now one of a small number of Indonesian artists recognized and active in the international contemporary art circuits, having participated in the Venice, Gwangju and Sao Paulo biennales, the Asia-Pacific Triennial, as well as noted international-scale exhibitions such as Cities on the Move and Global Feminism in the last 12 years.

Malaysian artist and art critic, Ray Langenbach, describes Arahmaiani as a "border intellectual", that is, an individual who presents herself and her ideas, emerging from local and national contexts, as art and cultural expressions on a transnational platform, which are sometimes

understood, in more critical terms, as marketable art and cultural commodities pliable to the ambitions and discourses of an increasingly transnational artworld. Her travels, guided by desires to seek more receptive contexts for her art practice and for learning and immersing in different religious and cultural contexts, have been extensive, taking her from high European and American metropolitan centers to local communities within Southeast Asia where every effect of globalization is starkly seen and felt. In these diverse contexts, she has been continuously sharpening her observations and fashioning staunchly idealistic articulations on a range of issues revolving around globalization, religion, feminism, sexuality, and geopolitical Islam.

Beyond such personal articulations, building artworld structures and strengthening networks for the emergence of alternative voices are very much at the fore of Arahmaiani's thoughts and everyday art practice. Besides the May 1998 decade anniversary project, in which she has enlisted the support of gallerist Deddy Irianto (Langgeng Gallery, Central Java), she is also anticipating the completion of a new studio-cum-project space in Nitiprayan, an artist colony at the western fringes of the small city of Yogyakarta. The new space will function as an incubator for artists and projects focusing on developing and sharpening concepts and conceptual practices. Knowing Arahmaiani, one can assume the imperative to address the realities of everyday local and global issues will retain foremost and even reinvigorated urgency through the collaborative exchanges and projects that will take place there. The completion of this space will very well signal a broader shift in Arahmaiani's temperament towards her art practice and life, that of gradually easing up on a nomadic cross-cultural life and increasingly seeking a port to dock in, an abode to return to and consolidate more than two decades of materials and works. As she has been saying of late, pauses and conceptual spaces for reflections are increasingly important elements she wishes to emphasize and ascribe a larger place for in her work, no doubt as a counter to the increasingly complex and dogmatic perspectives one is assailed with on fundamental issues in contemporary society. Under such circumstances, a greater need emerges for blind actions and ambiguous excesses to be quelled; instead, the spirit and rhythm of daily life should ideally be calibrated to admit more room for introspection.

Such a stand is in marked contrast to the polemical and earnestly hard-hitting attitude of Arahmaiani's key 1990s installations and performances. She gained her credence as an artist whose practice extended into social protest and activism with *Sex, Religion and Coca-Cola* (1994), an unflinchingly critical installation comprised of Islamic, sexual, and consumerist symbols in Jakarta. Amongst other polemics, the work undermines the sanctity of religion through Arahmaiani's insistence on examining religion within the context of more general values in society. This was followed up by two performances, *Offerings from A to Z* (1996), and *Handle Without Care* (1996-97), which exemplify the wide range of social issues her art practice is concerned with. *Offerings from A to Z* highlights acts of brutality directed towards women in contemporary society. The choice of performance site and format—a re-created ritual performance within the grounds of a Thai Buddhist temple—marks a conscious effort to push the boundaries within which

social and feminist agendas can be embodied. *Handle Without Care*, performed in Australia, New York, Thailand, Cuba, and Japan over a span of two years, is perhaps the most iconic of Arahmaiani's performances. In the costume of a Balinese dancer and bearing mock armaments, she fashions herself as a pastiche, elevated to an exaggerated, satirical position of rebellion against religious and social authorities that manifest themselves in the form of control over the body.

The (female) body is indeed a prominent medium in Arahmaiani's performance practice, often the direct site where societal perceptions and taboos are questioned. It is in this arena that critics note her firm advocacy of feminist causes. The brash and defiant, in-your-face style of *Handle Without Care* was followed up in another work in which the body is a central discourse. *His-story On My Body* (2000), captivating in its starkness and understated forcefulness, premiered at the Jakarta International Performance Art Festival in 2000 (of which Arahmaiani was a key initiator) and subsequently traveled through various German and Japanese cities. The work reveals a close alignment with the influential Foucauldian notion of the body as a corporeal object of surveillance. Arahmaiani located this theory within a context derived from her wide-ranging personal experiences, emphasizing how the body "becomes the battlefield of political struggles and conflicts of interests." Her thoughts on the body, especially in the context of Islam, are also articulated in an unpublished essay, *Feminism in Islam: Performing beyond Borders*.

The textual dimension strongly present in *His-story On My Body* has recently been further developed and brought to bear on the issue of cross-cultural understanding pertinent to discussions on globalization. As a latter-half 20th century phenomenon that continues to morph and prevail in the 21st century, globalization has received extensive coverage in the West, whereas understandings of globalization predicated upon and filtered through particular Asian experiences are comparatively more rare. For Arahmaiani, whose schedule as an internationally oriented performance artist might require her to traverse four or five different countries, cultures, and languages each year, the fallibilities of cultural translation and crosscultural understanding amongst individuals are real and personal. A developing tendency in some of her performance works in the last four years—*Soho Baby*, performed in Beijing, New York and Aachen, Germany, and *Breaking Words* (2004-06), performed in Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Northern Ireland—deals with this particular vein of globalization.

In *Soho Baby* and *Breaking Words*, Arahmaiani invites the participation of local audiences—at a fundamental level replicating the (mis-)exchanges that take place between people of different races and nationalities in a globalized world. She begins the body performance piece, *Soho Baby*, by inscribing Jawi characters on herself, delineating the essential markers of religious and linguistic identity that successful navigation in a globalized world demand of us. By Arahmaiani's own account, some of the texts qualify only as scribbles; these are to be interpreted as a desire to complexify the clichés and stereotypes so often employed in attempts to bridge differences.

Audience members then take turns writing words meaningful to them on parts of her body until it becomes a dense, living canvas, ridden with collective projections of societal values. Yet not one particular value is imbued or specifically absorbed; all of them are only skin-deep. The key question that emerges: are there universals underlying the diversity of appearances and values that we encounter in our daily lives?

Breaking Words reinforces this concern with overcoming cultural and personal differences: the plates, bearing written words by audiences, which Arahmaiani smashes speak symbolically of the tribulations and failures of cross-cultural interaction. This point was wryly brought out in the performance in Kuala Lumpur; a member of the audience, offended that a plate with “Allah” written on it was smashed, lodged a complaint with the police, who proceeded to shut down the festival, Satu Kali, in which the performance took place.

Misapprehensions of the intents and messages that artists bring forth in their works are not new to Arahmaiani. Any artwork, in whatever medium, bears an inevitable dimension of communication between the artist or performer and audience; the separation between life and art cannot be made distinct.

“Art and life are like the source and the end of the river. I endeavor to understand life as it is and I place art as the catalyst of this understanding process.”

This credo is firmly established and perspicuous in Arahmaiani’s everyday art practice. The plain spoken, get up-and-go spirit that has defined her artworld presence for the last two decades continues to resound in her current practice. Through the Reformasi project, she is transferring her activist-artist energy to working with a younger set of Yogyakarta artists who are actively resisting the lure of the art marketplace and seeking a truly alternative practice. In common conversation, she continues to rail at global problems and the numerous ills in Indonesian society. In pondering such issues, it is easy to accumulate negative energy. But Arahmaiani is doing well in this regard, keeping herself busy envisioning new directions in her art practice. This month sees her as occupied as ever with the Reformasi project, an Indonesian artists group exhibition focusing on art history in the NUS Museum, Singapore, and a painting exhibition in Berlin. These will be followed by a July solo exhibition at the Jogja National Museum, where she will take stock of key works and polemics of the last two decades. Amidst the flurry, Arahmaiani continues to be on the lookout to collaborate with non-established artists in Yogyakarta with her characteristic unbounded enthusiasm: new trajectories in the making.





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