

DEFINING EXPERIENCE: EXPLORING FEMINISM IN INDONESIAN VISUAL ARTS¹

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Feminism interweaves sociopolitical, intellectual and material strategies which challenge power relations founded upon normalizing sex and gender roles. Feminists question the structures which make the relationship between sex and gender seem natural, eternal and fixed.¹ Feminist thinking spans across a multitude of schools of thought and academic disciplines. In art theory, feminism is able to respond quickly to changes in both intellectual and material conditions, making innovative connections between ideas, objects and images. Feminism as a critical theory most importantly seeks to create ways to displace the binary opposition which structures the questions of gender.²

An example of an early feminist project in visual arts is the work of feminist art historians who have unearthed women artists previously ignored by the male-dominated art world. A 1977 exhibition in New York by Linda Nochlin and Ann

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Sutherland Harris titled “Women Artists 1550-1950” was an example of such a project. A decade later, however, it was no longer enough for feminist art historians to simply keep rediscovering ‘great women artists.’ Instead, the trans-disciplinary nature of feminism expanded its focus into looking at how language, images, texts and objects which surround women as subjects can be reworked. Thus the next step was a critique *within* patriarchy.³

Nonetheless, it soon became clear that the existing feminist critiques only illuminated the experience of white European and American women. It not only excluded the knowledge and history of women from other parts of the world, but also explicitly reinstated the perspectives of middle-class, heterosexual and white women. Shohat highlighted these issues when she brought up the ‘colonized body’ as part of a layer in reading works by non-white women artists, where (white, first-world) feminism itself is indeed part of the problem and the critique.⁴

The powerful critiques of ‘color blind’ feminist theory by women from non-Western backgrounds established heterogeneity and difference as key conceptual strategies and new ways of thinking about a previously predominantly Western feminist project. While some issues such as identity and context are still debated within feminisms, one core issue remains at the heart of almost all feminist debates in art theory, namely the representation of the female body. Betterton argues that the female body is a crucial site for feminist intervention in art practice because it was perceived as degrading in the erotic tradition in Western art, and yet at the same time offers a means of articulating female experiences.⁵

In Indonesian visual arts, the use of the term feminism remains problematic. Despite frequent use in various art texts, the definition of the concept and even the term itself still lacks consistency in the Indonesian context. Saparinah Sadli, one of the founders of the Women’s Studies Department (*Departemen Kajian Wanita*) at the University of Indonesia (*Universitas Indonesia* or UI) stated that this issue can be attributed to the idea that feminism tends to be identified with radicalism, lesbianism, anti-male and anti-family attitudes,⁶ a biting stigma that makes most Indonesian women in general and women artists in particular very self-conscious about associating themselves with feminism.

Secondly, feminism in Indonesia is also strongly associated with an unconditional transferring of a Western ideology that is regarded as the adversary of 'Eastern values' (*budaya ketimuran*) which are synonymous with an 'Indonesian identity' that is still strongly espoused by Indonesian society. Thus feminism as an ideology clashes with the ideologies of nationalism and patriarchy which are still powerful in Indonesian culture. Indeed, many women artists argue that the ongoing debate about the definition of feminism in Indonesia is in fact seen as counter-productive to achieving feminism's goal of gender equality in Indonesia.⁷

In visual arts, textual references and art discourses in Indonesia are normally disseminated through essays in exhibition catalogues, media reviews, or artists' monographs. Minimum infrastructure and government support for the arts have contributed to a lack of academic works or refereed journals common in countries with an established visual arts infrastructure. Although commercial publications such as the *Visual Arts* magazine, the weekly arts and culture sections in national newspapers such as *Kompas* or *Media Indonesia* and of course the internet have helped to alleviate the situation, scholarly engagement within the arts remains underdeveloped, particularly in regards to women artists. Only very recently have women artists started to publish books, with Rita Widagdo's monograph in 2005 and Mia Bustam's autobiography leading the charge. In 2007, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens* provided the first comprehensive overview of a broad range of Indonesian women artists. The book spans from the Persagi years (1938-1942) to the contemporary time.

Previously, some attempts to read the artistic and aesthetic explorations of women artists had been done by some male writers, including Sanento Yuliman (1941-1992), an art critic and lecturer from Bandung. In a posthumous publication, he argued that an exhibition by a group of women artists titled '*Nuansa Indonesia*' in 1987 was one of the strongest clarion calls of "*perang seks*" (sex war or gender war) between Indonesian female and male artists. However, he also pondered the uniformity of the works in regards to the skill and choice of medium.⁸ Bronze sculptures, large canvasses and watercolor drawings dominated the exhibition. In Yuliman's view, the absence of women's visual languages such as pottery, embroidery, *batik* and other

fiber-based art indicated the dominance of the masculine paradigm even amongst women art practitioners.⁹ Yuliman's essay echoed a similar statement voiced by American feminist critic Lucy Lippard who argued that certain forms, shapes and colors (the 'central core' imagery) are strongly associated with works by women. Furthermore, these 'feminine' qualities are then being reclaimed by feminist artists to restate their political messages.

For Yuliman, these visual languages should have been in the exhibition and also celebrated. Nonetheless, he was careful not to suggest that the aforementioned visual languages were feminist statements. While Yuliman was probably ahead of his time in questioning the hegemonic nature of visual arts in Indonesia, other writers such as Noerhadi and Supriyanto also call for reinstating a female language in the visual arts.¹⁰ All three writers agree that in the development of Indonesian modern art, the clash between high art (classic Western art history) and low art (visual culture, traditional art) made female-based cultural productions like pottery, *batik*, and embroidery pay a high price and led to their marginalization in the current contemporary art trajectory.¹¹

Paradoxically, many male artists both in Indonesia and in the West have used such visual languages throughout the course of art history. The issue is even more tangled by the hybridity of practices and themes in current contemporary art practices, especially in Indonesia where there is no clear-cut distinction between contemporary art practices and craft practices.¹² Furthermore, the celebration of feminine aspects in the Indonesian context is hitherto taken as a 'burden' from both the aesthetic and social point of view.

Significantly, in contrast to Yuliman and Noerhadi, Sinaga seems to take for granted that the medium is non-hegemonic. Calling for a specific movement for women artists to take a stand against the male-dominated world, she argues that even though some women artists have made critical and political works in recent years, they are still too preoccupied with personal narratives and have thus avoided their social and political commitments to express societal changes in their works.¹³ Moreover, what is worth noting in Sinaga's essay is that she acknowledges that it is inconceivable that the

(Indonesian) women's movement should be the same as those of Western feminism as the experiences and context are very different.¹⁴

Despite the shortcomings and an ongoing dominance of male or mixed group exhibitions, various solo and group exhibitions of women artists in Indonesia have in fact been curated, organized and staged in Indonesia since the 1970s. Apart from the aforementioned "*Nuansa Indonesia*" exhibition, several other more recent exhibitions such as "*Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan*" (Cemara6 Gallery, December 1998), "*Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil*" (a solo exhibition by Titarubi in Cemara6 Gallery, 2001), "*Women in the Realm of Spirituality*" (a group exhibition at the National Gallery of Indonesia and Pontifical University Gregoriana, Rome, Italy, 1998) and "*Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang*" (one of two large-scale exhibitions of women artists in the National Gallery of Indonesia in 2001) showed the development of a distinct discourse that is influenced by feminisms.¹⁵ And yet, explanations of how feminisms have operated within these exhibitions remain elusive.

In view of the wide-ranging artistic practices and political views of Indonesian women artists, it is significant to underline some general differences between women making art in male-dominated society and feminist art working against patriarchy. Barry and Flitterman-Lewis have used a feminist lens to identify works by women artists within several categories: works of art as glorification of essential feminine power, women's art as a form of sub-cultural resistance, women's art as submerged or outside the dominant cultural order and lastly, works of art that situate the artist within patriarchy which enables them to be critical of patriarchy itself.¹⁶ The latter category is the focus of this paper, namely artists who have built a critical awareness about the construction of femininity through their art works.

By applying a framework of a balanced textual and sociological analysis, the next section will look at the works of four artists – Arahmaiani, Titarubi, Marintan Sirait and Melati Suryodarmo – against the background of Indonesian contemporary art. These four artists have been chosen mainly because their practices and strategies employ one of the key points of feminist art practices, namely the representation of the female body.

Historically, the female body has long been a contested site of ideologies, discourses and specific discourses. Apart from Betterton, Nead has examined the representation of the female nude in Western classical art to look for feminist cultural politics on the female body.¹⁷ Wolff outlines the methods of deconstruction as a feminist strategy in contemporary art.¹⁸ Through an examination of cultural politics as well as corporeality, women artists who explore the body often provide a significant groundwork for articulating a strong critique towards patriarchy as well as reclaiming their own body.

To analyze the Indonesian body is to be presented with a different set of challenges than the existing analyses of works by Western women artists. For example, issues such as '*kodrat*' ('nature' in the religious sense of predestination), home, family, sexuality, class, culture, economy, religion and spirituality, form layers of meaning ever present in the Indonesian female body. Certainly, the issue of *kodrat* alone distinguishes the Indonesian women's body from the Western women's body.

Each individual artist covered in this paper interweaves the past, present and future in their works. They also present complex sexual, political, religious, ethnic and cultural layers of identity through predominantly performance and installation pieces. The strong tendency by these artists to use performance art and installation as media of expression perhaps can be attributed to the inter-disciplinary nature of these genres and also to the fact that they encourage strong interactivity between the artist and the audience.

Arahmaiani is one of the most prominent Indonesian women artists who have traversed the global art world since the 1990s. She graduated from the Bandung Institute of Technology in 1980 and continued her study in Australia and The Netherlands. Since her entry into the Indonesian art world, she has created works which are unambiguously political. She is known for her performance art pieces which in her earlier career often put her at odds with the authoritarian New Order regime in Indonesia.

Arahmaiani's performances have evolved from a refusal to the objectification of the female body to the locus of social trauma where the artist's body becomes the site of

protest. What is inflicted on the artist's body becomes a metaphor for what is inflicted on the social or collective body: Arahmaiani states that her works are to reclaim the female body.¹⁹ Her performances are often confrontational and they often involve participation from the audience, community members, or other collaborators.

One particular performance work is a piece titled "11th June 2002" (2003). The artist was invited to Canada and had to stopover in Los Angeles for a connecting flight. In the tense post-September 11 atmosphere when practically every Muslim traveling to the US was regarded as a suspect, she was arrested by US Immigration officials for not having a visa for the stopover. After a four-hour long interrogation, the artist was detained in a hotel room before continuing her trip. What came as a shock for her was that during her overnight stay, a male guard was instructed to accompany her to ensure nothing would happen, i.e. escape. The guard, who was a Muslim himself, was situated *inside* her room, thus transgressing the strict Islamic rules on the permissible physical proximity between unmarried male and female.

"11th June 2002" was exhibited at the 2005 Venice Biennale. The installation was arranged to emulate the hotel room where the artist stayed in Los Angeles. Arahmaiani added several elements such as the Quran and personal items to further draw the attention towards the banality of her situation. The installation and performance represented the injustice and violation, both cultural and sexual, on the artist's body and memory.²⁰

Melati Suryodarmo explores a different kind of bodily representation in her performance works. Born in Solo, Indonesia, and currently based in Gross Gleidingen, Germany, she studied International Relations and Political Science in Bandung, Indonesia before changing her course to study performance art under Anzu Furukawa and Marina Abramovich in Germany. Melati's works explore the boundaries between the artist's body and the environment which surrounds her. Melati states that her aim is to achieve a 'concentrated level of intensity without the use of narrative structures.'²¹ The intensity in her performances is built through a careful construction of relatively simple and/or repetitious movements as well as the relatively long duration of her performances.

“Exergie - Butter Dance” (2000) was performed with the artist wearing a black dress and high heels, in which she dances to a Makassan traditional music on a platform greased with butter where she continuously falls and yet picks herself up throughout the duration of the performance. The indignity and absurdity in the performance seem to challenge the way femininity as represented by the ‘little black dress’ and high heels is constructed by emphasizing the limitations of the female body. In another work, the artist is seen to be sitting on the floor, with long dark hair trailing the floor while cradling a raw cow’s liver on her lap.

“The Promise” (2002) brings up an association with the famous image Madonna and the Child, or perhaps on a more mundane level, an intimate moment between a mother and child. But in this performance the ‘child’ is replaced with a raw liver. Liver in the Indonesian/Javanese culture is associated with the phrase *makan ati* (literally translated as ‘eat liver’), which is the inability to express a negative feeling and where one has to swallow the indignity silently. The Freudian play on word association and visual imagery point out the ambiguousness of an aspect that is both sacred and profane to a woman, namely motherhood.

The next artist Titarubi also explores the notion of motherhood through a similar viewpoint. Titarubi studied at the Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, majored in Ceramics and is currently based in Yogyakarta. Titarubi’s work and solo exhibition in 2004, which have the same title “*Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil*,” (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind) emphasize the presence of the symbolic in this mixed-media installation. The installation is comprised of six ceramic busts of a child on wooden bases. Modeled from the body of her young daughter, the busts are inscribed with Arabic texts and illuminated by lamps above. The busts are accompanied by two upturned hands which face the viewers.

Moreover, the inscribed Arabic texts are a mixture of prayers and invocations for protection against bad spirits; an added protective ‘layers’ from the mother. Yet, the turned hands could also be interpreted as a rejection against the pressure on Indonesian children to learn Arabic prayers by heart without truly understanding the meaning. The installation thus not only criticizes the social construction of religion in Indonesia but it also indirectly questions the educational system during the New Order

regime. Perhaps significantly, the figure of the mother is absent in this work. The figure of the mother is represented from the signs for protection and the intimate portrayal of her young children. She exists through the 'mirror' images of the children as well as the emotional experience that emanates from the work.

Her next work titled "Bodyscape" (2005) reversed the masculine convention in art through playful irony. In this installation, the artist suspended several male figures and illuminated them with lights to emphasize the striking contrast between the figures' rigid posture and the colorful lace. The work delivered a critical message on the representation of the body in art, where the artist questions the political nature of the medium and subverts the masculine convention in art-making taught in Indonesian art academies.

The last artist is Marintan Sirait who also majored in Ceramics in the Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology. In the late 1980s Marintan was also a co-founder of a performance art group called *Sumber Waras* ('Source of Wellbeing'; the last word, however, could also be translated as 'sanity', thus 'Source of Sanity'). The now defunct group explored movements and the body as sources of self-awareness. Throughout the group's active period they often staged performances in the art school, theatres and on the streets of Bandung – Arahmaiani was also an active member of the group. Loosely based on the happening events familiar from Western art history in the 1970s, the group's philosophy remained influential to the subsequent development of performance art in Indonesia.

Similarly to Titarubi, Marintan creates installation works which bear only traces of the artist's self. The absence of the real body in Marintan's works evokes the transience of the human body in contrast to the more permanent forms of art. Her installation pieces are built through an elaborate, ritualistic performance in which the artist's traces are heavy with memory, absence and the artist's inner life.

"Kami Sedang Membangun Rumah" (We are Building a House), created in 1995, is one of the key works of Marintan's artistic explorations. In this installation performance, the artist created small mounds of sand on the floor of a 500 x 500 m space, where she then traced lines around the small mounds using her fingers. In 2007,

Marintan created an installation (without a performance) in Jakarta which showed the evolution of this piece with the title “Thank You for Blessing the Road I Walk On.” The contemplative nature of the installation performance reminds the viewer of the volatility of life, further emphasized by the absence of the artist’s body which is used to explore what it is like to be, to sense, to act. Like Melati Suryodarmo’s performances, Marintan Sirait’s performance installations are heavy with spiritual meanings which originate from the socio-cultural context of the artist. The work evokes both a cultural practice – a healing ritual from her North Sumatran ancestry – and an obsession with the past and the origin of self.

As part of an ongoing PhD project, this paper was not intended to define feminism in an Indonesian context or what is good art by Indonesian women artists. Rather, it has merely presented an overview of how some Indonesian women artists have sought to create an ongoing dialogue and critique of patriarchy in the Indonesian art world. As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, different artists have used different feminist strategies to achieve this goal, including a critical engagement with the ambiguous nature of motherhood (a *kodrat* for Indonesian women), a critique of the hegemonic nature of Indonesian art, and an exploration of the self. Perhaps also significantly, some of the artists have also represented Islam in their works. Given that Islam and its signification is a sensitive topic in Indonesia, the representation of the faith is still largely confined to male artists. And yet Islam in the works of women artists is represented from both deeply personal experiences and an insider/outsider critical point of view. The works of Arahmaiani and Titarubi seem to ask the viewer to contemplate the faith’s exterior symbols. It is a nuanced interpretation of a faith which has been deeply woven into the cultural and social fabric of Indonesian society.

The overall project in which this paper is embedded will be the first attempt to read Indonesian art works within a feminist framework. Driven by the same thinking as many other feminist projects in the past, this research project will be vital for Indonesian women artists to pave the way for reclaiming their own voices and identities as well as for developing a critical thinking towards feminism in Indonesia. As has been shown in this paper, the works of Arahmaiani, Titarubi, Melati Suryodarmo and Marintan Sirait have presented rich and varied representations of

Indonesian women and society, what is needed is comprehensive analyses of their artistic explorations.

Notes:

¹ Meskimmon, Marsha 2002, 'Feminisms and Art Theory' in *A Companion to Art Theory*, P. Smith and C. Wilde (eds.), Blackwell Publishing, p. 380.

² Pollock, Griselda 1992, "Degas/Images/Women; Women/Degas/Images: What Difference Does Feminism Make to Art History?" in *Dealing With Degas: Representations of Women and The Politics of Vision*, R. Kendall and G. Pollock (eds.), Pandora, p. 24.

³ Wolff, Janet 1990, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Polity Press.

⁴ Shohat, Ella (ed.) 1998, *Multicultural Feminisms in Transnational Age*, The MIT Press.

⁵ Betterton, Rosemary 1996, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body*, Routledge.

⁶ Sadli, 2002, 'Feminism in Indonesia in an International Context' in *Women in Indonesia: Gender, Equity and Development*, Robinson and Bessell (eds.), p. 80-81.

⁷ See Sadli, 2002, p. 90 and also a report by N. Pambudy on one these discussions of which the author attended in August 2007 in Indonesia, "*Membaca Perempuan Melalui Seni Rupa*" in <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0708/06/swara/3740509.htm>, 2007.

⁸ Yuliman, Sanento 2001, "Nuansa Putri VS Kuasa Lelaki" in *Dua Seni Rupa: Pemilihan Tulisan Sanento Yuliman*, A. Hasan (Ed.), Yayasan Kalam, p. 241. Originally published in TEMPO magazine, 31 October 1987.

⁹ Yuliman, Sanento 2001, p. 241.

¹⁰ Noerhadi, T.H. 2003, "Perihal Rekayasa dan Bias Gender" in *Politik dan Gender Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia*, Yayasan Seni Cemeti, p. 126-150.

¹¹ Supriyanto, Enin 2003 “Infrastruktur dan Proses Rezimentasi Seni” in *Politik dan Gender Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia*, Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2003, p. 151-164. See also Supriyanto’s essay on Kartini “The Mother of Indonesian Art?” in *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, C. Bianpoen, F. Wardani and W. Dirgantoro, Yayasan Seni Rupa Indonesia, Jakarta, 2007, p. 15-20.

¹² Dirgantoro, Wulan 2005, “Tentang Kria: On Bandung’s Contemporary Craft” in <http://www.craftculture.org/World/dirgantoro.htm>.

¹³ Sinaga, Dolorosa 2003 “Wacana Seni Rupa Perempuan: Antara Konsep dan Konteks” in *Politik dan Gender Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia*, Yayasan Seni Cemeti, p. 123.

¹⁴ Sinaga, Dolorosa 2003, p. 121-122. Interestingly, Sinaga’s dismissal of the political nature of the medium reflects the discrepancy of approaches in feminisms between art theorists and practitioners in Indonesia. The pervasiveness of masculine hegemony in art could be seen as one of the causes of this situation, but also perhaps due to not enough critical responses within the Indonesian art world.

¹⁵ Supriyanto, Enin 2001, “Perempuan, Seni Rupa, dan Sejarah” in <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0106/01/dikbud/per38.htm>, accessed 31/07/06. Tommy F Awuy in his curatorial essay for the “*Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang*” states that the premise of the exhibition is to bring about the awareness that women artists are able to traverse to the public spheres which are previously restricted to them and to express their private sphere through art-making processes (*Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang*, n.d, Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta, n.p). Significantly, most exhibitions by women artists are still curated by male curators. For further information on gender and the Indonesian art world see “Women in Indonesian Modern Art: Chronologies and Testimonies” in *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, C. Bianpoen, F. Wardani and W. Dirgantoro, YSRI, Jakarta, 2007, p. 23-33.

¹⁶ Barry, Judith and Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy 1987, ‘Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art-Making’ in *Visibly Female: Feminism and Art Today An Anthology*, H. Robinson (ed.), Camden Press, p. 106-117. Originally published in *Screen* magazine, Summer 1980.

¹⁷ See Nead, Linda 1992, *Female Nude Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Routledge.

¹⁸ Wolff, Janet 1990, p. 82.

¹⁹ See “Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin” in *Politik dan Gender: Aspek-aspek Seni Visual Indonesia*, Yayasan Seni Cemeti, 2003, p. 172.

²⁰ See *Arahmaiani in Bangkok: Stitching the Wound*, exhibition catalogue, The Art Centre at the Jim Thompson House, Thailand, 2007 for further continuation of this theme.

²¹ Artist's statement in <http://www.melatisuryodarmo.com>, accessed 31/07/08.