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TWO WOMEN FROM INDONESIA

The body turning, a young man reaches out, takes a firm grip on the woman’s outstretched arm and writes on it with a marker pen. She turns again: there is writing all over the upper part of her lightly clad body. The lighting is dramatic and the action is violent, although the woman isn’t harmed. This is the video record of a performance by the Indonesian artist, Arahmaiani, called *His Story on My Body*, performed in Bandung in 1999¹. The format is familiar - similar performances have been done in Western art - but this is Indonesia and with the change in context, the meaning has shifted. The atmosphere is loaded, for Arahmaiani is a Sundanese Muslim woman and this physical contact between men and women contravenes strong customs of gender interaction in public. Arahmaiani is using her own body to symbolise power structures that operate to suppress women and this is confrontational, political and rare in Indonesia.

In the same year and a few months later a figure stands silently outside in the gardens of the Queensland Art Gallery. It is completely covered in the skin of chickens’ feet, claws still attached, and nothing can be seen of the person within but for the eyes and feet. The performance/installation piece, called *Hi Inlander* by the Netherlands - born Indonesian artist, Mella Jaarsma, includes three other cloaks of fish skins, kangaroo skins (in honour of the country exhibiting the work) and, tellingly, frog skins. The cloaks reference *Jilbabs*, or Indonesian female Islamic dress, but chickens feet and frog skins are Chinese food and are *non halal*, or unclean for Muslims. To imagine being confined inside that ‘unclean’ skin would cause a psychosomatic shudder. Jaarsma sought to raise awareness and shift cultural perceptions in the atmosphere of racial tension that erupted in 1998 after the downfall of the Suharto regime and focused on the Chinese community.

Both Arahmaiani and Jaarsma aim to provoke debate with their art by raising the three topics supposedly not suitable for polite conversation: politics, sex and religion and the taboos associated with them. Jaarsma said, “it is important to make people aware, to extend how

they think and give them another opinion, something to think about".² But their methods differ: Jaarsma's approach is layered with references for consideration; Arahmaiani is head-on confrontational, she is the avant-garde for women's art in Indonesia and she believes the simple, direct approach is the most effective. Arahmaiani said, "...equality can only be implemented after several prerequisites are met: the destruction of male domination over females, political openness and of course political change."³ Both the artists address Indonesian culture through performance and installation and share the assumption implicit in activist art: that by provoking debate they can raise consciousness concerning issues and contribute to effecting change. They are among the very few in Indonesia who have addressed issues relating to women, yet both artists resist the term 'feminist', Arahmaiani believing there are distinct differences between western feminism and the growing feminist movement in Indonesia. According to Arahmaiani, the western aims of sexual liberation and individual self-fulfilment are inadequate in the face of inequalities that are the result of a colonial history and an uneven modernity that benefited some over others in Indonesia.⁴

In the revolutionary independence movement after the Second World War women played a role equal with men and were encouraged to be freedom fighters, but with the establishment of Suharto's *Orde Baru* or New Order regime, the domestic role of women was reinforced. Hierarchical Javanese customs combined with Islamic social conventions to make the patriarchal family the institutionalised basis of the state that has been referred to as *State Ibuism*⁵. Suharto stated the essential nature of women was to "...provide for the continuation of life that is healthy, good and pleasurable..." and that the correct position of a woman was "...as the mother in the household or *ibu rumah tangga*".⁶

Professor Saporinah Sadli, chair of the Indonesian National Commission on Violence against Women, said,

The terms 'feminism', 'feminist' and even 'gender' are still questioned by the majority of Indonesians. They are considered by many to be non-indigenous concepts that are irrelevant to Indonesian values. Certain assumptions remain common: feminism is a Western or northern concept, it is anti-men, it perceives men to be the source of all gender inequity, it promotes the acceptance of lesbianism and so forth. This is despite the fact that the principle of gender equity is embodied in article 27 of the 1945 Constitution, and in other basic laws of the Republic of Indonesia.⁷

The *Qur'an* appears to support the patriarchal structure of Islamic households but from a position of guardian. The *Qur'an, An Nisa* 1989: [4] : 34 states:

Men are protectors

And maintainers of women,

Because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because

They support them

From their means.

The problem lies more in interpretation by *Kyai*, or Islamic religious leaders, and *Ulama* or scholars, and the more extreme the sect, the more likely it is to restrict the freedom of women and seek a justifying text from the *Qur'an*. Women's Islamic organisations have urged the *Kyai* to re-interpret the *Qur'an* in favour of women's equality with men in order to improve conditions for women.⁸ Polygamy, for example, discouraged under the Suharto regime, is increasing and is a serious disadvantage for Indonesian women when, apart from Islamic custom, there are no effective civil laws to protect women and their children if they are superseded by another wife, or abandoned. Vice President, Hamzah Haz, had five wives, one more than a Muslim is allowed, claiming that powerful Javanese men often had many wives; yet he is not Javanese but from Kalimantan, so really the issue was power.⁹ *Otonomi Daerah*, the legislation for increased local autonomy brought in after the downfall of Suharto, has allowed the introduction of *Sharia* law in some areas, law that is often detrimental to the position of women. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, being modern and independent or being religiously righteous seem to be incompatible roles for women.

1998 was a year of turmoil for Indonesia. The Asian economic turndown contributed to the collapse of the economy and with it the Suharto regime. Habibie, Suharto's chosen replacement, looked equally unstable and riots, often believed to be provoked by the military, targeted the Chinese communities in the major cities of Java. The Chinese have been identified as outsiders and not part of the diverse ethnic makeup of the archipelago when some Chinese families have been established in Indonesia for centuries. Certain Chinese entrepreneurs became rich and influential under the Suharto regime which attracted

resentment, but it was the small businesses that were looted and burned and Chinese women who were attacked. Arahmaiani witnessed some of these events in Jakarta and was deeply shocked. She translated her experience into a work in the Philippines titled, *Burning Bodies - Burning Country*, where she performed in a space surrounded by large brush drawings of figures. She dedicated the work to “...the souls of the women who were violated and killed last May in Jakarta, or who committed suicide afterwards.”¹⁰

Jaarsma responded to these events by organising a group performance in Malioboro Street, the main thoroughfare of Yogyakarta. She contacted some ten expatriate friends and together they cooked frogs’ legs in woks and served them to the passing people. The Chinese food was offered on a paper wrapper with the word *Pribumi* written on it, a term meaning: ‘of the soil or native’, and a derogatory term from Dutch colonial times. During the riots people used the term on signs to identify as ‘native Indonesians’ rather than Chinese, hoping to protect their property from damage. The original understanding of the term, *Pribumi*, had been reversed and Jaarsma was pointing out that Indonesians who once were repressed were now repressing others. It was a dangerous time, the *pribumi* signs could still be seen and mosques were being burned. The night before the performance some of her friends wanted to pull out but, in the event, Jaarsma felt they were protected by their foreign status and people accepted the offering, entering into the spirit of things and asking questions. One man wearing the Javanese *peci* or cap identifying him as Javanese, lectured them on the meaning of *halal*, moving down the line until someone engaged him in *bahasa Indonesia*, his own language, then he too sampled the food. Jaarsma was cooking with racial and post colonial ingredients using the most basic form of communication, food.¹¹

Jaarsma has continued to work with the concept of the *jilbab* using a variety of media. Her work, *SARA-swati*, was a floor-length *jilbab* made from dried strips of banana tree trunk with fingers pointing outwards, finger pointing being considered offensive. Saraswati was a warrior princess from the *Mahabarata*, the Indian Hindu source of Indonesian *Wayang*, or shadow puppet performances. SARA is also the acronym for *Suku, Agama, Ras, Antargolongan*, or ethnicity, religion and race between groups, a slogan the Suharto regime used to promote tolerance and avoid tensions amongst the diverse ethnicities of the archipelago. Jaarsma felt that since the collapse of Suharto’s regime, attitudes represented by finger pointing were contributing to internal division that had escalated into atrocities. In the work,

Moral Pointers the *jilbabs* were sewn from gold coloured moth cocoons that looked precious but were fool's gold, and with others, *The Healer* and *The Feeder*, the *jilbabs* consisted of dried squid and seaweed and were cloaks of herbal medicines that trailed into pots of soup. Much of her work has related to food and cooking which are fundamental human activities common to everyone yet distinguished by ethnicity.

Since 9/11 Islam has become the focus of attention for western nations, the 'Other' to European based culture in the terms of Edward Said when he defined the orientalising tendencies of the West. A women wearing the *jilbab* head scarf is the most visible symbol of Islamic culture and to westerners familiar with gender equality, it is simultaneously exotic yet disturbing in its confinement of women. The Chirac Government's legislation against the wearing of religious symbols in state schools appears aimed at the headscarfs of Muslim girls and with them the 10% of the French population who identify as Muslim. In comparison Indonesians approach *jilbabs* differently. For many it is not much more than a fashion statement to be coordinated with other clothing when the occasion requires, and fashion magazines offer versions on models with elaborate make up and cosmetics.¹² At midday in Yogyakarta girls wearing jeans and the *jilbabs* required by their educational institutions, emerge from school, sling a leg over the rear saddle of their boyfriend's motorbike and zoom off. Worn this way the *jilbab* and jeans combine being modern with an Islamic identity and become an Indonesian style informed by familiarity with international fashion. On the other hand women can choose to wear the *jilbab* to avoid being perceived as a sexual object and signal that the wearer is committed to their religion. It is with the growth of Islamic fundamentalism that the wearing of the *jilbab*, particularly full length, has stressed a chauvinistic piety disturbing for many Indonesians. Fundamental Islam is seen by many as a Middle Eastern import and as foreign in Indonesia as in France, for Islam in Indonesia had over the centuries merged with local customs and religions and most practiced it with elements incorporated from Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism.

Mella Jaarsma was born and educated in the Netherlands and did not arrive in Indonesia until after she had graduated from a Dutch art academy, but she has lived in Indonesia for some 25 years with her husband, Nindityo Adipurnono, and their children. In one sense Jaarsma's choice of the *jilbab* as a motif for exploring ideas places her as the western outsider intrigued by the distinctive costume of the oriental world, but in another sense she has played with and

developed its symbolism as an Indonesian insider. So both in her work and her personal situation - her race, marriage and life in Indonesia - she is a personification of globalism, the manner in which people and cultures have moved and blended since the second half of the 20th century. Her most recent work involved *jilbabs* as tents with the title, *Refugee Only*. Again spectators are invited to imagine themselves as anonymous wearers inside the tent and in the ambiguous position that the *jilbab* provides, being simultaneously protected and confined. The work accrues different meanings in different contexts and while referring to the growing number of displaced people both inside Indonesia and internationally, it will resonate with Australians sensitive and sympathetic to the position of refugees on our own shores.

Jaarsma and Arahmaiani come from very different backgrounds. Arahmaiani holds an almost mythological position in Indonesian contemporary art because of her personal history and confrontational performances. Her father, once a member of the government, is a Muslim scholar or *Ulama* and her grandmother ran a *pesantren* or school for Muslim girls in Bandung. At an early age when she declared she wanted to be a *nabi* or prophet when she grew up, she was offended to learn that it was a role reserved for men. She developed an interest in the underprivileged and repressed through, first of all, seeing the life of their family servants and then, after leaving home at the age of 14, from living on the streets.¹³ Her story is well known and street life in Jakarta and Bandung being dangerous, it makes her a role model difficult for Indonesian women and women artists to follow.

Her performances are simple, her work raw and direct, relying on the semantic possibilities of the objects displayed with little aesthetic presentation. But in the process she leaves us with powerful images: the body lying on the cremation bench surrounded by photographs of sexual encounters, the Balinese dancer waving Star Wars toys, the reconstruction of the room where she was held as an enemy alien when transiting the United States. In 1994 Arahmaiani exhibited a Coca cola bottle, a condom and a copy of the *Qur'an* together in a museum vitrine and members of a fundamentalist group removed them, threatening her when she objected. She challenges Islamic teaching locally and international capitalism globally and since 9/11 has criticised the stereotyping of Muslims by the west.

Arahmaiani has been one of the ground-breakers advocating performance art in Indonesia for, although festivals and ceremonies make performance an integral part of traditional art,

the public found it difficult to understand contemporary performance as art.¹⁴ It is important to her that she is physically engaged in the work while Jaarsma has someone else wear the *jilbab* and her ‘performance’ is engaging the audience. Each from their own perspective address issues concerning Indonesian women and have brought them to an international audience.

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¹ Part of an exhibition, *Dayang Sumbi Refuses the Status Quo*, French Cultural Centre (CCF) Bandung, June, 1999.

² Interview, 28/06/00, Yogyakarta.

³ Arie Dyanto, “Kebudayaan itu Berkelamin komik tentang Arahmaiani”, “Culture is Sexist, a comic based on an interview with Arahmaiani” in *Aspek-Aspek Seni Visual Indonesia, Politik dan Gender*, Yayasan Seni Cemeti, Yogyakarta 2003, p169, translated by Kat Sadler, May 2004.

⁴ Interview, 25/6/01, Air Art House, Jakarta.

⁵ Julia I. Suryakusuma, “The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia”, in Laurie J. Sears, Ed., *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, Duke University Press, 1996, p.98.

⁶ Soeharto: *My Thoughts, Words and Deeds: Autobiography as told to G. Dwipayana and Kamadhan K.H.*, quoted in Sylvia Tiwon, “Models and Maniacs Articulating the Female in Indonesia”, in Laurie J. Sears, ed., *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, Duke University Press, 1996, p.59

⁷ Saparinah Sadli, “Feminism in Indonesia in an International Context”, *Women in Indonesia, Gender, Equity and Development*, Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessell, eds., Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2002, p. 80.

⁸ Lies Marcoes, “Women’s grassroots movements in Indonesia: a case study of the PKK and Islamic women’s organisations,” in Kathryn Robinson and Sharon Bessell, eds., *op.cit.*, p.194.

⁹ Reported by Dr Rochayah Machali, senior lecturer in Indonesian studies, UNSW, 8/10/02.

¹⁰ Datuin, F. M. V. and Flores, P. D., 1999, *Women imaging women : home, body, memory : papers from the Conference on Artists from Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam*, Cultural Center of the Philippines, March 11-14, 1999, Quezon City, Art Studies Foundation. The performance is described in detail in Astri Wright, “Thoughts from the Crest of a Breaking Wave”, *op.cit.*, pp. 55 - 56.

¹¹ Interview, 28/06/00.

¹² Amrih Widodo, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, speaking at the Asia Pacific week seminar for Indonesia, Feb. 2004. There are a number of magazines specifically for fashionable body-covering Islamic dress for women.

¹³ Arahmaiani, Interview 25/6/01.

¹⁴ Prasetyohadi, “Controversy surrounds the merits of performance art”, *The Jakarta Post*, 16 April, 2000. An article concerning the Jakarta Performance Art Festival at Teater Utan Kayu, March 2000.