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“I Don’t Want to Limit Myself to Binary Thinking”: An Interview With the Indonesian Artist Arahmaiani

Gunnar Stange

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Arahmaiani is one of the best known contemporary Indonesian women artists. Her works, performances, and installations have been exhibited at 7 biennials and in a total of 29 countries. She has taught at universities in Australia, China, Indonesia, Germany, the United States, and the Netherlands. Arahmaiani is a politically committed artist. In her works, she addresses the reduction of human beings to consumers, which is on the rise all over the globe, as well as the discrimination against people on the grounds of gender, religion, and ethnicity. While the phenomena addressed in her art are always of a global nature, the majority of her works deal with cultural, social, and political realities of Indonesia. She views these as being threatened by an increasing politicization and essentialization of Islam, whose protagonists supplant the country’s diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious heritage with a purely Islamic interpretation of the Indonesian past. In this interview, conducted by Gunnar Stange in December 2016, Arahmaiani elaborates on the main themes she addresses in her art works as well as on current political, social, and environmental challenges in Indonesia.

Keywords: Engaged Art; Environmentalism; Indonesia; Political Activism; Religious Extremism

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GUNNAR STANGE: *You have been active in the Indonesian and international art scene for some thirty years now. What were the drivers for your decision to set off on the precarious journey to become an artist?*

ARAHMAIANI: Indeed, time flies fast. I see myself as an artist and at the same time I want to give meaning to life. This is not an easy path. Yet, I consider this a call of my conscience that I simply can’t resist. My feet keep carrying me towards that direction. I follow my intuition. Besides that, I have loved to draw, paint, dance, and play music since I was a little child. So, already from that time on, I believed that I should become an artist. Even though some people discouraged me in the beginning (including my parents), I was sure that art is what I love and I wanted to become a good artist!

GUNNAR: *What are the main themes or questions that you are dealing with in your work?*

ARAHMAIANI: I think that the main theme of my works is power relations. But not limited to a narrow mind frame along binary oppositions. Only a free imagination makes it possible to explore fields that couldn’t be reached within the

boundaries of a binary thinking. I ask very simple questions, for example: ‘What does our life on this planet actually mean?’ In my quest for answers, I am particularly interested in norms and values that we inherited from our ancestors. In my work, I try to reinterpret these philosophies in the context of contemporary conditions.

GUNNAR: *You have been given many ‘names’ by the international art scene. Some call you an engaged artist. Others say that you are a political artist. How would you describe yourself?*

ARAHMAIANI: As antiquated as it may sound, I understand my work as duty and responsibility. If I put it in a modern or contemporary context that is characterized by individualism, I might simply say I do what I do because I have the right to do it, and I claim it. My way of thinking departs from ancient Asian traditions of thought. At the same time, I study and try to understand modern ways of thought, too. As I said earlier, I don’t want to limit myself to a binary thinking. In my way of thinking, two opposing things are actually related to each other. Thus, you can’t choose one over the other. This would be a simplification which ultimately leads to a ‘black and white’ categorization, which may look simple but actually causes many problems. In Asian traditions of thought, opposing principles had always been juxtaposed and were considered to be part of reality. Yet, this doesn’t mean that such a way of thinking doesn’t know the value of truth. It is about understanding reality as it is and dealing with it in a wise way. No easy endeavor, indeed. In principle, art is open and there are many things it can express. And it is easy to share it in public space. In this way, art can function as a bridge between different disciplines and lifestyles. This perfectly fits my multi- or transdisciplinary approach as an efficient way to express ideas.

GUNNAR: *We had the wonderful opportunity to work together on your retrospective exhibition “Violence No More” in Frankfurt am Main in autumn 2015. The exhibition was a journey through the last 30 years of your work, much of it regarding Indonesia. What are the most pressing political, societal, and environmental challenges in Indonesia these days?*

ARAHMAIANI: We are facing many problems in Indonesia: problems that are related to the past, the present, and the future. First of all, there is the trauma of colonization that has not been properly addressed. Then, there are the blind spots of Indonesian history that are still waiting to see a truthful portrayal, such as the genocide of 1965/66.¹ Dealing with the past in such a way has shaped the mentality, the way of thinking, and a certain attitude of Indonesians that is [still] problematic up until today. It is the very reason for the fact that corruption and hypocrisy have become epidemic in a country that is so rich in culture and in natural as well as human resources. This, again, has led to other problems like the ever-widening social asymmetry between the rich and the

1 After an attempted, yet failed, coup to overthrow the Sukarno government in September 1965, powerful parts within the Indonesian military accused the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) of being behind the coup. In its aftermath, the Indonesian military, aided by thugs and civil society mass organization, killed between 500,000 and 1,500,000 alleged members and sympathizers of Indonesia’s communist movement. Whether or not these gross human rights violations should be categorized as a genocide is still being debated among scholars.

poor. We can see that values like plurality and tolerance are less and less respected. Groups that claim to represent the Muslim majority increasingly treat minorities in a barbaric and inhumane way. This is true for non-Muslim religious groups in general, and the Chinese minority in particular. Women are also highly affected by these developments. Traditional and religious conservative values consider women not as equals to men. Still, there are movements of critical women who try to change this condition. But, if we look at the recent strengthening of conservative and even radical voices within the Muslim community, we can observe a backlash regarding the situation of women in Indonesia. It has become a normal thing that a member of parliament, who most likely is also a rich entrepreneur, has more than one wife.² Things like this have become socially acceptable again.

Also, our consumerist and materialist lifestyle increasingly erodes the consciousness that is needed to protect the environment. It seems that the government and corporations have an easy time getting rid of customary and traditional values that actually respect and protect the environment. This is how customary and traditional communities are marginalized and their lands transformed for industrial use that only benefits private businesses. Forced eviction and land grabbing by private businesses or the government are common practice all over the archipelago. The enormous tropical forest fires of 2015 and 2016 were, of course, the most visible example. These fires, purposely set by palm oil entrepreneurs, were the worst in a century.³ They have not only destroyed thousands of hectares of forest. They have also caused severe air pollution with heavy impacts on the health of local communities that often lose their land and livelihoods due to the fires. The forest fauna was also highly affected. Many animals died in the flames, got injured, and lost their habitat.

Another serious environmental issue is the pollution of water and soil as a result of the extensive use of chemical fertilizers. This farming system was introduced during the Suharto era in the context of the Green Revolution. Seeds, fertilizers, and even farming equipment had to be imported, rendering the farmers highly dependent on the producers. Up until today, the Ministry for Agriculture negotiates farming goods contracts with corporations like Monsanto. Another reason for the worsening of environmental pollution is the absence of an efficient waste management system. Rivers, arable and non-arable land, and even the sea are full of waste, mostly plastic waste that takes a very long time to decompose. The result is an increasing number of natural disasters such as floods and landslides.

All these problems have to be seen in the context of a poor education system. According to a survey, Indonesia has the worst education system in Southeast Asia. It is no surprise that Indonesians in general have a unique problem or, if you want to put it another way, difficulty: the ability to think logically.

2 A Muslim man may marry up to four women if he is able to treat them equally. On the other hand, Islam does not provide for polyandry. Whether or not this traditional practice is compatible with the idea of universal human rights is being hotly debated within the Islamic scholarly community and beyond.

3 Forest fires are a seasonal phenomenon in Indonesia. Purposely set fires are used as a cheap method to clear land for new planting. Most of the affected areas contain highly flammable peat soil, which causes the fires to spread quickly and makes it highly difficult to stop them.

GUNNAR: *As you said, Indonesia has experienced increasing levels of discrimination and violence against religious minorities in recent years. What are the drivers behind these developments and do you see any signs of change for the better?*

ARAHMAIANI: There are a couple of interest groups involved in that issue – at the local, the national, and even the international level. This includes politicians, entrepreneurs, and certain religious groups that are ambitious, have a limited knowledge, and want to prove that religion holds a superior truth. This makes the issue quite complex. The root problem of today's global 'political game' is the wish to control all kinds of resources. But this must also be seen in the context of an international 'political game' in which international corporations and even governments with all kinds of agendas have an interest in stigmatizing the Muslim community. At the same time, international radical Islamic groups develop their very own strategies to reach their goals. Conservative and radical groups on the local and national levels try to capitalize on this situation by claiming that Islam as a religion and a specific group of people is being oppressed and colonized by the West. These groups use this kind of rhetoric to legitimate their claims and to condemn everyone not in line with their way of life and thinking. Usually, they call them infidels. On the other hand, politicians at all levels try to capitalize on this situation and on the leaders of these radical groups for their own benefits. After the end of the so-called New Order of Suharto, it became evident that his regime 'created' radical groups in order to spread chaos and terror in society. Politicians used this atmosphere to their own advantage, for example, by portraying themselves as guarantors of the public order. To cut it short, the elites determine the rules of the game and, if need be, create disasters (like war or terrorist attacks) and willingly sacrifice people. These kinds of injustices are still practiced – through the economy, the manipulation of culture, the instrumentalization of religion, or the absence of the rule of law in everyday life. In other words: law can be bought. If you ask me whether I see a change for the better, I must honestly tell you that I don't see any reason for optimism at the moment.

GUNNAR: *Back in 2014, Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was elected president of Indonesia. His constituency considered him the Indonesian Barack Obama and had high hopes regarding the rule of law and human rights protection. Yet, under his presidency, the human rights situation seems to be worsening. Would you say that Indonesia's relatively young democratization process is experiencing a crisis of political representation?*

ARAHMAIANI: In the beginning, Jokowi was considered a light of hope by many Indonesians, especially by the poorer strata that suffer from injustices. Most important for this perception was his background as a small entrepreneur who came from a poor family. Additionally, he had no connection with the New Order whatsoever. He was the embodiment of the promise and the hope for a new type of leader that would bring welfare to the Indonesian people. But after he took office, it turned out that in reality he could not live up to these expectations. So, very disappointing. Injustice is still going on, corruption is becoming even more rampant, and human rights seem to be a mere slogan without any meaning. One example for the inhumane treatment of people is the fact that drug couriers receive the death penalty and are being executed

whereas the real bosses are at large. Also, corrupt politicians who are clearly guilty are not punished. The weakness of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is very disappointing. Other examples are, of course, connected to the dark history of the 1965 genocide. Although there are demands for justice and official apologies for the victims from many sides, nothing substantial has happened up until today. It seems that the more time passes by the less hope there is.

GUNNAR: *Do artists play a significant role in political and environmental activism in Indonesia? And, are there any governmental or private institutions that provide support and/or funding for politically engaged artists?*

ARAHMAIANI: The movement of art activism already started during the Indonesian independence revolution.⁴ So, there is quite a long tradition in this field. And even under the New Order, this art activism was strong and played a role in the political and social life of Indonesia. Actually, up until today there are artists in Indonesia that are active in this field. They are quite loyal and strong. Although the international art scene has changed a lot, the art market is becoming stronger and stronger. Besides the positive effect that more artists can actually make a living, the negative side is that the art world is increasingly focusing on the market which is more and more becoming an arena for business and investment. With a poor infrastructure, for example, the absence of publicly financed museums, and a critics scene that is half dead, market domination with all its games becomes stronger. The effect is that it is more about whether an artwork is a good investment than about the artwork itself. Art that has social-political or environmental messages is usually done on the artists' own initiative, or as endorsed by NGOs. Of course, there had already been a trend in the painting market that considered engaged art as something fancy. Yet, it was simply a trend that was soon replaced by another trend, and so on. The problem with the support of NGOs is actually that it is usually temporary and project-based. The rationale is usually that the NGOs can communicate their agenda. Additionally, sometimes NGOs are involved in corruption cases, which also constitutes a risk for artists working with them. In principle, there is no public institution in Indonesia that supports the activities of engaged artists. I'm completely on my own as I have to finance my activities myself.

GUNNAR: *For more than five years, you have been working with Tibetan monks in the Yushu region. The core focus of your work is to raise awareness for environmental protection. Among other things, you have initiated a tree planting campaign that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of newly planted trees.⁵ How is your Tibetan experience influencing you ethically and on a conceptual level?*

ARAHMAIANI: Actually, it has been already more than six years. Yes, my first aim is to develop a consciousness for the environment and to remind people how important

4 After the declaration of Indonesian independence on 17 August 1945, the Indonesians fought a war of independence against the Dutch, the former colonial power, between 1945 and 1949.

5 The trees make an important contribution to the reduction of soil erosion.

the Tibet Plateau is in this context. The Tibet Plateau is also known as the '3rd pole' as it is the world's third-largest area of ice. It is also called the 'water tower' of Asia, with Asia's seven largest rivers originating there: the Mekong, the Yangtze, the Yellow River, the Brahmaputra, the Ganges, the Indus, and the Salween. Global warming has severe effects on that area, as it causes the melting of the glaciers as well as the thawing of the permafrost. At the same time, there is an increase in flood disasters in Asian countries. And, of course, we can't allow this to continue. Until now, we have been working on the problem from different angles. This includes waste management, planting trees, re-starting collective organic farming, revitalizing the tradition of nomadic livestock farming with a revolving fund for Yaks (called the 'Yak Bank'), and the management of water sources for everyday use, energy generation, and medication. We got very lucky when two years ago the local government finally started to like the projects and started to support and even finance them. That's why the projects developed really fast. When I visited Tibet last summer, they estimated that already more than one million trees had been planted since we started the project.

My experiences from working and interacting with as well as learning from Tibetan Buddhists strengthened my belief in what I'm feeling and thinking. Although, I'm not completely free of doubt. Since I was a teenager, my thinking and understanding of reality has been grounded in ancient philosophy. Most people in Indonesia find that funny, especially from the Muslim community. Yet, in Tibet I received support and even confirmation for my way of thinking. I had the chance to deepen my understanding together with my friends and teachers, lamas from Tibet, both in the Lab Monastery in Tibet and the Sera Jey Monastery in India. Of course, that has deeply influenced my understanding of ethical concepts and ideas. I understood that, for a long time, the principle ideas of my art works and writings have been grounded in Buddhism. I simply wasn't aware of it. It also deepened my knowledge of pre-Indonesian history. It's very important to revive this knowledge because many Indonesians don't understand their own history anymore. They have lost that knowledge. The most important influence on me from all of this is that I understand so much more and am so much more conscious of what I actually want to express in my works. A deeper understanding of ethical principles, for example, the principle of non-violence, allows me to comprehend humanitarian problems with regard to social politics, culture, and the environment in a more holistic way.

GUNNAR: You are one of the busiest travelers I know, going from one artist in residence program to another, having exhibitions, and giving classes all around the world. Has being a 'modern nomad' been a conscious decision and how has constantly being on the move influenced your worldview?

ARAHMAIANI: I have been living a nomadic life for more than thirty years now. It all started when I left Indonesia for Sydney in 1983 after I was threatened by the Suharto regime. Before I left, I had been imprisoned for a month. I was finally released but not allowed to perform in public. On top of that, I was thrown out of Bandung University where I was studying fine arts back then. Living on the move gave me the chance to get to know many kinds of cultural practices and beliefs. It also helped me to understand how the global economy with all its effects actually works. I'm mainly interested

in its negative effects, such as injustice and the widening gap and asymmetry between the poor majority and the rich minority. It also helped me to understand how deeply intertwined the world actually is or, even, that everything is connected to everything. This has allowed me to learn and see the underlying norms and structures of the problems which we can find in human life. Yes, I believe we are all humans regardless of skin color, culture, or belief. Humans with all their abilities have certain strengths – as compared to other beings like animals – that can be used to achieve positive but also negative ends. For example, if power ambitions or negative emotions are not controlled, it can cause catastrophes and a lot of suffering for humans as well as the environment. In a global system that is increasingly interconnected, people should really open up to get to know and understand each other as well as cooperate in addressing the global problems that are threatening the continuation of life. Only if we appreciate and respect difference, will we be able to understand that all humans are related to each other and be able to co-exist. War and fighting are things that only lead to destruction and need to be critically questioned and prevented. The same applies to the weapons industry, which only profits a few but kills and destroys many people. The best would be to shut them down. Seriously, we have to strengthen inter-community relations in order to achieve peace and prosperity together to make sure that the future of the coming generations will be a bright one.

GUNNAR: *Arahmaiani, thank you very much!*

ARAHMAIANI: You are welcome.

Translation from the Indonesian: Gunnar Stange



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gunnar Stange is editor of the Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies. He currently holds a position as Assistant Professor in Human Geography at the Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna, Austria. He received his PhD from the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany. His research interests include peace and conflict studies, development studies, and forced migration. His regional focus is on South-East Asia, mainly Indonesia.

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