

ASIAN VISUAL CULTURES



Wulan Dirgantoro

# Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia

## Defining Experiences

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia

# Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

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# Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia

*Defining Experiences*

*Wulan Dirgantoro*

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# Glossary and Abbreviations

ASRI (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia)	Indonesian Fine Arts Academy
Candi	Hindu/Buddhist temple
<i>Carnavalesque</i>	Literary mode that subverts official atmosphere through humour and chaos
CGMI (Consentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia)	Association of Indonesian Students Movement
<i>Écriture Féminine</i>	Feminine writing or a set of strategies to recapture feminine subjectivity through the act of writing
FBR (Forum Betawi Rembug)	Native Jakarta Brotherhood Forum
FPI (Front Pembela Islam)	Islamic Defenders Front
GSRB (also GSRBI, Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru)	Indonesian New Art Movement
Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia)	Indonesian Women's Movement
GNI (Galeri Nasional Indonesia)	National Gallery of Indonesia
<i>HIS (Hollandsch-Inlandsche School)</i>	Primary school in the Dutch East Indies
iCAN	Indonesian Contemporary Art Network
IKBTA (Ikatan Keluarga Betawi Tanah Abang)	Tanah Abang Betawi Community Association
ITB (Institut Teknologi Bandung)	Bandung Institute of Technology
ISI (Institut Seni Indonesia)	Indonesian Fine Arts Institute
Jawi	Arabic script used for writing in Malay language.
<i>Jouissance</i>	Enjoyment, sexual pleasure
Kodrat (Also Kodrat Wanita)	Women's predestined fate, usually in a religious sense
Kebaya	Javanese/Sundanese women's traditional blouse
Kelompok Perik (Perempuan Eksperimental)	All female art collective
Keimin Bunka Shidoso	Cultural centre during Japanese occupation (1942-1945)

Kemben	Traditional body covering made by wrapping yards of fabric, bandage-style around the upper part of the wearer's body
Lekra (Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat)	Institute of People's Culture
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender and intersex
<i>Mooi Indie</i> (Beautiful Indies)	Painting genre typified by lush landscape and idealized scenery in the Dutch East Indies
PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia)	Indonesian Communist Party
Persagi (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia)	Indonesian Painter's Association
Reformasi	Reform era, 1998-
RUU APP (Rancangan Undang-Undang Anti	Draft Anti Pornoaction and
Pornoaksi Dan Pornografi)	Pornography Bill
Sekolah Seni Rupa Indonesia	Indonesian School of Fine Art
Selendang	Scarf
SMKN (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Negeri)	Vocational Senior Secondary School
SIP (Suara Ibu Peduli)	Voice of Concerned Mothers
STSRI (Sekolah Tinggi Seni Rupa Indonesia)	Senior Secondary School for Performing and Fine Arts
SIM (Seniman Indonesia Muda)	Artists of Young Indonesia
Sanggar	Studio system
Perek (Perempuan Eksperimen)	Experimental women (women who are open to sexual experimentation, sex worker)
Sumber Waras	Experimental body art group based at the Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology
WIL (Wanita Idaman Lain)	The other woman
WK (Wanita Karier)	Career woman
WTS (Wanita Tuna Susila)	Women of no morals (sex worker)
TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita)	Female migrant worker

# 1 Introduction

## Defining Experiences

In March 2007, a new contemporary art centre, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, was opened in Brooklyn, New York, USA. From 23 March-1 July, the Center staged an inaugural major exhibition titled “Global Feminisms: New Directions for Contemporary Art”. Curated by two renowned feminist art historians, Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, the event was the first international exhibition dedicated to global feminist art from the 1990s to the present. The curators stated that the main aim of the exhibition was to present a showcase of international works by women artists from a feminist perspective. Moreover, the exhibition was noteworthy for looking beyond the Western brand of feminism, which had been perceived as the dominant voice in artistic expression since the 1970s.

In the same year, from 1-10 August, another exhibition, titled “Intimate Distance: Exploring Traces of Feminism in Indonesian Contemporary Art”, was held at the National Gallery in Jakarta, Indonesia. This more modest exhibition presented a wide range of works by 35 Indonesian women artists from the 1940s until 2007. The aim of this exhibition was to explore the notion of feminism in the works of Indonesian women artists and in the artistic strategies used by these artists. It showcased works by mid-career and emerging artists as well as established artists and even some deceased artists. An important part of the exhibition was the launch of a book called *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens*, written by three Indonesian women writers and scholars, namely Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and myself.

There was no link between the organizers of the New York exhibition and the event in Jakarta. That they occurred within a relatively short period of time was pure coincidence.<sup>1</sup> And yet, these two exhibitions perhaps can be seen to reflect on one another, as “Global Feminisms” undertook a search for non-Western perspectives on art and feminisms while the Indonesian exhibition attempted to open up the Indonesian context to the international

1 Another similarly-themed exhibition was also held at around the same time. “WACK! Art and Feminist Revolution” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (4 March-16 July 2007). It was curated by Cornelia Butler and focused on the period 1965-1980, during which the majority of feminist activism and art-making occurred internationally. This exhibition showcased 120 works by artists that spanned across different media. For more information about the exhibition see Butler and Mark (2007).

discourse of feminism. Furthermore, the two events shared a common goal and theme as they both sought to look beyond the perceived dominance of Western feminisms and to search for a new approach in contemporary art using feminist perspectives.

Most importantly in the context of this book, the Indonesian exhibition was an attempt by Indonesian scholars and women artists to map out issues that are related to creativities and femininities in Indonesia's patriarchal art world. Although other women-only exhibitions had been held in various Indonesian art institutions since the 1970s, "Intimate Distance" was the first of its kind that attempted to highlight the influence of feminism in Indonesian contemporary art.

The use of the term "feminism" for the exhibition was decidedly ambitious in Indonesia due to its negative associations and ambiguous definition, issues that will be elaborated below. During the artist talk session that followed the opening, some artists whose work appeared in the show questioned the use of the term and some even rejected it altogether (even though they had no objections to being included in the show). Nonetheless, amidst the scepticism, most artists showed their support for the theme, arguing that it is important to acknowledge the wealth of female-centered experiences in their own works. This mixture of scepticism and support highlighted the challenges faced by Indonesian women artists in defining their own experiences as artists, mothers, wives, daughters and sisters, all of which are context-dependent, fluid and complex, especially in Indonesia's patriarchal art world.

### **"Intimate Distance" as background**

As the curator of "Intimate Distance", I argued that feminism was already a distinct discourse in Indonesian visual arts. Its effects and traces have been visible in many works over the past fifty years, shaping the artists' views on issues such as the female body, private/domestic space, art-making and medium, and landscape/memory. However, in post-exhibition reflections, I became aware that the exhibition and the artists' talk session had revealed some complexities that were not fully captured in the exhibition or the book.

Among the issues that surfaced were the complexities of the term feminism/s, the stigma of being a feminist artist, the lack of understanding of the art medium as a political/feminist tool and, more generally, the strong gender bias within the mainstream art community. However,



what was clear during the preparation of the book as well as during the curatorial research was that the term “feminist artist” is still problematic in the Indonesian context. A feminist, including a feminist artist, is often painted, almost comically, as a militant, angry woman who rejects family values, hates men and/or is a lesbian (Qibtiyah 2010).<sup>2</sup> For example, an article titled *Feminisme Tak Menjadikan Perempuan Bahagia* (Feminism does not Bring Happiness to Women) on the popular Islamic website *Era Muslim* (2013) states that feminism only brings trouble for women and many are plunged into (*terjerumus*) criminal activity (because of feminism).

For most Indonesian women artists, this labelling is highly problematic as it can create impediments to their career development; for example, they can be pigeonholed as “difficult” or “too angry”, thus limiting their exhibition opportunities. The fact that most key professions in the Indonesian art world, such as curator, critic, lecturer, journalist, gallery owner and collector, are dominated by men further exacerbates this problem.

While the current global interest in Southeast Asian contemporary art has brought to the fore a growing number of female collectors, gallery owners and managers in the region, this trend does not necessarily resolve the gender imbalance, especially in Indonesia. On the contrary, many women artists continue to experience a strong gender bias against them in their career. Moreover, most Indonesian women artists still have to rely on male-dominated patronage networks in order to advance in their careers.<sup>3</sup> Being perceived as critical can create difficulties, especially when they are just starting to make a name for themselves.

On the other hand, some of the more established women artists such as Arahmaiani and Titarubi did gain recognition, precisely because they were perceived as critical. Arahmaiani, for example, established her reputation as one of Indonesia’s leading feminist artists during the internationalization of Indonesian art in the 1990s. However, her reputation is a complex one

2 Qibtiyah discusses different perceptions of feminism/s from six different Islamic universities in Yogyakarta. It is interesting to note that most self-identified feminists are generally from the younger generation and also identify as Muslim. Even though their numbers are still small, this fact challenges, to some extent, popular perceptions that Islam and feminism/s are not compatible.

3 Patronage has often been perceived as one of the quickest ways for young artists to advance their careers. For example, the Indonesian feminist and scholar Toety Heraty, who established Cemara 6 Gallery and Café in 1993, has long been known for her support for Indonesian women artists. For many years, the gallery had a strong focus on women artists, but, since 2003, the gallery – under a new male curator – has broadened its exhibition program, no longer focusing only on women artists.

and much of her fame can be attributed to external factors, especially the work of foreign scholars and curators. Titarubi states that her outspokenness and critical attitude are often perceived as being difficult and the attributes of an angry woman, yet her career was founded on her outspoken criticism of social injustice and gender issues. Moreover, a female artist from Bandung, Mimi Fadmi, argues that the labelling does not bother her. She even identifies herself as a post-feminist artist and states that her works speaks not only for women, but also for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender, and intersex) communities in Bandung (M Fadmi, pers. comm., 7 February 2013).

The label “angry feminist artist” is not uncommon throughout the global art world. To counter this image, some artists deliberately utilize humour as an artistic tool, as exemplified by the actions of the artist/activist collective based in New York, Guerilla Girls, who launched a series of lectures, posters and publications to protest against what they perceived to be the inherent sexism and racism of the Western art world towards women artists and artists of colour. During their actions and performances, they always wore gorilla masks to hide their identities.

The use of laughter and the *carnavalesque* in Western feminist art has been described as a revolutionary strategy to challenge patriarchy in art (Isaak 1996). In Indonesia, however, feminism is rarely associated with humour. Rather, its main connotation is that of a reviled, “unnatural” political activity that is better avoided. In fact, it seems as if the majority of Indonesian women, including many female artists, abhor the label “feminism”.

### **Unnatural partnership: Women, political activism and feminism/s in Indonesia**

In her book *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (2002), Saskia Wieringa traces this association of feminism with “unnatural” political activism back to the demonization of the communist women’s organization Gerwani (*Gerakan Wanita Indonesia*, Indonesian Women’s Movement) by the authoritarian New Order regime (1966–1998). Gerwani was the biggest Indonesian women’s movement in 1950–1965, and its main aim was to reach equality with men. Initially, the organization did this by advocating for marriage reform, before shifting its focus to equal labour rights for women and equal responsibilities in the struggle for “full national independence” and socialism (Wieringa 2002: 140).

During the height of Gerwani's activities, a cataclysmic event took place on 30 September 1965. Several high-ranking generals were kidnapped and some were killed in their residences when fighting the kidnappers. The New Order regime would later claim that this event had been orchestrated by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), to stage a coup against the current government. The alleged coup was suppressed under Suharto's leadership, paving the way for his entry to power.

Gerwani's association with the 30 September movement was cemented after the New Order regime orchestrated a campaign of unprecedented violence through, among other things, the infamous film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Betrayal of the 30 September Movement/PKI) (dir: Arifin C. Noer, 1984). The film contains scenes depicting members of Gerwani committing acts of sexual debauchery as well as showing them participating in the torture and killing of the generals. The depictions have been proven to be false and part of the New Order's political propaganda (Sen 1994; Wieringa 2002). By implicating Gerwani in the killings of the generals and particularly by depicting them as active perpetrators of torture, the New Order regime sent the message that political activism for women is savage and unwomanly.

Wieringa's study highlighted the link between politically conscious Indonesian women and communism and, to some extent, moral and sexual depravities. She states that women's organizations established in Indonesia in the 1980s, such as *Kalyanamitra* and *Solidaritas Perempuan*, were often accused of establishing a "new Gerwani", despite their more contemporary aims. Indonesian academic Melani Budianta indicates that women's movements during the post-1998 *Reformasi* period made a point of breaking free from these stereotypes, so they were compelled to re-examine their political strategies by engaging with more inclusive, heterogeneous women from all levels of class, religious and ethnic backgrounds, including conscious identification as mothers (Budianta 2012). As a result of decades of vilification, Indonesian women artists not only struggled with the label, but this, in turn, had a demoralizing effect on the representation of the female body in the post-New Order era.

## **The female body, art and censorship in Indonesia**

The general reluctance by Indonesian women artists to display overt political activism and a commitment to feminist values may have contributed to the pragmatic attitude displayed by many artists towards the issue of

censorship and the female body in the post-New Order era. While during the authoritarian regime sensitive subject matters such as criticism of the state or the president or articulating left-leaning political thinking were often the cause of severe censorship and persecution, the beginning of democratization in 1998 ushered in a new era in which visual artists have faced a rather different kind of censorship. When the *Reformasi* (reform) era began in 1998, there was a sense that issues and opportunities that were previously considered to be taboo or restricted, such as women's rights, domestic violence, sexuality and even feminisms, were now opening up. This included the development of women's writings, film-making, activism and, to some extent, visual arts.

Yet, five years into the reform era, and with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, censorship had shifted from the vilification of women as political activists in the military-dominated New Order regime to the notion that sexualized female bodies were a moral threat to the social fabric of Indonesian society. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the furious public debate about the *Rancangan Undang-undang Anti Pornografi dan Pornoaksi* (RUU APP, Draft Anti Pornography and Pornoaction bill) in 2006. The bill was created due to widespread concerns among conservative Muslims about the rising circulation of allegedly pornographic materials in many Indonesian cities. The draft of the bill was intended "to stop the spread of pornography across Indonesia and to protect, to cultivate and to provide moral education for the Indonesian people" (Aliansi Mawar Putih 2006).

Ambiguous in its definitions of pornography and "porno-action", and even more questionable with regards to its purpose, the draft was deemed to be a threat to religious, cultural and ethnic diversity and harmony within Indonesia. Critics of the draft regarded it with suspicion because they saw it as a political move by conservative Islamic groups aiming at the "Islamisation" of Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> From a feminist perspective, the content of the draft was particularly concerning as it would have criminalized sexuality, with the female body apparently singled out as the primary target.

When the draft started to circulate in February 2006, it was greeted with mass demonstrations, intellectual forums and other forms of protest in large cities in Indonesia, mainly in Java. The protests were so vehement

4 The draft of the bill was rejected by intellectuals and academics (including high-profile liberal Islamic intellectuals), women's groups, the arts community as well as non-Muslim communities. On the other hand, the draft was supported by many of Indonesia's Islamic organisations such as Indonesia's Ulema Council (MUI), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (MMI), the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and one of the major political parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).

that the parliament retracted the draft and promised to formulate a new bill that would be more sensitive to the cultural and religious diversity of Indonesia (yet there was no mention of gender sensitivity).

Despite continuous opposition, the bill was eventually passed into law in 2008 after the content had been watered down. Even in its final version though, the law's definition of pornography still contains wording that is highly ambiguous and can be used to stifle freedom of expression across many areas of the visual and performing arts, literature and media. Article One of the law defines pornography as: "image, sketch, illustration, photograph, text, noise, sound, moving image, animation, cartoon, conversation, body movements or other form of message through media and/or public performance that contain lewdness or sexual exploitation that breach the society's moral codes" (Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia 2008: 2).<sup>5</sup>

Those caught creating or circulating banned content now face between six months and twelve years' imprisonment or a fine of between 250 million and six billion rupiah. Significantly, however, despite the huge public debate surrounding the drafting of the bill, the critics' fears that the bill would threaten Indonesia's cultural diversity and religious harmony has not materialized. Indeed, since the bill was passed into law, it has rarely been applied.

By 2013, Indonesia seemed to have moved on, yet tensions remain. Censorship today is no longer the prerogative of the state, but is exercised with increasingly coercive power and, arguably, increasing arbitrariness by societal actors. Religious hardliners in particular have often taken the law into their own hands, posing new threats to the freedom of expression and religion. This trend is a product of a growing discontent in Indonesia that stems from the perceived failure of the reform movement to deliver most of its promises. In the post-Suharto era, the absence of state control has created a need for different types of bonds, many of which are based on narrow interpretations of religion and ethnicity as exemplified by mass organizations such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI), *Forum Betawi Rembug* (Native Jakarta Brotherhood Forum) (FBR) or *Ikatan Keluarga Betawi Tanah Abang* (Tanah Abang Betawi Community Association) (IKBTA) from Jakarta.

Given that the state often remains silent – and, in fact, complicit – in the face of vigilante action, resistance against this growing trend of intolerance

5 *Pornografi adalah gambar, sketsa, ilustrasi, foto, tulisan, suara, bunyi, gambar bergerak, animasi, kartun, percakapan, gerak tubuh, atau bentuk pesan lainnya melalui berbagai bentuk media komunikasi dan/atau pertunjukan di muka umum, yang memuat kecabulan atau eksploitasi seksual yang melanggar norma kesusilaan dalam masyarakat.*

has been limited to some non-governmental organizations, community groups and individual artists. In the literary world, for instance, some female writers engage quite openly with issues long regarded as taboo. Transgressing cultural, social and religious boundaries, writers such as Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Dinar Rahayu, Djenar Maesa Ayu and Fira Basuki have explored issues such as the female body, sexuality and desire. While this phenomenon has raised critical responses – both positive and negative – from within literary circles, it has so far escaped the attention of both religious hardliners and the state.

However, the risk of becoming a target for persecution is real and not everyone is willing to speak out. In fact, self-censorship continues to be rife in parts of the broader art community and there appears to be a lack of consensus about how to respond to the legal and extra-legal restrictions on artistic expression. Moreover, the situation is further complicated by the fact that censorship issues have become a political bargaining chip for the government that can be used to win favours from conservative groups in the House of Representatives and in the general public. Fully aware of this challenging environment, most artists have developed a rather pragmatic attitude, soldiering on with their artistic principles without rocking the conservative boat.

During fieldwork for this research project, almost all artists that I spoke to, both male and female, expressed their opposition towards UU 44/2008 and its definition of pornography. Though many have continued to make works that challenge the first article of the bill, they tend to do it more discreetly now. Textile and performance artist Tiarma Sirait states that, while she is not afraid, she is now more circumspect in exhibiting works that have the potential to attract unwanted attention either from the government or religious fundamentalists (T Sirait, pers.comm., 11 January 2010). Tiarma's view appears to be echoed by other artists, with some artists opting to only exhibit their potentially controversial works to a select audience or overseas institutions. Specifically, women artists who wish to explore through visual language subject matter that is considered to be taboo, such as sexuality or the body, have found it more difficult to fully express their artistic ambitions.

### **Definitions and distinctions: Feminisms or gender?**

The debate about the anti-pornography law in 2005-2008 thus directed unprecedented attention to the role of women in Indonesian society, but it did not necessarily create a new generation of Indonesian feminists.

Even in the visual arts community, many women shied away from defining themselves as feminists, perhaps, in part, because of the ongoing negative association of the term with moral decadence and leftist political activism. As a result, the very term feminism remains poorly conceptualized in the discourse about Indonesian visual arts, despite being mentioned occasionally in some Indonesian scholarly and non-scholarly texts (Joedawinata and Supangkat 1998; Sumartono 2001; Noerhadi 2003; Sinaga 2003; Adi and Bujono 2012). The paucity of academic works or refereed journals common in countries with an established arts infrastructure further accentuates this problem. Minimum infrastructure and government support for the arts in Indonesia has produced a situation where, until recently, it was the norm for textual references to art discourses to be disseminated through essays in exhibition catalogues, media reviews, or artist monographs. Although commercial publications such as *Visual Arts* magazine (now defunct), the weekly arts and culture section in national newspapers such as *Kompas*, *Media Indonesia* or *Pikiran Rakyat* and the internet have all helped to alleviate this situation, scholarly engagement with the arts remains underdeveloped, particularly in regard to women artists.

Even though various solo and group exhibitions of women artists in Indonesia have been curated, organized and staged since the 1970s – albeit not as many as male or mixed group exhibitions – organizers have been reluctant to refer to feminism when creating these exhibitions. This reluctance can be attributed to three main factors. Firstly, feminism in Indonesia is widely regarded as an imported ideology transmitted unmodified from the West, representing the adversary of “Eastern values” (*budaya ketimuran*) or “Indonesian identity” (Sadli 2002). Secondly, the lack of a locally developed and broadly accepted critical framework for analysis has made it difficult to assess the work of women artists including issues such as art-making, medium and the perception of gender-based and/or feminist-inspired works.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, political works (by women artists)

6 Some of the approaches, such as *écriture féminine*, have been seen as a useful framework for creating and analysing women-centred texts. Because it emphasizes the need for women to “write their own body”, a number of Indonesian literary scholars have adopted this framework as a tool to analyse Indonesian women’s writing (Budianta 2003; Paramadhita 2007b: 67-68). Critics of this framework, however, have pointed out that *écriture féminine* is somewhat problematic when used in the Indonesian context (Budiman 2005; Allen 2007). For discussion about Indonesian women writers see Hatley (1999), Allen (2007) and Bodden (2007) and the criticisms (Bandel 2005; Marching 2007). Within visual arts, Enin Supriyanto and Farah Wardani, Indonesian art curator and art historian, respectively, have used *écriture féminine* in their writings. See Wardani (2003).

are not as marketable as works that are considered “safe” both in content and medium. Quite possibly, these reasons are also why the Indonesian journalist and writer Carla Bianpoen, despite her well-known support for Indonesian women artists, stated unequivocally that there is no such thing as Indonesian feminist art yet (Bianpoen 2012).

The challenges of using feminism in the curatorial framework could be seen in a number of major contemporary art exhibitions on women artists after the end of the New Order, including “Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan” (Taking a Stand: Violence against Women, Cemara Gallery, December 1998)<sup>7</sup>, “Bayang-bayang Maha Kecil” (Shadows of the Tiniest Kind, Titarubi, Cemara Gallery, 2001), “Women in the Realm of Spirituality” (National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta and Pontifical University Gregoriana, Rome, Italy, 1998), “Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang” (Women and the Dissemination of Space, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, 2001) and Festival Ungu’s visual art exhibition (Cipta Gallery, TIM, 2003).

Sari Asih Joedawinata and Jim Supangkat’s (1998) curatorial introduction to the “Women in the Realm of Spirituality” exhibition catalogue may exemplify the type of reading that dominates Indonesian curators’ views of the works of Indonesian women artists. The premise of the exhibition was to explore the themes of women and spirituality from a feminist perspective. The curators explained that the women artists who were invited into the show explored spirituality and religion from their personal perspectives (Joedawinata and Supangkat 1998: 116-117).

According to the curators, the works in the show represented a particular kind of female perspective on spirituality and religion by showing a close connection with nature and the Goddess movement.<sup>8</sup> What the curatorial

7 The exhibition was organized by Toety Heraty and *Koalisi Perempuan* (Women’s Coalition, a women’s non-profit organization) as a response towards the 13-15 May 1998 rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women. Indonesian artists, both male and female, across generation and ethnic groups, created works that condemned the violence and the state’s denial of the event. The exhibition also included performances and public forums that discussed a wide variety of women’s issues from domestic violence, politics and expression in the arts. Half of the proceeds of the exhibition sale went to *Mitra Perempuan Crisis Center* (Women’s Partner Crisis Centre) and *Divisi Perempuan Tim Relawan untuk Kemanusiaan* (Women’s Division: Volunteers for Humanity; both are non-profit organizations that support the victims of the May rapes). For information about the exhibition see the exhibition catalogue “Menyikapi Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan” (1998). Many prominent and younger Indonesian artists, including, among others, Agus Suwage, FX Harsono, Caroline Rika Winata and Tintin Wulia, are Chinese-Indonesians.

8 The Goddess movement is a spiritual movement that emerged from second-wave feminism, predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the 1970s. The movement seeks to connect nature and culture from a feminine perspective with female deity/ies replacing the male deity/ies in the established religion. See Klein (2009).



essay omitted was that the artists might look upon mainstream religion in a critical manner and/or indicate that religious life in Indonesia is dominated by male interpretation and perspective. In fact, while most of the works did indeed explore nature's link to spirituality, some artists such, as Astari Rasjid (now Sri Astari), took a more critical stance. Astari portrayed the patriarchal structure of Javanese spirituality and culture through her installation work *Prettified Cage* (1998, mixed media installation, dimensions variable). The curators' curatorial framework appeared to tiptoe around the fact that the close link between women, art and nature can embody criticism of patriarchy.

Another exhibition, titled "Perempuan dan Diseminasi Makna Ruang" (*Women and the Dissemination of Space*, 2001), curated by Tommy F. Awuy in the National Gallery in Jakarta also presented a similar strategy in the curatorial framing. The exhibition's aim was to explore the notion of domesticity and its strong ties to femininity beyond the binary opposition of masculine public space and feminine domestic space (Awuy 2001: 3). Women artists in the show were invited to present their personal take on the subject matter and the curator encouraged them to search critically for the meaning of personal space.

Yet, once again, the curatorial essay evaded the issue by moving on to talk about getting over binary opposition; it failed to mention that the real issue of gender construction and, in some cases, gender oppression must be addressed before moving beyond binary opposition. The avoidance of a stronger political statement in this 2001 exhibition was particularly ironic given that one group of artists invited to the show was Kelompok PEREK (Women's Experimental Group), the first Indonesian art collective to express left-leaning, feminist politics in their work.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at the examples above, Indonesian art critic and curator Aminudin TH Siregar was perhaps correct in stating that Indonesian women's exhibitions are often curated ambiguously and *malu-malu* (timidly) (Siregar 2003). Both exhibitions reflect the general trend of avoiding the use of

9 In contrast to the large-scale exhibitions, smaller exhibitions – both group and solo shows – tend to better capture the challenges of representing gender issues in artistic practices. Some exhibitions utilized process-based projects as a curatorial strategy to keep gender issues open-ended and not confined by a particular discourse (*I'm Making Art Project*, Bandung, 2004) or to ground the project in social activism (*Red District Project*, Yogyakarta, 2011) – with varying degrees of reception (Hujatnikajennong 2004; Pambudi 2005). For other notable curatorial framings see *Night sCream* (Galeri Embun, Yogyakarta, 2000), *seTubuh* (Benda Art Space, Yogyakarta, 2002), *Ripe: Harvesting Meaning in Motherhood* (Bentara Budaya Jakarta, Jakarta, 2005).

feminism as a political statement and as a basis for a critique of patriarchy in curatorial frameworks.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, what most Indonesian writers and scholars seem to agree upon is that (Western/post-structuralist) feminism/s entered the Indonesian art discourse in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> The term is juxtaposed with other Western critical theories that entered the Indonesian art vernacular during the mid- to late 1990s, but it remains undeveloped as a distinct critical theory in Indonesia,<sup>12</sup> even though, as Indonesian scholar and academic Melani Budianta explains, there is a general agreement among many Indonesian women's activists (and the art world) to use the term "gender" rather than feminism, especially in the mainstream media. Gender is seen as a less threatening and more inclusive term than feminism, not least because it

10 The trend in female-centred exhibitions in Indonesia in the late 1990s-early 2000s seemed to echo the development of contemporary art discourse outside Indonesia. Exhibitions and projects such as *Text and Subtext* (Singapore, 2001), *Womanifesto* (Thailand, 1995-2008/9), and *Trauma, Interrupted* (the Philippines, 2007) showed the strong interest by scholars, curator and artists to create a forum and transnational network of support for the region's women artists. In contrast to Indonesia however, there was less hesitation in using feminism as a framework for these projects. For further discussion on the historiography of exhibitions and Asian women artists in the early 2000s, see individual country essays in *Text and Subtext* (Huangfu 2001), *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (Reilly and Nochlin (eds) 2007), *Women-in-Between: Asian Women Artists 1984-2012* (Nakao, Rawanchaikul et al. 2012). For Indonesia see *Rupa Tubuh: Wacana Gender dalam Seni Rupa Indonesia (1942-2011)* [Architecture of the Body: Gender Discourse in Indonesian Visual Arts (1942-2011)] in IVAA Catalogue Series #1, Yogyakarta, 2011.

11 It is possible to link the entry of feminism to Indonesian art's internationalization in the mid-1990s. Indonesia's introduction into the global contemporary art world in the mid-1990s coincides with the big shift in the global agenda in contemporary art. It should be noted, however, that despite the increased profile of Indonesian artists in international exhibitions, some aspects of the real impact of internationalization on Indonesian contemporary art need more in-depth study. Ingham's study has noted that women artists in particular reaped few benefits from the process of internationalization as it was mostly male artists who were given access to international exhibitions, creating an unbalanced impression in international circles of Indonesian visual arts (2007: 319-320). See also footnote 6 for the use of Western/post-structuralist framing in Indonesian context.

12 Tracing the exact period when the terms "feminism" and "gender" emerged in Indonesian visual arts has proven to be elusive, not to mention frustrating due to lack of solid information. Toety Heraty, Indonesian feminist and scholar, claimed that her poetry and writings used the term feminism in the 1970s (Toeti Heraty, pers. comm., 1 August 2010). Heidi Arbuckle (2011) traced the early development of gender awareness in the visual arts to as early as the 1950s in an article by Rukmi. However, Arahmaiani explained that when she started to gain wider recognition for her works that addresses gender critique in the 1990s, the term feminism/s was used by foreign curators and only entered the Indonesian lexicon then (Arahmaiani, pers. comm., 7 June 2010). See also Saporinah Sadli's (2002) essay on the founding of Women's Studies department at the University of Indonesia.

was widely used by international development organizations (Sadli 2002: 82-83). But the term “gender issues” effectively means “women’s issues” in the Indonesian context, and is often a euphemism for feminism.

In this book, I employ both terms – feminism and gender – although I do not use them interchangeably. I argue that feminism is a political discourse that critically engages with the processes of gendering; it includes an exploration of sexual difference and subjectivity, but is also directed at social, cultural and economic organization. Furthermore, I also argue that feminism does not necessarily speak for women but, in fact, politically challenges the construction of women within a patriarchal society (Wolff 1990; Pollock 1999). I refer to feminist/feminism when discussing Western critical theory/ies and artistic strategies by Indonesian women artists whenever it is the artist/s’ clear political statement. I also employ a feminist perspective throughout the book by conducting a feminist reading of the history of Indonesian art, a feminist interrogation of particular themes in the works by women artists and a feminist analysis of the artistic practices of women artists.

By contrast, I use the term gender not only to differentiate the sexual and social construction of women from female biological traits, but also as a commonly accepted term amongst Indonesian writers and scholars when discussing and analysing works by Indonesian women artists.

That said, the book is not about defining what Indonesian feminism is, not only because it is beyond the scope of this volume, but also because such definition is seen by many art practitioners as limiting their artistic expression. I argue that even though many practitioners still dispute the term and only a small number have embraced it (whether positively or ambiguously), Indonesian women artists have used feminist strategies and have been inspired by feminism in their works to raise issues that are both personal and political, even though their works do not necessarily employ the visual languages familiar to Western feminist art.<sup>13</sup> Their reluctance to embrace the term feminism can be read not only as their continuous search for local feminism/s that would be accommodative to the type of fluid and context-dependant works that they do, but also as their critique of the narrow definition of feminist art currently circulating in the Indonesian art world.

13 For some of the early attempts to write about gender issues in Indonesian modern art see Yuliman (1987 republished in 2001), Sudjoko (1989) as well as Noerhadi (2003) and Sinaga (2003). See also Supangkat’s statement in Pol (1998: 3) on the dominance of male-centric language in Nuansa Indonesia’s 1987 exhibition (Nuansa Indonesia was an all-female artist group).

## Methodology

One aim of this book is to outline a framework with which to analyse works by Indonesian women artists. I discuss international feminist discourses in relation to feminist-inspired strategies and/or gender critique in Indonesian contemporary art practices. Following Wolff (2006) I then propose two alternative frameworks with which to re-imagine the Indonesian female body, namely, strategies of correction and interrogation. Strategies of correction are the re-insertion and re-inclusion of what was previously omitted or marginalized in Indonesian art history, much in the spirit of the feminist recovery project (Harris and Nochlin 1976). Strategies of interrogation are a range of critical queries and revisions of the already existing reading and views of Indonesian women artists.

In formulating these strategies, I rely heavily on what feminist art historian and scholar Griselda Pollock has termed “active re-reading”. In her text *Differencing the Canon*, Pollock (1999: 8) argues that an active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorized in the spaces of representation will be able to articulate that which, while repressed, is always present as its structuring other.

Within Southeast Asia, scholars, curators and artists have also addressed gender issues through art-making, exhibitions and writings.<sup>14</sup> Asian women artists only captured the global art scene’s attention in 1990s (Kee 2007), but their brand of feminism/s are distinct and seem to incorporate elements of Western feminism with their own localized and trans-historical contexts. For example, Flaudette May Datuin (2001: 16) states that for women artists in Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam testimonies (as opposed to autobiography) in art-making is one of the effective (feminist) strategies in finding shared commonalities across the different backgrounds between these countries. Datuin also observes a still unresolved tension between

14 Chandra Talpade Mohanty wrote one of the earliest and sharpest critiques of Western feminism in her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988). She argued that Western feminism has colonized third-world women by suggesting a “third-world difference”; a static category that seeks to explain how all third-world women are oppressed. Similarly, within the art world, first-world feminism not only excluded the knowledge and history of women from other parts of the world, but also explicitly reinstated middle-class, heterosexual and obviously white viewpoints (Meskimmon 2002). Ella Shohat (1998) highlighted these issues when she argued for 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.

art-making, activism and the place of theory within the practices of many women artists in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, in her text for *Text and Subtext*, Binghui Huangfu wrote that the challenges for Asian women artists when entering the contemporary art field are double-layered: firstly, the field is shaped by male participation in the local art world, thus their participation requires translation within the context of the dominant ideology. Secondly, the personal nature of their works makes it challenging for the local, dominant ideology to accept, but also for the others outside the boundaries of their nation state to engage with their works (2001: 159). Similarly, in her study of Vietnamese artists, Nora Taylor noted that Vietnamese women artists have been consistently working to bridge the gap between women as pictorial representation of Vietnamese society and their active participation in the Vietnamese art world (2009: 95).

Iola Lenzi (2005: 22) argues that, within Southeast Asia, gender vernacular in the visual arts incorporated elements from pre-modern local traditions, which allowed women to be economically independent, and has important roles to play in the socio-economic context. Moreover, their status also came from the region's pre-modern animist beliefs, which suffused women with life energy as well as matrilineal power. Lenzi argues that this background, coupled with the relative permissiveness of homosexuality in pre-modern times accorded the gender neutrality in the works of many contemporary male and female artists (2005: 30). While Lenzi is arguing for an inclusive reading of the complexities of understanding the coded ways of many contemporary Southeast Asian artists, I believe that, for many women artists and writers, the engagement with modern/Western discourse on gender issues is as strong as the references to traditional elements in their art-making.

While we must be careful about attributing “commonalities” amongst the diversity of artistic practices and subject matter by women in Asia, most scholars tend to agree that the singular definition of Asia – and, moreover, that of Southeast Asia – is problematic. Most importantly, many Asian women artists in their works also challenge the concept of “Asianness” that brought them to global attention in the first place (Binghui 2001; Kee

15 The use of testimony is significant according to Datuin because it places the re-tellings of the women's narrative in public and collective discourse (2001: 16). In contrast to autobiography, which is often open to the notion of solitary, artistic genius, which is the domain of the male artist – “testimonies locate women as social subjects who belongs to a class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on” (Datuin 2001: 16-17).

2007). The views of the aforementioned scholars, added to the powerful critiques by women from non-Western backgrounds thus established both heterogeneity and difference as key conceptual strategies as well as new ways of thinking about a previously predominantly Western feminist project in Southeast Asia.

My starting point for analysis comes from the intersection between art history and Indonesian studies, namely, from cultural and textual productions that are produced by Indonesian women artists through artworks, interviews, biographies, letters, and essays. I examine how critical language can be derived from these primary sources, thus basing the primacy of the analysis on the perspective of the female artists. To some extent, my analysis can be seen as embodying a stance that I criticize in the book, namely, that of valorizing female material creativity. Yet, I argue that within these works there is a complex picture of Indonesian women artists and their socio-cultural environment. The artworks are not a mere reflection of their personal stories and thoughts; their subjectivities cannot be simplified through their voice as primary sources. To balance this perspective, I examine a reception of art history and feminist-inspired works within the mainstream Indonesian art world. I demonstrate that it is equally important to look at the role of audience and reception in the production of meaning in order to open up a discursive field about feminism/s in Indonesian art discourses.

As an Indonesian living and working in Australia since 2001, I was often conscious of my particular position when I conducted my interviews. Kirin Narayan has written in her text *How Native is a "Native" Anthropologist?* (1993) about the false assumption that conducting research in one's own culture must surely be based on a position of intimate affinity. She argues that factors such as education, class, gender, race, sexual orientation or duration of contacts at different times often outweigh our cultural identity, whether from an outsider or insider perspective. I situate my writing as what Narayan terms an *enactment of hybridity*, namely, writing that depicts the author as minimally bicultural in terms of belonging simultaneously in the world of engaged scholarship and that of everyday life (1993: 672).

Feminism is also an important factor that shaped not only the methodology of the research, but also my own positioning in the research project. Feminist methodology operates on the primary principle that we must take seriously the viewpoints of those who participate in our research. Furthermore, feminist researchers have argued that the research itself can contribute to producing a kind of engaged, transformative research, which can produce the knowledge that an oppressed or marginalized group desires (Harding and Norberg 2005).

Yet, such progressive notions have proven nearly impossible to implement in my own experience of fieldwork. As a relatively young, female researcher studying Indonesian visual arts, which has so far been the domain of Indonesian male or foreign scholars, I was often placed in a position where I was told to “sit and listen”, not only by male interviewees, but also by older Indonesian women artists and scholars. This I reluctantly did. My own feminist desire to create an equal and engaged research with my subject matter was and still is being challenged by my gender, age and religion.

Ironically, when I conducted the second part of my fieldwork in early 2011 during the second trimester of my pregnancy, both male and female artists warmed up to my presence and became more open to discussing their works and personal lives. Perhaps seeing my bulging belly, they no longer considered me as a “feminist threat” and were able to categorize me as a mother-to-be – harmless and self-effacing. The position of mother has long been highly regarded in Indonesian society and this idealized mother figure was particularly promoted during the previous political regime as a symbol of femininity and goalkeeper of morality (Suryakusuma 1996).

Most artists preferred to conduct the interviews outside their personal living space, for example, in their studio or in a public space such as a café or restaurant. In the instances where I was invited to come to their house, often their husband or partner joined the interview. Yet, in some cases, the husband or partner dominated the entire conversation or the artist would choose her words more carefully.

Virginia Woolf famously stated that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she needs to write fiction. I argue that this is also applicable in the Indonesian context. For many women artists who can afford it, their studio is their pride and a place where they can fully explore their artistic possibilities without interference from their husband or family. Some younger artists share a space and are even happy to share with their artist boyfriend or husband. But in most cases, Indonesian women artists work in whatever space is available to them, especially when they already have children.

Despite the mostly positive support that I received during the research, I was constantly taken to task about my research project by both male and female artists. The perceptions that men and women are equal in Indonesian visual arts and that there is no such thing as gender discrimination are still very strong in the Indonesian art world.

My interest in women artists stems from my feminism. It is not the fact of being a woman that permitted and generated such desire, a view that accords with that of Griselda Pollock (1999:16-17). Because feminism/s

are inherently political, a primary lens through which to interpret the relationship between an individual and social structure, my challenge as a researcher is to understand how feminism/s as a contested discourse are able to produce an alternative reading of the works of Indonesian women artists.

### Selection of artists

Emiria Sunassa, Tridjoto Abdullah, Maria Tjui, Nunung WS, Hildawati Sumantri, Mella Jaarsma, Dolorosa Sinaga, IGAK Murniasih, Arahmaiani, Titarubi, Laksmi Shitaesmi, Lashita Situmorang, Melati Suryodarmo, Theresia Sitompul, Caroline Rika Winata, Diah Yulianti, Prilla Tania, Herra Pahlasari, Mimi Fadmi, Ferial Affif, Tintin Wulia and Kelompok PEREK, are some of the artists whose works have explored a wide range of personal, political, religious, class and socio-cultural issues. Moreover, their works present a complex picture of female subjectivities and even desire. Any of these artists would have warranted deeper analysis as part of this book. However, I decided to focus specifically on artists whose works correspond with the strategies of correction and interrogation framed within specific themes, which will be elaborated later on. Many of the works in the book are selected for their engagement with performance and installation art, but, most importantly, from what I see as the artist's ability to use these media to challenge the perception of Indonesian audiences on issues such as femininity, religion, ethnicity and class.

The artists selected for this book represent a cross section of Indonesia's women artists, both in terms of their age and the stages in their careers. Some artists have already reached an advanced stage of their career (Arahmaiani, Laksmi Shitaesmi, Titarubi), whilst others are considered to be young or emerging (Theresia Sitompul, Caroline Rika Winata). Others whose works will be analysed have already passed away (Emiria Sunassa, Mia Bustam, IGAK Murniasih). Most of the living artists were born between the 1960s and 1980s. This is the generation that includes myself, the generation that grew up under the New Order regime and, consequently, was subjected to the regime's construction of womanhood and femininity. We all grew up with the notion of *kodrat wanita* (women's predestined fate – pregnancy and maternal labour, usually in a religious sense) as something that must be followed and even aspired to. Many of the works examined in this book question and challenge *kodrat wanita* and this concept has formed the basis of the artists' perception of gender issues.



I have thought about the need to select male artists for this book. Certainly, there are some Indonesian male artists whose works have addressed the problems of gender and, more specifically, masculinity in crisis in their works. Nindityo Adipurnomo, for example, is amongst the few male artists whose works critically address masculinity codes in Javanese culture within historical and contemporary Indonesian contexts.

Indeed, many women artists to whom I spoke, whether in relation to the book or the previously mentioned exhibition project, wish to have their works seen in an equitable light, not just in the gender-based framework of an all-women show. Nonetheless, after careful consideration, as a research project that focuses on feminism/s and gender issues in Indonesia, it should be framed and told from the perspective of women artists whose works are within the feminist language, or in reaction and relationship to it.

Driven by the same thinking as many other feminist projects, this book asserts that it is vital for Indonesian women artists to pave the way to reclaiming their own voice and identity as well as to develop critical thinking towards feminism/s in Indonesia.

## **Book structure**

The book is divided into two main parts, framed by implementing the two types of strategy mentioned previously, namely, strategies of correction and interrogation. Following this introduction, the first part – Chapters 2-4 – commences with an investigation, from a feminist perspective, of the formation of the canon of Indonesian art history, in order to understand the basis for women artists' marginalization. It concludes by looking at the works of two women artists of the past and their unique place within Indonesian art history.

The chapters are arranged thematically, rather than chronologically. Thus, I address a sense of continuity, across generations and periods of time, in terms of the issues faced by Indonesian women artists. Despite their different cultural, ethnic, religious and class backgrounds, issues such as motherhood and maternal subjectivity, women as artists and challenging femininity are recurring themes in their works. Moreover, the shift between the periods also reflected that, despite the strongly patriarchal structure in Indonesian art history, it is still possible to find ruptures created by feminist readings.

Chapter 2 analyses two periods in Indonesian art history that are often defined as canonical, namely, the period of Indonesian nationalism (1940s-1950s) dominated by the figure of S. Sudjojono (1913-1986) and the radical movement *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* of the 1970s-1980s. The chapter presents a re-reading of these canonical periods and events through an analysis of the structural nature of canon-making and its selective version of the past. By employing Pollock's notion of differencing the canon, this chapter does not simply replace the masculine canon with a feminine version; instead, it aims to "difference" it by active re-reading and reworking of that which is visible and authorized in the spaces of representation (Pollock 1999). Furthermore, the chapter examines how the two historical periods are reified and used as a model in canon-making through the inaugural exhibition of the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1999. By looking at canon as a myth of genius and masculine ideals, I want to look beyond the issues of sexism and discrimination. Using a psychoanalytical lens, I "difference" the canon by arguing that the artist is a symbolic through which public fantasies – in the case of S. Sudjojono of masculine nationalism – take representational form. The fantasies are not gendered masculine exclusively, but still function to sustain a patriarchal legend.

In Chapter 3, I discuss two Indonesian women artists – Emiria Sunassa (1894-1964) and Mia Bustam (1920-2011) – whose creative lives spanned some important and turbulent periods in Indonesian art history. Emiria Sunassa was active during the early formation of the nation from the 1930s to the late 1950s, while Mia Bustam was active from the late 1950s until her career was cut short by the anti-communist purge of 1965-1966. The two women participated in an era described by Caroline Turner (2006: 161) as the breeding ground for the ideological platform of Indonesian modern art. The aim of this chapter is to critically examine that important period through the frames of feminism and psychoanalysis. The analysis of Emiria's works will reveal that, despite using the same medium as her male contemporaries, her choice of subject matter and her aesthetic executions have set her apart from them. Furthermore, Emiria presented a sense of haunting in Indonesian art history through a different vision of the nation, which also positioned the artist as a uniquely cosmopolitan subject. In addition to the analysis of Emiria Sunassa, the mix of personal and political memoirs of Mia Bustam represent a counterpoint to mainstream history. Her example represents the exact opposite of the "great lives" (usually of men) that have dominated Indonesian history. Mia's marriage to S. Sudjojono enriched her memoirs with first-hand accounts of artistic milieux during and after Indonesia's revolutionary years as well as during the anti-communist conflict and

reprisal in 1965 and after. Moreover, through her memoirs, the reader can gain an understanding of how Indonesian women had, and still have, to negotiate a masculine space by using art and writing as the main tools for expressing the self.

The first part of the book ends with Chapter 3. The subsequent chapters (4-7) focus on strategies of interrogation. Firstly, I look at two particular themes, namely, political motherhood/maternal subjectivity and the monstrous-feminine as ways to search for the feminine in Indonesian visual arts. Then, I explore how feminism/s directly influenced works by Indonesian women artists and their own search for local feminism/s.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the works of the late Balinese artist I Gusti Ayu Kadek (IGAK) Murniasih (1960-2006). Murniasih's works have been described as violent and absurdist, surreal as well as candid and humorous by Indonesian writers and art scholars (Dewanto 2000; Couteau 2001; Bianpoen 2006; Saidi 2007). These reactions come from the juxtaposition of violence and the female body in some of her series with the monstrous feminine in the forms of *vagina dentata*, the toothed vagina and medusa-like objects. And yet, Murniasih's works appeal strongly to the mainstream art world in Indonesia, despite the challenging nature of her subject matter. The chapter will discuss the ambiguity and the reception of Murniasih's works. The discussion seeks to read how her works seem to both assert and refute the insistent resort to abjection and the grotesque. The bizarre yet compelling works of IGAK Murniasih in this chapter represent the imbalanced relationship between the representation of the feminine, feminine desires and its masculine reading in Indonesian visual arts.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the works of the artists Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaesmi. This chapter focuses on the representation of motherhood and maternal subjectivity in the work of these artists as a potential for a feminist reading of Indonesian art discourse. Indonesian art critics and scholars have generally been silent on the subject matter of motherhood and maternal subjectivity. In the formative years of Indonesian modern art, motherhood was considered to be a purely sentimental subject matter, glorification of the feminine or embedded in the masculine nationalist reading. The art works by Titarubi and Laksmi Shitaesmi challenge these stereotypes by depicting a more nuanced representation of motherhood. Their works also represent maternal subjectivity. The representation of motherhood is shown by feminist scholars to be a complex interaction between social concepts of maternity and the psycho-sexual dimension of maternal subjectivity. This cannot be expressed with the idealized representation of mother and children alone, but requires visual forms that can reiterate certain

emotional or psychological states of motherhood, such as bliss and separation (Meskimmon 1998: 1). In the last section of this chapter, I discuss an installation by a younger artist, Theresia Agustina Sitompul, to indicate the complexity of reading this subject matter in Indonesian visual arts. I also discuss the distinction between motherhood as the lived-in experience of daily chores and pleasures for women as mothers, and maternal subjectivity as a site of the psychic dimension of emotion and feeling (Sieglohr 1998: 27) in the works of Indonesian women artists. I examine the works of these artists as an expression of what Sara Ruddick (1995) termed “maternal thinking”, the experience of motherhood as central to, and inseparable from, their life as artists.

Chapter 6 will conclude the section on strategies of interrogation by examining the works of Arahmaiani and Kelompok PEREK, an all-female artist collective. The chapter explores the link between feminism and performance art in the Indonesian context, even though both fields are still being redefined and challenged by their own practitioners. Arahmaiani has built an outstanding international career by using performance art as her primary medium of expression. When she first came to international attention as a feminist Indonesian artist in the 1990s, it was due mostly to her strong performances that addressed women’s issues in Indonesia. In their early years, performers from Kelompok PEREK predominantly used performance art as a tool and strategy to undermine the patriarchal discourse in Indonesian society. Their performances explored the female body as a feminist strategy in post-Suharto Indonesia. This chapter investigates the extent and ways in which Western models have influenced Indonesian women’s performance art practices. The chapter also analyses what local differences arise given the nature and roles of performance art in Indonesia, and examines understandings and interpretations of “feminism” in this context. Finally, Chapter 7 presents the main conclusions of this book and places it in the broader context of transnational feminism and global contemporary art from an Indonesian perspective.