



## What to Un/Learn Where? *In Conversation with Arahmaiani (1)*



Flag Project (2021)

*Performance artist and ecofeminist Arahmaiani (Bandung 1961)(2) shares her experience of years of artistic practice, community work, environmentalism and participatory performance art. Arahmaiani's critical practice can be set in a feminist-Marxist tradition,(3) offering new logics of resistance,(4) whose participatory performances question individualism, corporatist structures and global food systems. In Indonesia and elsewhere, overdeveloped agricultural industries combined with extractivist fishing and mining activities displace local marine knowledge systems that over centuries have cultivated balanced ways of living in, with and from the marine ecosystem. How do you/we recover your/our place in such ecosystems? 'Step by step.'*

### ◆ The Decline of Maritime Culture

In C: There are so many entry points in your work when it comes to the ocean, and actually within Studium Generale's programme Oceanic Imaginaries you gave a lecture on this topic for Rietveld students already last fall.

A: Yes, indeed. As I come from the largest archipelago on Earth,(5) the ocean is a major issue ever since maritime culture has been declining. It used to be a really international area, but now it has become isolated and people's maritime culture is limited, which has to do with the modern way of life. You know people are flying now! They don't have to go through the sea to travel! Knowledge of maritime culture and its technologies

were lost for many reasons, and people are becoming ignorant about maritime knowledge. For example the Mataram Kingdom,(6) in Yogyakarta and Solo, was not dealing with the ocean nor with sea culture, and had an agricultural orientation. After the Javanese became Muslim,(7) a culture of trading was still active, where colonisation led to the degradation of knowledge.(8)

C: Indeed part of the colonisation project was to homogenise culture and therewith erasing culture, that maybe became subcultures in the process. With colonisation as the erasure of diversity, we can imagine that oceanic knowledge systems become forgotten.(9)

A: Before the Islamic kingdom, the capital city was near the sea in the northern part of Java island. Due to the kingdom moving to the inner island they have forgotten this knowledge about the sea and how to work and deal with this part of nature. You have to have knowledge to be able to deal with the ocean. And then when modernisation started after so-called independence,(10) and becoming Indonesia, there was a sad situation where the country became a military regime under dictator General Suharto,(11) who controlled everything. There were people coming from China and other countries trying to get fish and the richness of the ocean. Basically they loot the ocean, right. That's what I heard when I was young during the military regime at the time. Then the military regime fell, and Indonesia tried to go into a more democratic system, but the young generation at that time had no possibility to learn more about that [oceanic] knowledge. Students went to study abroad, and got grants, or belong to rich families. I think that's a new beginning. When these young people care and are aware about the richness of the ocean, they begin to be critical about this. What happened with the government even until today, is that they are trying to support big business, the corporations, and they are just collaborating with them and you know what happens, these big corporations, local or international, they just want to suck the richness out of nature, whatever it is.

C: This kind of extractivism is indeed neocolonialism or imperialist powers again extracting wealth from a rich country.

A: Yes, and even until today the Indonesian so-called elite and our government are just collaborating with these corporations.



Yak Bank Project (2010)

C: You also mentioned the mangrove silviculture before, and that this ecosystem is currently under threat and deteriorating.

A: They are under threat and being destroyed and disappearing, which can affect the whole environment.

C: Could you explain the role of the mangrove trees, or are they called trees?

A: The mangrove is maybe categorised as a tree, but this is a special kind of plant in the sea area that can preserve the ecology of the sea. If they disappear, accumulating all this plastic and garbage, this is a disaster. We have already seen some proof of sharks, for example, that have eaten a lot of plastics. This is really something common now. Although of course those who are bringing these issues up are environmental activists, people don't know how to address these issues. Even though they know this is something terrible, the people have no idea how to grow awareness about what is going on.



I Don't Want to be a Part of Your Legend (2004)

#### ◆ Environmental Feminism

C: How do you see your role in this regard, or I see a connection also related to the work that you did in Tibet, in the Third Pole,(12) where you suggested to the yellow hat Lamas,(13) that they start cleaning up their environment, because there was littering by the community and then they quite quickly were convinced that indeed it's their place to keep, and clean up the garbage that otherwise nature collects for us. Do you see any kind of role for your practice to maybe, in a way repeat this kind of work in Indonesia?

A: Of course, I've been thinking a lot about that. You know I've been working here with young people and activists, but since I spend a lot of time in Yogyakarta and also Bali, and focusing first more on – to sort of convert the agriculture system – thinking about the security of the food system. Because we don't really live near the sea we started with this organic farming. We also try to manage the garbage and recycling to clean up and preserve the water sources, as the problem of trash is very serious here in Indonesia. I've been trying to work with various communities, with artists who care about this, but also of course environmental activists, and Islamic boarding school communities because this is very important, as the majority of Indonesia today are Muslim. So the influence of this kind of community on the community can be strong. But it's not something simple to work on, even with my own people, because the impact of the military regime ideology, the so-called developmentalism, is focusing more on economy, and the kind of economy that they propose or operate, is just focusing on material aspects.

C: It's this materialistic economy.

A: It's very materialistic, their orientation is more individualistic as well, so people are just busy with their own success, and will do anything they can to become successful, so it is no wonder there is a lot of corruption. This new culture in society is really sad! People are destroying nature, the source of life! Come on, you know.

C: We are destroying our own environment, in this manner.

A: It's like destroying our own home. It's really crazy, isn't it! When you destroy your own home!



Offering from A-Z (1997)

C: Yes, we're making our planet uninhabitable.

A: That's right. This ideology that is focusing on making profit, all the time, and then destroying their own home! It's really, really crazy! I mean, also stupid, right.

C: To an extent it's brainwashing people into focusing on one thing, individualism, in a straightjacketed economy, and neglecting the human right of collective self-organisation.

A: Exactly.

C: The Tibetan monk community that you worked with are very well self-organised, collectively, then a change is perhaps easily made. When society is individualised and fragmented in that way, it's much harder to make a proposition, which will be picked up collectively as well.

A: This is also what I learnt since I've been working with the Tibetan community, especially the monastic group. I can learn something that is really important, which is how a collective can be together and deal with whatever problems, and usually they can find a better kind of way, you know, and being together is actually a very effective, very efficient way to deal with problems. I mean that's so obvious. And when we become isolated individuals, that's what I learnt from my German students from the University of Passau, they complain about how they feel alone, lonely, get stressed and even depressed because they feel so alone, because they have to compete even with their friends. And that's not healthy! And why? Why do we have to live that way?

C: Yes, we don't have to live like that! We're just sort of convinced by, like, imprints of society, or power structures of society convincing us that we are alone, and

isolated.

A: Exactly, and then I have experienced this work with the community in Tibet. I can see for myself that: no, there is another possibility, another way of life, how we can live together, support each other, and be happy together. You know it's possible. This is what I've been trying now to also remind Indonesia of, my Indonesian family, to sort of say, hey guys, you know let's go back to our ancestral heritage, because the culture in Tibet is originally coming from here, you know. But of course this is something forgotten, a lot of people here don't understand it anymore. Hopefully, when kids are being educated about their own culture and heritage, they will realise that actually they already have this kind of, I mean their ancestors have this kind of awareness about how to live harmoniously with nature and with other beings, and it gives a sense of, you know, happiness! And the beauty of life itself! Not like being frustrated all the time because you have to compete with everyone you know! And everyone becomes your enemy.

C: Yes, it's depressing!

A: Yes! Even when I was young I remember people competing with each other, 'no I don't want this', 'why should I live like that?'. But then I became a strange, estranged person. In some of the articles about my work there is a term for me, they call it, I'm somebody outside of the fence. This is a common kind of term, because I was considered to be strange, you know, with my way of thinking. At that time during the military regime, people, young people were somehow brainwashed to focus on making money basically. I had this question: why do we have to live like that? I was seen as this strange young woman, crazy, and I was even put in prison, because I was questioning, asking 'why do we have to live like that?' Why don't we consider that our old culture is actually important? No, during that time our ancestral culture was considered old fashioned, and you needed to learn something modern, to have this modern lifestyle. Well I'm not against new or modern knowledge.

## ◆ Oceanic Teachings

C: This is also the time of the military regime and the communist prosecution and the mass killings, or genocide of so-called communists.

A: At the time I was questioning what was actually going on, and I was lucky that I met people who were socially engaged, who then were considered to be outsiders, and some were put in prison for many years. I was lucky I met some of these people and I got to learn about what happened. Lots of Indonesians, young Indonesians, didn't have this opportunity to really learn because the history books, for example, are being manipulated. So lots of young people didn't know what happened during the 1965–66 massacre.(14)

C: It's incredibly important that everybody learns the history of their society. You were also working on a new museum near the Borobudur Temple and you beautifully laid out the relationship between the temple and the ocean. How do you see the relationship to the archipelago and ancestral or ancient heritage, the Buddhist heritage of Indonesia, and its importance to recover this fully?

A: Since I worked in Tibet I got to learn about this forgotten cultural heritage, and I became really curious and felt that I needed to learn about this. I was lucky because the Tibetans gave me this opportunity to go to study in the Sera Jey Monastic University in India, and I learnt from the Dalai Lama,(15) because they say the Dalai Lama was a teacher from my past life. Although I didn't really understand at the beginning what that meant, I followed their teachings and found a lot of interesting things, including a way of thinking and a way of dealing with life and nature. I thought: wow, this is incredible! Here in Indonesia you can still see the largest Buddhist temple in the world, the so-called Borobudur Temple.(16) And during that time maritime culture was very strong so that's what made the connection between India and China possible. There are some serious scholars, monks, the monastery was the university, and at that time, the kingdom in Java, the so-called Medang Kamulan kingdom, was intermarried with the Srivijaya kingdom, who learnt from each other and respected each other's culture.

C: It was an international trade centre.

A: Of course, it was an international trade centre, but it's also an international culture – and knowledge centre! The Ministry of Religious Affairs is now implementing

a new kind of regulation to open the Borobudur Temple for the Buddhists and their rituals. But of course since the pandemic hit it's slowing down somewhat. I'm working on it because the people from the Ministry of Education and Culture are taking care of this new kind of tourism. The Ministry of Education and Culture will also be introducing the culture and not just seeing the temple as an object for tourism only, like it was before. They are going to build a new museum that is going to have this cultural heritage, not exactly in the Borobudur area but nearby, because they want to also activate the area not just the area near the temple. So people can also begin to learn again about this cultural heritage, and appreciate it. That's what I have heard so far, and then they ask for my help because at the ministry some people understood that I have learned this cultural heritage in Tibet and that this heritage is still being preserved and practised in Tibet until today. In Indonesia it is already forgotten, or part of it may still be surviving. What I have learnt so far in Tibet is that they still have the complete books you can also see on the panels of Borobudur.(17)

C: The Borobudur is readable like a kind of book.

A: But the books are not just books. Books of this important kind of teaching in the Buddhist world are considered to be very special and unique. It's called the Bodhisattva teaching. This is a special kind of approach because Bodhisattva is, well, as a simple explanation, a Buddha with a specific kind of task. In their terms they have this explanation: they say the task of the Bodhisattva is to make everybody free of their suffering, all the sentient beings. So it's not just you as a human. This is a deeply civilised kind of teaching, and very respectful of nature.

C: This is also your role, you are a Bodhisattva.

A: Yes, right. So this is important knowledge for everyone, not just for Indonesians actually, because the value is so universal. It's about the basic understanding of life itself, and how to be kind, and to become useful. So this is special, actually!

C: It's so special and important that this heritage is recovered and shared. Maybe in the diaspora of Buddhism, there are also quite a lot of other communities and countries that have adopted Buddhism into their culture, like in Japan, or South-Korea, as Buddhist societies, but in different ways than Tibet.



His-story in the Body (2000)

A: Right, but – after explaining the difference – also there is similarity. And what is interesting is this way of thinking emphasises this sort of ethic that as humans we live on this planet, that we have the responsibility, for the others as well. If we see the modern system with their way of thinking, that's very selfish, just thinking 'now how can I be successful', 'it doesn't matter if I destroy the Earth, or others'. Sometimes I'm just amazed, how can humans have just forgotten themselves? Because when we are thinking about life itself, we are living from nature, the thought 'What can we destroy?', is weird; meaning that we lost our awareness about who we are, and what is the purpose and function of you know our life, on this Earth, that is actually sad! Really sad.

All right now I want to talk about the ocean again. As you can see for example on the panel there is a beautiful kind of work there with this old beautiful ship.

Again this maritime culture and what is happening today, how it is being polluted, and the mangroves are gone, they're almost going to disappear. Of course this is a very serious problem. There are some environmental activists who are trying to address this issue, and there is also an international kind of organisation, similar to Greenpeace. They are trying also, but this is not easy. Because of the richness of this area and of nature, there are people who want to dominate it for themselves. The Indonesian government prefers collaborating with these big corporations. That is what is real and what is happening today. People and even activists seem helpless to deal with these elite and big corporations.

In Sulawesi there is this so-called nickel mining, a very important metal. When they mine it is polluting for the fish and the whole seaside gets poisoned, and people consume these poisoned fish, it's really crazy. And so far the government is just allowing them to do it. Because

maybe for them what's important is making money. This is what is happening and it's very difficult to deal with it.

So far that's what we can do, but of course we also learnt and we understood that there is a real problem in the ocean itself, because of that kind of abusive practice like nickel mining. For this kind of problem in the ocean so far, we're sort of helpless to be honest. This is the real situation. And actually, in my country, the most abused and even killed activists today are environmental activists. So that's another reason why people are very very careful about it, a really sad situation but of course we don't give it up, we do what we can. But actually we also want to deal with this problem, which directly has to do with the ocean and its wealth.

#### ◆ Commonality and Collectivity

C: And with this kind of environmental work and perspective, do you also give that a place in the community work you do in different places, or do you see it more located in a community that you live in? Because you are a well-known artist and familiar with the ecosystems of the archipelago, I can imagine if you go to Germany or to Istanbul, there is a very different relationship developing. Is there something that structurally comes up, as you are then also working as an environmentalist?

A: From my experience, working with your own community, where you come from, is sometimes even more difficult. If you are working with, say, other communities in other countries, this is what I have experienced so far, it's somehow easier! I don't know maybe because they also see me as someone coming from another place, and I have a different perspective, and then they expected that. And when you are working with your own people, who think your way of thinking is a bit strange, if it is critical they just see you as making trouble. Other communities may see you as someone from outside, if you have critical thinking or a different way of looking at things, they don't see it as a threat. They maybe even see it as something positive, because they also are aware that to have a different perspective means enriching their understanding. When you are with your own people, and you are different, then they see you as a weirdo! They say okay this is something coming from outside that we need to understand. When it is done by a local they will say you are threatening us, estranging us.

C: These are interesting and also problematic dynamics, and maybe also stem from this separatist or apartheid regime during colonisation,(18) and the more recent genocide of so-called communists.

A: It is also what happens as a political strategy today. That's everywhere, because the so-called divide-and-rule politics are still everywhere; that's how the people in power are controlling the rest of the people. Let them fight so we can do what we want to do. I mean, if your family is fighting I can come in and steal your house right!

C: It's like capitalism is making people so desperate to fend for themselves, and feeling isolated and becoming isolated, that there seems to be no time to work collectively, or, this time is stolen.

A: Exactly. Because when people are coming together, it would be hard to control them, so let them fight with each other. This is something that can be manipulated, especially now with these gadgets, Facebook, whatever. It's easy to make people angry, to make people you know hate each other, even now here with this kind of technology.

C: It suggests collectivity but actually it's individualism, together.

A: Exactly. I hope with this pandemic people will begin to realise and see that basically we need to work together, and hopefully can open up that kind of awareness.

C: When you're talking I hear your role as a Bodhisattva, and your role as an artist, and well you have many different roles, but you also embody many reincarnations. Being this maybe first an itinerant sort of artist, who moves around, and works on an international or global level, also as a trickster, working for the universal dream that you share and need to realise, I'm wondering how you see your different roles?

A: Okay, well actually for me it's simple. When I was young I asked myself a question: what is the purpose of this life, why am I here, for what? That's when I started to try to understand. And after going through some process of course, of learning and understanding what is happening in this life, somehow I feel that, I think I have a task to do. It's just a calling from my heart. That's why I said it's simple. The task is, just to do something positive. Slowly slowly when I begin to work with the community, then slowly slowly I begin to learn. Doing

a good thing, what does this mean? I found that doing a useful thing for others actually makes me happy.

Of course I have questions sometimes, I'm like, oh my god what is this! And when people in your surroundings think you are a weirdo sometimes it's also like: oops, there is something wrong with me. Am I really crazy or what? But luckily I have met some people who give me a kind of direction. Because that's also very human to be sort of like: which way I am supposed to go? I'm quite lucky that in my process I even met the Dalai Lama, for example. It's not like I already knew from the beginning. I think it's very important for us to then be able to understand what life is, and what our sort of purpose is in this life, and how this life becomes meaningful. Otherwise, if that's not meaningful then why am I supposed to live here, if there is no meaning?



Dutch Wife (2013)

◆ Un/learning Environment

C: And then we perhaps get to the depression that the students also experience.

A: Definitely when I learn from my students complaining about the problems that they have to deal with, I understand.

C: What do you tell your students?

A: Usually what I say to them is: Okay, the best way is..., because I'm not supposed to tell them 'you have to do this', 'you have to do that', but to just be honest to yourself. What do you want to do in this life? And try to learn who you are, and what your role is in this life. Because there are some possibilities, some roles, that we need to understand. Which role is actually my role? Usually that's what I say to my students. Then they are like: Okay, so if we want to be relaxed when we are thinking about this serious kind of thing, can we have some beer, Arahmaiani?

C: That will take the edge off.

A: This is really unusual! In the class we can go under the tree and lie down in the grass by the river and drink beer while talking about serious things, why not!

C: Then you don't need to break down the wall, you just leave it altogether!

A: Yes! To me this is so unusual. Usually there is a gap, the professor is considered to be very high, and never really relaxing together with students, except when there is a party, maybe then it's something different; as a method it is rigid. That's what they say to me anyway.

C: It could be that this education system is keeping walls in place that you are also addressing maybe, which keep us from reconnecting with nature, and to set free the learning environment, or collectivise the learning environment.

A: There is this image from young people in the east, of a Western young man who is living their good life, just dreaming of what they are supposed to be, how to be that successful guy with lots of money, but it's actually not all like that.

C: No, indeed this is an imperialist dream, and is sort of implanted.

A: Right, there are also some creative people who try to do something creatively. If they can meet other creative young people from another country from another background of culture, that is really interesting.

C: More movement, more travelling, more exchange, so we can learn from each other, inspire each other.

A: It gives a sense of hope really, especially because young people could exchange and come up with some new ideas, and I would like to support them. When you are asking me about my role, this is one, to support young people.

C: Is this an open invitation for the students to come to Indonesia?

A: Yes! I learn from young people here, but at the same time, what you see now and the ideas in your mind could also inspire young people here.

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This interview has been lightly edited for length and readability, transcribed from a video call on 3 February 2022.

CPR

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## ◆ Citations:

‘The world has now become a village – people can travel from one continent to another in a relatively short time. Places and time have been condensed. Human beings from various social and cultural backgrounds can meet as if differences are no longer an issue. Geographic boundaries have dissolved but mental and psychological gaps have widened and deepened, forming vulgar hierarchical rankings. Life is now divided as such; on one side there is a small group that “possesses special privileges” to obtain anything, in quantities of more than they need. And on the other side there is a large group who “have no rights whatsoever”, who are only permitted to dig around in the garbage dumps of the specially privileged group. They also are obliged to offer their time and work to their bones for the welfare of the powerful people above them.’ (19)

‘Humankind has been alienated from itself and also from other human beings. The same has happened in the art world – the artist is swept by the tide of self-surrender to the symbolic power that determines the conditions and the classifications of what is termed “art”. Art is considered to be “too important” and the artist is ensnared in the trap! So the artist loses her freedom and has reins put on her! Now, art seems to be a burden and a shackle that binds the wings of creativity to prevent them from flying freely!’ (20)

‘5. Our art is a channel for creativity, like plumbing that supplies fresh water. And creativity, like water, is an active, liberating force; the essence of life, which births ideas and concepts.’ (21)

## ◆ Notes:

1. Arahmaiani means ‘loving human being’, in a combination of Arabic and Hindi
2. Konferensi Asia-Afrika or the Bandung Conference in 1955 was the first convention with solely (new) heads of state from non-Western countries, a lot of whom had recently gained their independence after the decolonisation wave started by Indonesia’s independence in 1945. The conference was vital to the Non-Alignment Movement that united the non-West for the first time pledging their mutual support
3. Feminist-Marxism is a response to class-consciousness evoked by the writings of Karl Marx and specifically the monumental text *Das Kapital* to include the (intersectional) feminist or womxn’s perspective and their role in the establishment of capitalism as

providing free household labour and birthing children as workforce. Important thinkers in a feminist-Marxist tradition include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Silvia Federici.

4. Marco Scotini curated a show with Arahmaiani’s work in Parco Arte Vivente (PAV), Turin in 2020.

Indonesia has and has had different names describing the enormous island group and its oceans. Colonised by the Dutch spanning four centuries the archipelago was referred to as the East Indies during this period. Before then the archipelago and Maritime or Oceanic Southeast Asia were also called Nusantara, the ‘outer islands’, which is the name for the new capital of Indonesia yet to be built, starting this year on East Kalimantan and opening in 2024.

5. Javanese Hindu-Buddhist kingdom between the eighth and eleventh century.

7. Islam was introduced to Java sometime between the ninth and thirteenth century.

8. Most notably Dutch colonisation for 350 years, but also the Portuguese and the British were colonial powers attempting to control the region of what is now Indonesia.

9. When we speak of forgotten historical narratives, these are more often than not erased, more and less violently, and driven by political-colonial agendas.

10. The Indonesian War of Independence was the decolonisation war directly following the Second World War and the proclamation of the independent state of Indonesia on 17 August 1945, the former Dutch East Indies. Only this year in 2022 has a national research inquiry been finalised into the war crimes committed by the Dutch aggressor during this war from 1945–49. With international pressure, the Dutch finally recognised the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia in 1949, for which the Netherlands hasn’t taken legal responsibility, nor for the fact that this country violently colonised what is now Indonesia for 350 years since the early seventeenth century, also known as the Golden Age in the Netherlands.

11. After the decolonisation wave during which most formerly colonised countries gained their independence, several heads of state of these new sovereign states were assassinated and replaced by military regimes with dictatorships that then lasted for several decades, among which the assassination of Sukarno and instalment of Suharto in the so-called cold war of capitalism against communism, said to be driven by the US and CIA as Indonesia’s independence leading force was the communist party PKI.

12. Also see the lecture at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam last year, where Arahmaiani describes a decade-long project to recycle waste and reforest the Third Pole on the Tibetan Plateau, source of the ten largest rivers in Southeast Asia and third largest ice landscape on the planet after the North and South Poles, with the support of the Chinese government. See <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/rietveld-studium-generale-day-1-2>.
13. The Gelug, the yellow hat school or sect is a buddhist school founded in the fourteenth century and established since the sixteenth century in Tibet and Mongolia, combining analytic reasoning and yogic meditation.
14. The documentary film *The Act of Killing* (2012) (Indonesian: *Jagal*, 'Butcher') shed an international light on the reality of the massacre where the people who did the killing are openly bragging about how many people they killed and how, who were never prosecuted as the killings were state-sanctioned. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, and co-directed by Christine Cynn and an anonymous Indonesian director.
15. The direct translation of the title Dalai Lama is 'Oceanic Teacher'.
16. The Borobudur is a seventh century Mahāyāna Buddhist temple, one of the two main branches of Buddhism founded in the first century BCE.
17. The nineteenth-century photographer Kassian Cephas is the only person to have documented all 160 panels of the Borobudur.
18. The first genocide by the Dutch coloniser occurred on the Banda Islands in 1621 where most of the population was murdered in order to gain a monopoly on nutmeg production. Also see the book *Banda* (2021) by Marjolein van Pagee.
19. Arahmaiani, 'Letter to Marinetti: To liberate oneself from ecstasy of consuming and to discover the future' (Yogyakarta, 2009), reprinted in *50 Feminist Art Manifestos*, ed. Katy Deepwell, London: KT press, 2022.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Arahmaiani, 'Manifesto of the Sceptics' (Yogyakarta, 2009), reprinted in *50 Feminist Art Manifestoes*.