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Alia Swastika

Biennale Jogja Foundation, aliaswastika@gmail.com

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Reclaiming domestic space
Decolonial feminism and women’s sovereignty in Southeast Asia and beyond within the context of artistic practice

ALIA SWASTIKA

ABSTRACT
Contemporary art practices have developed expansively over the global stage with the development of big international exhibitions, including those held in museums or biennales and festivals. In the last decade, the global art world has witnessed the contestation of powers among institutions and art practitioners generated by massive movements such as Occupy Movements, Arab Springs, Black Lives Matter, which has shifted the positionalities of artists and arts in the Global South. This shift also encourages discussions on decoloniality in the art system and art history, including how to centralize the issue of gender equality. Southeast Asian women artists have expanded their practices to show their individual world views, and touch upon political and ideological contexts revealing common urgencies on such issues as ecology, history, spirituality, and humility. This essay discusses art works created by women artists in Southeast Asia presented as part of the Biennale Jogja Equator (BJE) series in the period 2011 to 2021. This has provided artists with possibilities to engage in critical conversations and experiences, usually the preserve of the male-dominated sphere. By looking into these projects, the wide range of the shared trauma of violence, war, and colonialism, ecological damage, and lost livelihoods, to the pilgrimage towards the inner-self, have been juxtaposed and interwoven to create an imagination of collective futurism.

KEYWORDS
Global South, decolonial, feminism, contemporary art practice, ecofeminism.

The author can be reached at aliaswastika@gmail.com (ALIA SWASTIKA). More information about the author can be found at the end of the article.

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INTRODUCTION
The discourse of post-coloniality has contributed hugely to the social sciences and cultural studies since the end of 1980s, expanding into various concepts and theories, such as decolonization, intersectionality, and global south studies, which have moved critics into a post-colonial position. With so many shifts in reading the current phenomena produced by globalization, these concepts, theories, and frameworks have been helpful not only in developing critical texts and academic discourses, they have also led to the possibility of utilizing those frameworks as part of socio-political movements. In the art world, the use of these frameworks has been particularly helpful in questioning the established structure of art system and art knowledge (education), dominated for hundreds of years by the colonial system, or called Western Art in mainstream literature. It has even occupied the mindset of art practitioners in colonized societies to the point it was almost taken for granted. In the cartography of power-relationships in the artworld, there are highlights of cities, institutions, and events which are seen as the “Centre” of the world, the rest being positioned as the “other”.

Since 2011, in Biennale Jogja, collective efforts have been made to reclaim the art ecosystem from the very much Euro-American centric global world, and to imagine another geopolitical connection linked the equatorial line. Jogja Biennale Foundation sees the possibility of using geopolitical imagination as a way to rethink the notion of “centre” and periphery in the context of the art world. As we were told in our textbooks at school, Indonesia is the jewel of the Equator, but we have never really investigated what the impact and consequences of being in this special part of the world have been. Furthermore, how do we examine the similarities and differences of the countries along this belt, in terms of landscape and climate, as well as the complex histories of colonialism, culture and spiritualism, industrial revolution, and massive ecological shifts.

With every edition, we have worked with a country or an area and brought curators, artists, critics, and researchers together, to connect and collaborate in making a bold statement about the new global art. In 2011, BJE worked with India, curated by Alia Swastika and Suman Gopinath, on the theme of belief and spirituality, to trace how Indonesia and India were connected by religions and how this had encouraged a deeper and more complex social power relationship today.1 In 2013, BJE collaborated with Arab countries (to replace the term Middle East, created from a US perspective but in common use all over the world), curated by Agung Hujatnika and Sarah Rifky, who invited artists from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Yemen, and Oman. The journey continued in 2015 with Nigeria, a West African

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1 I should mention my personal involvement with the Biennale Jogja itself, so that we have a clear perception on my close relationship with the issue and maybe all the opinions here are biased from this subjective insider’s position. Nevertheless, I believe that, as an intellectual and researcher, but also practicing curator, my essay here is a form of advocacy to enable the artists I discussed here to be exposed to different disciplines.
country, where Wok the Rock and Jude Agnowih coined the title “Hacking Conflict” to emphasize the similarities in terms of social chaos which fosters the democracy of everyday life in both Nigeria and Indonesia. In 2017, Sigit Pius Kuncoro worked with Brazil, bringing a discussion of the dynamic political shifts in South America (Brazil) and Indonesia as the starting point for future imagination. After four editions looking into the outside world, BJE finally visited its own “territory”: Southeast Asia in 2019, curated by Akiq AW, Arham Rahman, and Penwadee Nophaket Manont, giving border areas, such as Pattani, Hue, Sarawak, South Laos, and other marginalized parts of Southeast Asia, a strong representation, and in 2021, to close the first round of the Equator area, BJE reconnected the eastern part of Indonesia with other places in Oceania, such as Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, and other southern countries.

The adventure of going around the world along the equatorial belt has become a lifetime experience for both the organizers, and the curators, artists, volunteers, and many others involved. The Biennale has transformed into a living encyclopaedia of diverse issues, interests, and histories, encouraging more and more knowledge production, the result of the meeting points of the rich differences between those various artistic practices. Most of the female artists in many of the projects have adopted very strong political and ideological positions, and they have used beautifully strong metaphors drawn from their own bodily experiences which have become the site of reflecting on conflicts, history, social relationships, and so on. Their works have provided a stage and a space for the frontiers of civil movements to negotiate with global and structured capitalism, from the intimate, personal, and subjective points of views of an individual or collective usually hidden in mainstream historical texts.

In this essay, I would like to present projects by different artists which have been exhibited in the Biennale Jogja Equator (BJE) across the last decade, creating connections with different regions and cultural backgrounds, and making the notion of decolonial feminism an everyday practice of fighting against the status quo, including posing the dominant narrative of white feminism critical questions which are also revealed in art history. By analysing the artists’ works within the wider context of cartography and political shifting post-Black-Lives Matter movements, this text offers a new approach of advocacy across different generations, on women’s positionings in the global world today.

**From post-colonial to decolonial: local context of feminism and collective futurism**

Having had to deal with many different contexts and cultural backgrounds in which feminism has sought to struggle, instead of being fixated on a single, final definition we now need to give feminism a wide range of interpretations. Since the 1970s, marginalized groups – black and coloured women, indigenous activists – have become important parts of feminism through various introductions to black feminism and intersectional feminism in recent periods,
where they have demanded that the importance of women issues outside white feminism also be given a recognition. Since their beginnings, as Bell Hooks (2000) writes, feminist movements have been polarized; some of them have wanted to prioritize gender equality, while the more revolutionary have wanted to change the system in order to end patriarchy and sexism. There were also gaps of economy and social class between white women and women from other racial groups; Hooks argues that, once they have gained more economic power within the existing social structure, white women no longer fight for a revolutionary feminist vision (2000: 3-4).

Intersectional and inclusive feminism opens up possibilities of dialogues between women from diverse cultural and political backgrounds, enriched by various experiences and identities. As a conceptual foreground of a movement, intersectionality centres the voice of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depth of the inequalities and relationships between them in any given context (UN Women 2020). By accepting diversity and rejecting the tendency of universalizing women’s experience, the notion of intersectionality has given the women’s movement important and significant tools on embracing different meaning of feminism and developing feminist methodologies of women’s empowerment.

In Asia, feminism has been challenged by the patriarchal structure which is aligned with the status quo in the social political environment, religions, the class struggle, and post-colonial experiences. This oppressive power comes with a complex and the heavy burden of history and an unresolved trauma of violence, which has put women in the position of secondary citizen in the modern infrastructure for centuries. Marriage, education systems, religion, and social relations, have been constructed from a patriarchal standpoint so that women could be marginalized and discriminated in the public sphere. Most women have had access to formal education only since the early twentieth century; their political rights were limited to the formal political system, and religion robbed women of the possibility to be public leaders. Historical texts, mythologies, and oral histories were selected through the lens of the male gaze, consequently women’s roles and positions were seldom written and recorded. In daily life and the fluid social system, women’s significant yet hidden role can be recognized and their stories preserved in the form of oral histories, but there is a need to institutionalize those women’s significant contributions to social changes and political shifts in many aspects, from governance, religions, economy, the arts, science, and literature; especially their important role in providing communities with basic necessities, while maintaining the balance of human and ecological environments.

Traditions and rituals still exist as important aspects of everyday life and, rather than seeing them as commodities for tourism and creative economics, as the new campaigns many governments promote, these beliefs still serve as the source of knowledge and wisdom and are still perceived as the foundations of being. Women in indigenous communities hold the power of spirituality and knowledge production, and these wisdoms are documented in the various
forms in the textiles they produce, food recipes, songs, and dances but, in many cases, these are not taken as serious forms of knowledge. The formal separation between the public and domestic spheres, with the concomitant constructed hierarchies, has been directly responsible for demoting women’s powerful visions to mere secondary sources of knowledge.

On the other hand, from the early fifteenth century to the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asian countries did share similarities in their history of colonialism and wars. Confined by patriarchal, oppressive power, massive traumatic, and violence experience burdened women and drove them to the brink of despair; more and more of their contributions were erased, their stories were frozen and forgotten, and their histories buried by the dominant social structure. While encouraging feminism to acknowledge different issues generated by specific situations in various cultures, post-colonial feminism has introduced one perspective which helps us read the layers of global history from a female perspective, and this certainly needs an intersectional approach (Chandra Talpade Mohanty 2022).

Sharon A Bong, a Malaysian gender researcher, points out the post-colonial context of feminist studies and activism in Asian countries as follows:

Feminist postcolonial approach privileges not only gender but also ethnicity, class, cultures, and religions as analytical categories in making sense of gender inequalities and gender inequities in Asia. As such, there is not just one definition of feminism; it is not a monolithic body of knowledge and practices. The emergence of feminist post-colonial theory offers a counter-discourse that challenges the unexamined assumptions of white, western, and middle-class feminists. Its ethos seeks to de-colonize (hence the prefix “post” in postcolonial) by opening up feminisms that have greater resonance with the lived realities of Southeast Asia, in particular its poverty and the plurality of its political, social, and cultural contexts (Bong 2016).

In the later development of feminist thought, the so-called “post-colonial” has been criticized for its lack of engagement and direct involvement with grassroots issues and problems, and this had encouraged decolonial feminism to share more political acts. By its support, decolonial feminism has also given marginalized groups of women, the survivors of nation-state projects and global rapid developments, a clear voice. French thinker and activist, Françoise Vergès, strongly encourages the idea of decolonial feminism as a form of solidarity for the women of the Global South. She states,

To call oneself a decolonial feminist, to defend feminisms with decolonial politics today, is not only to tear the word “feminism” out of the greedy hands of reactionaries’ empty ideologies. It is also to affirm our fidelity to the struggles of the women of the Global South who have come before us. It is to recognize their sacrifices, honour their lives in all their complexity, the risks they took, and the difficulties and frustrations they experienced; it is to receive their legacy (Vergès 2021: 10).
In the art (academic) discourse, decolonial feminism had broadened the contexts of and narratives about the fundamental notion of art practice, including reframing who can be defined as artists. Rephrasing Intan Paramaditha (2018) and focusing more on the issue within visual art ecosystem, I underline the importance decolonial feminism to advocate process of re-definition and re-writing of local art histories to include the art-making activities of women, which most of the time is taken to be anonymous or seen merely as crafts, not art. Layers of decolonization, of art and of feminism, are demanding fundamental changes in structures and definitions to create a new phase in art practices. Besides bringing the issues of the absence of women artists in many exhibitions and publications, the political act suggested by decolonial feminism – as a critical perspective within the art practices – focuses on the deconstruction of the established definition of contemporary or modern art itself which, in major cases, is very much based on the western conception of art, which would dismiss the practice of art-making within indigenous or traditional communities.

Museums, art educations, curators, critics, and artists have launched a joint movement to create more space for this conversation and, particularly, female curators and artist activists have gradually joined forces to change the perception of what is art and non-art, leading to “feminist decolonial turns” in curatorial practices. Increasingly, in big international exhibitions, such as festivals and biennales, curators have begun to include artists from indigenous communities in which forms of textiles, other weavings, drawings, naïve paintings, and similar undertaking are positioned as equal to other forms of contemporary arts. Art world also needs to pay attention to the division of labour in various art worlds, and thus thinking of gender more readily in tandem with conflating categories like class, race, or citizenship, locality/transregionality, diverging social circumstances, among other subjectivity-nuancing options, as there are roles in the art world that less recognized as critics, art managers, art workers, where women have played great parts of these caring works (Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez 2019).

While decoloniality has raised questions about power relationships in art institutions and agencies, it is also possible to see its significant effort to decentralize. In the future, the presence of female artists from the periphery and indigenous communities, who were almost invisible in previous decades, will contribute more palpably to the shaping of a new art history based on local knowledge and materials. The ideological position of institutions towards female art-making practices will be seen as a collective futurism in the art world. One which will accommodate shared concerns about ecology, spirituality, and rights of indigenous communities.

**Body identity and self-articulation in post-colonial society (Citra Sasmita, Octora, Salima, Muslimah Collective)**

With the history of worldwide mobility and colonialism as two of the most dominant discourses rooted in the practice of everyday life, the journey towards finding one’s own identity is perceived as a process rather than
a destination, particularly when dealing with diverse historical power contestations. In the past, women were forced to see their bodies and selves as part of social property, repressed by the status quo openly stifling the expression of their thoughts and feelings, let alone being able to stand on their own two feet from a critical position. Women’s knowledge about their bodies was defined and formed by the patriarchal society, which led to a fundamental misunderstanding of women’s bodies and their politicization and commodification by global capitalism. Issues of birth control, abortion, and controversial hijab issues in some countries, are impacts of the silencing of women and the denial of their right to self-determination by the state and society.

The artists discussed in this section demonstrate this struggle to speak up on their identity and how the tensions between self and society, private and public space, past tradition, and the future speculation have created the possibility to articulate themselves in various forms and ideas in their art works. While they criticize the cultural and political system which operates in their society, the well-spring of religious, and economic systems, knowledge production, and many other influences, they also reflect on their own situation in terms of how their bodies, thoughts, and experiences have been affected by various kinds of social oppression.

Salima Hakim’s works serves as an important opening for a discussion of the history of women’s identity in a dynamic and fluid society. Her project “Herstory: if Knowledge is Power” (2021), presented in Biennale Jogja XVI Equator #6 2021, challenges the established and almost given (visual) perception of various histories across global civilizations (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Salima Hakim, “Herstory: if Knowledge is Power” hand-embroidered on fabric, 2016-2021 (Courtesy of Biennale Jogja Foundation).
The most popular visual image of the first human born is illustrated in “The March of Progress” created in 1965 in a book called *Early man*, in which only male figures are depicted as part of the history of humanity. From her expanding research, Salima Hakim re-created and re-presented a new visual representation of “The March of Progress” by replacing the male ape with a female one; a result of Salima’s search in archives, studies, and documents about the findings of female fossils in various parts of Oceania (Elia Nurvista 2021). She created a fictional journal which depicts the textual resources of her research and offers narratives in a new form of visual language by sewing them onto a large piece of fabric, and presenting them by a strong display strategy which connects to those techniques and materials usually perceived to be feminine.

Octora traced her body experience of the menstrual period to looking back into quite essential questions about how women define their own bodies from a very intimate physical perspective; blood, cells, liquids, which were usually hidden in a closet. By investigating her own feelings about this particular experience, Octora offered possibilities of breaking the boundaries of the taboo on menstruation and perceiving the experience as a source of women’s power of reproduction, nurturing, and caring. Octora recorded her own menstrual blood using a video recorder and displayed the video between the vulnerable structure of (small) houses to build a connection with the idea of the private territory of women’s experience. Her choice of using transparent soft materials resulted in a poetic visual imagery and at the same time invited the audience to examine the process of menstruation as a natural women’s lifecycle openly.

Citra Sasmita began her Timur Merah Project from her encounters with some old Balinese texts which reveal the strong position of women in the Balinese lifecycle and ecology even though, in the practice of everyday life, women are often positioned as second-class citizens. Her “Timur Merah Project: The Embrace of My Motherland” (Figure 2), presented in Biennale Jogja XV Equator #5 2019, combined her reading of the past and her observation of the present-day situation, using different symbols from Balinese mythology, including fire, and water, plus a host of others (Wahid Akiq, Arham Rahman, and Sita Magfira 2019). The female body dominates her canvases, claiming the space which had often been erased. In her visual presentation, Citra Sasmita borrowed and simultaneously created a new position for the traditional Balinese Kamasan painting tradition, in juxtaposition with visual references from contemporary art. Kamasan painting has a long history in Balinese art and culture, and, in the dominant narrative, it was the domain of men to create the sketches and narratives, while women were often assigned the role of adding colours to the sketches. Not only did Citra Sasmita criticize this division of labour in creation, she also replaced all the figures in traditional Kamasan paintings, usually

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2 Citra’s introduction to the technique of Kamasan painting was also influenced by her relationship with Mangku Muriati, one of the rare female Kamasan painters in Klungkung, Bali. Mangku Muriati had begun to bring this emphasis of the female characters from Balinese/Hindu stories by highlighting such goddesses as Saraswati, Shakuntala, and Durga. She has also created some paintings with narratives more relevant to Bali’s history and contemporary life.
dominated by the male body, with the female body, and put women in the position in power and authority. Her critique of Balinese canonical texts and the absence of women in local history was strengthened by positioning female figures as the most significant in the cycle of life and Earth. Citra’s narrative touched upon the subject spanning the birth of the earth and the history of humankind to the struggle against colonialism and patriarchy.

In 2016, the Muslimah Collective, a group of young women artists established in Patani, South Thailand, in 2016, presented a strong voice from a marginalized group which lives on the border of Thailand and Malaysia, with a complex history of violence and trauma because of their confrontation with military forces of Thailand (Sugunnasil Wattana 2006). The curatorial text mentions that “With the attempt to take action outside the box among the scope of equality, Muslimah Collective has been framed under hijab religious headwear over the role of womanhood, reflection from sense of beauty, and reality of people in the Deep South including their hope for peace” (Penwadee Nophaket Manont 2019). Their works represented the struggle of the Muslim community, particularly the women, to navigate the stereotypical perception of their physical identity, especially in the global tension caused by Islam and

Figure 2. Citra Sasmita, “Timur Merah Project: The Embrace of My Motherland”, painting on canvas, herbs, and turmeric text, 2019 (Courtesy of Biennale Jogja Foundation).

Muslims in southern Thailand were suffering hardship at that time. In 2004, they were attacked on multiple occasions. According to the Human Rights Watch, a military base in Arion District, Narathiwat, was attacked. Four soldiers were killed, and 400 rifles and ammunition were lost. In April, more than 100 militants attacked more than ten police stations throughout Yala, Patani, Narathiwat, and Songkhla provinces.
terrorism, given various negative identifications of the hijab. As the younger generation of contemporary artists in Thailand, their courage to speak up about the hidden feelings of marginalization and alienation opened up a conversation about the reconciliation of past conflicts. The works created for the Biennale Jogja were strongly connected to a new hope of Muslim solidarity in the Global South, echoing a shared experience of discrimination and trauma experienced by Muslim women. By using media closely associated with local crafts, such as weaving, clay modelling, recycled paper, together with more contemporary media, such as photography, video, or installation, these practices looked into the reproduction of local art knowledge intertwined with an attempt to raise the political voice of the forgotten.

These four artists underline the notion of self and body from a feminist perspective to seek to reclaim and empower women’s position in a changing society. Not only did the artists present the hidden female narratives which are usually absent from the mainstream history and canonical texts, they also confidently revealed their subjectivity in dealing with complex political tensions which can be seen as their personal-political view. These four artists displayed strong articulation in reclaiming women’s bodies as powerful agencies, giving their existence a new meaning rooted in their own experience and subjectivity, opening discussions about taboos and social boundaries associated with women’s bodies. Interestingly, these diverse personal perspectives also referred to various cultural contexts, such as race, ethnicity, and being a social class minority. Intersectional feminism believes that this acknowledgement of differences is the key to fight for equality in society and, within feminist movements particularly, such an understanding of intersectionality will lead to reading, analysing, and planning action based on local, relevant situations. The choice of metaphors, forms, approaches, and materiality served as the language to articulate their thoughts and concerns, and to show how these symbols also relate to the history and context of each artist’s individuality.

**Frontiers of Conflicts: the Everyday War on Landing and Food Politics**

(Elia Nurfista, Nguyen Tanh Mai, Nguyen Thinh Thi)

The discourse and narrative of landing in this context is connected to the broad interpretation of land which includes land as physical territory, materiality, borders, geographical imagination, as well as the history of land, plantation, housing, food culture, among many others interpretations. Land issues have emerged as one of most urgent problems which needs to be responded to since massive capitalism and developmentalism have caused damaged to land and inflicted grave impacts on people’s lives. Mobility and the expansion of colonization had greatly affected the relationship between humans and the Earth. The Anthropocene epoch puts human beings as the centre of the universe, giving them a position superior to other creatures. The post-Anthropocene theory challenges this perspective by looking into the equal position of all living creatures in order to reshape the ecological system of our time to restore the damage caused by the superiority attributed to humankind. Saras Dewi (2022)
had explored these complex connections to women’s bodies and gender roles, spirituality/religiosity, and art/cultural practices; each issues entangled in a cycle of interdisciplinary knowledge.

The institutionalization of life which generates the notions of nation-state, citizenship, marriage system and other social political definitions of being-human has transformed life into a quantitative and statistic matter. Subjectivity and individual stories are kept on the surface of bureaucracy, and this is where art practice and alternative knowledge production could take over the role of a personal approach and bring the stories of common people to a larger public. Looking into human relations with the Earth, the idea of “landing” in this context proposes on examination of the notion of living in co-existence with others and the implementation of ethics in the effort of fulfilling the needs of food and shelter.

Nguyen Thanh Mai’s long-standing project has generated a complex and meaningful series of installation and video project about the life of river villagers on the border between Vietnam and Cambodia. The project evoked the question of home, of “landing” and flowing, of residing and departing, based on the experience of Vietnamese refugees. Penwadee Manont, the curator in Biennale Jogja 2019 mentioned that through a variety of approaches including the documentary, the relational, and the interventionist, “Day by Day” examined the experiences of this often overlooked group of Vietnamese living (either currently or in the recent past) in Cambodia (Figure 3), especially those who then built their lives on the river, as if the notion of home is always temporary (Manont 2019).

Figure 3. Nguyen Thi Tanh Mai, “Day by Day”, series of installation with handmade ID cards, video, bamboo house, et cetera, 2019 (Courtesy of Biennale Jogja Foundation).
Her video follows the life of people on the river in Cambodia, struggling between alienation and separation, to acquire formal acknowledgement and rights as citizens, as well as recording their memories and hopes. The project raised the possibility that this community’s experiences are both unique and emblematic of larger issues. From the question of temporariness and belonging, Thanh Mai continued her investigation of asylum experience and created her next project on citizenship. During her research, she investigated and thought deeply about the necessity and importance of an ID card and its impact on people’s knowledge and lives. Civilization has created many things, including ID cards. However, for some people, ID cards are a problem. An ID is like the key to change in the lives of some people: it could be identity, it could be power, it might be a matter of classification, and it could be the stuff of their dreams.

Elia Nurvista was interested in the issue of food politics in everyday practice, ranging from the global trade of spices in relation to the history of colonialism to the present day, and to the distribution of food based on social class and race. Her project presented in Biennale Jogja XIII Equator #3 2015 was the result of her observation of how the state’s social food system, called Beras miskin (Raskin), had revealed the gap in food quality between the different social classes, and, worse, the party who should have been responsible for the prosperity of the citizens was the one which had systemically marginalized them. Elia’s research shows the occurrence of conflict in some areas as the women (received rice for this programme) protested about the poor quality of the rice they had been doled out in front of the Village Office. She collected some television news on this matter and recomposed these into a video project to underline the problem of a state failure to provide the basic needs of its citizens. Later, she created an installation and open kitchen in which she invited some people to create recipes and cook using the waste rice to provide a platform for conversation for the upper-middle class who usually take rice as something for granted, a strategy to encourage discussion about the problem of food gap.

Even though the government’s campaign for rice sufficiency was massive under the New Order, showcasing the increase in rice production which could provide for the whole nation, many backlashes of this legacy remained untold. The massive demand for productivity had caused a deterioration in soil’s quality, and, moreover, a decline in quality of life in general, its principal long-term effect being the result of, abundant use of toxic chemicals over a long period of time. This should be seen as in contradistinction to the persuasive success story of rice planting in the past, the proof of the pudding nowadays being the country could not provide a decent quality of rice for the poor. The land and soil have been exploited and deeply plundered, while the old local knowledge of agriculture and food production had been almost erased by the state’s hegemonic food propaganda. Elia Nurvista’s work borrowed rice as a metaphor for diverse broader narratives, such as food distribution, the wealth gap, state ignorance and failure, as well as women as the front-liners of household family life.
Nguyễn Trinh Thi worked to document the struggle of some villages in North Vietnam which were on the brink of being demolished by the plan to build a nuclear reactor in the area of Ninh Thuan. Her long film, *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), takes the form of exchange of letters between a man and a woman who long for their connection to the past. Through the letters, two voices, both representing Nguyễn’s own voice, address traversing distances: between lands, time, camera lenses, and the hollow space between this community and themselves. The two voices hesitate in performing their own roles as narrators. The film asks what is carried across such distance by people and memory before quietly exploring how history is lived in the present (Caroline Ha Thuc 2020).

Panduranga, the village, lies at the centre of the region of the Cham indigenous people, so the plan to build nuclear power plants poses a threat to the ancient matrilineal Hindu culture which stretches back almost two thousand years. In her film, Trinh Thi shifts the audience’s attention back and forth between personal stories and historical memories, intimate portraits, and distant landscapes, using various approaches borrowed from ethnography, art film, and footage of fieldworks. The woman in the film shows the strength of women in an indigenous community in preserving local knowledge and history; keeping the ecological environment safe for the next generation. Trinh Thi stated in one interview: “The only way for me to tell story is to talk about two stories at once: the intimate story of the Cham and the wider story of colonialism, war, contemporary politics, and the position of the artist.”

In my opinion, the three artists mentioned above have expanded the role of women in domestic space in which standing on the land (or water) really implies a struggle for the right to live and to defend their place to live and the air which they breathe. With the rapid developmentalism in cities in Southeast Asia, the proxy war between nation states, and the expansion of global trade in which Third World countries have become places for production, the change in ecology and in the notion of nature as space has become unavoidable. The people discussed in these artists’ works were not only marginalized from their own living places, they also had to deal with the negative impacts of the massive change in the landscape on their quality of life. By portraying the different struggles and challenges which they faced, the artists also shared the collective memories of community’s perceptions of nature and their environment. Vandana Shiva (1997) has emphasized the fact that women have always been important part of the struggles against the rapid developmentalism that destroys ecology, lifecycle and environment, particularly related to the food politics and the preservation of indigenous knowledges.

**Text and Context as a Way of Negotiating Spirituality, Nature, and Culture (Yen Sum, Christine Ay Tjoe, and Arahmaiani)**

The importance of texts in contemporary art vocabulary can be seen as an expansion of iconography as visual representation. While texts can be a
symbolic form of language, artists working with texts also enrich the metaphors and examine the notion of texts as resources of knowledge production. The use of texts can also be the tool to evaluate established knowledge and archives, to dig out new perspectives of interpretation, and reading layers of contexts which might be missing from the existing knowledge. Therefore, text and context in the practice of the contemporary arts provide space for deconstruction and redefinition, as well as rewriting history. In the same vein, spirituality has been one of the important discourses in the work of women artists as a personal project to re-negotiate their identity and strengthen their cosmological relationship with their selves. While, in many cases, the definition of spirituality tends to refer to the private, inner zone of the human soul, these artists have shown the broad imagery of spiritualism in relation to religious practice, iconography, and tradition. Many of the female artists’ works exhibited in the Biennale Jogja Equator series looked into the notion of spirituality in relation to cosmological phenomena, local knowledge, gender role and identity, among other issues.

Spirituality suggests a subjective situation which enables a connection to the external world outside oneself, without not completely necessitating the set of agreements or strict rules found in religions. Such subjective consciousness is closely related to how the (production of) art works, so it is not surprising that there are many artists interested in translating their spiritual experiences and research into a work of art. In some of her writings on the relationship between art and spirituality, Rina Arya (2011), who offers an acute interpretation in her analysis of artworks with spirituality as the theme, asks, “Is art able to accommodate spiritual senses? Is there something we can call ‘spiritual art’?” Artists delve into their personal experience of beliefs and spirituality and transformed them into aesthetic forms and moments.

The Arabic script has been massively constructed as the symbol of Islam as religion rather than merely an adjunct to language. In non-Arabic speaking countries such as Indonesia, the existence of the Arabic script usually symbolizes something within the religious spectrum which is taken for granted, without trying to extract the verbal meaning of the letters/sentences. Therefore, Arabic letters have become part of the stereotypical cultural representation of Islam which has its own political tools of interpretation in complex Indonesian society. Arahmaiani, a well-known performance artist who has been investigating the paradoxical practices and phenomena regarding religion and its gender politics, created a work entitled “I Love You” (Figure 4) to challenge this given perception of Islamic symbols, underlining the use of Arabic Pegon by Javanese Muslims (Anissa Rahardiningtyas 2022). She made objects from soft materials—fabrics and sponges—which visually closely resemble Arabic letters but are not actual letters. Some of these very brightly coloured – red, yellow, green, purple objects were displayed, almost life size, hanging from the ceiling, whereas some others were displayed on the floor, inviting audience to be part of the installation. Arahmaiani played with the fixed perception of symbols which have been fundamentally
institutionalized in everyday life, juxtaposing the pop-culture image (through the choices of colours and the strategy of display) with the visual realities in our surroundings, such as advertisement, and posters. This work gave the audience a space to use some critical self-reflection in their encounters with religious symbols in public spaces and on how they engaged themselves from a personal standpoint of the meaning of those symbols. As they walked around the letters, Arahmaiani provided them with a gesture of displacement and desacralization of religious symbols in order to accept in their actual meaning instead of the constructed meaning given to them in everyday life.

With a similar gesture of twisting symbols and using language as critical tools, Ay Tjoe Christine presented her work, “... Today I kill the first layer and I find another layer living as Landscape, Landscape, Landscape ...” in which she displayed an old typewriter and provided a long aluminium plate on which the audience could try to type using the machine. She intentionally erased all the letters, and left behind only three keys G, O, D. The machine was connected to speakers which would amplify the act of typing, escalating of a sense of being while participating in the installation. On the plate, hundreds of GOD words, created by the audience, could be seen in a random repeating form. In the period of 2005 to 2015, Christine Ay Tjoe had reflected intensively on her personal connections to religion and spirituality through a series of works which revealed her critical yet poetic questions about myths, such as the Crucifixion, the Last Supper collective memories, memento mori, and other themes. It is interesting that, in this work, the personal reflection which occurs
in the private area of one’s life is transformed into social acts by sharing it in an open public space like a museum/gallery, with amplification symbolized by the speakers. By openly performing the conversation with God, a person was encouraged to share his/her spiritual experience with others and to connect this conversation to other issues surrounding the gallery space. Ay Tjoe posed a significant question about space—about the public and the private and the tension between self/individual and the society, particularly in connection to personal beliefs, which usually haunt women’s personal lives, to stimulate an open conversation.

Yim Yen Sum, a young artist from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, was invited to join a residency programme with some other Indonesian artists for the Biennale Jogja XV Equator #5 2019. She was chosen to go to Aceh. All the participants in the Aceh Residency Program were women artists. Yen Sum followed the idea of Rachmadiah Tri Gayatri, her fellow artist, to research the impact of the 2004 tsunami on that area, and how local knowledge could serve as one of the alternatives for disaster mitigation. They went to Simeulue Island, in the southern part of Aceh, and learned from the local community how they had faced the disastrous situation. Simeulue was known to be one of the areas with the fewest victims of the disaster, and they were also somehow able to recover their lives quite quickly afterwards. After talking to many local people, particularly mothers and elderly women, Yen Sum became interested in the fact that the lullaby they sang to children at bedtime included a warning and knowledge about tsunamis and earthquakes. The local word for tsunami, smong, is part of the lyrics of the song, and this created a collective memory for children in that area about what they needed to do if a tsunami was imminent. By singing the lullaby, mothers in Simeulue transmitted important knowledge about nature and disasters, through a very intimate gesture in the most domestic space (bedroom), become a rituals transmitted from one generation to another. Yen Sum created an installation consisting of a small cotton bed strewn with stones originally from the area and mosquito-net bed-curtains with the text of the lullaby in the Simeulue language embroidered on it (Figure 5). She invited the audience to come inside and lie down on the hard bed to experience of being uncomfortable, while reading all the text which were unfamiliar to them. Yen Sum underlined the importance of this production of knowledge within the domestic sphere, and how women have become the frontline guardians in preserving tradition which is still relevant in today’s context.

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4 December 26, 2004, a tsunami struck Aceh and other parts of the Indian Ocean. The death toll reached 200,000 people; however, on Simeulue, there were only seven victims out of a total population of 78,000 (2000). People on Simeulue were alerted to the smong by the 9.2 magnitude earthquake. They ran to the hills and watched as the giant wave destroyed their houses.
Interestingly, the artist chose the bed and mosquito nets – usually considered as domestic attributes – to be the main metaphors of all these important findings. She opened the domestic space as the source of knowledge and wisdom, even involving the audience by inviting them to experience this domesticity from a different perspective. The artist stated:

I choose mosquito net as a medium of this artwork creation. It can remind us of the significance of the fading traditions. Some things can be eliminated with times but some things should be passed down to the next generation. Mosquito nets may be eliminated and no longer a necessity for life due to the modern technology (air-con) and various of anti-mosquito methods. Just like the oral culture. It might gradually disappear or inherited with text/book but the meaning of oral culture is more than that. It is the knowledge, art, ideas and culture material are received, preserved, and transmitted orally from one generation to another (Yim Yen Sum’s statement, 2019).

**What’s next; Exchanging knowledge and solidarity of the Global South**

Learning from all the works from the Biennale Jogja Equator series 2011-2021, the strong positionality and resistance of these women artists has shown how the boundaries of gender which exist in the social structure can be playfully blurred in the practice of everyday life. The domestic arena—home, land, kitchen, nurturing labour, inner self—were all turned into empowering spaces instead of passive domains. These women artists portrayed women in their potentiality, vision, and persistence, enhancing sisterhood and solidarity and highlighting the knowledge which has been produced and distributed across
the generations. Instead of offering a fixed (re)presentation of reality, these works put forward space for contestation and negotiation between women and the status quo.

In contemporary Southeast Asia art discourses, the crucial contribution of these feminist thoughts is still limited in the big narratives, and many archives and stories need to be researched and written as homework yet to be done. It should be underlined that the art ecosystem in Southeast Asian countries is not dominated by established institutions as art houses or museums – which became the locus of art history in the West, but most have been activated by artist-run collectives and through intensive series of independent festivals and alternative movements. In many cases, the knowledge production and the historical narrative which has been built by their decades of practices has often not been had a wide distribution compare those big institutions.

Nevertheless, in this specific situation, the construction of major – not to say canonical – narratives and art history does spreads around, which can be seen as a positive aspect in terms of the power relationship between these diverse alternative strategies. Platforms such as Biennales, therefore, offer the possibility to enable this political yet intimate aspect of women’s lives and experiences to be presented metaphorically to juxtaposed questions critical of the established system of gender disparities and to introduce the voices of women’s wisdoms from various cultural contexts. It is important for institutions like the Biennale to keep producing theories, notes, and records of various conversations which involve or are even created by women artists, writers, curators, and distribute them as widely as possible and make accessible to different publics. By doing this, we hope that women’s narratives will be included in every effort to decolonize art systems and rewrite mainstream history, thereby introducing change into the masculine and patriarchal field of the arts.

Biennales work continuously with collective and alternative spaces to create an orchestration of silence, of the forgotten, of the erased, creating the potential for conversations to emerge, even when held only in whispers.

References


About the Author

Alia Swastika is the director of the Jogja Biennale Foundation in Yogyakarta and is actively involved as a curator, project manager, and writer on a number of international exhibitions. She was co-artistic director of the Gwangju Biennale IX (2012): Roundtable, and director of the Biennale Yogyakarta XIV (2015). She also participated as the curator of a special exhibition of Indonesian artists in the 2012 edition of Art Dubai. In 2017, she curated contemporary art sections at the Europalia Festival, Indonesia where she organized exhibitions in Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, SMAK Ghent, MuHKA in Antwerp, and some others. She curated many exhibitions in Indonesia and abroad, including some established and new emerging artists. She is currently researching Indonesian women artists in the period of 1975 to 1990 and had published the first series of publications. She actively writes for various magazines, journals, and publications, in Indonesia and international platforms. Alia Swastika may be contacted at: aliaswastika@gmail.com.