New Order Policies on Art/Culture and Their Impact on Women’s Roles in Visual Arts, 1970s–90s

Alia Swastika

Figure 8.1: Dolorosa Sinaga, *Tak Kunjung Datang (They Never Came)*, 1992. Detail view. Bronze. Image courtesy the artist.
The New Order regime in Indonesia, which held power from 1966 to 1998 and is considered the most powerful authority in the history of the nation, established many values and norms that differed from previous periods. One of the most heavily impacted was the role and position of women in society, including in the arts and cultural sector. While reading the hidden history of the Sukarno era, or the Old Order, I found it very interesting to see the ideological shift in women’s movements, including the visibility of women (artists) in the sociopolitical context. Many women had actively joined movements and political organisations and some very strong and critical voices had emerged. By contrast, during the New Order it seemed that women’s voices were systematically silenced. This has led to the invisibility of women in the (canonical) art history of Indonesia: even now, more than two decades into the reformation era, women artists remain hidden and almost unknown. Rewriting history, in my opinion, is not only thinking about making a new canon, but most importantly documenting the diverse experiences and narratives that formed women artists during that important period of political silencing. Therefore, I am interested in looking at the small narratives—almost biographical—of five women artists from different backgrounds who lived and worked during the New Order, and examining how gender policies during the New Order influenced their artistic practices in one way or another. I studied archival texts (mostly catalogue essays and newspaper/magazines articles) on how women artists were portrayed in the mass media during the early 1970s to early 1990s to gain insight into the broader context of the art scene in general. The five women I studied and interviewed—Siti Adiyati (b. 1949), Hildawati Soemantri (1945–2003), Dyan Anggraini (b. 1957), Dolorosa Sinaga (b. 1953) and Mangku Muriati (b. 1967)—should not be seen as representative of women’s art practices of the period; rather, they represent five different stories that enrich the study.

In 1965, at the end of the Old Order, the world of art and culture had changed its ideology and perspectives in reaction to the newly emerging political situation. In the New Order era, Manikebu (Cultural Manifesto) artists marked their victory, mainly due to the dissolution of the Lekra (Institute for the People’s Culture), the imprisonment of Lekra’s important exponents and the massive exile to Buru Island. The New Order also raised the need for an aesthetic regime that worshipped a kind of obscurity and ambiguity in political matters. That need was easily filled by abstract painting. In his 1978 book Strategi Kebudayaan (Strategy of culture),
Ali Murtopo wrote: ‘The New Order is a cultural process’. In the context of art, the New Order needed a type of art practice that was not critical of the government and did not interfere with political affairs—art for art’s sake. Formalism met this need.

In relation to female artists, the New Order’s emphasis on women as mothers and wives influenced how women were represented in various media and the way they represented themselves. During the 1950s and 1960s, one of the most significant women’s movements in Indonesia was Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, shortened to Gerwani (Indonesian Women’s Movement), which also came under the umbrella of the Indonesian Communist Party, with many progressive female intellectuals and artists among its members. After the dissolution of Gerwani, when communism was banned in Indonesia, women were not only politically domesticated, but also awareness of the body, sexuality and individuality were restricted; hence, related issues became taboo for the majority of artists. Rachmi Diyah, in a study on body politics and power in dance, argues that female dancers during the New Order experienced structural violence on their bodies, mainly due to the loss of opportunity to express resistance.

From my observations, during the 1970s there were several strong female artists, such as Edi Sedyawati, Retno Maruti, Gusmiati Suid and N. H. Dini, who raised themes related to women’s position in society, emphasising the tension between tradition and modernity. Questions concerning the position of women occasionally appeared in the form of voices criticising how women were positioned in traditional social structures. The New Order regime strictly limited the agenda of women’s organisations to non-political spheres, forming a new structure in which most organisations were attached to the state’s bureaucracy, enabling the government to control them. Among the most important organisations of the time were Dharma Wanita, an association of civil servants’ wives; Kowani, the Indonesian Women’s Coalition; and associations of wives of military members. The government implemented national programs, such as Kesejahteraan Keluarga (Family Prosperity Program) and Dasa Wisma (Ten Households), based on families and their residential areas.

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These programs functioned as mechanisms of control, gathering women together every month to learn domestic skills such as cooking, sewing and other household duties. Julia Suryakusuma, one of Indonesia’s best-known feminists, called the New Order’s gender strategy ‘ibuism’ (mother-ism) because its state-sanctioned ideological standpoint emphasised only the roles of women as wives and mothers.3

In literature, as in visual art, women’s voices were eliminated in male-dominated literary canons, selected through a series of masculine procedures. Rukiah Kertapati is one notable example. Yerry Wirawan, a lecturer in history at Sanata Dharma University, claimed that Rukiah Kertapati was deliberately omitted from the history of Indonesian women and Indonesian modern literary history as she was a member of Lekra.4

In fact, the taming of the women’s movement not only caused the decline of women’s involvement in the sociopolitical arena, but also limited space for women to exhibit their work, compared to that of male artists. The female body was constructed as a machine to strengthen the state’s identity where the ruling regime held almost absolute control over what was permissible and what was not. Thus, ideas of ‘being female’ and ‘being an artist’ were developed in a highly standardised, narrow field.

**Outside the Canon: Discourse and Themes in the Work of Women Artists during the 1970s and 1980s**

The Indonesian art scene in the late 1970s and 1980s was fairly dynamic, marked by the birth of many new experiments and interesting encounters with various foreign ideas. In Jakarta, Taman Ismail Marzuki, built in 1974, enabled artists, intellectuals, art audiences and the public to gather and see each other’s work, conduct discussions and become part of a growing city. In addition, there were cultural spaces, including Balai Budaya, Bentara Budaya, Goethe Institut and several hotels, that occasionally held art events.

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In terms of the practice of art creation, there were a number of emerging trends in Indonesian visual art, including those that Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, the Indonesian New Art Movement) explored in several exhibitions and in their manifesto. During the 1960s, the dominant discourse on art turned on the dichotomy between ‘the political’ and ‘the aesthetic’, represented by Lekra and Manikebu, respectively. Such debates loosened somewhat after the 1965 incident, as many artists were imprisoned, exiled overseas or were simply missing. In the early 1970s,  

Editors’ note: Seng Yu Jin, senior curator at the Singapore National Gallery, noted the work combined a living plant that is also a harmful weed with artificial roses. He quotes the artist as saying that the work criticised Indonesia’s then president Suharto’s New Order as ‘just an illusion symbolised by the golden rose in the sea of absolute poverty that the eceng gondok represents’. Siti Adiyati to Seng Yu Jin, 1 January 2017, quoted in Seng Yu Jin, ‘The Re-Materialisation of Everyday Life’, National Gallery of Singapore, 13 June 2019, accessed 9 April 2022, www.nationalgallery.sg/magazine/siti-adiyati-re-materialisation-everyday-life.
artists were still trying to understand the period of political transition from the Old Order to the New Order in which political issues only appeared vaguely. The large-scale exhibition Pameran Besar Seni Lukis Indonesia (Major exhibition of Indonesian painting) held in 1974—historically significant because it triggered the birth of the 1974 Desember Hitam (Black December) manifesto—was considered by Bambang Bujono to be an exhibition with strong diversity in artistic orientation and style. Nashar, Zaini, Abas Alibasjah and Fadjar Sidik were the main references for artistic ideas. Meanwhile, mainstream exhibitions continued to attract visitors, especially if they displayed the works of maestro artists such as Basuki Abdullah, Affandi and other well-known names of their generation.

The history of visual arts during the colonial period—seen through art writing published in various mass media outlets, in introductory textbooks on Indonesian art history and in notes in some exhibition catalogues—indicates that art was a highly male-dominated scene. There were extremely few female artists mentioned, let alone as primary actors in the developing art discourses. In some sources, as in the important book by Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro, artists such as Emiria Soenassa, Mia Bustam and Trijoto Abdullah are mentioned. Yet it is very difficult to find other Indonesian female artists from the colonial period in these texts. This phenomenon is not specific to Indonesia or even Asian countries, as this absence is also notable at the global level. Griselda Pollock underlines the invisibility of women artists in canonical art history texts.

Against the backdrop of this masculine and canon-based history of art, fighting for women’s positions means questioning the criteria used to warrant recording an artist or artwork, including critically reassessing ‘hobbyist’ art practices, arts that are intertwined as a part of women’s social functions in certain structures—for example, in kraton (palaces) and in traditional ceremonies—and works that represent long traditions of craft, such as batik, weaving, ikat, embroidery and glass painting, all of which are mostly performed by women.

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If we want to question the elimination of women from the art canon, first we need to problematise the very concept of the canon. Generally, canons are understood as comprising works by maestros—masterpieces. However, there are more complex struggles for values in the establishment of a canon. Pollock defines the canon as a ‘discursive formation which constitutes the works or thoughts it selects as the product of artistic mastery’.\(^9\) The selection is conducted within existing race and class structures. This discursive formation legitimises white male supremacy.

According to Heidi Arbuckle, the language and structure of the Indonesian art canon (from the colonial period to the contemporary era) adopted Western ideas, including gender exclusion. This makes the role of female artists indefinite in art history. Arbuckle also investigated how the language or terms used in art have perpetuated masculine regimes. For example, the term ‘*seniman*’ is constructed from the incorporation of the words ‘*seni*’ (art) and ‘*man*’ (male), which, in itself, indicates a gender preference.\(^10\) This masculine regime lasted long enough that traces of the likely male-dominated social environment are still found in the Indonesian art scene today. In the late 1970s and 1980s, one of the well-known collectives was Decenta, whose members were all male. Apotik Komik, established in the mid-1990s, also consists of male artists only. Other recent artist collectives have also had exclusive male memberships, such as Mes 56, which restricted its membership to men until 2016.

A number of art exhibitions during the New Order included women artists, but they are not recorded in art history texts, let alone as part of the canon, as they were held in hotels or other commercial spaces. Thus, even when female artists contribute in the public sphere, they are not considered equal to male artists and do not receive the same level of media or critical attention. While some art critics, such as Sanento Yuliman, Bambang Bujono, Kusnadi and Soedarmadji, did write about female artists in this period, especially those who were considered to display interesting artistic ideas, the numbers were insignificant compared to the reviews of work by male artists. Sanento Yuliman conducted careful research on women’s involvement in Indonesian visual art for his introduction to the Nuansa exhibition catalogue in 1988, re-presenting Kartini, Emiria Sunassa and

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Trijoto Abdullah in an important historical context.11 According to Heidi Arbuckle, Yuliman’s major contribution was his insight that gendered differentiations of labour had significantly erased women’s roles in the art world.12

Yuliman identified an important distinction in art: men, he said, made statues and paintings, and women made crafts and ceramics. He noted that, by the end of the 1980s, men were making work using fabric and ceramics and that they were more commercially successful in this endeavour than women. Arbuckle underlines Yuliman’s sociological conclusion—that the problem for female artists in Indonesia was not aesthetics, creativity or ability, but a lack of opportunity and accessibility, and the need to overcome significant social barriers.

In the late 1980s, Carla Bianpoen began paying attention to the works of female artists. Her early writings have become an important source of data on the position of female artists in Indonesia and she continues to publish reviews in *Kompas* and the *Jakarta Post*. Bianpoen’s *Indonesian Women Artists*, co-written with Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro, made an important contribution to the literature on female artists, as did her collection of biographies, fragments of thoughts and artworks of almost 100 female artists.13

When distinctions are drawn between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ artists, presentations or exhibitions of women’s artwork were often relegated to the latter category. Bambang Bujono, a journalist who faithfully followed and wrote about the development of Indonesian art in the 1970s–90s, noted that female artists faced limited possibilities.14 They might be categorised as ‘real’ artists, hobby artists, Sunday artists or commercial artists. Maria Tjui, from Pariaman, West Sumatra, was considered quite successful in marketing her artworks during this period. Her works were often compared to Affandi’s works, especially because she learned from Affandi, even living with his family for some time. To a certain extent, she was widely known as a commercial artist and frequently featured in magazines and other popular media.

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13 Bianpoen, Wardani and Dirgantoro, *Indonesian Women Artists*.
There was little recognition of gendered issues in the 1970s and 1980s, and some even denied the existence of gender inequalities. Bambang Bujono stated that, generally, there was no problem of gender representation in these decades. However, in his review of Pameran Besar Seni Lukis Indonesia IV 1981 (Major exhibition of Indonesian painting IV 1981), Tjok Hendro lamented the lack of female artists. According to him, there were only three female artists out of 90 exhibitors—Nunung WS, Sriyani and Titik Setiawati—and all of them came from Jakarta.\(^\text{15}\)

At that time, female artists often participated in joint exhibitions with fellow female artists. While this ‘short cut’ enabled them to overcome the problem of quantity, it also reinforced discrimination, as female artists were effectively limited to exhibiting with other female artists. Moreover, some exhibitions seemed to be organised only to create a joint event for female artists and were not otherwise based on shared ideas. One such event was *Exhibition of 27 Female Painters* from Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta and Semarang, which took place at Balai Seni Rupa Jakarta (now Museum Seni Rupa dan Keramik/Museum of Fine Art and Ceramics) in 1979.

Five years later, *Pameran Seni Rupa Bias 27* (Bias 27 art exhibition) was held at Galeri Cipta, TIM, showcasing works by 27 female artists from Jakarta. The event deliberately gathered staff, teachers and female students who had studied at the Jakarta Institute of Art. Some of the artists participating in this exhibition were Hildawati Soemantri, Farida Srihadi, Ananda Moersyid, Dolorosa Sinaga, Windradiati and Lydia Poetri.

Given that GSRB’s artistic experimentations are regarded as having been successful, it is necessary to mention Siti Adiyati and Nanik Mirna, the two female artists of the group. The movement promoted a spirit of experimentation in finding new artistic expressions and members had the freedom to pursue their respective concerns and ideas. Siti Adiyati and Nanik Mirna seemed to have equal positions to other members. Thus, their contribution might be quite different from some aforementioned female artists. The fact that Siti Adiyati and Nanik Mirna were not recorded in the list of female artists compiled by Carla Bianpoen, Farah Wardani and Wulan Dirgantoro is quite intriguing. The general public only started to notice Siti Adiyati and study her important contribution after her participation in the 2019 Biennale in Jakarta.

\(^\text{15}\) Tjok Hendro, ‘Sedang Bertarung Seni Lukis Indonesia di TIM’ [Battling for painting at TIM], *Kompas*, 23 December 1980.
Themes of Female Artists’ Works, Mid-1970s – Early 1990s

It is interesting that, in many reviews, female artists were mentioned alongside the names of male artists that might have influenced them. For example, Bujono described Umi Dachlan’s work as nonfigurative due to the prominent influence of Ahmad Sadali, her mentor (see Figure 1.7), and Ida Hajar’s work as Picasso-like, but without any explanation or elaboration on the context or the theme. In another essay, Bujono described Reni Hoegeng’s work as embracing minimalism—a canvas with single background colour, and one or several shapes with one single colour as well. Later, Bujono praised this choice, stating: ‘Some paintings succeeded in presenting quite reasonable beauty of form’. Nunung WS’s work *Garis Putih* (White line) prompted a review praising the artist’s ability to offer imaginative adventures, weaving between long linear fields that emerge abruptly. These are some examples of how critics often read women’s work through their visual preferences instead of trying to describe the thinking behind those lines, colours or others features.

Popular styles during the mid-1970s – early 1990s were landscape painting and painting with decorative elements. In *Pameran 27 Perupa* (Exhibition of 27 artists), held to celebrate the anniversary of Jakarta in 1979, Kustiyah presented two paintings: one portrays a frangipani flower (one of her most frequent subjects of paintings) and the other is a painting titled *Laut Madura* (*Madura Sea*) (see Map 2). Landscape painting was a developing genre in the late 1970s in Indonesia.

Strong media experimentation was demonstrated by Hildawati Soemantri (b. 1945), a female artist working mostly with ceramics. In a striking exhibition in 1976 at Taman Ismail Marzuki (more details are in the later section about her biography and works), Soemantri showed her determination to work with clay. Her experiments and relationship with the medium itself created a strong spiritual element within her works.

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Amid the tendency to be apolitical, female artists determined to keep working and to play a role in the art scene. Meanwhile, among the streams of aesthetic and formalistic ideas, very few female artists worked consistently with dominant trends or themes. At that time, feminism was regarded as merely one among other emerging concepts, such as modernism and existentialism. It did not serve as a mainstream discourse within communities of female artists. A sense of agency was not necessarily presented in an obvious manner within their works. Nevertheless, expressions indicating self-acknowledgement are quite subversive in certain ways.

Images of women questioning issues of identity and relations with traditional structures are present in Astari Rasjid’s (b. 1953) paintings. Rasjid stated that she longed for the freedom to express herself the way she wanted to, but the Javanese tradition her parents had taught her ruled out individualistic behaviour. Her sense of individualism was heightened when she lived abroad for several years. Coming back to Indonesia, tensions between individualism and communalism inevitably arose.¹⁹

The notions of self that appeared in the works of Indonesian artists from the mid-1970s to the 1980s were quite different from the ones operating in the Western art scene. In Western art, notions of the self in work by female artists were presented mostly through their relationships to their physical body. Hence, performance art was a popular approach, and the medium was frequently used by female artists of that era. Lucy Lippard notes that one of the fundamental differences between the body art practised by male and female artists at that time was attitude. However, this element might be less obvious to those who opposed feminism or those who did not consciously examine women’s ideas or thoughts. Due to being invisible, to ‘speak louder’ women had to create radical visual images.

Does a female aesthetic exist? What are the issues? In the 1980s, and even today, Indonesian society considered the matter of sex to be taboo. One of the early artists to present issues of sex straightforwardly in the Indonesian art scene was Gusti Ayu Kadek (IGAK) Murniasih (1966–2006). Depicting radical images of the body on her canvases, Murniasih broke a longstanding taboo in Indonesian art. It follows that there are at least two ways that feminist artists can provide new perspectives on the canon and challenge established gender perceptions in the world of art. First, by redefining visual symbols that have already entailed certain connotations of gender; second, by creating radical images to immediately deliver the issues into the centre of a dialogue. Therefore, a strong sense of agency is critical for female artists.

Existential discussions about female artists frequently start with the issue of proportionate quota and end up with questioning whether there are distinctive characteristics in the works of female artists that distinguish them from those of male artists. To take the question deeper, we might ask: is there a feminist art?

Lucy R. Lippard argues that there are certain prominent aspects in the works of female artists that are inaccessible to male artists. These originate in the different political, biological and social experiences of

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21 Ibid., 152.
females. In my opinion, female experiences are deeply personal. At the same time, such experiences are always in tension with the culture that constructs them.

In a society where craftsmanship serves as an essential part of traditional rituals, the notion of artworks as the representation of the individual becomes ambiguous. Within this society, women’s ideas and thoughts are anonymised, leading to more biases since the society is, in itself, patriarchal. Correspondingly, the works of female artists, which are highly influenced by traditional legacies, such as making batik, woven fabric and ceramics, are not categorised as representations of thought. Such assumptions are reproduced continuously until women eventually believe that the products of their labour are not art and are unlike what men make. Another consequence coming from this assumption is the stereotypical construction of female art as if it only encompasses limited forms such as painting, fabric, embroidery, handicrafts, etc. This emphasis on labelling women’s art as ‘craft’ can, in a way, be seen as part of the domestication strategy described earlier—the politics of *ibuism* during the New Order period.

While the politics of *ibuism* touched almost every level of society, it is interesting to see how it impacted the works of female artists who practised during that period. Did the themes of their works become less political and less critical? How did they bring women’s problems of the time into their work? How did this depoliticising of women change their aesthetic vision or artistic practice, if at all?

I made a small study of five women artists, examining their trajectories, artworks and everyday life practices during the New Order era: Hildawati Soemantri, who made a very significant contribution to the history of ceramic art in Indonesia; Dyan Anggraini and Siti Adiyati, both eminent figures in the Yogyakarta art scene; Mangku Muriati, a painter from Klungkung, Bali, who explores the traditions of Kamasan as her visual language and is also the first priestess in Klungkung Village’s temple; and Dolorosa Sinaga, a sculptor who dedicates herself to humanitarian issues. Their stories (or case studies) go some way towards answering some of the fundamental questions mentioned above.
Political Narratives: The Political and the Personal

It is thought-provoking to study artists’ attitudes towards the political landscape of the 1980s. It is especially stimulating to see how they responded (or not) to the policies of the New Order and whether they consciously or unconsciously avoided political topics in their works. During the 1980s, global feminism was highly influenced by the concept that ‘the personal is political’, an argument widely addressed in the works of European and American female artists in response to political regulations that directly put women in unfavourable situations. At the same time, artists such as Doris Salcedo and Valie Export sought to connect their artworks to other political discourses to deliver criticisms of the state and authority. Yet, in Indonesia during this period, a consciousness of what was political in one’s personal realm was still undeveloped.

Siti Adiyati, a prominent artist who was a signatory to the Pernyataan Desember Hitam (Black December Statement) and GSRB, stated that, during the 1980s, the political was defined as a matter of building critical awareness and enhancing the desire to question the social context. Meanwhile, Dolorosa encountered an appealing discourse shift in regard to the meaning of the political itself. She swayed from interpreting the political as a matter of representation to understanding it as direct engagement—or, to be precise, activism. Among the five interviewees, Dolorosa is the only artist and activist. Hildawati was not interested in directly penetrating the political domain through her art practices. Thus, her works mostly talk about fundamental issues of humanity. Meanwhile, Dyan Anggraini and Mangku Muriati were directly involved in actual political arenas. Dyan worked as a bureaucrat and Muriati serves in a customary institution as the first female priest in the temple of her district, a very rare position in Balinese society. How should we see their political engagement at this point? How could one create meaning by being political in a period in which political trauma and state propaganda on developmentalism were so intense? How do female artists, in particular, raise issues of gender politics in their artworks and everyday life practices?

In general, government policies of the 1980s did not directly affect the thoughts of women of that generation. Most of them grew up during a transition phase in which the remains of the Old Order had been
removed and the New Order was just sprouting into a regime. The New Order’s propaganda for the ideal image of women had no direct effect on their works, since the art scene they chose to be in offered an open, free space for thinking. Neither did they necessarily criticise propaganda, mainly because they were already conscious of not addressing problems exclusive to women in their art, instead speaking about them within broader social contexts. In a way, this became their strategy: they wanted to be seen in an equal position to men as ‘artists’ and so avoided being put under the umbrella of ‘female artists’ by not addressing women’s issues in their art. Gender issues were portrayed as part of other social problems, for instance, in relation to religion or poverty, instead of being underlined as separate issues. For example, few female artists openly and critically discussed the domestication of women during the 1980s. Later, in the 1990s, commentary slowly appeared on the state of women as marginalised citizens, suffering from economic and structurally generated difficulties. Subsequently, this became part of women artists’ narratives.

Nevertheless, among the five women artists I interviewed, only Dolorosa Sinaga referred to herself as a feminist. Wulan Dirgantoro found a similar tendency in Sinaga’s work. Most of the female artists she encountered during her research, particularly those who were active in the late 1990s (post-1998), such as Lakshmi Sitaresmi, Titarubi and Theresia Agustina, refused the feminist label attributed by others to their works.²²

Indeed, due to different values and perspectives on the world, gender issues were largely ‘absent’ in Indonesian women artists’ practices. With the exception of Dolorosa Sinaga, female artists in Indonesia tended not to present gender problems overtly in their work. Instead, the appearance of such issues was unconscious, accentuating certain perspectives and readings in response to social realities. The sub-narratives of these five artists contain important insights into their awareness of gender issues. First, their awareness of women’s sense of agency. Most of the artists discussed here are strong people who see themselves both as individuals and as members of society. Their personal lives show varying degrees of independence and self-awareness. Most have created a balanced and equal relationship with their life partners (husbands) and are able to maintain their personal vision within marriage (except Mangku Muriati, who is celibate). In some cases, husbands have become supporters of their artistic

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²² Wulan Dirgantoro, Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.1017/9789048526994.
activities. The dilemma faced by many women of having a career and undertaking domestic duties seems to have been eased through honesty, transparency and respect: the women made it clear from the beginning that their partners needed to respect their vision as women and their artistic work as part of their identity.

All of them take part in activities outside their art practice that connect them to broader sociopolitical issues. Dolorosa is a lecturer and activist. Siti Adiyati has worked at the National Museum and is engaged with underground movements involving environmentalists, farmers and researchers. Mangku Muriati is a priestess and serves in the temple. Dyan Anggraini works in the bureaucracy of the culture sector. Hildawati Soemantri dedicates her life to tertiary education and was the first Indonesian female to be awarded a doctoral degree in art history. These activities have resulted in various achievements that may not be listed in the canon of art history but nevertheless contribute to social change. They deserve to be recognised.

A sense of agency encourages an individual to actively take part in changing or redefining their social reality. The five artists’ biographies and artworks imply plural social realities and, hence, point to their distinctive subjective attitudes. Judith Butler defines agency in opposition to authority; it is not something that is merely constructed by authority. A sense of agency becomes critical when one is shaping one’s identity in the midst of tense power contestations. Hildawati was one of the most important figures in pushing the Jakarta Art Institute to become a highly regarded art institution while battling well-respected and more senior male colleagues. When she held her first exhibition at Taman Ismail Marzuki in 1974—and in spite of the fact that she was a young woman who had just graduated from art school—she gained attention because her method of working with ceramics represented a significant breakthrough compared to other (male) artists of that generation. Her main installation in that exhibition not only utilised ceramics as a medium for installation (unlike its stereotypical label as craft) but also showed her personal intervention on the whole process, which included destroying and breaking the objects. While her works themselves never clearly captured or articulated a gender problem, her determination to promote ceramic art education was absolute proof of her self-agency as a woman.
In our daily practice, feminism is often positioned as a ‘discipline’ or ‘study’; however, in a more specific context, it might be regarded as a movement, hence its followers are called ‘feminists’. These perspectives frequently lead us to a binary opposition between ‘being’ or ‘not being’ a feminist. However, if feminism is perceived as a perspective or as embodying values and principles of life, then what matters most is how those values are applied in practice. The contradiction between saying ‘I am not a feminist’ while taking progressive action for the advancement of women does not, to me, indicate any problem regarding the subjects’ feminism. The problem lies not in whether artists demonstrate the appropriate values or not, but in the complexities of interpreting socially constructed values and the label ‘feminist’ (or feminism). The things they are fighting for are not necessarily acknowledged in the constructed label.

The second crucial sub-narrative that appears is the notion of women’s bodies as a feminist statement. Siti Adiyati presented women’s bodies (mainly the face in the 1970s) as a concept of human existence (related to her interest in notions of space and shadows); her works themselves do not specifically refer to issues around women’s bodies. But, in her works at the end of 1990s, some women’s bodies appear in the context of questioning identity and the complexity of modern life.

A strong feminist narrative in relation to the representation of women’s bodies is visible in Dolorosa Sinaga’s works, particularly in the late 1990s. These works affirm the way women’s bodies act as an immediate symbol of violence and social repression in society. Her most famous work, Solidarity (see Figure 0.4), depicts seven women with different positions and identities holding each other’s hands, resisting the controlling system. These gestures represent fighting together and emphasise the sense of solidarity among marginalised women. The bodies are not shown in a realistic style but instead focus on gestures and expressions, thus reducing the possibility of stereotyping. With her artistic decision to make the body more fluid and distorted, Sinaga raises the power and the energy of those women, far from the stereotypical conception of women’s bodies.

Dyan Anggraini believes that bodies are representations of humanism. In her early works, from the mid-1980s, the existence of women’s bodies in her paintings almost resembles the image of the ideal women as constructed by the state. Women in kebaya with noble postures, looking out of windows—these are images that could remind one of the figure.
of Kartini, the Javanese female heroine who has been constructed and represented by the state and other powerful agencies as the ideal Indonesian woman. Subsequently, men’s bodies were sometimes portrayed in Dyan’s work to deliver criticism of patriarchal culture, which she later associated specifically with Javanese culture through typical symbols and masks. In this way, the feminist spirit was addressed by criticising the patriarchal system. On one occasion, as expressed in her art, this critique became stronger in response to the bureaucratic system she had to face in her work. Using invitations and formal official letters as a ground, she drew a self-portrait with various expressions that showed the repressed thoughts and initiatives she could not realise in the name of the system.

Figure 8.4: Dyan Anggraini (b. 1957), East Java, Sang Inspektur (The Inspector), 2012.
Oil and pencil on canvas. 150 x 150 cm. Image courtesy the artist.
8. NEW ORDER POLICIES ON ART/CULTURE AND THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN’S ROLES

Figure 8.5: Mangku Muriati (b. 1967), Bali, *Wanita Karir (Career Women)*, detail, 2015.
Image courtesy the author. Permission: the artist.

Mangku Muriati’s artworks portray a specific political dimension, as therein she discusses the myths and narratives of Mahabharata, the great Hindu epics that have been adapted in Javanese and Balinese mythologies, and that principally address political issues and authority. Muriati inserted additional female characters into selected narratives from within the Mahabharata epics, which she represented as analogies through which she responded to Indonesia’s contemporary political situations. For example, she represented the Suharto dynasty as the Kaurava, one of the dynastic families central to the Mahabharata. To be able to scrutinise Muriati’s thoughts behind the narratives appearing in the form of Bali’s traditional paintings, it is important to understand her thoughts and ideas as a whole as well as her rare position as a female Balinese priest.

Bodies and self-portraits serve as a powerful metaphor to drag thoughts about politics and authority into more personal domains in the works of artists from the next generation, especially those of Arahmaiani. Her works demonstrate the artist’s shift in perspective, from the objective to the subjective. She presents her personal experiences in confronting religion, the state and wider society. Using herself as the subject, she
deconstructs society’s values and the ways of thinking that preserve the values of patriarchy and masculinity. This could also be underlined in works by IGAK Murniasih, which strongly reflect her trauma around her own body and sexuality.

It is not an easy task to draw conclusions about how the new policies of domestication and *ibuism* influenced the practices and works of women artists during the New Order. The fact that, after Gerwani was banned, there was no organisation that clearly advocated for the role of women in sociopolitical fields, let alone a union of female artists themselves, meant that the spirit of solidarity among women was already less visible, and this prevented women from openly discussing common issues. Women involved themselves in more inclusive organisations, where they had to compete with male peers and where, because of the strong patriarchal culture, men’s voices usually took centre stage, leaving women’s contributions forgotten, hidden, silenced.

The five women artists discussed here had different ways of critiquing New Order policies in their works. Some looked at class gaps that resulted from rapid economic development, where poor and marginalised groups (including women) became the victims of intense capitalism. Others looked at how the value of tradition was instrumentalised as a tool of political identity instead of being appreciated as part of everyday wisdom. In my opinion, it is not that their practices lacked political acts or ideas, but that the regime limited the political vision of female organisations. Even if some or many of them expressed criticism of the regime, without common actions and unified voices, personal interventions were not taken seriously or echoed as shared solidarity. In the mid-1990s, when some women activists started to create their own organisations, the notion of ‘gender issues’ started to become evident and this showed the importance of gathering and making coalitions or associations.

**To Work on Intergenerational Feminist Ideas**

It is quite complicated to create artistic work under a regime in which the notion of political and economic stability is coopted as a slogan to justify the absolute controlling power and domination of the state. In the context of depoliticisation, to be critical of sociopolitical realities meant
daring to take risks that threatened one's individual dignity and freedom of expression. In the wake of such oppression, resistance groups emerged among the younger generation, bringing with them calls to terminate the dictatorial regime and support pro-democracy ideas.

Female artists of this era explored more diverse themes, rather than focusing on particular political issues. The concerns they presented were inherently political, highlighting the problems engendered by binary opposition between state/society and individuals, rather than critiquing government policy (e.g. the works of Arahmaiani, Lucia Hartini and IGAK Murniasih).

In the post-1998 generation, concerns related to personal life became an important element in the works of female artists. Female artists put forward a wide range of interwoven issues of subjectivity, identity, body and sociopolitical topics. The invigorating sense of gender and feminism eventually contributed to providing a larger space for female artists to critically discuss the power relations that exist in gender discourses in Indonesia, as well as how political regulations affect women's personal lives.

In turn, after 1998, a more powerful sense of gender among women was directly influenced by the more visible women's movements, highlighting ideas and issues that immediately affected people's lives. The Suara Ibu Peduli (Voice of Concerned Mothers) movement initiated by Karlina Supelli, Gadis Arivia and other exponents, fought for the rights of mothers and children to be able to afford milk, the price of which was prohibitive at that time. In the wake of their public fight for rights and demands for the acceleration of democracy, the issue of equal rights for women has always been included in the reformation agenda. This agenda has been fought for intensively and consistently. During the same period, a publication entitled Jurnal Perempuan served as a medium to broadcast women's thoughts, intervening through academic discussions organised on many campuses.23

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23 On shifting meanings of the term *ibu* and claims regarding the political rights that were erased under the New Order, see Ruth Indiah Rahayu, ‘Konsep Ibu Berpolitik Sekarang adalah Sosok yang Melawan’ [The concept of the political mother today is a figure of opposition], *Tirto*, 15 July 2020, accessed 21 January 2022, tirto.id/cB85. Movements from 1998 are described in Nur Janti, ‘Puncak Kebangkitan (Kembali) Feminisme’ [The peak of the (re)revival of feminism], *Historia*, 24 May 2018, accessed 15 July 2020, historia.id/politik/articles/puncak-kebangkitan-kembali-feminisme-vXjR5.
Under the presidency of Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid), an institution was established that functioned as the locus for the Indonesian women’s movement. The Komisi Nasional Perempuan (National Commission on the Elimination of Violence against Women) was authorised to advocate for more favourable policies for women and to overcome legal and political disputes on behalf of women.

More attention to the problems of identity, and the rediscovery of personal narrative and its links to global culture, are among the things that gained prominence in artworks produced after 1998. Take, for example, Boys Don’t Cry, an exhibition at Cemeti Art House in 2002, in which young female artists celebrated their identities as women while critically questioning a range of ‘given’ social norms. Another initiative was taken by the then all-male art collective Mes 56. They conducted several exhibitions and workshops called Youth of Today, in which they invited female artists to join a series of meetings for three months. The artists who showed their works became actively involved in the art scene during the 2000s, creating their own individual works and projects. Some of these young artists, for instance Prilla Tania and Ferial Affiff, played an important role in the dynamics of Indonesian art and went on to represent Indonesia on the global art stage.

The two examples mentioned above suggest how female artists built their collective networks in order to express their thoughts. Conversely, during the early 2000s, female artists also started appearing in more individual domains. Among them were Christine Ay Tjoe, Bunga Jeruk Permata Pekerti, Sekar Jatiningrum, Ayu Arista Murti, Titarubi and Tintin Wulia.

Overall, for the generation of female artists who grew up during the transition between the New Order and Reformasi, tensions between individuality and collectivity, subjectivity and social contexts, and the personal and the political, are fundamental elements of the gender discourses presented in their works. Compared to the third wave of the Western women’s movement—which mainly explored subjectivity and personal narratives, and in which women’s right as individuals, including sexuality, were central issues—in Indonesia, sensitive issues such as legal abortion sank under the weight of other issues considered more relevant to the local context. Female artists not only challenged patriarchal power through their criticisms of the state, society and religion, but also fought to conduct deeper thinking to relate their notions of self and identity to the more complex narratives of globalisation, identity and capitalism.
By reading the works of female artists who were active during the New Order, the younger generation learned how to negotiate with different state apparatus to create a productive vision for the role of women in society, and, at the same time, to think about the importance of organisation and coalition.

Therefore, for me, feminism also serves as a vast, open space to be constantly deconstructed and redefined, taking into consideration the highly diverse lives practised by individual women. The female artists discussed in this chapter have recorded their experiences and related their practices and thoughts to a broader social context to be continuously re-read and interpreted, in the hope that it might inspire others to move collectively to create a fair and just living space. It is the prerogative of feminist critics and researchers to apply the label of feminism to these artists’ contributions and actions, but it is not for them to push artists to embrace that label themselves.
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