The Ascetic and The Sensual: Boundaries of the Body
by Lisabona Rahman

... Membaca kiasan badan dengan benar, memahami bahasa badan dengan lebih sensitif, adalah sebuah jalan aman untuk memahami banyak perkara penting dalam kebudayaan dan masyarakat, juga di Indonesia.

(Reading the idioms of body correctly, understanding body language more sensitively, is the secure way to understand many important matters in cultures and society, [and this also applies] in Indonesia)

Ignas Kleden, Indonesian literary critic,
foreword to Joko Pinurbo’s anthology
Di Bawah Kibaran Sarung (2001)

The Body exists and is imagined at the same time. It is something we experience from the inside but we are compelled to regulate the experience according to our knowledge and norms. As a material entity, the Body is supposed to be objective and universal for all human beings but in the realm of meaning it becomes relative. As far as experiences are concerned, the Body is supposed to be unique to each individual, but the perception of it is formed by what is ‘out there’: mode of production, culture and social conventions. The tensions in the practice of representing the body lie exactly in the contestations between expressing the unique experiences or aspirations of the Body and acknowledging the social conventions. Mr. Kleden’s above statement shows the importance of acknowledging such contestations through looking at one of its most important results: idioms of body.

This work is a result of a small scale result, mainly involving my literature reviews and a small portion of discussions with other people (mostly those who are involved in the arts, both visual and performing arts). By looking at different disciplines, I try to portray how the two roles are being used in artistic statements.

This article attempts to survey the Body in Indonesian culture by looking at how it has been represented through selected artworks. By limiting the survey to Indonesian cultural setting I will not embark on a discussion about body’s universality. Within this context I chose to group the Body into two roles assigned to it: The Ascetic and the Sensual. Both are cultural perceptions, the first comes from custom or religion, the second comes from our experience with the materiality and thus the subjective knowledge about anatomy and sense. I chose such grouping because the works which are going to be discussed in this article show preferences of either role. It is whether the reality of the Body is material or imaginative. Both are treated as mutually exclusive, if Body is material it is a system with sensual capacity in its interaction with other things in its habitat. Whereas if Body is imaginative it is treated as signifier of pain or contestation. In later parts of this article it becomes clearer that Body’s sensuality is rendered unacceptable and thus more subversive than its role as signifier.
Defining or Setting Boundaries for Roles of the Body

Going back to Mr. Kleden’s statement, in this part I will look at the expression of the Body as one of the many ways to understand the development of a culture. By taking into account that Indonesian culture itself is a very problematic term, I would try to patch different traditions in expressing the Body in what is now called Indonesian culture.

In most of indigenous Indonesian religion the Body initially was seen as the medium for the Spirits, thus performing arts at the earlier stage was seen as rituals to show acknowledgements of the Spirits. Rituals are performed by special personnel who are considered as having special gifts or talent to connect to the spiritual world and provide the Body as medium for the Spirits to communicate with human beings. The personnel have to go through a particular stage of meditation to enter a condition of trance before performing. Expressions made in this condition are perceived as coming from the will of the Spirits and not the person. Thus the Body’s expressions are very dependent on perception of the Spirits. This form of expressions remains in rituals like Tortor from Batak culture or Kuda Lumping from various Javanese cultures.

Apart from spiritual expressions, similar sort of rituals were also used by healers to chase away evil spirits from a patient’s body or a community. By projecting movements of the Body as the will of the Spirits, the body itself as the medium which makes the act possible, is very little recognized. Illnesses were treated with mantra (chants) and exorcism with very little efforts in studies of metabolism and medicine, which resulted in the discovery of medicinal plants and potion-making skills.

As societies become more complex and the expression of the body no longer is the privilege of the chosen ones who can connect with the Spirits, needs to control and invent rules became more urgent, and it produces definition of boundaries in expression of the body. Different degrees of religious institutionization bring new concept to the Body, being a form of representation of the Divine. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, God is embodied in humanlike creature perhaps to make it easier for people to identify and think of God as a more concrete entity, rather than the Spirit which was believed to be omnipresent in any materials. Indeed the embodiment of God also gave new awareness of the body as flesh and blood and its many experiences and memories like pain, pleasure, illness and the temporary nature of the body. Hinduism and Buddhism treat the temporary nature of the body yet as the media of the soul(s), making it possible for the soul to transcend the material body (i.e. through reincarnation).

After the arrival of Islam, embodiment of the Divine was forbidden and defined in a more abstract concept. Indeed, not all Muslims can accept presence of sculptures. The late Buya Hamka, a prominent Muslim leader in the 1980s, once made a ruling that the art of sculpture was religiously permissible as Muslims could see sculpture simply as being decorative or ornamental, not something to be idolized like during the Jahiliyah, the age of pagan ignorance preceding the Islamic era.
As writer and playwright Utuj Tatang Sontani described in his poetic novel Sulilng (Flute, 1948) the arrival of Islam brought about a sense of shame about body. Women are introduced to the concept of covering their breast to prevent sinful acts. Because of its material necessities the body became one source of sin, which is a common value accepted in the four major religions affecting Indonesian culture mentioned above. The bodily needs can force human beings into sin and sexual differences create different social implication and meanings for male and female bodies. Female body is seen both as a site of creation (with the capacity to bear children) and destruction (in its potentials of pleasure and seduction).

To compensate for the sins of the material Body rituals of purification are practised in respective religions. Different forms of asceticism which mostly involve pain, suffering and deprivation are used as methods to remind the Body of its shameful material necessities and its limitations. The rituals take place both in communal as well as individual level, which provide a connection between an act that takes place within the mind such as faith, and bodily act. Various sorts of meditations, pilgrimage and fasting are being practised by different religious communities, mostly to prove that the mind still has the capability of controlling and adjusting the body to proper norms and values of a good life. Thus the body is seen as the carrier of the mind (or soul), which is the actual being that defines a human. The body has to be shaped and regulated in the way defined by the mind. When the body takes too much control over mind, the balance has to be readjusted through asceticism.

Besides the religious norms, developments in mode of productions have also exert control over the Body. Bambang Sugiharto argued in his essay published by Kalam journal (15/2000) that in the logic of modernity Body is perceived as exteriority, as “wild tendencies which will jeopardize the stability of social order, civility of public life and the sanity of the mind”. Such wilderness is supposed to be tamed through education and socialization processes, so that the Body will adjust to requirements of discipline and effectiveness of modern production. Discipline in the modern mode of production becomes another form of asceticism, by denying the Body its desire to consume and recreate, but at the same time continue to provide very wide possibilities of temptations. The modern Body are thus trapped into a condition of forced asceticism controlled by the power of institutions in modern mode of production: capital, state and their apparati. Movements are coded and treated as important part of socialized knowledge within a community. Arts, performances and rituals are systematized to enable it to be re-enacted and to be taught. Representations of actual bodies take place along with the rules of what or who to represent and how.

It is also worth noting that representation of the Body and sexuality have been highly politized by reigning powers in Indonesia. Exposure of nude bodies is associated with the so-called “Western values” which in Indonesian language of power simply translates as decadence. During New Order military regime, critical expressions of the Body and sexuality, especially the female’s, are considered to be attempts to resurrect communism. The sense of shame and control over Body alienates Indonesians from knowing and taking the body as natural, especially a woman’s body. As references to female bodies in
particular are mainly available through pornographic calendars or videos, Astri Wright - Canadian Professor and researcher of Indonesian contemporary visual arts - argued in her article published by The Jakarta Post about how the failure to develop natural relationship with the Body makes it “hard for male artists to develop beyond an attitude of sexual sensationalism”.

**Initiating Contemporary Concepts of the Body**

As arts and its aesthetics became recognized as tools to reinforce power over subjects, establishments or institutions of power tries to create art by integrating artists to the power structure. Works of literature, visual arts, crafts and performing arts are being created to impose ideal representations of the Body as seen by the eyes of the rulers. Besides the arts, traditions of cuisine and beautification have also developed to support the ideals. Commissioned work such as *bedhaya* dance from palaces in Central Java shows controlled and very slow movements of female bodies dressed in royal bridal costume juxtaposing erotic lyrics of the music. Claire Holt, an American archaeologist, found a contrast between female dancer’s gesture in the relief of Borobudur temple and Javanese dance such as *bedhaya* and *serimpi*. The former show dynamic movements while the later were extremely calm. She speculated in her research about Indonesian art whether the suppressed body movements of female dancers in Javanese were influenced by suppression of the expressiveness of female body according to the values in Islam.

The process of integrating the Body into a culture in turn creates a memory embedded in the body itself (as opposed to the memory of mind) that reflects the social caste and its environment, the society’s aspirations, as well as different forms of individual resistance to the norms of society. The Body thus learn to react to the space it is placed in and produce specific gestures which are the synthesis of ideal representations and reaction to reality that can relate either in supporting or contradicting one another. It should be very interesting to investigate whether a paralleling popular culture also develop, ranging from imitation to resistance, against noble aesthetics which sometimes generate different ideals and concepts of the Body beyond the walls of palaces.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Indonesia has once again returned to the process of remaking itself as a democratic nation. The consciousness of a new nation is accompanied by matching vibrant debate over national culture, mainly marked by the question of whether to adopt Western/colonialist values or invent a synthesis of different ethnic and religious values all across Indonesia. Two of the main areas of debates in culture take place in the literature and visual art (particularly painting). I haven’t come across documentations on specific debate over representation of the Body during this period, and as Astri Wright have noted above, studies of anatomy and nudes were especially being avoided. Claire Holt have also illustrated this hesitation in her report describing how Hendra (painter and sculptor) taught anatomy to students at the Fine Art Academy (ASRI) using clay models instead of human body. The reluctance in dealing with the Body were perhaps stimulated by a greater energy put into defining the nation’s political orientation. Images of bodies (male and female) were mostly used to depict the material loss of Indonesian people but with a sense of positive aspiration in facial
expression. Sudjojono’s painting, *Di Depan Kelambu Terbuka* (In Front of the Open Mosquito Net, 1939) and *Jam Gerilya* (Guerilla Hour, 1949) are the most significant examples of this period. Apart from depiction of common people’s activities, self portraits are also a dominant preference, marking the rise of self-consciousness among Indonesian artists. However images of the bodies were quite Java-Sumatra-centered, only Emiria Sunassa, a woman artists from this generation was trying to bring up representation of cultures from Kalimantan and Eastern part of Indonesia.

The development of performing arts in the initial years of Indonesia as a nation is quite poorly documented, but discussions with people involved in performing arts scene in 1950s-60s revealed that most of the focus in this period were evolving around generating a popular culture as opposed to feudal culture. The influence of politics on culture was dominant and many artist groups were actively involved in politics. Thus discussion about aesthetics in this period are mostly concentrated on how to raise people’s consciousness and solidarity, and that solidarity should be the motivation of the production of arts. Although Indonesian leftist organizations such as LEKRA attempted to define what they call social realism, but Australian researcher Keith Foulcher have observed that it acts more as a guidance than a clearly defined aesthetic. Although the theme of people’s consciousness and solidarity became dominant, techniques and styles were left to individual artist’s choice. Sukarno’s ideology, *Marhaenisme* (a synthesis of Marxism and Nationalism), have been translated into visual arts in the form of dominant representation of farmers. Painter and sculptor Hendra Gunawan, for example, exaggerate the size of feet in his human figure to emphasize their class origin based on the assumption that farmer/lower class people have large and muscular feet because they always walk bare footed.

An interesting difference in representation of the Body can be observed by comparing several remaining public sculptures from 1950s-60s (e.g. *The Farmer, Freedom Monument* in Jakarta) and the works of Indonesian artists like Hendra Gunawan and Amrus Natalsja. The former were imported from Russian, showing optimistic human figures with raised chin and muscular body. The later were closer to the melancholic representation of the Body as in Käthe Kollwitz’s works, showing lean and defeated human figure. Compared to noticeable development of different individual styles in visual arts, in performing arts, attempts are oriented towards reinventing traditional dance and theater to support dissemination of *Marhaenisme*. Techniques of movements are not much explored, only the contents were revised to suit the new ideology.

Figures of optimistic bodies continue to characterize visual arts during New Order era, as it was the only representation allowed under the military regime. Dissenting tendencies started to grow in 1975, marked by the manifesto of the New Visual Art Movement in Jakarta. Jim Supangkat, in a work titled *Ken Dedes*, named after a famous queen from Majapahit Kingdom, dared to expose female nudity in a pose which was described by art critic Kusnadi as “vulgar” and “shameful”. Ken Dedes’ body were built of two parts, from shoulder to head was the classic Hindu sculputure, and from breast down was a drawing of curvy female body wearing an bell-bottomed jeans with undone zipper and high heels. Ken Dedes was standing with her exposed breasts and hands on the top of her
thigh. Jim Supangkat was using two different representations of a female body to articulate his criticism on ambivalent Indonesian cultural politics, marked by imposing Western values on the so-called Javanese tradition.

In performing arts, several Javanese choreographer like Bagong Kussudiardjo and Sardono W. Kusumo were sent to the US for training in modern dance technique. But as Malaysian researcher Zulkifli bin Mohamad have observed that they did not take “the technique they gained in the US; instead they were transforming the ‘spirit’ of American modern dance into their particular way of creating, i.e. the freer expression and exploration of new choreography”. In Helly Minarti’s opinion, Indonesian researcher in contemporary dance, the works of Sardono W. Kusumo (particularly Dongeng dari Dirah) were more focused on reinterpreting narrative of Javanese dance/theater and improvisations in movement than inventing new codes for body movements. A notable breakthrough was done by Gusmiati Suid, who created a new representation of Minangkabau women through movements in her choreography. I would like to discuss her works in the next section, together with other Indonesian contemporary artists.

**Boundaries for the Present Bodies: The Work of Indonesian Contemporary Artists**

This section is the result of a brief survey on Indonesian contemporary art/literature works. By looking at some samples of work – or rather, observation of works – I hope to do a rough sketch on various representations of the Body in Indonesian art/literature scene.

**Questioning Asceticism in Modern Indonesian Society**

The works of Dede Eri Supria and Semsar Siahaan use human figures extensively to portray the impacts of modernization on Indonesian people. Dede Eri Supria puts his human figures (with fashion statement representing the identity of the marginalized urban people) in the middle of chaotic elements of infrastructure which evoke a sense of repression and hopelessness. Semsar Siahaan’s drawing shows images reminiscent of human figures from artists in the 1950s-60s which are dark-skinned, lean, defeated but radiating anger.

The Body appears to be an ultimate matter in Dolorosa Sinaga’s sculptures. Chosing “Have You Seen a Sculpture from the Body?” as her solo exhibition title in 2001, she presented her 20 years of work in representing social issues through gestures of human body. Most of her sculptures are of women’s bodies shown with ambiguous combination of agony and resistance through gestures of each figure.

The works of the three artists are raising the issue of forced asceticism which are applied to the powerless people. Modernity is clearly held accountable for people’s suffering and deprivation in Dede Eri Supria and Dolorosa Sinaga’s work, whereas Semsar Siahaan
was showing the haves and the powerful as fulfilling Body’s sensual needs while the have-nots and the powerless pay the price of purification for their sake.

**Anxiety, Identity**

**The New Minangkabau Women**

Gusmiati Suid’s choreography tries to defy stereotypes of Minangkabau women being represented in classical dance. By using combinations between dance movements and martial arts, their choreographies pose challenges to traditional Minangkabau (or Malay women in general) that are gentle and subtle. By doing this Gusmiati Suid questions what she calls “rasa” the imposed memories on the Body, particularly on the bodies of Minangkabau women and tries to recreate alternative options of memory.

**The Written Bodies: the Cases of Joko Pinurbo and Ayu Utami**

In his anthology of poetry, Joko Pinurbo also have taken the Body as the main signifier. Rather than stating the Body as an integrated element of a human being, he insisted on separating the Body and the Soul. Throughout his anthology, Joko Pinurbo treat the Body as external to human being’s existence. He even show that the Body was merely an outfit for the soul, which are replaceable and temporary. Indonesian poetry, as Ignas Kleden argues, have always tried to transpose social phenomena to the nature, while Joko Pinurbo does it to human bodies. He turns human body into a vast landscape and started to observe how the Body reflects what happens in the universe by using sensual logic in *Tubuh Pinjaman*. Pinurbo also uses the word “*tubuh*” in *Pulang Mandi* similar to how the word “*badan*” is being treated in classical Malay, addressing both the Self (*diri*) and the Body.

Ayu Utami’s novels *Saman* (1998) and *Larung* (2001) triggered a heated debate in Indonesian literature scene because they raised the issue of women’s sexuality. Both novels addressed the issues of women’s sexuality and women’s knowledge of her own body, revealing a woman’s Body as the site of contestation for societal, familial and individual interests. The women protagonists’ critical consciousness of their bodies and sexuality subverts ideal representation of Indonesian women as constructed by religious, cultural and political institutions. *Saman* and *Larung* questions the alienation of women from knowledge of their own bodies, as well as challenging the asexual representation of women in Indonesian literature. Both novels also points out how bodies and sexuality of political dissidents have been subjected to torture as affirmation of the power of an authoritarian state.

**The Body’s Memory**
Dadang Christanto’s work, *They Give Evidence* (1996-1997), consisted of 14 human figures each carrying a corpse. Inspired by the massacre of people accused as being communists in late 1960s, he exhibited several other installations mainly showing imitation of human body parts. The 14 naked figures were safely exhibited abroad but caused protests from people living near Bentara Budaya. In response to the protests, Dadang and Hendro Wiyanto, the curator, did not object to wrapping the statues up with black cloth. The sculptures were transformed into new works. Unfortunately, residents around Bentara Budaya could not accept them being on display in their neighborhood and the sculptures were removed and placed in a warehouse. This exhibition took place in July 2002. Many people suspect that the protests against Dadang Christanto’s work were motivated by resentment to discussions about the massacre in 1960s. Although Abdurrahman Wahid’s administration (1999-2001) have lifted the restrictions on speaking about the subject, the embodiment of the victims from clearly was still not acceptable by some groups.

Arahmaiani has long made critical statements through her art, especially by using her body as media. She has occasionally made use of clearly depicted genitalia, which in her work symbolise domination and militarism in an Indonesian context. As one of the few critical Indonesian women artists her work might appear more radical because there is so little comparison. At a performance in the French Cultural Centre in Bandung in 1999 she took off her clothes and invited the audience to take a marker pen and draw or write anything they liked on her skin.

Lexy Rambadeta in his documentary film *Mass Grave* has take up similar sentiment in the case of relocation of the graves from the late 1960s massacre victims. One of the scenes show a group of people protesting against the relocation saying that they don’t want their village to be polluted by communists’ graves.

**Bodies and Sexuality**

The photography exhibition during Q-munnity Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 2003 have also brought up a new way of looking at human bodies. The works of John Badalu, for example, shows how the male body parts can be interpreted in different ways according to different sexual orientations. This exhibition particularly eroticize the male body, especially in the works of Yoyok Budiman, suggesting an alternative to the general portrayal of the male body, its masculinity and its relations to power and strength.

**Contemplation of the Woman’s Body**

In the works of Titarubi (exhibited in 2003), she displays body parts in a composition that creates a context to mark the space and position of women. The body parts looks like something sticking out from a covered or hidden entity, showing a potential of repression and defense at the same time. By displaying the body in parts, acting as a complementary to other parts in the same space, she suggests the status of women as being...
complementary to its surroundings (the family, the husband, and the society) but haven’t been able to participate and appreciated as a whole. The work also imply a search of the body (or a woman) to become a whole presence.

IGAK Murniasih’s paintings also shows an opinion of how women’s bodies have been used as commodity and place it as an object of worship. In the opinion of Farah Wardani, the paintings shows “women’s body as being placed in a passive narcissistic prison. It reminds us of the other side of women’s sexuality, a narcissistic desire to reclaim one’s own body which has been raped too many times.”

Rather than plainly describes the sexed bodies, the drawings and paintings of Sekar Jatiningrum are trying to evoke uneasy blend femininity and masculinity in the Body. She creates rough, dark and grotesque images juxtaposed with feminine images or presence. She implies a certain degree of violence in tenderness, a divided self within each character, and raised the question whether every Body are bisexual and multi-personality in nature.

Stark Reality of the Bodies: Tensions in Photographing the Body

Photography, because of its capability in representing images very close to the realistic, is a subversion in itself. It makes images less regulate-able, and opens more possibilities of representation. Firman Ichsan expressed his hesitation in capturing the Body as a whole. He recalls an experience of identifying his subconscious shame in capturing the Body, particularly genitals. He realizes that he was drifting far away from the Hindu/Buddhist cultures of body representation as shown in the relief of Borobudur, and that it prompted a question about his roots and identity and forces him to reflect on how the Body are being addressed in his culture.

The words of Firman Ichsan have implied not only external (cultural) barriers but also an internal (self-censorship) block in representing the body through photography. Many Indonesian photographers have made studies of the body or nude, only to shove it away in their drawers. Nude paintings are more acceptable than photography, the fact which is quite ironic considering the extensive distribution of erotic photographs in printed media. I would discuss the nude works of Paul Kadarisman and Nico Dharmajungen, both have never been exhibited in Indonesia.

In Nico Dharmajungen’s works, women’s body are shown with the face covered by various forms of sculpture. All in black-and-white, the figures have mostly turned into a surrealistic appearance, almost like a modified form of a minotaur. Whereas in Paul Kadarisman’s works, even though the woman’s body is also faceless, but it is represented as having a potential of agency in itself amidst ambiguous sense of control to recreate a lost paradise. The body is trying imitate natural senses in a synthetic environment.
Body vs Language: The Question of Contemporary Theatre

The tension between body and language couldn’t have been more emphasized in Indonesian theatre scene after the birth of Teater Mandiri in 1971. Trying to base themselves on improvisation, Teater Mandiri have tried to free theatre from the confinement of written script. Counting on movements and stage design, the context of the plays are given in the title and minimalist dialogs. The rest of the narrative are being conveyed by movement of the actors.

Yudi Ahmad Tajudin, director of Teater Garasi, have argued that there has been too few talks about the Body and language in Indonesian contemporary theater. He urges for “an investigation of tradition and conventions in theatre so that bodies and language on the stage will not construct an arbitrary communication. It is also important to look and interpret realities of bodies and language happening outside the stage so that bodies and language on the stage will not stop at being a nostalgia.”

Conclusion

The art works discussed above show coexisting (or competing) social interpretation about the Body’s Ascetic and Sensual roles. The Body is not a passive object which accepts the definition and act being exercised upon and against it, but as the process goes, the body also internalizes fragments of definitions and acts, thus absorbing bits and pieces of them as its memory and the basis of its expressions of life or continuity of being. The Body becomes a medium for expression as well as the expression itself of value contestations in the society as well as the resulting emotions.

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