

NOMAD AND
SHAMAN, FLAGS AND *TERREMONTO*.
Arahmaiani Feisal's artistic practice
from the perspective
of Joseph Beuys' "social sculpture"

Contemporary art and Indonesia – these two words were frequently mentioned and juxtaposed in 2022. Suffice it to recall that Ruangrupa, a collective of Jakarta-based artists, was responsible for the 15th edition of the famous *documenta* exhibition in Kassel and organised it around the idea of *lumbung*, emphasising the creation of spaces for community action and the accumulation of “resources” (knowledge) for the future as an alternative to the mainstream. A show exploring Europe’s relationship with the rest of the world – *Revolusi! Indonesia Independent* at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum also generated significant response. It evoked the not-so-distant era of colonialism, showing that we still live in a world shaped by its influence. Themes from these exhibitions are also strongly present in the work of Arahmaiani Feisal,¹ who is recognised not only as the most prominent contemporary

¹ Arahmaiani indirectly participated in *documenta 15* through the archival section prepared at the Fridericianum. She was one of the invited participants shown at the Asia Art Archive. AAA is an independent non-profit organization from Hong Kong initiated in 2000 in response to the urgent need to document and make accessible the multiple recent histories of art in the region.

Indonesian artist but also, more broadly, as one of the key female voices on the Southeast Asian art scene. However, her multifaceted oeuvre does not merely consist in depicting how inequalities, which are in part the result of the Dutch colonial legacy, play out at the level of restrictive government policies, religious doctrines, socio-cultural systems and traditions. In this text, I would like to focus on those elements of her artistic practice that are defined by yet another exhibition from 2022 – *Nomadic Ecologies* at Warin Lab Contemporary in Bangkok.²⁾ For the title words encapsulate what, in my opinion, has been most significant in the last two decades of the work of the artist born in Bandung (1961, West Java). It directly reveals the activist philosophy of Arahmaiani,³⁾ who leads a “nomadic” life and has the goal of initiating collective performativity and creativity, combining social change with environmental protection. As several interesting studies have recently been written about Arahmaiani,⁴⁾ I propose to complement this discourse with the perspective of a Western art critic who sees echoes of Joseph Beuys’ ideas in her work. On the one hand, such influences have been mentioned in interviews by the artist herself; on the other hand, since the German artist’s death in 1986, there have been debates about his legacy and influence on subsequent generations. I would like to explore both of these perspectives in more depth, especially as this thread in discussing her work has not been

² *Nomadic Ecologies*, Warin Lab Contemporary, Bangkok, 08.11.2022 – 14.01.2023, curator: Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani. Warin Lab Contemporary is a new art space located in the heart of a culturally rich area of Bangkok. To achieve the goal of engaging the audience at a profound level, the space works with artists and curators from around the world and devotes its focus to only one social issue per year. Since its inception in 2021, the theme has solely been “Environment”. This subject is a fitting one, as Warin Lab Contemporary is housed in the 100 year-old former residence of Dr. Boonsong Lekagul (1907-1992), biologist, medical doctor, ornithologist and the legendary Thai wildlife conservationist. See: <https://warinlab.com>.

³ In the text, I will use only her name “Arahmaiani”, as the artist herself does. Perhaps this is due to the fact that it is her name- the result of a compromise made by parents of different religions- that emphasizes the multicultural nature of her initiatives. “Arahma” in Arabic means “loving”, and “iani” means “human being” in Hindi – Reilly (2021: 15). Her name therefore represents the syncretic mixture of two different cultures that she experienced in her upbringing. It is worth recalling here the Indonesia’s national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (“Unity in Diversity”), which refers to the unity and integrity of Indonesia, a nation consisting of various cultures, regional languages, races, ethnicities, religions, and beliefs.

⁴ Rahadiningtyas (2021); Jurriëns (2020: 3–38).

explored before. Given that the tendency to play the role of mediator between different (sometimes warring) worlds is key to understanding the Indonesian artist's stance, the question of tracing links with one of the most famous European artists of the 20th century appears as an intriguing research task. Perhaps it is in this combination that her work will become more comprehensible to viewers who come from the Global North. Therefore, in my text, I will first describe the key elements of Arahmaiani's artistic practice starting from the 2022 exhibition and then try to locate Beuys' ideas within them.

Nomadic Ecologies (2022) is a two-part project in which, in a manner characteristic to Arahmaiani, gallery work and grassroots activism complement each other. The artist commenced the project with a month-long residency at Patani Artspace in Pattani province in southern Thailand. This was not a random choice. Pattani, along with two other border areas – Yala and Narathiwat, constitute the so-called Deep South, inhabited by Malay Muslims. Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country, has been experiencing a huge identity crisis related to its Islamic population for several decades. The conflict, which has been ongoing since at least the 1990s, has taken various forms, practically leading to a rebellion in the south of the country. Acts of violence have become commonplace, on the part of pro-government police and military forces as well as on the part of separatist Islamist movements. Moreover, the political-religious divisions were also reinforced by the economy; today, Pattani is the poorest province in the country. In response to the massive presence of security forces, the endlessly prolonged state of emergency (since 2005), and human rights violations, many Muslims have taken to creating their own forms of social organisation, often in opposition to state structures (and narratives). One of the alternatives were places like Patani Artspace, trying to create a space to build a sense of community and self-expression, to engage in a dialogue through contemporary art, thus going beyond simply viewing art.

Into this space entered Arahmaiani, an artist from Indonesia, the country with the largest number of followers of Islam and the fourth largest in the world, growing up in a middle-class Muslim family (where her father, an Islamic scholar, provided strict teaching of his religion, while her mother's family, with Hindu-Buddhist roots, allowed her to learn Javanese dances, songs, legends, poetry and customs).⁵ As an Indonesian Muslim woman (as well as an artist and later a mother), she experienced in different ways

⁵ Binder, Haupt (2003); Reilly (2021:15).

how the intersecting systems of religion, class and ethnicity bring about its own kinds of oppression and exploitation in this socio-culturally unique hybrid region. While still young, she faced rejection and harassment, first by President Suharto's military regime (she was jailed for a month for painting tanks on the pavement with chalk on the day of Indonesia's independence celebrations, 1983),⁶ then by Islamic religious fundamentalists (she was even threatened with death for insulting religious feelings with the works shown in the exhibition *Sex, Religion and Coca Cola at Oncor Studio*, Jakarta, 1994). For this reason, she had to travel abroad, to Australia and the Netherlands, and then again to Australia. Thus began her nomadic artistic life. Arahmaiani has worked and lived in many countries but it is the fact of being a nomad that has allowed her, as Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani (curator of the *Nomadic Ecologies* project) argues, to explore each community through a different perspective and to create art in which people and situations requiring social intervention are the media. "Embracing a holistic approach, Arahmaiani's works bridge geographical and geopolitical distances because they are fundamentally the voice of the people, of the local communities".⁷

With the help of activists from Pattani Artspace, Arahmaiani was able to tour the province during the first part of the project, meet locally active people, work with them for almost a month, and identify natural resources – in a word, experience the place personally, tangibly, beyond anything seen on the mainstream news. However, the artistic results of her work could already be seen in another location, 1,000 kilometres away, in the capital, Bangkok. Warin Lab Contemporary's exhibition space, reminiscent of the Western modernist *white cube* formula, was filled with giant flags (*Project Flag*). One word was embroidered on each. These were: "Patani", "Prosperous", "Defend", "Heir", "Brave", "Nature", "Peace", "Fair", "Faith", "Water", "Protect". Next to it was a large installation of wood, earth and seeds, shaped in the form of

⁶ As a consequence, she was expelled from the Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), an elite Indonesian university, where she studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts (1979-1983). Unable to study in Indonesia, she continued her education at the Paddington Art School in Sydney, Australia (1983-1985), and then- thanks to a scholarship program- at the Academie voor Kunst en Industrie in Enschede, the Netherlands (1991-1992). See: Jurriëns (2020: 15).

⁷ Pazzini-Paracciani (2022). "The intercultural and interreligious aspects of her personal nomadism also seem to point to the inherently nomadic history and contemporary condition of the Indonesian archipelago, which has been deeply shaped by centuries of newly arriving and intermixing state and belief systems". See: Jurriëns (2020: 16).

a mandala on the plan of the largest Buddhist temple Borobudur (*Memory of Nature*). The flags also became the main elements of a video shot in distinctive Pattani locations – beaches, rice fields and coconut forests – to highlight the natural beauty of the Deep South in the face of persistent conflict (*Ecology of Peace*).⁸

The works shown in Bangkok are iterations of projects the Indonesian artist has been working on for more than two decades. I will, however, focus my attention on the *Flag Project* (*Proyek Bendera*), which I believe to be crucial. Arahmaiani started working on it as early as 2006, when, learning of the tragic earthquake in Bantul, near where she worked and lived (Yogyakarta in Central Java), she became involved in supporting the local community. She then took part in *Perfurbance* (*Performance Art Urban Festival*, 2007), a periodical performing arts festival. In addition to contemporary artists from Indonesia and abroad, traditional performing arts such as *gejog lesung* (beating out rhythms using a pestle and mortar for beating rice), *jatilan* (a trance dance to expel evil spirits), *sholawatan* (Islamic prayer songs), *zikir* (sung phrases to praise God) were all presented at the festival – or rather, in houses, at road crossings, rice fields and village homesteads. They were accompanied by workshops on environmental issues, herbal medicine, organic farming as well as religious and spiritual values. The name of this edition of the festival – *Pembaharuan Spiritual, Spiritual Renewal* – referred to Central Java’s distinctive tradition of *ruwatan*, a “cleansing” ceremony that frees one from a curse or misfortune (such as an earthquake).⁹ Arahmaiani then partnered with Muhammad Djawis Masruri, the leader (kyai) of Pesantren Amumarta, a traditional Islamic boarding school that also boasts a long agricultural tradition. An environmental programme was developed as a strategy to strengthen communities while mitigating the effects of the disaster (and the climate change that caused it). Through ongoing negotiations and discussions, it was possible to convince *santris* (persons learning at *pesantren*) and local farmers to set up a cooperative to extract oil from the fruit of the native *nyamplung* tree. They were inspired by a verse from the Qur’an (verse 80, surah 36) about a green tree from which fire can be made. The project did not just work well for the production of renewable energy (biofuel for machinery) but also offered real improvements to the social and ecological environment of run-down villages. Instead of cutting down trees, it was becoming more

⁸ Pazzini-Paracciani (2022).

⁹ Jurriëns (2020: 22-23).

cost-effective to protect and plant them due to their strong, deep-growing roots, reducing soil erosion and retaining moisture in what was, after all, a dry region of Bantul.¹⁰

Arahmaiani was involved in all of these activities gaining consultant status and continued to work with Pesantren Amumarta for many years – leading discussions and passing on knowledge, as well as supporting other environmental programmes such as batik production from natural dyes (a dyeing method particularly popular in Malaysia and Indonesia), the creation of organic cosmetics, and tree planting. Significantly, it was at the same time that the idea for an art project emerged, which, as it turned out later, launched a whole series of activities collectively referred to by the artist as *Project Flag*. Their key element was the eponymous large flags in vibrant colours, each decorated with a single word, written in the language of the communities with which Arahmaiani worked. The first two flags contained the words “Akal” (“intellect”) and “Nyali” (“courage”). They were embroidered by Muslim seamstresses from the Minggiran area, near Yogyakarta.

The act of embroidering words had many meanings for the Indonesian artist. In this particular context, it was a response to the horrors of the 2006 earthquake, which resulted in almost 6,000 casualties. It was simply about sharing one’s fear and despair, thereby bringing people together and uniting the community through common wounds.¹¹ Arahmaiani saw this as an opportunity to speak up and, at the same time, express the agency of (often marginalised) groups facing an inextricable tangle of socio-political, religious and environmental problems. It is not without reason that she reached for a flag, which is a distinctive sign, a symbol of the state, but also a means of conveying visual signals (for example – the international code of signals). The use of a flag involved, in this sense, a shift in both meanings: from questioning its authority as a national language of power and control to a “signal” transforming itself into a visual symbol expressing identity and the core values (problems, desires, concerns) that specific communities consider important to them. As Pazzini-Paracciani argues: “the key aspect of Arahmaiani’s practice is to function as enabler of change by empowering the people. The flags them-

¹⁰ Rahadiningtyas (2021), Jurriëns (2020: 22-23), Großmann (2019); Großmann, Arahmaiani (2018).

¹¹ Pazzini-Paracciani (2022).

selves are in fact only one dimension of the long-term impact her residencies bring to the various communities”.¹²⁾

It is also no coincidence that she embroidered the flags using Jawi script. This variant of Arabic script appeared in the 14th century with the arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia and was modified for use there as a form of Malay script (and other related languages). Three centuries later, it was largely replaced by the Latin alphabet, which was in turn linked to the introduction of a colonial education system by the British and Dutch.¹³⁾ What led Arahmaiani to see Jawi as a tool to create her art? She put it this way: “as well as Jawi embodying an important cultural heritage that is still alive in Southeast Asia’s Muslim world, it is also living proof of flexible and hybrid cultural practices in the Muslim world (...) by definition provides

the opportunity to connect different worlds of culture because of its interesting ability to phonetically reproduce the sounds of other languages. What I have done with Jawi so far is to essentially find new possibilities for its functional form of aesthetics, using it to bridge different cultures or to stimulate associations and thoughts”.¹⁴⁾ It is also hard to resist the impression that with this action, the artist places the words produced outside the domain of religious expression, which is precisely the complement to what she does with the peculiar use of the flag formula.

Importantly, the impetus generated by the creation of the first version of the *Flag Project* contributed to the subsequent social, artistic and environmental interventions that the artist has now pursued around the world.¹⁵⁾ The project’s formula was extended to include performative activities, in which the artist and volunteers used colourful flags to manifest in public spaces a concept or common need around which a community can unite. Some of them became, as in the case of *Ecology of Peace*, stand-alone video works.

¹²⁾ Pazzini-Paracciani (2022).

¹³⁾ Today, Jawi is one of the two official scripts in Brunei, it is used in religious and cultural administration in Malaysia and sometimes by Muslims in Indonesia and Thailand (i.a. in Pattani).

¹⁴⁾ Lenzi (2015: 21).

¹⁵⁾ This community based art project has been and is still being implemented in various communities in Indonesia (Borobudur, Merapi, Kali Opak, Bali, Yogyakarta, Ngawi), Malaysia, Thailand (Bangkok), The Philippines (Dumaguete), Singapore, China (Shanghai, Shenzhen), Australia (Sydney, Melbourne), Japan (Nagano), Tibet, Uni Arab Emirate (Sharjah), USA (Charleston), and in Europe (Rostock, Passau, Berlin, Ghent, Amsterdam, Istanbul).

This was the case, for example, with *Crossing Point* (2011). Here, we have the following sequences: a picturesque shot of Mount Merapi (one of Indonesia's most active volcanoes); scenes of destruction following a major eruption in 2010, accompanied by the piercing, melodic vocalisation of *tembang* (a type of sung poetry from colonial times) and the sound of the wind; people waving colourful flags against the devastated landscape; words on the flags suggesting the impermanence of the physical world ("death" in Arabic) and the importance of human values ("omah"- "home" in Javanese; "tresna"- "love" in Balinese/Javanese; "jnana"- "wisdom/knowledge" in Sanskrit).¹⁶⁾

Together with Arahmaiani, the flags have also "made their way" to the "roof of the world", to Tibet, where the Indonesian artist has been conducting a particularly important project for her since 2010 with monks and residents of several villages at the Lab monastery. She ended up there because the region had been hit by an earthquake but she was shocked by the littering there. She decided to act having learned of the area's enormous importance to the life of the whole of Asia. The Tibetan Plateau is commonly referred to as the "third pole" because it has the highest concentration of ice on earth outside the Arctic and Antarctic, while its water reserve (also known as Asia's "water tower") feeds the continent's ten major river systems, providing water for drinking and irrigation for more than two billion people. As with the project in Bantul, Arahmaiani used a combination of artistic and religious approaches to promote environmental awareness and seek practical solutions. Implemented over the following years through her regular visits, the environmental programme included litter clean-up, reforestation, new water management, and the revival of organic farming.¹⁷⁾ Working with the monks also inspired her to research the almost forgotten cultural ties between Tibet and Indonesia in her country, which grew out of the Buddhist teachings (10th century). This interest manifested itself in cycles that were started at the time, such as *Memory of Nature* (2013-present) or *Shadow of the Past* (2015-present). They explored themes of spirituality (especially Tibetan Buddhism), cultural syncretism, humanity's interconnectedness with nature, and the place of femininity in religious traditions. Her fascination with the buried past of her native Java and its rich Hindu-Buddhist heritage (symbolised by the monumental Borobudur temple, hidden for hundreds of years under layers of volcanic ash and jungle growth, and rediscovered some 200 years ago) has

¹⁶ Rahadiningtyas (2021).

¹⁷ Rahadiningtyas (2021); Jurriëns (2021: 17).

made Tibet an important part of Arahmaiani's spiritual journey, as a woman, an artist and a Javanese Muslim. On the Tibetan Plateau, she carried out one of her actions using flags (2018) – dressed in grey robes, with her face and hair covered in grey clay, she marched along the mountain paths to a monastery, waving a yellow flag with the Hindu mantra “Om” decorated in green. The performance suggested a message of peace coming from and into the natural landscape and the local community, as well as this remembrance of the heritage hidden beneath the dust (and clay).¹⁸⁾

Based on the examples above, it is clear that Arahmaiani sees her task as an artist precisely in promoting positive change and initiating development processes.¹⁹⁾ Such understanding of art underpins her entire oeuvre and is undoubtedly, already at this general level, reminiscent of all that Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) tried to implement with his concept of “social sculpture”. Perhaps no other artist of the 20th century has caused such a diverse unrest (and controversy) in so many fields as he has. He divided his commitment between art exhibitions and galleries, teaching work, as well as pro-democracy and pro-environmental activities. Arahmaiani, an artist from faraway Indonesia, only came across his concepts when she found her way to Europe, to the Dutch city of Enschede, where she began her postgraduate studies at the Academie voor Kunst en Industrie.²⁰⁾ Her lecturers at AKI, Ad Gerritsen and Uwe Pott, encouraged her to study the work of Beuys (as well as Marcel Duchamp), noting the mutual closeness of their artistic ideas. She said herself: “though the specific German context is essential to understanding Beuys, I found in his concepts many similarities with Asian views – especially in Beuys’ spiritual interpretation of nature. Further, Beuys’ activist component, his ‘extended definition of art’, fits with and confirms my goals in art making”.²¹⁾ While still in the Netherlands, she paid tribute to him with the exhibition *From Pieces to Become One- Homage to Joseph Beuys* (Enschede, 1992), and

¹⁸⁾ Jurriëns (2020: 24).

¹⁹⁾ Arahmaiani, “Letter to Marinetti: To liberate oneself from ecstasy of consuming and to discover the future” (Yogyakarta, 2009), reprinted in: *Feminist Art Manifestos* (2014: 86-90).

²⁰⁾ Binder, Haupt (2003), Jurriëns (2020: 15). Unfortunately, Arahmaiani studied at AKI for only one year instead of the planned three years. The Dutch criticism of Suharto's rule for human rights violations in East Timor meant that all Indonesians with scholarships from the Dutch had to return to the country. See: Silas, Stathacos (2014).

²¹⁾ Lenzi (2015: 22).

later carried out two performances in which she made direct reference to the German artist's heritage using titles: *Make-up or Break-up, After Joseph Beuys Social Sculpture* (Shenzhen, 2007) and *I Love You" (After Joseph Beuys Social Sculpture)* (as part of her own exhibition of the same title, Esplanade, Singapore, 2009).

Delving further into the artistic practice (and biography) of both artists, one will find many more such points of contact. Growing up during the Third Reich and being a pilot during the Second World War, Beuys experienced the chaos of the post-war reality of a divided country that struggled with both guilt and despair and enjoyed the "benefits" (and devastating effects) of the unfettered development of capitalism and state bureaucracy.²² It was in art that Beuys saw a point of departure from this destructive situation, attributing therapeutic possibilities to it. This condition was illustrated, among other things, by the memorable installation *Show Your Wound (zeige deine Wunde, 1974-1975)*, originally exhibited in a gloomy pedestrian subway in Munich, which represented society's illness and argued that "showing your wound" is a prerequisite for successful recovery. In doing so, the German artist saw his role as a shaman who, as in ancient primitive societies, was to guide and heal (free from learned, destructive patterns), mediating between the community and nature and spirituality.²³ This was exemplified in his famous performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (René Block Gallery, New York, 1974), when he locked himself in a New York gallery for two days with a live coyote.

Undoubtedly, the concept of "wound" (trauma) was referenced by Arahmaiani when she began her long-term *Flag Project* series in an earthquake-affected community. This was her version of *ruwatan*, "purification" from misfortune. She grew up under a military dictatorship that emphasised economic progress and individual lifestyles ("being selfish") in the name of "modernisation". During this time (the decade of the 1980s), after her return from Australia and even before she went to the Netherlands, when she was not allowed to resume her studies at ITB, she continued her informal education in the theatre group Teater Bengkel, in the training centre for traditional art and culture Sanggar Paripurna, and above all in the experimental art group Sumber Waras. It was then that she finally turned to performance (she and Beuys are primarily recognised as the very creators of such art),

²² Zumdick (2015: 144-145); De Domizio Durini (1997: 168-170).

²³ Briegleb (2021).

recognising that systems of regulation and oppression cause widespread “mental illness” and deep wounds to the soul, which requires an individual, alone or in a group, to engage with the environment”.²⁴⁾ “The basis of my thought is concern with balance, or the conjunction of opposites... In my opinion, the situation we find ourselves in currently, is one of imbalance. With one opposite being oppressed/repressed by the other: feminine energy by masculine energy, spirit by matter, nature by culture, the ‘weak’ by the ‘strong’”.²⁵⁾ A natural consequence of such beliefs was the subsequent activist and environmental projects, which, importantly, cannot be considered independently of each other. She said that her overarching objective in engaging in social processes was to provoke change for the better.²⁶⁾

Here, we have a direct reference to Beuys’ “social sculpture” (*soziale Skulptur*),²⁷⁾ a concept that plays a key role in his work. Its essence is best presented using an example, but I propose an example that is not obvious and rather unfamiliar, but which, in my opinion, fits perfectly with the deliberations conducted here. For Beuys’ artistic practice also features *terremonto*, which is Italian for earthquake. On 23 November 1980, this meant the destruction of the small town of Irpinia in the volcanic highlands above Naples. The artist believed that, in contrast to the industrialised northern parts of the country, this area, known as the Mezzogiorno, had, through its agricultural character, retained its original archaic structures and its people its vital energy, which he believed emanated from ancient traditions, carrying

²⁴⁾ Jurriëns (2020: 17). Years later, speaking at Lab Gonpa Monastery in Tibet (2012), the artist said: “The impact of the materialistic and individualistic modern life-style also causes problems at the level of community life and culture. (...) This kind of ego worship brings about disastrous side-effects and suffering for humanity and life in general. (...) Nature and humans (who are part of nature itself) tend to be treated as mere objects whilst the human ego becomes the regulator and master of life on a continual self-indulgent mission. (...) It appears that mankind has the capacity to forget that life is a beautiful garden, heaven on earth. Mankind forgets to care for it and nurse it and transforms the garden into a jungle where wild and fierce people prey on each other” – Arahmaiani (2016).

²⁵⁾ Arahmaiani, *Artist Statement, Bandung*, 1993, cited after: Donoghue (2022).

²⁶⁾ Lenzi (2015: 19-20).

²⁷⁾ Beuys developed several concepts related to “social sculpture” that complement each other, such as: plastic theory (*plastische Theorie*), an extended concept of art (*erweiterter Kunstbegriff*) and an extended concept of science (*erweiterter Wissenschaftsbegriff*). As theoretical constructs, he used them to determine specific actions in the artistic, social and political fields.

with it the promise of creating something “good” (creative) in the present day as well.²⁸ Convinced that social change could only be brought about by art, as the only true revolutionary force, Beuys attempted to activate the local community to work creatively in a crisis.

At the Palazzo Braschi in Rome, he exhibited the sculptural work *Terremoro* (1981), the centrepiece of which was an old typesetting machine (once used to produce the newsletter of the left-wing political party *Lotta Continua*). He draped the machine with an Italian flag wrapped in felt, smeared grease on its keys (causing them to become dysfunctional), and arranged boards and a small oil barrel around it. Boards with alchemical symbols and chalk drawings of human heads with their mouths open in a silent scream formed a peculiar altar, representing the victims of the earthquake. The artist also glued to the machine his earlier manifestos representing the ideas of the so-called “third way”. Negating both capitalism and communism, Beuys believed that it was necessary to look for a model of social organisation based on man conceived as a moral, social, creative being, striving to help others out of his own free will – in other words, man as the creator of social sculpture. In this way, the artist wanted, as Petra Richter argues, to call for reflection and repentance in Mezzogiorno’s²⁹ flawed political system and, at the same time, to equip its inhabitants with new energy and a sense of solidarity. This was somewhat illustrated by the Italian flag, symbolically charged with energetic power through the heat-giving power of felt.³⁰ It is important to remember here that in Beuys’ conception, heat was a catalyst for creativity, while felt (and fat) could store energy and retain heat. He believed that it is only through creativity that man can find freedom and himself and thus have a formative influence on society.

A few days after his presentation in Rome, the German artist presented the spatial installation *Terremoto in Palazzo* (1981) at Galleria Lucio Amelio in Naples. He built it from elements found from around the Irpin crater: old work tables, a bootblack’s footstool with drawers, crockery, broken glass (which he scattered on the gallery floor). One of the tables was balanced on four glass jars, which the artist placed under each leg; between the others, he placed ceramic pots and an egg, which would have fallen and shattered at the lightest touch. In this way, Beuys conveyed the idea of fragility and precarious

²⁸ Richter (2019).

²⁹ Richter (2019).

³⁰ Richter (2019).

equilibrium, which alluded to the existential vulnerability of people, on the one hand threatened by the destructive forces of nature, and on the other, deprived of proper support by the misguided (catastrophic) policies of local authorities. Beuys wanted not only to show solidarity and compassion to the people of the Mezzogiorno, but also to demonstrate the possibilities offered by their right to self-determination and innate strength. It is difficult not to agree here again with Richter, who wrote that the German artist saw the energy forces released by the physical earthquake as an opportunity for regeneration: “equated the vitality inherent in nature with man’s creative powers. Just as nature had been shaken by tremors, the human soul would be brought into vigorous movement, so that it would become possible to instigate change. According to Beuys, the explosive potential of volcanic energy could be seen as a metaphor for warmth – for what he called a ‘warmth sculpture’, in which the artwork possesses the emotional qualities of human empathy, as opposed to the coldness of intellect or reason”.³¹⁾

This transformative power of nature’s energy was the leitmotif of *Diagramma Terremoto* and *Vestito Terremoto* (1981), two campaigns that Beuys carried out on the day he presented *Terremoto in Palazzo* in Naples. In the first, sitting under one of the tables from the installation and acting as a “human seismograph”, he drew “waves” on graph paper for ECG. Here, the beating of the heart was linked to seismic shocks, evoking a reflection on the deep connection between man and nature. The second campaign consisted of similar “elements”: the artist cut holes in the jacket and shirt of his friend, gallerist Lucio Amelio, in order to then apply ECG electrodes to his body and record the measurements on paper. Here again, in a literal way, the rhythm of the heart muscle was linked to potential tectonic shocks of the earth. The clothing left behind after the campaign became not only a vestige of the catastrophe – a vestige deprived of the body that wore it – but also an indication of a potentially positive impulse that the energies of nature can transform into a creative process.

It is evident here that Beuys saw the creation of a “revolutionary earthquake in people’s minds” through the catalytic influence of art as a positive response to the horrendous experience of *terremoto*. It is actually an interpretation of his idea of “social sculpture”, which he confirmed shortly afterwards in yet another spectacular way. The great world exhibition of contemporary art *documenta 7* (1982), the 7,000 basalt columns and 7,000 oak trees that

³¹ Richter (2019).

appeared in the city of Kassel within five years and are today a characteristic element of its landscape, the hundreds of participants involved, the implementation of activities even after the artist's death – all this was part of the project *7000 Eichen – Stadtverwaltung statt Stadtverwaltung (7000 Oaks – City Forestation instead of City Administration)*. Beuys explained the intentions behind this campaign to Richard Demarco, “I wish to go more and more outside to be among the problems of nature and problems of human beings in their working places. This will be a regenerative activity; it will be a therapy for all of the problems we are standing before”.³²⁾ However, in order to initiate this process, individuals and organizations needed to consider their own responsibility in enacting global environmental change by participating in the project. Undoubtedly, these words could successfully be attributed to Arahmaiani. *Project Flag*, which has been running for years, also requires active participation and taking social responsibility for the ongoing activity. This means not only thinking about unjust oppressive practices or natural disasters caused by human activities, commenting on them in the present or speculating about them in relation to the future. It is more than that – it is about creating better and fairer relationships together in the present within the creative space of an artwork.³³⁾ Indonesian artist believes that art “must do its part to encourage and empower communities and individual people to evaluate and understand their own situation and problems, particularly issues of cultural, social, political, and environment conflict”.³⁴⁾

Therefore, there is no doubt that for Arahmaiani too, the aim of art is to shape the society of the future and the means to do so are actions based on, as Beuys described it, “the total energy of this individual creativity in people, by people and for people, but with a new emphasis on in, by and for, as a creative process”.³⁵⁾ “I think art can function as a catalyst in society if the market and politics do not interfere with it too much. Art is a form of communication that is open to possibilities and interpretation so art can bring things together, can provide a new perspective. This being said, art still has to stand as an autonomous discourse and narrative. When this is the case, art can then be an appropriate tool for reaching out to people”.³⁶⁾ Not surprisingly, Anissa

³²⁾ Demarco (1982: 46). See: Jordan (2016).

³³⁾ Donoghue (2022).

³⁴⁾ Rahadiningtyas (2021).

³⁵⁾ Jedliński (1990: 8).

³⁶⁾ Lenzi (2015: 17).

Rahadiningtyas saw *Project Flag* as a performative and ritualised repetition that aimed to heal the wounds caused by violence, marginalisation or natural disasters, to raise awareness of environmental issues, and to create a space for open, egalitarian collaboration.³⁷⁾ Like Beuys, Arahmaiani places the human being at the centre of the relationship with nature, initiating actions that go beyond the modernist understanding of art and that are both personal and political (social).

I think she found in Beuys' work not only inspiration but also confirmation of the path she had chosen. The connection between the Indonesian artist and the work of the German artist is very clear. She herself recognises this closeness and appreciates it, realising, however, that she has to put it in her own context. This context is undoubtedly formed by formal and informal artistic education at home and abroad as well as life experiences. They are characterised by a span between dominant political, religious and economic structures and a critical reflection on tradition and modernity, an understanding of local and global tensions, as well as a sensitivity to the social and natural environment. This is partly because her artistic practice always refers to what she herself has experienced. Thus, it seems that for Arahmaiani, being a nomad challenges her sense of limiting stability. Her nomadism has undoubtedly allowed her to broaden her perspective, although, as she points out, Indonesia remains her most important source of inspiration and close connection.³⁸⁾ Therefore, the aim of her art is not "to please the eye", she believes – like Beuys – that that artists are healers who have an ethical responsibility to contribute to society, to participate in social processes, and to produce a new social consciousness.³⁹⁾ I think this is a unique, contemporary complement to the legacy of a remarkable German artist.

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³⁷⁾ Rahadiningtyas (2021).

³⁸⁾ Silas, Stathacos (2014).

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1. Arahmaiani during her residency at Patani Artspace (Thailand) in October 2022. Courtesy of Warin Lab Contemporary.



2. Making of Ecology of Peace - a video work featuring Flag Project Thailand with the involvement of the community in Pattani (Thailand), October 2022. Courtesy of Warin Lab Contemporary.



3. The opening reception of Nomadic Ecologies - performance and Memory of Nature art installation by Arahmaiani. Warin Lab Contemporary, Bangkok, November 2022. Courtesy of Warin Lab Contemporary.



4. Arahmaiani, Nomadic Ecologies, exhibition view, in the foreground – flags for Flag Project Thailand (2022, fabric and wood, 150 x 200 cm each). Warin Lab Contemporary, Bangkok, November 2022. Courtesy of Warin Lab Contemporary.



5. Arahmaiani, *Nomadic Ecologies*, exhibition view, in the foreground – *Memory of Nature* (2022, soil, wood, fabric, sprouting seeds, 200 x 200 x 25 cm). Warin Lab Contemporary, Bangkok, November 2022. Courtesy of Warin Lab Contemporary.