Trajectories of solidarities in Asia and beyond. The work of Arahmaiani, Phoebe Ching Ying Man and Sun Shaokun

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how three women artists working in Asia and beyond – Arahmaiani (Indonesia, b. 1961), Phoebe Ching Ying Man (Hong Kong, b.1969), and Sun Shaokun (People's Republic of China, 1980-2016) – employ diverse artistic media to address gendered violence in their specific cultural contexts, while building transcultural solidarities. Notions of visual activism, feminism and solidarity are interwoven to critically analyse *Burning body, burning country* (1998, 1999 and 2024) by Arahmaiani, *Rewriting history* (2009-2012) by Phoebe Man, and *Circumcision* (2014) by Sun Shaokun. These works are feminist interventions that respond to gendered violence, such as rape and female genital mutilation, and expose marginalised stories of sufferance, trauma and healing. I discuss how their feminist visual activism transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, and contributes to larger dialogues on gendered violence, activating spaces for solidarities and advocacy for gender justice in Asia and beyond.

Keywords: gendered violence, solidarity/ies, Asia, Arahmaiani, Phoebe Ching Ying Man, Sun Shaokun.

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Introduction

Helicopter engines whine
Rousing a restless sleep
I pull back the curtains
And open the window
Black smoke clots
Rising to the heavens
Putrid stench of a conspiracy
Roasted corpses
Sting the nostrils
Make breathing painful.
…
Chinese women raped
Children shot down too
…
I don't understand
Why did all of this have to happen?

(Arahmaiani 1998)[1]

To the rhythmic beating of her traditional frame drum (*rebana*), Indonesian artist and activist Arahmaiani (b.1961) sang these verses in Bahasa (Indonesia) during the performance *Burning body, burning country* (Figure 1) enacted on 21 November 2024 at Tate Modern in London. This multi-media and multi-part work, which includes a singing-cum-drumming performance and a multi-modal installation now part of the Tate Collection is the fifth version of *Burning body, burning country*, which Arahmaiani first showed in 1998 at the French Cultural Center in her native city Bandung (Indonesia). According to Arahmaiani (2025), three iterations of the performance took place, namely, in 1998 at the A. Kasteyev State Museum of Arts in Almaty, Kazakhstan (Figure 2 and 3), in 1999 in the Indonesian capital Jakarta (Figure 4) and in Manila, Philippines (Datuin 1999; Figure 5). The work responds to the atrocious events of 1998, when under the Suharto regime (1966-1998) four university students were shot dead during anti-government protests in Jakarta. The subsequent riots and looting, fueled by rising anti-Chinese sentiments, led to the deaths of about 1,200 people, the majority of whom were ethnic Chinese, while more than a hundred women, also mostly Chinese, were raped (Human Rights Watch 1998). *Burning body, burning country* has been described by the artist as 'a memorial "for the souls of the women who were violated and killed" during the riots' (Tate 2024). While the work addresses historical events specific to Indonesia, it simultaneously advocates for transnational gender justice.

Recent research on the multilayered intersections of activisms, feminisms and art testifies to a growing global necessity to further explore how art functions as a platform, tool and strategy for exposing gender-based violence (GBV), reversing gender asymmetries, and

advocating for women's rights and social justice (Deepwell 2020; Sliwinska 2021a; White & Hartle 2022; Caldwell, Colburn & Gonzalez 2024). In this article I provide new insights and research into the practice of three Asian women artists with a focus on selected artworks, including the previously mentioned Arahmaiani and her series of public performances *Burning body, burning country*, Phoebe Ching Ying Man (Hong Kong, b.1969) and her *Rewriting history* (2009-2012), and Sun Shaokun (People's Republic of China, 1980-2016) with her solo performance *Circumcision* (*Geli*) (2014). Building on the existing scholarship on contemporary feminist art and visual activism conceived as 'a way to create forms of change' (Mirzoeff 2016:283) while 'encouraging us to see the world and how it operates differently' (Deepwell 2020:10), I demonstrate how their art functions as a strategy for feminist visual activism, and builds multifold and transcultural trajectories of solidarities across Asia and beyond.

The critical interpretations of the selected case studies adopt an intersectional feminist approach to mobilise stories of women and explore how gender interlaces with notions such as visual activism, the environement, the body, rituals, archives and solidarity. In particular, I refer to the postcolonial concept of feminist solidarity conceived by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2004:7), which is defined

> in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.

Within the understanding of transcultural solidarities, I refer also to the concept of 'imperfect solidarities' as formulated by Aruna D'Souza (2024:24) who, moved by recent geopolitical events and in particular the war on Gaza (2023-present), reflects on how solidarity should be conceived beyond the instinct of empathy or the consolidation of love, and should instead be motivated by the necessity to care – in this case, the obligation to care for (other) women, to fight against GBV and to advocate for global gender and social justice.

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Photo of Arahmaiani's performance *Burning country* at Tate Modern, 21 November 2024. Courtesy of Arahmaiani. Photograph courtesy of Tate (Ben Fisher Photography).

Burning body, burning country (1998-2024)

Arahmaiani is an artist, activist, writer and poet. Brought up in a mixed religious family, to a Muslim father and a Buddhist mother, she first pursued her training at the Art Department of the Institute of Technology in Bandung. As she began to learn about the underground resistance movements to the Suharto regime,[2] Arahmaiani courageously used her work as a tool for activism early on in her career, and not without consequences. In 1983 an untitled street performance, in which the artist challenged the meanings of Indonesia's Independence Day (17 August) under the constraints of a dictatorial regime, attracted the attention of the police and led to her arrest and imprisonment (Arahmaiani 2025).[3] Upon her release from prison, Arahmaiani moved to Australia to continue her art studies. The artist said that although her home remains in Indonesia, she is a 'global nomad', moving from country to country across Asia, Oceania, Europe, and South America.[4] Her overt critiques of the grand systems of politics, global capitalism, and

religion, and her engaged activist practice on issues concerned with gender and environment, have gained her international fame (see Dimitrakaki 2016; Jurriëns 2020).

The iterations of *Burning body, burning country* demonstrate Arahmaiani's continuous commitment to gender justice.[5] All five versions combine a performance and an installation, with one component that remains unchanged: her enactment of the sung poem "Show me your heart" (*Tunjukkan Hatimu Padaku*), composed by the artist to capture her shock and agony as a witness of the 1998 attacks. By playing a medium-sized round frame drum and singing, Arahmaiani contributes to the female dimension of music performance and drumming in Java and the Indonesian archipelago, where tradition merges indigenous and Islamic practices. The role of women in traditional music performances in Java remains largely unexplored, perhaps due to the relatively marginal role women tend to have in singing and drumming, and the illicit associations drawn in Islam between women and music.[6] Playing the frame drum strongly correlates with ritualistic practices and supernatural powers, and with women in several ancient and pre-Islamic traditions in Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean, and Egypt. The frame drum tends to be accepted across Islamic societies as a non-melodic instrument played by women particularly within the women's quarters and at weddings, and can be seen as an instrument of feminine power (Doubleday 1999). In playing the *rebana* (frame drum) and singing, Arahmaiani challenges some of the traditional perceptions of women and the frame drum, which in Indonesia continues to be a practice dominated by men, while reclaiming the female potential of the instrument.

Arahmaiani's emotional singing of the poem recalls the Islamic *sholawat* (sung prayers) and evokes the laments of a dirge, conveying a dramatic performance of mourning and sufferance. The chanting quality of her voice, together with the methodical beats of the drum, reflect the style of *dikir rebana*, a form of singing and drumming usually performed by men in Islamic ceremonies (Chaterji 2025).[7] In the London performance, the ritual feminine power carried by her voice and presence is amplified by the woman with praying-like hands (*sembah*) in the centre of the wall painting, thus extending her reclamation into the space of the gallery (Figure 1). As she recites towards the end of the composition, 'I want to turn this [trauma] into a red rose, a sign of love' (Arahmaiani 1998), the poem functions as a *sembahan* (offering) to the victims, the survivors,[8] as well as her audiences – an offering which establishes a relationship, whether metaphorical, metaphysical or actual, with the recipients.[9] Aramahiani bestows the performance on her audiences, creating an affective sense of empathy, as the sounds, rhythms, and her embodied ritual activate a sense of common mourning, healing, and protest against violence and injustice, while building solidarity through her feminist intervention.

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Arahmaiani, *Burning body, burning country*, Kazakhstan, 1998. Performance. Courtesy of Arahmaiani.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Arahmaiani, *Burning body, burning country*, Kazakhstan, 1998. Performance. Courtesy of Arahmaiani.

The installation component of *Burning body, burning country,* which varied across the five iterations, is the primary tangible and lasting product of the creative process. This is especially significant given that performance is meant to be experienced by the audiences in the *here* and *now*, and that recordings, such as videos and photos, are not usually included in the installation. The latter encompasses variations of paintings and sculptural elements, which differ in the five versions of the work, yet also carry strong similarities. In the first performance in Bandung, a wall projection showed simple monochrome drawings representing images of chaos and killing that the artist witnessed in 1998.[10] In Manila, as well as in London, the black and white wall paintings create an immersive background for the performance (Figure 5); the monochromatic palette coupled with the simplicity of the figures heightens a sense of drama, stripping the representations down to their bare essentials in order to foreground the work's core concern with the human condition. The performance in Kazakhstan presented a unique element: the artist displayed two books on a table, *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx and the Qur'an. Arahmaiani tore some pages off from both volumes, and burnt them using the flame of a candle (Figures 2 and 3). The act of burning texts, which could be considered extremely controversial, was instead conceived by the artist as an act of actualisation: the fire with its purifying and transformative power brings things into being (Silas & Stathacos 2014). This work resonates with others by Arahmaiani, such as *Lingga-Yoni* (1994) and *Etalase* (1994) in the early part of her career, in which the artist is concerned with expressing her views of religions, and her own Muslim identity, often connected with her environmental concerns (Jurriëns 2020; Rahadiningtyas 2021; Rahadiningtyas 2023).

In the Tate Collection, the installation, which was completed the day after the performance (Ye 2024), has two parts: the first includes the wall painting, three red roses placed on a small plinth, and a pair of scissors left on the floor, similar to the installation in Manila (Figure 5). The second shows two white silk garments, a long skirt and an open-fronted long-sleeved traditional blouse (called *kebaya*) with white embroideries, hanging mid-air above a map of Indonesia made of matchsticks.[11] The clothing indexes the female presence (or absence) and its gendered design conveys a sense of femininity, while the colour white, according to the artist, represents the need of maintaining a sort of 'neutrality' and the ability to remain sane during challenging political circumstances (Arahmaiani 2025). Equally, the colour white animates reflections on the idea of being untouched, uncoloured, and pure. In this case, it calls for the need to not stigmatise rape survivors, who are instead often seen as responsible for the crime they suffered. Matchsticks arranged in the shape of a map of Indonesia were used both in the performances in Jakarta (Figure 4) as well as in London, and connect directly with the image of "burning" repeated twice in the title of the work. The matches represent the actual fires that burned in 1998 and the inflammability of our world, in the sense of both its environmental vulnerability and its political instability (see also Ye 2024). While using the map of Indonesia

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Arahmaiani, *Burning body, burning country*, Jakarta, 1999. Performance. Courtesy of Arahmaiani.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Arahmaiani, *Burning body, burning country*, Manila, 1999. Performance. Courtesy of Arahmaiani.

creates an immediate context and reference for Arahmaiani's work with specific references to her locality, in the London iteration, the series of wall paintings in black and white show women belonging to different ethnic groups and religions. According to Arahmaiani (2025), her work is a critique of the global capitalist economy, materialism, and individualism to expose the exploitation of the land and women with an ecofeminist approach, which raises the necessity to respect women and the environment as well as the ecological knowledge they guard (Arahmaiani 2025).

Arahmaiani's commitment to uncovering the entangled connection between women and the environment is evident in her community-based art projects, such as *Proyek Bendera* (*Flag project*) (2006-present), which began as a creative intervention to heal the trauma brought by a 6.4 magnitude earthquake that hit Yogyakarta in 2006. *Proyek Bendera* unites communities where women stitch flags with appliqué words in local languages, such as woman (*padasi*), unity (*guyub*), and land (*tana*) to emphasise the woman-nature connection typical of ecofeminism (Rahadiningtyas 2021). According to art historian Wulandani Dirgantoro (2017:176), Arahmaiani's global name has failed to inspire other Indonesian women artists to embrace a more open feminist approach, while Edwin Jurriëns (2020:9) suggests that her work is best interpreted by combining the Indonesian notions of *unjuk rasa* (which roughly translates as "visual activism") and *ekofeminisme* (ecofeminism) to demonstrate how in fact 'she has always retained strong ties with her homeland and has, if not inspired, at least been part of a much larger emerging movement of creative female activists'. Furthermore, Arahmaiani's art weaves global dialogues on feminism, GBV, the environmental crisis, and religion, while activating transcultural solidarity.

Burning body, burning country functions as a feminist intervention that translates violence into a ritualised and affective form of activism for gender justice and tangles with her environmentalist practice. The women on the Tate wall painting – some naked, two wearing a niqab, one screaming in despair, another praying and one blind-folded and with her mouth covered – call for solidarity across religions and cultures, despite differences as she advocates for 'unity in diversity' (Tate 2025). This concept strongly echoes D'Souza's (2024:24) definition of imperfect solidarity as 'based on temporary, context-specific alliances, one that allows difference and even contradiction to remain intact, and that sees such contradiction as a strength, not a weakness'. The artist affirms her solidarity with survivors and victims of anti-Chinese discrimination and women raped in the 1998 attacks. In turn, as her solidarity spreads across geographies through her work, it affects the audiences of her performances and installations. Framed through D'Souza's concept of solidarity, this occurs not because of a shared sense of empathy, but because of a rooted obligation to care equally for other human beings.

Rewriting history (2009-2012)

Phoebe Ching Ying Man is a multi-media artist who has played a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary art scene in her native Hong Kong. She is a founding member of one of the most significant art spaces in Asia, the independent and non-profit Para Site, and formerly served as the director of the Asian Experimental Video Festival in Hong Kong. Her work, which has been exhibited internationally, responds to socio-political and gender-related issues, drawing from both her local context as well as broader regional and global concerns. Although she stated that her work emerges from 'the position of a human being rather than a feminist' (Lowery 2023), many of her art projects foreground women-related issues, such as the stigma and anxiety around menstruation as seen in *Beautiful flowers* (1996) and *My mirror* (2014), and GBV as in *One person one heart* (2014), where Man reflects on the trauma of "comfort women" who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese military in the twentieth century.

Rewriting history (Figure 6) is a four-part and multi-phase work which ran over four years and stemmed from the artist's concern over the increasing number of sexual assaults in Hong Kong and the urgency to raise awareness on GBV. The work includes writing, paper cutting, installation and animation; the latter encompassed in-person participation of communities as part of the creative process. Thus, the work could be loosely defined as socially engaged. Interaction with local communities is a recurrent feature in Man's work, as seen in projects such as *Birthday cakes* (2014) and *Love China love Hong Kong thick toast* (2015), inspired by the 2014 Umbrella Movement fighting for political fairness and justice (Zeng 2020), and *Post #Metoo* (2021), discussed below.

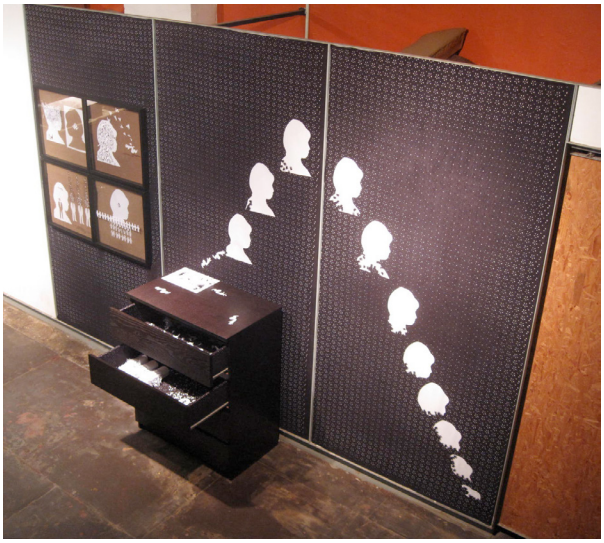

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Phoebe Man, *Rewriting history,* 2010. Installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Phoebe Man.

FIGURE Nº 7

Phoebe Man, *"They walk the streets and I live a life sentence." KC, a survivor*, 2010. Paper-cutting, 50 cm x 50 cm x 4.5 cm. Courtesy of Phoebe Man.

Through *Rewriting history,* Man participates in the fight against GBV in Hong Kong by using testimonies of survivors of sexual assault as the affective and documentary inspiration for her work. The artist dedicates paper cutouts within *Rewriting history* to an individual narration of GBV, showing a diversity of women's voices, ages, and circumstances, and visualising stories of rape survivors which are often silenced or unheard. In a section of the work (Figure 7), a paper cutout represents a woman's upper body hugging herself, while the head appears as a complex nest of thinly shredded paper. The figure conveys a sense of introspection, while the tangled mass of shreds delivers a feeling of chaos and uneasiness. Man's website reports: 'This art work is inspired by KC, 50 years of age, survivor of 2 rapes, one at 14, one in her thirties'. To increase further vicinity and intimacy with KC's story and her struggles, Man ([sa]a) includes her words,

> One thing I always think about being a victim, [is that I'm] now a survivor, I live a life sentence. Once I was a victim the first time I was stripped of my freedom. I haven't gotten that back in my fifty years. Freedom. They walk the streets and I live a life sentence. I'll live it to the day I die – I can't shake it.

The multiple voices collected and documented in Man's work expose the vulnerability of rape survivors, the difficulty of reporting their cases to the police, and the struggle to

continue living a happy life as survivors. A second series of cutouts produced in 2012 as *Redo Suzanne Lacy's work "Rape is"* (Figure 8) reinterpreted the American feminist artist and activist Suzanne Lacy's (1972) artist's book project *Rape is*.[12] Man provided sheets of A4 paper with the text "Rape is" to solicit audience responses, and in a few days she collected about a hundred and forty answers, which she used to produce another series of paper cutouts under the same title (Man [sa]b). Even though distant in time, both artists respond to a local (and global) necessity to raise awareness on rape, breaking shared attitudes of shame and silence around it; while Lacy's work responds to the feminist fervor of 1970s California, Phoebe Man bravely raises a dialogue on rape, which stands out in the Hong Kong contemporary art scene.

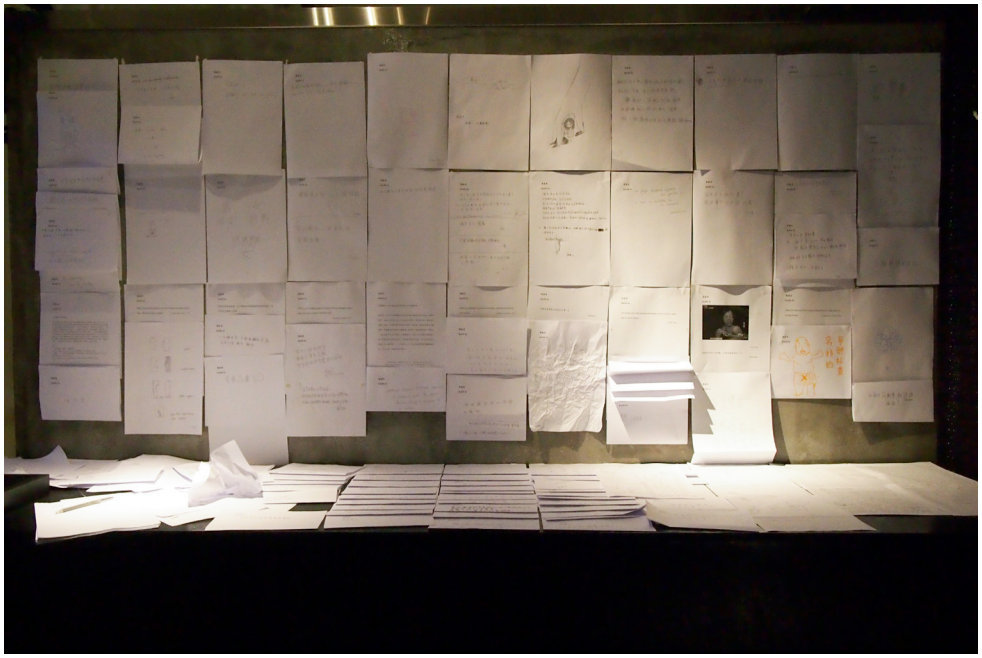

FIGURE **Nº 8**

Phoebe Man, *Redo Suzanne Lacy's work "Rape is",* 2012. Socially-engaged art. Courtesy of Phoebe Man.

The medium of paper cutting connects Man's practice to the long history of Chinese folk artistic tradition which likely dates back to the second century. Paper cutting is conventionally practiced by women in rural China to produce brightly coloured decorative and celebrative motifs, such as auspicious animals and religious images, and it is also seen as a means of self-expression. Yet, while cutouts are conventionally red or rendered in bright colors and are primarily celebratory in the themes represented, those by Man are solely white, thus adopting a somber tone more apt to the expression of suffering and trauma of survivors of GBV. The choice of white paper also reclaims the idea of being

untouched and pure, to counter the stigmatisation of rape survivors, similar to the interpretation proposed earlier in the article of Arahmaiani's use of white clothes in *Burning body, burning country*. It is important to note that the Chinese character for "rape" is composed by three repeated graphemes meaning "woman", thus the etimology of the word burdens women with the history of discriminatory language and gender bias.[13]

Phoebe Man's use of common paper, thicker and stiffer than the *xuan* paper traditionally utilised in paper cutting, conveys the ubiquity of GBV, just as the fragility of paper itself, easily ripped or affected by light and humidity, indexes the vulnerability of women subjected to rape. Nonetheless, a reference to the long-standing practice of paper cutting as an art form connects with the resilience of the survivors. While in Man's work paper cutting as a medium is traditional, the motifs she represents are not. Her subject matter responds to the stories she visualises, and in doing so she reifies and documents their minor narratives into the making of art. Bao Hongwei's (2019:260) study of Xiyadie, a Chinese queer artist who uses paper cutting to illustrate his queer experience and open up dialogues on homosexuality in post-socialist China, reveals how cutouts can be rethought in contemporary practice and used as a tool to disrupt power relations. Inspired by the notion of material agency as developed by Karen Barad (2003:828) for whom 'matter is not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing', a reflection on the materiality of paper in Man's work animates the possibility to perceive paper as a body itself able to reinscribe its own history, and become, in entanglement with the artist, an agent of resistance and empowerment.

The act of cutting can be seen as a cathartic and relieving act, perhaps part of the healing process the artist is enacting on behalf of the rape survivors she encountered. The role of the artist in making the invisible visible is reiterated by the display of the cutouts in 2010 (Figure 6) and the use of a cabinet to emphasise the tension between secrecy and disclosure, private and shared experiences by rape survivors. In *Rewriting history*, Man reimagines how history can be narrated through hidden and subaltern stories of women, which provides an alternative method for creating history. In so doing, Man's work functions within the notion of feminist rewriting of history as a feminist intervention, in the sense expressed by Griselda Pollock (2003:12), for whom

> Feminist interventions demand recognition of gender power relations, making visible the mechanisms of male power, the social construction of sexual difference and the role of cultural representations in that construction.

Man's continuous commitment to exposing GBV is evident in *Post #Metoo*, a multi-part work in which the artist organised community events under the name *Free colouring if I were*, the first of which took place in January 2018 at the Fotan Open Studios in Hong

Kong. In the heat of the #MeToo movement the artist provoked those who joined the event, around 230 people of different genders, ages and backgrounds, to spend some time together drawing and coloring on a piece of paper based on a given prompt: 'Imagine with empathy if they were a victim, a perpetrator and a bystander' (Man [sa]b). Subsequent events were organised in other venues in Hong Kong and in 2021 an animation was created to showcase the responses collected; it was shown in sixteen international film festivals and exhibitions in the United States, Taiwan, Argentina and Colombia, amongst others (Man 2021).

The social engagement elements in Man's work, as in the animation included in *Rewriting history* or the Free colouring activity in *Post #Metoo*, can be described as symbolic acts rather than actual socially engaged art, following Helguera's classification (2011:5-8). The social involvement of groups of people or communities in Man's works seems episodic rather than 'geared to communication and understanding between individuals that can have a lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory force' (Helguera 2011:7). Nonetheless, 'symbolic gestures can be powerful and effective methods for change' (Thompson 2012:18) and despite the more simplistic call for empathy seen in the prompt used in *Post #Metoo*, Man's work creates a sense of solidarity within the communities she engages with, which expands beyond the initial reach of her work through affective resonances. Across her projects Man creates spaces in Hong Kong and beyond for the discussion of rape and GBV, aligning with a trascultural pedagogical necessity, as Monika Fabijanska (2024:148) claims: '[a] noncensoring, open approach founded on a deeper analysis of artworks about rape – whether graphic, empowering, or even aestheticizing – enables us to transcend isolation stemming from personal experience, education, or lack thereof'. The critical interpretations of her work show how Phoebe Man transforms traditional, everyday materials and collective encounters into vehicles for rewriting a feminist history of solidarity against GBV in Hong Kong and beyond.

Circumcision (2014)

While community engagement and public performances are central to Arahmaiani's and Man's practice, Sun Shaokun, who worked in the People's Republic of China (PRC), often enacted her performances in remote locations and with minimal audiences, as exemplified in the case of her 2014 piece *Circumcision*. Born in Hebei Province, Sun moved to Beijing to study traditional Chinese ink painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Though she primarily worked in performance, her practice also encompassed painting, installation, photography, and video. Her works such as *Biting* (2012), *Reeds as frost* (2014) and *Symbiosis with begonia* (2014), explore physical and mental endurance, using the body

as a site of suffering, resistance, and activism against gender-based discrimination and violence (Feng, Guest, Liu, Merlin, Ohlsen, Penetsdorfer & Tsui 2022:106-109; Merlin 2022). Sun achieved a degree of recognition in her artistic career, yet, perhaps given the boldness of her work within an increasingly conservative, surveilled, and restrictive cultural milieu under the presidency of Xi Jinping in the PRC,[14] she remained at the margins of the mainstream artistic scene.

Circumcision is perhaps Sun's most daring and painful performance, which was witnessed only by two photographers. In October 2014 the artist reached a secluded location in the countryside around Beijing, and wearing only a mesh outfit decorated by some prickly grass resembling chest hairs, she sat on the rough shell of a tortoise next to a white-feathered black male chicken (silkie). After cutting the mesh, Sun threaded together her inner vaginal labia using a thick veterinary needle. In the six minutes video of the performance, the hand-held camera is mostly fixed on the artist's open legs while her steady actions complete the circumcision. The last shot shows Sun's bloodied hand gently caressing the chicken.[15] Female circumcision, better known as female genital mutilation (FGM), is a practice typically forced on girls and women and is considered a severe violation of human rights. The global figure of girls and women who have been cut so far is two hundred and thirty million, predominantly in countries in Africa, the Middle East and growing figures are documented in Asia (UNICEF 2025). Besides psychological damage, FGM poses serious medical risks, including infection, long-term health complications, and even death (UN News 2023). Databases made available by UNICEF (2025) show that FGM is not practiced in the PRC to date, yet as Sun inscribes on her body a practice from the "elsewhere", she becomes the "other" and opens up possibilities for female solidarity beyond her locality, for a transcultural perspective into circumcision.

Sun imbued this non-verbal performance with philosophical and metaphorical meanings. In Chinese culture, the tortoise is a sacred and celestial animal, evoking a famous legend about the origins of the universe in which a gigantic tortoise assisted the Yellow Emperor to control the Yellow River waters which were overflowing, and so it was rewarded with ten thousand years of life, thus creating the association of the tortoise with power, longevity, and immortality (Minneapolis Institute of Art [sa]). By sitting on the tortoise, Sun reclaims her dominant positionality, reminding that female suffering is the origin of life (literally through childbirth), and simultaneously an element deeply ingrained in the cosmic history of the universe. The male chicken in China is often associated with malehood and good fortune (as "chicken" *ji* in Mandarin sounds like *ji* "auspicious"), so in the performance it becomes a metaphor of the male gaze over the artist's female body, while her final gesture of tenderness as a caresse epitomises the power of her compassion. Sun with her posed gestures adds a furher ritualistic dimension to the performance, similar to how Arahmaiani through her voice, music and interpretation implies references

to Muslim ceremonies. The idea of the ritual is also suggested by the Mandarin Chinese title, as geli "circumcision" is composed of *ge*, which means "to cut or sever", and *li*, which stands for "ceremony or ritual". Though Sun did not enact the severance of her genitalia, the idea of cutting echoes with Phoebe Man's paper cutting, and in both cases the wound becomes an act of healing.

Sun often used self-harm in her performances. In 2016, she enacted *Dreaming of Mondrian* (Figure 9), for which she travelled to the Lingshang mountain, a rural location not far from the capital, and immersed in nature, she cut her ring finger until it bled. She then used the blood to colour red the bark of a tree she had previously carved and painted white with a pattern echoing the geometrical shapes of a Mondrian painting (Sun [sa]). By employing her body and blood to create art, and re-create a Mondrian, Sun reclaims the female genius as visceral creativity, rethinking the role of women artists like herself, often marginalised and overlooked in art history. Some artistic precedents of the cut/wounded body in the PRC are Ma Qiusha (b.1980) and her 2007 documentary video *From no.4 Ping Yuan Li to no.4 Tian Qiao Bei Li*, in which the artist recounts the expectations of growing up being a girl while holding a razor blade in her mouth. This tactic was followed by Li Xinmo (b.1979) in a 2013 performance piece in which she recited poems with a razor blade in her mouth to denounce violence and rape against girls and women (Merlin 2022:166-169). In all these instances, the artists are using self-harm as a tool of protest against gender discrimination. The scars left by the wounds as the body heals remain as visible and indelible traces of the artist's performative interventions. The scars become documentation emphasising the role of the body as archive, not only a repository of memories, but as an active and constantly changing site for creativity and solidarity.

Circumcision was documented in photos and a video, thus allowing the performance to be seen by a wider audience, beyond the *here* and *now*, as Susan Sontag (2003) reminds us of these media's crucial historical role in watching, sharing and experiencing the pain of others. Yet, the video was not likely shown in public displays and rather seen within more intimate settings.[16] Witnessing and gazing self-harm in artistic expressions challenges the role of the viewers. As highlighted by Sophie Anne Oliver (2010:119), 'how are we to move from voyeuristic spectating of the traumatized body as object, to an ethical witnessing of that body as part of the other's and our own, humanity?' This question becomes doubly uncomfortable when the object of our gaze is the traumatised and wounded female body overtly exposed with its central core imagery. Yet, it is in this challenge that Sun's *Circumcision* activates solidarity.

The explicit actions by Sun solicit the viewers to become 'response-able', transcending the mere act of spectating and turning into responsibly self-reflective individuals able to meaningfully respond to and reflect on what they are looking at (Oliver 2010:100). Sun's

Circumcision, according to Han Bing, the videographer and producer of the performance video, was aimed at denouncing gender discrimination and any abuse against women, and was dedicated to the struggle for female independence and freedom.[17] Sun plays with the artist's agency and ability of making the invisible visible, be that the exposure of her wounded body, the intimacy of her genitalia, or an illegal practice such as FGM. As Amelia Jones (2009:57) reminds us:

> works of wounding function through a radical relationality, calling for us to embrace rather than disavow our incoherence in order to provide a potential opening for a politics of change. This generous act of opening us to our own pain and mortality aims to reduce the forces of violence that scar every aspect of living in the world as it is today.

Through the materiality of Sun's lived and wounded body, she invites us to be "response-able" and activates a sense of responsibility, which aligns with D'Souza's notion of solidarity as the obligation to care. At the same time, similar to the offering enacted by Arahmaiani, Sun presents us with "a generous act" and enables the viewers to heal their own wounds thorugh her body. Sun's practice expands the discourse of feminist interventions in the PCR where the body and performance are contested spaces in the contemporary art world. Her *Circumcision* symbolically creates an affective sense of vicinity with the survivors of FGM, and activates solidarity in the fight against GBV.

FIGURE **Nº 9**

Sun Shaokun, *Dream of Mondrian*, Beijing Lingshan Mountain, 2016. Performance. Courtesy of Han Bing.

Trajectories of solidarities

> I dream of a world in which we act not from a love for our fellow humans (and, for that matter, nonhumans), but something much more difficult: an obligation to care for each other whether or not we empathize with them (D'Souza 2024:24).

The work of Arahmaiani, Man, and Sun demonstrates the diversity of practices, aesthetic choices, and strategies used to address GBV by artists advocating for gender and social justice while weaving solidarities in Asia and beyond. Their works are feminist interventions aimed at building consciousness on discrimination and violence against women, while exposing minor stories of subalternity, whether of rape or FGM survivors. *Burning body, burning country* by Arahmaiani, *Rewriting history* by Man and *Cicumcision* by Sun function also as archives of first-hand accounts that document, at a micro and individual level, specific historical events and GBV. Individual, local and minor histories are often marginalised in state-produced historical narratives and become invisible in global visions of history. However, these artworks preserve the stories of survivors, whether directly or indirectly, and continue to resonate with other episodes and practices of discrimination and gender-based violence. At the same time they activate what Hal Foster (2015:60) calls 'the archival' as they have the ability 'to turn "excavation sites" into "construction sites"', and signal 'a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic'. The archival dimension of these works goes beyond their repository function by elevating memories and histories to new creative possibilities for the construction of gender and social justice while tracing new trajectories of solidarity.

The solidarities built within and through the work of Arahmaiani, Man, and Sun serve as sites of resistance and empowerment. Individual suffering, whether expressed through the body of the artist herself or via other media, becomes a collective space which belongs to all of those who feel the necessity to care. In the creative process the three artists initiate a healing process through the embodiment of pain, its memorialisation and sharing. In the case of Arahmaiani and Sun, they entangle notions of suffering with those of corporeality through their lived bodies. The body is raised to a site of creativity, where practices rooted in local traditions entangle with feminist activism. In so doing, these artists echo the work of other artists across geographies,[18] and as aptly suggested by Meskimmon (2019:365) through their work,

> feminist corporeal-materialist aesthetics connect us in our embodiment with the knowing and the making of others, such that we can think differently and "experiment" otherwise, towards hopeful and, if not yet realised, *possible* worlds.

Trajectories of solidarities – from Arahmaiani to the Chinese communities and women in Indonesia, from Man to the local communities and rape survivors, from Sun to FGM

survivors – transcend the borders of their locales, extending across Asia and beyond. While solidarity is constructed at different levels and moments of the creative process, in the engagement of communities and audiences, in the making of art or its display (there and then, here and now), their art possesses the power to continuously activate solidarity and sustain its legacy. Inspired by their feminist interventions advocating for gender and social justice, I too align with their obligation to care, and this article chimes in as an act of solidarity.

Notes

1. This is an excerpt from the translated text of the poem, originally in Indonesian, provided by the artist.
2. Suharto (1921-2008) was the president of Indonesia from 1967 until 1998. His authoritarian regime was characterised by a policy called "New order" which aimed to modernise the local economy. Yet, repressive rules, the large use of military force and lack of democratic processes increased corruption, inequality and internal tensions while heavily curbing freedom of expression (see also Turner 2005:202-213).
3. The artist confirmed the performance was interrupted by the police who subsequently arrested her.
4. Zoom conversation with the artist, 30 March 2025. See also Edwin Jurriëns (2020:4).
5. Due to lack of documentation, not all five versions of the work are discussed in equal depth. In the London performance, for the first time, Arahmaiani's sung poem was followed by a music session with a violinist and a gamelan player (Ye 2024).
6. Veronica Doubleday (1999) discussed the role of women in drumming in Islamic communities across the Middle East. Her discussion can partially illuminate the Javanese context. Kartomi (2011) addressed the Aceh communities in Sumatra in her discussion of women performing a sitting dance called *meuseukat*.
7. I am deeply grateful to Katia Chaterji for sharing her knowledge and information about drumming and singing in the Indonesian archipelago.
8. "Survivor" is used throughout the article to emphasise their resilience and strength, rather than focusing on their potential submissivity and victimisation.
9. At Tate and in Manila, red roses are included in the installation as a reification of her offering.
10. This is based on a video of the 1998 Bandung performance provided by the artist.
11. The display also includes a video of the performance with English subtitles.
12. Suzanne Lacy (b.1945) is an advocate for women's rights. Several of her works, including her first artist's book *Rape is* (1972), raises awareness on rape and other social issues that particularly affect women.
13. This term carries the same sound as 'traitor' or 'treacherous' which is by association also used especially for women (Cui 2016:iii).
14. Cultural productions in the PRC have been heavily affected by Xi Jinping and his ruling characterised by heavy surveillance, permeating state propaganda and highly limited freedom of expression (see Xiao 2019).
15. The video was kindly shared by Han Bing, her videographer and friend.
16. Artist Abdul Rahman Abdullah (2016) recalled watching the 'pretty intense' video of Sun's performance during a residency in Beijing in 2016 where he met Sun.

17. This is included in the post-production text added on the video of the performance provided by Han Bing.

18. See Sliwinska (2021b) for a feminist study of the Polish artist Anna Baumgart.

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