

# Melati Suryodarmo

*Interview by Mark Rappolt*



## Performing to Resist

Born in Solo, a historic royal capital of Java, Melati Suryodarmo has, over the past decade, established a reputation as one of Southeast Asia's leading performance artists. She is particularly feted for her durational works, which might involve crushing and grinding hundreds of kilograms of charcoal over a 12-hour period (*I'm a ghost in my own house*, 2012) or dancing on butter until she collapses and leaves, exhausted (*Exergie – Butter Dance*, 2000). For almost 20 years she lived and worked in Germany. While her performances cross cultures, her body, and by extension the female body, remain a constant. This month she opens a major solo exhibition at Museum MACAN, Jakarta.

ARTREVIEW *What's it been like to develop the exhibition for MACAN?*

MELATI SURYODARMO We've been working on it for three months and I feel a constant déjà vu. Seeing all the objects and the documentation again, and trying to remember what happened at those times in my life. It's like performing my archive: although some of those performances will be performed by others, and some I'll present myself.

AR *Do you have to go into training to do those, or do you just take the condition you're in as a given?*

MS There are various methods of training. For a long durational performance that lasts 12 hours, I really need at least two or three days of total quietness, but also physical space, and physical training for endurance. This show includes a very tough piece called *The Black Ball* [first performed in 2005 at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam], where I sit in a chair for eight hours a day for four days. The chair is installed up on the wall more than two metres from the floor. That's it. No movement, no nothing. That will be challenging for me to do again. Not a challenge in the sense of *The Guinness Book of Records* of course, but I'm afraid that people will consider it that way. In Indonesia they love that sort of thing. But I guess people will mostly think, 'Why do you torture yourself by doing this?'

AR *Why do you torture yourself by doing this?*

MS It's not torture, it's a *resistance*. My faith in performance art derives from the spirit of resistance. Even after more than 20 years of practising performance art – starting in the underground scene in Berlin, and now performing in museums, galleries, art fairs – I still do grassroots activities in my hometown. Initially I was going back and forth between Germany and Indonesia. Then, in 2012, I decided to move

back to my hometown, Solo. The studio is just a house I rent, but it has a 5,000sqm garden with a lot of thick trees. I built an open-air platform stage with very simple rigging for the lights. We organise *Undisclosed Territory*, an annual festival of performance art, and host a 'laboratory' for performance art, as well as a 'dance laboratory' for young choreographers in the region. Every two months, we support young choreographers or composers who develop performances for a small theatre in collaboration with the art centre. It's all very simple. But I need to do this, and as long as it's still possible to do it in Indonesia, I'm going to continue. I love it, it's totally independent.

AR *Is this in response to the fact that there aren't such spaces in Indonesia in general?*

MS They don't teach performance art here. The institutions are limited, so I love the idea of supporting an ecosystem of performance art and independent artists. In doing so, I understand what is happening in my surroundings. I think artists cannot be separated from the art community, the art environment. If you don't support your environment, you become more alienated from that society.

*Suryodarmo obtained a degree in international relations at Padjajaran University in Indonesia before moving to Germany in 1994, where she studied under Butoh dancer Anzu Furukawa and later Marina Abramović, graduating with a masters in performance art from the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig in 2002. This shift to dance and performance isn't without precedence: Suryodarmo's mother was a practitioner of traditional Javanese dance. Her father, Suprpto Suryodarmo, was a dance artist and choreographer who founded the Lemah Putih art centre in central Java and taught dance for over five decades, developing his own method of freeform movement called Amerta.*

AR *You mentioned earlier that your work is a form of resistance – resistance against what?*

MS The idea of using the body as my main medium is about presenting the life aspect of the person who is making the art. I like the idea that the artwork is a 'lifework'. It's not like the conventional performing arts. This is not acting or dance. When I move, it's not necessarily choreographed.

AR *But is it still related to choreography?*

MS It's slightly different. Maybe seven decades ago, during the boom of performance art, it was

*facing page* *Transaction of Hollows* (2016): Dressed in a white suit, the artist notches a bamboo arrow into a gendawa (traditional Javanese bow) and shoots it into the gallery wall. She repeats this action 800 times over four hours.

Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, 2016. Photo: Petter Petterson

*facing page, top Exergie – Butter Dance (2000):*

The artist walks into a space, heading towards 20 bricks of butter that are prepared on a square dance mat. She stands with her back to the public. She turns around and steps on the butter. She dances and lets herself fall over if she slips on the butter. The artist gets up and continues to dance. This action is repeated until she loses her energy. It takes around 20 minutes. The artist takes off her shoes, stands up slowly and leaves the space.

VideoBrasil, São Paulo, 2005 (first performed at Hebbel Theater, Berlin, 2000). Photo: Isabel Matthaues

*facing page, bottom Sweet Dreams Sweet (2013):* Performers in white outfits arrive in pairs, walk, sit and lie down in the performance area. They dip their feet into liquid that dyes their stockings blue. Over two hours, 28 female performers gradually occupy the performance area.

Jakarta Biennale, 2013.  
Photo: Sayekti Lawu

*overleaf, left I Love You (2007):* For between three and six hours, the artist moves around an entirely red performance area holding onto a sheet of glass (90 × 200 × 1 cm). She repeats the phrase 'I love you'. She describes this as a mantra that, 'depending on the recipients, the meaning of the phrase becomes blurred. Language is expressed, but it is sometimes not representative of what we think. Our capability of using language is limited.'

Ebent07 Festival, Barcelona, 2007.  
Photo: Angel Vila

“Performance is not an individual experience, it’s a shared collective experience. A performance should be able to be perceived from many perspectives. I think that’s why it will always be interesting”

like that, but not now. Now we have a totally different environment with the addition of the digital world in visual art, where everything looks super-high-pixel and hyperreal. I’m not scared of this, but we need more energy that is direct. I think there is a space for the artist and the audience to experience something that is revealed at that time and in that space, impressions that are left in the memory of the audience and the performer themselves that are very subtle and very specific. It’s not like a self-healing experience or anything. I hate that – performance of self-healing is not my thing.

AR *Never?*

MS *Never. Maybe the only time was for The Promise performance [2002, Landesvertretungshaus Niedersachsen, Berlin], when I was thinking about the subject of femininity and of my mother, who suffered from cancer – but then I thought, many people suffer from cancer too. I try not to present my private stories in my performances. I let go of my personal background. Because in many cases, these lead to works that are whiny: ‘I’m a suffering female, so I scream, and I want to fight for my rights, so I open my shirt and go naked’. I’m a bit worried about this method. Of course, people can express these sentiments in whatever way they like, but it’s just not my way.*

AR *A lot of your work concerns gender and the role of women. Do you feel like you have to moderate that for a local audience?*

MS *Yes. I think I need to learn more about the history of gender relations in our society. For example, I often fought with my late father, criticising him as a ‘soft Javanese’, for being macho, or a patriarch – this kind of thing. And he would say, ‘Why do you accuse me of such things? I have not learned from my parents how to be a man, or how to differently respect women. I thought I already respected women, but that is still wrong today.’*

Then I realised, of course, his environment was different, his background was traditional Javanese, and they treat and respect women differently. It cannot be an immediate change. And that little example relates to how I see things in terms of what is private or self-healing, and performance. Performance is not an individual experience, it’s a shared collective experience. A performance should be able to be perceived from many perspectives. I think that’s why it will always be interesting.

*Suryodarmo has performed extensively over the past three decades in galleries, institutions and festivals, including the 50th Venice Biennale (2003), Manifesta 7 (2008) and*

*exhibitions within the Singapore Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra; the exhibition at Museum MACAN is her first institutional solo exhibition.*

AR *You use traditional forms and engage with tradition in your work. Is that to change them or to respect them?*

MS *For me, tradition has the potential for transformation. Tradition has a quality of change and exchange. To see tradition as a solid form is not correct. Institutions love to make traditions fixed things. But take Javanese dance: many of the traditional Javanese dances have no author. There are specific dances that are created for the palace, mostly by the king. But most of the art is created anonymously. There’s no original creator because the dances also change over time.*

I love the idea of how traditions are maintained, but also how traditions can change. Traditional knowledge is so rich. I’m slowly realising how rich, for example, Javanese mysticism is.

AR *Were you interested in that connection, and that grounding within Javanese culture, when you decided to go to Europe?*

MS *My dad had a big influence on me. He was an artist who developed his own method of dance and movement. He didn’t just create dance for the stage, but dance for the people. He would do different kinds of ritual performances, but the way he did it is, of course, very different to what I do now, because he was self-taught. He really learned from nature and he studied philosophy. It’s a totally different approach, but the idea of connecting us with the ground, with reality, with nature, is very inspiring to me. I think to get closer to the human, our human reality, we also need to learn from nature. What I know from Java is that there’s a lot of local knowledge of nature. And not just nature in the sense of the environmental context, but also knowledge of the human body, of health, death, birth, traditional medicine and even cooking. A lot of those knowledge systems are being lost, because we’re not using them anymore.*

AR *Is it difficult, given what you’ve described as the contemporary reality of Solo, to bring some of the contemporary performance techniques that you developed in Europe to your hometown?*

MS *No, because I never claim the elements of traditions per se. For example, I did some research in Makassar, South Sulawesi, where I met a fifth gender (bissu) shaman in the Bugis tradition. Bissu are intersex people; a documentary about it will also be presented in the exhi-*









bition. I was curious about the shamanistic practice, but I was mainly there to understand the meaning of emptiness as a state of mind. There's a lot of exposure now on gender identity, but while I was researching, the gender context came to me later, when I connected it with the Bugis' spiritual concept of emptiness. The shaman, who is considered the conduit between the people and a higher spirit, is a person who is totally free of gender identity. I still cannot describe this shaman, who I really, really adored. We became friends. They showed everything to me, they were very generous. They passed away already in 2011. There was a special connection, and I try to be careful not to expose or exploit that culture.

I've been practising Javanese meditation since I was teenager, but for me, I have some natural connection with the Bugis of South Sulawesi. I don't understand the language, and I don't want to exoticise the culture. I don't buy into exotic or cultural tourism. It's a method of ethics, and that matters to me, as that culture is part of Indonesia.

AR *Would you feel the same way, or the same sense of responsibility, about something that was not part of Indonesia, like Butoh dance or these other cultural forms?*

MS Butoh is often misunderstood. Butoh is very connected with its Japanese roots, but as a form it's also influenced by Mary Wigman, the German expressionist dancer and choreographer. The spirit of Butoh can go anywhere. It can go in any form, actually, because the spirit of Butoh is not just 'the dance of darkness', it means *grufti* [German slang for gothic] dance. It's the darkness of Japanese tradition – Zen Buddhism. It's about the darkness before we know something.

Butoh is a means of reaching a kind of enlightenment. Enlightenment not in terms of nirvana but of understanding. There are different understandings about Butoh as a form of dance and Butoh as a bodily performance. The complexity of Butoh is that there are so many theories that are made up by Western historians or researchers. But if you

go to different masters of Butoh, they explain Butoh totally differently.

Butoh was a movement from Asia after the Second World War that consciously tried to resist both tradition and Western influence. It's a fluid way of seeking a new form, and that's also present in performance art. I think Butoh is very strong, but I don't believe that Butoh belongs to Japan only. Butoh should be open to everyone, because it has already spread since the 1950s. You cannot stop the flow.

AR *You said you're inspired by the history of art in Europe and the West as well as from Asia. Do you think that people in Indonesia see you as more of a Western artist?*

MS Yes, probably. They probably still see me as very Western-influenced, but I have had a Western education. I had seven years studying in Germany. I cannot avoid the influence of the West, and for me it doesn't matter, because since my early practice during the late 1990s, I've tried to avoid the politics of representation. Because there are so many different positions to take: shall we talk about how the United Nations divided us after the Second World War? How about the Eastern bloc and Western bloc? What is the meaning of being part of the Third World countries?

I was aware early enough, maybe because I studied international politics before. I was aware of where I put myself as Melati Suryodarmo, 'Indonesian artist'. And that if I am an 'Indonesian artist', do I have to represent the Indonesian identity in terms of culture and art? And what does it mean to be a 'representative' of Indonesian culture and art in the international art world? It's so much pressure. Art needs freedom. And if the world is not free, then freedom begins in your work and your thinking. Freedom begins in the mind, not from the determination of what kind of identity is attached to my skin. **ara**

*Why Let the Chicken Run? features 12 selected performances by Melati Suryodarmo and is on show at Museum MACAN, Jakarta, through 31 May*

*preceding pages, right The Black Ball (2005):*

Inspired by Egon Schiele's *Organic Movement of Chair and Jug* (1912), a drawing in which a chair and jug are captured midfall, Suryodarmo sits on a chair attached two-and-a-half metres up a wall. Below the chair is a shelf covered with AstroTurf, designed by Marina Abramović. For eight to ten hours a day, for four days, the artist sits on the chair holding a black rubber ball. She says, 'I am compiling all the silent moments I have ever experienced in my life, especially those when I felt fear or loss. I approach the closest path, the most sensitive line, between my body and the undiscovered landscape of my psychological experiences. I am listening to my silence, focusing on its darkness.'

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, 2005.  
Photo: Oliver Blomeier

*facing page, top Why let the chicken run? (2001):* Asked by curator Jens Hoffmann to reflect on the history of performance

art, Suryodarmo drew from Ana Mendieta's filmed performance *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)* (1972), in which Mendieta shakes the blood from a decapitated white chicken onto her naked body. Instead Suryodarmo, wearing heels and a black dress, sets a black rooster loose in the gallery, and gives chase.

kw Institute, Berlin, 2001.  
Photo: Roland Runge

*facing page, bottom  
An Afternoon with Powang  
Matoa Haji Saidi (still), 2020*

*all images* Courtesy the artist

“To see tradition as a solid form is not correct. Institutions love to make traditions fixed things. But take Javanese dance: many of the traditional Javanese dances have no author. There's no original creator because the dances also change over time”