

Ecological Critique through Ritual and Community Art: Ecofeminist Perspective in 'Memory of Nature' by Arahmaiani

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Abstract

The role of female artists in voicing ecological issues is crucial. This study aims to analyze how "Memory of Nature" articulates ecological critique through the body, ritual, and community collaboration. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach to deeply examine the communities and places involved in this work. The results show that Arahmaiani's "Memory of Nature" is not only symbolic but also operative in building collective ecological awareness. Arahmaiani's work not only highlights the unfair relationship between humans and nature but also emphasizes the role of women as guardians of ecological cycles.

Keywords: Ecological-criticism, installation-art, ecofeminism.

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1.0 Introduction

Issues of environmental degradation, climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources have become central concerns in contemporary cultural discourse, serving as root causes of the global ecological crisis. In this context, art is no longer merely an aesthetic representation; it functions as a medium of social and ecological critique, with the capacity to awaken collective public consciousness. One Indonesian artist who consistently addresses these issues is Arahmaiani, through *Memory of Nature* (2013–present), an ongoing installation-performance artwork that reflects the spiritual and ecological relationship between humans, nature, and local communities. This work was first presented in the context of a global environmental exhibition and has since evolved into various participatory forms across multiple locations, including Tibet, Ladakh (India), and Indonesia.

Banghua Sun (2025) states that modern community art positions the audience as the main actors in the creative process, minimising the dominance of the artist and prioritising participants' choices. In doing so, it expands the meaning of participation and collective aesthetic experience within contemporary art. That contemporary ecological art can awaken collective consciousness by creating participatory spaces that foster solidarity and new imaginaries (Legino et al., 2024). *Memory of Nature* centres on environmental degradation because of development that exploits natural resources. By using the body as a medium and positioning the community as an active subject, Arahmaiani invites us to recall the "memory of nature" that has long been suppressed by modernisation through industrial practices and capitalism. **Memory of Nature** is not merely an aesthetic creation; it is also an act of resistance and ecological

healing. This perspective aligns with ecofeminist thought, which views the oppression of nature as inherently linked to the oppression of women. "The violation of women and the violation of nature are intimately connected, rooted in the same patriarchal logic of domination and control" (Shiva, 1989). Val Plumwood further asserts that the modern dualistic system has discredited forms of knowledge rooted in embodiment, relationality, and affect, dimensions traditionally associated with the experiences of women and nature (Plumwood, 1993; Wardoyo et al., 2024).

This study aims to understand how Arahmaiani's artistic practice articulates ecological resistance that is both spiritual and communal. An ecofeminist approach serves as the theoretical foundation for this research, as it effectively elucidates the interconnectedness between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. The ecofeminist perspective demonstrates the value of interpreting artworks not merely as visual objects but as living, contextual, and transformational practices. In this regard, Arahmaiani's work can be read as a form of participatory art that opens up spaces for dialogue, both among humans and between humans and nature. Therefore, the outcomes of this study are expected to contribute to the advancement of interdisciplinary knowledge. Figure 1 illustrates Arahmaiani's creative process in producing the work *Memory of Nature*, where the body and rituals rooted in spirituality and local wisdom intersect with contemporary art practices, woven together contemplatively and brought to life through community participation.

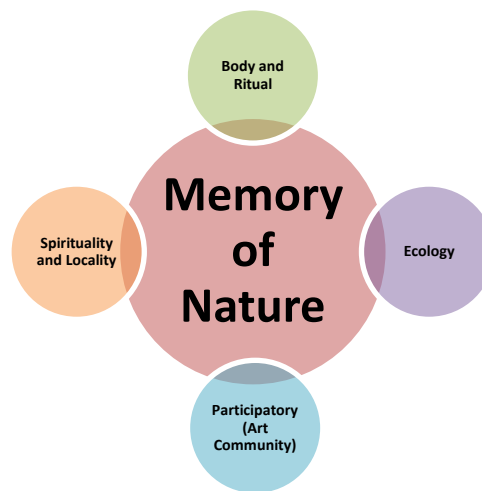


Fig. 1: Creative process of memory of nature by Arahmaiani.
(Source: Arinta Agustina, 2025)

2.0 Literature Review

Studies on Arahmaiani's works have been quite extensive, particularly in the contexts of Eastern spirituality (Islam and Buddhism), hybrid culture, feminism, and the politics of the body. For instance, an article by Adril Husni (2021) published in the *Ikonik* journal discusses Arahmaiani's calligraphy painting *Lingga Yoni* through the lens of critical discourse. Similarly, Taufan Hidayatullah (2011) examines her work within the framework of gender discourse in an article published in *Visualita*. These studies indicate that academic attention toward Arahmaiani tends to situate her artistic practice within the realms of symbolism, identity, and bodily representation. Meanwhile, current developments in ecofeminist scholarship demonstrate an expansion in meaning and context, particularly in response to the global climate crisis and increasingly complex social inequalities. Rosyidah et al. (2024) emphasise how women's collectives treat art as eco-artivism, a form of social action that deconstructs hierarchical relationships between humans, women, and nature. Purbandani and Mahaswa (2022) further assert that contemporary ecofeminism is no longer understood merely as a critique of patriarchy, but also as an ethical framework and praxis for building just and sustainable ecological relations.

Nevertheless, in line with the previously outlined research gap, these studies have not specifically addressed *Memory of Nature* as a community- and environment-based installation-performance work that functions as a medium of ecological critique from an ecofeminist perspective. Earlier research has largely positioned Arahmaiani's work as an object of representational analysis, while the dimensions of ritual, community participation, the use of living natural materials, and non-hierarchical human nature relations within *Memory of Nature* remain relatively underexplored. Accordingly, there is an academic need to examine this work as an ecological art practice that is not merely symbolic, but also operates as a contextual and participatory space of ecofeminist critique.

This study employs an ecofeminist perspective to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Arahmaiani's *Memory of Nature*. Ecofeminism aligns with the conceptual framework proposed by Arahmaiani for repositioning women within their surrounding cosmos, while simultaneously creating a reflective space that connects the spirituality embedded in local communities with the need to restore the Earth in the face of dominant narratives of modernity. Ecofeminism affirms that women possess ecological knowledge that is often marginalised by patriarchal and capitalist systems (Shiva, 1988; Merchant, 1990). It also emphasises the importance of women's roles in responding to environmental crises. *Memory of Nature* further highlights women as spiritual bridges between humans and nature by involving local communities directly in the artistic process, forming what Florida (1995) refers to as a prophetic artistic intervention rooted in lived cultural memory.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method with an ecofeminist approach through an exploratory and interpretive case study, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the social, cultural, and ecological contexts within “Memory of Nature” by Arahmaiani. This approach enables the exploration of symbolic and performative meanings embedded in the artwork, grounded in bodily experience, community engagement, and human-nature relationships. Makateng and Mokala (2025) explain that qualitative methodology focuses on understanding meaning, experience, and context rather than statistical measurement. Data collection was carried out through several stages. First, a literature review was conducted, including the examination of archival materials, exhibition catalogues, curatorial articles, and art essays discussing Arahmaiani’s works as well as discourses on ecological art and contemporary ecofeminism. Second, visual documentation analysis was undertaken, consisting of photographs and videos of the Memory of Nature exhibition or performances, which were used to observe visual aspects, materiality, spatial arrangements, and forms of community participation within the work. Third, this study draws on secondary interviews previously conducted by media outlets, curators, or art researchers with Arahmaiani to capture the artist’s narrative perspectives on the ideas, processes, and objectives of the work.

The collected data were then curated and analysed using an interpretative critical method. This analysis focuses on reading symbols, ritual practices, and the social-ecological relations presented in Memory of Nature, relating them to ecofeminist theory and community-based art discourse. The results of the analysis are subsequently presented in a narrative description, emphasising the interconnection among social, cultural, and ecological contexts as a unified field of meaning. Through this methodology, the study aims to understand Memory of Nature as an artistic practice that not only represents ecological issues but also functions as a medium of ecofeminist critique rooted in embodied experience, community engagement, and reciprocal relations between humans and nature. Figure 2 illustrates the methodological framework employed in this study.

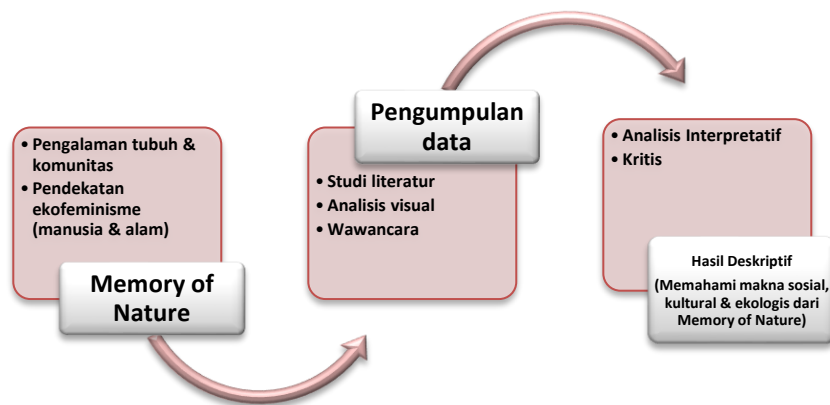


Fig. 2. Research methodology process in the work Memory of Nature

4.0 Findings

This study finds that Memory of Nature by Arahmaiani functions as a medium of ecofeminist-based ecological critique, manifested through ritual practices, community engagement, and reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. The work operates not merely as an installation or performance, but as a space of social praxis that collectively activates ecological awareness. First, Memory of Nature presents ritual as an artistic strategy that connects embodied human experience with natural cycles. Activities such as planting, watering, and caring for seedlings function both as symbolic actions and as ecological practices, affirming an ethical relationship between humans and the environment. These practices demonstrate how the body becomes a medium of ecological knowledge, aligning with ecofeminist principles that reject the separation of body, nature, and culture. Second, this study shows that the work blurs the boundary between artist and audience through direct community participation. This collective involvement shifts the audience’s position from passive observers to active subjects in the production of meaning. In this way, Memory of Nature operates as a form of community-based art that challenges individualistic and hierarchical models of modern art. Third, Memory of Nature offers a critique of the anthropocentric and patriarchal paradigms that underpin the ecological crisis. Through an ecofeminist approach, the work highlights the interconnectedness between the exploitation of nature and structures of social domination, while proposing more egalitarian and sustainable models of human-environment relations. In Memory of Nature, the artistic experience serves as experiential ecological learning. Ecological values are not conveyed didactically, but are cultivated through participation, affect, and collective experience. Overall, the findings of this study affirm that Memory of Nature not only represents ecological issues, but also operates art as a space of cultural and ecological resistance, contributing to the development of contemporary art discourse grounded in ecofeminism and sustainable artistic practices.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 The Body and Nature as a Medium of Ecological Resistance

This installation-performance work was inspired by Arahmaiani's collaborative practices with Buddhist monks in Tibet, incorporating symbolic elements such as soil, water, seeds, textiles, and others arranged in the form of a mandala, drawing visual and philosophical references from the Borobudur temple. The mandala, as a representation of the universe, symbolises interconnection and harmonious life. For Arahmaiani, it is essential to recognise humans as an integral part of nature and to reject the view that sees nature as a mere object. These symbolic elements are activated through ritual performances carried out by Arahmaiani alongside members of the local community. The rituals may involve meditation, mantra recitations, chanting, or other spiritual practices aimed at restoring collective ecological awareness.

Figures 3 and 4 depict Mandala symbols created using seeds arranged on a soil surface, placed within a large wooden box-shaped container. Each side of the box features slight protrusions that symbolise the four cardinal directions. After several days, the seeds scattered on the moist soil begin to sprout and eventually grow into plants. These seeds serve as a symbolic representation of the Earth's hope for healing itself from the wounds inflicted by exploitation.



Fig. 3: Mandala shape symbolizes philosophy and science.
(Source: ISA Art Gallery Documentation)



Fig. 4: Seeds sown on the surface of the soil, left to grow into sprouts.
(Source: ISA Art Gallery documentation)

In *Memory of Nature*, Arahmaiani's body becomes the primary medium through which ecological suffering is articulated. The performance begins with simple gestures: scattering soil, drawing a mandala on the ground, and chanting spiritual mantras that call for the protection of the Earth. The artist's body functions as a ritual body, rather than an entertainment body, carrying historical, spiritual, and ecological burdens. According to Tenti (2025), in contemporary performance art, the body and affective relations are not merely representational but constitute integral elements of performative action that generate new realities, including new ways of understanding the relationships between humans, the body, and the environment through non-representational artistic practices. This implies that the body directly contributes to the formation of aesthetic and political meaning in contemporary art. In this context, the performer's body is not simply a representation of a character, but becomes an existential field in which social meaning and identity are formed. Movement, breath, rhythm, and bodily structure create performative experiences that resist the dominance of digital visibility and produce new meanings beyond conventional narratives (Basri et al., 2025). Through a body that merges with natural elements (water, earth, and fire), Arahmaiani conveys a critique of environmental destruction caused by the exploitation of natural resources, particularly in areas affected by extractive mining practices and deforestation.

Figure 5 illustrates how Arahmaiani's performative body becomes an instrument for conveying messages. Carrying a green flag emblazoned with a leaf symbol, she runs around the Mandala box while chanting mantras or prayers, transforming the act into a medium that reminds us of the intrinsic relationship between humans and the environment. The artist's body functions as an agent of change, symbolising the interconnectedness between care and environmental stewardship.



Fig. 5: Memory of Nature, at ISA Art Gallery, Singapore, 2013.
(Source: Documentation of ISA Art Gallery)

In *Memory of Nature*, the body and nature serve as central media that are spiritual, political, and collective in nature. The female body, which for centuries has been reduced within patriarchal structures to a passive and naturalised entity, was rearticulated by Arahmaiani as a transformative agent that reawakens sacred connections with the Earth. Griniuk (2024) argues that performance art establishes a creative relationship among the human body, tools, and the environment that transcends the traditional view of the body as a separate entity, thereby affirming mutually influential intercorporeal relations. Within the concept of the transcorporeal, as articulated by Wist (2024), artists create experiential spaces that illustrate the interconnectedness of the human body with environmental elements, producing spaces in which the boundaries between humans and the environment blur and become mutually permeable.

The interplay between bodily movement and natural elements in this work can also be interpreted as a form of ecological healing ritual. Through performances that incorporate meditation, sacred chanting, and slow, contemplative gestures, Arahmaiani constructs an affective space that invites both spectators and participants to re-experience their emotional connection to the Earth. Respati and Jennifer (2024) argue that contemporary art, within the context of modern and consumerist societies, holds the potential to rearticulate the spiritual dimension of aesthetic experience by disengaging perception from the dominance of materialistic logic and opening space for deeper, more contemplative, and more meaningful engagements with nature.

In *Memory of Nature*, the body and nature are not merely present as symbols but emerge as primary agents in the process of “re-membering” humanity’s relationship with the Earth. This constitutes a form of resistance against the exploitative logic of global capitalism, which separates humans from nature, and against patriarchal systems that enforce dualisms between the body and spirituality. By positioning her body as a bridge between humans and the environment, Arahmaiani proposes an aesthetic approach that engages the affective and spiritual realms while also creating space for collective ecological awareness. Art, in this context, becomes an environmental act, one that not only voices critique but also activates resistance through embodied, emotional, and transformative experience. The symbolic use of soil and water holds powerful spiritual and ecological significance, especially within the cosmology of Nusantara, where the Earth is revered as the “Mother”. “If women and the Earth are both being exploited, then we must return them to their sacred position,” Arahmaiani (in Stange, 2017).

5.2 Community as Subject, Not Object

One of the most significant aspects of *Memory of Nature* is the active involvement of the community as subjects of creation and transformation, rather than mere objects of representation. In this work, Arahmaiani does not act solely as the artist who designs and directs the process but rather as a facilitator who opens space for collaboration with local communities. Unlike many other performance art practices, the involvement of the community in ‘*Memory of Nature*’ entails the co-creation of rituals with residents, such as those in the Mount Merapi area of Yogyakarta, Ladakh (India), and Tibet. The community is invited not merely as spectators or providers of performance space, but as active participants who help shape the form, content, and values of the ritual. This practice shifts the paradigm of art from representational to participatory, where local knowledge and lived experience are not only respected but also become the very foundation of the artistic narrative. This approach aligns with Grant Kester’s theory of dialogical aesthetics, where the relationship between artist and community and the value of creative capacity emerge from a collaborative process. *Memory of Nature* is a work formed through a dialogical process between artist, community, and the environment, thus producing aesthetic and ethical meaning collectively (Kester, 2023).

In Arahmaiani’s work, the community is not a tool or decorative element but rather an ecological agent that revitalises local knowledge, nature-based spirituality, and non-confrontational forms of resistance through practices such as collective meditation and chanting. In *Memory of Nature*, Arahmaiani creates a space where the community engages as co-creators who, through embodied experience and ecological actions, actively produce artistic and ethical meaning. This affirms that the work operates as a social practice that shifts art from the realm of representation toward collective praxis, in which community experience becomes a source of ecological knowledge and reflection. Participatory art encourages genuine public engagement, strengthens community cohesion, and promotes local identity, positioning the community not merely as an audience but as actors in artistic processes that influence the community’s

social and cultural development (Ke, 2025). Thus, it becomes evident that collaboration and co-creation between the artist and the community in Memory of Nature are directly intertwined within both the creative and ecological processes.

Furthermore, community engagement in Memory of Nature also carries an ecofeminist dimension, as it emphasizes values of care, sustainability, and reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. The community is not treated as an object of artistic intervention, but as an agent with historical, cultural, and ecological relationships to the site in which the work takes place. In this context, simple actions such as caring for plants become practices that are simultaneously symbolic and political, challenging exploitative logics toward both nature and human beings. By positioning the community as subjects, Memory of Nature constructs a participatory space that enables experiential ecological learning and the formation of collective awareness. The work demonstrates that contemporary art can function as a medium of dialogue and social transformation, in which communities are not merely “included” but are recognized as integral to the creative process and as holders of meaning over the artistic experience itself. This positioning reinforces Memory of Nature as an ethical, inclusive, and transformative ecological art practice. Such an approach shifts the traditional position of communities from passive or repressed objects to agents of change who possess voice, agency, and contributions to both the production and interpretation of the artwork.

Figure 6 shows how Memory of Nature encourages audience engagement as ecological agents who revive local spirituality through their knowledge of nature. The audience's role is not that of passive spectators, but rather that of relatively active and involved participants. The space created within Memory of Nature becomes a shared place of healing, not only for the natural environment but also for mending social relationships.



Fig. 6: Memory of Nature artwork at the Nature of Botanical Gardens exhibition by Farmer Framed, on May 29, 2020, in Amsterdam.
(Source: Eva Broekema / Farmer Framed)

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate how audiences actively participate in “Memory of Nature”, becoming a vital part of bringing the artwork's messages to life. This engagement encourages a shared, spiritual experience that transcends mere sight or thought. The audience directly connects with natural elements and the processes of ecological healing.



Fig. 7: The audience is invited to play an active role in forming the Mandala as a symbol of natural harmony.
(Source: Eva Broekema / Farmer Framed)



Fig. 8: During the exhibition, visitors can observe the development of seeds growing on soil media.
(Source: Eva Broekema / Framer Framed)

5.3 Women and Nature as Interconnected Subjects

Ecofeminism asserts a historical connection between the exploitation of nature and the subordination of women. As Chinsya (2024) shows, ecofeminism critiques patriarchal domination that subordinates women and nature, while simultaneously highlighting women as agents of change in ecological conservation. Contemporary ecofeminist critique emphasises that patriarchal capitalist logic constructs dominant relationships that separate humans from nature and position the body, particularly the female body, as an entity that can be controlled, exploited, and valued according to productivity. In this work, Arahmaiani consciously challenges this logic by shifting art from the realm of commodified objects toward a living, relational, and care-based collective experience grounded in ecological practice. For Arahmaiani, women embody local knowledge, empathy, and practices of sustainability, in which embodied experience and community engagement become the foundation of collective ecological meaning.

The visual structure of *Memory of Nature* is deeply influenced by the form of the mandala, a spiritual geometric pattern often found in Buddhism and Javanese cosmology. Mandalas are created using coloured soil, sand, seeds, or even fragments of stone. Their creation is a slow, deliberate process, performed with the body near the earth, symbolising humility and spiritual connection to the land. In this context, the concept of "Memory of Nature" can be read as a reversal of patriarchal narratives about women and nature, as critiqued by Shiva (1989), who underscores the importance of alternative cosmologies based on reverence for life and ecological diversity. "Ecofeminism affirms the interdependence of all living beings and emphasises mutual care, empathy, and reciprocity as political values" (Shiva, 1989, p. 42).

Memory of Nature is not merely an installation or an aesthetic performance; it activates the concept of "memory of nature" as a living phenomenon, a collective experience, and an evolving form of ecological consciousness. Here, memory of nature is not understood solely as human recollection of the environment, but as a record of embodied experience, ritual, and socio-ecological relations that emerge when communities engage directly in practices of planting, caring, and interacting with natural materials. These practices shape not only aesthetic meaning but also the reconstruction of more caring ways of living with nature through shared, transformational experiences. Within the context of contemporary ecofeminism, the memory of nature resonates with the idea that ecological experience is not confined to the rational domain but is integrated with embodied, spiritual, and social experiences, making an important contribution to how we understand human–nature relations. Art grounded in ecological and feminist values seeks to position women and nature as active subjects rather than passive objects within both social and artistic relations (Rosyidah et al., 2024). This relational framework reflects the inseparability of ecological experience and women's lived experience, which cannot be detached from cultural structures and embodied subjectivity within artistic action.

In *Memory of Nature*, Arahmaiani does not merely present the female body as a representation of the Earth in pain, exploited, wounded, and marginalised, but also as a regenerative force endowed with spirituality and resistance. Her performative gestures, such as scattering seeds, planting, meditating, or arranging mandala symbols from natural elements, are not merely aesthetic rituals. They serve as declarations that the female body and the Earth are interconnected sources of life that sustain one another and must be collectively healed. This relationship lies at the heart of the ecofeminist approach, which critically challenges patriarchal dualisms between culture and nature, reason and emotion, and male and female that have historically justified the domination of both women and nature in the context of modernity. This concept aligns closely with Vandana Shiva's (1989) assertion that women hold both epistemological and ontological ties to the natural world.

In conveying her ecological critique, Arahmaiani does not emphasize her ego as an artist; instead, she immerses herself in the social and spiritual processes taking place within the community. She seeks to create a collective space where spirituality, local memory, and ecological awareness can be developed together through participatory and sustainable practices. This approach emphasizes that *Memory of Nature* is not merely an individual expression, but rather the result of a dialogical and relational process that values local knowledge and the community's lived experiences as primary sources of meaning.

Through this approach, *Memory of Nature* transcends the boundaries of conventional performance art. It becomes a collective ecological rite that repositions the community as an agent of change. In this work, Arahmaiani not only voices a critique but also offers an alternative imagination of a more egalitarian and sacred relationship between humans and the natural world. Art becomes a means of restoring not only the human-nature connection but also interhuman relationships within a community built on mutual support, deep

listening, and collective action. This perspective aligns with the principles of communitarian ecofeminism, which emphasises relational values, equity, and community-based sustainability (Gaard, 1993). Thus, Memory of Nature presents an alternative narrative: women and nature are not merely victims of patriarchal and capitalist systems but rather powerful forces interconnected in spiritual, social, and ecological networks, working to reconstruct a world that is more sustainable, ethical, and just.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that 'Memory of Nature' by Arahmaiani is not merely a work of visual aesthetics but a profound articulation of social and ecological critique. By integrating the body, natural elements, and ritual practices with local communities, Arahmaiani constructs a performative space that voices ecological and spiritual trauma resulting from environmental degradation. Through the lens of ecofeminism, the work can be read as a form of resistance against the capitalist-patriarchal system that exploits both nature and women. In this work, the female body is not depicted as a passive object but as an active subject that expresses the sacred relationship between humans and the Earth. Furthermore, the active participation of the community reinforces the collective message that ecological healing is only possible through collaborative efforts grounded in spirituality, ethics, and justice.

Curators and art institutions should begin to create space for works that integrate ecological practice, local spirituality, and community participation, such as those developed by Arahmaiani. This form of ritual and community based art offers a relevant alternative for addressing the challenges faced by contemporary art in the context of the climate crisis. Ecological art studies in Indonesia must be further developed through interdisciplinary approaches, including ecofeminist perspectives, relational theory, and embodied studies.

This study is limited to a single case study; therefore, its findings cannot be generalised. In addition, limited access to the field led to reliance on secondary data without direct involvement of community participants. Future research is recommended to adopt ethnographic or comparative approaches in order to examine the long-term impacts of ecological art practices on changes in environmental awareness and behaviour.

Acknowledgments

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study contributes to the courses Contemporary Art and Art Curatorship in the Art Management Program, Faculty of Fine Arts and Design, Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta, as a reflective teaching resource that presents contemporary art and curatorial practice as interdisciplinary, process-oriented, participatory, and contextual practices. Through an examination of Arahmaiani's Memory of Nature, students are encouraged to understand that contemporary art does not merely exist as an aesthetic object, but as a space of social and ecological praxis involving the body, community, and human nature relations. The use of an ecofeminist perspective in this paper also enriches the theoretical framework of learning by offering a critical reading of ecological, gender, and power issues, while opening space for discussion on the position of Indonesian contemporary art within global discourse. Accordingly, this paper can serve as a reflective learning medium that encourages students to think critically, contextually, and transformatively in understanding contemporary art practices.

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