Visions of the future: imagining Islamic modernities in Indonesian Islamic-themed post-Suharto popular and visual culture

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Chapter 6

Unearthing the past and re-imagining the present: Contemporary art and Muslim politics in a post-9/11 world
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Contemporary art and Muslim politics in a post-9/11 world

Popular and academic discourses have often constructed Islamic communities as hostile to visual culture. Though admired for their traditions of verbal imagery, Muslim communities are frequently depicted as aniconic (avoiding images), iconophobic (afraid of images), and iconoclastic (destroying or disapproving images), particularly when it concerns pictures of living things (George 2010: 10). In the late twentieth century, art historian Oleg Grabar did much to draw attention to Islamic art and aesthetics (Grabar 1987). But, he also admitted that “Islamic culture finds its means of self-representation in hearing and acting rather than in seeing” (Grabar 1987: 3), a view that has been echoed by leading observers of Islamic art Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom (cf. Blair and Bloom 2003: 153; George 2009: 591).

Particularly after 9/11, the widely reported outcry over the images of Prophet Muhammad in the Danish cartoons, the petition against Wikipedia after an article about Muhammad was published that included portrayals of the Prophet, and the Taliban’s ban on the depiction of living things in public have further reinforced the idea that ‘Islamic culture’, wherever found, is hostile towards image-making and visual culture (George 2009: 591).

However, as Finbarr Barry Flood (2002) has rightly pointed out, there is no “timeless theology of images in the Islamic world, but instead a rich tradition of aesthetic appreciation, awe, fascination, [and] revulsion” (Flood 2002: 650, cited in George 2010: 11). Muslims continuously rethink and rework their visual culture in response to the shifting currents of history, culture, (geo)politics, and social life, while negotiating their various affiliations to ethnicity, class, gender, nation and kin (George 2010: 11).

Contemporary Indonesian art shows how visual culture is indeed a site of (Muslim) politics, creativity, contestation and conflict, a site where issues associated with Islam are mobilized to come to terms with the present state of the world. Today in Indonesia both Muslim and non-Muslim artists (such as Titarubi, Arahmaiani and Murti) are embarking on an approach to Islam and art that deviates from the calligraphy and the abstract images that are usually associated with the pairing of Islam and art (Bianpoen 2009). The work of these Indonesian artists typically lacks Islamic signs and figures, favoring a figurative art. Nor does their work praise Islam –
as calligraphy and nonfigurative work often does – but it rather mobilizes (issues related to) Islam to articulate political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the state of the world. And it is often through tactics such as provocation, parody, self-reflexivity, and humor that critique is expressed.

But how are aesthetics in these artworks mobilized as a way of negotiating and contesting political, cultural, and historical circumstances? How are politics and aesthetics (Rancière 2004) intertwined? What kind of critique is articulated and what tactics are employed here? And how might we understand these politics? Is it possible to read these politics of (Islamic) aesthetics as resistance? If so, how is this resistance structured? And how is being critical a part of being modern?

This chapter explores these questions. Through conducting a visual analysis of two art works, I propose that a Benjaminian socio-historical politics underlies the objects’ aesthetic strategies. Through their aesthetics the works evoke fragments from the past to question the construct of the present. The works keenly fragment the past and translate these fragments into images. These visual historical fragments are reassembled within the present to challenge present (dominant) narratives that are antithetical to Muslims. I suggest that these aesthetic strategies form the base of a (Muslim) politics.

In the previous chapters, I have suggested that the possibilities for critical politics – for contesting dominant structures of power – are diminished by a power that seems to have the capacity to absorb and thereby disarm forms of resistance (McNay 2009: 65). The self-help books and the Islamic-themed films under study both invoked a notion of an absolute block or challenge to the workings of power. They provided alternative representations and coined these against images of a secular modernity, against stereotypical New Order representations of gender (chapter 5), against images of aggressive and intolerant Muslims (chapter 5), and against assumedly dangerous printed content (chapter 4). I suggested that the contestatory potential of these representations is thrown into question by the ways they become subject to a governmental logic (cf. Foucault 2008a [1977-1978]). In this chapter, I propose that the contemporary Islamic-themed artworks that I analyze mobilize different strategies. The works do not just provide alternative representations, but they also work to destruct the logic of a dominant present that neutralizes the images that they contest. I propose that this is a more effective way of questioning and contesting dominant structures of power.

While powerful political and popular discourses construct the idea that ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’ are on a cultural collision course, a closer look at Indonesian art presents us a more subtle and complex picture. This observation is not only relevant for the
study of Indonesian art, but should also be seen within a larger context. Most studies that have analyzed Muslim politics and visual culture have focused on the politics of representation to unpack the relations of power that underlie the construction of meaning about Muslims and Islam. Two types of studies can be broadly distinguished here. First, there is a large body of Said-inspired work that examines how Muslims are represented by Western visual culture (see for example Shaheen 2001; Kabir 2006; Saeed 2007). Second, there is a smaller body of work (see for example Khatib 2006; Bangura 2000) that analyzes how Muslims speak for themselves, how they represent themselves. Though often presenting excellent analyses, both sets of studies point at a methodological and theoretical quandary. These studies tend to either operate within a dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’, or they align heterogeneous stories without being able to say much more about them than that they exist. This raises the question how to be critical and how to theorize Muslim politics while evading these traps.

Indonesian Islamic-themed contemporary art provides a useful case to look into these questions. Drawing on the works of Walter Benjamin (1999 [1982]; 1968 [1940]) and Pierre Nora (1996 [1989]), I show that instead of stimulating either a single history of power structures or many histories of this structure’s failure, the politics in Indonesian art allow a different ‘history’. After analyzing the two artworks, I propose that it is a specific relation between politics and aesthetics (Rancière 2004) that in the works gives way to a ‘critical history’. This history opens up new possibilities for the practice of a Muslim politics while also offering a more productive approach to study Muslim politics and resistance.

Contemporary Indonesian art and Islam

Contemporary art constitutes an important part of Indonesia’s visual culture and the art scene is currently more dynamic than it has ever been (Supangkat, Godfrey, Cruickshank 2010). It has however received relatively little scholarly attention (but see: George 2009; 2010, Ingham 2008, Jurriëns 2010; Rath 2005) especially when compared to its Asian counterparts (like China, India, and Japan). The body of work on Indonesian art and Islam is even smaller, as most observers have devoted their attention to Middle Eastern artworks. Kenneth George’s (2010) work on Pirous is an exception. Yet, approaches to Islam and art that differ from calligraphy and nonfigurative work remain underexplored. This paper offers a starting point for the discussion of these interpretations.
These interpretations are part of a global trend that is currently opening doors for a wider spectrum of ‘Islamic art’. In the past few years, artists and curators worldwide have been exploring a fresh interpretation of Islamic themed art that moves away from abstract work. In 2006, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example held a prominent exhibition of artists of Islamic heritage living in the West (Bianpoen 2009). In the exhibited works, themes associated with Islam were subject to political projects and unorthodox experimentation (cf. Cotter 2006). Indonesian adherents of this trend are also increasingly exhibiting their work at a global stage (e.g. New York, Berlin, Sydney, Singapore, Venice) thereby contributing to this renewal of Islamic themed art.

For this study two works have been selected. The first work is a performance artwork by Wilman Syanur titled *Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat* (2009). It depicts a dummy of Obama being driven around in a *becak* while campaigning for world peace. The second work is Arahmaiani’s *11 June 2002* (2003), which depicts a hotel room where Arahmaiani was detained as a ‘possible terrorist threat’ while travelling via Los Angeles to Canada.

What unites these two works is an Islamic theme; they mobilize issues associated with Islam to come to terms with the present state of the world. Specifically, these two works were selected because their politics revolve around the same topic. The two objects negotiate and contest current geopolitics and the volatile position of Indonesia and Muslims in a post-9/11 world. Moreover, the works engage in different politics to formulate their critique. In this way, the objects enable an examination of different strategies and facets of this Muslim criticality.

*Membuat Obama* and the politics of juxtaposition

In ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1968 [1940]), Walter Benjamin rejects the past as a continuum of progress. To explain his alternative vision of the past and progress, Benjamin employs Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus painting (1920) as ‘the angel of history’, a figure that has his back turned to the future. As Benjamin writes: “Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet [...] That which we call progress, is this storm” (Benjamin 1968 [1940]: 257, his emphasis). Benjamin here criticizes Marxist historical materialism, which was concerned with forecasting a revolutionary future. Instead he suggests that historical materialism’s real task should be to look at, and save, the past.
This is important as Benjamin observes that in the present, consciousness exists in a mythic state against which historical knowledge is the only antidote. Benjamin’s aim is to “destroy the mythic immediacy of the present, not by inserting it into a cultural continuum that affirms the present as its culmination, but by discovering that constellation of historical origins which has the power to explode history’s continuum.” (Buck-Morrs 1989: 10) For Benjamin, it is thus dangerous to see the past as a logical narrative that is whole. Instead, we should see the past as fragmented. History picked up certain fragments – that are of interest to those in power – while leaving others behind to be forgotten. For Benjamin, it is these fragments that must be reoriented within the present in order to question its construct. Only in this way does history refrain from the overwhelming ideology of myth (Plate 2005: 15).

In the following analysis, I suggest that among these fragments, amidst the ruins of history, the two artworks seem to be rooting around, looking for useful elements to assemble a new object that shows the pieced-together nature of the present. Each work here has its own way of looking at the rubble, and its own tactics of putting the fragments together. The works take up fragments and reassemble them within the present to question the construct of this present. The ‘ur-history’ i.e. the history of the origins of the present (Benjamin 1999 [1982]: 1045) that is in this way created, unravels unified ideological narratives and forms the base of a Muslim politics.

The first work, Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat (‘the making of Obama and artificial peace’, Figure 1), is a performance artwork made by Wilman Syanur (b. 1973), a sculptor from Bandung who graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Institut Seni Indonesia in Yogyakarta. He is not explicitly framed – by himself or by others – as ‘Muslim’. In 2009, Syanur created Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat for the 10th edition of the Jogja Biennale (Dec 11, 2009 - Jan. 10, 2010), which was titled ‘Jogja Jamming, Visual Arts Archive Movement’. The curatorial concept of ‘jamming’ stimulated the two hundred participating artists to literally jam, crowd and occupy Yogyakarta’s city streets with their artworks. In addition to the Biennale’s four main venues (Taman Budaya Yogyakarta; Jogja National Museum; Sangkrit Art Space; Bank Indonesia Yogyakarta) works were exhibited on two hundred public-space locations, including Jalan Malioboro, Jalan Ahmad Yani, Jalan Panembahan Senopati, Jalan Kusumanegara, and Jalan KHA Dahlan (The Jakarta Post, 14.12.09). In this way the event thus invited not only the Biennale audience (often middle class people and students), but also other city residents to see and enjoy the artworks. Syanur’s
artwork was one of the Biennale Art Awards winners and was later that year (Jun. 17-27, 2010) also exhibited at the National Gallery in Jakarta.

Figure 1: *Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat* (2009), fiberglass and painted becak, Jogja Biennale (Dec 11, 2009 – Jan. 10, 2010)

Figure 2: Syanur driving the becak through the streets of Yogyakarta
Figure 3: Close up of the Obama dummy

*Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat* (Figure 1) shows president Barack Obama sitting in a becak (pedicab). Fitting with the jamming theme of the biennale, Syanur drives the becak through the streets of Yogyakarta (Figure 2). During Obama’s tour around town, the work’s aesthetic construction was modified. As I suggest below, the artwork practices a Benjaminian politics at two moments: first at the moment we witness the initial aesthetic construction of the artwork and then at the moment that these aesthetics are set into motion and the aesthetic construction changes.

When first looking closely at the artwork’s (initial) aesthetic construction (Figure 1-3), we see that the work takes up two fragments from the past. By placing Obama in a becak, a symbolic Indonesian vehicle, the artwork first takes up a fragment from the president’s own past. Obama spent four years of his childhood (1967-1971) living in Menteng, a neighbourhood of Jakarta. The work also invokes Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Attached to the front of the vehicle are two American flags that make clear that although Obama is sitting in a becak, he still represents the United States. The dummy wears the president’s characteristic smile as he makes a peace sign (Figure 3). Positioned on the left side of the vehicle is a blue collecting box that contains banknotes, while on the front a sign is attached that reads ‘campaign for peace’. It thus becomes clear that the president is here campaigning for peace. On the becak’s side panel (Figure 1), the words ‘yes u can’ are painted
referring to Obama’s famous ‘yes we can’ slogan. By substituting ‘we’ for ‘u’, the artwork points out that it is not the collective, but Obama himself who can establish world peace, a point made stronger by the expressions painted above: ‘Save Iraq’, ‘Save Gaza Strip’, ‘Viva Afghanistan’, ‘Viva Palestine’. These expressions also refer to Obama’s 2008 campaign, when he toured Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, and the West Bank. During this trip, Obama met with international leaders to talk about his plans and solutions for the region, while the world could witness a spectacle of international peace-making.

It seems as if Obama is here successfully campaigning for world peace, he is driven around town – and returning to Indonesia – as a celebrated man. His confident smile and comfortable posture in the becak underscore this impression. But the images are also ambiguous. The president’s smile comes to seem treacherous and artificial when looking closer at the side panels of the becak. The background to the slogans features a landscape with a smoking volcano (Figure 1), which seems to refer to the ongoing military conflicts and the unstable situation in the Muslim countries that are mentioned in the expressions – conflicts that persist despite or because US military intervention. The aesthetic construction of the artwork then produces an ironic and critical commentary on the president and the current geopolitical situation: Obama, who himself once lived in the world’s largest Muslim country, who is celebrated as a Nobel Peace laureate, is still involved in military conflicts in other Muslim majority countries. The work here responds to several things that were going on at that moment. It was the end of 2009; one year after Obama was elected for the first time. Indonesian president Yudhoyono announced that Obama would visit Indonesia for the first time since his election. This news was hailed with pride, especially when Yudhoyono revealed that Obama could still speak some Bahasa (The Jakarta Post 2009). But there were also rumours that his trip would be cancelled. Also, at that time, Obama had just been nominated for the Nobel Peace prize, and stated only a few days later that the U.S. would send an extra thirty thousand troops to Afghanistan (Journal Bali 2010).

In addition to the works’ context and content, its striking techniques merit discussion. The work resembles the tactics of Benjamin’s rag picker, who sifts through piles of refuse and collects what has been thrown away, and from this creates a new object. Benjamin introduced the figure of the rag picker in his writings on the work of Charles Baudelaire (2006 [1937]). Rag pickers first appeared in Paris when the new industrial processes gave refuse a certain value (Benjamin 1937; 2006: 53). They made a living by sifting through piles of refuse to collect material for
salvage. Paper could be turned into cardboard, broken glass could be melted and reused, and even dead cats could be skinned to make clothes. As Benjamin writes:

Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. [...] He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects [...]. (Baudelaire 1857 cited in Benjamin 2006 [1937]: 108)

For Benjamin, the historical figure of the rag picker holds critical potential. The rag picker shows the flipside of the industrial revolution. His very presence – his poorness – demonstrates that the pile of refuse is filled with the promises of the revolution. Beautiful promises have become ‘rags of speech’ and ‘verbal scraps’; words of the past that have been thrown into the trash to be picked up at by the rag picker. Benjamin comments:

If we wish to gain a clear picture of him [...] what we will see is [him] picking up rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them [...] a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or another of those faded cotton remnants - ‘humanity,’ ‘inwardness,’ or ‘absorption’-flutter derisively in the wind (Benjamin 1999: 310).

The rag picker collects what has been thrown away, the lost and the forgotten, and creates a new object, while pointing out the deceit and inequality of the industrial revolution. By sifting through a pile of refuse, the artwork invokes tactics that are similar to that of Benjamin’s rag picker.

The specific pile the work is sifting through here is both history and Obama’s own pile of refuse. From this pile, Obama’s presidential rag cart picks up two allegedly ‘thrown-away/forgotten’ fragments: Obama’s own past in Indonesia and the (promises of his) 2008 presidential campaign. The work suggests that Obama has forgotten his own past, while constructing his ‘peace promises’ as ‘rags of speech’ and ‘verbal scraps’; deceitful words of the past that have been thrown into the trash. In this way, the work criticizes the president himself as well as his uncritical supporters, including Indonesians, who are of course the main audience for the show. But it also criticizes the present geopolitical situation where the U.S. stokes violent conflicts in Muslim regions. The artwork here thus invokes fragments of the past to critique the dominant narratives (at least in 2009), which optimistically celebrated what Obama represented, and his promise for world peace. The work also shows that a different selection of historical fragments constructs a different
present. In the alternative present that is constructed here, the president is not on a campaign for peace, but on a ‘tour of deceit’, something that becomes clearer as the tour continued.

While driving on Jalan Laksa RE Martadinata, Syanur suddenly lets the becak fall over. Syanur and Obama tumble out of the vehicle (Figure 4) and Obama breaks into pieces. The crash of the becak and Obama’s fall generate a threefold meaning. First, Obama’s tumble out of the Indonesian vehicle emphasizes the alleged forgetting of his own past in Indonesia. Second, throwing Obama out of the becak and on the street, functions as a rejection: Indonesia should not embrace as one of its own this man who is still involved in conflicts in Muslim countries. And third, the crash of the becak indicates that Obama’s present ‘tour of deceit’ can no longer be accepted and should be brought to a halt. Importantly, it is then not, as we saw earlier, the past that is here broken up into fragments, but the already constructed alternative version of the present in which Obama is on a tour of deceit.

Figure 4: Syanur and Obama tumble out of the becak, Obama’s foot falls off
Meanwhile, the president’s body parts are scattered on the street (Figure 5). With the help of bystanders, Syanur picks up the pieces (Figure 6) and drives them to the PKU Muhammadiyah hospital in Yogyakarta, an Islamic hospital. When Syanur later poses with a newly repaired and visibly bandaged Obama in front of this hospital (Figure 7), it is suggested that it is in this Islamic hospital that the president has been put back together again. A narrative is constructed in which in Obama finds healing through Islam and is in this way able to get back into the becak. In the final aesthetic construction of the work, Obama is driven around again (Figure 8), although the traces of the crash remain visible via the bandages. Through the alteration of aesthetics, the artwork has here staged a humorous intervention – people standing alongside the road were laughing and clapping – in the alternative version of the present in which Obama is on a ‘tour of deceit’. This tour, and thus this alternative present, was literally called a halt by letting the work crash and fall apart – thereby ridiculing Obama. The newly repaired work now imagines and fantasizes yet another version of the present. In this version, the president continues his campaign for peace, but has turned to Islam to repair the damage that his tour of deceit has caused. The work suggests that despite his war mongering, Indonesians are not ready (yet) to throw Obama into the trash. If he repairs his tour of deceit, he can still be one of them.
Figure 7: A repaired and visibly bandaged president posing in front of the PKU Muhammadiyah hospital

Figure 8: The newly fixed Obama is driven through the streets again
Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat practices a critical Benjaminian politics through the alteration of aesthetics. These politics may best be described as a politics of temporal juxtaposition. The work actualizes fragments from the past to question the present and to highlight its constructed nature. This happens both in the artwork’s initial aesthetic construction as well as at the moment aesthetics are on the move. In both cases a new object is created that is a pieced-together creation in which the lines of temporal juxtaposition show through. In the initial aesthetic construction, two past fragments – Obama’s own past in Indonesia and his 2008 presidential campaign – are juxtaposed with the present. And in the final aesthetic construction, three temporal layers are juxtaposed, namely: the past that was imagined in the initial construction, the present that was rejected – the traces of which are visible through the bandages, and the newly imagined present in which Obama has (re)turned to Islam. It is through this politics of juxtaposition that the work points out that there is no beautiful unified whole, no seamless blending of past and present (Plate 2005: 16); the fragments are merely temporarily frozen into an image of juxtaposition.

11 June 2002 and the politics of memory

After September 11, airport security changed drastically. The scanning and screening of passengers ostensibly to lower the probability of new terrorist attacks has become routine, but does not go uncontested. Critics have claimed that measures are excessive and infringe on the rights of travellers. While every traveller is confronted with security measures, the repercussions of heightened security are perhaps most felt by Muslims, who are in practice those most often targeted by security.

Arahmaiani’s installation 11 June 2002 (Figures 9-14) responds to this situation. The Bandung-born artist Arahmaiani (b. 1961) is known for her performance art pieces, which in her early career often put her at odds with Suharto’s New Order regime (1966-1998). After a performance in which she criticized the military, she was held for a month and barely escaped the infamous camp for political prisoners. Today Arahmaiani is a key figure in the Indonesian art scene and one of the most prominent Indonesian female artists to traverse the global art world. She has exhibited widely in Southeast Asia, Japan, Europe, Australia and the US. She is also an avowed Muslim.
In 2002, Arahmaiani was invited to speak at the University of Victoria. 11 June 2002, which was on display during the Venice Biennale in 2003 (Jun. 15 - Nov. 2), is based on her memory of a stopover in Los Angeles while on her way to Victoria, Canada. On 11 June 2002, Arahmaiani was arrested by US immigration officials at the LA airport for not having a visa for the stopover. After being interrogated for four hours, she was supposed to be locked up in a cell, but after lengthy negotiations it was decided that she was to be detained in the hotel room she booked. During her overnight stay, a male guard was instructed to closely watch her to ensure nothing
would happen. The guard, himself a Muslim, stayed inside Arahmaiani’s room. The strict Islamic rules on the physical proximity between unmarried men and women were violated, much to the shock of the artist. The situation was all the more offensive since Arahmaiani has been active against militant interpretations of Islam for a long time. 11 June 2002 (Figures 9-14), which depicts a hotel room, recalls Arahmaiani’s memory of these events.

In what follows, I suggest that the installation is what Pierre Nora (1996 [1989]) called a ‘lieu de mémoire’, a site where memory crystallizes and secretes itself (Nora 2006 [1989]: 7). As a lieu de mémoire, the installation criticizes a present in which Muslims are suspected terrorists, while pointing at the fragmented nature of our past, thereby soundly echoing Benjamin (1999 [1982]; 1968 [1940]). The emphasis of the work on the discontinuity and selectivity of history forms the base of the politics it practices.

Lieux de mémoire are thus sites of memory. They are sites in three senses of the word – material, functional, and symbolic (Nora 2006 [1989]: 18) – and these aspects always coexist. 11 June 2002 embodies all three. Arahmaiani’s memory materializes in a site which functions to communicate her memory. The site also references and symbolizes the larger plight of Muslims as frequent targets of policing. But these are not the only factors that construct the installation as a lieux de mémoire.

What is equally important is that lieux de mémoire occur at a particular historical moment. As Nora asserts, the acceleration of history – the increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past – confronts us with the realization that something has ended that we saw as self-evident: the equation of memory and history. For Nora, memory and history appear to be in fundamental opposition (Nora 2006 [1989]: 8). Nora’s idea that there is a rigid split between memory and history has been challenged by a number of scholars (e.g. Samuel 1994; Thelen 1989; Burke 1989), who propose a more fluid transition between memory and history. Yet, memory and history are different (Nora 2006 [1989]: 8). Memory is life, sustained by living societies founded in its name. History is not life, but is the reconstruction of what is no longer. It is the way in which our forgetful modern societies organize the past (Ibidem). At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is suspicious of memory, and its mission is to empty it out its subjectivity (Nora 2006 [1989]: 8-9).

Lieux de mémoire occur in this moment, when memory is torn and survives only as a reconstituted object beneath the critical gaze of history (12). We realize that the process that carries us forward and our representation of it (history) are not of the same kind anymore, and therefore we deliberately create lieux de mémoire. They
originate with the sense that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep these memories away (Ibidem). These lieux that come from the fund of our memory are constructed as small fragments of history torn away from the main flow of history. As Nora writes:

Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de mémoire – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned: no longer quite life, not yet dead, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded. (Nora 2006 [1989]: 12)

Lieux de mémoire are thus created by the play, by the push and pull of memory and history. They are in between memory and history, connecting to both while differing from both (13). The trait of lieux de mémoire that sets them apart from history is that they are not realia; they are not historical sites or events in themselves. Contrary to historical objects, lieux de mémoire are their own referent (22-23).

As suggested above, for a lieux de mémoire to come into being, there must be a will to remember; the memory the lieu defends must be threatened. 11 June 2002 clearly speaks of a will to remember. The memory embodied in the installation is threatened as it constitutes a fragment of history that is likely to be buried because, as Benjamin would say, it is of no use to those in power. The fragment that is torn away from history here does not merely try to ‘complete’ history, but it rubs (the dominant order) of history against the grain.

11 June 2002 thus constitutes a lieu de mémoire. But how is this lieu de mémoire constructed? What is torn away from history, from memory? What is taking place in this fragment of history? How does the installation root around in the ruins of history? And how to understand this rooting as a political practice? I explore these questions through analyzing the installation as a lieu de memoire, i.e. as a material, functional and symbolic site of memory. When observing first the material construction of the site, a contradiction is recognized between two permeable material layers. The first material layer constructs the hotel room as a cheerful site that expresses a love and desire for America. Looking at the room (Figures 9-12), we observe that the room is a light one-room space with a window. Beside the window sits a bed neatly made up with white sheets decorated with pink and red hearts. The heart-pattern is repeated on a shower curtain, and there is a red rose on the bedside table, which further strengthens the ‘love theme’. A large American flag looms in the far corner and insignia of a US consumer world are strewn around, including two shiny retro Coca Cola vendor machines, Coca Cola
bottles, and Coca Cola wall signs, all of which contextualize the room (Figure 11). One of the wall signs emphasizes America’s successful global throttle, reading in German ‘Erfrische Dich’, meaning ‘refresh yourself’ – a (1924; 1925; 1964) Coca Cola slogan from decades ago.

Displaying cheerfulness and uncomplicated love for consumer America, the room is an ironic site for detention, contrasting with the cruelty of Arahmaiani’s confinement. A second material layer, which is constructed through the presence of Arahmaiani’s personal items, does capture this cruelty. Strewn across the bed are a black lace bra and black pantyhose (Figures 9-10). Socks lay on the carpet. A variety of toiletries are added to the sink: Marvital tampons, Lux soap, Dreaming shampoo and a powder compact. Above the bed photographs are hung (Figures 15-17) that depict Arahmaiani undressing herself, slipping into a bathrobe, brushing her hair and reading the Quran in bed. The Quran itself is placed on the pillow (Figure 13). The display of these photos and other intimate personal items here work to construct the guard’s intrusive gaze and emphasize the violation of the Muslim female body during Arahmaiani’s overnight stay in the room.

Figures 15-17: Intimate pictures that are hung above the bed in 11 June 2002

The material construction of the site is thus characterized by a sharp contradiction. The first material layer constructs a cheerful room that displays a blatant love and desire for America. The America imagined here is not today’s America, but an America of the past, that is created through the retro vendor machines and the old Coca Cola slogan. Moreover, this ‘past America’ is a promising and optimistic America; it is the trouble-free consumer society that successfully exported its commodities abroad. But this more innocent vision of America is contradicted by Arahmaiani’s American nightmare that is constructed through the second material
layer. For Arahmaiani, this is the America of the present. America is here imagined not as an optimistic and promising America, but as an America of surveillance, of paranoia, of the violation of privacy, and of the discrimination against Muslims. If Arahmaiani was not arrested, she would have stayed in the same room, but there would not have been a guard to observe her. This first material layer, in which the guard’s intrusive gaze is absent, thus represents ‘the way it should have been’ – it is the America that should have been. The second layer shows what the room, and by extension America, instead became: a place of paranoia and surveillance. The installation here juxtaposes two different temporalities; two historical fragments; two visions, (1) that of an America that ‘was’, and that ‘should have been’ and (2) that of an America that ‘is’, but ‘should not be’.

The lieu de mémoire is both a material and a functional site. It can have numerous functions, but here I would like to highlight just one. The installation functions to communicate Arahmaiani’s memory to an audience, which can be both Muslim and non-Muslim. The very way in which Arahmaiani’s memory is communicated, keeps the memory alive and ties it to the present. To communicate the memory of Arahmaiani’s ‘America of surveillance’, the installation tries to turn the spectator into a voyeur. By entering the installation and observing Arahmaiani’s intimate items and photographs of her body, we practice (or at least are invited to practice) the guard’s gaze. In this way, the audience is (involuntarily) positioned to continue the violation of Arahmaiani’s body in the present moment. Arahmaiani’s (living) body itself is absent in this process. It is only through the (dead) materiality of the site that this process comes into being. The installation thus restates its entity as a lieu de mémoire. While Arahmaiani’s memory is materialized in the installation and moves away from the realm of living ‘unviolated’ memory (cf. Nora 2006 [1989]: 8), it is not yet dead either. It is through the interplay between the spectator and the specific material arrangement of the site that the memory revives. Paradoxically, to make the memory visible and to keep the memory alive, the Muslim female body is put on display (again) and continues to be violated by a larger audience.

The gender politics and the violated female Muslim body also play a role in the construction of the installation as a symbolic site. In the way the installation communicates Arahmaiani’s memory, a particular body politics is practiced. We can understand these politics by reading the work’s tactics in the light of the analogy Mary Douglas sees between the body and society – an analogy that I also recognized in Islamic-themed films (chapter 5). In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas identifies the concern for purity as a key theme at the heart of every society and observes an analogy between the body and society. But, instead of seeing the body
simply as society, Douglas sees the body as a coding and transmitting machine: “the body communicates information for and from the social system of which it is part” (Douglas 1966: 172). The body expresses the relationship of the individual to the group and in this way is embedded in, and contributes to, the social situation at a given moment. In the installation, the female Muslim body becomes a social body. Arahmaiani’s body constitutes the central locus for a critique of the (American) present moment in which, in the name of security, Muslims are labelled and treated as terrorist suspects. As she appears uncovered and policed by a Muslim guard, this ‘violation’ of Arahmaiani’s body symbolizes discrimination. The representation comes to stand for the reality a larger group of Muslims face in a post-9/11 world.

The fragment of history that 11 June 2002 as a lieu de mémoire constructs and embodies is a perceived historical moment. And contrary to those lieux de mémoire that cherish a memory that history would sweep away, this installation is highly critical of the historical fragment that it itself constructs. The installation constructs a historical moment characterized by surveillance, paranoia, and prejudiced views about Muslims, a critique mainly directed at America. But the installation also reflects ambivalent discourses currently constructed about the direction of modernity in Indonesia. In these discourses America often functions simultaneously as the ultimate example of a glossy modernity and as a capitalist, consumerist dystopia that is violent and antithetical to Muslims – hence something to aspire to and be wary of. The critique of America is in 11 June 2002 articulated through the female Muslim body. This shows that the female Muslim body is not – as was the case in chapters 4 and 5 – only a site through which women are governed. It is also a site for affirmative politics. Yet, this is ambiguous. By practicing these politics the female Muslim body is here continuously violated.

Through its politics of memory, the installation, like the first case study, echoes Benjamin by pointing out that we must see the past as fragmented. It stresses that there are fragments that are taken up in a unified narrative of history and there are fragments that are likely to be forgotten. 11 June 2002 does not merely root around in the ruins of history to question the present, but it creates this ruin itself. As a lieu de memoire, a site in between memory and history, the work shows what (according to a symbolic Muslim community) is not taken up in history, but what should be registered. Based on a memory, the installation creates a fragment of history that it does not find itself in history. The work, as Benjamin encouraged, embodies a lost fragment of history, a fragment that is of no use to those in power. By creating this ‘extra’ fragment of history, the work ruins the wholeness of the narrative of history.
Muslim politics and aesthetics: practicing a critical history

Through their aesthetics the two artworks practice critical politics. These politics are twofold. First, the works are contesting current geopolitics and the volatile position of Indonesia and Muslims in a post-9/11 world. The works challenge realities and narratives that have come into being after 9/11, and that are antithetical to Muslims. Through a politics of juxtaposition, Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat (2009) criticizes the current geopolitical situation of U.S. (and Western) hostility toward Islamic countries. And through a politics of memory 11 June 2002 (2003) responds to post-9/11 realities in which Muslims are cast as Islamic terrorists.

A second critical politics is identified in the very way in which the two works contest these post-9/11 realities. We have seen that the works evoke fragments from the past to question and critique the construct of the present. Membuat Obama dan Perdamaian yang dibuat-buat and 11 June 2002 are evoking fragments from the past to point at the instability of the truth of the present. By juxtaposing multiple and different temporalities in the same object, the artworks underscore the multiple, different, and simultaneous temporalities of contemporary Indonesian society. Currently, the unequal speed of modernization makes the archipelago seem like a temporally fragmented entity. The works do not necessarily prefer ‘the modern’, as the critique of the United States – the ultimate example of capitalist modernity – shows.

Furthermore, as pieced-together creations the works embody the aesthetics of an ‘ur-history’, a history of the origins of the present (Benjamin 1982: 1045). For Benjamin, this ur-history frees the present from myth. And indeed, the re-actualization of fragments from the past here fractures and unravels unified ideological narratives that ostensibly transfigure the present. Consequently, just like the future – formerly a visible, predictable, well-marked extension of the present – has become invisible and unpredictable, so do the artworks suggest that we have moved from a visible past to an invisible one; from a solid and steady past to our fractured past (Nora 1996 [1989]: 17). By emphasizing the selectivity in the act of reassembling fragments from the past the works suggest that (the writing of) history is merely a question of representation.

But to me this is not what makes the politics of these works meaningful. The politics of the works mainly revolve around the act of making visible. They visualize a present that has been (too) invisible, exactly because the historical fragments that make up this present have been buried, as they are of no use to those in power. In the artworks, Muslim politics and aesthetics are then intertwined in a Rancière-ian
way, although this relationship is driven by a Benjaminian logic, which turns the practice of critical politics into the practice of a critical history.

For Jacques Rancière (2004), core to the bond between politics and aesthetics is a making sensible, a making visible. For Rancière our social order is an antidemocratic police order that strives to maintain the existing patterns of power. This police order establishes a distribution of the sensible, a law, that divides a community into groups, social positions and functions (Rancière 2004: 3). The distribution of the sensible separates those who take part from those who are excluded. Importantly, this distribution works through establishing possible modes of perception. ‘Sensible’ refers to what is apprehended by the senses. The distribution of the sensible thus sets divisions between what is visible and invisible; audible and inaudible; sayable and unsayable.

The essence of politics then lies in interrupting the distribution of the sensible. Politics is the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the established order. It is an attempt to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004: 3). Aesthetics is bound up in this battle, because the battle takes place over what is permissible to say or show. Art is one way in which the distribution of the sensible can be reconfigured. Aesthetics can literally render visible what is invisible in the distribution of the sensible, hence aesthetics can help to contest naturalness and obviousness. For Rancière, aesthetics is thus at the heart of the political and vice versa (Rancière 2004: 3).

As shown in the analysis, the works’ critical Muslim politics are rooted in their aesthetics and revolve precisely around the act of ‘making visible’. Politics and aesthetics are thus intertwined in a Rancière-ian way. The works visualize a present that is imagined to be (too) invisible in the police order because it is unsympathetic to this order. The police order that the works are contesting here is an order that is profoundly global and that, in this historical moment, is antithetical to Muslims. Through their aesthetic-politics the artworks attempt to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible that is keeping this global police order in place.

What is important, is that the artworks are not only interrupting the distribution of the sensible by offering alternative aesthetics (like the films in chapter 5 did), by creating aesthetics that are different from those that work in favor of the police order. They are not coining images of friendly Muslims against images of violent Muslims. The works interrupt the distribution of the sensible in a much more fundamental way. As I suggest below, through aesthetically constructing an ur-history, the works simultaneously create and destruct.
For Benjamin, all creation entails destruction, or as he says overtly: “construction presupposes destruction.” (Benjamin 1982: 470) Destruction lies at the heart of creation, and to get to truth, the boundaries imposed at creation must be taken apart. Creation does not come simply through putting things together, but in clearing away, in taking things apart, resituated walls, moving mountains, and then rearranging the terrain in order to lead through – a sort of rag picker’s art, though Benjamin never puts it that way.

Benjamin then sees aesthetic creation as a two-part process; new meanings are created while other meanings are destroyed (Plate 2005: 29). The artworks are here not only creating new meanings (alternative aesthetics), but they are simultaneously cutting up notions that seemed whole and logical in the distribution of the sensible. The works do not just provide alternative representations, but they also work to destruct the logic of a dominant present that neutralizes the kinds of images that they contest. The artworks destruct the history that justifies the present (global) police order, where after they reshuffle the pieces and paste them together in a new way. As creative activities that simultaneously create and destroy, the works then do not just target singular outcomes of the distribution of the sensible (repressing aesthetics). Rather they doubt the whole historical narrative that is constructed by the distribution of the sensible and that justifies the system.

The practice of an aesthetic-critical politics is here then turned into the practice of a critical history. And since this critical history questions the very foundation of the (global) police order, the construction of such a critical history opens up new possibilities for the practice of Muslim politics. The artworks do not suggest an abandonment of the writing of history. Instead, they propose a different history. Echoing Benjamin (1999 [1982]; 1968 [1940]), the artworks point at possibilities for both artists and scholars to imagine and write histories that help to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible and contest the (global) police order that is imagined to be antithetical to Muslims. The works call for a critical ‘ur-history’; a history that unearths the past and that sketches a history of the origins of the present (Benjamin 1999 [1982]: 1045). Through imagining this ‘ur-history’, the artworks practice a critical politics that is more promising than the politics practiced by the Islamic-themed films (chapter 5) and that presents a more effective way of questioning and contesting dominant structures of power – in other words, that presents a more effective way of being critical.

Partha Chatterjee (1997) has suggested that being critical is an essential part of being modern, as he writes: “true modernity consists of determining the particular forms of modernity that are suitable in particular circumstances; that is applying the
methods of reason to identify or invent the specific technologies of modernity that are appropriate for our purposes.” (Chatterjee 1997: 8) By articulating a critique of America, the artworks critically contest the vision of America as the ultimate example of a glossy modernity – and particularly 11 June 2002 strongly articulates this critique. Both works suggest that the paranoid and violent version of the modern that this type of modernity today represents is antithetical to Muslims and is not “appropriate for our purposes” (8). But what kind of modernity is ‘appropriate’ and for which purposes? And are there other explanations for the critique of America? As we have seen, the critique of an imagined ‘Western-style modernity’ recurs several times in my case studies (cf. chapter 3, 5). Why does this critique recur? And how to understand this critique? I will engage with these questions in the closing chapter of my dissertation.