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## <Book Review>

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**Karen Strassler. *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020.**

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and how they continue to do so. This overall theme is relevant not only in the history of Buddhism and medicine but also in the more general questions of relationships between religions and medicine, questions that have been discussed more at length with regard to other religions—primarily Christianity, but also Islam and to a lesser extent Judaism. In this sense, too, this book is important as it brings the discussion of Buddhism and medicine within the playing fields of relevant mainstream disciplines where Buddhism and medicine are still not sufficiently known, taught, and researched. With this excellent volume at hand, we are in a much better position to hope that Buddhism and medicine will become better known in contexts and disciplines where they are not yet well known.

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## *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*

KAREN STRASSLER

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020.

It took a decade for Karen Strassler to come up with her second and much-awaited book. Indeed, it could have taken much longer to do the ethnographic fieldwork, converse with a whole gamut of sources, and finally put together a monograph that sustains her analysis of the productive work of images in contemporary Indonesia. *Demanding Images* is a fascinating study that younger scholars can only aspire to do. The author introduces the concept of the “image-event” or “a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field, becoming a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics” (p. 8) to help us analyze Indonesian visual culture in the wake of Suharto’s downfall.

Benedict Anderson remarked that the mass medium of print enables the creation of the nation when it conjures communities, when people of the same polity imagine others as fellow subjects in the nation. Strassler broadens this continuing imagination by exploring images existing in the public sphere: photographs, videos, money, street art, graffiti, banners, posters, and digital media. As both cause and consequence, images are demanded by certain situations as they also demand the creation of different kinds of order for the people that produce and consume them. In other words, images neither simply exist nor are created: they happen and make things happen.

Strassler calls attention to “ludic” images instead of the “evidentiary” mode of documentary images such as photographs. Ludic images “deploy remediation, repurposing, and reworking to generate new constellations of truth and modalities of revelation on the surface of the image” (p. 24), which are suggestive of the pleasurable, conservative, redemptive, and revolutionary functions of images, depending on one’s manner and purpose of using them. Yet there is something that exceeds the intentionality of the image-maker and user. There are possibilities of reversal and an opening to new ends. After reeling from three decades of authoritarian rule, Indonesia is experiencing an exponential proliferation of images in its public sphere, at once a testament to initiatives beyond what was once the center, which is the state, and part of the worldwide technological and artistic innovations in crafting images.

The author begins by discussing the doctoring of the rupiah, the country’s currency, in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis of 2008 that devastated the economy and led to Suharto’s resignation. Suharto’s images resurfaced as a man hiding in shame, asking the public whether times had been better during his three-decade rule. In response, people manipulated Suharto’s face on printed currency as the image of money became the focal point for criticizing the New Order regime, which had delivered rapid economic growth but collapsed under the weight of fiscal mismanagement and cronyism. Arrested students attended law court hearings using pictures of Suharto’s face as masks, demanding that he appear instead and be accountable. The abundance of counterfeit money, called *aspal* (a combination of *aslu* or “authentic” and *palsu* or “false”)—issued by the state bank, no less—exposed the corruption that lay at the heart of Indonesian politics. Counterfeit money also served as a platform for evoking nostalgia for the Sukarno era as a counterweight to the Suharto period, when Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno’s daughter, appeared on fake currency. The politician Megawati also had authoritarian tendencies of her own, though, and her short-lived presidency failed to deliver on the promises of democracy. Strassler deepens the anthropological conceptions of the face as a mask, the fetish of money and power, and examinations of appearances: the malevolent force hiding behind the mask and images, the Javanese pleasure in appearances, and the prowess (and cowardice) and strongman’s rule centrality (and its decentralization and deterritorialization) in the archipelago.

While photography became pivotal as a *document* for witnessing history during the Reformasi and as a *play* in the satirical exposition of corrupt regimes, it became fodder for misogynistic and

racist attitudes when its presence and—especially—its absence became a defining ground for adjudicating the rape cases of ethnic Chinese women in the heady days of Suharto's ouster. Since the prosecution of crime relies on proof, for which photography provides the supreme objective and impartial form, the disinclination on the part of Indonesian Chinese women to present documentation of their sexual abuse highlights the question of the authenticity of both their violation and their status as Indonesians. Here, what Strassler calls "the dream of transparency" (p. 68) grapples with "forced visibility" (p. 73), and national pride staves off the "international gaze" (p. 79). The possibility of photographic falsification, "conjur[ing] specters of obscurity and manipulation" (pp. 80–81), not only belies transparency but also discloses the gendered dimensions of violence in what was supposedly a democratizing society. Indonesian Chinese women are victimized anew by this obsession with transparency that works against them: Who would want to be stigmatized and retraumatized by photos of one's violation? It is telling that the bodily violations of Indonesian Chinese suggest their persistent marginalization from the Indonesian body politic. The author does not include pictures in this second chapter, so as to avoid replicating the violence of the visual on silenced subjects.

The third chapter shows leading political figures embroiled in sex scandals that could not be denied because of the authenticating evidence of videos and photos. At a time when citizens are finally cherishing the production and circulation of images beyond state control, it is the lurid side that (expectedly) animates the public and produces a productive relationship between democracy and morality. Self-proclaimed telematics expert Roy Suryo's role is pivotal in unmasking pornography, though his expertise is questioned by hardline Islamic groups that support the politicians. It is also through publicity that porn stars have tried to make amends or correct public perception by public displays of piety. The following chapter delves into the controversy generated by the *Pinkswing Park* exhibit showing naked celebrities. Usually, artworks attract a limited audience, being enclosed in galleries and museums that tend to alienate the populace who must spend time and money and may not know much about art. Yet this time around, the policing gaze of political Islam thrust the image into the public sphere and subjected the exhibit to a moral campaign that radicalized adherents of political Islam. The Indonesian art world and its secular middle-class champions, in turn (and unfortunately), responded by segregating artistic production from religious interpretation, saying that the artworks' value should be appraised by the keen eyes of artists, critics, and curators.

The last chapter, "Street Signs," is particularly absorbing as it analyzes the people's appropriation of public spaces through street art. Dominated by state and private interests simultaneously announcing and advertising their control and soliciting support, urban inscriptions by guerrilla street artists testify to the reclamation of the commons. However, the same spaces are being repossessed by government agents who are out to fabricate overwhelming support for extrajudicial acts of punishing criminals. And here is where the possibility (or threat) of reversal to more

authoritarian times portends both residual and emerging repressions and dares artists and citizens to be bolder in critiquing and wrestling state power. In 2013, street artists called for justice for the human rights activist Munir, who had been assassinated in 2004, and yet the same spaces of mediation are now being reconquered by evil forces most likely guilty of present-day violations. This is coupled with Yogyakarta natives' rebuke of "outsiders" who use the city as a canvas for social critique, revealing the other kinds of social boundaries regnant in the country. While the banner-posting operation was surreptitiously carried out by the military immediately after the prison-killing operation, the presence of banners in public places conceals right-wing and counterrevolutionary violence insofar as it proclaims public approval from authors hiding in anonymity. Banners proclaiming support as if it was coming from the public demonstrate the manipulation of the people and uncover the tendentious character of actually existing democracy. This "as if" quality is central to images as it unwraps artifice, (un)truth, play, potentiality, and redemption.

Strassler's conclusion draws our attention to the most explicit demonstration of public visibility of the contemporary moment: the selfie. Belying accusations that backing for the popular candidate (and by now twice elected and outgoing president) Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was fake or exaggerated, supporters flooded social media with selfies of their attendance at campaign rallies, even demonstrating the technical details that indexed the mammoth crowd. As a self-made entrepreneur and political figure with no ties to the New Order regime, Jokowi also embodies the "dream of transparency" in fighting the lies and fakery of his electoral opponent, Prabowo Subianto, the dictator Suharto's former son-in-law and himself a military general involved in the murder case of Reformasi activists. Although selfie-taking demonstrates a very active kind of self-produced visibility using the benefits of technology, group selfies by middle-class participants at electoral campaign rallies also show the limits of democracy: this is not substantive democracy—a democracy of civil freedoms, human rights, and material equality—but electoral (and to some extent) elite (because elitist) democracy, congenial to neoliberal self-fashioning that includes insofar as it excludes many others. "Neoliberal volunteerism" that calls for a "mental revolution" (pp. 236–237) is far removed from the structural transformation that revolutions desire. Admiring themselves and relishing the technology through which they produce themselves, the middle classes and educated people also tend to look down on others and brand them as susceptible to fake news and disinformation, the unworthy subjects of democracy.

It is expected that the relatively open political climate of the last two and a half decades will result in the full flowering of image production and contending ideas in the marketplace of democracy. Yet this marketplace is something that is presumed—not a given, and maybe not the ideal. As more and more people gain the knowledge and creativity to craft images, there is a tendency for image creation and reception to be monopolized by "people who know" instead of being fully exercised and enjoyed by the "people from below." The former aggressively remediate our understanding of the world, limiting our capacity for changing it. There is the gatekeeping of

democratization, its subjection to problematically nationalist, elitist, religious, partisan, conservative, and even right-wing and counterrevolutionary pursuits. Who has the right to say and determine what democracy is and what determines its course? The authenticity expert? The religious cleric? Art curators and critics? Government bureaucrats? Old elites seeping into new politics, displaying their revanchism in the public sphere? Strassler's book is a perceptive study of the visual in a time of neoliberal democracy, and we hold our breath for more of her work.

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### ***Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia***

MADOKA FUKUOKA, ed.

Singapore: Jenny Stanford Publishing, 2023.

*Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia* provides an introduction to Ramayana performances across contemporary Southeast Asia, with chapters on Cambodia (Sam-Ang Sam on a range of Khmer art forms inspired by the *Reamker*), Thailand (Hinata Shinsuke on Khon masked dance and Hiramatsu Hideki on Ramayana-inspired films by Chaiyo Studio), Indonesia (Umeda Hideharu on Wayang puppet theater in Bali and Fukuoka Madoka on Sendratari dance drama in Java), Singapore (Takemura Yoshiaki on dance performance in the Indian diaspora community of Singapore), and Japan (Fukuoka Shota on Ramayana displays at the National Museum of Ethnology in Japan).

Each of the contributors has taken care to make their work accessible to non-specialists, so the book should be of interest not only to Ramayana scholars but also to scholars working in Southeast Asian media studies more generally. While the title refers to Ramayana “theater,” the chapters actually cover a wide range of performance media including dance, song, film, animation, comic books—what the editor calls “dramatic art forms”—along with other visual arts as well as cultural practices such as astrology. For readers unfamiliar with the Indian Ramayana, there is an appendix with a summary of Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana, which is an important point of reference for all the performance traditions discussed in the book.

The chapters are written such that they can be read independently. This results in some redundancy, as historical background about the Ramayana is provided repeatedly. However, each time the writers present the specific literary and performance history in a way that is most relevant to their own national context, providing a kind of crash course in the many centuries of Ramayana literature and performances throughout Southeast Asia.

Because the chapters are introductory overviews, they do not engage in detailed critical or