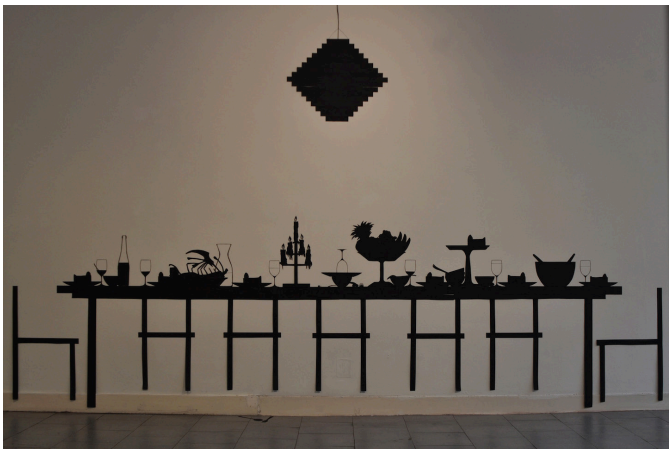
Preserving Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Asri

Prilla Tania

Eating is an activity long taken for granted, and people often neglect to think about its causes and consequences. Likewise, when it comes food ingredients and their availability and accessibility in modern times, people are complacent and no longer question the purposes and reasons for eating. These are the questions that I raised through my work "EAT!" from the *Beyond Panopticon* exhibition at BEC (Bandung Electronic Center, 2003). Like other animals, humans need food for energy so they can survive, do various activities, and procreate. The difference between animals and humans lies in their efforts to obtain food. In the case of humans, they formed culture (with tools, strategies and methods of processing) which have continued to develop over their hundreds of thousands of years of existence on earth. The cultures of hunter and gatherer societies, simple agriculture, modern agriculture, industry and so on were thus formed. All these forms of society are still around today. But in modern society, how to get food is no longer as simple as it was in traditional communities such as with hunters/gatherers/farmers/breeders. Today, humans have to earn money to be able to buy various products and ready-to-eat foods. And in this development, humans are no longer just eating to fulfil their daily energy needs, but eating has become a social activity, for example: a celebration must be completed with a range of food of different shapes, colors, and flavors; or a group of small children go to a corner shop to get snacks together to share while playing.

What happens when humans no longer need food? "De Chloroman," an art project that I worked on as part of the *Hier/Heden* program in Den Haag in 2012, envisions an engineered, green-leaf human being created to solve the problem of meeting future food needs. With green leaves, this human would no longer need food to fulfill its daily energy requirements. Like plants, it photosynthesizes by absorbing sunlight and water (and the minerals contained in it) to produce energy. But with the loss of eating as necessary to people's daily lives, how will this form of social activity change? In this project, I conducted a month-long experiment in the summer. In that one month I didn't eat from 4 am to around 9 pm. I would attend various social activities ranging from employee farewell parties, meetings, going to the beach with friends, to getting dinner (6pm). All those activities involved food/drink. That experiment resulted in a work entitled "Ik Eet Niet" which took the form of a paper installation which was also processed into a stop motion video, imagining De Chloroman at a dinner.



"Iik Eet Niet" part of the Hier/Heden program in Den Haag in 2012

When humans were still living in small groups, their basic needs were met from their surrounding environment, and the people around them. It could be said that humans were still part of the food chain in an ecosystem. Sometimes they became top predators when they were successful in hunting deer, or at other times, humans became food for tigers or crocodiles. Eventually, farming communities emerged and they cultivated the land in a shifting manner. There were changes in the land and forest, but these changes were minor because the abandoned fields would become secondary forests before being reopened as fields in another cycle. Then from experience, humans began to produce knowledge about their way of life and passed it on from generation to generation. At one time, a group of people established settlements, gardens, and rice fields amidst the wilderness in the highlands. It was in a society such as this that the myth of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Asri developed. In this myth, the gods agreed to kill Nyi Pohaci, whose beauty made her adoptive father, the Sang Batara Guru, fall in love with her. But her murder made the gods feel guilty and afraid, so they buried her body on earth, far from heaven. Her purity and kindness shone through where she was buried. From her body grew various plants that are very useful to humans. From her head grew a coconut tree; from her nose, lips and ears grew various herbs and vegetables; from her hair, grass and various flowering plants; from her chest, fruit trees; from her arms and hands, teak and other timber trees; from her genitals grew sugar palm; from her thighs, different types of bamboo; from her feet, various tubers; and finally from her navel rice grew. In another version of the story, it is said that from her right eye grew white rice and from her left eye, red rice.

With this myth, perhaps it's possible that what these ancestors wanted was to convey a science of managing the land for an ideal environment (a form of permaculture), by providing a plan for people to follow, with the composition of plants growing from Nyi Pohaci's body, from head to toe, with the head imagined as a highland and feet as a lowland. Moreover, it suggests a plan for the various types of plants that will meet the needs of the community: starting from food sources to materials for kitchen utensils, agricultural tools, buildings, and even including medicine.



Sketch of Nyi Pohaci Sanghyang Asri by Prilla Tania

The more "advanced" a human civilization is, the more distant its people perceive their relationship with nature. Nature becomes merely an object and a source of material to fulfill their desires in an effort to form an ideal society. Traditional societies tend to see themselves as part of nature; they are subject to nature. They hunt and grow according to the season. Meanwhile, modern society tends to want to try and conquer nature. With the help of technology, spaces that were seasonal were transformed so that one no longer even knows the difference between day and night; now one can grow fruit, flowers and vegetables all year round. The scale of agriculture is getting bigger (even gigantic) while the types of plants grown are getting smaller. Modern society can even marry various types of creatures with genetic engineering for the benefit of humans.

My work "Democratization of Carbohydrates" was part of the *Indonesian Women Artist: Into The Future* exhibition which was held in 2019. What will you eat tomorrow? This question was posed to visitors and was answered by them inserting a wooden slat into a gunny sack. Written on each stick was the Latin name of several carbohydrate sources: *oryza sativa, ipomoea batatas, manihot utilisima, shorgum, canna discolor,* and so on. The gunny sacks were hung on the wall and also had the names of the corresponding plant sources printed on them. On the opposite wall were pictures of the plants drawn in chalk on the black wall. On certain days the wooden slats in the gunny sacks were counted. An empty sack meant there were no visitor responses, and so the plant image on the back wall would then be erased and the next day, the empty sack would be rolled up, and it could no longer be selected by any future visitors. The exhibition continued in this manner.

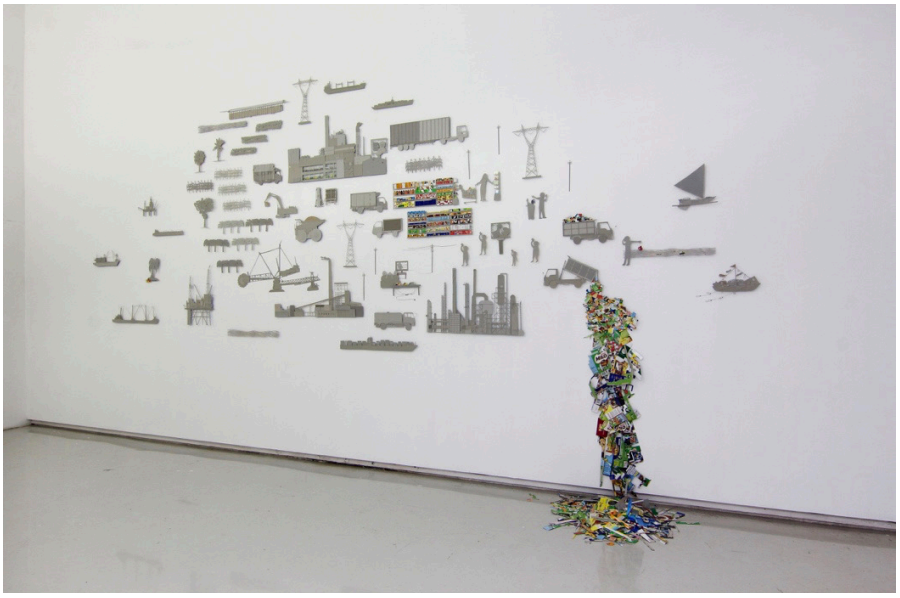


"Democratization of Carbohydrates", part of Indonesian Women Artist: Into The Future exhibition in 2019. Photo by Hendriana Werdhaningsih

Of the various carbohydrate-producing plants on earth, only three to five are the staple food sources for the population of Indonesia and the world. Why? Some of the staple food sources of the ancestors of this land such as *uwi, ganyong, suweg, taro*, and breadfruit are foreign to the present generation, and even to the previous generations who lived and grew up in cities. Even though these plants are very easy to grow and do not require special care, it's a wonder why people prefer to consume rice, which requires special conditions for growing, or even wheat and oats which are clearly not grown in this country due to the climate or other reasons. When people no longer recognize these various sources of carbohydrates, the worry is that this rich biodiversity will slowly disappear, especially if there is no effort to save and reintroduce these sources to the next generations. When given the choice to choose a carbohydrate source, what did the visitors consider? Was it health, economical reasons, lifestyle or social status, or what?

If we refer to the mythology of Nyi Pohaci's body, where the present condition of only rice, and rice again, is developed as the source of staple food, then it could be said that currently, with regards to Nyi Pohaci's body, only the navel is enlarged, while the other body parts have shrunk or even almost disappeared.

From 2004 to 2016 I started a period of living as a hunter and gatherer. I would hunt for experience and would gather ideas. Through works of art, I conveyed thoughts and concerns about natural damage caused by human activities. In the e-exhibition at Selasar Sunaryo, 2013, five works were displayed which presented ideas and materials that aimed to raise awareness of environmental issues caused by humans in their efforts to fulfill their primary needs (food). The main material used for this work was used food packaging (cardboard), which was temporarily borrowed in order that they could later be recycled, and made again into food packaging. In this way, the work indirectly enters our food chain (network). One of the pieces, entitled "Daur Energi" (Photo 4), shows a map of the food web, starting from gardens, then processing, shipping, markets, all the way to the leftover garbage that ends up in the sea.



Daur Energi. Photo Documentation by Selasar Sunaryo Art Space

1
'Wisata sukarelawan' adalah bentuk pariwisata yang menawarkan kepada wisatawan (sebagai sukarelawan yang membayar) berbagai pengalaman peluang sukarela di, kurang lebih, negara 'berkembang' atau 'terbelakang', untuk 'menawarkan dukungan' (misalnya dana, dll.). Mencakup masalah kemiskinan, perawatan kesehatan, perawatan anak, pengajaran bahasa asing, pelestarian alam, dll

From the experience that I gathered, even if it is difficult to farm in countries with four seasons, that did not dampen the enthusiasm of the residents whom I met to produce only food that has guaranteed quality (that is, without pesticides or chemical fertilizers). There is a passion for gardening, which is also a form of expression of gratitude for sufficient water, warm temperatures, and abundant sunshine. During this time, gardening turned out to be a leisurely activity that I pursued on the sidelines of hunting. I start planting European spices (rosemary, oregano, basil, sage, mint) as well as strawberries on a plot of no more than 1.5 by 1.5 square meters in one corner of my parents' house. But with a semi-nomadic lifestyle, a sustainable garden was never formed; with every return from weeks or even months of "hunting," I would find the garden overgrown with wild plants, or find some of the spice plants dead. As a consequence, I would feel this desire to someday settle down, farm and raise livestock. At that time, I chose the year 2014 as my target.

I slightly missed that target, as 2016 was the beginning of the sedentary period for me. I started with gardening and am now entering the stages of farming (wet rice fields) and raising livestock (a pair of manila ducks). In previous periods, I only dared to express thoughts and concerns, and shouted through the art works in the gallery. But in this period, the thoughts are carried on more silently and my concerns slowly dissipate We have settled, with limited knowledge and experience about farming, on land that is 1000 times the area of our previous garden, and life was quite inconvenient in the early years. We did not know where to start. But the first dry season taught us, reminded us, about the importance of water. With the size of a garden like this, watering the garden with a hose is not wise. So, we started to make water reservoirs and make water channels in the form of a drain that snaked through the garden. Armed with intuition, we started cultivating the garden.

We recognized that tropical rainforests are ideal ecosystems in the latitudes of the earth where we live. We try to make our garden resemble a forest. Diversity is the key. We collect and plant various types of vegetation to support our garden. Some of the plants we got from exchanging with fellow farmers, and others from our parents who still live in the village. We "arrange" the garden irregularly: some tall plants—guava, papaya, *kecombrang* (ginger torch), banana—we spread in various positions taking into account the shadows that will block the sun. Then some of these plants are deliberately infested with other plants—passion fruit, *uwi, telang* flower, beans. Tubers, which are a key part of our collection, are also planted in various positions. Plants such as sweet potatoes and pumpkins are planted to cover the soil surface. We sow some plants from seeds by throwing them and scattering them so that (some of the survivors) grow between other plants. We thought that instead of weeding the wild plants, it would be better to just fill or overlap the garden with plants that we could use (eat). Initially this method was quite confusing to our parents, but now they have started to accept our way of managing the garden. Entering the fourth year, the garden has begun to form and we have enjoyed the results every day at lunch. Previously we were more accustomed to eating vegetables from the market but now we have gotten used to eating from the garden. And this is possible because there are various types of leaves, nuts, tubers, and fruit, and even some types of wild plants that we can cultivate every day, and

2
'Spesies karismatik' adalah istilah yang digunakan dalam istilah 'biologi konservasi' serta aktivis lingkungan, untuk menggambarkan spesies hewan dengan nilai simbolis, katakanlah, untuk meningkatkan kesadaran, atau untuk mendapatkan dukungan populer (misalnya mengumpulkan dana) untuk lingkungan kampanye (mis. iklan TV atau dokumenter yang menggambarkan bahaya beruang kutub, gajah, penguin, panda, gorila, simpanse, orangutan, harimau, badak, dll.).

in the rainy season, if we are lucky, we can find wild mushrooms (*suung Bulan/suung tanduk*) for sautéing or cooking as *pepes*. Our routine before lunch is usually to walk around the garden and collect ingredients to be processed, so the menu is determined on the spot.



(Leuwigoeng, Bandung)

Entering 2020 we started to learn how to manage rice fields, so, naturally we started to follow the rice field planting pattern, from soaking the seeds to drying the rice which turned out to be much more complicated than managing the garden; no wonder that this plant gave birth to various technologies (terracing, subak) and myths such as Nyi Pohaci (Sundanese), Dewi Sri (Java and Bali), and Inari (Japan). The experience of rice fields is very new for us and has been quite a hassle; throughout this year most of our time is spent tending the rice in the fields. Apart from the knowledge conveyed by our parents, we also observed each stage of rice growth in the two seasons that we have experienced (rainy season and dry season). We are currently studying the method used by Masanobu Fukuoka (1913–2008, Natural Farming) in managing his rice fields and gardens. We feel this method is in line with what we want to achieve. To be able to carry out this method we must really recognize the ecosystem (climate, plants and animals and their interactions) in our environment.

The place where we live now is named, Leuwigoéng: leuwi means a hole or basin at the bottom of a river while goéng means to turn or whirl. As the name suggests, hopefully this place can be a place to learn and to reach a basic understanding of nature. The more people take part in caring for the whole of Nyi Pohaci's body, the more sustainable nature will be.

Bandung, December 2020

Author's Bio

Prilla Tania is a multi-disciplinary artist whose works include soft sculpture, installations, videos and photos. Prilla's works are influenced by the idea of food sovereignty and the sustainable relationship between humans and nature. Recent notable exhibitions include 'In To The Future', National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta (2019); 'Jogja Biennale XII: Not A Dead End', Yogyakarta (2013); 'E', Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, Bandung (2013, solo). Currently she is managing a garden called Leuwigoeng in Bandung focusing on organic farming and sustainable living.

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