Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia*. 2020, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, xxxiv + 368 pp, ISBN: 9781478004691, price: USD 29.95 (paperback).

Karen Strassler's new book "Demanding Images: Democracy, Mediation, and the Image-Event in Indonesia" assembles some of the most explosive and painful scenes in recent Indonesian history. From mass rape of ethnic Chinese women to unchecked violence and intimidation by powerful militia groups, Strassler delves into issues that exceed and confuse the politics of representation and visibility. *Demanding Images* presents its central concept of an "image-event" to develop a distinctly social analysis of image-centric popular behavior, in particular how political and politicized speech happens through the circulation, manipulation, and resignification of provocative images. How do we interact within and around and through images? These images have prolific energy yoked to morality and democracy, and have been launched into a media climate ripe for fragmentation and misinformation. A less nuanced writer might configure the analysis to work solely between the categories of meme and misinformation. But Strassler attends more broadly to an active sense of what such demanding images do as they are disseminated. Pictures do not only seem designed to provoke certain forms of popular engagement, attention, and salutation; they appear to directly feed Indonesian understandings of civic participation and democratic representation. To give a sense of the political significance attached to the iterability of images, whether expressed through new media or through new channels in public space like activist art, Strassler writes that "each iteration of an image transforms the time and space of its emergence" (p. 13). The vivid color photographs that introduce the book become a visual timeline of the emergence of a democratic public sphere in Indonesia, of ordinary citizens in action. Documentary and pop-art at the same time, these images are representative of the layered viscosity of urban space in Indonesia, a visual overlapping concatenation. One image in particular, plate 7, shows a crowd selfie posted to Twitter by a volunteer for presidential candidate Jokowi that captures the affective power of the crowd, a power that came to determine his electability and legitimacy.

Demanding Images is organized chronologically, following sixteen years of major political and cultural events in Indonesia (1998–2014), albeit mostly located in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, two major cities in Java. Chapter 1: *Face Value* tracks the demise of the New Order through the joyous appropriation of state-backed signs of power and authority, whether these be masks of Suharto or "play" versions of high-value bills now featuring dissident and oppositional political figures. The sudden public fascination with political play money

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exposes the hidden truths of past electoral politics; rather than being the dumb recipients of vote-buying tactics, the public has now broken the state monopoly on “money politics.” The ludic play of the first chapter is followed by a sobering chapter on the failure of visibility and justice in the case of the mass rapes of ethnic Chinese women during the May Riots. Chapter Two: *The Gender of Transparency* shows how rape victims could not overcome fear, social stigma, and real threats to their safety, to testify or present themselves publicly, a condition of invisibility that formed the pretext for state denials that human rights violations and sexual violence took place. At the same time, the (majoritarian) public’s consumption of rape imagery of an ethnic minority forced a displacement of sexual violence into the realm of pornography and deceptively edited images. Such harsh conditions for evoking the visibility of rape victims have led others, not the victims themselves, to conduct brave artistic experiments to address racial and sexual trauma in film, literature, and visual art.

One of the more curious examples in the book (and in real life) occurs in Chapter Three: *The Scandal of Exposure* with the “telematics expert” Roy Suryo, an academic who soared to national fame and political relevance through his ability to fix the outlines of Indonesian criminal behavior through visual and digital technology. In several high profile court cases, Roy Suryo served as a self-proclaimed expert, able to break down potentially deceptive images, videos, and audiofiles into bytes, signals, and waves—and in doing so turned the facticity of images into a blunt instrument of legal and moral judgment. His techniques confirmed what counted as pornography, and unveiled disgraced politicians and corrupt officials. However, Roy Suryo’s claim to expertise by deploying dense technical language was hardly infallible. In the same chapter, Strassler describes how ordinary citizens mocked and questioned the veracity of Roy Suryo’s judgments, creating Youtube channels and websites dedicated to satirical images and videos that skewered the technology expert. The wave of entertainment television and celebrity sex scandals that Roy Suryo rode to political relevance shaped a noisy and consequential national space that also bolstered the vigilante efforts of right-wing militias to assert their cultural dominance.

Chapter 4: *Naked Effects* highlights the rise of islamist right-wing militias like the FPI that acted with complete confidence as a fascistic visual police force with its own image-agenda and apparatus. Exploiting these volatile images, the FPI conducted illegal raids on bars and cafes, film screenings and art shows, in the name of preserving public (Islamic) morality. Strassler’s analysis of how two worlds collided during such a raid gives us the analytical thrust of this chapter and foregrounds the book’s conclusion. In 2005, the FPI protested the CP Biennale in Jakarta, a highbrow international art event, on account of the

controversial “pornographic” display of the digital photographic artwork “Pinkswing Park” by Agus Suwage and Davy Linggar, two well-known figures in the art world. Pinkswing Park depicted a famous television actor and a model in apparent nudity, but what would otherwise have been a little-known exhibit outside of elite cultural circles became a media circus with the FPI’s bold intervention. Any argument based on artistic merit and therefore liberal and class based world-views about the sophisticated, internationalist register of Indonesian art died in the face of public discourse about pornography and Islam. The emergence of several publics as a result—a normative “mass” public, a progressive (but out of touch?) middle class public, and a vigilant and proactive right wing public—provides a template for understanding the political polarities that characterized the 2014 image-wars of the Jokowi and Prabowo presidential campaigns.

The problem of public space as the arena for political image-events continues in Chapter 5: Street Signs, which focuses on the well-established post-Suharto street art and graffiti traditions of Yogyakarta. Juxtaposing the oft-critical, anti-state messages of local street artists and the pro-military urban inscriptions attributed to the anonymous masses, Strassler asks what happens when supposedly democratic channels such as street art serve illiberal purposes. The weaponization of urban images reaches its apex in the conclusion, where the image-driven crowd surfaces on Twitter and Instagram to stand as authorized signs of national sovereignty. It should be no surprise to the readership that recent online surveys have deemed Indonesians the least “polite” (i.e. civil) in their online behavior. The visual excesses of the 2014 presidential campaign trail fused media space (the ‘twitterverse’ and its curatorial home on 24-hour news outlets) with democratic national space, so much so that the candidates were assessed in terms of the militant participation of their supporters. These included not only the historical, undifferentiated masses, but also legitimate citizens who knew how to behave in these new digitalized venues for democratic participation. In sports stadiums and at rock concerts, the politically awakened middle classes congregated and proclaimed their presence through crowd selfies that spread through their own social networks and in syndication thereafter. One cannot help but see the sleek and wealthy look of the selfies Strassler includes—these are the privileged volunteers who felt sufficiently cosmopolitan to circulate freely in politicized national contexts.

The critique I would like to make is directed at a small but evocative statement located in the preface, where the post-authoritarian era of the book (by now a *longue durée* in Indonesian political time) is described as “exciting but anxious times of transition” (*preface*, p. ix). Rather, the social, racial, class, and religious dimensions of the political controversies that the book exam-

ines deserve a more direct assessment. “Exciting and angry” or “inspiring and ridiculous” might very well characterize Indonesian visual experiments, as they would other image-fueled regimes around the world, especially when image-work is attached to capitalist investments, nativist sentiments, harmful lies, and the rehabilitation of dubious subjects. I wonder how and when the debates within anthropologies sited in the US or Europe might, with full intention, cohere with the debates over morality, justice, and techno-visual imaginations in Indonesia, and whether the space and time for anxiety (and hence reflection) remain at all viable in the era of high-cost, high-impact electoral politics here and there.

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