2001 Workshop.

A Communion of Understanding
Steven Pettifor

For the last half decade, a small but determined group of Thai-based female artists, historians and curators have been actively striving to gain a better perception of what female art is and where it eventually could be. Under the banner Womanifesto, this enthusiastic gang has expedited three international art events on Thai soil, their goal to create a permanent cross-cultural bond and communication of female art in Asia and hopefully beyond.

"Women are the weaker sex." This is the long-rooted popular misconception that modern woman has to battle when trying to expel gender stereotypes – struggling to attain that elusive goal of sexual equality. Rendering a maxim to a populace so that it's absorbed, remembered and effective in its' intent is no easy task, especially when you have several thousand years of conditioning to over come. Western women have made some progress in redressing the centuries of global collective psyche. However, in Asia as with other continents, gender prejudice and inequality are still strongly prevalent and permeate all strata of society.

In Thailand, a determined network of female arts practitioners have been exploring methods to promote and better understand international women's art. Their concerted efforts as a movement took root back in 1997 with 18 artists gathering for *Womanifesto*, which was held in the capital's independent art space of Concrete House. The event germinated and expanded further in 1999, when ranks bolstered to 32 participants for *Womanifesto II*, that year situated in Bangkok's Saranrom Park. This October it underwent its most significant mutation yet for *Womanifesto Workshop 2001* set up at Boon Baban farm in the rural North Eastern province of Si Saket.

Varsha Nair, a Bangkok-based Indian artist who participated in both previous events, has become increasingly involved with the project and is one of the principal protagonists at this year's workshop. "An event such as this is not about keeping male artists out. It is more about addressing and understanding what the pre-occupations are of women as human beings, and as artists coming together out of their own individual backgrounds to communicate first hand," affirms Nair.

Womanifesto I and II were fruitful international exposes of female art – the provoking title enforced a particular sexual agenda with several artists in attendance expressing a definite political intent. However, the limitation with the first event in 1997 was the primarily closed shop environment – held within a highbrow, clinical gallery vacuum and almost exclusively witnessed by the Thai art establishment and its clique of followers. Although Thai art still exudes sexist tendencies with a strong male hierarchy, it's decidedly more liberal than society's majority. Therefore as a target audience – it is restricted and confined.

Spear headed and coordinated by Thai artist Nittaya Ueareeworakul along with her fellow Studio Xang representative Pantini Chamnianwai and supported by prominent Thai art historian Somporn Rodboon, the performance and visual art project contended for greater awareness over mutual concerns and sensitivities within the female art community. Through creative intercourse they hoped to formulate guises to overcome obstacles, barriers and discrimination that confront women in their respective cultures and societies.

Womanifesto II aimed to consolidate and reinforce the foundations laid by its' predecessor, thereby cementing an institution that would hopefully lead to wider respect and recognition from within and outside the international art sphere. Thanks in part to the then city Governor Dr Bichit Rattakul, the 1999 event took place during a period of cultural liberalism and encouraged ambitious whispers of a leap toward forging Bangkok as a freethinking artistic Asian hub. "We seem to have less freedom than our male counterparts. We hope that one day Womanifesto will grow into something more meaningful for female artists. Besides the female movement, Bangkok should get credit as being the first in Asia to establish this base," declared Chamnianwai.

To Ueareeworakul, *Womanifesto* was more about building friendships with females from other nationalities – an exciting opportunity for communicating through collaborative activities. With that notion in mind, there was a major revamp over structure and method of engagement, precipitating the call for a more workshop oriented gathering. Ueareeworakul excitedly describes the intent; " We wanted to keep things simple, avoiding orthodox institutions through our own network of women. The reception has been so positive that many women were prepared to fund themselves to attend this exchange-cum-documentary-art-picnic." She also hoped the event would encourage greater interaction among young emerging Thai female artists, who she feels are still reluctant to make their voices heard.

There was also a desire to flee the constraints and distractions of Bangkok's urban locale and focus on the project from a grass roots level. Escaping the technological comfort of the capital, they were offered the up-country farm of Thai male artist Mitree Parahom in the remote province of Si Saket, close to the Cambodian border. The Parahom family's residence became a picturesque 10-day commune attended by 12 artists and organisers from Thailand, Pakistan, India, China, Japan, USA, Germany and Finland. The workshop is funded by the Chiang Mai based Heinrich Boell Foundation, a non profit German organisation who's aim is the international promotion of intellectual openness.

Free from communicative luxuries like the Internet, the group of females had ample time for discussion and hands on interaction during the *Womanifesto Workshop 2001*. Due to time restrictions and personal schedules, this had been the main pitfall of the previous *Womanifesto* events. They were pulled together by the practicalities of their country retreat. On top of the regular power cuts, one artist came down with a fever while a scorpion stung another participant. Visiting American curator and co-organiser Naomi Urabe elaborates upon the mechanics, "Obviously personalities differ, and isolation accentuates that. Not everyone feels comfortable with the group dynamic. There may have been language difficulties, but this usually ended in laughter. The only real apprehension came from nature itself (the bugs!), which was bound to happen when dropping a bunch of city types into a rural domain."

The first day of the workshop, crafts people from the surrounds came to the farm and demonstrated traditional artistry such as basket weaving. Initially this was fairly static and one-sided, but this soon gave way to artists like Karla Sachse from Germany and Pakistani Nilofar Akmut offering more experimental input by introducing customised materials like paper and wire instead of the common bamboo. Eyebrows rose with momentary shock from the local artisans, but this quickly led to more meaningful discourse. The craftsman returned to contribute on a daily basis with discussions between the artists and villagers on subjects like form versus function, aesthetic appeal against practical usage.

Some of the artists continuously worked alongside the craftspeople, like Ueareeworakul's adaptations of woven bamboo fishing baskets into larger organic sculptural forms. Other participants branched out and focused on certain elements in the landscape that also had some bearing upon their own oeuvre. Japanese artist Yoshiko Kanai teamed up with several villagers and student volunteers to toil her large *Muddy Woman* in a nearby paddy field.

One of the highlights of the workshop was Thai artist Surojana Sethabutr building a kiln directly from the land. The simple yet effective bucket shaped kiln was used to fire creations made by visitors to the farm, the clay dug straight from the earth and several termite mounds.

Overall Urabe feels that the workshop achieved its self-imposed goals, "This has exceeded my expectations and been really successful. Several of the artists I'd never met or seen their work before and it's been impressive getting to know them and their art. Interacting on a more personal level outside a gallery or studio. We all have to deal with being removed from our urban environment and deposited in a very rural surround. It's given us a feeling of camaraderie and being connected not only with each other but with this local society as a whole."

Another way the community was involved was children and teachers from a nearby school participating in the workshop. They had the opportunity to mould clay sculptures in Sethabutr's kiln, Akmut took a group into the surrounding forest and got them drawing into the earth while Thai filmmaker Lawan Jirasuradej instructed an older group of students on the principles of camera work and let them wander off and shoot what they wanted. The results of which Nair says "It was really interesting to see how quickly than began to see images and to project what was in their, they adapted well to the shown methods."

Often rudimentary, the improvement and enrichment of rural teaching methods was an area the group was very conscious of, particularly for Thai arts administrator and co-organiser Preenun Nana. She feels the workshop can serve as a tool for encouraging rural students and teachers alike to appreciate their remote environment and to use it as stimulation, rather than succumbing to the pull of the big city and migrating in the desire to 'better' themselves. For her workshop project, Nana drew inspiration from local vegetation – the edible and medicinal qualities in much of the surrounding flora, getting students to explain the properties and labelling the plants for documentation.

Nair reinforces this objective, "The video documentation and distribution to other schools in the area as well as to provincial universities is a fundamental part of the project. We hope to make a difference and initiate some kind of thinking process for the future. These 30 plus school children will grow up remembering this experience and perhaps a couple of them will become educators, art instructors or even artists themselves. If we've contributed to this, then that's an achievement in itself."

Instilling pride in the youth is vital if traditional expertise is to remain alive. Too many are consumed by the lure of technology and the urban environment. "I'm worried about the survival of these craft techniques. Usually the elders pass their knowledge down to the younger generation, but they have no interest anymore. Their kids just want to move to the city, find a job and start earning steady cash. We hope in someway to affect this trend," laments Nana.

At the outset it may of appeared the farm populace wasn't getting as much from the transposal as the artists obviously were, but after witnessing the interactive process – the sharing of information and mutual development of craft know-how, it became clear how significant and long lasting the effect the workshop would chisel upon the villagers. Seeing the enthusiastic response by the visiting artists to objects skilfully crafted by these traditional artisans; instilled the community with a genuine sense of pride they hardly ever felt.

"This has been somewhat a journey into the unknown. What the locals will gain from this project is a long-term question; in time they'll maybe start experimenting in the employment of core materials and their designs might start permeating giving them the edge when trying to sell in the marketplace. More importantly this is hopefully just a beginning, it's more about the ongoing contacts that have been forged here, which will keep several of the local artists like Nittaya (Ueareeworakul) and Surojana (Sethabutr) returning here to work periodically," comments Nair thoughtfully.

The skills employed by rural craftspeople are rapidly disappearing in the shadow of modernisation. The workshop tried to impress the importance of keeping these methods alive, which falls into a grey area – the negation of modern methodology for the sake of cultural preservation – also denies the capitalist opportunity for increased productivity and economic prosperity. But for Ueareeworakul it's been an uplifting experience, "News of the workshop spread quickly in the nearby village and surrounds. It's been valuable to this area and many people have passed by in interest. It's reinforced the significance of their culture and the appreciation of their crafts."

In the third instalment of *Womanifesto* the emphasis has altered drastically from the advancement of female art to an interchange (involving considerable male input) and sustainment of Thailand's rural society. This is a long-term task requiring more commitment and interaction if it's to achieve its goals. Success will be gauged not just on the 10-day workshop but also what happens subsequently. Plans for the next *Womanifesto* are already in embryo with Nair's idea for "a location free year-long collaboration between women and their chosen partner, be it another female, male, artist or other professional. This would all be put together and presented as a travelling exhibit."

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