

Alana Hunt, Judy Freya Sibayan and Varsha Nair on Intergenerational Art Practices

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The following conversation—like all conversation and interviews in this anthology—exists between two registers. On the one hand, it is a formal contribution, undertaken for the purpose of publication, on the other, it is a document of collective remembering which moves with the meandering flow of conversation. Read or watched across these registers, we are given insight not only into the history and practices of Womanifesto, but the intimacies of recollection, maintenance and production.

In the case of the conversation below, there are connectivity issues throughout the recording. While the video has been left uncut, disruptions have been largely edited out of the transcript.



Still from Alana Hunt, Judy Freya Sibayan and Varsha Nair, 'Alana Hunt, Judy Freya Sibayan and Varsha Nair on Intergenerational Art Practices', in Yvonne Low, Varsha Nair, Roger Nelson, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Nitaya Ueareeworakul and Marni Williams, *The Womanifesto Way*, Power Publications, 2026.

Varsha Nair (VN): Okay, here we are. Where do we begin?

Judy Freya Sibayan (JFS): This is supposed to be a discussion on Womanifesto as a challenge to the Biennale. But I was thinking, Womanifesto is already beyond the biennale. So, at its simplest, I think Womanifesto is already beyond the question of the biennale. Except for a few years where it had large scale exhibitions every two years, it doesn't work like the Biennale where different artists exhibit periodically. Womanifesto on the other hand, keeps exhibiting the same artists together with new artists as it gathers more women artists to exhibit and work with. And, this way it becomes more potent. It's power is actually based on the growing of a community. Okay. Hello? You seem frozen.

Alana Hunt (AH): No, no, I was writing notes. I was lingering on those words that you just said.

VN: Yes. Me, too. Judy, as you say, it's beyond the Biennale. It doesn't work like a biennale. it's not curated. I mean, perhaps loosely. I would say it's brought together with a sort of loose idea of curating, like we did with the

'Flowing Collections' exhibition. But it's also not curated, in the sense we are not saying 'this is a work we want'. As you were saying, I think, this power is based on the growing of the community. And the power also comes from that openness. I think a lot of it comes from the letting go. What was really great about this exhibition, was the behind the scenes, our working on the exhibition, on, that sort of care.

JFS: A practice that is not mandated externally. So it's a self-legitimising practice instead of relying on somebody else's authority to say, do this, do that. It's a self-organising, self-regulating practice.

VN: Yes.

AH: And, Varsha, I just wanted to ask you on the topic of letting go of things, do you embody that in your own individual artistic practice, or is it more something that's present in Womanifesto?

VN: I think it's there in my own practice as well. Funnily enough, I was thinking quite deeply after I returned from Bangkok, what is it that I do in my own practice? And is there anything that is really like a defined practice? Some artists can very clearly say, this is my practice. And, I got a bit worried because, well, I've reached this age and stage now and I'm not able to really put my finger on it and say, this is my practice.

You can't call my work community based, you can't call it political, or socially engaged specifically. You can't specifically call me a painter or installation artist. Or a performance artist. And I thought, well, actually, that's all right. And I think that is the letting go, rather than getting into this mindset of no, no, no, I must, I must do things this way or I must start to define this or start to develop work along this line, which you know, often leads to

ignoring everything else that comes in and gets me excited and gets me going. So I never thought about it Alana, but now that you mention it, I think it is. It is this letting go, and in a way going with what really feels potent at the moment or pertinent to the moment.

JFS: I think this has to do with what Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez wrote about.¹ And to the trope of 'Flowing Connections'—we really can't simply say this is our practice and differentiate it, separate it from the many other things we do beyond the usual activity called artmaking. The maintenance tasks that Eileen cites—archiving, teaching, organising—and beyond these, curating, publishing, and writing, all these are the totality of our kind of artmaking. There's no separation nor conflicts amongst these activities.

This brings me to the question Alana asked when she emailed us. You wrote, 'as a younger artist, I would like you to help me figure out how you've maintained your work and how you have had the stamina to go on working.' Varsha and I met in 1998, and at the time, she and I were already well on our way to knowing, believing and practicing that a de-centred practice. Not depending on institutions for making art was our future—thus the practice of co-creating Womanifesto, for Varsha, and Scapular Gallery Nomad, for me, were foundational works for being self-reliant, self-authorising, and self-governing. They saved us from wasting our time and energies, (now more finite and precious) on waiting for, calling on, or proposing to art institutions to support us. And this meant basically relying on working with many individuals who believed in our mode of production, and our taking on many other roles beyond just making art objects for

exhibitions. And, for me, having a stable job teaching for 30 years which paid the bills.

AH: Judy, I do feel when we're having the LASUEMO zooms, I'm sitting in that zoom room with sometimes 20 or more women, sometimes less. Women of different ages and generations and from all around the world who have been practicing for many, many years in many different ways and finding their own paths. It's very inspiring and nourishing, and humbling. Maybe you guys don't feel it, but to be in your presence and to witness this, I think that it's also possible for me to keep making, and to do it over the course of a whole life. Because it is very uncertain terrain. How one pieces together the life of an artist while still having a roof over your head and paying bills and having some quality of life, and to keep making. I also love the different personalities. And seeing that reflected in their work—how their personalities shape their work or how their work is informing who they are. That space that has been created through LASUEMO is very nourishing for me.

I wanted to also talk a little bit about Eileen's article. Towards the end she compares Varsha's practice, but also Womanifesto more broadly, with Rirkrit Tiravanija's work around the land. I actually learned of Womanifesto via a Google search around social practice in Bangkok, and Thailand more broadly. That was in 2012 when I was working on *Cups of Nun Chai* (2010–2020), and about to travel through Bangkok on my way back to Delhi. When I read about Womanifesto, I saw Varsha's name associated with it, and I already knew Varsha. I'd seen her work in Delhi. And so I wrote to her and asked to share a cup of nun chai with her as part of that body of work. So Varsha and I met, but I also met a few other people at Gallery Ver in

Bangkok, which Rirkrit supported. So somehow my Google search led to both these things. So it's really interesting for me to think about where my Google search led so many years later.

And now in this article, Eileen has compared these two different approaches to collective and relational ways of working. Thinking about women artists and feminism I also want to note that my son is just next to me now eating dinner. So as we're talking about labor and maintenance, it's all very present.

What I liked in Eileen's article was when she compared an understated quietude with the visibility of grandness. It reminded me of a British artist who lives in America who I've worked with called Lenka Clayton. She once said to me that invisibility can be your superpower as well. We were talking about that in relation to women's labor and the invisibility of parenting, but also the invisible labor that goes into being an artist where the world only really ever sees the tip of the iceberg.

I wonder if you want to talk a little bit more on this idea, and experience of visibility and invisibility. You spoke about community building as the power of Womanifesto. But also I like the term you used about self-legitimising. That's quite an empowering way to think. That is hard for me to do personally, but something one can try to foster.

JFS: I started doing self-instituted work because I once worked in one of the most powerful art institutions in the Philippines—I was the museum director of the erstwhile Contemporary Art Museum of the Philippines of the Cultural Center of the Philippines in the late 1980s. But I realised I didn't have the political wherewithal to work with such a huge bureaucratic institution that dealt specifically with spectacle. I quit after two

years.

My departure marked the beginning of my disengagement with art institutions where I experienced artists largely being dependent on the tremendous amount of resources provided by such institutions for their legitimization. It marked the beginning of my disengagement from institutionalised production of art and my crisis of faith in art as worthy of my vocation. I did not make art for five years.

I had to do a lot of internal work figuring out what I really needed to do; and where and how I can have agency. Scapular Gallery Nomad showed me the way, a gallery I curated and wore daily everywhere for five years, it was small, light, nimble, nomadic, almost invisible work. It was not a monolith. It had to do with friendships. Varsha and Karla actually exhibited in this gallery Taking on all the roles of running a gallery, I had full control and thus agency over my work.

It was about self-care, where the energy and resources that it required were based only on the scale of the life of one person. It brought me to the real work that continues up to today.

So with self-instituting work, I created my own institutes, and I self-mandated, and self-legitimised, which was a form of self-care. When it comes to matters of visibility and invisibility, and Rirkrit's land work, that had to do with large scale and spectacle, in contrast, Womanifesto has more to do with the quiet and invisible work of building a collective, a community. It's actually a kind of work that has to do with sensing and following an un-prescribed path where things open up specifically for you outside of institutional practices, rather than waiting for something to open for you. Or work where you go it alone on un-chartered paths

believing and trusting that eventually others will be there for you.

VN: It's very interesting. Going back to visibility invisibility, we knew that with Womanifesto we would have to 'self' everything, from putting ourselves out there to writing about ourselves, and to just keep going.

We knew that we were visible, but we were ignored in a way by the movers and shakers of the art world, by the gatekeepers. But, as you say, we plod on and we go on. The work, this invisible labor, it is hard work but it doesn't feel hard because you are so into it, and it's something you really want to do.

Judy, as you said, this self-managed, certainly self-legitimised and self-instituted, it's all based around this concept of care, of support, of not making unreasonable demands, so that you have the energy that you can put back into carrying on with what you feel passionate about.

JFS: I believe the strength of Womanifesto is its ways of doing things originally unrecognised by that artworld that ignored it precisely because these were ways beyond the demands, remit, orbit of that artworld. It didn't have the eye, the right lens to see you. Thus, their blindness to and the non-recognition of Womanifesto's work! But what you were actually doing was creating your own audience, your own public. You were actually producing and circulating your art and yourselves on your own terms. You were already self-instituting. And thus most important, you yourselves were making your very own artworld. An artworld not of spectacle and consumerism. But it took 20 years before your archive started to take shape making evident this world-building.

VN: Yeah. 1997 to 2018.

AH: So what happened in 2018? Was that when Asia Art Archive started archiving Womanifesto?

VN: Yes. Well, our archive had been building up. There had been a conversation with Asia Art Archive before, when they had a representative in Bangkok, and they were interested in digitising our archive, but that kind of just sat there. And then there was somebody who started Thai Archives and we thought, great. Especially, if it can be in Thailand. But that didn't really proceed either. I always felt quite strongly that the archive needed to be digitised, made available online, so that people who are researching can actually access some of the documents and material, beyond a Google search. And then, around October or November of 2018, I was contacted by John Tain, head of research at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, and at the same time there was this symposium that was being organised by Yvonne Low, Clare Veal and Roger Nelson and it was going to be organised with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. And they got into conversation with us about exhibiting the archive. So all of a sudden there was momentum. We were starting to talk with Asia Art Archive about the technicalities, and also then, immediately, thinking about the exhibition part as well, and the context of the symposium. This led to exhibitions at CommDe at Chulalongkorn University, and in Sydney at The Cross Art Projects. The symposium was held at Sydney University, through Power Institute.

AH: Yes, I remember that.

VN: It was, of course, precious material for us. But to suddenly be able to actually, for the first time, start to share it with the public, it just

became something else. It was really special. At that point I was also preparing to leave Thailand and move back to India. I'd already had a conversation with Nitaya, and I had said this archive has to come to you now. I'd been taking care of the boxes over the years. They moved wherever I moved. And, there was no occasion to open up the boxes and go through the material. So when Nitaya happened to be visiting Bangkok, I said, come, let's open the boxes. So we really got into that process of looking through the boxes to see what is there. And, having those moments like, oh look at this, and oh, wow, do you remember that? We were walking down memory lane and really enjoyed going through it all. But then it was time to start working with the material—sorting and making decisions on what we will exhibit and how. When we started Womanifesto, we never thought about archiving. I don't think it was even in our heads to get any kind of professional photographer to document the whole exhibition, and the proceedings. So what survives from 1997 is literally a few photos that were taken by the artists who were involved, or what the artists had given as a proposal—slides and photographs of the work that they wanted to present. So, there's really very little material from that time. But in 1999, I remember saying to Nitaya that we are going to have to start documenting, because otherwise further down the line we won't remember and we won't have anything to talk about, and share what we've been doing. I was also aware of the fact that, maybe more so in Thailand, memory is in a way, well, what is past is past—it is the letting go. So, I kept saying we need to document, to have these reference points that would be available to future generations to look back and to see

what was happening in the late 90s, for instance. And, so, we never thought of it as archiving, but more documenting. And that included writing, that included saving all these bits of paper and filing them away, and cutting out any little press report, and all these texts and everything that we would come across, and keeping all of that. So, the thought was there that this material must be saved.

JFS: Which brings us to what Eileen says about how the work of women artists, and women's work are most of the time off the record. Thus the impulse to keep things for the future is actually an impulse to put things on the record.

Also in fleshing out our art practice, enfleshing, that's a word from Eileen—in terms of writing about our stories of our practices—the narratives of practice, this is also a big project for us because any artwork that doesn't get written about is going to be mostly invisible in the future. So we must take responsibility of making visible our work now and in the future if no one else will.

Writing is needed to strengthen our narratives of our own practice. I think this is one of the reasons why I continue to publish the online *Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art* of which Varsha is a member of the editorial board. She writes about women's art practice. I think most of your issues have to do with women, right Varsha?

VN: I don't think it's strictly just women—Judy?

Judy's internet cuts suddenly. Varsha and Alana are disappointed

AH: These internet glitches do really reflect the notion of letting go of that which you started with. When I first joined LASUEMO the zoom meetings felt very unscheduled and uncontrolled.² I was used to being in other zoom meetings where someone is chairing the discussion and there's a time limit. Whereas I think the LASUEMO meetings that we have when we come together, they're unruly because they're not scheduled or controlled in that way. And I think that's a beautiful thing. Maybe also accidental in a way that reflects the idea of going with the flow, but also a little bit subversive in relation to the way I am used to working personally.

I'm socially conditioned to behave on zoom meetings in a certain way, and I like that there's an intimacy and casualness that comes with our LASUEMO meetings that subverts the idea of an agenda. So, I'm just trying to think of Judy's technological breakdowns right now along those lines.

VN: In the early discussions about LASUEMO we asked ourselves should these meetings be recorded? And we very clearly said, no, we don't want that.

I also remember between Lena, *durbahn and myself, when we were discussing things, we made a very conscious decision that we don't want LASUEMO to be like a gallery presentation, we want to keep it very informal.

In the beginning, I must say, it was quite stressful because somebody has to moderate it, at least. But how do you moderate without saying, 'oh, now your time's up?!' We can lay out a loose framework and hope that people will just be aware of the fact that we are all in this together and everybody needs to have time to input, so, don't hog time. Sometimes we went for nearly two hours or even more. And we were wrung out at the end of it.

We haven't discussed it but I think now we've reached what the three of us had hoped for, that LASUEMO would have this sort of ease about it. Something similar to a group of friends meeting on a Sunday, you know, that kind of a feel to it. It feels really good now. And, I know, Alana, you missed the last couple of sessions when we talked about this project that we thought about when we were actually in Thailand. Virginia had come as well, and Lena was there, and we were all in Udon Thani at Baan Womanifesto, on Nitaya's farm, and, Lena and I had sort of talked about how it would be good to have a project that would span the whole of 2024, to think of something that we can build over the year, and so we talked.

Well, Lena talked about something that she and Iva, Ivana Lakic, who has joined LASUEMO now, had done with the students back in Lucerne. They made some sound recordings and there's a piece with it. And she said it was really special. So, I said why don't we think about something like that? And then, of course, Virginia was there and we all know Virginia is really good with video and sound. She's been working quite a lot with sound, as has Iva. We put it out there and they both said great, yes, we can do it (editing/bringing the sound piece together). That's how we came up with this idea of doing it over the whole year. And instead of the four seasons, we call it the 'Three Seasons—Sonic Trilogy.'

It's really not seasonally set at all because, you know, we're talking about the weather again, and we're talking about how the seasons are really completely out of order to what we understand them as being from before. Instead, we're talking about the time of the day. So, it's the start of the day, middle of the day and then end of the day. That's the three seasons, or the three recordings that we are

asking everyone for. Also it's nice, this kind of openness. Not controlling everything, as you mentioned, Alana, allows for something else. This is a space for ideas to come out as part of the discussion.

AH: I sent Virginia my audio for morning last week.

VN: Yeah. Wonderful.

AH: Judy, I feel like you got cut off before when you wanted to say something more about what Eileen has written about or thought.

JFS: The fleshing out of women's art practice—

AH: Yes.—

JFS: It has to do with the archive actually. It is after all a collection of materials—a primary source from which narratives of our practices and our lives will have been written from—'enfleshed' from. I consider my self-archive as my other body and, you know, it is a body of materials that will live on after I die. But for the moment, it's more like a prop when I tell stories about my art practice, it's what Peggy Phelan refers to as a 'theatrical surround' when one performs the telling of one's life. But I'm curious, Alana, about you, having now moved to Sydney, what are your thoughts about your future in terms of your practice? Because I sense that some of your work, like *Cups of Nun Chai*, has a life of its own now. It's being shown here and then it pops up there. And all your other works seem to have that nature or character like, like you don't have to exert too much effort because people do know about it. And then they're interested, and they're interested to host the work or exhibit it.

AH: I am really interested in finding ways to circulate work, both within and outside of the art world. So perhaps my work lends itself to that kind of ongoing movement. But there is a lot of effort that goes on behind it all.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, my life and my work has been quite rooted in Kashmir (in South Asia) and Miriwoong Country (in the north-west of Australia). Although seemingly disparate, my work and life has ricocheted and resonated across these two places, with a lot of similar conceptual threads. And each place comes to inform my understanding of the other.

In Kashmir my work is looking at state violence and resistances to that, through things like memorialisation and breaking communication blackouts, and the place of the media. But through all of that, a sense of conversation is central.

Similarly, in Australia my work looks at colonial violence in the everyday; really trying to examine the materialisation of non-Indigenous life on stolen Aboriginal land through things like tourism, development and legislation—which I see in Kashmir also. Since 2011, in Australia, I was living in this really remote place. A place I thought I would be for the rest of my life. Perhaps I still will be in some ways, but now I'm in Sydney, in Gadigal Country, and the future feels like a little bit of an unknown horizon. Though I can still feel a sense of continuity, actually, between Kashmir and the Kimberley and where I am now. Perhaps the threads are in me, as much as the places I am in. So moving to Sydney is not like a thread is cut off suddenly, but rather the threads continue weaving in interesting ways.

Varsha, you spoke about how you used to feel a little bit bad about not being easily categorised or definable as an artist.

I have felt that too, and I have also felt bad

about the slowness of my work. *Cups of Nun Chai* was something I began in 2010, and I knew it would be a commitment of a couple of years. But it's 2024 and the work is still with me now, and I'm still carrying it forward.

However, I've come to find that really nourishing as an artist—when work takes on a life of its own. When it starts moving in ways and with people that are not neatly or necessarily tied to me.

VN: Yeah, it's not that I feel bad that I cannot categorise myself, but it's about accepting that I cannot be categorised in any one way. And that is actually a good thing when I think deeper about it, rather than trying to analyse and think, 'why?'; 'what does that mean?'; and, 'where does that place me?' And I think that that's actually a really good thing, because that frees you up a lot.

Judy, I remember this so well, at one point we were talking about something and I said, oh, well, you know, I'm just diving into this, and I don't know where it's going to lead, and that's fine.

And I remember Judy, you saying, the way I work is that failure is always an option. And we had a talk about it. Doesn't that just free you up so much? And I think it became my mantra. Having this thing in the back of your mind which is embedded there, oh, well, what's the worst that could happen? That you would fail. I think that's very strong.

JFS: You know, worrying about the success of a work is actually like overtaking the work.

VN: Yeah.

JFS: Instead letting it unfold so that it actually surprises you. I think that's the beauty of it. I've never considered things that are failures, failures, because I can make them as materials for another work. For example, I was supposed to go to Canada to premiere, *DIY*

Museum of Mental Objects (MoMO). The artist embodying a museum of whispered artworks, thus mental, thus invisible objects to deplete art objects' commodifiable aspects. I was supposed to go there to workshop ten artists to become Museums of Mental Objects. And as the Ur Museum of Mental Objects, I was the only one who could guide others to become Museums of Mental Objects by workshopping them to become new MoMOs.

So I wasn't able to fly there because, again, I got sick. But I told myself, this is not going to be a failure. I am going to make a manual for those ten artists to become Museums of Mental Objects. Thus was born *DIY MoMO*—now it's another work for life.

And I have let go somewhat as the museum is now embodied by others with the use of the *DIY MoMO* Manual. So to me, a failure is never a failure. It can spawn another work or further your thinking. I'm now actually plotting a chart of my major works and all their tributaries—a chart of major works, (beginnings) and where they evolved into other works. It's a wonderful thing to see, you know, where things went and where things stopped (endings) and then where things picked up again.

VN: I want to just say something about the slowness of work happening. This is very much me as well. Alana, I have sketches or little drawings or thoughts on pieces of paper that I keep in folders. Early last year I just happened to open one up and had all this material falling out. But suddenly, in that moment, I knew what I wanted to do with it: collaging. I've started looking more and more, and then I come across things that I probably did in like 1999, and I can bring that in. The other thing I do is I cut up drawings. I make drawings, put them away, and then when the time comes and if that's what I think should

be done for a collage, then I cut them up and add them in. At one point I thought, well, surely I should be keeping these things because one day I should exhibit this. And then I think, 'no, it's not how it works, this is still developing, the work is not done yet. And I remember a younger artist who was here, I didn't know her from before. I met her at an opening, and she said, I've been through your website and it really interests me how a lot of your work looks unfinished. And I thought that's a real compliment. So I think I'm forever unfinished with what I do. And that's how it is, that's me. That's always going to be.



Work in progress in Varsha Nair's studio, 2025.
Photograph: Varsha Nair.

AH: Although I don't work in a similar material way to you, I also find it quite hard to define when works begin and end and when it's completely closed, and when it can keep iterating in different ways.

VN: When you read that this artist has a series of works, I think to myself, well, the series doesn't necessarily end when you exhibit it. That's one part of it, but surely there is a continuation. There is every chance it is going to continue.

AH: I feel compelled sometimes by expectations in the art world to say 'this is a

series of 12 photographs'—whereas to me, it is often ongoing...

JFS: I have kept about 20 years of lists of things to do daily—go have a haircut, go to the bank, cook this recipe, list groceries, etcetera. These 20 years of lists of things to-do-daily fit in two boxes. I consider this the minor archive, meaning, this is not the archive of the big eventful things in my artistic life, of the spectacular, of the art that has been made public. This is the archive of all of those things that we do to maintain our life daily. Art doesn't happen without the everyday things we have to do—the ordinary, the repetitive, the taken for granted, the “invisibles” or the invisible labor that Alana refers to. This work of lists was exhibited in two major museums as my work of the everyday as institutional critique.

AH: You know Judy, I have also been keeping lists, since my son was born, of all that I do in life and art-work. I have a weekly list I type up, and work from. It begins the week very neat and ends full of scribbled hand written notes by the week's end. It is also a way of archiving life, and of making the invisible—an artist and mother's labour, just a little more visible. Particularly for my son.

JFS: Wonderful, Alana! Perhaps we/Womanifesto can make something out of our lists, call it 'Women's Lives in Lists'? And perhaps this is a good place to end this conversation by returning to Womanifesto as a challenge to the biennale. A biennale institutionalises and structuralises art, artists and exhibitions. Whereas we at Womanifesto work within the flow and speed of our everyday lives where the creation of friendships—the intimate, the personal—is paramount to the creation of our art. We cook, we do our laundry, mind our children while

zooming about Womanifesto for a project, and as a self-governing collective of individuals, a good few times, we get inspired to gather everyone perhaps to go to a farm to “re-create” ourselves and consider this as our kind of artmaking.

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1. Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, 'Art on the Back Burner: Gender as the Elephant in the Room of Southeast Asian Art Histories,' *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, Vol.3, No.1, March 2019, pp. 25–48.
 2. LASUEMO is conceptualised and hosted by Varsha Nair, Lena Eriksson and durbahn. See <https://lasuemo.net/about/>.
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