

Mangosteen, a male stray called Toob Oei, and Womanifesto

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Translated by Kong Rithdee

In his Translator's Note for *I am an Artist (He Said)*, Kong identifies Araya's writing as an extension of her artmaking: 'Araya treats all units [of] language—word, phrase, sentence, and so on—as materials, like paint or wood or video, that allow her to plumb the depths of her own thoughts while at the same time letting her toy around with the text, taking it apart and manipulating it at will.* These recurrent tactics extend to the 'unit' of the quote—manipulated and altered (misquoted), supplied without citation—as such, citations in this text have been elided.

An invitation to an exhibition titled 'The Leg Hairs of Chivalrous Men' by a group of male artists of varied ages has arrived in an anachronistic fashion to the postbox as early seasonal rain rattles and hot wind wails. Overripe mangosteen fruits, oversupplied and unpicked beyond the harvest season, fall from the high branches to the ground, echoing the way their market price has fallen. The toob-toob sound is heard at intervals from morning 'til night, a reminder that the cycle of reproduction of this summer is about to end. Has Mother Mangosteen, bejewelled with offspring-fruits, ever considered the injustice or prejudice inflicted by the terrain of orchard? I reside on a plain by a ditch; or I'm at the edge of the orchard; or I take in the balmy morning sunshine but am blocked from the bright afternoon sun. Why are reproductive trees granted rights that ignore

the injustice and representation of their own existences?

How come the concept of gender has given rise to a modus operandi that unleashes a florid, persistent scream, drowning out the scream of other modes of existence and demanding a stage on which to flaunt itself, here and there, here and there, in a reflexive echo and with a pattern of performativity supplemented by strategy? Why has the clamour for rights drowned out the moan of sexual pleasure in a curtained bed mixed with the painful scream during childbirth which produces boys who one day would rebel and make fun of the flock of mothers by exhibiting their leg hairs?

And who would have the wits to foresee the consequences of lust and biology? After sexual gratification, womanhood will produce children overgrown with leg hairs who inherit superiority over their mothers due to the upbringing of these mothers, who have been done in by cultural preconception and later attempts to disclaim it through certain art practices.

Art is generous towards project titles that prominently highlight the gender of art-makers, perhaps because art, in one aspect, has to rely on the foundation of the reality of the world and of life, either going with or against the current. We who have observed it from a distance may feel accustomed to the mechanisms of expressing oneself, as individuals or as a group, by nature or by consciousness.

Animalifesto cries out and emits a smell of intuition that declares: the state of animality never classifies gender through consciousness, but through instinct. Ruff-ruff! Hong-hong!

With the humility of Nature, the fertile mangosteen trees whose unpicked fruits drop to the ground morning and night never compose any statement or manifesto. The village's morning news bulletin reported that a dog had fallen into a ditch in the mangosteen

orchard where the fruits had been late in coming. An old, male dog with crippled back legs. Festering wounds on his body, maggots feasting on his tail and feet. The X-ray showed that his spine was broken in three places, several nerves flattened and torn. His stomach was littered with animal bones. He could not pee or poop. There was a shiny object inside him—a bullet, iridescent in his belly. It was amazing how the X-ray had revealed a perilous journey of ‘manhood’, so much so that the group exhibition about male artists’ leg hairs might be construed as a joke. ‘Toob Oei’ was the short-lived name given to the dog for use in the patient file at the vet clinic during examination; it lasted just overnight since he was given a shot to depart the next day.

‘Toob’ is the sound of a mangosteen fruit hitting the ground, frequent at first then thinning out at longer intervals. It’s more muted than the toob sound caused by the male dog falling into the ditch. Meanwhile, ‘oei’ is an interjection signifying adorability or pity towards the preceding subject.

‘Womanifesto’ is a title that radiates strength. But if you try ‘Womanifesto-oei’, the fierceness is moderated, because in fact, some parts of the statement are softer than the project title:

‘Each location organises a gathering of two to five artists residing in the nearby areas and in the local environment—homes, studios, public parks ... “Assembling” a sense of group, extending welcome and building face-to-face relationships.’

‘... emphasising the role of women and the spread of knowledge and immense wisdom from one generation to another by sharing it between men, women, and children. Learning, working together and sharing experiences from grandfathers and grandmothers to practitioners of folk handicraft, as well as embracing the

original way of life, energizing the environment, formulating a working process and encouraging creative exchange.’

‘The Womanifesto archives exist in different forms. Workshops and residencies at rural farms in Thailand ... Spending time with communities, researching local materials, ways of thought and daily life ... Communicating social issues relating to local communities.’

‘... initiated to increase the presence of woman artists and research practitioners.’

‘... stressing the flow and participation of Womanifesto in feminist art.’

‘... raising the point of under-representation, prejudices and discrimination against women in Thai society ... At this point, Womanifesto has transcended geographical boundaries and become an international project.’

‘... exhibiting the history of Womanifesto, a biennial feminist project that took place in Thailand from 1997 to 2008, emphasizing its role in imparting knowledge. This exhibition presents the project as a crucial example of the feminism movement in Southeast Asia and its role in international exchange.’

Visiting homes, welcoming guests of all ages and genders with kindness, inheriting ways of thought and practice within a community, showing compassion towards the past (be it people or materials), blending in with the way of life of a community, understanding regional and local consciousness—all of these practices have existed for a long time.

Nonetheless, the emphasis on a particular gender, its specificity in the title and in the context of art, which is usually

generous towards whatever and whoever, still falls under the longstanding mentality and practice of females (and males). 'Increasing the presence of women' hammers home the same-old route and sign and path of gender, ever so subtly and gently. How does the womanly ying-ying proclamation under Womanifesto respond to 'a proper standing towards all sorts of things-parts' that have nurtured, enclosed and rooted them in womanhood, as is apparent in the intention? If it really is as I have said, why do we need an art stage to place-install-express the state of being as it has already been for a long time?

The toob sound of mangosteen fruits falling has occurred since forever in centuries-old orchards. The solitude of the toob sound of an old male dog falling into a ditch went unheard until somebody found the dog and wrote up a report. The toob sound of the two objects, placed side by side; the unspoken past that Toob Oei couldn't recount on the X-ray films, narrating the dog's biography so rough it overwhelmed the meaning of its pitiable name; the fierce-sounding 'Womanifesto', once suffixed with 'oei', becomes Womanifesto-oei; but suddenly, Animali-festo counterstrikes, a title that leaves out any specific name, a raw, animalistic title sprinkled with itsy-bitsy, higgledy-piggledy oddity that even the addition of 'oei' would not elicit pity ... Now, this is the way that artists show an act of mixing-conjuring.

The mixing-conjuring in the context of art is overlaid upon the old sort of mixing in the tradition of women who worked on erudite projects like world-weary sages—the women who walk on a rural village road that leads out towards international destinations. The echoing sound of mangosteen fruits repeatedly falling, toob, toob, here and there, resonates into a question: When will 'The Leg Hairs of Chivalrous Men' exhibition take place? How can mangosteen fruits, over-ripened in the helplessness of eternity, express themselves under the pile of leaves on the orchard floor when we are not a breed that prefers selecting and categorising? And

then... Who will know that we already let some of the roots of an old mangosteen tree be chopped off to make way for a grave of an ownerless dog with the extremely short-lived name of Toob Oei? We let it happen not because the first syllable, toob, rhymes with our condition of impermanence (we who also fall because of gravity) nor because we are fruits or fruit-bearers, but because 'We are we and we are nothing else according to labelling or factionalising.' This is why we like to share ...

The nothingness of the supplementary acts to the late-season mangosteen and the injured dog in this writing has a place in art, in research work, and even in real life because 'its existence is like a backdrop or a surrounding that nobody takes notice or mentions; it exists by itself'. Without intending to (for they never had any will or intention), within the narrative of this writing, they inadvertently manifest the visible angle of Womanifesto—they who are well-versed in the mechanism of art. Well, if 'the discrimination against women in Thai society' has concealed and given birth to the mechanism of life, how can we interrogate injustice and gender disparity through artistic contexts in a way that unveils what is concealed, what is unmanifested, that is, the antipathy coagulated into the marrows of inequality which lurks beneath feminism? Submission, ambivalence, the abstract prize of womanhood (or is it warm captivity?) both in biology and culture—in fact, these are the aspects that merit observation and interrogation.

But from the Womanifesto's manifesto, they inherit the instrument of captivity, all the more so with primness and politeness. Teaching is the inherent mission of females since birth—teaching the local way, utilising the materials from villages, developing intimacy with communities, welcoming and building relationships. These are standard practices that are not confined to the context of art projects—they are often cited by

government agencies and private organisations.

How can the temperament of late-season mangosteen as expressed through the sound of their falling fruits—the fruits that yield no economic value—be explored for a deeper meaning than the routine harvesting by fruit-growers?

How can we contemplate the ‘inner-ness’¹ of stray animals and manhood in an equally sophisticated manner to the complexity of experience shown in Toob Oei’s X-ray films? From there, we can return to look at the implicitness of women. How can femininity and womanhood bud-burst abstract flowers of free-spiritedness, bringing about a liberation from the standard call for attention as shown in the statement:

‘... initiated to increase the presence of woman artists and research practitioners’

‘... stressing the flow and participation of Womanifesto in feminist art’

‘... raising the point of under-representation, prejudices and discrimination against women in Thai society’

Perhaps Womanifesto’s proposal comes up short of the bar set by reality. It allows itself to become too friendly with its own reproductive concern, which originated in villages. Its declaration submits to the game and social mechanisms that enable the safe coexistence of women, despite this being an opportunity to be more adventurous.

Perhaps the art project is just a mechanism of ‘existence and survival’, persistent and ying-ying womanly style. Just shifting the context from real life to art.

But do not forget that this belittling statement is easier to make by someone who keeps a distance and does not partake in the difficulties and problematic structures that underlie the formation and sustainability of the art project.

So ... just pay it no importance. Because there, did you hear it? The toob sound that closes off this train of thought.

It is just one sound among so many that are more audible, clearer and louder, and we hardly ever mentioned them before.

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- *. Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *I am an Artist (He Said)*, Kong Rithdee (transl.), Roger Nelson and Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol (eds), National Gallery Singapore, Singapore, 2022, p. 418.
1. The choice of the term ความใน khwam nai, literally “inner-ness”, recalls the term ในมนุษย์ nai manut, literally “inner-human”, coined by Araya and used in her book, *I Am An Artist (He Said)* to signify a combination of wisdom, instinct and humanity. Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *I am an Artist (He Said)*, Kong Rithdee (transl.), Roger Nelson and Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol (eds), National Gallery Singapore, Singapore, 2022.
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