

Letter to K

Thanavi Chotpradit

2 March 2025

Dear Kate,

How's everything going? Hope you and your husband and the little one are well and happy. ☺

It was such a huge surprise to see you last month at Jim Thompson Art Center, after all these years. I've been thinking about you and the time we shared our secrets and dreams (and gossip). We were so young back then—young, raw, and innocent ...

I'm writing this letter because I've been invited to write an essay on Womanifesto, a collective of women artists that both you and I knew, though we never participated in their activities during our time together in the mid-2000s. I thought of you when I learned that Womanifesto is rooted in friendship—and that it has lasted until today, with an elasticity that allows members to join, take a hiatus for any reason (including those so-called 'womanly' matters of being daughters, wives and mothers), and return. I wanted to write to you because this invitation reminded me of an incident you might not know about—or maybe you once did, but don't remember (and I don't remember telling you about it). It was at night, sometime in the mid-2000s, not long before I left for Leiden. After someone's exhibition opening—though I don't recall whose—in a bar near Pratu Phi, a male artist (whose name I won't mention) said to me: 'Now you may be friends, but one day you'll become enemies.'

I remembered that I was surprised and pissed. It felt like he was saying that a woman cannot be friends with another woman—that

we, women in the art world, could only be rivals, and that friendship between women (in the art world) would never last.

The stories of Womanifesto remind me of us—though our way was nothing like theirs, it was still about being women and being friends. And now that you have left the field, and I've become a middle-aged art historian, let me share with you a bit about them—what I think about them and us, and about women and art collectives in Thai art history.

It has always been hard to be a woman, to be a woman art student, a woman artist, or a woman working in the patriarchal (Thai) art world. But despite all that, we are still ourselves: women who face and embrace all those challenges, gracefully at times, and clumsily at others. I recently revisited Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's (b. 1957) article, 'Mother's Hand'. It was translated into English and published as part of a collection of her serialised columns by the National Gallery Singapore in 2022. (Can you believe it? The Thai original was published in 2005!) And it really moved me. I often brought it to my art history classroom at Silpakorn University (you know she also did her BFA at Silapakorn, right?). She wrote:

During my time there, a lecturer in art criticism once told me, 'Some female students win prizes in competitions, but I dare not use your works as examples in my class. I'm reluctant to group you into a movement, because once you graduate, get married and have kids, you'll stop working.' It's a line of thought that's then generalised: women art-makers will never go anywhere. Our names and our works won't be accepted into the art criticism class; besides that, men control the cogs and wheels of the art world, as managers, as scholars, as judges in competitions, as directors of art centres, even as arrogant artists. (p.151)

Long quote, huh? Araya, a contemporary of Womanifesto who refused to join the collective, wrote this article in the early 2000s; the classroom she mentioned must have existed in the 1980s. This quote reminded me of what the sculptor Khaimook Chuto (1938–1996) wrote in *Ajarn Silpa kap luk sit* [Professor Silpa and his Students] (first published in 1984; I read the third edition, published in 2008). She recalled that Silpa Bhirasri (born Corrado Feroci, 1892–1962), head of Silpakorn and honoured as the ‘Father of Modern Art in Thailand’, once said to her (p. 351), ‘Women will just end up getting married, looking after husbands and kids, and stop doing the art they studied.’ (I should note that, despite this remark, Silpa had many women art students, many of whom became artists or art professors with his support.) Khaimook was a student at Silpakorn from 1957 to 1962 and later became a court sculptor under the patronage of Queen Sirikit (b. 1932).

Concerns about women art students at my beloved Silpakorn seemed to focus especially on those who wished to become sculptors—perhaps because being a sculptor also meant creating monuments, a role typically tied to civil service positions at the Department of Fine Arts (Krom Silpakorn). This perception persisted from Silpa’s time to Araya’s time (in a 2019 interview, Araya said that a professor at Silpakorn advised her to study graphic arts instead of sculpture because she was ‘too thin’), and to at least my own years as a BA student of art history from 1999 to 2003. I remember my senior (we were both volunteers for the art magazine *Art Record*, led by the editor and artist Wijit Apichatkriengkrai [b. 1964]; all the volunteers were women) saying, with surprise and admiration, upon seeing a sculpture made by a women art student, in the gallery of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts: ‘She’s a petite woman, but she can sculpt a large-scale figure!’ That senior, Ochana Phulthongdeewattana (b. 1979), now teaches in the Department of Art Theory in that

faculty, and that student sculptor, Lugpliw Junpudsa (b. 1980), now teaches in the Department of Sculpture—also in the same faculty.

Back to Araya’s quote: while she wrote so pointedly about marriage and children as hindrances to women artists, in another article in that same collection, ‘Dreams’, she chose Misiem Yipintsoi’s (1906–1988) painting *Witee Hang Kwamfan* (*Dreamer’s Avenue*) (1949) as an entry point, a threshold to the past of modern Thai art history. Misiem, who won the first gold medal in the first National Exhibition of Art in 1949, was a mother of five children whose interest in art began in her 40s, after taking one of her children to seek medical treatment in Europe. The ‘she’ in the article, Araya herself, ‘stepped into the frame’ of Misiem’s work and strolled down the long road, encountering both old masters and contemporary artworks, all created by male artists. What is interesting here is that along this path, very much like walking through the National Gallery of Thailand and Silpakorn University’s collection of award-winning artworks from the National Exhibition of Art, there are no other women artists besides Misiem. I mean, there’re a few artworks by women artists in those collections, but not in this article, which features works from those collections.

Misiem was both a painter and a sculptor, the first Artist of Distinction (after winning three gold medals in the National Exhibition of Art in 1949, 1950 and 1951), and the wife of a businessman. Yipintsoi & Co., established by her husband in 1926, eventually grew into an empire. Like a few other women artists of her generation, as well as some slightly earlier and some after, Misiem came from a wealthy family. Mom Chao Pilailekha Diskul (1897–1965), Mom Chao Marsi Sukhumbhand Paribatra (1930–2013), Lawan Upa-In (b. 1935) and Khaimook Chuto had elite backgrounds as well. For them, being a woman, a housewife or a mother was not an obstacle to making art (except for Mom Chao Pilailekha and

Khaimook, who never married)—some made art as a hobby, after all.

Some years after Misiem won those awards, the number of women art students and artists gradually increased, but there was still no such thing as a group or collective of women artists at the time. Oh! There was a group exhibition at Bangkapi Gallery in 1963 by Lawan Upa-In, wife of painter Sompot Upa-In (1934–2014) and mother of stylist Isr Upa-In (date of birth unknown); Pranee Tantisuk (dates unknown), wife of painter Sawasdi Tantisuk (1925–2009) and mother of painter Parinya Tantisuk (b. 1955); and Suwanee Nandakwang (1932–1984), wife of (and later divorced from) painter Tawee Nandakwang (1925–1991) and mother of designer Maynart Nandakwang (b. 1955). (Suwanee eventually shifted from being an artist to becoming a writer and novelist under the pen name Suwanee Sukhontha. She also founded the women's magazine *Lalana* [Girls] in 1972. My mum loved that magazine and its writers—I grew up with some of their works.) That exhibition is believed to be the first group exhibition of women artists in Thailand. The title was simple: Sam Sinlapin Ying [Three Women Artists].

There were so many artist-couples back then. All of them had children. Seems to contradict what Araya wrote in her article? Not really—maybe. Of course, it was hard to do both, and the path to entering the art-historical canon was rough for these women artists, many of whom, unlike the previous generation, did not come from well-to-do families. Still, I don't think it was quite like the case of European women artists centuries ago, where to be an artist one needed to be the wife or daughter of an artist. Rather, it shows how small the Silpakorn circle was back then. The students became friends, then colleagues—teaching at the College of Fine Arts or Silpakorn University or working as civil servants at Krom Silpakorn next door—then couples and families. The ties were that close and tight. And yet, there was no attempt

to form a collective of women artists. That came much later.

It feels so good to write this letter to you and allow myself to get lost in minor details and side stories. Academic work has a solemn and authoritative presence. Its intellectual gravitas is built, in part, upon citations (to show engagement with existing scholarly work), hundreds of footnotes, specific styles, formats and requirements. Rigid like an iron curtain sometimes. Writing this letter is such a relief, and it reaffirms, at least to me, that the very foundation of writing (art history or otherwise) is storytelling. I just want to tell you a story—the story of others that remind me of us, you and me.

But since I'm still an art historian, I can't help but try to situate this story in the timeline of Thai art history, to contextualise it in some way (you've probably noticed, though, that I included dates of birth and death for everyone, whenever I could find them). The first artist collective in Thailand, I believe, was Chakkrawat Sinlapin Group (The League of Artists), founded in 1944. It was a group of writers, visual artists and applied artists that aimed to support the art profession as a viable and sustainable livelihood, free from unjust exploitation or coercion by capitalists. (They organised only two exhibitions in 1944 and 1945; the second exhibition included works by amateur artists.) To form a collective, I suppose, is to amplify the power of the small—to become united, like a union born out of the labour movement.

From then on—from the modern to the contemporary—various artist groups in the country have been formed, disbanded and re-united occasionally, or vanished altogether. Some had social and political consciousness, like those that emerged in the ideological rupture of the Cold War of the 1970s as part of the 'Art for Life' movement, such as Naeo Ruam Sinlapin Haeng Prathet Thai (The United Artists' Front of Thailand) and the Dhamma Group.

Well, politics and ideology aren't the only reasons artists come together in groups. This actually has a lot to do with the gaps in the art ecosystem. For decades after Silpakorn was founded, both the university and the National Exhibition of Art held a kind of monopoly, which naturally limited both artistic styles and platforms. That situation really shaped how artist groups and private galleries started forming. These groups came about as a way to push back against those limitations (which had existed since the time of Chakkrawat Sinlapin Group in the mid-1940s). Some of these efforts led to the first private galleries opening in the early 1960s. But many of them struggled, mostly because there wasn't much financial or managerial support behind them. Add to that the fact that there were so few private collectors or patrons. So, in the end, artists forming collectives wasn't just about solidarity, it was about survival. They needed each other to find spaces to show their work and to support one another outside the limited, established system. (Sansa Stark in *Game of Thrones* once said, 'The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.')

But there happened to be one patron—a woman—Mom Rajwongse Pantip Paribatra Chumbhot, known to Westerners as Princess Chumbhot. She supported the Makkasan Group. The group was founded in 1961 by some avant-garde artists mostly from Silpakorn. They opened a gallery called the Bangkok Art Centre that same year. That gallery functioned like a *Salon des Refusés*, showing works rejected by the National Exhibition of Art alongside other pieces. It drew some attention from Bangkok's art lovers, including Misiem and Princess Chumbhot.

The Princess later invited the group to visit her Suan Pakkad Palace, which led to the founding of the Suan Pakkad Palace Art Gallery in 1962. She then founded the Mekpayab Art Centre, an art workshop and printmaking studio, in 1973, and later co-founded the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art

(BIMA) in 1974 (Misiem was one of the committee members). BIMA, which operated until 1988 (the year of Princess Chumbhot's passing—it ended as its patron passed), hosted numerous exhibitions, workshops, music events, theatre performances, film screenings, poetry readings and seminars. With its experimental, innovative and interdisciplinary approach, BIMA occupied a transitional space between modern and contemporary art in Thailand. And despite its association with the royal elite, it was opened to artworks considered 'leftist', such as those by the Dhamma Group. Chumpon Apisuk (b. 1948), a performance artist who served as assistant to BIMA director Chatvichai Promadhattavedi (date of birth unknown) in the 1980s, was formerly a leftist student who had joined the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the 1970s. Chumpon founded the Concrete House in Nonthaburi, north of Bangkok, in 1993 to be an art centre focused on performance art. Phaptawan Suwannakudt (b. 1959), daughter of neo-traditionalist mural painter Paiboon Suwannakudt (1925–1982) and co-founding member of Womanifesto, met Chumpon at BIMA in the late 1980s and subsequently met his wife, Chantawipa (Noi) Apisuk (b. 1947), founder of the Empower Foundation, a non-profit organisation that worked with sex workers at the Concrete House in the early 1990s. A seed of Womanifesto—one among many—was planted there at the Concrete House. I will come back to this later though.

Kate, you can see that women have always been present in the Thai art world: artists, art students, professors and patrons. They were everywhere—among men. Before the 1990s, women artists were part of artist groups that were composed mainly of men, for example, Somboon Puangdokmai (b. 1959) and Poonsap Klinchauncheun (date of birth unknown) in the Vane Group (Kanghan Group) and Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit (b. 1953) in the White Group. Certainly, women don't have to be friends with only women (nor do men have to be friends with only men). One can be friends across the gender spectrum.

One can be friends with other species. There's a reason people say their pets are their best friends. Some artists even bring pets into their works (think about Araya and her dogs and Wantanee Siripattananuntakul [b. 1974] and her African grey parrot named "Beuys"). A group or a collective, whether in art or beyond, is a gathering of people with shared purposes, values and ideologies, building on care and mutual support.

So then, what is so interesting about a women's collective like Womanifesto? (Obviously, artists in other groups and collectives are friends too.) What is its significance, both in the context of the late 1990s and today?

Here comes the 1990s: the era of Thai artists travelling overseas, participating in large-scale art festivals, biennales and triennales across Asia, Europe, North America and South America, showing their works in art institutions. There were two Thai curators in the early 1990s: one woman, Somporn Rodboon (b. 1947), and one man, Apinan Poshyananda (b. 1956). This 'Go-Inter' phenomenon ran parallel to a vibrant local art scene. It was also a time of artistic exchanges, made possible by foreign cultural institutions like Alliance Française, the British Council, Goethe-Institut, Japan Foundation, various embassies and mega-travelling exhibitions. Contemporary art extended its wings to other parts of the country as art education continued to grow—both emerging from Silpakorn and, at the same time, pushing against it.

More people. Thais and foreigners. More graduates from overseas. New roles, new terms, new concepts and discourses, new art organisations, new art forms, new art spaces (art found its way outside institutions and commercial galleries into all kinds of places, from abandoned buildings [*Huey Kwang Mega City Project*, 1996] to a cemetery and a dental clinic [*Chiang Mai Social Installation*, 1992–1998], on tuk-tuks and in the river [*Cities on the Move*, 1999] and many more), and new art professions. ('What is a

curator?' I asked one artist—a man better left unnamed—when I was still a student. 'Hand and foot of artists,' he replied. Then I read Apinan's interview in *Art Record*. 'A wolf pack that ran at high speed,' he said. Must be a different pack from that of Sansa Stark. This pack looked like it was in hunting mode rather than survival mode.)

More women in the art scene—and not only as artists, but also working in galleries, university galleries and beyond. Some were curators, some ran their own alternative art spaces, or managed others' spaces. (The word 'alternative' [if not another two words: 'independent' and 'experimental'] was like a mantra back then.) We both worked with some of them, full-time or otherwise. For you, it was Gridthiya Gaweewong (b. 1964) of Project 304 (founded in 1996), who was your teacher in that international MA program in cultural management at Chulalongkorn University, and who is now the director of Jim Thompson Art Center. For me, it was Klaomard Yipintsoi (b. 1964) of About Art Related Activities (AARA, founded in 1997), granddaughter of Misiem, my senior at Silpakorn, and currently the director of Maruekhathaiyawan Palace Museum in Hua Hin. AARA had an art space called About Studio/About Café. Thanks for reminding me, the last time we talked, that we first met at About Studio/About Café. That's where you told me, 'We're the new generation. Let's be friends.'

Now let's get back to the story before our time: Womanifesto in the 1990s.

Womanifesto emerged amid the vibrancy of the 1990s. Phaptawan met Nitaya Ueareeworakul (b. 1966), an artist and manager of Studio Xang, around 1988–90. They would eventually co-found Womanifesto together with Varsha Nair (b. 1957), an Indian artist based in Bangkok, and Nopparat (Mink) Chokchaichutikul (b. 1964), who came up with the name 'Womanifesto'. Phaptawan recalled meeting many artists—both men and women, Thai and foreign, many from within the region—at the

Concrete House in the early 1990s. Among them were Paisan Plienbangchang (1961–2015), Jittima Pholsawek (1959–2023), Suraphon (b. 1953) and Khaisaeng Panyawachira (b. 1952), Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957), and the writers Thanom Chapakdee (1956–2022) and Paisarn Teerapongvisanuporn (b. 1956). All, except Paisarn Teerapongvisanuporn, were members of U-kabat Group (u-kabat means ‘meteor’), founded in 1995. U-kabat Group was a collective of artist-activists, some of whom had been active in the political movements of the 1970s. Phaptawan also met Lee Wen (1957–2019) and Amanda Heng (b. 1951), both from The Artists Village (TAV, founded in 1988) in Singapore; Arahmaiani Feisal (b. 1961), from Indonesia; and Ray Langenbach (b. 1948), from Malaysia. These artists would go on to participate in many other exhibitions and festivals including Chiang Mai Social Installation and Asiatopia, the international performance art festival founded by Chumpon in 1998.

At Concrete House (I used to go there often—I did a research report on Asiatopia in 2004—but never met you there), Chantawipa, as director of Empower Foundation, initiated the idea of an ‘all-women exhibition’ for International Women’s Day. That group exhibition, titled ‘Tradisexion’ (1995), featured works by Phaptawan, Nitaya, Nopparat, Jittima, Khaisang and Charasri Roopkhumdee (b. 1969). The catalogue included writings from women writers and poets: Sidaoruang (Wanna Sawatsri, b. 1943), wife of writer and editor Suchart Sawatsri (b. 1945); Chiranan Pitpreecha (b. 1955), ex-wife of my uncle—student leader of the 14 October Incident in 1973, political scientist and writer—Seksan Prasertkul (b. 1949); Chama (Suthathip Moralai, date of birth unknown); Prae Jaru (Prateep Tongkhang, date of birth unknown), wife of poet Thanom Chaiwongkaew (1951–2014); Chitraporn Vanuspong (date of birth unknown) and Ngao Silp (real name and date of birth unknown). There was also an article co-written by Chantawipa and Thip (date of

birth unknown), a former bar waitress from Patpong, who used to come to the Empower Foundation to learn English.

The feminist tone in ‘Tradisexion’ was prominent; as the title implies, it addressed tradition and sexuality. On the opening day, all artists wore *pah tung* (a sarong) to honour Thai women, echoing Phaptawan’s work *Akojorn* (in her translation of the text with the same title, she rendered ‘*Akojorn*’ as ‘tabooed area’), in which she hung *pah tung* on a clothesline above head level. In Thai culture, *pah tung* is considered the low, as it is worn on the lower part of a woman’s body—the area of the vagina, where the womb is housed. It is never supposed to be hung on a higher part of a clothesline, and it is considered a bad omen and an affront to dignity—particularly for men—to go under or walk past it (since the head is considered sacred and high). Isn’t it ironic that everyone, including men, enters this world through the lower part of a woman’s body?

Phaptawan, Nitaya and Nopparat continued the idea of organising an exhibition for women artists and forming a network of women artists. Varsha, who had just moved from India to Bangkok, was introduced to Nitaya by a mutual friend and became the fourth member. Friends and networks, here, they are one and the same. The first Womanifesto was held in celebration of International Women’s Day in 1997 at Concrete House and Baan Chao Phraya. It featured artists from eighteen countries, including Jittima and Khaisang from ‘Tradisexion’, Amanda, and Arahmaiani—whom Phaptawan had met earlier at Concrete House and who had participated in several exhibitions and art festivals in Thailand. Somporn, a curator and professor of art theory at Silpakorn, was invited to be an advisor, along with Chumpon and Chantawipa. New Thai women artists included Kanya Chareonsupakul (b. 1947; both she and Somporn received Thai government scholarships to study in the US in the 1970s); Pinaree Sanpitak (b. 1961), who

studied art in Japan and was then the wife of painter Chatchai Puipia (b. 1964; they also ran a gallery called Silom Art Space) and mother of designer Shone Puipia (b. 1993); Sriwan Janhuttakarnkit (one can be a member of more than one artist group! Do you remember that she was also with the White Group?); and Surojana Sethabutra (b. 1956).

Did I make you dizzy with all these names? I have more!

Anyway, I'm not gonna do this for every edition of Womanifesto. Nor am I gonna write in detail about what they did in each edition. Other writers and scholars will surely take care of that (so you can read it from the *Womanifesto Way Anthology*!).

What I'm trying to do here is to point out a network of artists—in groups and as individuals—both Thai and foreign, as well as other people within the art circle, to show the dynamics of the Thai art world. I'd say 1997 was an important year for women artists and art professionals in Thailand. Why? Because it wasn't just Womanifesto.

One year earlier, Gridthiya co-founded Project 304 with Michael Shaowanasai (b. 1964), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (b. 1970), Sajeetip Nimvijit (date of birth unknown), Prapon Kumijim (b. 1972), Kamol Phaosavasdi (b. 1958), and Chatchai Puipia. (They also made BANG Monthly Art Newspaper.) In 1997, Klaomard, my ex-boss, co-founded AARA with her husband, photographer Nopadon Kaosam-ang (b. 1959). AARA had Chitti Kasemkitvatana (b. 1969) as its first curator, using About Studio/About Café as a playground. Chitti had previously worked as an assistant to Hans Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968) when Obrist was developing 'Cities on the Move', which would eventually travel to Bangkok in 1999. He also worked with Project 304 and taught part-time at Silpakorn, playing a crucial role in encouraging young people, many of whom eventually formed a collective we hung out with later in the 2000s: As Yet Unnamed. Chitti co-founded Namdee Publishing Station

with Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961), art journalist Phatarawadee (Ann) Phataranawik (b. 1966), and Pratchaya Phinthong (b. 1974). Namdee Publishing Station functioned as a production house where young artists like Pratchaya, Pattara Chanruechachai (b. 1971) and Thakol Khaosa-ad (b. 1977) produced artworks for international artists such as Tobias Rehberger (b. 1966) and Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967). They created VER Magazine (four issues) before shifting to the art space Gallery VER—our late-night nest at that time.

One Womanifesto event was held at About Studio/About Café: the post-workshop discussion and presentation following the 2001 workshop at Boon Bandan Farm in Sisaket. It was co-organised by Nitaya, Varsha, Preenun Nana (b. 1969)—who was a project manager at AARA between 1998 and 2001—and the Japanese curator from New York, Naomi Urabe (date of birth unknown), who was then the first curator in AARA's Curator-in-Residence Programme. This was before my time at AARA. I started working there in 2003. Preenun was no longer there by then. In 2003, Manuporn Luengaram (b. 1972) was serving as the project manager for AARA's new program, About TV, a web TV program developed with Superflex (we went to the first Thai Pavilion at Venice Biennale to produce a web TV program). She used to be the coordinator for VER Magazine and the office manager of Namdee Publishing Station. Today, she is the education program manager at Dib Bangkok, the new contemporary art museum built to house the collection of the late collector Petch Osathanugroh (1960–2023).

That same year (I mean 1997. Sorry, I keep adding details!), Luckana Kunavichayanont (b. 1967), wife of artist and Silpakorn art professor Sutee Kunavichayanont (b. 1965), took on the role of director of Tadu Contemporary. My other senior, Somsuda Piamsumrit (b. 1979), who had also been a volunteer for *Art Record* when we were students, worked with her there in

the early 2000s. (After Tadu Contemporary, Somsuda was involved in the planning phase of the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre [BACC], but left before its opening to join the curatorial staff and became an education program coordinator of the Jim Thompson Art Center under Gridthiya's directorship. She was also an independent curator.) Luckana later served as director of BACC from 2011 to 2017 and as acting director in 2021–22. The other Art Record volunteer, Nuanlaor Phungprom (b. 1971)—our big sister, since she was the only non-student among us—has been working at BACC since before its official opening in 2008. Gridthiya wrote about this significant year, 1997, in her article (co-written with R.J. Preece) 'Thai women artists: Doin' it for themselves'. This article ends with a section on 'art administration', highlighting the emerging roles of women in the art profession. From that year onward, the role of women as directors of art institutions became increasingly notable. I'm thinking of a few names: Ek-Anong [Aey] Phanachet (date of birth unknown), who founded 100 Tonson Gallery in 2002 and later transformed it into the 100 Tonson Foundation 2020; Sukonthip [Fon] Nakson (date of birth unknown), who opened La Lanta Fine Art in 2006 and founded Warin Lab Contemporary in 2021; Sutima [Junko] Sucharitkul (date of birth unknown), who established Nova Comtemporary in 2016; and Adulaya (Kim) Hoontrakul (b. 1985), the current director of BACC. Things seem to have changed since Araya wrote her article: 'Men control the cogs and wheels of the art world... as directors of art centres'.

There's one photograph I like. It is a photo of a group of women artists: Phaptawan, Nitaya and Nopparat from 'Tradisexion', as well as Ratchada Thanaporn (dates unknown), an exhibition co-ordinator at the Art Center, Center of Academic Resources, on the 7th floor of Chulalongkorn University's main library. The four of them are standing playfully amidst the standees of European male artists: Joan Miró (1893–1983), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989),

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and many others. The standees were tall, a bit larger-than-life and in black and white, suggesting the past and their mighty status as art historical canons (and of course, all dead). The women were also dressed in black and white—as if to make fun of them, or as if to try to be part of them (in the patriarchal art world and male-dominated art-historical canon). But they were flesh and blood, three-dimensional (sounds weird here since I'm talking about a photograph), not as flat as the standees. They were very much of this world—alive and happy.

That photograph was taken not long after 'Tradisexion', when the three artists were forming Womanifesto, and before Varsha joined them. I like it because it says something about women in the art world and art history, about what they've tried to do (to survive, to strive, and to have fun in making and working with art), and about what I've tried to do (to record, to contextualise, to insert what I value into the art historical narrative, to perform art historiography, as I am an art historian). Many have gone, things and people, but they can be immortalised here in this letter.

I also like the photograph because it was taken at that Art Center, where you worked as an exhibition coordinator after Ratchada. That last section on art administration in Gridthiya and Preece's article, the presence of Ratchada in this photograph, the program you studied (there was no curatorial program at that time, only two cultural management programs, one at Chulalongkorn University, another at Thammasat University, and a museum management program at Mahidol University), and your work there after graduation—all point to the often-undervalued role of women in the art profession: a supporting role (unless one becomes a 'curator,' which seems to carry more weight than 'coordinator,' 'administrator,' or 'manager').

Where else can I address the supporting role of women in the Thai art

world if not in this letter? Imagine me crafting a research proposal, trying to build a strong argument, convincing whoever holds the grant money that these women, who perform ‘everyday care’ of artworks, art exhibitions and artists, deserve a place in art history. I don’t think I can, or even want to, do that. It was like when I worked with our kind brother, Pratchaya, for ‘This page is intentionally left blank’ (2019) at BANGKOK CITYCITY GALLERY. The gallery was co-founded by my senior, Supamas Phahulo [b. 1979] and her partner, Akapol Op Sudasna [b. 1979]. I didn’t know Supamas personally when we were students, but I remembered her well because she was ‘VJ Louktan’ on Channel V Thailand. She worked for AARA after I left, then for Thailand Creative & Design Center [TCDC] before opening her own gallery in 2015. Many of my former students now work there. For that project, Pratchaya borrowed the logbooks from the National Gallery of Thailand and turned them into an artwork. Those logbooks contained nothing important and, therefore, had no archival value—just records of the staff’s daily routine: the invisible labour of those who were there every day to care for artworks. While they would never find a place in any art historical narrative, because what they do is considered unimportant and mundane, it is only through art and (unconventional academic) writing can I recognise them and these roles.

Womanifesto also included these people: the non-artists. Scroll through the website and you’ll find names of curators, coordinators, managers, academics, activists, craft-makers, villagers, students, volunteers, etc. (There were some male artists too, in certain projects. And some participants were male or female only in terms of biological sex.) From an exhibition of women artists held every two years (Varsha said in a 2009 interview that it was a biennale in Thailand before the ‘biennale craze took hold’) to workshops, residency programs, publication projects, web-based initiatives and Zoom-gatherings, Womanifesto has initiated collaboration within and across the

nation’s borders. It has been an art and social space for people to meet, mingle, make artworks and make friends—friendships that have lasted for decades.

After more than 20 years, Womanifesto returned to my thoughts, but not through an exhibition. It came back via some friends I met during the 2015 research initiative ‘Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art’ (when all of us were still PhD students): Roger Nelson (b. 1982; now teaches at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), Yvonne Low (b. 1981; now teaches at the University of Sydney, Australia), and Clare Veal (date of birth unknown; no longer in the field). Together with Stephen H. Whiteman (date of birth unknown; Stephen was not a grant recipient like us but one of our advisors. He was then at the University of Sydney but has since moved to the The Courtauld Institute of Art, UK), Clare co-convened the symposium ‘Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories’ in Sydney in 2017.

That symposium was followed by a series of events, discussions, workshops, publications and exhibitions. The 2019 project between the University of Sydney (the The Power Institute, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the School of Letters, Arts and Media—now the School of Art, Communication and English) and Chulalongkorn University (CommDe, with a strong support from Juthamas Tangsantikul [b. 1972]). ‘Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?’ focused on the histories of Womanifesto and included an exhibition of the Womanifesto archives. The peer-reviewed journal *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, for which Roger, Yvonne and I are members of the editorial collective (Clare was as well, before leaving the field), also published a special issue on this in 2019.

In 2023, BACC invited Womanifesto to its ‘Master Series’; the exhibition ‘Womanifesto: Flowing

Connections’ on the 8th floor signalled a gesture of recognition—as a ‘master.’ (Remember those standees of the Western male masters in that photograph? This somehow reminded me of that.) Yes, Womanifesto has been part of the canon-making process; it already has a place in the Asia Art Archive (you’ve seen the links I’ve been using so far), and the online anthology by the Power Institute is currently being developed. This letter to you, as I mentioned before, is a part of that anthology and a larger canon-making project.

What I liked most in that exhibition was the ‘In Memoriam’ labels scattered throughout the space. I liked how they commemorated those who passed away—Jittima, Pan Parahom (1939–2014), Tari Ito (1951–2021) and Jiratti Kuttanam (1980–2023)—including and embracing them in this occasion that, as Preenun said, was such a delight: finally having a place in the ‘Master Series’ after 20 years of work. Everyone, including those who have passed, will be remembered.

I saw a photo of a friend, Jiratti, alongside her work titled *There was nothing recorded on a palm leaf when I was born*, referring to her birth in Isan. She never knew which year she was born—only that it was in August. The year 1980 written on the label was the one she had chosen for herself, though she wasn’t sure if it was accurate. She herself was a mother of two before her passing. Never an artist in the strict sense, she worked various jobs within the art world. She participated in the ‘2001 Womanifesto Workshop’. There is something about birth and death here, something that has lingered in my mind as I think about Araya’s article and being a woman, a mother, a daughter and a woman art-maker.

I saw some drawings made by my friend’s little daughter, Tara—Yvonne’s daughter. Yes, anyone can make art. Let it flow...

Womanifesto offers a place that friendship can grow and be nurtured. It’s a safe place. Tari Ito performed Self-Portrait, saying “I am a lesbian” in the inaugural Womanifesto in 1997.

I’m writing this letter to you because you’re also a mother—and my friend. Your absence from the artworld could be a long hiatus, like some of Womanifesto’s members, or maybe forever—but it doesn’t really matter. The friendship I observed from afar in Womanifesto made me want to write to you. We never became enemies, like that male artist once predicted. So, this letter is about our friendship, as much as it is about sharing their stories with you—stories of other women in the Thai art world. I want to address them here, as much as I can. Many remain unmentioned in this letter, simply because it’s impossible to include everyone. There are Penwadee Nophaket Manont (b. 1973), Head of Exhibition Department and Chief Curator at BACC; Paramaporn Sirikulchayanont (b. 1977), former director of Art Centre, Silpakorn University and curator of the 2024 Bangkok Art Biennale; Narawan Pathomvat (b. 1980), founder and director of a contemporary art library, The Reading Room; independent curator Nim Niyomsin (b. 1980); Anchalee Anantawat (b. 1982), who runs Speedy Grandma and teaches at King Mongkut’s University of Technology, Thonburi; Asia Art Archive researcher Kamolwan Boonphokaew (b. 1982); independent curator Mary Pansanga (b. 1984); Kasamaponn Saengsuratham (b. 1984) and Kittima Chareeprasit (b. 1989) of Waiting You Curator Lab (founded in 2016); Sirima Chaipreechawit (b. 1988) and Sikharin Langkulsen (b. 1987), co-founders of GroundControl (founded in 2020), an online media platform focusing on art and collaborative agency; Pojai Akratanakul (b. 1990), curator of the 2024 Bangkok Art Biennale; Ariane Kupferman-Suthavong (b. 1993), curator of DeCentral and co-founder of Inappropriate BOOK CLUB (iBC, founded in 2020); Ariana Chaivaranon (b. 1996), curator of Dib Bangkok; Namkheun

Collective (founded in 2020) (they did some cool translations, such as The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century and The Queer Nation Manifesto) and GMT±

Collective (founded in 2022). Maybe I should write another letter. Still, this form of writing, a personal letter to a friend (not just any friend, it has to be you), allowed me to recall the past and be inclusive (I'm not old enough to write a memoir, I guess).

I'm also writing this as a letter for other reasons. In academia, personal correspondence is treated as a primary source. We learn about the past—what people see, how they perceive the world, and the relationship between sender and receiver—through this form of personal, intimate communication. It is a source of both information and feeling. There's good reason to reposit correspondence in archives. (There's a section titled 'Correspondence' in the Womanifesto archive at Asia Art Archive, though it is official correspondence, not personal. Yvonne pointed out to me that members of Womanifesto wrote personal letters to keep in touch with each other, long before the arrival of smartphones and social media.) However, I'm not writing this letter to be a primary source, but rather as a piece of art history. Writing this letter, for me, is a way of writing art history.

Two collections of letters came to my mind, as they form part of the history of modern art in Thailand. The first is a collection of 43 letters written by King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, 1853–1910) to his daughter, Princess Nibhanabhatala (1886–1935), during his tour of 'civilised' Europe in 1907. In these letters, the King described the artworks, exhibitions, galleries, museums and artists' studios he visited. He also mentioned European artists he commissioned or whose works he purchased. He made clear that he didn't like modern European art and preferred classical art. One can learn so much about royal preferences and the new aesthetics that would shape early modern Thai art by reading these letters. The

collection was later published under the title Klai Baan [*Far From Home*].

The other is a collection of letters exchanged between Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862–1943) and Prince Narisaranuvattiwongse (1863–1947), two of the most prominent intellectuals of their time. Prince Damrong was a historian and the father of Mom Chao Pilailekha Diskul (the women painter I mentioned earlier) and Mom Chao Subhadradis Diskul (1923–2003), an art historian and professor at my department at Silpakorn. Prince Naris was an artist, designer and architect who once resided in a royal residence that is now home to the Art Centre, Silpakorn University. From 1914 to 1943, the two princes corresponded regularly, sharing their observations on the contemporary scene and exchanging views on art, history, culture and current affairs. Their letters were eventually compiled and published in 27 volumes under the title San Somdet [*The Princes' Messages*], which has since become an invaluable source of information on Thai art and culture. (Many of Prince Damrong's letters were written during his exile in Penang, Malaysia, following the People's Party Revolution in 1932. I once had the idea of doing research on this—what I saw as a kind of art history writing in exile—but haven't had a chance to do it. I did, however, write an article about this in Thai after a trip to Penang a few years ago.)

So, I like letters very much. And I once came across a letter written by an artist that functioned both as an artwork and a short art history writing: Letter to Montien (2018) by Navin Rawanchaikul (b. 1971). Navin was a student of Montien Boonma (1953–2000), a key figure in the Thai contemporary art scene of the 1990s, as both artist and professor. In this letter, Navin reflected on the Thai art scene after Montien's passing in 2000: how he himself grew as an artist, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), the introduction of the Silapathorn Award for Visual Art, the Thai Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale, the intersections of art and political turmoil, and much more. Actually, Navin's letter inspired me to write this one to you too—a kind of intimate letter, sharing stories and thoughts, while at the same time performing an act of art historiography. Also, this letter is to update you on what's been happening since you left.

With love and all my messy thoughts,
Pong

Last but not least, I've been referring to 'my senior' for everyone who is indeed my senior—not for hierarchy, fraternity or hazing, but to point out that, long before art management and curatorial programs emerged in the Thai education system, the Art History Department at the Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, had produced many art professionals. I'm not claiming superiority or seniority here. My point is that art history has long served as a foundation for a wide range of roles in the art world. (There were two exceptions in this letter: Ochana was from the Archaeology Department, and Luckana was from the English Department, under the umbrella of the Faculty of Archaeology. I didn't mention earlier that Luckana was my senior, but she was.)

This year, I've moved to another program in Taiwan—the MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art (CCSCA) at the National Taipei University of Education (NTUE)—and I'm still teaching art history (I first came to Taiwan in 2010 with painter Yuree Kensaku [b. 1979] to participate in the Kuandu Biennale. Who would have thought I'd eventually end up here as a full-time faculty member?). Yes, I'm insisting on the relevance of the discipline, as I know that it's been shrinking in many parts of the world, and because I love what I do, even if I work as slowly as a sloth on vacation.

I think it's time to end this super-long letter. I'm looking forward to your next chapter, as a full-time mum and everything else. Come visit us sometime. I go on and off with the Thai art world too, with which I have a love-hate relationship, lovingly annoyed by it.