

The Womanifesto Archive: Communities as Practice, Archives as Method

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Stretch the accordion pages of *The Flower of the Nation* (2022) across a table and they unfold into one long, interwoven telling of Womanifesto's history. Women gathered around a 'Tradisexion' banner blend into groups seated with children at Boon Bandarn Farm, which give way to hands weaving baskets, then to hands typing beside a 'No Man's Land' banner. Nothing here follows a strict timeline; the pages move the way memory does, between moments of collaboration and collective action. Flip the pages over and on the other side, banners in English and Malay declare, 'Women Strike for Peace and Equality,' anchoring the work in a call for solidarity.



Salikhain Kolektib, *Manifesting (In)constancy*, 2022, mixed-media installation; Pangrok

Sulap, *The Flower of the Nation*, 2022, woodblock print book. Part of The Collective School, AAA Library, 2022. Photo: South Ho.

This woodblock print book was created by Pangrok Sulap (est. 2010), a collective of artists, musicians, and social activists based in Sabah. The piece grew out of an invitation from Asia Art Archive (AAA) to respond to Womanifesto's legacy, made for our exhibition 'The Collective School' (2022) in Hong Kong. Once they were in the archival materials, Pangrok Sulap recognised something familiar: both practices gather people first and let that gathering do the work of linking art to social change.

Womanifesto weaves exhibitions, workshops, and residencies together, and Pangrok Sulap does something similar on the ground, teaching rural communities across Malaysia to draw, carve, and print, passing on tools for artistic expression that double as tools for getting by. Their choice of medium says a lot about how they think: woodblock printing costs little to produce, and does not depend on specialized equipment, so it travels easily into the places where the collective works. As they write in *Decolonising Design Education: Schools of Departure No. 1*: 'Instead of being limited to traditional art institutions or galleries, we create a method of collaboration in the form of activities that allow participation from diverse communities, making full use of public and open spaces for community events.'¹

The Flower of the Nation holds two things at once. It celebrates Womanifesto's values, and it reflects Pangrok Sulap's own way of building community by making things together. In doing so, it points to something both practices know: that art can live outside

gallery walls, carrying its ways of learning and being together with it.

I work at Asia Art Archive (AAA), an independent nonprofit founded in 2000 to widen and complicate the recent art histories of Asia, particularly the practices and sites that dominant narratives tend to leave out. Womanifesto belongs to that conversation. It is a collective for whom learning and shared authorship *are* the work, and it gives shape to what scholar Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez calls 'maintenance work'²—the labor, often-invisible, that keeps an art world running at all. Conventional art history rarely has room for this kind of work; it prefers individual artists and singular objects to the groups of people quietly holding things together. Archives like Womanifesto's are one way of pushing back.

At AAA, the questions we return to are simple to state and hard to answer: how is art made, how does it circulate, who does it sustain. Womanifesto's own commitment to community and to passing knowledge along is not so different from ours. Archiving, for us, is a form of intervention; preservation is where the work starts, not where it ends. What is at stake is whether art histories stay fixed as records of objects and names, or stay open, reshaped by the people who encounter them next.

Crafting Communities

We work the way Womanifesto works: collectively. AAA calls this a post-custodial model—artists keep ownership of their physical archives, and we organise, digitise, annotate, and put the material online, for free. Archives do not sit still once they are with us; they move through exhibitions, workshops,

residencies, and publications, and each pass through the world is a new encounter. The digital Womanifesto Archive, launched on our website in 2020,³ shows how this works in practice. Assembled over years by artists Nitaya Ueareeworkaul and Varsha Nair, and expanded with documents from Phaptawan Suwannakudt that same year, the archive keeps growing, shaped by its owners and by everyone who spends time with it.



Installation view of *Crafting Communities*, Asia Art Archive, 2020. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

Once the digital archive was live, we brought it into our Hong Kong library as 'Crafting Communities'(2020), curated by then Head of Research John Tain. It was the first time the material had been shown physically in our space, and the exhibition put pedagogy at the center of Womanifesto's practice—a question our team keeps circling back to in our own work: how do artists shape the way people learn? The project traced an artistic practice that sits at the intersection of traditional craft and contemporary art, one that stays attentive to the needs and rhythms of the communities it grows from.



Installation view of *Crafting Communities*, Asia Art Archive, 2020. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

Visitors entering the library first met Womanifesto's early years: the catalogue of the 1995 Tradisexion exhibition, a 1997 poster imprinted with a grid of handprints, and a 1996 *Bangkok Post Sunday Magazine* cover reading 'Portrait of the Artist as a Thai Woman.' Newspaper clippings from the late 1990s placed these gatherings inside a wider feminist conversation. Writing in *The Nation* on March 8, 1997, journalist Phatarawadee Phataranawik noted, 'Although progress in some Western countries on women's issues has been achieved since the first [sic] World Conference on Women was held in Nairobi in 1985, women still remain undervalued and discriminated against in Asia.'⁴ Read together, these materials cast Womanifesto's interventions as both locally rooted and globally conversant, claiming ground in male-dominated cultural spaces while speaking to broader feminist movements well beyond Thailand.



Installation view of *Crafting Communities*, Asia Art Archive, 2020. Photo: Kitmin Lee.

Nearby, a vitrine held a selection from nearly ninety contributions to 'Procreation/Postcreation' (2003), a portable, multi-edition project, shown alongside material from the online project 'No Man's Land' (2006). Both projects made the same point in different formats: Womanifesto builds platforms for exchange that cross borders. Speaking at a public program at AAA, artist Varsha Nair made the stakes clear: 'We cannot wait for others to organise or [to] be invited, [to] be curated. We have to do it for ourselves. The decision to start thinking about the next event began at the first event.'⁵

The '2001 Womanifesto Workshop' and the '2008 Womanifesto Residency' in Boon Bandarn carried that same generative spirit forward. At the far end of the library stood a poster cabinet next to Yin Xiuzhen's *Enjoy* (2001), an blown-up photograph of the workshop's artists swimming in a river. The image reads as leisure at first glance, but Yin's notes and the surrounding archival material tell a different story—one just as much about knowledge-sharing as rest.

Thirteen artists worked alongside local craftspeople that year, testing how artistic practice might carry traditional skills forward while staying answerable to the rural communities around them. Nitaya

Ueareeworakul's sketch for a collaborative sculpture, with basket weaver Promma Vanatawee, is one trace of that exchange: weaving treated as material practice and as feminist pedagogy at once. The pencil drawing shows a basket with a narrow neck flaring into a wide, rounded base—an hourglass form that reads, almost literally, as a work still growing, each contribution built on the last.

Varsha Nair, reflecting on how knowledge passed down in rural areas where younger generations were often drawn to bigger cities, described the kind of encounter Womanifesto was after: 'It was not that the artist community was meeting up with another community. It was that we were all together forming a community.'⁶ This distinction is close to the heart of what Womanifesto does: a feminist methodology inseparable from its setting, built on the everyday networks of knowledge and support that let art step outside the gallery and into daily life.

Records from the '2008 Womanifesto Residency' add another layer. Over a month, artists co-created installations with children, students, and villagers, reimagining where contemporary art and vernacular craft meet. On-Anong Glinsiri's *Togetherness & the Way We Were* (2008) is one striking result: two intimate portraits, of Varsha Nair and the artist herself, both looking directly into the camera, woven into grass mats interlaced with printed vinyl strips. The pieces work as portraits and as textiles you could sit on, a kind of collective self-portrait of the women who kept the project running. We hung them above a study desk in our library, a small gesture meant to blur the line between artwork, everyday object, and archival document.



Installation view of documenta fifteen: On-Anong Glinsiri, *Togetherness & The Way We Were*: Varsha, Phaptawan, On-Anong, 2008, Asia Art Archive. Fridericianum, Kassel, 11 June 2022. Photo: Frank Sperling.

Translations, Expansions

A year after 'Crafting Communities', ruangrupa, a Jakarta-based collective, invited our team to participate in documenta fifteen. This was a chance to put the Womanifesto Archive in conversation with other collectives built on similar terms: groups that teach as they make, and that treat the archive as something to be acted on rather than simply kept. Documenta fifteen took its structure from *lumbung*, the communal rice barn, a model built on sharing what you have and giving back to the group. Womanifesto's self-organized, intergenerational approach became one anchor of what we brought.



Installation view of documenta fifteen: Asia Art Archive, 2022; The Black Archives, 2022. Fridericianum, Kassel, 11 June 2022. Photo: Frank Sperling.

Our contribution, titled 'Translations, Expansions,' drew on three artistic and collective practices from AAA Collections: Womanifesto; the Living Traditions movement at MS University of Baroda in post-independence India; and the regional networks of performance art festivals across East and Southeast Asia around the turn of the century.⁷ Together they showed something artists have long done without much recognition: taking knowledge embedded in daily life—craft, vernacular practice, embodied skill—and passing it on. Preservation, in this frame, turns relational: it keeps a history alive through participation and teaching, which is exactly the sensibility that shapes how AAA approaches its own archives.



Installation view of documenta fifteen: Asia Art Archive, 2022; The Black Archives, 2022. Fridericianum, Kassel, 11 June 2022. Photo: Frank Sperling.

The Baroda section centered on artists associated with the Faculty of Fine Arts, including K. G. Subramanyan, Jyoti Bhatt, and Nilima Sheikh, a community that treated fieldwork as a form of study in its own right, documenting and teaching traditional and vernacular art in post-independence India while pressing on the divide of modern and traditional in a postcolonial context. On display were rangolis (threshold paintings), stencils, outdoor installations, and handmade toys from the Fine Arts Fairs, which ran from the 1960s through the 1980s as a community-driven space for students and teachers to experiment with traditional forms. Like Womanifesto, the Baroda community never separated artistic practice from teaching, showing what collective study can produce.

The section on performance art festivals followed artists' networks across East and Southeast Asia through the 1990s and 2000s: Artists' General Assembly in Singapore, Jakarta International Performance Art Festival, Nippon International Performance Art Festival, Hong Kong's On the Move Performance Art Project, Beyond Pressure International Performance Art Festival in Yangon, and OPEN International Performance

Art Festival in Beijing. The performance videos on view showcased the use of everyday materials and vernacular settings as their raw creative ground. Artists like Lee Wen and Ray Langenbach worked as both participants and self-archivists, keeping record while building platforms for peer exchange. The festivals functioned, in effect, as living archives, where performance and pedagogy were inseparable from the communities that hosted them.

The Womanifesto section itself brought archival materials into dialogue with artworks tracing the collective's long engagement with place and memory. Suspended from the ceiling, Karla Sachse and Khun Pikul Deelong-Ngam's *Female Vessel* (2001)—a basket form woven from plant fiber and paper—interlaced discarded newspapers with handwritten notes from workshop participants and farm residents, turning scraps of everyday material into a vessel of shared voice.



Installation view of documenta fifteen: Asia Art Archive, 2022; The Black Archives, 2022. Fridericianum, Kassel, 11 June 2022. Photo: Frank Sperling.

Nearby, Phaptawan Suwannakudt's *Casting off Memory* (2008), a handloom-woven fabric sculpture over two meters tall, layered fading ink inscriptions with recollections of the farm, her ancestral home, and her father—memory holding on and slipping away at once. Varsha Nair's video *Lullaby for a Storm* (2008) sat in a

different register, setting the intimacy of a lullaby sung to a child against television footage of political unrest, care and vulnerability tangled up with public turbulence. Together, the works showed Womanifesto's relational mode of working: turning personal and collective experience into shared knowledge, and making visible how close the line runs between a lullaby and a broadcast, between the domestic and the political.

Placing Womanifesto alongside Baroda's 'Living Traditions' and regional performance networks made one thing clear: these are all artists doing the work of keeping knowledge moving and handing it forward. Our display sat next to initiatives like The Black Archives in Amsterdam and *Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie*, which only sharpened the political stakes running through all of it.⁸ Seeing these threads side by side confirmed something we had already come to believe at AAA: an archive can work as infrastructure, an engine for pedagogical innovation rather than a container for the past.

The Collective School

What we learned from 'Translations, Expansions' pushed us to rethink our library back in Hong Kong. Around the same time, we began a renovation to build a space made for learning by doing, together—a shift that became apparent in 'The Collective School' (2022), the first exhibition in the new space, built around one question: How do collectives teach and learn?⁹



Gudskul, *Temu Wall*, 2022, wall graphic; Gudskul's *Veranda Talk*, video. Part of *The Collective School*, AAA Library, 2022. Photo: South Ho.

Developed with Gudskul, a Jakarta-based collective, 'The Collective School' brought eight artist collectives from across Asia into contact with archival materials from our collections, documenting three collectives that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s:

Womanifesto; Xiamen Dada, known for their radical performative actions critiquing the art system in China in the 1980s; and Black Artists in Asia, which started VIVA ExCon, the longest-running artist-run biennial in the Philippines, in the 1990s. What the participants made—videos, sculptures, zines, games, interactive installations—grew out of group conversations, where the exchange mattered as much as whatever got presented at the end.¹⁰

Over a year, participants worked through a series of workshops with our researchers, educators, and curators. Bringing together groups that shared resources while staying rooted in their own communities let us fold Womanifesto's intergenerational, community-first approach into how AAA itself operates.

Individual works kept resonating with each another in unexpected ways. Pangrok Sulap's

The Flower of the Nation, suspended in a wooden display case, sat inside Salikhain Kolektib's mirrored installation *Manifesting (In)constancy* (2022). Founded in 2017 and based in Quezon City, the collective built a structure that housed archival material from Womanifesto and their own practice alongside Pangrok Sulap's woodcut, setting the straight line of chronology against the fractured, multi-angle reflections produced by the mirrors. Collaboration and iteration, the installation suggested, sit inside how both works were made.



Salikhain Kolektib, *Manifesting (In)constancy*, 2022, mixed-media installation; Pangrok Sulap, *The Flower of the Nation*, 2022, woodblock print book. Part of *The Collective School*, AAA Library, 2022. Photo: South Ho.

Bishkek School of Contemporary Art (est. 2020) picked up and extended what Pangrok Sulap and Salikhain Kolektib had started. *Round Table* (2022), a card game for three to six players, invited participants to respond to prompts through drawing or writing, slowly building a zine out of their own exchange. *The Portal* (2022), a 96-minute video centered on the Altyn Kazyk Library of Saved Books in Bishkek, treated the library itself as a community-built site for discovery. Alongside their *Aralash* zine series, these pieces landed on the same idea as the mirrored installation:

learning passed peer to peer, multiplying as it goes.

Floating Projects (est. 2015), a Hong Kong-based collective and one of our local partners, pushed the question of collective learning toward play and improvisation. Their public program, *Assemblage at AAA* (2023), a two-day durational performance, transformed the library into a site of spontaneous making. Members brought in found objects, materials from their studios, and items from AAA's own library and office, and started creating on the spot. One person invented a chess-like game. Another built a sculpture out of shredded confidential documents. At a nearby table, someone sat down to a typewriter and let automatic writing take over. Visitors could join at any point, blurring the line between performer and participant. Floating Projects turned the whole thing into shared, unplanned action, using the archive as a space of play, where knowledge came out of improvisation and whatever happened to be at hand.

Each contribution bounced off the others, amplifying others' gestures. Taken together—the library, the zines, the mirrored installation, the card games, the improvised performances—they made the case that archives come alive when they are treated as dialogical spaces: places where knowledge moves across generations and geographies, questioned and remade along the way.

Archives as Methods

Among the questions that guide AAA's work with archives, one keeps returning: how do you keep personal reflection and collective memory alive inside a living practice? It came into focus for me during a conversation at the

Sharjah Biennial 2025 with artists Varsha Nair, Jamilah Preenun Nana, and Nitaya Ueareeworakul, standing in front of Lena Eriksson's *From Here and From There* (2025). Shown as part of Womanifesto's contribution to the biennial, Eriksson's drawings, videos, and stories about the 2008 residency capture just how delicate this work of sustaining memory can be. Beside her drawing of Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Eriksson had written a note: 'Only, how am I supposed to tell this to the blind horse. Maybe I'll just stroke his nose,' which encapsulates the ineffable labor of holding and transmitting memory.

Eriksson's note brings me back to scholar Yvonne Low, who has written about how much interpretation goes into the way Womanifesto has built its own archive. At a panel AAA organised with AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, and Indonesian Visual Art Archive in Yogyakarta in 2024, Low pointed out that this sensibility has been there since the collective started documenting its own activities, pointing, as one example, to the handmade photo albums from Womanifesto workshops, their fabric covers sewn by Nitaya Ueareeworakul. For Low, these covers turn the albums into something more than a container of images: 'These fabric covers function as more than mere protection for the album. In as much as it serves to aestheticise the album and subjectivise the viewing process, these covers enable [Ueareeworakul] to partake in the story-telling process.'¹¹

For Womanifesto, documenting and archiving are not separate from the art—they are an extension of caretaking and shared authorship. As the collective continues to document and archive its own work, it shows how records can stay open to interpretation,

inviting whoever encounters them into an ongoing act of meaning-making.

Our own work with Womanifesto runs on the same principle. It is the thread connecting the three projects I have described here—'Crafting Communities', 'The Collective School', and 'Translations, Expansions'—and it is the thread running through everything AAA does. An archive stays alive only if we keep working it. Knowledge circulates when communities pick it back up and send it forward it, changed a little by the passing. This is the feminist methodology behind this work, and it is ours, too: it asks who gets to hold knowledge, and it insists that learning happen together, in the room, shaped by whoever shows up.

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1. Pangrok Sulap, 'Empowering Community Through Art,' in JJ Adibrata, Regina Bittner, Katja Klaus, and Philipp Sack (eds.) *Decolonizing Design Education: Schools of Departure No. 1*, Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, Dessau, 2023, <https://atlas.bauhaus-dessau.de/en/journal/decolonising-design-education>, accessed 7 October 2025.
 2. 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, pp. 25–48.
 3. The Womanifesto Archive was digitised and prepared for access by John Tain, Ali Wong, and Garfield Chow in AAA's Research team, and reviewed and approved by Elaine Lin and Gabrielle Chan in Collections. Intern Lora Fong provided assistance. The online archive project was made possible through the generous support of the AAA Women and Gender Diversity Fund: Jonathan Cheung, Geoffrey Chuang, Luke Fehon, Shirazeh Houshiary / Lisson Gallery, Margie Lau, Dee Poon, Ed Tang, and Claudine Ying. See 'Womanifesto Archive', Asia Art Archive, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/womanifesto-archive>, accessed 7 October 2025.
 4. Phatarawadee Phataranawik, 'Sisters in Arms', *The Nation*, March 8, 1997, pp. C1–C2. The World Conference on Women in Nairobi was the Third World Conference on Women, following the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975 and the Second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen in 1980.
 5. Varsha Nair, Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, 'Backyards and Neighbourhoods: Feminist Strategies and Communities', talk organised by Asia Art Archive, November 17, 2020. For documentation and more information see <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/backyards-and-neighbourhoods-feminist-strategies-and-communities>, accessed 7 October 2025.
 6. *ibid.*
 7. The working team for *Translations, Expansions* included Pallavi Arora, Samira Bose, Gabrielle Chan, Sam Chao, Susanna Chung, Özge Ersoy, Christopher K. Ho, Lydia Lam, Charlotte Mui, Sneha Ragavan, John Tain, Rebecca Tso, and Debby Tsui. Thanks to Carol Choi, Paul C. Fermin, Leah Lam, Paco Ma and Chương-Đài Võ. The project was generously supported by documenta gGmbH, as well as Wendy Lee & Stephen Li, and Virginia & Wellington Yee.
 8. AAA was part of one of the mini-majelis—groups that regularly met to exchange ideas and share resources—at documenta

fifteen, which included Another Roadmap Africa Cluster (Kampala, Nyanza, Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, Maseru, Johannesburg, Lagos, and Cairo), Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie (Algiers), Centre d'art Waza (Lubumbashi), El Warcha (Tunis), Graziela Kunsch (São Paulo), Keleketla! Library (Johannesburg), Komîna Fîlm a Rojava (Rojava), Sada [regroup] (Baghdad and other locations), Siwa Plateforme - L'Economat at Redeyef (Redeyef), and The Black Archives (Amsterdam), who presented their projects at the Fridericianum in Kassel.

9. 'The Collective School' was developed by Susanna Chung, Özge Ersoy, and Rebecca Tso, in close collaboration with Samira Bose, Noopur Desai, Sneha Ragavan, John Tain, Chương-Đài Võ, Congyang Xie, and Anthony Yung. The project was generously supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, as well as Wendy Lee & Stephen Li, and Virginia & Wellington Yee.
10. Participants in 'The Collective School' included ba-bau AIR (Hanoi), BiSCA (Bishkek), Gudskul (Jakarta), Load na Dito (Quezon City), Omnispace (Bandung), Pangrok Sulap (Sabah), Salikhain Kolektib (Quezon City), Scutoid Coop (Kaohsiung), and Yayasan Tonjo Foundation (Yogyakarta), as well as two local partners: Floating Projects (Hong Kong) and Rooftop Institute (Hong Kong).
11. Yvonne Low, 'Artists-Organisers: Conditioning Art and its Narratives' panel presented at 'The Flow of History: Southeast Asian Women Artists' (Yogyakarta), co-organised by Asia Art Archive, AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions, and Indonesian Visual Art Archive, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, November 16, 2024.

Documentation and more information, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/the-flow-of-history-southeast-asian-women-artists-yogyakarta>, accessed 7 October 2025.
