

Womanifesto, Short Opening Speech

The Cross Art Projects

At a time when 47% of women occupy the Australian workforce, yet earn 14% lower than their male cohort; occupy 13% of Board positions and 17% of CEO roles; despite being statistically more academically qualified and the larger student body at universities; and in Australian public art collections represent around 28% of holdings, if that, it's time to pause and reflect.

Women-led art initiatives are a significant part of this story and one meaningful way in which female practitioners and writers have found a voice, and a platform from which to speak.

Womanifesto is one such initiative, and represents a way to address marginalised and forgotten voices in women's art history in the Asia Pacific region. Operational for two decades, since 1995, in Bangkok, Sydney and beyond, it represents one of the first women's artistic collectives in the region and is presented here today as a constellation of archival elements - written, visual and audio-visual.

Womanifesto is a changing, independent, inter-generational group of South-East Asian artists - predominantly women but men also. Since the mid 1990s its bi-annual events and projects have taken the form of exhibitions, writing and research, workshops, artistic residencies, and online iterations that have linked creative communities in Thailand, Australia and the wider world.

Academic research and scholarship in the region have expanded the collective's reach, and result in the present symposium at the University of Sydney, plus the roundtable and archival exhibition here at Cross Art Projects this afternoon.

Womanifesto's first exhibition took place in 1997, and followed on from the 3-person project Tradisexion in 1995 at Bangkok's Concrete House, by artists Varsha Nair, Phatwan Suwannakudt, and Nitiya Ueareworakul. Its last manifestation was in 2008, with 6 artists, in the form of a 5 week residency in north-east Thailand; whilst its online presence and exchanges continue into the present. Through its exhibitions, online curation, writings and residencies, Womanifesto has built visibility and opportunities for women in and also beyond the creative sector.

So where to now, in terms of Archiving Womanifesto? And importantly, what may have changed over the two decades since its inception? Our world, of course, has changed dramatically, from South-East Asia and Australia across other continents, geographies, political and digital contexts. So perhaps now, more than ever, independent, collaborative and inter-generational initiatives like this are greatly needed: for they share information, bridge gaps, and educate successive generations in histories that may otherwise be overlooked or forgotten; and they remind us of the criticality and significance of women's creative practice, and women's dialogue. Returning to the statistics - for these facts don't lie - they remind us too of the work ahead to redress imbalance and inequity for our children and theirs.

Like a ripple effect, the outcomes of this collective include opportunities to collaborate, ways to foreground women's issues in Asian art history, to recuperate or recover lost narratives, and bring about new opportunities for dialogue in the present. This is the

good work of art and artists today, practicing in uncertain times with limited resources but a bold and generous vision. Thank you.

Rachel Kent

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