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Phaptawan Suwannakudt

Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, Volume 3, Number 1, March 2019, pp. 175-180 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2019.0009>



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*Phaptawan Suwannakudt*

I met Nitaya Ueareeworakul around 1988–90, during an art event at Alliance Française on Sathorn Road, Bangkok. We were introduced by a French friend who said, “You two have to meet each other”. Nitaya ran Studio Xang, where she painted and conducted children’s art classes. The studio was frequented by artists outside the usual circles, and I met artists and saw works I did not see elsewhere. I also met Chumpon Apisuk, whose work I had seen earlier at Bhirasri Institute when Chatvichai Promadhattavedi introduced him in the late 1980s. This time he was running Concrete House, an alternative space for art activities outside commercial galleries and art institutes. His wife Noi (Chantawipa Apisuk, a law graduate from Harvard University), who worked for a non-profit organisation, Empower, was based there temporarily. Empower was an organisation she had founded to deal with legal matters and other issues for sex workers. One of my childhood friends in my neighbourhood, whose mother worked in the sex industry, had sadly dropped out of school at Grade Four and we lost contact as a result. I was intrigued and inspired by the work Noi did for sex workers, particularly the way in which she helped them to find their own sense of dignity. With Noi’s help, they were able to get back in control of their lives and start negotiating for improved work conditions.

From the mid-1980s, I led a painting team and engaged in large-scale mural projects. During this time, I also produced small individual pieces to participate in group exhibitions. Each year I donated work for sale in support of a women’s shelter, then known as *Baan Pak Chuk Chern*. It was for victims who were affected by domestic violence, sex crimes and different forms of exploitation of women and children. This was run by Khun Ying Kanitha Wichiencharoen (who later ordained as a Buddhist nun and become Mae Chi

[ Southeast of Now  
Vol. 3 No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 175–80 ]

Kanitha). Soon after, I was contacted by Thailand's Women's Foundation, then Peuan Ying, who ran Friends of Women Foundation, to participate in women's exhibitions to help raise funds for the programme during International Women's Day, in which I had participated a couple of times. There were only a handful of known women artists in Thailand in the 1980s and early 1990s, and we normally turned up in the same exhibition on International Women's Day.<sup>1</sup> Each artist contributed one work that did not necessarily focus on women's issues in terms of materials and themes.

Such events were held at Concrete House, which provided a platform for art activities outside commercial galleries and art institutes. It was a place where art communities could exchange their ideas, stage performance art and exhibit their works. These artists included Paisarn Plienbangchang, Jittima Pholsawek, Suraphon and Khaisang Panyawachira. Vasan Sitthiket and art writers, such as Thanom Chapackdee and Paisarn Teerapongvisanuporn, were among the circle of friends and visitors. Concrete House occasionally put up foreign artist friends who visited Bangkok, regardless of whether their visits were related to an art project. It was through this network that I met artists such as Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, Arahmaiani Feisal and Ray Langenbach, and became aware of their work when they participated in the Chiang Mai Social Installation in 1995.

Not long after I met Nitaya, I was introduced to Noi, when she initiated the idea of an all-women exhibition at Concrete House to coincide with the upcoming International Women's Day. Already engaged with World AIDS Organisation, Noi implied that the works in the exhibition could reflect women's and social issues. Encouraged by Nitaya, I quickly responded to this and found myself involved in group meetings to put the exhibition together. The group included Khaisaeng Panyawachira (performance artist), Jittima Pholsawek (performance artist/writer), Jarasri Roopkhamdi (printmaker), Nitaya Ueareeworakul (multidisciplinary artist) and Nopparat Chokchaichutikul (performance/multimedia artist). With the exception of Nitaya and Nopparat, this was the first time that I met the other artists.

Nopparat had studied at L'École Nationale des Beaux Arts and she came and greeted me at the group show of Tan Kudt group and other Thai artists in Paris, which I organised in 1989. Nopparat was trained outside Thailand and cited Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* ("One is not born, but rather becomes a woman"), while the rest of us explored through experiences in life and work, and found a common ground, through customs, beliefs and expectations; the way in which prejudices and discrimination were created against women in Thai society. I am unclear whether it was Chumpon or Noi who put into words that what we reflected on in the conversation was indeed

a challenge to dissect Thai traditions. All these discussions eventually led to the development of an exhibition titled Tradisexion, which was held from 4 March—4 April in 1995.

When we worked on Tradisexion, we did not construe it to be exclusively for Thai artists. We were just a group of likeminded individuals who were available and gathered at a time when the terms ‘curator’ or ‘curate’ had yet to exist. We were open to ideas and arguments. We even talked about including male artists whose work dealt with women’s issues, but in the end, we thought we would leave it for another time. Women artists in Thailand then were far and few between and were under-represented, so everyone was excited to be able to get a space to show their work in the first place.

On the opening day, each artist wore a *pah tung* (sarong) to honour Thai women and introduced themselves and their works in front of the crowd. The exhibition also launched the book with the same title, which included works and writings by participating artists, as well as essays, poems and articles on women by Sri Daoruang, Chiranan Pitpreecha, Chantawipa Apisuk, Chama, Prae Jaru, Chitraporn Vanuspong and Ngao Silp. The exhibition featured paintings, installations and performances. I met Flaudette May Datuin, a Filipino feminist art historian, at that opening. Much later, she mentioned to me that this encounter and the exhibition had inspired her to explore the subject further. Datuin subsequently curated and organised Women Imaging Women at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines in 1999, which included me as one of four participating artists from Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.

With Noi’s encouragement, we talked and planned for the next year soon after the opening night. Nitaya, Nopparat and I were enthusiastic, but this was not the case for Khaisaeng, Jittima and Jarasri, who seemed to have other priorities in mind. In the end, the three of us carried on with the idea of approaching more artists for the next exhibition the following year. It was during one of our earlier meetings that Nopparat came up with the title Womanifesto for the group. We continued to work on our plans and started looking out for funding for this second exhibition. Nitaya introduced us to Varsha Nair, who subsequently joined the group and completely dedicated herself to the project. It was refreshing and much more promising to have Varsha step in after being turned down by prominent artists such as Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who did not feel like joining in.

We invited Somporn Rawodboon and Flaudette May Datuin to be our advisors for the preliminary plan. We wanted to involve more artists and first looked at women artists who were available and based in Thailand, keeping in mind viability and the need to keep costs low. Nopparat was occupied with her teaching job in Rangsit, so we were relieved to have Varsha in the team.

The challenge then was not about finding participating artists but how to organise an exhibition. How could we do this whilst juggling other commitments such as continuing our practice, making ends meet, living a normal life and finding time to seek for support in face-to-face meetings? I recall how we sometimes went individually or in pairs to meetings with firms, institutions and organisations to beg for support, which was very daunting and not always successful. After a few failed attempts to find sponsors and financial support for the exhibition, the team finally secured a place at Baan Chaophraya, the former location of Goethe Institut, at Pra Athit Road near Banglamphu, where the inaugural exhibition with the name Womanifesto took place in 1997.

In the wake of the exhibition preparation, I relocated to Sydney in April 1996, where I completed the *Nariphon* series to send and participate in the first Womanifesto. Nopparat later left, and it was Nitaya and Varsha who committed to the organisation from 1996 onwards, further strengthening the activities for Womanifesto. It has since become a platform for international art activities for emerging and established women artists. With the exception of two of the Womanifesto events (in 1999 and 2001), when I was unable to participate due to motherhood obligations, I participated in every Womanifesto event thereafter from a distance, and in person at the five-week residency at Rai Boonbandarn in 2008.

Relocating to Sydney entailed new challenges: it meant starting my career from scratch as a migrant. The Buddhist narrative genre of mural painting was foreign and ancient to the Australian art network. I had to juggle my activities as a wife and mother to two young children during the early years of my move, then as a daughter to an aging mother with dementia during the later years. Needless to say, the distance from Thailand kept me away from assisting the management work for the Womanifesto events. I kept in touch via snail mail and overseas phone calls and worked through different time zones.

Varsha, herself an expatriate who had uprooted to Thailand, was empathetic towards my situation. She felt that Womanifesto should be flexible and, above all, should leverage women's strength and ability to build a network. Along with new participants and cohorts, she explored the project titled Procreation/Postcreation, which was built around the idea of women and childbirth. I participated by sending bilingual (Thai and English) prose on the names I gave my two children, which came to me in my dreams during each pregnancy: Cantrachaaysaeng [the moon sends its light] and Yenlamtarn [coolness of a stream].

The following project was a web-based event (No Man's Land, 2005–06) that involved Katherine Olston, who was in Thailand during Australia's Asialink programme but stayed on for five more years with her then partner, a Thai

artist from Chiang Mai. Kat was the co-editor and web manager for the No Man's Land project. For the project, I contributed a text, *Mer-People in the Noman's Land in Which We Dwell*. By now it seemed that Womanifesto had gone over and beyond the Thai borders.

In this regard, over time Womanifesto has evolved to become an international event based on the situations and conditions we faced over time. Above all, Womanifesto serves fundamentally as a platform for women who work in the arts.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Phaptawan Suwannakudt** (born in Thailand, 1959) trained as a mural painter with her late father Paiboon Suwannakudt and led a team of painters who worked in Buddhist temples throughout Thailand from the 1980s to the 1990s. She was also involved in the women artists' group exhibition Tradisexion in 1995 and in Womanifesto. She relocated to Australia in 1996 and completed a MVA degree at Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney University. She has exhibited extensively and internationally, including *Traces of Words: Art and Calligraphy from Asia*, Museum of Anthropology, UBC, Vancouver, Canada (2017); *Retold-Untold Stories*, Chiang Mai (2014) and Sydney (2016); *Thresholds: Contemporary Thai Art*, New York (2013); and the 18th Biennale of Sydney (2012). Most recently, she was exhibited in *Beyond Bliss*, the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale (2018–19).

**NOTE**

- <sup>1</sup> The women artists included Kanya Charoensupakul, Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit, Somboon Puangdokmai, Pinaree Sanpitak, Surojana Sethabuttra and Nitaya Ueareworakul.