

# Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: **Art, Design and Canon-Making?**



# Brief

**The symposium's focus on 'canonisation' aimed to critically address a primary aspect of the writing of art history: who is credited, and why.**

*Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?* ran over two days on the 19th and 20th of April 2020. The format was open to the public and multi-faceted, employing lectures, workshop, film screening and panel discussion. 11 academics, artists and other cultural workers delivered the sessions.

Canons are selective and exclusionary, and can represent structural discrimination from society at large. Gender and sexual difference are typically fundamental to structural discrimination.

Moreover, within the context of Southeast Asia, the academic discipline of art history is relatively young and, for Thailand, over-embedded nationalistically. Thus, the symposium also aimed to explore new methodologies for future research.

A highlight of the symposium was a major archival exhibition organized in conjunction. *Womanifesto* is a biannual art festival that has been held in various parts of Thailand since 1995 and has remained understudied as an example of grassroots and politicized practice in the arts. Mounted at the Design Center of the Department of Industrial Design in the Faculty of Architecture, the exhibition included the promotional materials, documentation of exhibitions and other events, and a variety of ephemera from the years of the festival. Further to emphasizing questions of labour and collectivity, in the context of the theme of the symposium, this exhibition was also very significant in two other respects. *Womanifesto* retains a commitment to using the terms 'feminism' and 'women artists' as a frame, calling attention to local debates about these mantles. And, the exhibition contributes to the recent disciplinary turn towards examining the histories of exhibitions as an alternative to canonical



art histories. An example of this includes the publication *Art-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98*, edited by Dr. David Teh and published by Afterall Books in London in 2018. Here we can note that both *Womanifesto* and the projects covered in this book existed before-and are thus an important critical reference for-the expansion of art biennales internationally in the last two decades, including the founding of the *Bangkok Art Biennale* in 2018.

# Summary

## Highlighting a range of critical issues and questions about gender and labour beyond stereotypical assumptions about 'feminism' and 'women's work.'



The symposium opened with a lecture by Dr. May Adadol Ingawanij, Director of the Centre for Research and Education in Media and Arts at the University of Westminster in London. Titled 'Matriarchs of Medium,' May discussed how she is less concerned to assert the importance of art (or other forms of work) by women than explore how media represents gender and what it means for artists and other agents to challenge historically entrenched views. Her lecture discussed a rich variety of sources, including literature, film and popular culture. And she drew on theories of haunting to prompt idea of looking past the familiar and/or the given.

In the afternoon, Dr. Clare Veal led a workshop titled 'Re-evaluating Agency: Authorship and the expanded field of production in Southeast Asian Art.' This introduced key points about authorship, canon-making and possibilities for critical analysis. Noting how artistic authorship is

rendered in masculine terms in the figure of the singular genius, Clare discussed how any number of agents are involved in the production and circulation of artworks. Building on May's earlier lecture, she cited the often overlooked figures in canonical artworks such as Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and also gave examples of the multiple individuals involved in the organization of exhibitions and gallery spaces, individuals typically left out of dominant historical narratives. The lecture particularly highlighted how we should not treat art objects (and otherwise) as merely passive, familiar entities but instead a means to challenge our understandings of the world. The workshop that followed pertinently focused on the phenomenology of objects, as participants were required to visualize their sensational engagement with a chosen object and then write notes on the experience, thus challenging our preconceptions and allowing our thoughts to move in new, fresh directions.

This day concluded with a talk by Patrick Flores, curator and Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines and the founders of *Womanifesto*, artists Varsha Nair and Nitaya Ueareeworakul and also the artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt. Patrick elaborated theoretically on relations of the individual and collective and drew parallels with *Womanifesto* and various art practices by women from around Southeast Asia since the 1980s, providing concrete examples of the social significance of labour and women's lives. Varsha and the others discussed the trials and tribulations of working with the various manifestations of *Womanifesto*.

The second day of the symposium opened with a screening of the film *Nervous Translation* (2017) by Shireen Seno, followed by a discussion and Q+A with the director and May. Shireen is Filipino-born but grew up in Japan and she spoke about the pressures she experienced as a child to "perform" the role of a Filipino female

according to society's expectations. May highlighted how much of the film focuses on a profound sense of space, and they spoke about how home and memory can inform an authentic understanding of self; but, for Shireen, her memories of the Philippines are fragmented and the film's haunting qualities claim them as elusive. Thus, by implication, her own sense of self is fragile.

Moving the symposium into a direction that is very specific to Thailand, the final session was a panel discussion titled 'Gender and Creative Industries in Thailand: Exploring the issues.' The architects and designers Rachaporn Choochuey, Thida Plitpholkarnpim and Saran Yen Panya each discussed the distinctly contemporary experience of gender and sexuality while working professionally. The issues ranged from perceptions of women in traditionally masculine domains such as construction sites to managing your routine while also working as a mother.

# Background

**This symposium was the 2nd organized by the forthcoming MFA Communication Design, or CommMa, and aims to continue as an annual event within the Faculty of Architecture of Chulalongkorn University.**

The 1st was titled *The Ghost in the Machine* in 2018 and led by the photographic historian Clare Veal, from LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore and the artist Piyatat Hemmatat who is based in Bangkok. In view of CommMa's aim to critically address the visual and material cultures of Southeast Asia, the symposiums aim to explore archival lacuna, produce newer terms for debating knowledge, and provide public workshops for applied theories. *The Ghost in the Machine* looked at the intersection of the importation of photographic technology in Siam in the 19th century with local animist beliefs. And this year's symposium pursued insights into the collectivity and labour that is usually hidden by a canonical focus on exceptional individuals.

An objective of these symposia is to develop questions that will inform CommMa's curriculum.

The organization of *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?* was shared between Chulalongkorn University and the Power Institute of the University of Sydney. The Power Institute is a research

platform for studies in visual art and culture, and previously organized the international conference *Gender and Southeast Asian Art History* in 2017 in Sydney. A selection of the proceedings was published in the journal *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* in March 2019. And future events, to which CommMa contributes, include the establishing of an online platform for collating materials related to gender and sexual difference in Southeast Asian art.

The core group of organizers for *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?* were: Dr. Yvonne Low, Department of Art History at the University of Sydney; Dr. Roger Nelson, curator at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS); Dr. Juthamas Tangsantikul, Founding Director of CommMa; and Dr. Clare Veal, lecturer on MA Asian Art Histories at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore.



## Symposium Organizers

Dr. Yvonne Low, Department of Art History at the University of Sydney; Dr. Roger Nelson, curator at the National Gallery Singapore (NGS); Dr. Juthamas Tangsantikul, Founding Director of CommMa; and Dr. Clare Veal, lecturer on MA Asian Art Histories at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore.

## Event Supporters

Ratchadapisek Sompoch Endowment Fund Chulalongkorn University; Department of Communication Design, Department of Architecture, The Department of Industrial Design, Chulalongkorn University; and Power Institute, University of Sydney.

## Lecture and Workshop Leaders and Participants

Dr. Rachaporn Choochuey, architect and Professor in Architecture at Chulalongkorn University; Patrick D. Flores, curator and Professor of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines; Dr. May Adadol Ingawanij, Director of Centre for Research and Education in Media and Arts at University of Westminster; Varsha Nair, artists and co-founder of *Womanifesto*; Thida Plitpholkarnpim, co-founder of Documentary Club in Bangkok; Saran Yen Panya, designer; Phaptawan Suwannakudt, artist; Dr. Juthamas Tangsantikul, Founding Director of CommMa; Nitaya Ue-areeworakul, artist and co-founder of *Womanifesto*; and Dr. Clare Veal, lecturer on MA Asian Art Histories at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore.

## Design and Text

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