

Artists retreat to countryside

Varsha Nair, a visual artist who lives in Bangkok, reports on the recently-held Womanifesto Workshop, which was a gathering of artists from different parts. It took place in a rural environment, on a farm in Isarn, Northeast of Thailand

“I really do not have to make a work ... ?”

“Yes, really ...”

Thus began my discussion with Thai ceramic artist Surojana Sethabuttra, about her participation at the **Womanifesto Workshop 2001**. Unlike its previous manifestations (biannual exhibitions held in Bangkok in 1997 and 1999), this Womanifesto event was designed as a ten-day workshop in the remote setting of north-eastern Thailand with no formal exhibition of works planned thereafter. At Boon Bandaan Farm near Kantha ralak, Si Saket, a group of eighteen professional women - artists, curators and art administrators, as well as five students of cultural management as volunteers - were invited to interact and exchange not only with each other but also with the local crafts people and community. Focusing particularly on the position of women and the wealth of stored knowledge - shared amongst men, women and children in rural areas, handed down from generation to generation - the emphasis was on engaging with crafts people, exploring local materials and a traditional way of life. The set-up



Local inspiration: Khun Mae's unique style of weaving

of the workshop was carefully planned to initiate dialogue and create a dynamic environment for process and exchange. In addition, the participants were not required to produce ‘work’ in the ten days but were free to devote the time to gather material and document to use at a later date. Womanifesto Workshop 2001 was fully funded by the Chiang Mai-based Heinrich Boell Foundation.

In our contemporary environment, the gaze is focused on urbanisation and city centres. Traditional methods of production and rural knowledge of living are being overlooked and quickly forgotten. According to **Nilofar Akmut**, an artist from Pakistan and one of the invited participants, “the tradition of craft which has its roots from the beginning of time in women’s work and creativity to clothe, provide utensils, religious objects to furnish their homes was later to be usurped by men as industrialization took over on a global scale. The look and feel of industrially crafted objects is synonymous with globalisation. Lost is the creative voice of these artisans. Traditionally, artisans carried the mental images of pure forms from generation to

generation. Co-operative sharing of skills between the artist and artisan could bring high art and everyday objects together in maintaining individual creativity in our mechanized world.”

Under the thatched roof of the central *sala* (a pavilion, usually within temple grounds), which was also the venue for post-dinner slide presentation and talks, a hive of activity ensued each morning with members of the local community arriving to hold individual ‘workshops’ demonstrating their own particular knowledge and skills. We might refer to them in special terms, i.e. as “artisans” or “crafts people”, but in effect, they simply carried out what was part of their everyday lives – making or mending basket, turning coconut shells into ladles and cups, weaving cloth and mats, etc.. All this is due to and in a way controlled by the seasons, because during planting and harvesting the staple rice, almost everyone in the community is fully engaged working in the fields, leaving them little time to devote to other activities.

Local resident **Khun Pikul Deelon-ngam**, who runs a women’s co-operative in a nearby village, differs from the more traditional basket weavers in that she uses cut-up strips of old newspapers to wrap around wire and weaves these into more decorative forms. Khun Pikul found a dynamic collaborator in **Karla Sachse** from Berlin, who is recognised for her text-based works, her use of “left-over”, carefully preserved documents and other bits of paper. For example, in one of her installations titled *‘Don’t search for them’*, Karla carefully cut out the senders’ addresses from letters sent to her over the last thirty-odd years. These individual hand-written addresses were then laminated, and the pieces strung together to make up a giant hammock which was installed in the wait-

ing room of the now defunct Bahnhof Westend railway station in Berlin. At the workshop and along with khun Pikul, Karla embarked upon weaving a large paper container. Titled *‘Female vessel’*, she took the concept of a basket being a container or vessel further by engaging all present – female and male. Handing out blank strips of paper she asked us to record our bodily experiences in the time we had been there. These hand-written strips, including ones written by Khun Pikul and her sister, bearing some very personal accounts were then rolled and woven along with the newspaper to become part of the large belly like form. As she explained, “... the first step is this basket and asking all to write their texts. This is to make people see that what they write is a visible record of their experiences which are personal but invisible to others. Similarly, opened up the writing on the strips is visible but once rolled up, it becomes invisible and yet remains present in the form of this vessel”.

This also became a point for Karla to launch yet another collaborative work based on a text or poem relating to her own ‘female’ history. Handing out these texts to the group, the collaboration called for individual responses in the form of texts, images, etc., which she aims to combine into a book in the future. Karla, who is interested in individuals communicating memories and histories in a fresh and thought provoking manner, said “to me what is most important is to hand out this text about my female history and give it into your hands ... I start a new project which is invisible at the moment and I wish to make it visible in the future.”

Two days into the workshop and **Surojana Sethabuttra**, well known for her complex architectural installations, largely employing self and/

or factory-made ceramics, decided to build a kiln. Attempting to do so for the first time, Surojana based her design on the simplest kind of kiln known in Thailand, one that is open at the top; but instead of using bricks and the more common rectangular form, she laid down a circular bamboo inner structure

which was then packed with clay containing a mixture of mud, straw and sand. Inside the kiln, found bits of iron were trimmed and placed to construct a grid, making a platform to hold the objects during firing. The purpose of building a kiln on site was two-fold: not only did Surojana want to re-create a kiln on the farm where, she was told, one had existed in the past; but, more importantly, she wanted to establish the foundations to revive the tradition of making pots and other objects amongst the residents of the farm and surrounding community. Demonstrating a firm commitment to the project, she ensured her own return to the site in future to conduct workshops with students from local schools. Preferring to experiment and work with materials found in the immediate environment, the clay used for making pots and other objects was found on the land which she mixed with sand and mud from termite hills to achieve the right consistency. The natural presence of iron in the clay gave it a reddish colour when fired. At the firing stage, burning materials such as coconut and rice husks, cow manure and driftwood - all found on the farm - were gathered to stoke the kiln. Surojana's foresight also synthesized and brought many on the farm to work together - from helping to build the kiln to preparing the clay and making objects

Surojana's foresight also synthesized and brought many on the farm to work together - from helping to build the kiln to preparing the clay and making objects which were successfully fired towards the end of the workshop period.

which were successfully fired towards the end of the workshop period.

Another fruitful collaboration resulted from the sensitive interaction between **Khun Phromma** and **Nitaya Ueareworakul**. An expert at making traditional large baskets

called *Toom* which are used as fish-traps, Khun Phromma raised many a question as to the "new" form that Nitaya discussed and embarked upon with his valuable assistance. Highlighting the functionality of the objects that have been produced for generations, Nitaya discussed how it was also possible to employ the same

materials and techniques and take it further to explore new shapes and forms which could be presented in a more contemporary context. This, in turn, would help nurture and maintain the continuity of individual creativity, traditional techniques and use of materials, keeping the 'craft' alive for future generations.

From weaving materials to weaving a camera - filmmaker **Lawan Jirasuradej's** ingenious video footage of working hands was carefully filmed and edited in the process. Wishing to capture the many processes that various pairs of hands were involved with - from cooking, drawing, kneading clay, weaving cloth or baskets to washing clothes and pouring water - Lawan's video captures the essence of the workshop in many ways. Titled *'Hands in the coop'*, the piece was filmed and completed during the course of the workshop. On the final day, Lawan installed her work inside the chicken coop, and could be viewed through a peephole cut into one of the thatched walls, ensuring that

the residents of the coop were not disturbed. The connection between the image on the TV and the scene inside the chicken coop was an obvious one, hens roosting in the baskets connected to the image of hands weaving said, “when the audience look at the installation, they see on the TV monitor hands that weave, saw, hammer, cook and build from both experts and novices, and at



*Khun Phomma and Nitaya Ueareeworakul:
a fruitful collaboration*

the same time, they witness the surroundings. A chicken coop, turned theatre, is an art installation within itself. The villagers have installed with their hands different shapes and forms of nests for their dwellers.”

‘Hands in the coop’ also became a part of the presentation during the post-workshop discussion at About Studio/Café, where the participants were asked to speak about their work and experience when their hands appeared on the screen.

Some artists, with the energetic input from volunteers, explored the exciting possibility of making site-specific works. **Yoshiko Kanai**, a New York-based Japanese artist, constructed out of a mud wall, a large outlined form titled *‘Earth woman’* in the midst of the rice field. Painter **Maritta Nurmi’s** (from Finland, living in Vietnam) sensitive and subtle “marks” can be perceived to be honouring the abundance of different species of trees on the farm. Placing small sheets of silver leaf, a material widely employed in her canvas-based works, on the trunks of trees on a winding path around the rice field, Maritta painted almost invisible images on the bark and the silver background. “By using the same silver leaf I use in my paintings on canvas, this time straight on tree trunks, I painted these small marks in the midst of this area of great silence in order to create a momentary shattering, shaking or sparking in the minds of passerby. On one of them I painted across the road. On another one I painted fishes to mark the small river nearby... more anyhow wishing it to give a glimpse about ‘the river beneath the river’, the big Creator herself. The third one is telling about yet another river; tears being the river that take you somewhere. Tears will lift your boat off the rocks, off dry ground, carrying it



Trouble in the Henhouse: Lawau Jirasuradej filming working hands

down river to someplace new, someplace better.” Maritta’s charged and meaningful shift became a major factor in expanding the horizon of her own art practice. “Like all my work I wish those small marks to give wind for new hopes and dreams, flashes from other worlds, other possibilities”. Taking a bold step away from the confines of a canvas, she successfully juxtaposed her images in direct response to the environment and landscape.

Day 5 was set aside to conduct workshops with students from local schools, which 40 students, spanning from age 6 to 15, along with their teachers, attended. Five groups were set up according to age. A group of older students joined a video workshop led by Lawan Jirasuradej, myself and **Nataya Masawisut**. Some joined Surojana’s ceramic workshop, yet another group of younger children joined Nilofar and **Vipapat Wadkeaw** to draw on the floor of the forest and simultaneously use body movements to express themselves. And, a group of eight became teachers for the day to teach vital lessons to **Preenun Nana** and **Sirinapa Sirinakorn**. Preenun’s main aim was to stress upon the community the importance of inherited practices and continuing with their way of life. “This idea came from my personal interest in local vegetables and medicinal properties of plants we use in everyday cooking and I want the local people, especially kids, to be proud of the richness of nature around them. So in the workshop with the students I asked them to be the teachers telling about the properties of plants they knew as we walked through the forest and along the rice fields. Not only I could learn from them but also the rest of the group could as they took turns to share what each of them knew. I asked them to write and attach tags to the

relevant plants so others could also read and learn. Some of them told us at the conclusion session how proud and glad they were that the “little” knowledge that is handed down to them by their parents and grandparents could be so



Marietta Nurmi: “to give wind for new hopes dreams, flashes from other worlds”

meaningful to people. To me, it’s very important and enriching to have this kind of a sharing and learning experience”

Certainly the camaraderie, openness and willingness to share, particularly from the residents on the farm, extended beyond simple hospitality. The genuine welcome and input of the owners of Boon Badaan Farm - the Parahom family including fellow artist **Maitree Parahom**, his brother **Ngam Parahom** and most importantly their mother **Khun Mae** - contributed to the success of this event in more ways than one. Furthermore, Khun Mae, who proved to be the ultimate story teller, experiments with the natural flora and fauna on her farm to make dyes for silk and cotton yarn which she weaves into cloth. From learning about which colour could be obtained from a particular plant to the matter of how to fix colours whilst dyeing, and that of

peeling the inner bark of the *areeca palm* and its uses in the intricacies of fabric weaving patterns, being in Khun Mae's company and experiencing her immense energy and depth of knowledge was inspirational to us all.

Yin Xuizhen, an artist from Beijing explained: "I was beginning to dislike life as an artist, the pressure of exhibitions. This makes me see what it should be about... I really needed this ..." Xuizhen, who is known for her humour-filled installations in which she explores personal materials and conditions to

speak of universal human experiences, spent the ten days recording in her diary what she saw and experienced at the workshop, among so much beauty of nature's own great installations. **Naomi Urabe** (ex-curator at About Studio/Café and currently curator at Art in General, New York), a co-organiser of Womanifesto Workshop 2001, rightly summed up, "...while some of the work inspired by the Workshop may not be evident right away, it is hoped that the experience of living in Northeastern Thailand, even for only a short while, will help to inspire future projects and perhaps further collaborations. We hope that this first Workshop and exchange, not only among the artists but with the local community

as well, will continue beyond the ten days that we spent on the Boon Bandaan Farm. Many of us did not know each other before the event and having the time to exchange our experiences and have dialogues, both formal and informal, was crucial to the whole Workshop process."



Wise beyond their years: Children at the workshop show the instructors how it's done.

Varsha Nair

Womanifesto Workshop was held from October 22 to November 4, 2001 and organised by Preenun Nana, Nitaya Uaeree-worakul, Naomi Urabe & Varsha Nair

Participants: Nilofar Akmut, Hiroko Inoue, Lawan Jirasura-

dej, Yoshiko Kanai, Varsha Nair, Preenun Nana, Maritta Nurmi, Karla Sachse, Narumol Thamapruksha, Surojana Sethabuttra, Nitaya Uaereeworakul, Naomi Urabe, Yin Xuizhen.

Volunteers: Vipapat Wadkeaw, Nataya Masawisut, Sirinapa Sirinakorn, Duangnapa Silapasai and Jiratti Khuttanam

Catalogue and Video available April 2002. Contact e-mail: womanifesto2001@yahoo.com

This report is also published in art4d magazine, Bangkok

Photographs by Preenun Nana and Varsha Nair