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Belatedly and Finally: The Early Time of the Indigenous in the Concurrent Contemporary

Abstract

This essay discusses the uneasy process of mediating material that is assigned the term “Indigenous” and its variations, including “folk,” “customary,” “ethnic,” “Aboriginal,” and “First Nation,” among others. These terms are, in turn, set against a range of dominant rubrics, such as “national,” “modern,” and “Western”—a contrast that may catalyse assimilation or incite resistance. This fraught process plays out in various ways through the writing of art history, the curating of contemporary art, and the organisation of a national modern art collection and representation of living traditions. This essay shares the unease, as well as the productive effort, in struggling with these problematics, which implicates the very condition of nature and the well-being of the species. It annotates experiences in two specific settings: the nation-state and the contemporary biennale. This reflection on practice is intended to initiate conversations on how the Indigenous is constitutive of the cultural politics of curation and the methods of telling time in crafting a context deemed (art-) historical. In this engagement, the curatorial gesture is troubled by lateness as well as by timeliness in reclaiming an earlier moment of creative life that is finally rendered as a contemporaneous cosmology.

Keywords: *Indigenous artists, Taiwan artists, Filipino artists, cultural politics, curating contemporary art, nation-state, contemporary biennale*

In composing my keynote speech for the “Grounded in Place” symposium at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), which forms the basis of this essay, I realised how difficult it is to unravel the narrative of origin, on the one hand, and the work of power, on the other, across eras and birthplaces. I begin with this question of origin and power because it cuts across claims to resist, re-articulate, and transform asymmetrical conditions in ways that may elude the procedures of critique as we know it, or to possibly reclaim primordially as we have never imagined it to happen within intersubjectivity. The spectre of power hovers above episodes of colonial civilisation, marked by violence and culture, and the tropes of origin that on their own inscribe discriminations and consolidate everyday events as identity-effects. In this contentious atmosphere, the struggle to be first and to

be free and the complicities entailed in working with others—sometimes amid unfreedom and erasure—proposes trajectories into what we may provisionally call “indigeneity” as opposed to “instrument” and “alienation.”

This essay discusses the uneasy process of mediating material that is assigned the term “Indigenous” and its variations or inflections, among them “folk,” “customary,” “ethnic,” “Aboriginal,” and “First Nation.” These terms are, in turn, set against a range of dominant rubrics—such as “national,” “modern,” or “Western”—which are contrasts that may either catalyse assimilation or incite refusal or dis-integration. This fraught process ramifies in various ways through the writing of art history within the history of culture, the curating of contemporary art within the biennale complex, and the organisation of a national modern art collection and representation of living traditions. This text shares encounters with the unease as well as the productive effort in engaging with the problematic, which implicates the very condition of nature and the condition of the species. It annotates experiences in two specific settings—the nation-state and the contemporary biennale—in which the circumscribed territory and geopolitical unit of a country are captured in terms of national identity even as the biennale flourishes amid contemporaneous subjectivities promised by a proliferating platform. This reflection on practice hopes to initiate conversations around how the Indigenous is constitutive of the cultural politics of curation and the methods of marking time in crafting a context deemed (art-)historical. In this type of action, the curatorial gesture is troubled by lateness as well as by timeliness in recovering an earlier moment of creative life finally rendered as a contemporaneous cosmology.

I share here lessons I have learned from the process of writing art history and curating. I will not prescribe templates, as I am constantly confronting questions that tend to lead to provisional positions. In the spirit of casting artistic or curatorial practice as a lively public sphere of theorisation of the contemporary Indigenous, or the Indigenous contemporary, I am always interested in hearing from peers about their own experiences.

In 2020, I was asked by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum to curate an exhibition and programming for Taiwanese Indigenous artist Sakuliu (b. 1960) of the house of Pavavaljung for the Taiwan Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Taiwan’s presence in this context is tricky, of course, because the Venice Biennale only recognises nation-states as far as the national pavilions are concerned, and Taiwan has a precarious geopolitical status.¹ I view this tension as productive because it complicates the notion of the national in the context of the biennale, which is supposed to be worldly or global or intensely inter-local. The work of Sakuliu hails

from a distinct place in the copious creative world of Taiwan. While it is rooted in, and homes in on, the Indigenous lifeworld of the Paiwan, it actively interacts with the changing social context surrounding it. Sakuliu stands at this crossing and strives to transpose spaces across and within it. Sakuliu's presence further confounds the biennale paradigm to the degree that he intimates the Indigenous within the expectations of the representation of a proto- and para-nation partaking of ambivalent or mottled Chinese-ness although not reducible to it, as attested to by Sakuliu. To some extent, the Indigenous artist performs a history of exclusion within Taiwan and Venice, as well as the practice of re-mediation in the sites of the Pavilion and the Biennale, which need not be conflated with each other.

Sakuliu's practice is informed by the impulse of a knowledge generator who, on the one hand, undertakes visual research of resilient mythology, communal strategy, and an embracing cosmology through drawing, ceramics, photography, and animation. On the other hand, he reveals a full-bodied intelligence for artistic intervention through sculpted forms, the built environment, installation, and the cultural labour of politically recalibrating heritage. I am struck by his layered artistic language and his deep engagement with his community in Sandimen in Pingtung County, in Taiwan's south. Coming from the Philippines and Southeast Asia, I was keen to draw intersecting lines between these two points of the south in the sheltering context of Austronesian culture, and to reflect on the current discussion of what it means to be either contemporary (self-conscious of the present) or local. Sakuliu seems to think this as a false binary, as he enlivens an ecology stirred by the spirit of ancestors and recreated by the commitments of the citizen-artists we encounter.

However, in January 2022, three months before the exhibition opening, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum revoked its support of Sakuliu as a representative of Taiwan to Venice, owing to sexual assault accusations against him. As a curator, I thought that my moving forward meant staying with the trouble, so to speak, in the vein of Donna Haraway, by perhaps offering a proposal for a pavilion of Indigenous and gender restoration.² The pavilion, I ruminated, must be able to find a way to curate a performative condition in which this tear in the fabric of society may be stitched with generosity and fairness within a tradition of deliberation and restoration in our contemporary time. This is our delicate and poignant obligation to the Indigenous communities of Taiwan, the first people to inhabit the country, as well as to the women who have been wronged in history. To not support them at this very trying time with a proper curatorial ecology

would have a profound effect on the Indigenous movement and the future of Taiwan as a nation of ethnic and subjective complexity.

The serious sexual assault accusations against Sakuliu in December 2021 were unforeseen and unfortunate, and his disqualification as the artist of the exhibition left a deep void in the project. As events quickly unfolded away from curatorial calibration, I thought that in the future there should be a methodology to replenish amid a trauma, a crisis, or a fissure in the cosmology, harness the care that curatorial work promises, and to initiate a process of reparation and transformation for those who feel violated and those who are named as agents of the violation. For me, institutional disengagement, which I completely understand, should not be bound to the curatorial patience to stay with the trouble and come to terms with the loss of art, curation, and a pavilion.

Sakuliu's Taiwan-signifying presence in Venice would have performed a series of exclusions within Taiwan and Venice. First, as an Indigenous artist, he does not belong to the dominant Han Chinese geopoetics. Secondly, Taiwan, for its part, is not considered a nation-state in Venice and therefore is not entitled to a pavilion. The third exclusion is his ineligibility to embody Taiwan and its identity-effects, on account of a supposed transgression of an ethical and moral norm, which ultimately defines the aesthetic viability of a representation, the material requisite itself of national respectability. These exclusions mingle the discrepant registers of the Aboriginal and the compromised, the primeval and the injurious, the erotic and the ethnic.

The attractiveness and desire of representation, as well as its disavowal at various levels, may be linked to the opportunity of an entity to express a position within the exceptional plurality that Venice affords. This conviviality or publicness seems to be irresistible even as it risks the conflation of so-called diversity with global agglomeration. That said, from this agglomeration a counter-imaginary through the pavilion may be carved out artistically and curatorially—and phenomenologically, too, as the audience becomes a mediating public sphere in Venice. Such a counter-imaginary need not begin and proceed under the aegis of the nation, or even the post-colony, but may rather ramify in a gamut of localities that is not reducible to the national artefact: village, street, continent, diaspora, pre-national community, or statelessness, among other resonances of locus. Here lies the crucial nexus between nation-ness, globality, and the world of indigeneities, as well as the contact zone of contemporaneity and primordality that gives rise not so much to a hegemonic identity as to an original relationality. The Taiwan presence, in fact, flourishes in this elusive condition, deemed as it is a

collateral exhibition and not a national pavilion in light of Chinese protestations. As a sheer and mere collateral, it is at once invested and concomitant.

Asia-Pacific

My involvement at the second Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1996—as a speaker and a writer for its accompanying publication—introduced me to the Asia-Pacific as a geo-poetic category, a different place that creates differently, apart from being a normative geopolitical one that is of Cold War vintage and neoliberal persistence. The event in Brisbane also introduced me to the term “Aboriginal” within art history and contemporary art. It was an instructive trip for me, particularly because the Philippines would now be situated within Asia and the Pacific and no longer within Europe and the Americas of which the actions and attitudes of the colonialist and the imperialist were blueprints of legibility. At the conference, I spoke on a panel on popular culture alongside Philippine artist Mark Justiniani, Indonesian critic Enin Supriyanto, and Japanese visual artist and superstar Takashi Murakami. I talked about Justiniani’s appropriation of the decorated mode of transport in the Philippines called the jeepney, which mutated from the Willys jeep of World War II in the Pacific. I mention this because a recurring motif in the discussion of the Indigenous within the contemporary is the tactic, and sometimes the polemic, of appropriation—or how elements of a culture not beholden to the modern are re-worked in contemporary forms that may well be postmodern or postcolonial. The jeepney exemplifies an eccentric mix, straddling the rural and the urban, securing its place in folk and popular culture. In Justiniani’s art, the craft of the jeepney ornament is re-functioned to convey colonial critique as well as to exalt native ingenuity and even national identity.

It is worth noting that Philippine filmmaker Eric Oteyza de Guia, better known as Kidlat Tahimik, in his seminal film *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977) begins with a shot of a jeepney to access the lifeworld and history of a town. Tahimik’s forays into this territory would lead him to profess some kind of Indigenous practice; in his public appearances and daily life, he has been seen wearing a northern Cordillera community’s lower garment and using a movie camera fabricated from the fibre of rattan. It would also motivate him to research interpreter Enrique de Malacca for his film *BalikBayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment Redux VI* (2015). In general, the figure of Enrique is resonant in the way he rewrites the script of the first circumnavigation of the world by

Ferdinand Magellan, the quincentenary of which was commemorated by the Philippines in 2021, imagined as coincident with the first Mass in the archipelago to be called the Philippines and the heroism of the chieftain Lapulapu who, along with his men, killed Magellan in 1521. In his last will and testament, Magellan describes Enrique as a captured slave from Malacca, formerly occupied by the Portuguese and part of present-day Malaysia. He is identified as a “mulatto” and a Christian. Enrique’s role in this history of exploration is enhanced by his skill in communicating with both the explorers and the explored, which indicates that he spoke some of the languages of Austronesia and Southeast Asia, including the one spoken in the future nation of the Philippines. In surfacing the spectacle of circumnavigation, it is vital in the same vein to speak of the layers of indigeneity and complicity as embodied by Enrique, who was a linguistic medium, evoking the imaginaries of the brown skin, African ancestry, and slavery even as he also indexed Catholic conversion and translation.



Figure 1. Kidlat Tahimik, *Magellan, Marilyn, Mickey & Fr. Dámaso: 500 Years of Conquistador RockStars* (installation view), 2021. Multimedia installation, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid. Photograph courtesy of the author

Tahimik exacerbates this aesthetic in his installation work *Magellan, Marilyn, Mickey & Fr. Dámaso: 500 Years of Conquistador RockStars* (2021), which was presented at the Palacio de Cristal (Glass Palace), in Madrid's Buen Retiro Park under the auspices of the Museo Reina Sofia (Fig. 1). To a certain extent, with this work the artist is returning to the scene of the crime, as the palace held an exposition on the Philippines in 1887 that presented living Indigenous peoples like anthropological specimens to be ogled or scrutinized. In Tahimik's reckoning, this place of racism morphs into a postcolonial phantasmagoria of tableaux and installations made by him and other collaborators. Through the prism of entertainment or a rock concert, colonisers and pop icons contrive the helter-skelter Philippine history, a carnival of re-possession built up from organic materials, industrial objects, detritus and invention, and a meandering and heady imagination.

Postcolonial

The colonial moment is salient in the reflection on the Indigenous because it foregrounds the coming together of a global order, as well as marks the moment of the Anthropocene and the beginning of possible natural extinction, as Sugata Ray points out in his ongoing project on Indian Ocean art histories. The latter moment is exemplified, in the way territory is possessed in terms of cartography and ethnography, in the 1734 map, engraved by Nicolas de la Cruz Bagay from the archipelago, who inscribes the word *indio* (native) on the work. The map unfolds a range of creatures and formations: inhabitants, foreigners, plants, animals, land, water, air. The shift from a global to a planetary sensitivity may well emerge with this same ecology in which these creatures and formations, as Sugata Ray puts it, "dwell in difference," and perhaps, if I may add, in alterity.³

In 1999, I worked with Australian artist and critic Pat HOFFIE to select the artists from the Philippines for the third APT. One of the artists we chose was Roberto Feleo (b. 1954), who has devoted a large part of his career to visualising Indigenous belief systems that had been previously only been orally intuited. When I was curator at the National Art Gallery of the National Museum of the Philippines around 2006, I presented Feleo's sprawling work called *Tau Tao* (Fig. 2). Feleo evokes an Indigenous mythological schema in what may be considered by the art world as an installation, but he calls it *tau tao*, which, according to him, is the "secondary vessel the dead are believed to occupy to make themselves available to their kin when they need to consult them for solutions to their

problems.”⁴ He makes reference to this form in Indonesia, but also mentions examples from Palawan and the Northern Cordilleras in the Philippines. Feleo insists on this context and this nomination. This specificity extends to the main material of the *tau tao*—sawdust—which, to him, summons the practical intelligence of Philippine house builders and carpenters and what he regards as collective memory.



Figure 2. Roberto Feleo, *Tau Tao*, 1994. Multimedia installation, National Museum of the Philippines. Photograph courtesy of the author

This specific work signifies Feleo’s investment in the project of reconstructing an imagination of a deep past through an idiosyncratic contemporary medium, which in turn is traced to customary form. In his own words, it is a “visual retelling of the Bagobo myth of the afterlife through a three-dimensional presentation consisting of six life-size pieces and the landscape in

which they interact.”⁵ He characterises it as an allegory that “serves as a map to the Bagobo cosmology where light and darkness, order and chaos . . . all the cycles of earthly life interplay—eventually answering the ultimate question: What happens to us after we die?”⁶ I am intrigued by this fascination with the “afterlife” as a trope that likewise releases “art” from the hegemony of aesthetics and into an animate sensibility.

At the National Museum, I also met the soil painters of the Talaandig ethnic community in Bukidnon in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, who participated in a national competition held at the museum. Artist and cultural worker Abraham Garcia Jr. had curated these artists at the Singapore Biennale in 2013, where they presented the painting titled *Cultural Plight*. According to Garcia, the work portrays the Talaandig people’s “shared land and world, where they negotiate the layered engagements in a multicultural Mindanao region and milieu” in which “visual elements are depicted from varied hues, shades, and tones extracted from fourteen types of clay found within the ancestral territory in Songco, Bukidnon.”⁷ Multi-faceted artist Rodelio (“Waway”) Linsahay Saway introduced soil painting to fellow artists Salima Saway-Agra-an, Marcelino “Balugto” Necosia Jr, Raul Sungkit Bendit, Soliman Poonon, RJ Sumingsang Saway, Niño Dave Tecson, Christian Lloyd Eslao, and Adelfa ‘Nanay Ipa’ Saway Kinuyog. As Garcia notes,

they sourced clay, experimented [with] its pigment qualities, and enhanced its binding qualities that culminated in their first collective show in 2006. It further expanded their creative works besides weaving, oral tradition, music, dance, chants, tribal prints, and body tattoos.⁸

In 2009, I began working at the Jorgas B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center of the University of the Philippines, where I also teach art history. In the museum, I have had the opportunity to reflect on what it means for the Indigenous to cohabit the space of the modern and the contemporary with all the attendant risks inhering in the politics of representation and the ethos of authenticity. In 2018, British art theorist, writer, and academic Stephen Wilson curated the group exhibition *Transpersonal, Instructions* at the museum, bringing together a number of overseas artists. Among them were some members of the Karrabing Film Collective, including Gavin Bianamu, Shannon Sing, and Elizabeth A. Povinelli. On their second day in the city, the artists scoured the junkyard of the university and repurposed materials into an installation in the museum, beside which was a room that screened their film, *The Mermaids, Mirror Worlds* (2018;

Fig. 3). According to them, the “installation represents Karrabing Dreamings as they survive by reshaping the toxicities of extractive capital into their own shape.”⁹ On another work’s label, they explained:

This tin shed wall demonstrates how the force and meaning of Karrabing totemic life resonates through youth culture. The totemic tags follow traditional story lines with the splotches of paint representing the shared ceremonies, story, sweat and blood that connect countries across difference or as Karrabing say in creole, “show mebela roan roan country and how wuliya connected.”¹⁰

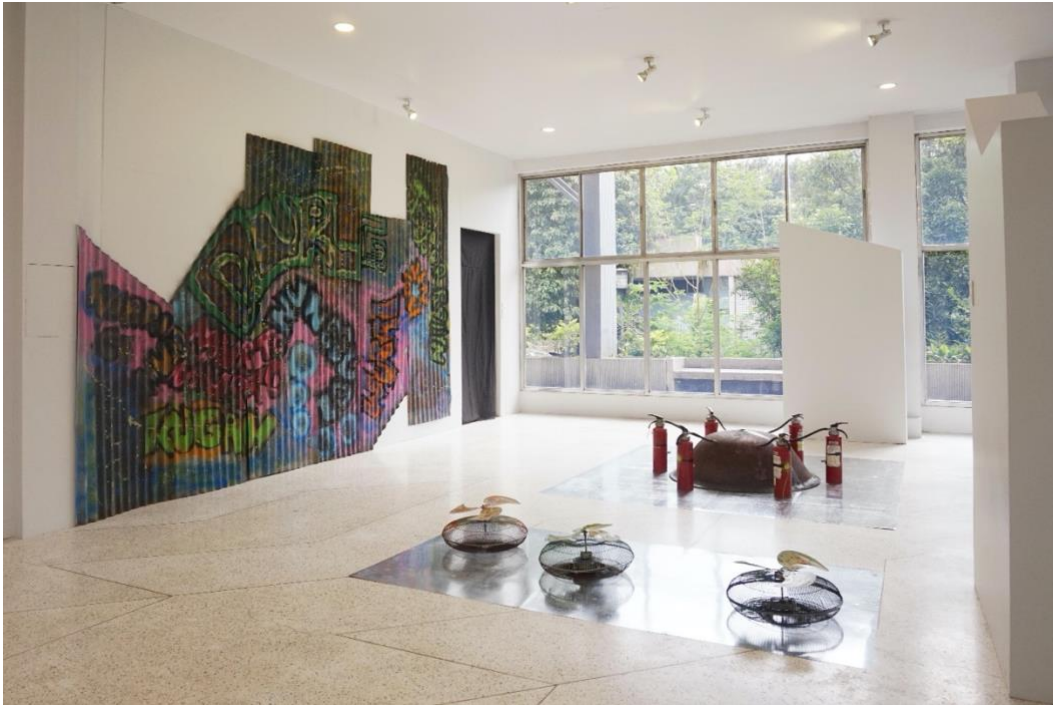


Figure 3. Karrabing Film Collective, clockwise from left: *Graffiti Dreaming #3*, 2018; *Kaingmerre (Sun)*, 2018; and *Penidjebhe (Star) Dreaming #2*, 2018. Multimedia installation in the exhibition *Transpersonal, Instructions*, University of the Philippines Vargas Museum, December 14, 2018–February 1, 2019. Photograph courtesy of the author

Their video titled *The Mermaids, Mirror Worlds* has been described as

an exploration of the present future vision in a new exploration of western industrial toxicity. Screens alternate between publicly accessible promotional films of chemical giants such as Monsanto and a story of young Indigenous man, Aiden, taken away when he

was just a baby to be a part of a medical experiment to save the white race, and who is then released back into the world of his family. As he travels with his father and brother across the landscape, he confronts two possible futures and pasts embodied by his own tale and the current fantasies of multinational chemical and extractive industries.¹¹

Povinelli, a well-known American scholar and theorist at Columbia University, delivered a lecture in which she persuasively laid out the critical link between creative form and social ecology by way of Adorno's suture and Benjamin's rupture. This link may have generated false choices and in the contemplation of the Indigenous, we need to simultaneously contemplate imbrication, on the one hand, and Povinelli's concept of geontology, on the other. Through geontology, we begin to reconsider another matrix of false choices between life and non-life, being and non-being.¹²



Figure 4. Gerardo Tan, Felicidad Prudente, and Sammy Buhle, *Rendering 2* and *Rendering 4*, 2019. Multimedia installation at the exhibition *Visualizing Sound*, held at University of the Philippines Vargas Museum, February 9–March 7, 2019. Photograph courtesy of the author

Re-mediation

Philippine artists have long sought to create work in dialogue with an Indigenous imperative, as it were. For instance, in the exhibition *Visualizing Sound* (2019), also

held at the Vargas Museum, Gerardo Tan (b. 1960) collaborated with ethnomusicologist Felicidad Prudente (b. 1950) and Ifugao weaver Sammy Buhle (b. 1989) to access the sonic atmosphere of textile production and reflect on the translation of forms through a series of works titled *Rendering*. The work's video and audio documentation of sound was generated by weaving and notated in modern symbols, which were then translated to visual images and interpreted in textile by the ikat method (Fig. 4). The relay between conceptualism, weaving, and ethnomusicology calibrated Indigenous and contemporary form through a collaboration among agents of different disciplines.



Figure 5. Gaston Damag, *Ifugao Red*, 2014. Solo exhibition held at University of Philippines Vargas Museum, October 4–November 15, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author

Gaston Damag (b. 1964), who also traces his heritage to the Indigenous Ifugao in the Northern Cordillera, revisited the modernist estimation of colour, as in Yves Klein Blue, with his 2014 solo exhibition *Ifugao Red* (Fig. 5–7). Damag re-performs cultural objects and places them in a museological context. His works may be read as reconsiderations of the civilisational and the institutional, as well as the modernist. Objects including pestles, knives, and a figure of a *bulul* (rice granary spirit) rendered in wood are mingled with industrial materials such as galvanised iron, steel cables, incandescent bulbs, and glass. There might be a hint of the museological sublime here, as well as an animating Indigenous presence in terms of the fastidious formalism of the display that is foiled by the cogent ethnicity of the embedded forms within the said formalism.



Figure 6. Gaston Damag, *Ifugao Red*, 2014. Solo exhibition held at University of Philippines Vargas Museum, October 4–November 15, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author



Figure 7. Gaston Damag, *Ifugao Red*, 2014. Solo exhibition held at University of Philippines Vargas Museum, October 4–November 15, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author

In 2020, installation artist Junyee (b. 1942) spoke to the COVID pandemic condition through the use of bamboo in *Kwarantín* (Fig. 8). Junyee constructed beds, with black marks dispersed across them, out of bamboo, referencing Indigenous materials. Each was enclosed in a tall, uneven bamboo rail and the beds were strewn on the museum's lawn to suggest a state of unrest. In Junyee's practice, the Indigenous pertains to the material and its source, as well as the technology underlying its form, veering away from the fine-arts repertoire of tools and themes.



Figure 8. Junyee, *Kwarantín*, 2020. Multimedia installation, University of the Philippines Vargas Museum. Photograph by the author

As seen in these three cases, the Indigenous moves in and out of registers. In the Philippines—which has been colonised successively from 1521 to 1945 by Spanish, American, and Japanese empires—the Indigenous is defined as not Christian and not Muslim and is distinguished from the folk, which is a mixture of so-called native and foreign cultures via colonialism, conversion, and trade. On the one hand, creative agents who epitomise traditional modes of aesthetic production are exalted by the government as National Living Treasures who sustain living traditions. On the other hand, modern and contemporary artists have cited the Indigenous through realism, abstraction, installation, performance,

moving image, and the neo-ethnic avant-garde. In this traffic of mediations, annotations around craft and art, consciousness and gift, apprenticeship and innovation, dreaming and learning constantly modify the ways we understand contemporaneous sensible forms and actions. Moreover, the museological and curatorial intervention foregrounds the need to create conditions of a political community of interested agents, which can undergird efforts towards a poetics of presentation built around seminars and thoughtful deliberations by interweaving constituencies, enmeshed lineages, and shared passages.

Biennale

The second locus of engagement I present here is the biennale, generally thought to be a form of global capture and agglomeration. In 2018, I co-curated the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale. I worked around the provocation of the themes of the child and the primitive to converse with the title of the biennale, which was *Beyond Bliss*. The child and the primitive are absorbed in the procedures of the human and the quest for contentment, if not completion and perfection. This process inevitably takes on racial and capitalist dimensions in which it is the very body and labour of the colonised that become the resources needed to sustain a dominant system of disproportionate and worldwide structures.

At the Bangkok Art Biennale, Vietnamese artist collective Art Labor's *Jrai Dew: A Radicle Room* was a think-tank room and a mind map. The phrase "Jrai Dew" speaks of the belief in the human and the cosmos of the ethnic community Jarai, based in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. As Art Labor explains:

In [Jarai] philosophy, being human is a part of the metamorphosis cycle of nature. After death, the journey going back to their origin ends at becoming dew (*ia ngôm* in Jarai language) evaporating to the environment—the state of non-being—the beginning particles of new existence. In this metaphorical context, forestland with its people is the vanishing dew, while new existence of modernization and industrialization arise. The radicle room encompasses three years' worth of work with the community of the Central Highlands of Vietnam and includes archival materials, documentation, and texts collected from previous projects within this scope. The project springs from problems involving the relations between cultural workers and the community, explorations that trigger collaborations among agents and within Jrai Dew. Using the idea of the "artwork" as pretext, Jrai Dew pivots on collaborators' process

of observing, understanding, touching, smelling, feeling, and processing landscape, people, and nature.¹³

Yuki Kihara's *Taualuga: The Last Dance*, a performance and video work, was a response to the photographic archive of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, specifically photographs of Sāmoa during the colonial administration of New Zealand (1914–62). The archive includes works by New Zealand photographers John Alfred Tattersall, Thomas Andrew, and the Burton Brothers. The *Taualuga* is a Samoan dance performed to both affirm Samoan resilience and lament the losses encountered in its colonial history. In Kihara's performance, the *Taualuga* is mobilised as a way of confronting colonial history, referencing the Mau movement in 1908 that inspired Western Sāmoa's assertion of its independence from New Zealand's colonialism.

Samak Kosem's *Nonhuman Ethnography* was a series of visual ethnographies based on field research at the southernmost provinces of Thailand by focusing on queer ties of human and nonhuman agencies in the realms of Anthropocene spaces. This nonhuman ethnography of *Sheep* (2017) and *Waves* (2018) was conceptualised with the idea of art and anthropological methods to explore the representation of coexistence among people, things, and places. The works included multimedia images, videos, photographs, writing, drawing, and objects. The videos dwelled on sheep and waves. The other part of the installation was composed of "field notes" in the Melayu language spoken in Southern Thailand.

Finally, pioneer Indonesian artist-activist Moelyono (b. 1957) presented hauntingly beautiful painted portraits of schoolchildren in Papua or Irian Jaya in Indonesia, a place and people assimilated into the Indonesian nation-state but who have asserted their freedom to be primordial. Rendered in an extremely realist style, the images uncannily resemble photographs. They exude innocence and dignity, speaking to the fantasy of paradise. The paintings, however, came with art teaching modules that the artist prepared for students in a project he initiated for schools in Papua. These modules referred to activities that asked students to draw figures from their environment. This alternation between portrait and the initial experience of drawing points to the agency of being present and of making present in a contested territory.

I was the artistic director for the Singapore Biennale in 2019, at a time when Singapore was marking the bicentenary of the arrival of the British. The title of the biennale—*Every Step in the Right Direction*—was taken from a line in an interview with Salud Algabre, a woman revolutionary from the 1930s in the

Philippines. When asked about a revolt that she co-led, she rectified the interviewer by saying: “No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction.” Part of this right direction is the postcolonial inspiration to reconstitute the worldliness of the global contemporary. Key in this gesture was the inclusion of artist/curator Carlos Villa (1936–2013). In 1976, the year that the United States was marking its bicentennial as a nation, Villa curated *Other Sources: An American Essay*, in which more than 300 artists participated in the affiliated exhibitions and performances. The notion of the Third World was invoked here, but not to be defined in the singular; the assembly was “instead a comprehensive multi-level description of that experience” in which the “documentation becomes representation” of everyone and everything repressed or systematically discriminated upon by the modernist canon: people of colour, women, Indigenous and queer communities, and so on.¹⁴

In his self-portrait—an Itek print of a photograph of himself—Villa draws patterns to delineate a chance of becoming: “Somewhere between the enlarged image of an Asian face and the act of drawing was space. At that time there existed a void, devoid of a knowledge of true national identity or a specific and truer art history.”¹⁵ In *Artist’s Feet*, Villa narrates a tale of the Aboriginal people in Australia walking on feathered shoes around enemy camps and casting spells; the feet also pertain to a surrealist Magritte painting where feet morph into shoes.

In 1980, Villa performed *Ritual: A Painting Performance/Interaction* at The Farm in San Francisco, mingling Dogon cosmology and American action painting. He interfaced with Tom Seligman for around four hours, which involved paint, blood, feather casts of his body, masks, and a cape. Lucy Lippard describes Villa’s art as “generous,” characterised not only by the “density of its visual content, but by . . . an embrace, a rare passion that resembles his own modestly charismatic presence.”¹⁶

Alongside Villa at the Singapore Biennale were Chang En-Man (b. 1967) and Busui Ajaw (b. 1986). Chang En-Man’s work for the biennale traced the pathways of the giant African land snail from its origin in Africa through Singapore and into Taiwan, where it was introduced during Japan’s colonial rule. Over time, it became part of Indigenous gastronomy in Taiwan. Busui Ajaw, an Akha artist living in Northern Thailand, presented a set of paintings evoking the story of an Akha prince, his son, and the world’s first mother, named Amamata. Surrounded by these paintings was a traditional spirit gate, the border between the village and the mythical world. The presence of these Indigenous Taiwanese women artists offered a different enunciation of situatedness and migration, taking the Biennale to Austronesia, an ethnogenetic marker of Southeast Asia based on an out-of-

Taiwan theory, as well as to Zomia, the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia which refers to parts of Southeast Asia that have eluded strict control of nation-states and their bureaucracies to include North Vietnam, Thailand, North Myanmar, Southwest China, Tibet, Northeast India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Venice

In preparing for the Taiwan Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2022, I was excited to learn about the Firsts Solidarity Network. This artist-led network intended to bring together inaugural national pavilions, as well as national pavilions presenting artists of a specific subjectivity for the first time as a critical turning point in their respective countries. Initiated by Yuki Kihara as the first Pasifika, Asian, and Fa'afafine/trans artist to represent the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion, this solidarity would offer support across the participating pavilions through a series of collaborative programs. The solidarity likewise would interrogate the "internal structures of national pavilions and their commitment towards equitable representation of artist/s."¹⁷ The scheme sought to "offer visitors to Venice a route to discover these 'firsts' at the global art world event. For artists and curators the network offers practical advice and camaraderie among participating pavilions."¹⁸ Included here were Albania, Great Britain, Poland, Nepal, Singapore, and—if plans did not miscarry—Taiwan, via Sakuliu, whose firstness as an Indigenous artist to represent Taiwan was ultimately to be thwarted. Indeed, the enterprise to "represent" is vexing and prone to constant appropriations.

That being said, such an aspiration to solidarity leads me to think more deeply of Chadwick Allen's idea of the transIndigenous, or the

diverse, sometimes multidirectional, even multidimensional forms. Most readily, we conceive such projects within and across a multitribal Native North America and its manifold Indigenous survivances (to borrow Gerald Vizenor's term for survival as active presence).¹⁹

The transIndigenous may translate as well to the interspecies, the transdisciplinary, the queer and transgender, and a possible futurity in the technologies of making. Allen looks into "purposeful Indigenous juxtapositions, which prioritize reading *across* and *through* multiple, diverse, and distinct Indigenous texts and contexts, rather than endlessly re-centering the colonial legacies and Indigenous-settler binaries of particular nation states."²⁰

I close with two speculations on an Indigenous future. In 2018, I was invited to Ulaanbataar, Mongolia, for an event around the project Land Art in which the idea of nomadic democracy was prominent. This was uncanny because in 2015, I curated the Philippine Pavilion in Venice, where an entry point was the film *Genghis Khan* produced in Manila in 1950. The film points to exceptional conquest within early modernity and the current dispute over the South China Sea—hailed by China as the contemporary silk road and which offers a horizon of a vaster Austronesia. For the Singapore Biennale 2019, we were initially working with the Romani artist-activist Ladislava Gaziova, who co-founded the Romafuturism Library. In both instances, the nomadic and the diasporic, the itinerant and the dispossessed, the wandering and the afterlife may well be compelling pathways to take as we continue to create geographies, solidarities, and time zones for, through, and across the Indigenous. I was thinking of this when I turned to the adverbs “belatedly” and “finally” for the title of this paper. This thought process beckons the early time of the Indigenous in contemporaneous cosmologies as a way of shaping the mediating around the question of the modern, which is the foundational condition of the possibility of knowing and sensing the Indigenous. The term “finally” signals epiphany and exasperation, as if to say the Indigenous is at long last before us, emerging during the emergency of the planet’s decisive decline and summoning the dreamers, the diviners, and the healers who have ushered in the Earth ever since. Indeed, concepts around the de-colonial, the non-modern, the multicultural, and the de-modern should be part of this theoretical vernacular that restitutes and restores what has been alienated by refusals encrusting around ethnicity, race, class, gender and sexuality, and other categories of personhood. These subjectivities need to be liquid again, like islands, and forever regenerative, like mangroves.

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Notes

¹ See Chris Horton, “Taiwan’s Status Is a Geopolitical Absurdity,” *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/07/taiwans-status-geopolitical-absurdity/593371/>.

² Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

³ See Sugata Ray, “From New Spain to Mughal India: Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey,” in *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed. Karl Kusserow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2021), 94–113.

⁴ Patrick Flores, “Roberto Feleo: Bagobo Afterlife: A Close Reading of an Installation,” in *Meridians of Region: Writing Art History and Curating Contemporary Culture in the Philippines and Taiwan* (Philippine Contemporary Art Network and the Taiwan Visual Art Archive, 2021), 53, <https://vargasmuseum.org/meridians-of-region/>.

⁵ Flores, “Roberto Feleo,” 53.

⁶ Flores, “Roberto Feleo,” 53.

⁷ Abraham Garcia Jr, unpublished notes, emailed to the author.

⁸ Abraham Garcia Jr, unpublished notes, emailed to the author.

⁹ Extended object label, *Kaingmerre (Sun) and Penidjebhe (Star) Dreaming #2, Transpersonal, Instructions*, Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines.

¹⁰ Extended object label, *Transpersonal, Instructions*, Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines.

¹¹ “Haegue Yang: *Triple Vita Nestings* / Karrabing Film Collective: *The Mermaids: Mirror Worlds*,” *e-flux*, June 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/196963/haegue-yangtriple-vita-nestingskarrabing-film-collectivethe-mermaids-mirror-worlds/>.

¹² Geontology, or more specifically, geontological power, is a term formulated by Elizabeth A. Povinelli to “intensify the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets . . . intended to highlight, on the one hand, the biontological enclosure of existence (to characterize all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life). And, on the other hand . . . the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.” Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.

¹³ Unpublished notes of the Art Labor artists, emailed to the author, June 2018.

¹⁴ Carlos Villa, *Other Sources: An American Essay* (San Francisco: San Francisco Art Institute, 1976), 4.

¹⁵ Carlos Villa, *(60 Forms of) ATANG / Payback and Tribute (In Filipino)*, unpublished manuscript, n.p. Courtesy of the San Francisco Art Institute archives.

¹⁶ Lucy R. Lippard, "Making the World Smaller: Carlos Villa's Polyculturalism," in *Carlos Villa: World in Collision*, ed. Mark Dean Johnson and Trisha Lagaso (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 13–15.

¹⁷ Unpublished Firsts Solidarity Network brief, emailed to the author, August 2021.

¹⁸ See e-flux Announcements, "Firsts Solidarity Networks," March 28, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/450780/firsts-solidarity-network/>.

¹⁹ Chadwick Allen, "Charting Comparative Indigenous Traditions," in *Cambridge History of Native American Literature*, ed. Melanie Benson Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 447.

²⁰ Allen, "Charting Comparative Indigenous Traditions," 463.