

FLIGHT



Estan Cabigas from the series *Looking for Mr. Vhoy* 2011. Courtesy the artist.

■ Flaudette May V. Datuin

People who are constantly moving and leaving – and in the Philippines, they are legion – tend to be picnoleptic. Picnolepsy is concretely apparent in states of mental disturbances, shock, trance, possession, daydreams, jokes, manic and epileptic seizures and is marked by a series of vacancies and absences, configured in shifting and provisional arrangements, rather than coherent unities, ordered and logical thought.¹

These disappearances, gaps, black holes give rise to a form of making do, or struggling along, a term that the anthropologist Robert Desjarlais employs in his account of homeless people troubled by mental illness. Instead of coherence

and integration, struggling along involves a succession of engagements, unfolding episodically and distractedly – very similar to shelter life where political agency is “built out of tactical movements, an acutely tactile engagement with the world, a constant focus on daily concerns, a distanced style of communication, a poetics of pacing and talking centering on unconnected episodes, a makeshift economy of cigarettes and loans and conversations, and a ragtag collection of words, memories, images, and possessions.”²

Filipino citizens scattered across the globe make do and struggle along amidst picnoleptic unsaids, vacancies and absences. Comprising mostly women who serve and make homes in strange lands, they fall between the cracks of the

'real,' the rational and the visible in a global culture of unequal access amidst material excess, of want and poverty amidst waste and plenty. As we said in our Call for Proposals brief for *Nothing to Declare*, an international exhibition scheduled to take place in November 2011, the Philippines is "a nation of nannies,"³ of exported overseas workers whose remittances to those they leave behind supposedly keep the economy afloat.⁴ In an early installation (*Filipina: DH*) by Imelda Cajipe Endaya, this overseas nanny is fashioned out of recycled household discards, crafted out of gestures associated with keeping house – ripping, tearing, sewing, folding, hanging, recycling and petrifying fragments of domestication and domesticity: old curtains, bedcovers, rags, craggy sack-cloth, an ironing board with Mater Dolorosa's rays, flat irons hanging over worn out slippers, and so on. The resulting collage of gestures and household objects or *kasangkapan* overflows with women's devalued anonymous toil, destined to disappear, as Neferti Tadiar⁵ passionately puts it "in the huge pile of waste that appears as the excess byproduct of global progress." The assemblage renders material and emotional the migrant domestic worker's objectification as craft, fashioned out of the labour of women who made her, and as the "technological apparatus designed to perform the reproductive work of 'natural' mothers and daughters, for whom she fills in as a new industrial or perhaps posthuman *replicant*." At the same time, these women labour to survive, to re-invent and re-connect their fragments, "through the very modes of producing subsistence and survival with which women are tasked."

Overseas Filipino Workers or OFWs are absent presences made present through money coming through the wires, a condition the photographer Estan Cabigas describes as "awkward," in this instructive passage from his proposal for *Nothing to Declare*, which I quote:

"For much of his life, Estan Cabigas, 36 and the photographer/project proponent knows only his father through the toys, the calls, the *pasalubongs* (souvenirs from abroad to people back home), and the brief times that he is home. An awkward situation, but it is one that has greatly made an impact on who he is now.

"Last May 2006, at around 0100H, he received a call from his mother informing him that his father, Jose 'Vhoy' Cabigas II died in a hotel room in India due to cardiac arrest. He cried for a few minutes and just stopped, trying to make sense of the tragic loss. He also realised that plans to know more of his 'absent' father, of trying to speak, to hold and to 'reconcile' what needed to be reconciled is no longer possible. It was just too late and he has to live with it.

"What he is left to do is to know more of his father through the recollections of his mother, the reminiscences of his sister and kin and holding on to his own memories or the things that will remind him: the mynah bird that is still greeting in the morning, the barometer that indicates the coming of a storm or a good weather. He has to contend with the notes written on his father's notebooks like the recipe for an ox tail stew or the oversized sando (sleeveless) shirt with holes in them. Did my father wear this during his free time on the ship? Did he listen to these

Toto CDs with his familiar signature written on the case's face?" Estan is left to wonder.

"These tangibles (the things, the people) and the intangibles (the stories, the anecdotes) are what's left that Estan has to piece together to paint a portrait of his father.



Alwin Reamillo Thuringowa Helicopter Project 2011, at The Substation / Hobsons Bay Community Arts Center in Newport, Victoria. This a multi-sited, multi-phased sculptural installation initially developed in collaboration with multicultural communities of Thuringowa-Townsville in North Queensland in 2007. The project was later developed as a national touring exhibition organized by Kultour in Sydney, Darwin and Melbourne. Participatory public workshops were facilitated with local schools / communities to create a swarm of mini-helicopter/ dragonfly-shaped bamboo lanterns to accompany the main helicopter. Courtesy the artist.

"*Looking for Mr. Vhoy* will be a photo project that the photographer proposes to do for *Nothing to Declare*. It will consist of a series of images of the things, the people and the places that all have a connection to his father. On the whole, this project will try to make a portrait of Mr Vhoy Cabigas."



Kawayan de Guia *Candy Houses* 2011. Courtesy the artist.



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Imelda Cajipe Endaya *Filipina: DH* 1995, installation (detail), found objects, plaster-bonded textiles, sound, images projected on maids' uniforms, dimensions variable.

Cabigas struggles to re-claim and re-collect the scattered fragments of his father's life by holding on to 'tangibles' and 'intangibles' – traces of a difficult passage aboard a much-awaited ship that never arrives.

For others however, there are instances where grief cannot even play out in bodily terms, through actual sensing, touching and smelling.

Nowadays, the process of making do, of getting through the day has gone hi-tech. If money can be remitted electronically, so can grief. A funerary service dubbed Cyber-Burol or cyber-wake promises to beam images of the bereaved and the dead via webcam. Christian 'Bong' Ramilo, a Philippine-born artist based in Darwin is interested in these virtual encounters, and proposes to "contribute an installation that represents voices and images of Filipinos overseas using Facebook feeds which are "voxified" (that is, text transformed into vox using the Festival text-to-speech application) and sonified, where text is transformed, through algorithmic composition, into musical sequences. More than 600,000 Filipinos log on to Facebook daily. As such, it provides a "natural aggregator," as Ramilo puts it, "for expressions of so many Filipinos world-wide, including those I wish to recruit into the project."

Kawayan de Guia, on the other hand, proposes to engage with those who do come home and survive the hard life abroad as well as the equally perilous homecoming. Returning Filipinos strive to recover their losses, and come to terms with the pain of leaving and arriving through brand new houses built in a style that de Guia calls 'Candy Houses' – Corinthian style villas that "sprout along every Philippine highway". For *Nothing to Declare*, he proposes to document and collect images, sounds, notes, sketches of these 'Candy Houses' along the road from Banawe to Hungduan, Ifugao in Northern Philippines, home of hardy mountain villagers, whose cultures – although Christianised to a large extent – bear characteristics markedly different from Christians in lowland communities, where Christianisation is more complete. Travelling along these roads, de Guia witnessed many changes over many years, but it is a "trend that applies to the whole Philippines," he observes. Through this documentation, he addresses the following queries: What hides behind the mask of these houses' gay appearance? Why do the owners want to set themselves apart from their community (from those who are not so 'fortunate' to work abroad) and from their rural environs? What does it mean to lose touch with the life of your elders? Is the distance intended? Is it consciously willed to make a point? Where does this pathway lead to - this road from root to cement?

A similar ethnographic impulse is evident in the proposal of composer Motohide Taguchi, who intends to produce an experimental sound installation exploring the life of OFWs in Japan, one of the most popular OFW destinations. However, as Taguchi observes "it is not easy for most Japanese people to know about them, because in Japanese society, they don't have the power and they are in the silence as those who have nothing to declare." Along with workshops, and performance with selected participants in Manila, Taguchi hopes to engage with the theme of shifting geographies by collecting memories from two fronts: "The memories of the

Filipinos living in Japan ... about their hometown and their family in their mother country" and "the memories of the people living in Manila about the family members or former close neighbors living in other countries as OFWs, migrants etc. These are the memories about the people or the place that were left or brought by the people going to other countries. In other words, these memories were shifted from their original place. Between those shifted memories, this work attempts to see various human relations."

Never fully arriving, caught between movement and stasis, the Filipino migrant – as worker, as expatriate artist-exile – is always migrating, always on their way, struggling to breach borders. Alwin Reamillo's giant helicopter, which he proposes for *Nothing to Declare*, provides an apt image for this attempt at frustrated flight. Weighted down by gravity and by a carapace of shells alluding to a crab mentality that pulls people down, a negative Filipino trait, the helicopter does not take off. On the other hand, the helicopter does take off, albeit metaphorically borne on the wings of a creative flight that builds alternative community formations through a process he calls "cross-cultural *bayanihan*," a term for a Filipino form of the cooperative practice of carrying and building houses together as a unit without expecting anything in return. In other words, being *bayani* or heroes together (-*han*). Through such collaborative projects as the *Thuringowa Helicopter Project* and *Mang Emo + Mang-himo Grand Piano Project*, to name two recent ones, he produces what he terms "social sculptures" that "emerge out of a cultural context of engagement, one that is dialogical, immersive, and participatory".

Makeshift, collaborative, participatory – these are words that have gained currency in contemporary art-making and theorising. Artists contribute to these discussions through creative flights that embody the spirit of struggling along amidst picnoleptic silences and of summoning and putting together, from rooms miles away from home, often in contingent, fleeting and tactical ways, pieces of themselves, the places they left behind and the places they claim and remake as their own. ■

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1 Paul Virilio. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* USA: MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass; London, 2009.

2 Robert Desjarlais, "Struggling Along: The Possibilities for Experience Among the Homeless Mentally Ill" *American Anthropologist* Vol. 96, No. 4, Dec 1994 Through <http://www.jstor.org> (18 July 2006), p. 896.

3 Sheila Coronel, 2 April 2005. <http://pcij.org/stories/a-nation-of-nannies/>

4 Data from 2003-2009 of the Bangko Sentral showed that there has been increasing remittance flows from OFWs. In 2003, total remittance was USD7.6 billion. In 2009, total remittance reported was USD17.3 billion. Data on Overseas's Filipinos Remittances by country, by source are available at <http://www.bsp.gov.ph/Statistics/keystat/ofw.htm>

5 Flaudette May V. Datuin (ed), *Alter/(n)ations: The Art of Imelda Cajipe Endaya*, University of the Philippines Press, Quetzon City 2010.