

accruing invisibles

alfredo+isabel aquilizan



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Smell, they say, is the sense that propels us most immediately into recognition and action. Stronger than sight and hearing, smell works like a conduit that carries us almost immediately into a state of responsiveness. Apparently it's because of its close relationship to triggers related to survival: to fear and flight. But it's equally associated to attraction, to picking up pheromones and other invisible indicators. It's obviously important to animals that seem capable of recognising a lot more olfactory clues than humans, but even the most olfactorially challenged of our species may be picking up on triggers we're not immediately aware of, and responding to in ways that we might not readily recognise.

The installations of Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan have been in high demand at biennales and survey exhibitions across the world for more than a decade. Some Filipinos have dubbed them "the darlings of the biennale circuit". Much of the work they produce relates to ideas of place—local place, transition, site, displacement. It's an ongoing theme that keeps mutating, and common to all of them is a persistent scent—a fragrance that hovers in the air surrounding the materials of their work. It's the smell of sampaguita.¹

Manila by night swelters in all seasons. Traffic tunnels its way through a shimmering miasma of fumes that sits perennially compressed beneath a blanket of humidity. There are buses and an across-city rail, but most of its denizens commute by jeepney, the famous passenger pickups that are riotously decorated by highly skilled artisans to resemble rolling pimp-my-ride shrines, and then decked out with high calibre sub woofers. The jeepneys were originally created as reconvered jeeps left over from the USA's post-WWII military presence, but they've since become adopted as the most immediately recognisable icons of that overcrowded, over-polluted capital. And despite the changes in vehicle design, the basic shape remains more or less true to the originals. They're there in the provinces as well, but in Manila they seem to reach the apogee of fabulous insanity, a mix of reverence and ribaldry that is difficult to match. They punch out toxic emissions at approximately the same pitch as they can volume from their speakers, and when you travel in the back, squeezed into fleshmeat with people you may never come across again, the experience is one of proximity where sound and smell and vision and touch are compressed and heightened.

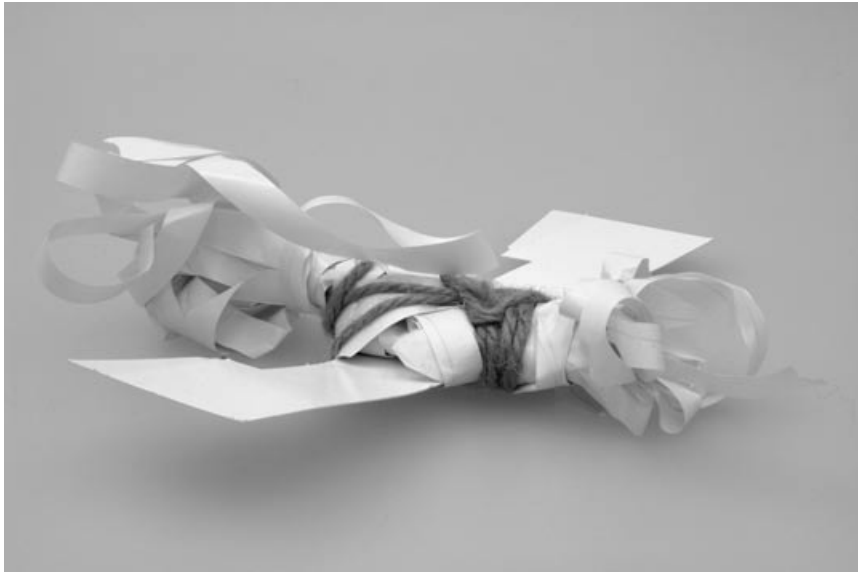
The traffic is relentless. Yet often, just at that point when the sensory overload threatens to overwhelm and take you under, there is a lull. Stopped in the sluggish stream of traffic by night, exchange takes place, and an underage child passes over a garland of small flowers for a few coins. The driver winds the ring of buds around the rear view mirror, and the entire vehicle is suffused by the scent of the sampaguita blossoms. The same garlands are used to wend around the santos and the Santo Nino and the reliquaries in the ubiquitous churches that are filled to bursting point by the faithful and the penitents, the hopeful and the desperate every Sunday. At those times and during Holy Week and festivals the scent of the garlands, heaped one upon another by those who can barely afford bowls of rice, mounts and swells to fill the interiors of the churches like the voices of those singing praise.

The sampaguita is a small insubstantial flower. The garlands are threaded together by tiny buds that seem destined to never completely open. Yet together they produce an insinuating, sensuous scent that wends its way through and into so many aspects of everyday life in the Philippines, lacing together the sacred to the profane, the hyperactivity to a sense of balanced peace, the sense of imminent trauma to a sense of inevitability. Like a memory of a prayer, the scent is almost-not-there, almost-not-possible. But it has a capacity to throw anyone who's spent any time in the Philippines hurtling right down a time-tunnel so that you doubt you'd ever left.

At this year's *APT6*, the Aquilizans are representing Australia. In 1999, at the third *APT*, their work was included as part of the Philippine representation. In between, in October 2006, they moved to Brisbane with their five children. Even so their work has continued to be presented in a score of international survey exhibitions with the assumption that they are from the Philippines. Not that there would be any anomaly in this. The economy of the Philippines is dependent upon the phenomenon of its global diaspora of up to eleven million "Overseas Filipino Workers" to keep it afloat—so the Aquilizans are both Australian and Filipino.

There is an easy, phlegmatic approach to the necessity of self-exile evident in the Aquilizans' attitude to their life and work as artists. In the lead-up to the 2006 *Biennale of Sydney* they decided they'd migrate to Australia, and when curator Charles Merewether subtitled the *Biennale Zones of Contact* it seemed to them like an open invitation to conjure their personal situation into a readymade art event. *In Transit* (2006), was comprised of twelve *balikbayan* boxes, wooden tea-chests used by Filipinos all over the world to send their possessions overseas and *pasalubong* (gifts) back at a relatively cheap prices. Most cities have a Filipino grocery store that manages *balikbayan* postage, so the freighting was as appropriate conceptually as it was affordable. In appearance, the installation had the same kind of measured, poised presentation that, like so much of their work, is influenced by Alfredo's undergraduate training in approaches to high modernism. And at the level of relational aesthetics this work had an extraordinary appeal, both as a way of reflecting the experience of millions of diasporic Filipinos and as a means of transporting their belongings to begin a new life. The precisely packed bundles were evocative of family life with five children—Prada shoes squeezed in next to the more essential, everyday objects, dispelling any sentimentality of exile. And through and between each of these cubes of containment the scent of sampaguita wafted in and out as a reminder of what had been left behind.

Unknown to its Australian audience a sister work was exhibited in Manila at the same time. Housed in the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, built by Imelda Marcos as a modernist monolith to reflect the weighty significance of the country's willingness to adopt the principles of internationalism, the other part of the *Belonging* project was titled *Address* and also consisted of twelve cubes made of the things they were leaving behind. These cubes were assembled into what looked like a house-shell constructed from assumptions and hopes about what (the forthcoming) life might be like, and that its roofless structure, thus offering no shelter, made the work all the more poignant. *Address* eventually found its way over to Australia as well, as part of Felicity Fenner's 2008 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Handle with Care*. And perhaps ironically, like the Aquilizans, it has continued to move around—to Sydney to coincide with the 2008 *Biennale of Sydney* for the *Concrete Culture* exhibition at University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts, to the 2008 *Singapore Biennale: Wonder* exhibition curated by Matthew Ngui and Joselina Cruz, and (at the time of printing) is showing in *Dojima River Biennale: Reflection: The World through Art*, in Japan.



The themes of displacement and resettlement are continued in their artwork for *APT6*. The Aquilizans have proposed an installation titled *In-Flight* that is conceived as another sequence in their ongoing three-year *Flight* workshop project with migrants. Like so many of their artworks, the title is poised to pivot between at least two meanings, and the construction process of the work is at least as important as the final product. Alfredo and Isabel talked about the project:

It's part of a three year project that started in 2007; it began as an invitation to migrants to make their own aeroplane that will eventually be brought together to make one big plane. The APT project that we're doing now, In-Flight, is for us principally about what happens during the making of the object. The curators always talk about the object and how to display it... but for us, it's not principally about the object; it's about what transpired during the process. The object is there to trigger that exchange and to slow people down. If you create a situation where people can sit down and make an object that they can talk about as they make it, some of the best part of the artwork happens when the makers share their ideas and their experiences with each other. The very title is ambiguous—it's unclear whether it's about flying or about a particular plight. But we've been dealing with these issues since 1997, when Alfredo left to study for his Master of Art in Fine Arts at Norwich School of Art and Design at Anglia Polytechnic University in England, when he received a UNESCO bursary for the arts to study for one and a half years.²

At that time Isabel was still teaching in Makiling High School for the Arts in the Philippines; the work Alfredo produced during his candidature concerned his experience of separation and dislocation. In the UK he had connected with communities of Filipino migrants who had married white English husbands as part of the 'mail order bride' phenomenon. Alfredo described the connections he made there as having been as much motivated by a need to get a regular fix of *sinigang* (a delicious Filipino version of fish soup) as it was through a need to make art. And the fact that he was freezing (the studio he worked in had no heating) motivated his choice of wool as a material. That Isabel was pregnant at the time further directed his choice of baby's clothing and shoes as other materials for his research.

It is here that some of the parameters of Bourriaud's descriptions of relational aesthetics as a way of describing a 'new wave' of art produced in Europe in the early 1990s begin to fray at the edges. Although Western-based understanding of contemporary art may provide a different way of evaluating visual art production, in countries like the Philippines concepts such as 'the *bayanihan* spirit', or working together as an interconnected community, have underpinned the way in which both traditional and a contemporary culture and art have been made. In this kind of framework, it's about engagement and collaboration and the sheer pleasure of working together and adjusting it as you go along.

These differences are rarely evident in what is presented as resolved and finished artworks in the contexts of exhibitions such as biennales. But for those artists who perform their work within this homogenising structure, the processes of how the work emerges are often very different. The Aquilizans describe it as a very Filipino experience, one that draws from the same spirit of spontaneity and interaction that has always been needed to construct and carry a *nipa* hut to a new site in the *barangay*—it's one where the whole community contributes and gets involved at all levels. And it is this kind of spirit that makes survival in a zone of crisis a possibility.

This approach is still evident in, for example, contemporary Filipino music in bands like Pinikpikan, that bring the percussive traditions of many parts of the Philippines together with a Western underpinning; or in the range of street theatre that has been generated through local activism. Another colloquialism might be the term 'jamming', and the Aquilizans recognise it as being a prevalent approach in many other Asian countries as well. They describe how, among those artists selected to be part of Hou Hanru's *Zone of Urgency* exhibition at the 2003 *Venice Biennale*, a group of artists that included Heri Dono, Wong Hoy Cheong, Tisna, Krisnamurti and the Aquilizans worked together as a group to get their individual installations completed and follow with their observation that when Southeast Asian artists are working together on exhibitions in different parts of the globe there is always the sense of interdependency through working together that is common to this region. The academics, Alfredo says, call it "collaboration".

All too often these biennales end up presenting the work like an assembly-line of rich people's trophies rather than as a series of experimental approaches that may well end in a certain messiness or hesitancy—a kind of determinacy that belies process rather than works that set out from the beginning to fulfil the demands of the viewers' dictatorship. And it is not until contexts are examined that the differences emerge.

So much of the work the Aquilizans have produced in the past has been brought into being through long processes of collecting. For *Erasure and Remembrance*, their work in the 1997 *Havana Biennial*, they installed approximately one hundred thousand toothbrushes collected from the Philippines and Havana in a building that had formerly been used as the Bishop's house in Old Havana Vieja, in the old part of the city. An elevated pathway ran across the darkened room, a compositional device that was also a way of positioning the viewer inside the work and experiencing oneself as part of it, while wafting up from under the walkbridge, suffusing the atmosphere of the little room, the scent of sampaguita enveloped the audience.

The artists had gathered the work's components slowly from friends and accomplices, family members, school groups, from both the Philippines and the inhabitants of the city in Havana. The choice of the used toothbrush as material grew from their response to the overarching theme of that *Biennial: Memory and Remembrance (Requerdos y su la memoria)*. In the years leading up to the end of the millennium it was a very common theme, and the Aquilizans thought that the toothbrush represented a very individual, personal object that was linked to each person in a particularly intimate way. When accumulated, they interpreted the result as like a community of individuals who had lost their identity. The artists also described how easy it became to distinguish those toothbrushes that had come from, say, the relatively wealthy students from Ateneo University in Manila from those that had been used by barrio children at a public school in outlying Laguna. They described the process of collecting the brushes as laborious, one that involved endless introductory talks about what the project was going to be about and long discussions before each collection was harvested. The histories of the Philippines and Cuba have strong parallels. While both countries were former colonies of Spain and shared very similar patterns of colonialism for over three hundred years, and that the national hero of each country—Jose Marti and Jose Rizal—were close friends, they also shared the production of coffee, tobacco and sugarcane for the international market. Somehow the toothbrushes seemed all the more potent as a material choice for that kind of orally destined production.

They were invited to present the same work for the 1999 *Fukuoka Triennial* and although for that presentation different communities had contributed the materials, the collection process had been organised by the Asian Art Museum. The artists talked about the differences that occur in such circumstances working with institutions, how the work itself changes—for example missing out on hearing the stories attached to the collection of each particular toothbrush. For viewers of the work, these invisible processes may or may not make a difference. It may well be that once the idea has been generated through concepts and materials in a particular way it is infinitely reproducible and equally satisfying each time. Or it may be that such invisibilities, things that may perhaps accrue through intimate processes of interaction and engagement, have a way of insinuating themselves right into the heart of the matter. Perhaps it might act something like a scent, hovering right around the perimeter of the experience, invisible, but capable of jettisoning you right down and into another level of experience before you can even begin to think why.

Notes

¹ The national flower of the Philippines, and Indonesia

² Interview with the artists, 17 October 2009