

Big Question

How can art further political resistance?

Enzo Camacho and Ami Lien use
the artistic
process to build shared
understanding.

Interview conducted for Art21 in December of 2024 by Max Levin.



Enzo Camacho and Ami Lien photographed for Art21 in November 2024 by Maya Fuhr.

In 2017, we traveled to Negros, a sugar plantation island in the Philippines, to begin a research project. This was our first trip to the island together, though Enzo has been going there regularly since childhood to visit his mother's family. Our intention was to study a midcentury Catholic mural painted by the queer, Filipino-American modernist Alfonso Ossorio, which is located inside a workers' chapel within a sugar mill compound. Known as *The Angry Christ* (1950), the mural is a flaming, psychedelic depiction of Christ that feels especially unorthodox within the island's monocrop landscape. The explosive presence of *The Angry Christ* intrigued us. We didn't have a specific plan of what we wanted to make out of our research, only a basic idea to read the mural through the lens of the surrounding plantation environment.

The first public manifestation of our project was presented for an exhibition at the NTU Center for Contemporary Art in Singapore in late 2018, which was accompanied by an artist lecture. In the exhibition space, we reproduced a segment of *The Angry Christ* as a graphite outline traced directly onto the wall, overlaid with hand-painted textual fragments taken from research we had been doing on both Ossorio and Negros. Using the composition of *The Angry Christ* as a scaffolding, our wall drawing brought out intersections and parallels between the sociopolitical history of Negros and Ossorio's life and practice. It wasn't a fully developed work, and we thought of it as a mural-

sized sketch, or set of lecture notes as a way to organize our thoughts.

A few months after this show, we returned to Negros and took a paper-making workshop at a small community center, located in a coastal neighborhood in a city called Sagay. The workshop was primarily offered for women in the community, mostly wives of fishermen, but we were invited by the organizers who knew that we were visiting artists interested in local cultural organizing. We were struck by the simplicity of the process and how it could allow for so much material experimentation, with the possibility of incorporating almost any kind of plant matter into the paper pulp. Immediately after this first workshop, we began making paper compositions using fiber from sugarcane and other local plants. This ended up being a formative experience for us, and is a practice we have continued up to today. Every time we're in Negros, we forage for plants outside or go to the market to collect vegetable and fruit scraps from vendors in order to make paper.

It was around this time in 2019 that we were also starting to grapple with the extent of oppressive violence on the island. A brutal massacre had taken place in Sagay in October of 2018, just months before we arrived in the city. A group of farm workers had set up a protest encampment on a piece of plantation land and were ambushed by armed men who murdered nine of the farmers. Just a few weeks later, the human rights lawyer who was working

with the victims' families was assassinated. These events made clear to us the real foundation of the plantation system: deadly violence enacted by the state and large landowners.

It was a lot to confront, and it pushed us to learn about the various forms of political resistance on the island. One practice that we became particularly inspired by is *bungkalan*, a protest action taken up by Filipino peasants and farm workers who have been deprived of their legal claim to land redistribution. In response, they occupy parcels of disputed plantation land and collectively grow rice and vegetables. Unfortunately, these acts of guerrilla farming are regularly subjected to the most brutal forms of repression. In fact, the victims of the Sagay Massacre in 2018 were setting up a *bungkalan* site at the time of the attack.

Our political awakening that began in Negros coincided with a growing interest amongst cultural workers in the Philippines to stand in solidarity with peasants and farm workers during a time of increasing militarized violence in the countryside. In 2017, a group of Filipino cultural workers established SAKA (Sama-samang Artista para sa Kilusang Agraryo), an anti-feudal alliance of artists advocating for agrarian reform, rural development, and food security. One of SAKA's major initiatives was to help set up a *bungkalan* site on a piece of agricultural land that was under threat of being developed in the middle of Metro Manila. With the guidance of experienced peasant

leaders, SAKA artists would gather on weekends to farm with the local community, while continually campaigning for that specific community's claim to the land. This is a form of culture-making that is difficult to make sense of by the professional art and culture industry. Over the years, we have maintained a deep dialogue and exchange with SAKA, as well as other organizations that are part of the broader Filipino popular movement, which has helped us to rethink and reground our practice. We have also become active in political organizations working to support and advance the Filipino people's struggle overseas in our respective cities of residence (Berlin and New York). While we make our living from the contemporary art industry, we no longer see it as the primary site of our cultural work.

The artworks in the current exhibition at MoMA PS1, produced between 2022 and 2024, should be seen as part of a wider, collective, cultural-political project that does not begin or end with the museum. Alongside a suite of new paper works, a light-based installation, and a short 16mm animation, the centerpiece of the exhibition is a newly commissioned, one-hour film entitled *Langit Lupa* (2023). *Langit Lupa* is our first attempt at making a documentary. It was a response to the political urgencies of the moment. Conceived in the build-up to the 2022 Philippine election, which resulted in Bongbong Marcos, the son of the former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., claiming the presidency. The younger Marcos's rise to power was the result of a years-long disinformation campaign around the history of

the Marcos dictatorship, which made clear that the guarding of historical memory is a vital political task.

Our film centers testimonies from survivors of the 1985 Escalante Massacre, an incident of political violence that took place in Negros under the first Marcos regime. Early on in the process, we made the decision to avoid using historical footage in the film: we wanted to make sure that it was read as a film about the present and not strictly about the past, to address the continuum between the violence of that era and the incidents of violence happening in the present. Instead of historical footage, we combined the spoken testimonies with wide, sweeping landscape shots of Negros in the present. We also included extended 16mm segments in which bursts of luminous, plant-like forms fill the screen. These segments, which in some ways remind us of the explosive intensity of Ossorio's *Angry Christ* mural, were created with an experimental *phytogram* technique that involves using processed plant matter to leave chemical traces directly on the analog film emulsion. We are influenced by experimental cinema, and the *phytogram* sections of the film were an attempt to utilize certain strategies from this tradition to agitate the viewer's perception, so that the tensions and nuances in the survivors' testimonies might be more keenly understood. Like the paper we make from foraged plants, the *phytogram* imagery draws out the relation between environmental and social struggles against a toxic plantation paradigm.

When we have screened the film for other activists in the Philippines, we have sometimes been questioned about our decision to lean into this kind of formal experimentation and not to include any archival imagery. We don't deny the importance of making historical evidence visible, but we see this film as just one attempt to tell this story in a particular way, which should be part of a broader collective effort. It cannot be the only attempt, the only take, the only approach to this or any other subject matter of relevance to the movement. For us, it's important to contextualize the work in this way: as one attempt to ascertain formal strategies, see what they're able to do, and what they're not able to do. Hopefully, that helps us and other comrades make future decisions about how to give visual forms to these kinds of narratives.

More and more, we see our art-making as part of a lineage of propaganda work, which we recognize as a necessary part of any effective political struggle. We've thought a lot about the tension between experimentation and accessibility, and *Langit Lupa* in particular was a self-conscious attempt to produce something that could be shared in both a contemporary art museum and a self-organized screening for farmers in the Philippine countryside. There is often anxiety for folks working in the professional cultural field regarding resolving the contradictions of political art-making in relation to institutional spaces and the capitalist marketplace in which these spaces are entangled. We think these questions are

important, but aligning our work with the Philippine mass movement has given us a different perspective. The art world isn't where these contradictions will be resolved because the context is already too compromised. The most important work happens elsewhere. But nonetheless, there are platforms here in the art world, and they do reach audiences.

After having the opportunity to tour the film and exhibition to Hong Kong, Berlin, Glasgow, and New York, we have not lost sight of the fact that this work was largely developed and produced while living in Negros for about five months, in the same small coastal neighborhood in Sagay where we took our very first paper-making workshop, and that the vast majority of our meaningful experiences there are not represented in the final artworks. We spent countless hours with the kids in the community who ended up performing in our film, as well as with their families, conducting art workshops, playing games, learning how to cook local dishes, chatting with them about dreams for the future as well as current struggles, and of course discussing our project. For us it was important to both communicate to them our intentions and to understand their relationship to the content. The question for us became: how to use every step in the artistic process to build a deeper shared understanding with an explicit purpose? A lot of contemporary art avoids the question of purpose and revels in ambiguity. For us, that has become less meaningful. More meaningful is

dealing with concrete questions and collective goals, and allowing these questions and goals to guide artistic decision-making.

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