

1335MABINI

GILLAGE

by Dayang Yraola

“I suppose I am a child of Manila, by which I mean the sprawling Jackson Pollock painting that is contemporary Metro Manila, rather than the civilized metropolis that you glimpse in prewar postcards and photographs.. it never occurred to me to consider a city (let alone MY city) as something to be *regarded*. The city was a given; one simply dealt with the city. What do you want, where do you need to go, how do you go there? The city – its traffic, its topology, its flows, its bottlenecks, its absence of signs, its crowdsourced, jeepney routes that are not registered, measured or codified in any book or map but whose relevant fragments are conveyed orally at need -- was just what one dealt with, the way one dealt with the weather. A city like the weather: an emergent sum of millions of independent forces. This naivete/indifference was not cured by experiences of living in Japan, Hong Kong, Denmark or the United States. Living in a different city was like living in different planet: different forces had produced different things.”

–Tad Ermitaño

Tad Ermitaño explores the landscape of Manila from the perspective of one who has accustomed himself to the varied textures of the city. A city, to the artist, is a given; one need not have an opinion about it, one only deals with it. It is then new for the artist to conceive of the subject within limits of a *readable visual field*, therefore studying the topic from a sensorial experience of a local.

In an exhibition in 2015 (*Deus Ex Machina*, 1335Mabini), he featured sound producing objects that used traditional music instruments, found objects, custom electronics and digital programming. It surveyed the variety of technology Ermitaño explored, coming from a single motivation of producing sounds that interact with bodies, and which the body responds to. His other projects include a single work with two parts, titled *Uwang*. One part of the work is what the artist called “real matter”. It is comprised of a log of *kaong* tree (variety of coconut) where *uwang* (wood worm) lay their eggs. The log exhibited has *kuok* (larvae), which was kept alive in the duration of the show by funneling water to hydrate the log. The other part of the work is an interactive audiovisual set-up where the sound the *kuok* made can be heard through headphones, as the viewer draws on a graphic tablet lines that crawl on the screen, creating a virtual version of the *kuok*.

These works present an immediate mode of viewing, a directness brought by a tangible experience explained by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s concept of “presence”.¹ Consisting of a material in its spatial relationship with the physical world, the idea of “presence” resonates in Ermitaño’s work “Gillage” - a

¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004). *Production of Presence, What Meaning Cannot Convey*. California: Stanford University Press.

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term coined from the conjunction of Filipino word *gilid* (loosely translated as border or edge), and *village*, in its sense as a settlement.

The multi-media sculpture is an object that references structures informally and illegally built beside buildings, public works, and others. As the Philippine Pavilion's curatorial centered on the idea of *muhon* (Filipino term for a landmark or boundary stone), the content of the work is based on local materials taken from constructions of informal settlers (commonly referred to in the Philippines as "squatters") from Pandacan area, one of the oldest districts in Manila. Ermitaño regarded the social conditions of the workers as *socioeconomic shadow-twins*, as the informal settlements are located near iconic buildings that the workers helped build. According to him, "the businesses in the iconic structure supply the settlements with jobs, and the settlements supply the businesses in the buildings with labor." This reciprocal presence is an ignored and invisible relationship, but one that lies at the very root of Manila's history and economy. The *gillage* hence is what the artist considered as *anti-muhon*.

Gillage has three parts. First, on the component called IMPRINT, are two video screens floating above a waist-high stand collaged from wood scraps and chopped-up trolley parts. One has a blueprint animation of Pandacan Bridge, showing the train line and vehicle overpass; and the other has video showing footage around the actual Pandacan Bridge, a low-income area crammed with informal settlements, with the train tracks regularly traversed by human-powered trolleys that the settlers use as transportation. The stand's construction is meant to mirror informal-settlement architecture; to capture its visual texture formed through patchwork and D-I-Y construction, within a rectilinear silhouette that alludes to skyscrapers and standing stones. Second, on the component called MARKERS, is a much larger video set-up. While the stand is also made of trolley parts, it carries four screens: a large screen with a dollying, claustrophobic shot of pathways within an informal settlement. Three smaller screens contain 1) a long shot of trolleys flying across Pasig; 2) a dolly shot of informal houses crammed together on the street that parade the extent and variety of informal settlements; and 3) detailed shots of the trolley's construction and use (e.g. a close-up of the trolleyman's feet propelling the trolley on the rails, a close-up of the braking system, a close-up of the bearings that keep the trolley on the rails, etc.). Finally, the third component called PROJECTION. Its set-up alludes to the first, except that the trolley parts are now a scrap heap of singed and broken fragments below the two floating screens. One screen contains a blueprint animation of a small informal dwelling, while the other displays footage of settler families in the act of taking their dwellings apart.

The first two parts form the ends of a cycle. The first part, like an establishing shot in a narrative film, showed images of the *gillage* as it is viewed from outside, while the second part brings the audience inside it. He tried to capture the cramped chaos of the *gillage* and the "creative (mis)use" of technology and architecture exemplified by the trolley, an improvised vehicle that Ermitaño describes as "an image of flight". He abruptly cuts the 'sight-seeing' on the third part, where he shows the usual fate of these types of settlements—demolished, destroyed to give way to formal structures.

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Back-dropped against a history of negotiation, the project tackles the politics of inside/outside wall; issues of the formal and informal, public and private, and of legal and illegal. People in the said gillages become signifiers of presence, and it is not only their positions in relation to physical space that the artist tried to capture in this work, but also the concepts of inhabiting and adaptation towards or despite authority.

This practice of constructing temporary shelters is seen in the writings of British sociologist John Urry, where he claims there are particular types of 'sociations' or people-groupings that "experiment with new kinds of 'dwellingness,' which are often temporary and involve diverse mobilities. They may empower people, providing relatively safe places for identity-testing and the context of learning new skills."² *Sociation* then becomes a form of Gumbrecht's *presence*, as the culture and practices of a specific group of people describe the landscape they inhabit. By choosing the subject of the material used by informal settlers to be shown at an international platform, the artist starts a conversation regarding the notion that official or institutional memory attaches greater significance to the study of formal architecture. By using the trolley as his central metaphor, he acknowledges the ingenious way of how informal settlers create, continuously defining their place in the urban landscape. Finally, by including the demolition of the *gillage*, he locates a specific cultural practice within the discourse of present urban realities.

A culture is felt by its landscape, and "markers" can be observed in the Philippines as a compendium of idiosyncratic modes of experience, where function overlaps with expression, and functioning a definition of presence. Ermitaño's "gillage" is a marker that depicts a socioeconomic aspect of living in the city where the thoughts and behavior of a people limit or expand multi-sensory presentations of structures.

² Urry, John. 2000. "Dwellings". *Sociology beyond society, mobility for the Twenty-first century* (131-160). Routledge.