

Planting Rice

interviewed by Kenneth Paranada

KP: I am very interested in your collaboration platform that tries to generate awareness about contemporary art in the Philippines. Can you tell me about the story of Planting Rice and how it came about?

PR: Planting Rice is a curatorial collaborative founded in Manila, Philippines. Contextualized to the current conditions of contemporary art production in the city, as well as a cultural infrastructure that is flawed – we endeavored to create programming with full awareness of these conditions. We also function as a site for information, events, and archives of current discussions in contemporary art in the region. It is very hard to create contemporary art projects in Manila, without addressing very important problems like art education, funding, labor, and capital. Within our programming, we also reconcile with the fact that we started out without a physical space. As such, this gives us opportunities within the idea of “repotentializing” spaces, and also including the discussion of architecture, autonomy, territory, demarcation, and ephemera within our everyday notions of contemporary art. In our case, we have created programs that explore different spaces, for instance, an unknown commercial art space. We build partnerships and focus on creating potential. For example, the emerging/unknown commercial art space funded the production budget and honorarium of a five-series contemporary art installation with emerging artists from Manila. Funding for the production budget and honorarium of a non-sellable work in Manila is very rare, in this case it worked out because they needed the promotion, and they created this as a strategy to introduce the space to this type of audience. Within the social networks, we practice metacognition by intentionally using our networks as curators to get a pool of news (art events, grants, opportunities) from our feeds, which we then shape into a system of organized resources/information for the arts. We utilize free networks such as social media as an education/information tool for artists working in Manila or citizens involved in the art scene in Southeast Asia with Manila as the focus.

Planting Rice came out of our own desire to

educate ourselves as curators about our own geography and needs with the Manila art scene. We ended up learning side by side with the rest of the art community of Manila via the design of our online platform (website, e-news), and the purposive use of our social networks. Manila is, after all, one of the top ten users of Facebook in the world.

KP: You’ve been known to be a “curatorial collab,” what does this actually mean?

PR: It just means that with all projects labeled as Planting Rice, it is actually a byproduct of the collaboration of two curators, Sidd Perez and Lian Ladia.

KP: Are you the producers of exhibitions for communities or the mediator, translator?

PR: I think as a curator, producer/mediator/translator are all part of the job description. In our case, it can also be cultural worker, with the kind of work we do in terms of informing our public of mobility opportunities and access to archives of contemporary art through our online library.

KP: Tell me about the dynamics of how you work.

PR: It has been very easy within the dynamics of how we work as a collaborative; we have the same goals and ideals, as well as being versed in the ethics and management of our community, such as working very hard, and having the concept of a non-physical, but cultural value is something we have successfully explored. You see, if the goal is non-monetary, and the driving forces are ideas and values—it becomes self-sustaining.

KP: What were your personal motivations for doing this?

PR: Personally, the flawed mechanisms of cultural infrastructure in Manila is what is moving this. Honestly, this project is autonomous yet sustaining.

KP: Your curatorial strategy often includes new audiences and the use of the Internet. Can you share the reason behind this?

PR: We came in the wave of social media and, for some reason, the diasporic tendencies of Manila have made the online platform accessible. Filipino Germans, Filipino Danish, Filipino Americans, and transnational artists suddenly are gaining access to the Manila contemporary art scene – it's a rare yet welcome opportunity.

KP: Do you have a target audience?

PR: Within the culture/art educational/mobility aspect of our site, we target Filipino artists who need information on grants and funding. We also target other nationals with interest in Southeast Asian contemporary or Philippine contemporary practices. Our demographic, though, consists of artists, curators, collectors, students, and supporters of the arts in Southeast Asia and the Philippines.

KP: How do you fund your curatorial projects? Do you carry on your practice with institutional support or perhaps private sponsorship?

PR: Manila is a city whose art economy is dominated by private citizens. We have never experienced public funding, although most of our projects are geared towards nurturing contemporary practices within the public arena. The only public funding that has supported us comes from countries like Finland or Belgium with high development indexes that it's part of their government's mission to support interesting global projects like ours.

Our funding mostly is self-sustained, but on bigger projects, private citizens in Manila who are active and involved in the art community do not hesitate to support us.

KP: Do you consider Planting Rice a socially engaged platform? In what way do you think it engages or rather how deep is the engagement on your part?

PR: It was not really intentional, yet we adhere to process-based and experiential practices as such; I would say engagement is really a big part of it.

KP: The island nation state of the Philippines has always been known to have diasporic communities and varied cultural sensibilities all throughout the archipelago. With this in mind, as well as the

political upheavals and cultural differences of the Catholic North and the Muslim South, do you have a specific curatorial approach for each and every one of them?

PR: Our practice is mostly based in Manila, however something that can be related to this question is our idea of nurturing local sensibilities. A few days ago we were involved in a curatorial workshop in Bacolod City, in the Visayas Region, and invited peers from Bangkok, Singapore, and Phnom Penh to join in. Surprisingly, our sensibilities of a non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal, localized, non-Western idea of programming became the emphasis of the workshop. In line with this, it was sponsored by the VIVA EXcon—a 26-year-old biennial that is artist-run (founded by the Black Artists in Asa) and focused on supporting the artistic practices of artists within the islands of the Visayas region. This is antithetical to a more diplomatic, homogenized biennial that features almost all of the same global artists. To me the focus of non-hegemonic constructs is quite inspiring and important.

KP: Can you tell me about your past projects that tried to socially engage a particular community?

PR: More than trying to engage a particular community, we create programming that creates opportunities for spaces and discussion in various capacities. We've worked with commercial galleries by having them deal non-sellable work that can still benefit their overall programming. We've worked with a group of business owners to revitalize their area of business (Escolta, the colonial business capital of Manila); Escolta offered us an office space and in return we created programming in their beautiful but (almost derelict) art deco spaces, bringing Japanese and Filipino contemporary artists into the area. A museum archive opened up to the idea that a contemporary duo (Alice & Lucinda) would create work out of the notion of fictional archives. Artists and Artist studios opened up their spaces, so we could create a program called #Studiovisits, engaging the public in a more discursive activity as opposed to your usual gallery opening. With the social networks, we created #ArthropManila, which lists all the free art events and openings for the week. Currently we are working with a museum staff to open up the private collection and engage in a generative exhibition where the audience is invited to add to the archive. Next year, we will be working with an artist family (a family of artists), because they proposed an ecological exhibition—and we are working with

different artists exploring architecture, contemporary practices, and politics, which even includes anarchist info-shops.

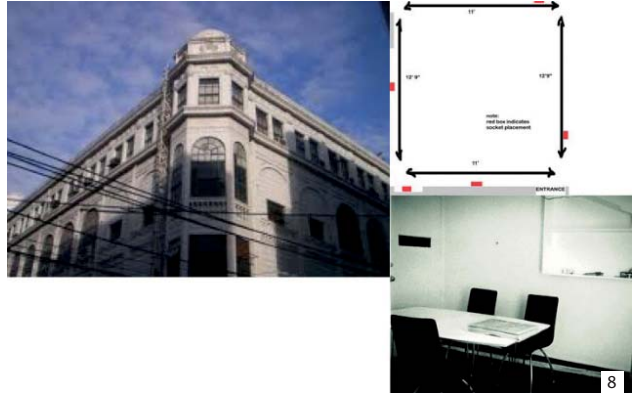
KP: Can you tell us about your ongoing research-based show about the art archives in Manila—the one that will be exhibited at the Lopez Museum this coming September? Do you think this exhibition could serve as a model for other community-based engagement?

PR: The exhibition at the Lopez Museum does not really aim to serve as a model for community-based engagement. The curatorial framework, again, arose from the idea that we wanted to know more about contemporary art criticism in the Philippines and its peripheral countries. Where do we start? We've decided to make the exhibition an exploration of artistic languages that does not limit itself to academic art writing. We've included conceptual artists who engage with self-reflexivity and critique, journalists highlighting important bits of our contemporary art history, personas who have nurtured the growth of contemporary art—and within these explorations, we found art writing in several forms: in poetry, journals, scrapbooks, and curricula made by artist/educators like Fernando Zobel. We've also endeavored to create a weekly discussion group inviting artist-curators or curators to facilitate a discussion motivated by coffee; we will be using the idea of a coffee shop/reading lab to stimulate reading/workshop discussions on Philippine contemporary art. At the end of each session are text-swap sessions, so we can accumulate more text that the library we are working with can keep, for a future researcher or emerging curator. The exhibition is generative and hopes to compile significant art writing contributed by the audience/participants at the end of the exhibition.

KR: I'd also like to know how this project has been received? Considering that the capital has yet to fully grasp what Philippine contemporary art is about or, hell, what is it for?

PR: The exhibition will begin in September, so we have yet to know. We are already building the reading lab/coffee shop and everyone (especially the museum workers) are excited about (for the first time) having coffee inside the museum space haha





Captions

- 1 Photo at Escolta Manila by Shaira Luna
- 2 Photo at the office shared with 98b at Escolta Manila
- 3 A built cafe for discussions for the exhibitions Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum, 2014
- 4 Common Space/ Swarm Bibliotheque, a meeting room common point of 5 autonomous/ anarchist projects in Manila: Etnikobandido, Onsite, Marindukanon Studies Center and Infoshop, overX-out, CIV:Lab held at the UP Vargas Museum, 2015.
- 5 Archival works of fictional characters Alice and Lucinda, The UP Jorge Vargas Museum
- 6 Program titled, #Studiovisit with Australian artist Tom Dunn at 1335 Mabini
- 7 Program for social networks, #studiovisit
- 8 Offered office space in former colonial business district of Manila, Escolta, shared with artist-run 98B
- 9 Nilo Ilared, a contemporary artist with conceptual practice was featured by Planting Rice for Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum
- 10 A built cafe for discussions for the exhibitions Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum, 2014
- 11 Organized dinner with Japanese and Filipino Curators and artists at Terminal Garden.

Planting Rice is an alternative platform aimed at fostering the rise of cross-pollination among artistic communities. It distributes information on vital exhibitions, events, places and influences by art professionals in South-east Asia, Australia, the United States and Europe who maintain networks and crossovers in the Philippines.
<http://www.plantingrice.com/>