

[ SHORT RESPONSE ]



# On the Heels of Forgotten Histories:

## Review of *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go* (2016)

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### Introduction

Reflecting on the representation of history and political memory within Southeast Asia, art historian Nora A. Taylor recently argued that contemporary art (particularly archival and performance-based practice) holds the power to evoke collective histories and shared forms of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> While Taylor's observation holds true in many cases, it raises the question of how contemporary art relates to events that lie beyond the collective imagination. What is to be made of histories that are forgotten or purposefully erased? What of events that are considered too marginal by a given majority? And, perhaps most importantly in the discussion on creative practices and migration, how may art tackle developments that take place abroad?

This article focuses on artistic practices that delve into the spaces of liminality and omission. It is particularly interested in works dealing with invisible or forgotten histories, and argues that the role of migrant artists is central in recovering these narratives and asserting their contemporary relevance. It concentrates on works which simultaneously excavate lost histories and re-enact them in the present. Here, the term "excavate" plays an important role, for it emphasises that the histories which the artists seek to

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unearth are, for many, considered obsolete. Their incorporation into art thus serves as reanimation, giving them a new life in the present.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging the affective allure of such practices, this article also considers their ability to negotiate history in a contemporary context which, as Saloni Mathur notes, is “*both* inextricably interconnected and mercilessly blocked by the barriers and boundaries of historiography, writing, and the narratives of art history”.<sup>3</sup>

In reviewing the performance *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go* (2016) by UK-based Philippine artists Noel Ed De Leon, Kulay Labitigan and Lawrence Carlos, this article examines the work’s citation of historical parallels and shared histories between Britain and the Philippines. Exploring the ways in which the artists deploy exposition, juxtaposition and re-enactment, it argues that *Kilapsaw* relies upon the placement of the artists abroad in order to perform a symbolic act of excavation. Here, a series of site-specific actions in central London evoke histories, such as the destruction of Manila during World War II at the hands of its American allies, and the British occupation of Manila between 1762–64. Staged in the run-up to the referendum on Britain’s status in the European Union, these historical moments become resonant with contemporary debates around allegiance, opportunism and belonging.

Further bringing this work into conversation with recent research-led projects by Erika Tan and Arin Rungjang, this article posits an incipient interest in artistic excavation and citation in Southeast Asian diasporic art. In this line of practice, the mapping of traces and partial histories, far from aiming to produce definitive historical knowledge, leaves room for imagining how the lessons of the past resonate within present-day social and political debates.

### ***Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go* (2016)**

An invitation to explore hitherto absent confluences, here between Britain and the Philippines, was initiated in the performance *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go* (2016) by Britain-based Filipino artists Noel Ed De Leon, Kulay Labitigan and Lawrence Carlos.<sup>4</sup> Performed on 18 June 2016, *Kilapsaw* was conceived as part of the informal “do-it-yourself” initiative known as the London Biennale<sup>5</sup> under the theme “Synchronisation/Syncopation”. Taking as their starting point the frenzy of weekend shopping in London’s consumerist heartland around New Oxford Street and Regent Street, the artists described their venture as “a durational performance which tests the limits of humans in an urban space rife with materialism. The performance explores the synchronization of political interests, capitalism, commercialism, war, religion, migration, poverty and inhumane acts in the making of central London’s urban environments.”<sup>6</sup>



FIGURE 1: Kulay Labitigan (left), Noel Ed De Leon (centre), Lawrence Carlos (right), *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go*, 18 June 2016, Regent Street, London. Image courtesy of the author

Commencing on Cavendish Square, the performance carried out a “spatial mapping”<sup>7</sup> in which the artists followed a pre-planned route along Regent Street, tracing a number of key bombing sites from World War II. In taking this route, the work pursued two objectives: first, to highlight the extent to which these sites’ specific histories have been all but erased by London’s post-war reconstruction and modernisation; and second, to employ this transformation as the basis for exploring parallels, thus rendering visible previously hidden connections between the Philippines and Britain. This latter goal was carried out not only by flagging the urban environment as a symbolic site, but also by using it as a stage on which the artists’ racial and professional “otherness” was played out.

Claiming to “test their own physical and mental endurance as they move through sites echoing a history of destruction, reconstruction and the silent voice of people around us”,<sup>8</sup> the work highlighted the centrality of physical endurance and risk as tools for evoking a personal sense of trauma and violence, embedded within the history and topography of the cityscape. Walking in formation (Figure 1), with Carlos at the front documenting the journey, de Leon in the middle pushing a cart filled with memorabilia from



FIGURE 2: Noel Ed De Leon (left) and Kulay Labitigan (right), *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go*, 18 June 2016, Regent Street, London. Image courtesy of the author



FIGURE 3: Noel Ed De Leon (left) and Kulay Labitigan (right), *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go*, 18 June 2016, Regent Street, London. Image courtesy of the author

World War II and Labitigan bringing up the rear while pulling along a suitcase and trailing a wet sponge, the artists halted at a number of pre-selected locations in order to perform a series of acts (Figures 2–3). Interpreting these actions as “invented signs,”<sup>9</sup> a term that Nikos Papastergiadis uses to describe gestures aimed at generating an imagined connection to a specific site, the artists proceeded to enact the personal as political.

Through actions such as pushing an unwieldy cart whilst chained around the ankles, attempting to ingest a rosary in front of All Souls Church, donning a gas mask and entering a military canvas bag outside an H&M department store, and the scattering of salt on the pavement in front of the Statue of Eros on Piccadilly Circus, they evoked an imagined connection between these former sites of trauma, and their personal struggles for professional recognition, establishing anew a physical home and sense of belonging.<sup>10</sup> This ambition to represent hardship was further captured in the photographic series *Kilapsaw: The Delirium Sequence* (2016) by Lawrence Carlos (Figures 4–5). In a sequence of double exposure photographs taken by Carlos at ten-minute intervals, the shots amalgamate glimpses of movements and passers-by in a series of dream-like images. Here, the metropolis appears as a hub of fleeting transience in which the struggle to survive seeps into the past and present.

Through an allusion to Christ’s Station of the Cross in the artists’ formation and the multiple stoppages, the artists’ performative suffering further took on connotations of a shared experience, particularly that of the Filipino diaspora, in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> By making themselves willing subjects to confrontation and reproach along the way, physical struggle was staged as symbolic of sacrifice, with the artists posing as martyrs willing to suffer in the name of their art. However, it is important to note that while these representations of hardship and risk prompt an interpretation of *Kilapsaw* as a diasporic iteration of invisibility and struggle, the work’s discursive value rather resides in the artists’ personal and professional journeys as allegories of hidden histories within the topography of the city. *Kilapsaw*, the very title of the piece and the Tagalog term for “ripple” or “wave”, articulates a position of unrest and tension beneath the surface. This sense of latent turbulence is conveyed through a juxtaposition of the former sites of bomb detonations with war memorabilia such as metal flasks, gas masks, military mess kits and metal helmets acquired by De Leon in Britain and the Philippines. Speaking about the significance of these objects as salvaged items with a deep-seated personal value, De Leon notes,

The cart was found and salvaged in front of the magistrate’s court in Brentford which was converted into a commercial establishment a few



FIGURE 4: Lawrence Carlos, *Kilapsaw: The Delirium Sequence* (80 mins), double exposure photograph, 2016



FIGURE 5: Lawrence Carlos, *Kilapsaw: The Delirium Sequence* (100 mins), double exposure photograph, 2016

months later. A metal flask and one mess kit were passed on to me by my grandmother. According to her, they were used by my grandfather during post-war period whilst working in a mining company in Baguio City in the Philippines. I myself even used that metal flask and mess kit during my scouting days in the 1980s. That is how I got inspired to search for similar items with historical and sentimental values. This search has taken me from house to house, and across different places.<sup>12</sup>

Through this contrast of the surviving and the hidden, the local and the foreign, the performance hints at the incongruence between London and Manila's post-war reconstruction. While both metropolises underwent significant destruction during World War II, *Kilapsaw* prompts a recollection of the fact that Manila was largely demolished in 1942 by—supposedly friendly—American armed forces in an effort to halt the Japanese occupation. Thus, what nowadays appears as visible similarities of these two “global cities”<sup>13</sup> through the presence of capitalist and corporate structures is, in fact, underpinned by a history of subjugation. Concluding the performance by laying



FIGURE 6: Noel Ed De Leon (left) and Kulay Labitigan (right) on Piccadilly Circus, *Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go*, 18 June 2016, Regent Street, London. Image courtesy of the author

out the war memorabilia in front of the Statue of Eros on Piccadilly Circus (Figure 6), a symbol of love and a point of gathering for London's many visitors, the performance further evokes a concrete moment of confluence between the Philippines and Britain's military and commercial endeavours, namely, in the short-lived British occupation of Manila of 1762–64. This allusion renders a moment in which the Filipino is frequently cited as historically absent from British history, yet remains implicated in a range of contemporary debates around movement, migration and belonging.

Performed in the run-up to the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016, the artists' laboured journey may be read as an ironic juxtaposition to the deeply nationalistic slogans of a progressive and enlightened "global Britain". While Britain's withdrawal from the European Union was directed primarily against migrants from Europe, De Leon, Labitigan and Carlos's self-staging amidst emblems of nationalism evokes the rhetoric of opportunism being used to describe the imagined possibility of new social and economic alliances with countries in Asia and Africa. Staged in the midst of Union Jack flags, headlines and campaign posters on public transport, *Kilapsaw's* evocation of the often overlooked British occupation of Manila thus casts an eerie light over the UK's search for new alliances.

### **Excavating Lost Histories in the Contemporary**

*Kilapsaw* does not lay claim to producing definitive historical narratives in its performative evocation of the past. Rather, it invites affective readings and the "piecing together" of histories from a present-day context. In the words of British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, "we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*."<sup>14</sup> Albeit falling short in providing in-depth research to back up the historical relationships between the Philippines and Britain, this work resonates with a wider trend in contemporary art from Southeast Asia in which the diasporic condition is activated as a site from which fragmented and partial narratives are investigated. Examples of this line of practices include a research-led project in which Erika Tan resuscitates the biography of a Malay weaver, Halimah Binti Abdullah, from the footnotes of British and Malaysian history.<sup>15</sup> Conducting primary research in the archives of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the artist collected a set of primary documents which testify to the history of Halimah,<sup>16</sup> who participated in the 1924 Empire Exhibition in Wembley, but was buried in an unmarked grave after dying of pneumonia shortly after. Commissioned as part of the inaugural launch of the National Gallery of Singapore as a performance-based



FIGURE 7: Erika Tan, *APA JIKA, The Mis-Placed Comma*. 2017. Commissioned by the National Gallery Singapore for “Unrealised”. Image courtesy of Erika Tan

video, installation and lecture series, the marginalised personal history of Halimah becomes a means for Tan to evoke the embeddedness of Malayan identity within Britain’s topography and history, all the meanwhile underscoring a sense of invisibility of Malaysia and Singapore’s contemporary presences in Britain.<sup>17</sup>

In a similar effort to draw out lost personal narratives, Arin Rungjang’s multimedia project *246247596248914102516... And then there were none* (2017) emerges from a compilation of partial histories in which the past and present predicaments of Thailand and Germany become intertwined.<sup>18</sup> The work takes as its theme the account of “Prasat Chutin” (General Phra Prasart Phitthayayut), a leader of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 who was appointed as Thai ambassador in Berlin in 1939, in the wake of the outbreak of World War II. Prasat gained moderate notoriety as the last person to sign the guest-book in Hitler’s bunker. In Rungjang’s installation, copies of Chutin’s journal, Hitler’s guest book and a replica of Corrado Feroci’s monument *Soldiers Fighting for Democracy* (1939), which features as one of sculptural reliefs on the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, are presented as fragments of the two national histories which Rungjang seeks to explore. In an accompanying video, Rungjang superimposes readings of excerpts from Prasat’s journal, recounting his experiences in Germany and his imprisonment by the Red Army in Russia in 1946, onto video footage of craftsmen in Thailand recasting the monument in bronze. Interspersed with footage of Thai dancers performing in an apartment overlooking Hitler’s bunker, the video becomes a collage of personal and historical accounts, overlaid with current political concerns around fascist tendencies in both Germany and Thailand.

Both works use personal accounts as an occasion for unravelling overlooked historical narratives. In doing so, they attempt to imagine a new constellation between Europe and Southeast Asia. In this imagined entanglement, Southeast Asia is not excavated from the history of subjugation and distance but is, rather, situated as an actor and a voice in contemporary global affairs.

Read in conjunction with these works, *Kilapsaw* is emblematic of a wider effort to use art as a means to map “lost” historical traces. Yet, these practices are not mere exercises in recuperation as a tactic to resolve marginality. They represent a deep-seated interest in the very notions of partiality, iminality and omission as spaces which spawn further research, invite more reimagining and, gradually, expose the confluence between personal journeys, national histories and present-day discourses as incongruously intertwined, and inextricably embedded within one another.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

**Eva Bentcheva** is an art historian and curator. She completed her PhD in art history at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her dissertation, titled “The Cultural Politics of British South Asian Performance, 1960s to the Present”, examined the relationship between performance art and expressions of diasporic identity in Britain. In 2016, she was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Tate Research Centre: Asia. She is currently an Adjunct Researcher for the Tate Research Centre: Asia, developing a project on the emergence of performance art and conceptualism in the Philippines from the 1960s to the 1980s.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the public talk “Performance as Site of Memory: Performing Art History in Vietnam and Singapore” (Tate Britain, 6 May 2016), Nora A. Taylor proposed Pierre Nora’s notion of *lieux de mémoire*, or “sites of memory”, as a means of exploring how performance art in Southeast Asia communicates through its recourse to shared forms of knowledge, hearsay and rumour. For a summary of Taylor’s discussion, see Eva Bentcheva, *Event Report: Eva Bentcheva on ‘Performance as Site of Memory: Performing Art History in Singapore and Vietnam’*, May 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/asia/research-resource/event-report-nora-taylor-on-performance-as-site-of-memory> [accessed 6 Dec. 2017].
- <sup>2</sup> The author has previously used the term “reanimation” in relation to Noel Ed De Leon’s practice, in particular, his use of original historic objects in installations and performances, as a way of drawing attention to the artifacts’ histories. See Eva Bentcheva, “Tokens of a Time Gone By: Reanimating History as Art in the Work of Noel Ed De Leon”, exh. cat., 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Saloni Mathur, “Introduction”, in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), p. viii.
- <sup>4</sup> While all three artists identify strongly with the Philippines as their country of descent, their personal trajectories abroad differ. Having trained as an architect in the Philippines, Noel Ed De Leon migrated with his family to Britain in 2007 in pursuit of professional opportunities, and subsequently developed an artistic practice in the UK. “Kulay” Carl Irving Labigitan graduated with an undergraduate degree from the University of the Philippines College of Fine Art in 2012, before coming to London on a British Council scholarship to undertake a Master of Fine Art degree at Central St Martins, University of the Arts London. Lawrence Carlos was born in London to Philippine parents. He holds degrees in architecture from the University of Sheffield and the University of Westminster in 2014, and pursues an interest in photography.
- <sup>5</sup> Initiated by David Medalla and Adam Nankervis in London in 2000, the London Biennale invited artists to produce works and organise their own initiatives around bi-annually selected themes. Art critic Guy Brett has described the initiative as a “do-it-yourself” venture, referencing Marcel Duchamp’s notion of the readymade object as a resistance to institutional structures and the exclusivity of the art exhibitions and festivals. See Guy Brett, “Hub Crawl: Guy Brett on the First London Biennale”, *Art Forum*, Feb. 2000, p. 24.
- <sup>6</sup> Lawrence Carlos, Kulay Labitigan and Noel Ed De Leon, “Kilapsaw: Everything Must Go”, performance cat. (London, 2016), p. 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>9</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics, Art, Place, and the Everyday* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), p. 11.
- <sup>10</sup> An interest in developing a dialogue between specific sites and biographical experiences is present in earlier works by De Leon. Having relocated to London from the Philippines with his family in the late 2000s, the artist has evoked the experience of migration through the use of risk and endurance in a number of performance-based works, most notably in *Life As I Know It* (2012), for which the artist positioned himself in front of the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square in London, wearing a gas mask and testing how long he could endure breathing in the summer heat. See Bentcheva, “Tokens of a Time Gone By”.
- <sup>11</sup> References to religious iconography play a prominent role in contemporary art practices, both in the Philippines and the diaspora. For a discussion of how contemporary Philippine art produced in the United States evokes references to religious iconography through strategies of mimicry and humour, see Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonised Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- <sup>12</sup> Correspondence with Noel Ed De Leon, Dec. 2017.
- <sup>13</sup> Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- <sup>14</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 222.
- <sup>15</sup> Erika Tan’s body of work around the excavation of the history of Halimah Binti Abdullah has been staged as multiple expositions, including the performance debate *Art Rhetoric: Debating History, Nation, and Art: The Ontological Status of the Forgotten Malay Weaver* (2015), the performance-based video installation *Halimah-The-Empire-Exhibition-Weaver-who-Died-Whilst-Demonstrating-Her-Craft* (National Gallery of Singapore, 2015), an installation that featured copies of archival footage and sculptural weaves titled *The Weavers Lament* (2016–17), the performance-based video *Apa Jika, The Mis-Placed Comma* (2017) and the installation *The ‘Forgotten’ Weaver* (2017) as part of the Diaspora Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017.
- <sup>16</sup> Throughout the project, Tan refers to Halimah Binti Abdullah by her first name. Correspondence with Erika Tan, Jan. 2018.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Arin Rungjang’s *246247596248914102516... And then there were none* (2017) was exhibited at the Neu Neu Galerie in Kassel, Germany as part of Documenta 14 (8 Apr.– 17 Sept. 2017). The installation comprised several parts—the Democracy Monument, a replica of Prasat Chuthin’s book, a copy of the last page of Hitler’s guestbook, an oil on canvas painting of Nao Chuthin and Prasat Chuthin and a one-channel digital video installation. The work was co-produced with the Ministry of Culture Thailand, DC Collection, and Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum, Chiang Mai.

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