

This essay is the first published segment in a currently untitled book project since the curated exhibition, *Transpersonal, Instructions* (2018-2019) at the Vargas Museum.

Stephen
Wilson

**Unpre
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and

Manila

Filipino film director Eduardo W. Roy Jr captures the many terrors of homelessness and helplessness in his 2016 film *Pamilya Ordinaryo*. While it is uncomfortable to view at points, the film centers on a true story of the survivalist activities of street children living in Manila. It follows a teenage couple, Jane and Aries, aged sixteen and seventeen, who lose their one-month-old baby to a transsexual falsely named Ertha while buying diapers in a supermarket. After Aries leaves in the morning, Jane is left with the baby and is easily fooled into a deceptive loan-arrangement by the older and seemingly ‘baby-doting’ Ertha. While sharing a little money and holding baby Arjan for the mother at the supermarket checkout, Ertha mentions they will need more cash to purchase the diapers. And so gradually gliding through the bustle of a supermarket queue with baby Arjan underarm, Ertha walks outside to an imaginary ATM never to appear again. As Jane begins to search for them, the scene promptly enters the callous judgment of a supermarket surveillance camera, a downcast perspective that cruelly witnesses everything and nothing from the crime itself. Jane is soon left crying alone.

Pamilya Ordinaryo identifies a baby-snatching transsexual with the creeping normalization ensuing desperation and homelessness, not to mention the terror of helplessness that unfolds in a failing state system that unashamedly exploits and cruelly depicts every direction the protagonists take. For Jane and Aries, however, the final truth to Roy’s directed storyline is quickly broached and sadly replaced in favor of mainstream entertainment. It becomes self-evident as both Jane and Aries become casually broken to the charms of the cinematic medium in a rather underdeveloped emotional form of poverty porn. *Pamilya Ordinaryo* – titled *Ordinary People* for its international release – manages to tap into a relapsing and circular theme of artistic ambiguity through homeless adolescent class-based struggles inside a socio-economic Philippine reality. As recently published by the Manila Bulletin in late September 2019, Senator Leila de Lima spoke widely to the Senate regarding the rise in street children and homeless families: “There are approximately 250,000 street children in the Philippines, based on the statistics provided by the Department

of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Some reports claim that their number can be as high as one million."¹ These street children "...are particularly vulnerable to forced labour, child prostitution, sexual and physical abuse, early pregnancy and many of them show severe symptoms of depression and anxiety,"² which the meta-narrative of *Pamilya Ordinary* exposes throughout its telling.

In one sense *Pamilya Ordinary* articulates the complexity of *ordinariness*. After all, this is about 'underage-adulthoods'³ that are in fact unsuspecting, abandoned minors who are poor, street-bound and ill-equipped to handle adult predators. Yet, this depiction is not solely for the educated classes or the public bystanders who watch and rarely engage; rather, homeless people share circumstances that are in fact participatory and public. After an exhausting sequence of relentless events, Jane and Aries cautiously have sex on dirty flat packed cardboard out in the streets as if someone nearby is watching them throughout. Aries constantly turns his head in anticipation, while Jane glances searchingly over his shoulder telling him to be faster. They know this is controlling and emancipatory even whilst engaging in a feral glimpse of public participation. At issue here is nothing less than the ongoing creation of a demolished state – an urban instrument for governing displaced early livelihoods – with children living outside the security of an 'ordinary' homelife.

1 This statement was published by the Manila Bulletin on September 30th 2019 in an address by Senator Leila de Lima to the Senate "to investigate the increasing numbers of street children and families wandering on the streets to determine concrete government interventions in addressing the root causes that led them to street begging."

Accessed July 1, 2020, <https://news.mb.com.ph/2019/09/30/de-lima-wants-senate-probe-into-alarming-rise-in-number-of-street>.

2 Agence Francaise de Developpement, "A breath of hope for street children in the Philippines," AFD, accessed July 1, 2020: <https://www.afd.fr/en/actualites/breath-hope-street-children-philippines>.

3 I am offering two examples to contextualise 'Underage Adulthood'



fig. 1: Raquel de Loyola, *Mound* (performance documentation), 2011, live performance with mixed media installation and video projection. All images courtesy of the artist.

To a large extent, adolescent trauma is an 'ordinary' agent in the passing representation of children's stories and adolescent lives. If we consider the cultural significance of formative learning experiences anywhere in the world, there is always a public fascination for the inconsistency of what seems secure. Yet, in an absolute or ideal sense, 'ordinary' representations of such adolescent realities could equally be deemed a betrayal. After all, where do Jane and Aries really belong besides existing somewhere in Manila? This is a question in the story that remains unanswered and, more interestingly, it also raises the consideration of why there is not more time to imagine a good answer. One could argue that this scenario is made as an exception to, and outside of, what society should address. Increasingly today it occurs that most societies are unwilling (or not prepared) to repair such exceptions. However, Roy's film positions the most vulnerable of lives as indistinguishable from society's definition of acceptance, and *Pamilya Ordinaryo* attempts to highlight this in the context of modern Manila.

further: (1) Teenagers often go to the cinema to watch films that are rated 18 & R18. This is a teenage thrill that somewhat deterritorializes adulthood with little consequences. (2) Kidult is a notion that describes a prolonged state of adolescence (kid/adult). This is largely a western phenomenon and often refers to a culture of university graduates who regress to their teenage lives by co-habiting back with their parents upon graduation, as opposed to fulfilling the standard expectations of 'adulthood'.

In bringing these examples together, I am thus connecting biopolitics to the subject of 'unpreparedness'. Both cases exemplify a passive model of *adulthood without sovereignty*. Globally, young people today in relative privilege remain suspended in a bioinsecure state

In an equally compelling encounter of insecure biopolitical circumstances, Racquel de Loyola's durational performance, *Mound* (2011), gives exceptional form to an unforgiving aspect of life in Manila. Looking at this installation online, I am captivated by the intersections of a vulnerable Filipino body. In paraphrasing Jennifer Doyle's perspective on Ron Athey's *Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative Sparkle*, "The real show in this performance is not de Loyola's body but the spectacularization of our communal relationship to it."⁴ I first came across this particular work while developing an exhibition context for *Transpersonal, instructions* at the Vargas Museum in 2017, which included de Loyola as an exhibiting artist living in the Philippines. Some time later, it became noticeable that this earlier work had not been repeated and was only produced once for an exhibition, curiously allied to a residency under the theme of 'aliveness,' or rather the inanimate object coming to life through performance, art and absence.⁵

Mound itself comprises a large wall projection (ten by eight feet approx.) mainly encompassing the Manila skyline alongside a view of high-rise buildings that appear slightly cropped and cut off. The pictorial focus attends to the height of each building and how they remain visible under a dominant gray/blue sky. Occupying the heart of the exhibition space as one might enter is a large 'mound' of debris, which is piled high with the artist lying prostrate across an industrial grey concrete ground. The performer, de Loyola, is partially visible from the head, arms, and shoulders while buried underneath a large bank of loose debris covering her legs and waist. Over a four- to five-hour period, she appears settled as if 'playing-dead' (fig. 1) amongst a variety of materials, from breeze blocks, rubble, and wood to the metal-based fixings that suggest a broken home or perhaps part of a demolished building. Once the performance ends, the artist is substituted by its documentation on a monitor that sits on top of one side of the mound gently flickering. What finally remains for the viewer (and is especially lasting), is the delicate image of a contemporary female artist who is consciously situating herself in the center of techno-patriarchal congestions living in Manila. It is an urban sphere that encompasses the additional surveillance of invisible brutalities alongside interminable adjustments, which have to be considered living in Manila – "the world's most densely populated city with 42,857 people per square kilometer."⁶

Mound etymologically suggests a pile of dirt, a rounded heap of sand or stones, or a raised area from the earth; yet, in this instance the subject is not predicated on a fiction or an imaginary construction. Rather, it is redeeming, communal, self-orientated and driven by the artists' own experiences, which return to an adolescent history around a similar

of precarity. Marked by the inflation of incurred-student-debt, recessions, reduced social services and an environmental crisis. So while previous generations occupied a period of relative adult preparedness, in financial terms, the state of 'unpreparedness' today predicts a future-present of eternal precarity.

- 4 For a cogent analysis and history of performance art, see Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 50.
- 5 *Absence: Performance art is alive* was the title given to a group exhibition at the now defunct Manila Contemporary in June 2011. Contributing artists included the Indonesia-based Mella Jaarsma and Melati Suryodarmo, and Manila's visual and performance artist Bea Camacho, in addition to Racquel de



fig. 2: Raquel de Loyola, *Mound* (performance documentation), 2011, live performance with mixed media installation and video projection. All images courtesy of the artist.

period to Jane in *Pamilya Ordinaryo*. Aya Yuson writes a review in GMA News Online on *Absence* at Manila Contemporary Gallery and makes the following observations: “Mound’s statement seemed to be about the absence of moorings in a childhood marred by displacement from a childhood home. Perhaps the artist was uprooted as a child—plucked from a safe childhood home and transplanted to some kind of setting of extreme urban decay. The reference may have been the demolition of one’s home. In any case, of this we are certain—the psyche whose point of view was represented by this piece was a psyche scarred.”⁷

While Yuson remarks on a ‘scarred psyche,’ it can also be explained that this performance is one among many offered by the artist with a continued reciprocal thought to a long-drawn-out violence. After all, this is an artist who understands how cautious tales attribute and serve to emphasize oppressively gendered socio-political realities. Furthering this position, this is an artist with a live art and performance-based history in numerous titles such as *Subsisting Sustenance (Mebuyan Series – 2006)*, *Blemish* (2013) and *Traces: Encompassing Time and Space* (2018), to name three projects that return to the daily problems of living, persisting and finding coping mechanisms in Manila. In either instance, Racquel de Loyola embodies the spirit of feminist performance histories within the Philippines and continues to address this. While successfully engaging in a critical art practice that continually isolates trauma through acute national oppressions, several projects by the artist openly expose a less conventional root towards decolonised self-care and the indentured body as acknowledged by Audre Lorde, who reminds us that “caring for myself is not self-indulgence,

Loyola. This exhibition was also developed in the context of the gallery’s month-long Performance Art Residency project, which de Loyola attended.

6 World Population Review, accessed June 12, 2020: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/manila-population/>.

7 Terence Krishna V. Lopez, “Manila Contemporary’s ‘Absence’: Performance art is alive,” *Bulatlat - Journalism for the people*, accessed June 3, 2020, <https://www.bulatlat.com/2011/06/08/manila-contemporary-%e2%80%99s-absence-performance-art-is-alive/>.

it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”⁸ Yet conversely, the personal history and biopolitical contouring of durational–life–practices surrounding the production of *Mound*, highlight a position that stands to defamiliarize the very ground where such artistic practices lie. In other words, it unmistakably carries the increasing precaritization of work, life, labor, desire, extinction, and the insecure passing of personal costs.

Let us remember the years between 2001 and early 2008, when de Loyola was going through adolescence while her family was being evicted and the home they occupied for eight years was being demolished. As de Loyola recollected in conversation, her eighteenth birthday was spent in Montalban (Rodriguez, Rizal), a relocation site, and she celebrated under the moon and stars without walls, floors or a roof. Her life partner, Mideo Cruz, was also there, cooking pasta and a baguette which they shared together with the whole family. Prior to this, the family had suffered and experienced the political tyranny of local governments, while living within the unsettling margins of ‘home-security’ on Commonwealth Avenue in Quezon City. They were severely exposed on multiple fronts inhabiting a building right in front of Kristong Hari Church – an area where 3,500 families were devastatingly affected by the repeated threats of physical displacement.

De Loyola’s father, Gene de Loyola,⁹ led a resistance¹⁰ against the demolition plans, which would have affected so many homes in Commonwealth Avenue. Working closely with the inhabitants of the community, he organized and radicalized an imperative to support “freedom from exploitation and foreign domination.” At the heart of this struggle was how to engage with the wider social and political housing reforms that can defend a community commitment, and therefore lay claim to a national responsibility involving a decolonizing economics of urban homecare against family extraction and demolition. While Gene de Loyola’s paintings sought to improve and question the unequal conditions of proletariat laborers, farmers and the under-class, which are frequently depicted in his drawings and paintings, from 2001-2008, his own family was

- 8** Audre Lorde, as referenced and blogged in detail with ongoing insights by Sara Ahmed in “Selfcare is Warfare,” Accessed July 7, 2020, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.
- 9** Gene de Loyola (1956-2018) was a prized Filipino artist, acknowledged activist, and in general a highly respected figure for his social realist paintings. Through a committed and generous spirit, his art practice successfully developed throughout his lifetime. In a Philippine era of artistic politicization and nationalism during the 1970s & 80’s and being “no stranger to grassroots organizing during Ferdinand Marcos’s martial law ...” Gene de Loyola continually sought to improve, socially connect and question what constitutes a Philippine National identity in the arts and the cultural sector. More so, he often taught workshops to the most deprived children in the depths of Manila’s slums and in 1975 founded *Sining Binhi* art group of Ermita and in 1981 developed *Buklod Sining* – a grassroots community group that created influential protest murals and banners against the Marcos reign and significantly impacted the political climate of the time. Gene de Loyola’s activism and his paintings tackled the unequal conditions of proletariat laborers, farmers and the underprivileged environments, which are frequently depicted in his drawings and paintings. Similar to artists searching for a deeper independent autonomy in Taiwan, Hong Kong and across Southeast Asia, Gene de Loyola shares a necessary understanding, sensitivity and legacy that remains vital today and touches many contemporary artists living and working in the Philippines. The scope of this brief text prevents me from discussing this in more detail, however the National Museum of the Philippines houses several of his paintings.
- 10** Gene de Loyola founded the organisation SATAMAKA Inc. [Samahan Tanglaw ng Maralita sa Kapaligiran Incorporated], which united various homeowner’s associations and combined guidance to a vulnerable range of displaced communities and individuals across many regions within the Philippines.

preoccupied with the unsolicited harassment of organized housing threats, family devastation, syndicate intimidations and profound insecurity. What is important to consider is how no teenager, child, or adult, can be immune to such a threatening situation. Just as *Family Ordinary* exposes the 'unprepared' extremes of living inside family homelessness; *Mound* equally studies a family home in devastation and demolition.

It is common knowledge that many years may pass before we draw attention to traumatic events. Racquel de Loyola's *Mound* traces a fragile line of purpose between contemporary art, feminist performance, social practice, patriarchal histories, and political activism, which declares a 'broken-habitus' in knowing how belonging is everything, particularly when out of reach and in pieces. As her arms and one hand can be seen to flail around the surface floor of the gallery space (fig. 2), there is a gentle acknowledgment of bare life, social endurance, and something possibly for afterwards—although this is maybe less culpable. What remains accountable during the physical hours the artist occupies the debris, is a post-patriarchal-deposit between a female artist's body of work and historically a predominately male tradition of art. In other words, the artist is "unleashing creative energy from patriarchal bonds."¹¹ The anti-fragile corners of a 'broken-habitus' are potentially a broken-society – a mini-planet tearing through its own respiratory systems and now fully ventilator dependent.¹² Perhaps this is a cue to explore the slumbering inequalities of social and private housing reforms? Or perhaps not. Yet, the staging of a semi-posthumous existence in *Mound* is exhilarating and traumatic as much as it is simultaneously a puppet of urban exhaustion. As noted by Lisa Ito-Tapang, "if there is anything that history teaches us, it is that Filipino artists refuse to remain passive amidst censorship, poor governance, and social injustice."¹³ Here, in this artwork, the artist constructs unknown divisions, or rather, 'in-house-demolitions' that refer to unjust consequences and socio-economic turmoil, where political and cultural decisions sit alongside failed policies and corruption.

- 11** See *Rivolta Femminile*, March 1971; free translation by Arlene Ladden from Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel: La Donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*, 1,2,3, Milan, 1974. Mound deploys a type of ‘non-performance’ by the artist which doubles as a withdrawal or a castration of the patriarchal unity of the past – to adopt a psychoanalytical framework. By ‘not-quite-performing’ in *Mound*, Racquel de Loyola assertively refuses to play the art game and instead proposes a symbolic *résistance* that circulates beyond the traditional readings of her work as well as the depictions of her father’s artistic identity – both anchored in the restraints of social realism, the mainstay of an older patriarchal guard in Philippine art history.
- 12** See “Life Support”, an interview between Zoë Wool and Nick Dupree (a writer and activist living on mechanical ventilation support since 1992). The emphasis of ‘ventilator dependence’ is equally focused on early and mid-life support and not centered on the process of dying as this interview articulates. Accessed July 8, 2020, <http://somatosphere.net/2014/life-support.html/>.
- 13** Lisa Ito-Tampang, “Visual Arts and Activism in the Philippines: Notes on a New Season of Discontent,” in *ART ARCHIVE 01*, ed. Patricia Tumang (Manila: The Japan Foundation, Manila, 2017), 21. Another excellent example of this is ‘Solidarity against Silencing’ – the given name to a collective initiative of cultural workers in the Philippine arts sector. Together this actively generates a valued consensus and defining testament to those parties involved that condemn the Anti-Terrorism Act of July 8th, 2020, introduced by president Rodrigo Duterte.

What later reverberates is how simply *Mound* repositions and questions the viewer into an arc of cultural destruction, one that notionally belongs inside ordinary peoples' urban dwellings within the Philippines. While this proportionately aggravates homelessness and demolition in relation to *Family Ordinary* – de Loyola's point is how the public fails to acknowledge their general tendency to look away if they can. While the work is both persuasive and eloquent, it is our public perception of private and intimate space that is challenged.

This installation further internalizes the self-demoralized sentiments of isolation, which harbor incessant remote living (A constant threat to life during COVID-19 as our lives continue without a vaccination).

Moreover, this artwork locates an unfamiliar site that drives the artist's practice to radically imagine new preparations and new positions: "...in an era of resurgent and terrifying ethnic and racial nationalism around the world, how can contemporary writers, artists, and thinkers reimagine the concept of nation itself? What does it mean to belong?"¹⁴ How do you organise the unprepared? What does it mean in Manila to be prepared for tomorrow's devastations? 'People grow old but their fears do not,'¹⁵ is this not the state of 'unpreparedness' within our times?

Alternatively, when I read an article recently written by Laurie Garrett for foreignpolicy.com titled, *The World Knows an Apocalyptic Pandemic Is Coming* – I drew a connection. In raising an outlet, Garrett points to how powerful national leaders and individuals around the globe tend to overlook the importance of 'preparedness' in the context of a crisis, a pandemic disease, or an outbreak, and reinforces how "preparedness is hampered by the lack of continued political will at all levels....Although national leaders respond to health crises when fear and panic grow strong enough, most countries do not devote the consistent energy and resources needed to keep outbreaks from escalating into disasters."¹⁶

- 14** *On Nationalism, Borders and Belonging* is a co-curated research exhibition with the Racial Imaginary Institute [TRII] curatorial team. It was organised for the CUNY Graduate Centre, New York (April 2020) and touring to David Kordansky Gallery in LA. However, as the installing process began, Covid-19 moved this to next year. Please see the press release, which was co-written and is on the TRII website. Accessed July 6, 2020, <https://theracialimaginary.org/issue/on-nationalism-borders-and-belonging/>.
- 15** This is a script line taken from the recently produced documentary film *Aswang* by Alyx Ayn Arumpac (2019).
- 16** This fascinating article, which critically reports on rise of disease outbreaks, climate crisis, vaccine development, antivirals and ‘appropriate nonpharmaceutical interventions’ for airborne microbes is understandably described as ‘ominous’ and is carefully qualified by an independent panel comprised in the form of “the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (GPMB), which was assembled last year in response to a request from the office of the U.N. secretary-general, and convened jointly by the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO). Co-chaired by the former WHO head and former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and the head of the international Red Cross, Elhadj As Sy, the GPMB commissioned expert studies and issued a scathing attack on the political, financial, and logistical state of pandemic preparedness affairs.” Garrett interestingly mentions the pandemic diseases that have wiped out millions and millions of humans throughout history and how the “the African swine-fever epidemic that started in China late in 2018 has spread across Asia and just turned up in the Philippines: Tens of thousands of pigs in the region have died of the incurable, usually lethal disease.” What is interesting here is how the disease was spread by forty dead pigs being left to rot in the Marikina river in Quezon City, Manila. Accessed March 6, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/20/the-world-knows-an-apocalyptic-pandemic-is-coming/>.

De Loyola's *Mound* attests to such a condition – a 'state' upending disaster, an outbreak of hurt and social maturation. Similarly, Eduardo W. Roy Jr. captures loss, corruption and teenage despair in Manila, and the viewer is equally presented with an imaginary field of art that sits within a failed political infrastructure. It is both destitute, homeless, and unstable. Yet, it is also uncomfortable and is about people on the edge, about the forgotten, and it promises that the real work begins during the burden of solidarity and anticipation. In other words, while it is possible to constantly surround our thoughts with such catastrophic events, both *Pamilya Ordinaryo* and *Mound* occupy real-life experiences that are specific to 'unpreparedness.' While they both engage with aspects of despair, it is their shared sense of catastrophe that distinguishes the construction of both the film and the installation. When *Pamilya Ordinaryo* focuses on losing what you cannot have or keep hold of, *Mound* equally presents no clear future of repair, yet it begs the question that we must keep trying regardless. In subjects that are uncomfortable to stay with, there is a genuine appetite for contemporary art in the Philippines. An art that continues to strive for a sense of relief while tackling the meditative journeys that overcome personal atrocity alongside unjust memories. Or rather, as Marc Auge remarks on the question of time as material in *Everyone Dies Young*: "This is neither glorious or truly hopeless. The results constitute a failure but also the possible beginnings of another story."¹⁷

17 Marc Auge, *Everyone Dies Young: Time Without Age*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 36.