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On March 9, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a public-health emergency following the first local transmission of Covid-19. Two weeks later, Duterte enacted the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act,” authorizing him to wield emergency powers to contain the virus. With more than 450,000 cases and 8,700 reported deaths, the Philippines is expected to stay

in various states of community quarantine, with restrictions on regional travel and gatherings, through 2021.

While tackling Covid-19, Duterte’s government led a crackdown on the media. In May, Congress refused to renew the license of the major television broadcaster ABS-CBN; its closure left far-flung regions without emergency information during super typhoons in October and November. On June 15, journalist Maria Ressa, founder and editor of the independent news site Rappler, was convicted of “cyber libel” charges over a social-media post. In July, more than 100 artists, art writers, and arts-industry workers signed the Solidarity Against Silencing petition against a controversial anti-terrorism bill, which critics fear will be used to stifle activism.

At the beginning of 2020, several major shows opened, including a five-decade retrospective of painter and printmaker Ofelia Gelvezon-Tequi, “Allegories and Realities” (2/22–5/24), at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. After the nationwide quarantine forced the closure of museums, libraries, galleries, and archives, many institutions turned to online platforms and initiatives to support artists. The Vargas Museum, in Quezon City, opened installation artist Junyee’s “Kwarantín” (7/16) virtually, displaying the artist’s constructed bamboo beds installed on the museum’s lawn, the forms created in reference to the material’s utilitarian potential and the government’s tentative pandemic response. The museum also created the downloadable Public Art Module, featuring works previously exhibited on the museum’s grounds. In April, Ateneo

Art Gallery announced the Marciano Galang Acquisition Prize Program to purchase works on paper related

to the pandemic as many artists struggled to stay afloat financially. Fundacion Sanso’s “Mutation Series,” curated by Dayang Yraola, brought together a video by Annie Pacaña and audio by artists Children of Cathode Ray and Rubber Inc. on a purpose-built website to explore the idea of fearlessness amid disorder.

As galleries repositioned their exhibitions online and limited visitors, many artists and curators turned their attention to the microcosmic realities of home and their environs. At Underground Gallery in Makati Cinema Square, painter Joseph Tecson exhibited large-scale canvas paintings exploring isolation and the desire to escape in “Luxe, Calme et Volupté” (7/25). At the Alley in Karrivin Plaza, where shows were by appointment only, The Drawing Room made digital catalogues available, including one for “Collaborations” (8/22–9/12) by Manuel Ocampo and Jigger Cruz, whose canvases confronted the place of beauty in contemporary reality. 1335 Mabini hosted the group show “in single cells” (8/20–9/18) with works by Kolown, Mars Bugaoan, Miggy Innumerable, and other artists who reflected on art in a time of survival. Artinformal featured Marina Cruz’s paintings of clothes and Rodel Tapaya’s paintings of family scenes in “Everyday” (8/29–9/26); Costantino Zicarelli’s multimedia works in “This Land Ghost Land in Land is Land” (10/3–31) confronted the mysteries of the natural world.

There were still a number of exhibitions in which artworks addressed larger, heady topics and existential realities. Along Chino Roces Extension, Silverlens gallery converted its space into a laboratory for conceptual artist Judy Freya Sibayan’s “Performing My Self-Archive, My Other Body” (2/22–3/21), which touched on themes of memory and mortality, and later exhibited Norberto Roldan’s “Ziggurat” (10/17–11/21), with the artist’s assemblages salvaged from the nonprofit Green Papaya’s studio fire in July. In the warehouse complex La Fuerza, Finale Art File presented “Heavy Ground” (6/18–7/7) by multimedia artist Arturo Sanchez Jr., who explored the intangible weight of faith, and Oca Villamiel’s paintings inspired by raku ware, “Quiet Earth” (7/15–8/7). Vinyl on Vinyl opened the group show “Unusual Tranquility” (7/6–31) with four artists, including Archie Oclos and Dennis Bato, whose works expressed societal anxieties.

Other exhibitions and artist projects delved into contemplation of the subjective experience amid confinement. In Fort Bonifacio, the artist-run MO\_Space presented works about ideas of transition by artists including Poklong Anading, Christina Quisumbing Ramilo, and Mariano Ching in “Liminal Spaces” (8/8–9/20). Located in Quezon City, Blanc Gallery featured paintings and sculptures of shadowy human-like forms by Jared Yokte in “All Along the Watchtower” (10/10–31), based on the artist’s meditations in a tree house originally made for his daughter. West Gallery presented Mark Andy Garcia’s large-scale, self-reflective paintings in “To Live” (6/25–7/25).

Among independent initiatives, Parcel Exhibitions launched a portable collection of artworks, “Fiat Lux” (10/23), curated by artist Pam Quinto, as an alternative model to circulate artworks. Artists also initiated various fundraisers. Max Balatbat held the Anti-Virus Live Auction (3/29) on his Facebook page, with proceeds benefitting the Philippine General Hospital. Lena Cobangbang and MM Yu spearheaded Para-Paraan Paabot Naman, from June to August, to raise money for displaced jeepney drivers. Load na Dito Projects, with the Kwago Publishing Lab, held a 20-minute online auction of household objects, “202020” (9/19), probing digital transactions and the movement of goods. The Baguio Art Lab’s online project “Bcc: in search of cures” (10/24) was an anonymous email exchange between artists looking to confront and heal from their experiences of the pandemic.

Individual artists responded to experiences of the pandemic in creative ways. Mark Salvatus’s “Home Exhibition for Yoji” (5/6), presented on Instagram, featured the artist’s five-year-old son’s exercises of creating and critiquing installations using household materials. Fr. Jason Dy SJ’s *Arrange/Enliven* series (2020), displayed on the artist’s Facebook page, depicts the flora he collected and arranged in the ikebana style on the altar used for online masses, evoking an aesthetics of solemnity and a reminder of the divine design of nature.

While the year presented a number of impediments due to the pandemic—the curtailing effects of the long lockdown, and the undervaluing of art and culture as “non-essential” by the government—many found innovative ways to approach activism and find inspiration and healing through artistic output. By learning to utilize the online sphere not solely as an alternative platform but as a site of creativity in its own right, artists and cultural workers expanded their collaborations and the circulation of artworks. The potentials of technology present exciting ways by which contemporary Philippine art might evolve in materiality and meaning in the years to come.

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MANUEL OCAMPO and JIGGER CRUZ, *Revolving Objects of Disintegrations*, 2020, oil on canvas, 190.5 x 137.2 cm. Courtesy The Drawing Room, Manila. Copyright and courtesy the artists.



Installation view of JUNYEE's *Kwarantín*, 2020, bamboo installation, dimensions variable, at Vargas Museum, Manila, 2020. Courtesy Vargas Museum.



Installation view of NORBERTO ROLDAN's "Ziggurat," at Silverlens, Manila, 2020. Courtesy Silverlens.