

# INVISIBLE STATES, PERIPHERAL SITES: ARTISTIC NEGOTIATIONS OF THE URBAN

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This paper revisits Alma Quinto's collaborative art project *Urban Plan/Duyan* installed at the Sambalikhwaan Grounds as part of the Publikhaan event in 2007. This artistic engagement can be considered 'acts of surfacing and re-envisioning'. *Urban Plan/Duyan* engages three parallel sites of contested visibilities – the border street of Onyx where junk shops thrive, the homes of the women of Onyx and the alternate site of Quinto's artistic vision installed at the Publikhaan event. These spaces are fraught by fickle visibility and a fragile ephemerality. The Onyx community thrives on the business of refuse; junk shops litter this street bordering Makati's Central Business District. As its residents take apart the global city's disposables, their homes sit on precarious ground unpredictably overcome by floodwaters and eviction threats. As Quinto, Soni Kum (another woman artist) and the author listened to the stories of women from Onyx, a mine of strength is unveiled and recorded through subsequent artistic negotiations. Thus, the paper reviews these locations as sites of re-imagining the contested spaces of the city by mapping them through life- and artistic narratives. This return journey is likewise aimed at the larger project of crafting alternative ways of dwelling the city, stark contrasts to otherwise technocratic views of the urban.

## Return Journey

Onyx is remarkable for side streets lined with junk shops overflowing with used office equipment and dated computers taken apart to skeletal bareness. The junk shops form an interesting foil to the bustle of a central business district, seen from atop the dividing wall that marks Manila from Makati. Junk shop workers preoccupy themselves with a rhythmic taking apart of things as transactions beyond the wall take on an entirely different rhyme. While the junk strip is Onyx's outer face, its inner labyrinthine streets reveal it as an old riverine community, once sparse with houses but now littered with makeshift homes. Residents here once thrived from the generous harvest of cabbage swamp. One of the women interviewed for the collaborative project *Urban Plan/Duyan*, shares this memory of Onyx; of a

time when the houses were few and they were less threatened with fire, flood or relocation. The project *Urban Plan/Duyan* sought to reinterpret these stories and more; as these negotiations as I call them proved instrumental in realizing collective ties. This collaboration was the outcome of a long process of forging connections with the women of Onyx who shared stories flanked by their bevy of children, doing the laundry and sometimes overwhelmed by memories of danger, fire and death. These women and several others however, enlivened and infused Onyx with hope through life stories of resilience and survival. Their stories were the loom for Quinto's own 'urban plan', a work grounded in the real life conditions of majority of Metro Manila's residents. The fabrication of an alternative urban plan, shaped by contiguous and conflicting realities addresses the act of 'remaking' the city in ways informed by strategies of episode and temporality. In this return journey to Onyx, I will examine the possibilities inherent in art for 're-visioning' cities and consequently raising prospects of altered understandings of city life through collaborations facilitated by art.



Figure 1. Onyx community's labyrinthine streets

### **The Paradox of Cities**

Cities and their inherent rhythms are simultaneous backdrops and agents to the unfolding of lives. These birthed conditions are often grounded on contradictions, both compelling and threateningly overwhelming. Lives in cities are shaped by the dualities of pleasure and fear, of hope and despair, of

excitements and anxieties. These contradictions are echoed and articulated by spatial forms, urban imaginaries and life conditions. As such, every prosperous, First World city will typically house its own version of a ghetto, birthed through constant replication of cores and fringes. These uneven formations inhabit imagination and real life spaces and result from the workings of power. There exist however, discourses and imaginaries that attempt to thwart the real repercussions of these power structures. Beyond mere background or site to social formations and collective action, the city and the forces that make it can be re-structured as active agent in the formation of emergent, critical practices. In this paper, I propose that public art through its rethinking of issues relevant to public life is one such critical practice. While public art's efficacy is assumed negligible and difficult to measure, I argue that its episodic engagements and interpretations of shared concerns offer a possibility of 're-visioning' the city – art's own mode in redefining and thus, 'remaking' urban life conditions. Artistic process is proposed as altered visioning and in the specific context of the Urban Plan/Duyan project I will later discuss, a mode of 'surfacing' and of making visible by way of consciousness-shaping and the fostering of collective action the real life conditions of Metro Manila's less-privileged communities.

### **Public Art as Compass**

*"We individually and collectively make the city through our daily actions and our political, intellectual and economic engagements. But in return, the city makes us." --David Harvey (Quoted in Lees, 2004: 234)*

David Harvey astutely phrases the dialogues that transpire between cities and the individuals who inhabit them. In this section, I examine the 'makings' that happen in cities and explore other tongues that enable these re-makings to transpire. What manner of 're-makings' do we aspire to? Where can these 're-makings' lead us? Do we aspire for the pragmatic translations of such dialogues or helplessly yield to endlessly bemoaning the disillusion of the urban jungle? Public art may perhaps offer a possibility for dialogue and an eventual pragmatic 'remake' of the city. While the city and urban life have been staple themes and subject matter for art, few works pragmatically engage the city in forms and ways that directly respond to issues informed by its very formation and the circumstances that frame urban life.

Located in the terrain of the search for possibilities and new definitions, public art may be thought of in terms of participation, engagement, critique and process. While all art have their publics and because the term can refer only to representations of what is assumed

'public', it is best that "debate and dialogue" frame understandings of publics and public-ness (Kelly 2004:457). Art's modes of expression, theme, subject matter and medium all presuppose publics. Public art's main concern is to engage issues in the public domain with the aim of shaping and raising debate. What sets apart new genre public art is the primacy given to process and engagement over art object. Arlene Raven enthusiastically argues – "art in the public sphere extends to the possibilities of public art to include a critique of the relations of art in the public domain" (in Miles 1995: 167). Consequently, public art is best made sense of as a "forum for investigation, articulation and constructive reappraisal" (Phillips 1992:296). Suzi Gablik defines this artistic vision of engagement and critique as "a new paradigm based on the notion of participation, in which art will begin to redefine itself in terms of social relatedness and ecological healing" (in Miles 1995:27). Such concerns are nowhere more urgent than in this present besieged by calamities and the escalating gap between rich and poor. (As I write, this same gap is the one exploited in presidential campaigns by candidates in this year's elections.)

Tacit to this argument are the possibilities that art offers for shaping consciousness, the formation of critical audiences and fueling collective action. I chose Quinto's work because it realized a landscape of networks through collaboration. *Urban Plan/Duyan* engaged multi-tiered publics, taking advantage of long standing relationships alongside the chance element of ephemeral engagements and finally, making room for extending inquiry on issues raised on the hazards of urban life for the city's less privileged. While Alma Quinto initiated the collective engagements that helped materialize later versions of the urban plan, collaborative practice significantly defined her artistic roles as catalyst and ethnographer. Public art and its redefinitions of art, artistic roles and authorship destabilize the modernist notions of an insulated and highly individualized art making; an important repositioning of the artist within social life and her cultural world.

*Urban/Plan Duyan*, an artistic 'remake' of metropolitan Manila engages urban contradictions through artistic process and language. Alma Quinto has long been involved in community based artistic collaborations as with her long-term engagement with CRIBS and the much later, House of Comfort. These projects had Quinto conducting workshops with children who were victims of abuse, and helping communities make sense of trauma at both individual and collective levels. The workshops enable channeling through artistic language altered articulations of trauma, a decisive path to possible overcoming. *Urban Plan/Duyan* is distinctive for its specific engagements of

urban communities and urban locations. The project begun with Quinto's art workshops in Onyx, sessions where children visualized their realities, hopes and dreams through drawn pictures and creative projects. Workshops were sponsored by the Kaibigan Ermita Outreach Foundation, which also funded livelihood projects for the women of Onyx. Fully drawing from the opportunities provided by the workshops and support from the NGO Kaibigan, Quinto's collaborative map expanded to a network that later included the Onyx community, the NGO Kaibigan, the artist Soni Kum and the artists' collective TutoKarapatan. My involvement with the project was largely those of the latter two, as I joined Soni and Alma in documenting interviews with women of Onyx in their homes.

We ventured through Onyx by way of its ordered outlying main streets, its inner labyrinthine walkways and finally, the border of junk shops at its outskirts. The life stories we listened to were those of survival, place-memories, and anxieties over a nearly collapsing house, the threat of fire, and the death of children. In these conversations, Soni, Alma and I were openly taken into the fold of this community of women who amid nervous laughter and the occasional shrug of resignation, shared their ordeals over making ends meet to the more mundane matters of fetching water for laundry taken in for income, of domestic arrangements and the endless shifts of domestic spaces. These stories were woven together in Kum's video work *Lotus from Plastic Mud: The Onyx Story*. Among these layers of creative productions and engagements, Quinto's installation of Metro Manila's altered map at the Sambalikkaan grounds speak strongest of the city that we make, and which in turn, make us. The next section will discuss this installation work in detail and argue for the work's relevance to more than just the Onyx community. While it subtly references Onyx, it may also stand for other communities that are very much like it. The installation embodies in varying degrees the inequalities that plaque the globalizing city and the contradictions that underlie urban life in Metro Manila. I examine in detail this altered map of Metro Manila, an urban plan in itself as a tool to reveal shared urban conditions and their consequences.

### **'Resurfacing' as Revisioning': The Urban Plan/Duyan project**

Urban Plan/Duyan was Quinto's installation project for the Tutok 2Talk Creative Convergence art festival from the twenty-seventh of February to the first of March in 2008. The festival's various components included performances, art discussions, and site-specific installations. Curators for these specific components were responsible for conceptualizing the overarching theme, for inviting artists and evaluating their proposals and

finally, for coordinating the final set-up of the works. Environ/mental state was the theme for the event's installation component. The notion of the environment assumed a layered connotation that referenced physicality and psychic territory; a conceptual means to "reassess one's mental environment as an illusory climate" (Tutok Program 2008). It aimed at dialogue to spark interest in the works and to raise bigger questions about our beliefs and inner state of being. The installations echoed the materiality and state of the environment and encouraged audiences to construct their own interpretations of issues spurred by the works. Art works for the festival have also expressed aims of 'reclaiming and redefining public space', a conceptual frame of various events and festivals organized by the Tutok collective (Tutok program 2008).

Tutok artists' collective was organized in 2005, an initiative that merges art and advocacy while creating linkages among artists, organizations and communities (Organization profile 2005). It is interesting that Tutok's organizational structure is one based on flux having a central core of senior artists who plan events and activities, and a rotating group of artist- members who realize these goals. Members of the collective take on shifting roles in the organization with several of them becoming organizers, curators, and participating artists for the organization's projects. Buen Calubayan, the curator for the installation program of Tutok 2Talk Creative Convergence recalled the curation process as essentially having three components – inviting the artists to be part of the project, a scheduled site visit, and finally realizing the proposals. The Sambalikhaan grounds the venue for the arts festival was also an interesting site, a bucolic retreat nestled in the heart of Quezon City. Its grounds are marked by a rugged terrain, unexpected depressions and elevations. As Calubayan pointed out, Sambalikhaan as both site and organization supports the installation program's aims of welding art and the environment together, while mobilizing communities to participate in the program (2009). All the project proposals for the site installation had, in one way or another emphasized community involvement and participation in varying degrees. Calubayan likewise notes that the installations once set up, were also responsible for consolidating 'improvised communities', who share the ephemeral emphasis of the installation works (2009).

For her proposed urban plan, Quinto chose the old fishpond of Sambalikhaan, long drained out, deep and wide enough to mimic the plan of a submerged city. The installation used plastic bags pieced together with barbecue sticks, randomly collaged to form the bed of the pond. The finished work mimicked an aerial view of Metro Manila. Plastic bags were chosen as primary materials for the work for according to the artist, they signify

consumption, suffocation and environmental blight. Quinto wanted to build “a community from people’s refuse”; the plastic bags a barometer of consumption, a seismograph of overpopulation and a metaphor of inequality and multinational financial power (2008). She recalls entire communities in Baseco, Tundo where she also held workshops, resting on layers of garbage, foamy grounds where lives are realized or lost. Quinto surmised that living in Baseco and like communities have become mute cycles of survival and making-do. Amid this seeming chaos, order and harmony are somehow engendered. The barbecue sticks that pierced the earth and stitched the plastic bags together connote harmful ways that leave destructive imprints on the environment. The resulting work is submerged in the fishpond’s belly, a harmonious collage of color and pattern, parodying the order of technicist flavored planning. Curiously enough, Quinto’s plan was also littered with the ubiquitous Shoe Mart bags, the malls landmark structures of Metro Manila. This urban plan was juxtaposed with the installation of a hammock that provided rhythmic background movement, an oscillation between rest and tension. The hammock was meant as a temporary communal respite and a pause to watch Kum’s video work.

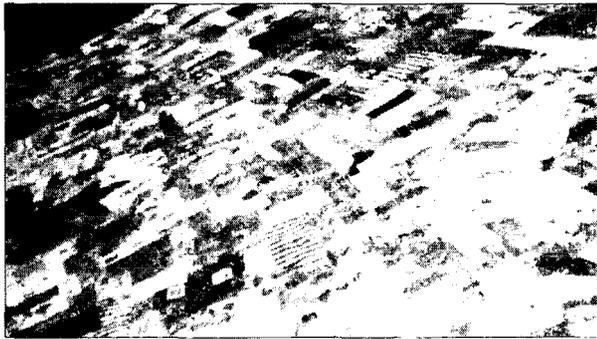


Figure 2. Alma Quinto’s installation project *Urban Plan/Duyan*, Sambalikhayan. Grounds, plastic bags, barbecue sticks. March 2008.

*Urban Plan/Duyan*’s installation form thus, strongly emphasized site to initiate reflections on urban life, which in Metro Manila is typified by oppressive density, crowds and unmoving traffic. While Metro Manila planning relies on an undecipherable order, Quinto’s urban plan rests on temporal ephemerality and indeterminacy reaffirming real life conditions of illegal settler communities, of which *Onyx* is an example. Quinto adroitly phrases this irony in her proposal – “images of squalor and congestion will

provide contrast and tension with comfort one associates with the duyan (hammock)” (2008). The communal hammock may well be a metaphor for rural life, poignantly inserting into reality what many of these city migrants reluctantly left behind.

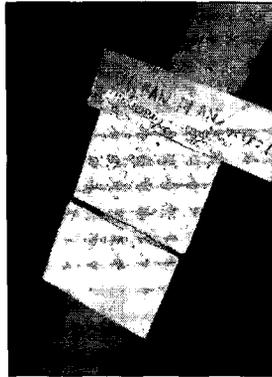


Figure 3. Alma Quinto’s installation project Urban Plan/Duyan, Sambalikhaan. March 2008.

### **Narrative Pause**

Quinto’s projects typify an activism that deftly resituates art in the midst of life’s challenges, of marginal voices surfacing through creative byways. The core elements of such artistic projects are engagement, process and advocacy, a form of social activism involved in shaping and identifying “local models of healing and ecology within the old order” (Miles 1995: 187). The emphasis shifts to artistic process and engagement, away from the creation of an insulated, permanent and stable object. Urban Plan/Duyan is marked by collaboration, strengthening the sense of community, and realizing the possibilities not just of survival but of change, the kind identified with shared interests. The collaborations initiated by Quinto fueled the emergence of a community of women, a collective movement working on a shared sense of the need for communal action. The project culminated with a sharing with the women of Onyx, a testimony to their shared strength and resilience, facilitated engagements of the NGO Kaibigan and partners like Alma and Soni.

Stories are ways to cope. In each of Urban Plan/Duyan’s phases, stories inform the project’s blueprint. Quinto’s map is a timely depiction of how

much we have taken from the environment. Typhoon Ondoy's October floods refigured the plastic bags of Quinto's Urban Plan/Duyan map. Crossing Aurora Boulevard the day after Ondoy struck, the surreal disarray of homes and vehicles, the patched collage of garbage that covered the San Juan River, and the tangled web of plastic bags brought to mind the Sambalikhaan map. Only this time, the plastic bags signified chaos and loss as they marked the flood water levels that submerged Manila. This time, they were ghostly markers of the flood's rising waters, of the loss of lives and homes. Two weeks after Ondoy, we precariously navigated the uncertain streets of Manila threatened by floods, weather forecasts and forever altered by loss and death. How do we collectively deal with the nightmare that was the flood? Perhaps, the version of the map prefigured for us in October was one of despair and warning. In this collectively shared trauma, life-stories may perhaps become a means to survive. Urban Plan/Duyan illustrates that artistic translations of these narratives may help us make sense of and later, act on these shared understandings.

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