

Staying Slippery: Seven Curators in a Bar with Merv Espina Edited by Sofía Dourron

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In November 2018, the participants of the De Appel Curatorial Programme 2018/2019 took a research trip to Manila, where they met with Donna Miranda, cofounder of Metro Manila’s legendary Green Papaya Art Projects. A few months later, one artist and six curators—including some of the Curatorial Programme participants—walked into a bar to continue the conversation initiated in Manila, this time with Merv Espina, an artist, researcher, and the program director of Green Papaya. They discussed institutionalization, archiving practices, and communities; drank beer and yelled over the loud music the bartender refused to turn down.¹

The coven of seven included Nikolay Alutin, Bruno Alves de Almeida, Alisa Blakeney, Zoe Crook, Sofia Dourron, Jo-Lene Ong, and Rachael Rakes.

Jo-Lene So it’s 2019, the year that *Blade Runner’s* future was set in.

Rachael Also *The Running Man*.

Jo-Lene Really?² And it’s one year before Green Papaya’s expiration date. Sofía, do you want to start?

Sofía So, Green Papaya has been around for almost twenty years and has successfully avoided institutionalization. What is it like to share your archive with Asia Art Archive, an independent archive that has grown to be an influential institution with one of the most comprehensive collections of research material in Asia?

Merv I never really thought of AAA as so much of an institution, at least not in the way it’s perceived here. We started the same year, in 2000, so did ruangrupa, but I guess we all became different things and are perceived

very differently now. Anyway, that's how we developed this kind of affinity with them, you know, keeping tabs after all these years. I guess now AAA has become much larger, like a real institution. I have to say that there's a lot of tensions, especially with the direction of how our archive and history is going to be portrayed. There's issues of scope and categorization, so it's a constant negotiation with them. But they do understand our needs, and at the same time, it's good to have a sparring partner, because they bring up certain things that we hadn't necessarily thought of before. But it's simple things—like how to organize certain materials, like an exhibition that was also a performance that was actually a cooking event—that have become more complicated. Papaya was quite fluid, so now we have to look back and analyze what the hell we were doing. It's a good exercise.

Jo-Lene After the year 2020, Papaya will start to exist primarily as an archive, and Papaya itself is playing a very active part in building and narrating the record of its own story. Aside from issues of categorization, what are some of the key concerns in how and what will be told?

Merv I'm hoping that there's more than just one narrative. Maybe some of them deliberately contradictory, so that we can still be playful.

Jo-Lene Can you give some examples?

Merv Examples... how to keep slippery? I guess we're actively omitting certain things and keeping other things within the community, things people who've worked with Papaya over the years might know, things we think we want to keep private. Also, when we tell artists that we are archiving an exhibition they did and ask them for documentation, sometimes they will say, "Yes, here's some

documentation, but don't ever show it!" So they invoke their right to be forgotten.

Sofía When you arrived at Papaya in 2010, it had already been around for ten years. Was there an archive or is this something that you brought in?

Merv I can't shake off this archival slant in my practice. So, coming into Papaya and living there, I had to try to make sense of it. The way I approach a lot of things is through art historical material, I try to generate a kind of historiography and make it accessible, because most of these histories are intangible or inaccessible. You need to know certain people who would know certain stories or have certain files. When I arrived at Papaya, all this material was already there, and not just within Papaya's immediate time period, which was the 2000s. Pee Wee [*Norberto Roldan, who cofounded Papaya with Donna*] had also kept materials from Viva ExCon and CAP (Concerned Artists of the Philippines), from the '80s. Besides that, over the years, a lot of artists who went through or exhibited at Papaya left stuff, artworks or documentation, that they either forgot or donated. And because Donna is a dancer and choreographer who is also an anthropologist by training, she was aware of the future use of the materials and so, she kept them.

There was also the material I came with, media art stuff, film, video material, some sound. That said, there was not one neat file that said "archives." I had to start asking them about things, and they'd even find stuff under their beds. That's why the archiving process takes a while. A lot of it is very reliant on human memory, human frailty, and personal relations; we have to remember it together. When I go back, we're going to hold some community consultations to discuss the direction that we are taking. We have a kind of loose board

that involves people like Yason Banal, Shireen Seno, and John Torres—people who also run spaces in Quezon City, collaborators who we feel don't necessarily have geographical proximity but are quite involved. I think, though, one of the most pressing concerns for us right now is not so much the content that we have, but where it will all go afterwards. We don't want it to come into just any institution. Even more so, what if it's a private institution? We're kind of set on dispersing it, so it will still be slippery in a way. The digital archive, or a form of it that's not necessarily all, is going to be online with AAA, that will form the core. But a lot of the audio and the moving image materials are actually going to the National Archives of the Philippines because they have proper facilities for them. I feel more at ease that they're going to a national institution, even though the national institution could totally vanish out of some presidential whim [laughs].

Nikolay Are you thinking about making this decentralization of the archive explicit? Because AAA appears to be a big, centralized structure, so at some point I imagine a person would go in and ask for materials on Green Papaya and just assume that's everything there is to know about it.

Merv That's a good point. We're trying to think of ways to be more playful about it, but also take advantage of the veneer of institutionality. I think we do have to make it explicit, to be upfront about it.

Bruno If it's dispersed, how do you then integrate a bit of the specificity of the social or political context in order to be able to fully grasp some of your projects through the archive?

Merv I think that's why we're coming up with a few publications, not just about key moments or key topics, but also

the surrounding geopolitics. We would like future generations to have access to it, but at the same time keep it funny and slippery. Like, how do I construct this joke that will still be funny after a few centuries, right?

Zoe Do you think it's common practice in the other artist-run spaces surrounding Green Papaya to have some kind of archival practice?

Merv No, I wish it was, so it would be easier to access. For example, there's this mythical artist cafe from the '60s called Café Los Indios Bravos. It's mentioned in novels and poems and some experimental films, but there's no one account of it and not much photographic documentation either. I do think the new generation of artist-run spaces in the Philippines has a bit more consciousness about it, and these days it's easier. But yeah, it's not that common. For me it's important to get at least a simple historical narrative in place and build on it, but since these are lacking, if you can do it yourself, then, you know, don't sit on your ass.

Jo-Lene Now that you are in the process of constructing the archive together with AAA, do you have an audience or community in mind of who you want these archives to serve or to be seen or used by?

Merv Aliens! No... Well, I think our archive is a good case study for Quezon City and for this period of Philippine art history, which I think is quite dynamic. While Papaya was around, there were a few revolutions and regime changes, and within our archives, there are not only traces of these events, but also records of other initiatives.

Jo-Lene Why is it important to Green Papaya to stay slippery? You used that word a few times, and my impression is that

retaining the slipperiness was more important than getting some sort of economic sustainability that may have made you more institutionalized.

Merv Yeah, I think we're already perceived as an institution anyways. There's been some instances when some of these globetrotting curators came to Papaya and were like, "Oh, this is your house. Okay, let's see Papaya." And they would have to come into our bedrooms to see the archive. So, yeah, it's important to stay slippery... I think over the years people have misread us anyway, and that is something fun to play with. It also goes back to the name Green Papaya—it's not ripe, it's not the final point of the organism yet, but while it is in this green papaya state, it can be utilized for a lot of things like green papaya salad, fritters, or stews. It's a state of potentiality more than a fixed or rotting organism.

Rachael Earlier you talked about community as other spaces, or as people involved with other spaces—do you think they have informed what you have done over time? Was there ever an intention of having a certain community?

Merv I think Papaya's immediate community is the artists that were part of it or are still part of it. It did come out of a generation that lacked spaces for a certain kind of practice. But the scene has evolved over the past nineteen years, and some of these people now have better places to show at or have evolved to practices that are better suited for commercial galleries or institutions.

Jo-Lene My sense is that people see Green Papaya as occupying a position like a community elder or leader...

Merv I'm surprised, because a lot of the time people don't really care about us anymore.

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Rachael Really? Because there are younger spaces replacing you or because you are closing?

Merv I'm not sure. This is one of the things that we get to discuss now—our impact and relevance. The cynical part of me thinks we've overstayed our welcome, and maybe that's why, when I came in, we actively stopped making exhibitions and had more discussions. I felt that there was a lot of production but no criticism. Then again, we co-organized a biennial... But as much as possible we don't do that kind of project. So maybe we do occupy some spaces, not necessarily related to art, but to a wider sociopolitical agenda that we feel we are part of, especially now. So a lot of the stuff that's happening is not actually even Papaya initiated, we just host because there's a lot of community members, like Donna, Kiri Dalena, Pog [*Antares Gomez Bartolome*], or Peewee, who hold a lot of activist meetings about the war on drugs or land reform that are much more valid. And we don't have to publicly advertise it, but it's happening and it's, I guess, much, much more urgent.

Sofía Did this have anything to do with your setting an end date for the project?

Merv I think setting an end date was a practical decision. There was a certain point where we were just really tired. Besides seasonal or project-by-project grants, there is no active source of income, it's all out of our own pocket. It's great that we adopted a bar, but you do come to a point where like, man, this can't go on forever. It's not financially sustainable. So yeah, it was practical things more than a conceptual critical agenda. That agenda came later, when we started to really assess our worth in the process of going through our archives.

Nikolay Were there ever any unconventional funding sources?

Merv Yeah, like dealing drugs—that was unconventional, right?

Zoe Do you think Papaya’s was the best structure for the Philippines or for your area, or do you think that it could have been structured in a more effective way?

Merv I think Papaya had semblances of structure which worked for particular moments. It was ad hoc and case by case. I think the structure is only coming now that a clearer direction is in place, but prior to that it was more like free ranging.

Jo-Lene What about Papaya’s role as the international reference point for Manila’s art scene?

Merv That depends on the networks that are in place, and the access and mobility of the people involved. I think more and more people are going to Bellas Artes or consulting Mark Salvatus, who has a fantastic network because he travels everywhere and brings that back with him. On our part, there’s an active sharing of these networks as part of our going-away presents, but for people we feel that are deserving or who need it.

Alisa I have one more question. What does the Manila art scene need in the wake of Green Papaya?

Merv Oh my God. There’s no one scene, it’s archipelagic, even within Quezon City there’s all these different ecologies that don’t necessarily interact with each other. I guess because of a combination of factors, like age difference and a diversity of interests, although Papaya has tapped into a lot of them. But I think maybe it’s also a bit conservative. I do think that the scene needs more active self-criticality and

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easier access to history. There’s a group of people in the south called *Tausug* that are known to be these kite-flying philosophers. The elders will tell you a riddle, and you won’t get it for years because you’re not prepared for it yet, you don’t have the maturity or life experience to get it. But when you eventually get the riddle, it’s wisdom that has been earned. So I have been thinking, “Oh my God, how do you do that for an organism like Papaya? How do you leave with riddles?”

With thanks to Zoe Crook who transcribed the interview and identified/Shazaamed the songs.

NOTES

- 1 Some of the songs that played during the interview included “The Devil Wears a Suit and Tie” by Colter Wall; “Jimmy Mack” by Martha & the Vandellas; “Mickey Rat” by Messer Chups; “Play That Funky Music” by Wild Cherry; “I Just Want to Make Love to You” by Muddy Waters; “In the Midnight Hour” by Wilson Pickett; “C’mon Everybody” by Eddie Cochran; “Brown Eyed Girl” by Van Morrison; “Stuck in the Middle with You” by Stealers Wheel; “Baby, You’re Mine” by The Delta Bombers; “Kashmir” by Led Zeppelin; “Where Did Our Love Go” by The Supremes; “I Put a Spell on You” by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins; “You Shook Me All Night Long” by AC/DC; “North Side Gal” by JD McPherson; and “Riot in Cell Block #9” by Wanda Jackson.
- 2 Not really; *The Running Man* was set between 2017 and 2019.