

Rosalia Namsai Engchuan
*COMMUNITIES FOREVER IN THE
MAKING*

How to Make a Painting from Memory evokes a multiperspectival mediation on the potentialities of community as a placeholder for home. Weaving together histories of female migration, collective rituals of moving houses in the Philippines as well as the metaphysical infrastructures of Thai spirit houses, the work approaches the question of home from nomadic and diasporic angles.

Growing up the artist recalls seeing a particular painting in every Filipino household. A depiction of the bayanihan, a group of men carrying a wooden nipa hut. As so often, history is captured in fragments. In popular renditions of the bayanihan women remain off-screen and out of frame, even though during the actual ritual they are taking care of the communal festive gathering after the act of moving the house. To counter this tendency, the artist gives screen space to an assemblage of female storytellers.

Bayanihan literally translates to ‘being in community’. Bayan can refer to any kind of community, a town or a nation. The moving of houses when their prior location becomes unlivable, often because of floods or landslides, has become the most popular image but in vernacular practice, bayanihan can also mean helping neighbors on the rice field or with weddings and funerals. Bayanihan is a way of organizing living and being together. It does not run on direct financial exchange and instead, reciprocity and trust act as processual currencies of communities in the making. Resorting to the community for tasks that are bigger than an individual can mount is a human default. Only recently such interactions have been organized under the rationale of capitalist transactionalism. Bayanihan, like so many other practices of collectivity, makes sense from the ontological assumption of interdependency, of always already relational beings.

It is often advertised as the epitome of Filipino culture but the communal spirit of bayanihan precedes and moves beyond the nation state. Under different names, similar practices of mutual support can be found in other places. In Indonesia for example, people speak of gotong royong (lifting something up together) when supporting neighbors in need. In the Philippines, the mobile architectures of the nipa huts were spaces of

anti-colonial organizing, breeding places of independence that did not desire a nationalist dictatorship — a nation ascribed from above — as its ultimate end-goal. But history did not go this way and post Spanish and American colonialism the many potential becomings of community were narrowed down to fit the template of the modern nation state. Bayanihan, initially a horizontal practice, experienced vertical intervention. In its re-made version bayanihan became a placeholder for the idealized and romanticized selfless rural community, a template for the nation at large. In the wake of postcolonial nationalism many supposedly indigenous traditions were hijacked by modern nation builders and their political agendas. In Indonesia, the notion of gotong royong was declared foundational to the new nation by its first president Sukarno. Murals and paintings of the bayanihan became nation making tools, to popularize and mediatize the bayanihan into the imagination of Filipinos. The image signifies something to identify with as a national citizen, it acts as an invocation. And over time, the imagined selfless and self-sustaining community has become a cynical but unavoidable building block of modern nations unable to keep up with their promises of better lives.

The modern independent nation replaced colonial regimes in many places. Only superficially antagonistic, nationalism is a western invented concept and obscures the continuation of the same colonial grammars of centralization, erasure of indigenous thought, epistemicide and extractive neoliberal capitalism. An uncritical romanticization of bayanihan and similar grassroots mutual support systems obscures these other stories, histories of violent nation making as well as the realities of living with an absent state in the face of the multiple and interrelated disasters caused by the complex problem clusters of so called modernity. Environmental degradation, social inequality and political power games make people leave in search of new homes, forming diasporas all over the world.

In *How to Make a Painting from Memory*, diasporic beings who have left Thailand for a new home in Germany share the screen with a disembodied caring presence and one of the last teak spirit house makers in Thailand. They appear in explicitly artificial interview

situations, acknowledging the violence of representation that comes with the creation of spaces for underrepresented voices. The line between good intentions and the exploitative extraction of stories remains thin and the obviousness of the staging here makes it an explicit line.

Like so many, some of the women have left Thailand from the Northeast, a region often called Isan. A name that local progressive artists and activists reject because it was imposed by the center to signify a relationship of dependency. Geographically bordering the Mekong, the area shares more relations with neighboring Laos but was gradually integrated into the Thai nation in the making under crypto-colonialism. In more than one way, the history of this region is also the history of Thai female migration to Germany. Mega-dam projects during the early phases of centralized development left farmers in the region without land making it difficult to maintain a home. For reasons, political and historical more than natural, the region is today the poorest and driest in Thailand. The temporary home making of US soldiers during the American War in Vietnam and the dawn of mass tourism to Thailand gave birth to international sex tourism. The tourist marketing image of the Thai Woman as exotic and submissive beauty carved the paths for transnational marriage migration, some of these paths led to Germany.

The diasporic situation upsets any easy definition of home. Growing up in Canada and moving to Germany later in life, for the artist, like the women coming to Berlin from Thailand, the notion of home was always more elusive than given, more a question than something tangible. Arriving in Germany, the women did not take much with them. When drawing the houses they grew up in, they tap into memories of a past left behind 'in a village in Isan' of 'a big family' and 'a house with no walls'.

The potentiality of home in a new place has to transcend material localities and fixations. The women on screen were well aware of this. The Thai Park evokes memories of meeting other Thais, 'feeling like home' and happiness. In the 90s Thai Park used to be a picnic gathering of Thai German families. In its early days it was about being together as a community, 'it was about sharing rather than selling.' It was the most precious thing — built organically by and for the community. The function it performed was creating and holding space for a collective diasporic home.

Understanding this is important to see the violence of the most recent state interventions. 'Now everything changes', the women tell us. In its quest for order the modern bureaucratic state was unwilling to grasp an intentional ecosystem, a model of collective organizing

that grew organically among the women for decades. Their ways of coming together were sensitive to the weather, to sunshine and rain, adaptable to the specific needs of individuals as human beings and rooted in relationships of trust. Like the bayanihan and so many other horizontal initiatives of collaboration, the Thai Park has been vertically hijacked and distorted under the neoliberal project of marketing Berlin as a multicultural and exotic tourism destination. Thai Park is now 'official', a commercial market with too many rules and regulations, a brute distortion of what the Thai Park constitutes to the women who build it, even pushing out its weakest members. The original function of the market, diasporic home making, is violently replaced and human beings in search of home are turned into service providers in an extractivist commercial system solely geared towards the benefit and convenience of the consuming visitor in search for exotic authenticity in the form of Thai food. The desire for and need of home making away from home is not legible to the German bureaucracies with their delusional ideality of conditional integration. Rather than reciprocating the over-praised hospitality they experience on their holiday trips to the 'Land of Smiles', at home they turn out to be anything but welcoming hosts.

From one of the last practicing teak spirit house makers in Thailand we learn about urban development in Bangkok and its effect on traditional industries and her family business. Thai teak forests have almost completely disappeared since the 1950s because of illegal logging. Histories are always and already related, even if these relations are hard to trace. One of the women on screen recalls moving because her village was flooded. Floods caused by deforestation become constitutive actants in migration trajectories.

In Thailand, spirit houses are built for the protective spirits of a place. There are numerous iterations of spirit houses in contemporary Thailand and they vary regionally. An amalgamation of Hindu, animist and Theravada Buddhist ontologies, they constitute a phenomenon that is difficult to grasp with modern brains wired on Enlightenment beliefs in neoliberal individualism, the power of the market and domination of nature. Spirit houses are nodes in larger metaphysical and ceremonial infrastructures that desire harmonious co-existence with the more-than-human. At the core lies a sensibility and a promise to care for something other than oneself, an acknowledgement of interdependency. If the significance of spirit houses as well as home in Thailand is locally situated in all those relations. How can it translate to diasporic situations, where land is left behind and relatives are far away?

The house sculptures are an artistic proposal that

gestures in this direction. In conversation with the women the artist embarks on a collective process that desires reparation in the face of all the homes lost, both in Thailand and in Germany, in a series of translations, conversations, sketches turned into architectural drawings, 3d rendered sculptures, adorned with gold leaves. The houses remain symbolic, the task was not to recreate what was lost. What remains is a future oriented gesture forming new collectivities and new homes — elsewhere and otherwise. Communities, forever in the making.

Rosalia Namsai Engchuan is an artist and researcher whose practice builds on collaborative encounters as well as decolonial, multispecies, and queer theory. She has written widely for art and academic publications on Asian femininities, contemporary art, and epistemic violence and lectured internationally at Cornell University, Harvard University, HKB Fine Arts, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and Sandberg Institute.

Her PhD at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and Friedrich-Alexander University centers on decolonial epistemologies. In collaboration with knowledge holders outside of modern scientific and state health infrastructures, her ongoing intuitive research is invested in the imperatives, promises and desires of decolonial healing practices. Rosalia curates screenings and dialogical encounters with un.thai.tled and the Forest Curriculum and was the 2021 Goethe-Institut fellow at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin.