

For Te Tuhi's Project Wall, Charles Buenconsejo presents a large mural of images taken between 2016 and 2020. Each picture provides a window into his family's everyday experience as recent Filipino migrants to Aotearoa New Zealand.

*2016 – 2020* is a visual diary which represents a new form of timeline in Buenconsejo's journey: a process of self-transformation through the decolonisation of his mind and gut bacteria, in this unfamiliar territory of Aotearoa.

Taking photos to project our lives on social media has become analogous to breathing. In pursuit of convenience and social validation, we have sacrificed elements of our relationship to the physical sphere, our communal and personal lives, and our capacity to engage with the natural environment.

After four years away from the Philippines, Buenconsejo is practicing forms of regeneration, connecting with allies in his new habitat. This may be likened to the revitalisation of soil, a slow process of deep transformation.

2016 – 2020

Living in the Philippines before 2016 felt relatively peaceful, a different time, in which most of the people I knew were focused on global clothing brands, #selfies, 'likes' and the potential of corporate sponsorship.

In 2014 *Time* magazine declared that Makati city should not only be known as the financial capital of the Philippines, but also boast the title, 'Selfie Capital of the World'. It was a period in which everyone I knew – friends, families, neighbours, schoolmates – had migrated to social media. This is when I started to become sceptical of internet culture.

Philippine society had become homogenous: everything was about the projection and validation of the self on social media. Taking photos, location tagging, hashtags; recording every action and reporting on our lives, all in the ephemeral peek-a-boo universe of Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter. Everyone was becoming a tourist, in our own and other people's projected [un]realities. Digital life had become synonymous with breathing, eating, being.

But at that time digital life – in social networks and mainstream media – was not yet flooded with the issues that now compete for our attention. These include the propagation of 'fake news'; extrajudicial killings of drug addicts, farmers, indigenous communities, environmental activists and

journalists; human rights' violations; the war on drugs; the COVID-19 pandemic, #junkterrorlaw, #freemasstesting and #oustdutertenow.

Social media has become the arena for political propaganda, and back home in the Philippines, the weaponising of this arena has given rise to the fascist regime under 'Dutertopia'. Rodrigo Duterte's presidential campaign manufactured internet bots and paid trolls to construct and spread fake news, to manipulate people's beliefs and emotions by exploiting the algorithms that power social media.

In a country that suffers severe social injustices and extreme wealth inequality, created by the corruption of both public and private institutions, the people have consistently been deprived of the radical political change they desire. This made fertile soil for a heavy handed populist tyrant, who mobilised fear, uncertainty and doubt. An army of 'Dutertard' trolls destroyed the fabric of Philippine society.

Our gut bacteria sensed that our country was heading on a dystopian path. In July 2016 my wife and I were forced to become nomads. We managed to escape Dutertopia just before he was elected to power.

My last solo exhibition in the Philippines, in 2016, was entitled *Name, Kind, Application, Date Last Opened, Date Added, Date Modified, Date Created, Size, Tags* – the list of categories used to arrange the files on one's computer. The endlessness of this show's title is a playful jab at the impossible volume of information accumulated in the attention and projection economy.

It was a sentimental farewell show in which I decided to print all of the files archived on my hard drives, starting from 2003 (when I started taking photographs and first had access to a personal computer), until 2016 (when my wife and I migrated from the Philippines to Aotearoa New Zealand). These files comprised thousands of personal and commercial photos, web images, documents, emails and internet cookies.

My brother, a software engineer, helped me to develop a computer application that automated, collected, and arranged these images based on the date they were taken and created. What resulted was an enormous scroll titled *2003 – 2016*, a visual diary of thumbnails which in aggregate resembled pixels. A timeline of my pre-migration existence hung from the ceiling and spread across the floor of the gallery space.

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In Aotearoa New Zealand life became a blank canvas, an accumulation of fresh data as we immersed ourselves in our new environment. This canvas slowly filled as time moved forward. I continued to accumulate and record thousands of images on hard drives, preserving the digital traces of our experiences. The images that populate this mural, taken between 2016 and 2020, represent every moment since we stepped foot on this whenua.

Many significant events have occurred during this time. Initially I was dealing with the internal and external chaos brought about by the displacement and disconnection from family and community that accompanies migration, in conjunction with the difficulty of finding a home and employment in a foreign land. However this mural also reveals the journey of self-transformation which emerged as we adapted to survive in this unfamiliar territory. Repeating the process of my brother's app with these new images illustrates that as new roots grew, my mind and gut started a process of decolonisation.

When we found our current home we were introduced to the idea of growing our food rather than grass on our front lawn. This could be seen as the antithesis of the aspiration of progress, but with my hands in the dirt, I was immediately transported back to my pre-internet provincial life in the Philippines. When I removed the lens of modernity, I was left with the community of life: friends, seeds, birds, bees, worms, microbes, fungi, clouds, water, the sun – in collaboration. It reminded me that this is what constitutes true value and meaning in life. Walking into the future, I was rediscovering my past. I learnt to wash my hands by building soil, and the dirtier my hands got the more my community grew: in my yard, in my neighbourhood, and eventually, as a full-time volunteer in the m<sup>ā</sup>ra at Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae.

This work – paradoxically, generated digitally and presented as a communal selfie – has revealed that regenerating the culture of abundance is an antidote to hyper-individualistic modernity and selfie culture. And the culture of abundance reveals itself as a radical political transformation and a viable alternative to the tyranny of convenience and the populism offered through the internet and by Duterte, Modi, Bolsonaro, Johnson, Putin and Trump.

– Charles Buenconsejo

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