

# Off Site/Out of Sight: Grassroots Pulse-taking and Tactical Negotiations in a non-place

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Back to Square 1 independent art platform/University of the Philippines

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"The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."

Marc Auge

You would think that territorial claims over a dumpsite would be ludicrous, but clearly, this was not the case in the four-hectare area we conjured as a virtual 'free zone' for the project Off Site/Out of Sight: site-specific installations and community workshops at the University of the Philippines (UP) materials recovery facility where we hoped to have everything up and running by February 2015. Literally surrounded by thousands of informal settlers squeezed into shanties concealed by foliage and rundown fencing, this dumpsite, once a national equine farm then recycling post was a site that we thought would be symbolic and workable. Yet, we had not even been a week into the preliminary attempt to get the project team familiarized with community members and their precarious daily living conditions, when we were quickly disabused of the notion that such a concealed receptacle of yard waste could pass off as that anachronistic non-place in French anthropologist Marc Augé's imagination.

Within that logic, Auge had ascribed non-places as locales of ambiguity and indetermination borne of over- or super-modernity<sup>i</sup>--places that were constantly being emptied of meaning, specifically of notions of identity and subjectivity. Clearly, such tell-tale elements of anonymity and being nowhere in a somewhere were patent in this former stud farm turned recycling station, but the mounting stakes on the nominally fenced-off site also marked it as clearly charged in all its dystopic slop and muck. Daunted but not beaten down, we stuck to our artistic director-curator's intuitive impulse and decided on keeping the core activities of Off Site/Out of Sight in this nowhere zone.

That this former stud farm was no longer on the mind map of members of the academic community for decades was telling in itself. Its disuse, re-use, and sheer decrepit state logically erased it from the narratives of a storied and still much visited campus, once proudly touted for its short-lived Diliman commune that bravely fended off martial law police forces from breaking past the makeshift barricades of school desks, blackboards, and other classroom detritus. By the time two President Aquinos had come after Marcos, UP had, over the decades taken an increasingly more mainstream track. Though the vaunted intrepidity of the school clings to it so tenaciously that not a few graduating high school students today still get forbidden from even taking its entrance exams lest they enter into its rolls and turn red and head for the mountains, abandoning college altogether, UP's activist past is really a shadow of its former self. That well worn cliché of both students and teachers forsaking all for a mass cause dates back to Marcos's strongman rule. Since then, UP education has eased into a no longer so subtle mode of privatization where large parcels of campus land are leased to corporate interests such as the Ayala real estate conglomerate bent on gentrifying what used to be a no-nonsense neighborhood. And so while the very first Philippine President Manuel Quezon had actually envisioned Quezon City (QC) as a laborers' village where property values would never get too high that these could chase out the middle class, the string of city-hall approved demolitions and requisite resettlements elsewhere is a last song syndrome refrain now. Palpably, UP's populist sympathies have been wagered in this way since the political tides (a.k.a. state budgetary will) definitively turned against it in the mid 1980s, with lawmakers increasingly adamant about refusing

subsidy raises on the grounds of campus landholdings being adequate enough to generate rental income instead.

It is in this context that approximately 70,000 informal settlers (half of which by the 2010 census were still working as UP employees) live under threat of being forced from their homes, however tucked away they may be in the less visible environs of the campus. The appetite for real estate and leveling up to a more conspicuously lucrative commercial tenancy scheme has become so voracious that even the greasy spoon-student budget eateries have not been spared.

Poignantly, Auge describes the paralyzing predicament of the non-place as a space where one “sees everything but (where one) can do nothing”, and this, to our mind presented one of the major challenges behind Off Site/Out of Sight that seemed, at its inception, to overreach in its attempt at opening up a space for sociality, whereas relationships on the ground were anything but convivial.

### A Place Confounded in Contending Values

As co-curator, the first order of the day to my mind was literally to take our own blinders off. No one is ever far from abject poverty in the Philippines, but this was different because it was the poverty of opportunity, the poverty of secure shelter, the poverty of access to basic taken-for-granted electricity and flowing water right in our backyard which confronted us. This was not some distant Smokey Mountain or Payatas landfill. Our project team of artists, curators, and cultural workers ventured into campus-based ragtag housing clusters called Daang Tubo (literally, sewer pipe route), Daang Malinis (ironically, clean path), Krus na Ligas (possibly named after a crossing marked by a ligas tree), CP Garcia (named after a former Philippine President), the generically named Villages A, B, and C, and the also little known urban forest called the Arboretum. Despite trying to exert due diligence by having community organizers introduce our presence and intentions, our venturing into these communities still generated much suspicion. Where were we the prelude to a demolition team coming in? Were our research questions and overtures anything different from what less benign Community Affairs personnel laid on them before? Were we just there for the research, the badge of social consciousness, then like everybody else, just as ready to pack up and move to another assignment?

Off Site/Out of Sight was woven into a larger project called the Bakawan (mangrove) Festival, an avowedly art/environmental platform that had, at its core organizing level, an ambition to pitch art and social change in a spectacular manner. Clearly, by deciding to move away from the possibilities of press pull presented by commissioning public art around more visible and easy to navigate sites on campus, the curatorial logic behind Off Site/Out of Sight was already at odds with what Bakawan had seemed to want to do by way of attention-grabbing. Nevertheless, the festival team humored, or perhaps tolerated our waywardness and thus we launched amidst the deviance--this seemingly out of place idea of activating a space which we thought no one else would be interested in.

Off Site/Out of Sight was to be done in what seemed was a site of unmoorings (a place that couldn't quite be figured out--once a national equine farm, now a hybrid of recycling and landfilling). It was amidst this transitory existence of both people and purpose—where bodies were literally passing through to get home, dumping through to get what passed off as home clean where we would set up workshops and site-specific work largely made of what was on site. It was the picture of itinerancy we felt matched the relationship of those making up the university, and those who were trying to establish some modicum of abode within it. Going by this curatorial logic, we thought of the stud farm as a site where both notions of art and place could be entangled in. As we found it, it was a place which allowed the university to get on with its business, of asserting itself as institution of higher learning

leading the charge to social change even if this was not happening as it should or might have in its own backyard. The project hypothesis was that this shared illusion of magnanimous existence could only persist if the waste (of people and tasks) could be swept away or tucked into a non-place that was daily being forgotten.

Ironically, by framing this non-place's locus of socio-physical conditions within Auge's discussion of super or over-modernity producing the excess and repeated confrontations of charged meanings in such sites, we also had to make peace with the foregone conclusion that it was almost wholly impossible to un-'make' this place. It had been clear from the onset that the clock was ticking on us. Nevertheless, the project was precisely about occasioning pauses or enabling cessation in the conflict to arrest the creative, affective, and social stupor that the battling for territory was imposing on all those who imagined it was only right that they were there. Thus for that fleeting time, those increasingly imperiled weeks of February through the trickles of workshops that Off Site/Out of Sight was last allowed to carry out in June 2015, access to spaces for art-making (inkers, deckers, musicians, writers, installation artists) and a whole range of non-formal art education (community-mapping, storytelling, bead-making, kite-making, drawing, toy-making) alongside a children's honesty library and a bike trail came to pass. On a given weekend, Off Site/Out of Sight would have at least a hundred participants coming in to either take part in the workshops or simply relish having free access to open areas that were previously off-limits.

In conjuring the former stud farm as a non-place, we further bring up Auge's notion of this particular non-anthropological site as one that had a "lack of characterization" and its being a "non-symbolized surface"<sup>ii</sup>. This site's seeming barrenness as if it were ever truly empty of occupants and interest made it a logical nexus. The ambition was of course to dislodge the idea that no human settlements were present, and secondly, asserting that stake was not merely about repositioning or breaking down waste, but also of positioning between privileged and less privileged occupiers: the university on one hand, and informal settlers made invisible in official narratives, on the other hand. Auge, in referencing Michel de Certeau's speaking of place being constituted by the writing of narrative<sup>iii</sup> appears to affirm this casting, or casting away as it were.

Amidst Back to Square 1's undertaking Off Site/Out of Sight's installations and workshops, including overseeing the more mundane project details such as daily tidying up, attempting to referee between competing needs of artists, visitors, materials recovery facility staff, even monitoring a weeklong fire in one of the garbage piles near the installations at the stables, it ought be said that there were both earnestly gratifying and pensive moments. There were truly encouraging days when the children would be especially responsive to artist-volunteers, pouring over the honesty library finds, even avidly putting together a new installation in a still vacant horse stable. But there were also instances of object breakage, vandalism, rising gang presence, skating accidents, as well as troublingly rough skirmishes between children and teens from opposed housing clusters. Vivid episodes straight out of F. Landa Jocano's ***Slum as a Way of Life*** and Ricardo Abad's ***Squatting and Scavenging in Smokey Mountain*** came to mind at these junctures. The settlers' nowhere status continues to be made emphatic in their not being granted access to legal water and electrical connections. We contended with the fact for instance that some of the children looked at the stud farm as if it were one big toilet since they could not have access to one back home which was just a few meters away. Given status quo pronouncements from university higher-ups, no building projects in the settler homesites could exceed certain heights, certain widths, certain degrees of permanence of building materials. The settlers' ironic state of being forced into a perennial mobility (because of non-'ownership' of land' but at the same time being kept from being socially mobile, of being able to extract themselves from homelessness and marginal means of income, literally keeping them from producing a new place for themselves) translates in patent paralysis.

Auge, in his seminal text does minimally touch on how politics and structural obstacles come into play but stops at pointing to how these figure in the inorganic or more pointedly, cosmetic/made-up mode of the non-place or "out of place". At least in this particular text, he does not go on to take on why this non-organic nature operates. In the specific case of the stud farm turned materials recovery facility, we might hazard that this non-living aspect has to do with how territorialities play out, essentially pushing the site and the people who 'occupy' it into the inevitable throes of death.

There are many pressing and remaining questions: How intricately did we want to get entangled in the au curreant planning language of place-making, benign green architecture, conviviality in community work, etc. that was fuelling at least some parts of the university's master plan for development? How instrumentalized were we willing to get in regard to placating community resentment over UP's still ominously perceived landlord posture?

By way of a quick epilogue, Back to Square 1, the independent art initiative behind Off Site/Out of Sight had by August 2015, already lodged and was waiting for action on its proposal to the UP Diliman administration for a longer-running, if not categorically institutionally supported re-launching of Off Site/Out of Sight phase two, this time hopefully with even more decidedly participative engagement with settler community members and academe. The hope is that we could attempt broader based options intended to get both faculty and students to embark on what still gets called extension or outreach in these neighborhoods that are a jeepney ride away from the academic buildings. Post-Off Site/Out of Sight phase 1 evaluation suggests that more directed programming also needs to be evolved through further immersion with informal settler community adults and teen-agers as only pre high-school age children were responding previously to our posing art as our primary engagement platform. The genuine challenge is to more intricately weave art into the work of space activation, and we must do this specifically in ways that make sense in the grit and mire of daily negotiating these non-places of non-living.

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<sup>i</sup> Auge, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso 2 edition, 2009. Here Auge posits the non-place as "a space which can not be defined as relational, or historical, or a space concerned with identity". Elsewhere he refers to these as transit points and temporary abodes which operate in the polarities of the luxurious and inhuman including squats and shantytowns threatened with demolition, pp 77-78.

<sup>ii</sup> Auge, 82.

<sup>iii</sup> Auge, 84.