



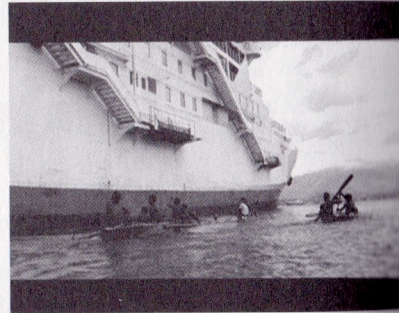
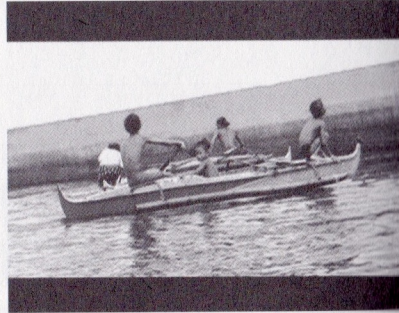
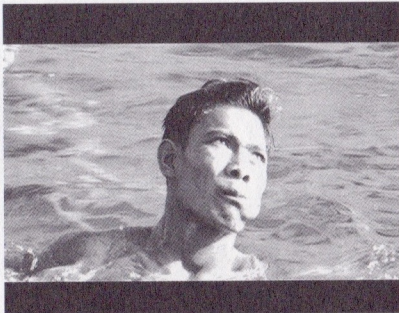
TENGAL

LILIBETH CUENCA RASMUSSEN

[gender](#) / [identity](#) / [anthropology](#) / [documentary](#) / [humor](#)

Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen is a half-Dutch, half-Filipino artist who grew up in Manila and moved to Denmark when she was 8. She works primarily with video and performance art. With consummate style and an almost voracious curiosity, she navigates the interspaces between different kinds of realities and extremes. Between the perfect staging of music videos and the raw reality of documentaries. Between personal confessionals and political commitment. Taking her Danish-Filipino background as a point of departure, Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen displays a keenly honed sensitivity, almost like that of an anthropologist, to the narratives that exist in and between a place of birth and home country. She gathers, adapts, and makes these narratives universal in her both critical and humorous approach to issues such as identity, gender, and social relations.

The Artist Song / Photo: Lasse Bak Mejlvang



House of Hope (Bajuas) / video stills / 2007 / Images courtesy of the artist

Let's start at the beginning... what are your earliest memories of the Philippines?

The different smells. The smell of sampaguita* – that was one of my first memories of the Philippines. Or it could be the gutter, the good smells, the bad smells...these are among my first memories. And when I came back 13 years later, after I moved to Denmark, every time I recognized a smell, I burst out into tears. It was recalling a memory, a longing that I had suppressed for many years. The different smells that were triggered within my body made me take notice how strong a feeling of a scent can be. It made me realize how powerful the organ (nose) is, it can really open up many things psychologically – because the sense of smell is beyond language, it is wordless; it is very attached to emotion and, obviously, memory somehow. I think it sounds freaky but it was such a wild experience, or maybe I'm just built like that – I have a strong sense of smell.

**Jasminum sambac is a species of jasmine native to South and Southeast Asia. The flowers are also used for perfumes and for making tea. It is the national flower of the Philippines, where it is known as sampaguita.*

How did you perceive school in Denmark?

I went to school in the Philippines from when I was 5 until I was 8. In the Philippines, the level was much higher because you start school earlier compared to Denmark. The children in Denmark start school at age 7 or 8. We have a very different way of looking at children: the children have to be children for as long as possible, that's the attitude here. When I first arrived to Denmark, they put me in school a week after, and I couldn't understand anything. It wasn't just about not being able to understand the language, but the level of education was so low. They didn't have science or religion classes – they didn't know what being Catholic was all about (I was still a Catholic back then), and the kids at school were like: what is that? I really felt I knew more and had more knowledge than the kids of my age, but I couldn't speak their language. So that was my education, to learn the language, to learn the culture, it wasn't about the level of skill in science or math really. I felt this also when looking at Liva, my daughter, in her first years of school. It wasn't about learning a subject, it was all about fitting into a group, about properly fitting in in a society, a culture, the whole point had become to have this feeling of being schooled, to have a feeling of a certain level of education.

We could identify two forms of mimesis in your work...One is the act of imitating but revealing the self, in the way you stereotype gender culture, for example, in the way you celebrate macho culture in your work. For example Cock Fight, or the way you exoticise male-female stereotypes in your works Afghan Hound and Absolute Exotic, or the way you imitate and remix some well-known performance art canons in art history by doing a tribute performance series to your favorite performance art works. And the second form is more in line with Micheal Taussig's understanding of mimesis, wherein the way you examine people from one culture adopt another's nature and culture at the same time as distancing yourself from it, as seen in Seeing Pillar, Distorted Heart...

There is an uncomplicated quality in stereotyping which I love. I love to use it, it provokes and triggers, because it is politically incorrect, even though stereotyping is a language made in order to decode cultures easily...And regarding dualism - being part of something and pushing it away even though you are still part of it - is part of the human nature, this ambiguity is normal and interesting because it is contradictory. Being alive is contradictory. One day everything is awesome, the next day can be suicidal. The challenge is to be able to contain both situations and feelings, to be neither one nor the other.

It can be almost impossible for an artist with any contemporary art-world orientation to do projects with small communities without a knee-jerk negative response from critical studies academics, that you're somehow using people for your own needs, that there's something "colonialist" or patronizing about working with everyday folks. People suspect cynicism. Do you run into this kind of criticism?

Yes I do, I listen to it. I think when you bring out issues like this - telling a story about a people on the lower level of hierarchy in society, the upper hierarchy gets intrigued because of their bad consciousness. When I made the story about the Bajau they were so happy that I was interested in them. When I made a story about the Danish biker women they all showed up for the opening and they were so proud about being portrayed. You see, I am not making up a story, it is a real story put into an art world frame. It is indeed ambiguous - but how can you make a story about the Bajau without stereotyping at all, it is a common code and an entrance to their stories and if you take your time and watch, you will see the layers in the story. It is not about patronizing.

Why did you choose the Bajau's as your subject?

The choice was personal. I had a memory from when I was child, when we were visiting relatives in the province and we took a boat. I had a memory of these children in a small boat and I was on a big boat and people were throwing coins at them. I discovered they were not just children, they were tiny people. I was six years old, oh my god, and they were treated like animals. I began wondering who they were. Why are they diving into water like monkeys? For me it was like a circus. This memory was stuck in my head. Almost all the films I made in the Philippines were like images from my childhood memories. Later, I returned to the Philippines, no longer as a child but as an artist who was taught in the western school of thought. I came to trace an image from my childhood. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at first, I think I wanted to write about them. I knew from the beginning it was going to be a sort of a fairy tale...but poetry. They were just like rats in the sea, nobody noticed them. I didn't know their stories, I came there to find them and then tell them. It's not about patronizing or putting people down, it's actually the very opposite of that for me. It's giving them a place, giving them a space. I was traveling from Europe to go there, film them and live with them in their garbage pit, and then placing this footage in a museum in Europe. I felt like I gave them a space. They appreciated my interest in their lives because no one else was interested. I was hanging out with them for a while and I felt like an alien.

**The Bajau are an indigenous ethnic group of Maritime Southeast Asia. The Bajau continue to live a seaborne lifestyle, making use of small wooden sailing vessels. They are sometimes also referred to as sea gypsies.*

Do you think art can find a way to showcase people who are underappreciated and unknown using the museum context without patronizing or mocking other groups on your account?

Well, I don't know - you cannot measure if art can make a difference, how do you measure that? For me it makes a difference - if you can change 5 people's way of thinking per year through your art you're already achieving something. If I can change, say, a businessman's or a politician's way of seeing these problems with the Bajaus, I think I already made a difference. I can only answer for myself. Art is not about telling you everything but it is about trying to open up your mind and make you look at things in a new way. The mainstream media are not doing that, they are only telling you a part of the story, you never hear about it in detail, they are only giving you highlights. The same goes for art, but art can help you open your mind to think about these situations in a different way. I think that's the good thing about art. If I didn't think like that I couldn't do the works with what I'm doing, because I see myself as an anthropologist somehow or as a mouthpiece, and I do work on these issues as a mouthpiece for people who don't have a voice in a society.

Let's talk about your use of pre-existing material. How do you find an image, music, or a piece of text, and how do you take ownership of it or transform it for use in your work? For example, your video piece *Hollywood*, in which you took the lyrics of Marilyn Manson's *Anti-christ Superstar* and made a music video using footage of people being crucified during the holy week in the Philippines, or say in *Shout and Afghan Hound*.

It's tricky to use existing material, because you can never completely leave behind what that material was. Even if you alter it, without completely and literally destroying it at every level, you cannot remove its connection to its past. Material produced for its own purposes has an undeniable power. Although I see your point, I think existing material still has many layers, and if you as an artist find this angle within the material or topic, you make it yours with your signature.

For example in the work *Afghan Hound* - if you read the performance lyrics - I have already put so much of my language into it, that you can even forget the original topic. I act out my topics -- that is what my performance is about.

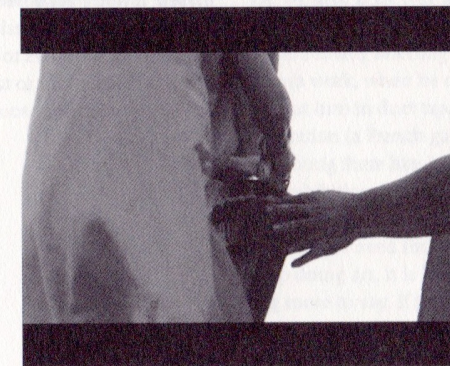
*Your Western eyes
Judging! Preaching! About Human Rights
You choose which conflicts you want to see
Your sympathy and aid are never for free*

*Your leaders pay me to dictate
You and I have agreed on this trade
To access cheap labour, oil and petrol
Keeping us in debt and under your control*

*It's happy hour, double up
I will never leave the power, huh!
It's happy hour, double up
I will never leave the power, huh!*

*Ideas of liberty could land me in jail
My ideologies are fully for sale
My political choice - support the authority
Or wind up as a refugee*

Excerpts from the lyrics of "Afghan Hound"



Hollywood / video stills / 2007 / Images courtesy of the artist

Well, one thing I've noticed is that you create a historical as well as a socio-political setting for seemingly all your work. Is this something that you feel is necessary only as it applies to you and your work, or do you feel that all art is political in nature?

My art is partly about saying things you do not say or choose not to see. I see myself as a mouthpiece for people who don't have a voice in society and that already becomes political. The topics I work with are things I find important to speak about. I follow debates about what troubles a society. The best thing about Denmark is the freedom of speech. I treasure this open dialogue in public debate in this country. And I do not take this for granted, I try to use it in my art. My interest lies in the individual as a part of humanity - not in politics and power structures; they are part of it, but I want to reach beyond this masquerade.

Do you see the political itself as a masquerade?

Yes...just like art.

There seems to be an internal dynamism or essential instability to your work that compels you to employ ever-larger frames of reference, leading from objects to site-specific installations and from exhibitions to institutions and then to even larger and political and social frames such as city and country. In light of that instability or expansiveness, I'd be particularly interested to turn to where it all began - the very first piece you made that you consider to be part of your mature work.

My first works - the family works - are still works that are exhibited, are in demand and relevant. But this also took some time. I am somewhere else now, and then in another sense, I am not. The instability of a large and diverse repertoire is not the most strategic way to present one's self as an artist; but I always need to challenge myself; if not, I get bored with my own art. Sometimes this push led me to a new direction, other times to a wrong path. But this is a chance I try to take each time. I do not fancy repetitions too much.

It's important to have the history of art documented from an alternative viewpoint (I'm reacting to your work, "The Artist's Song"), actually from an insider point of view. How do you feel now that you've reached a certain level of artist stardom (being invited to the Venice Biennale for example.), does this success make it more or less ironic?

No. Venice just happened once, there are artists that always take part in the Venice biennale - e.g., Maurizio Cattelan, who is one of my favourites. In 2011, he made a remake of his piece installing stuffed doves all over the biennale venues. He repeated that again and I see it as a self-ironic comment on him being able to do the same piece twice. It is genius. I think The Artist's Song is relevant, regardless of your artistic level, because it's about artists being kind of greedy. It's a mixture of being greedy and not being satisfied. We don't feel that we have achieved enough even if we become successful - once you reach one goal, there is another goal. The figure in this work wants to make art history, she's placing herself in a museum and placing herself in a historical museum with important work.

So Who decides, what is art

Is it enough, like Manzoni, to cut a fart?

To common people, it can be hard to understand that making art, can be to crap in a can.

Ofeili's elephant dung on canvas.

because he is famous, it can even sell in Kansas.

Rirkrit cooks Thai and makes people happy.

But John Bok's style is to make it look crappy.

Art is great - it has no limitations

You can get by doing recitations.

Masturbating at an art exhibition

many did so... in a progression.

Selling paintings is a piece of cake.

If you wanna make money, that's what it takes.

Collectors and galleries want objects and goods.

and artists are human too. We all need foods.

Who is important depends on C.V.

or whether or not if you hit on T.V.

Bitterness, bitchiness and jealousy

Is he or she a better artist than me?

Excerpts from the lyrics of "The Artist Song"

...and the part where she sings "is he or she a better artist than me..."

I was actually referring to Maurizio Cattelan's work, when he crucified his gallerist. He put him in duct tape on the wall for an exhibition (a French gallerist in Paris) and he was hung there like Jesus Christ—that was his exhibition. It was his art dealer as well. Because an artist never stops doing art, it is an internal need for a way of existence. If I stop doing art, it is because I'll have nothing more to say. If I decide that I don't want to be an artist anymore, I hope I will do it because I'll have nothing to say. If I come to this point, and I will have nothing to say, then I will stop doing art.