

# Taking it on Faith: Inscribing the Un(der)written in the work of Varsha Nair and Raquel de Loyola

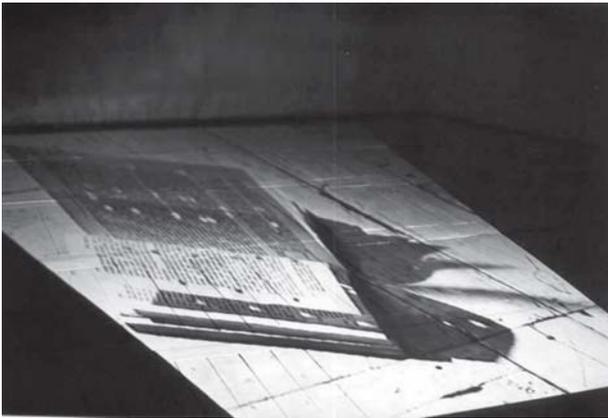
*Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez*

I began writing this in the midst of a news account streaming across the airwaves and the internet detailing how the latest cybersting operation of the human rights organization Terre des Hommes had both visibly and horrifyingly paid off. Posing as Sweetie, a CGI-generated a.k.a. 10-year-old Filipino girl, the group had created a cybertaunt which identified nearly 1,000 pedophiles' IP-addresses and turned these over to Interpol. This shortlist was drawn from a pool of 20,000 propositions to Sweetie from 71 countries over the 10-week gauntlet of its campaign. Meanwhile in the same week on cable, CNN's Christiane Amanpour interviewed the Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousafzai whose noisy insistence on the public education of Pakistani girls so angered the Taliban they lodged a bullet in her head a year before. With my background in journalism before I started writing art history, I am keenly aware these are just the stories that have got airplay, many others of equal relevance are not even getting close to this kind of attention, since they haven't gotten on the radar in the first place. As I am writing from a country that already has had two female heads of state, the contextual disparities are made all the

more incongruous, though not entirely incomprehensible, given what continues to stay unsaid and unaddressed nearby, here in the Philippines, and elsewhere. These two stories became the backdrop to my reckoning with two parallel projects of artists who are set apart as much in temperament as they are in ethnicities and even, in the biological phases of their lives that they find themselves living through presently.

## **Positional Edict**

Varsha Nair's *Laws of Manu* (man) makes utterly legible what has largely persisted as a matter of course in her paternal homeland, India. In her referencing of the *Manushastra* or *The Laws of Manu*, an ancient Indian text that plainly prescribes women's lesser "*nature*" across the social sphere, Nair has, over some fifteen years, physically and poetically summoned an antidote in and through her work which is both visceral and lyrical in tone. An earlier work, *Blemish* consisted of her metaphorically etching the text upon her own body, literally marking herself with punched out fragments from the book. Manifesting again as both ground and epidermal surface for a latter performance-installation



Varsha Nair *When Words Fell* (1998) (video performance)

*When Words Fell*, Nair then layered these words through the physical act of puncturing a reference to them. The action reiterated the disengaging and penetrable nature of this didactic literature, dislodging it from its purportedly normative order as a bound book, unbinding it and wilfully asserting a newly reconfigured meaning,

Nair, whose paternal ethnicity is rooted in India, presently lives and works in Bangkok. She puts the conundrum about her place in her country of origin which she explores in this way: ***‘The Laws of Manu have conditioned society into a way of thinking that runs very deeply.’***<sup>21</sup> And she continues, ***‘There is a big question today as to why when India is one country where goddess worship is still alive and kicking, are women so heinously brutalized in the rapes that have recently taken place (in fact this is not recent, such awful rape cases have taken place for a long time, mainly amongst the so-called “lower” caste/minorities, but they go unreported).’***<sup>22</sup>

Nair reveals how, in her mind, the psychic hold expressed in social codes carries the gravity of both history and spirituality. *The Laws of Manu* reinforces the basis for caste



Right: Varsha Nair *Trans Figure* series (detail) (2012-present)

Below: Varsha Nair *Reorder* series (detail) (2012-present). All Images, Courtesy of Artist.

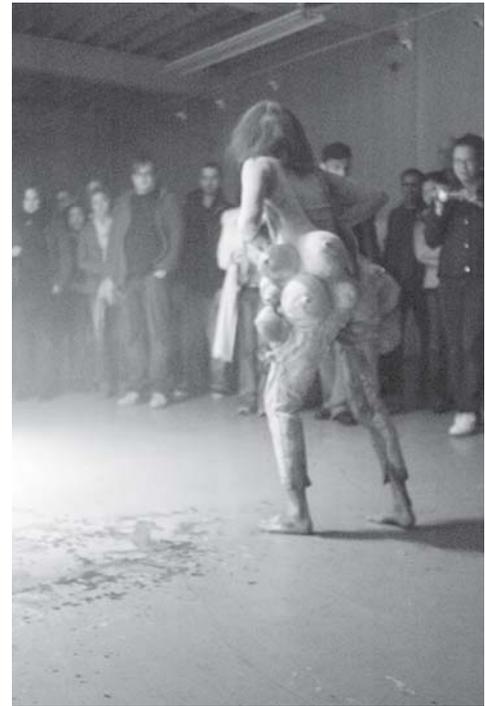


division and naturalises the taken-for-granted situation of women that has persisted into the twenty-first century. The artist’s tenuous citing of the code in her work over several years sensorially plays out how texts such as these have been impressed on the body of women, beginning in the 1998 live performance work, *Blemish*. Nair’s work on this subject has morphed from performance, video, installation to what could otherwise look like benign works on paper but which are ingrained with the insidious backstory of Nair’s fixation over picking apart literature through mindful interventions. Her work is a form of active remaking of the implications underlying these scripts. For her, women’s bodies weave in and out across time and space in her redrafting of their position.

Yet to say that lives get lived by the book these days easily makes one sound old hat, even old school in fact. The bottomless desire to strike out in some albeit arguable strain of difference is the youthful mantra bandied about by digital natives longing to brand themselves, and they are thus often disinclined to play by any rules handed down to them. In



**Raquel de Loyola *Mebuyan* performance (2007). Courtesy of Artist.**



this light, Nair's poetic re-rendering of text onto and unto a woman's body renders this flatly, and ultimately reductively one-dimensional exposing this restiveness even as it stands as quiet counterpoint to the more rambunctious, overtly provocative tracks taken by other artists taking on the narratives that hover around and constrict their life options.

Considering Nair's work interestingly highlights for me how virtual omissions in canonical texts also hail artists, instigating them to strike out and seek to unearth the rationale behind these silences which act to mute dissonant voices. So while Nair's preoccupation with texts' sacralising convention makes for a compelling study, there have also emerged over the past two decades an increasingly critical eye cast upon the ways in which recuperative history occasionally gives birth to unintended backlash. In the specific case for instance of the Filipino performance artist, Raquel de Loyola, we might discern this in how the woman's body, as the vaunted epitome of the spiritual becomes a backhanded pronouncement, a virtual sentencing to a codified life proscribed by conventions writ large in the civilizing channels of home, school, church. Given that many many other channels have opened up to pose alternate routes and such routes are constantly being redefined by the contours of the unwieldy structures of the internet and newer spheres for sociality, there is still much to be said about what continues to be spelled out in the very gendered but constantly contested spaces in which artists venture into.

De Loyola's taking on the *babaylan* (pre-colonial priestess/shaman) trope in her earliest performances has

invoked not just a pre-colonial but potentially postcolonial counterpoint which was pretty much off the books for much of the recent history during which my generation was growing up and getting schooled (namely, the 1970s and the 1980s). The physical reference to De Loyola's appearance in her most seminal work is to the Bagobo mythical figure, *Mebuyan* from whose multiple breasts stream sustenance, *ergo* a form of tribal survival extending to the underworld. In this day and age, this figure also stands as a metaphor for the still searching souls of the residually disempowered. What persists in mainstream education spaces, but hopefully is happening less and less, is that children still get prepped to emulate the docile, subservient archetypes, those deliberately removed from the groove of the recalcitrant *babaylan*. Seminally civilizing texts such as Presbitero D. Modesto de Castro's 1850s correspondences between the sisters, Urbana and Feliza, for instance revealed how women were taught to rear other women: how they reminded each other to be wary of backsliding into the barbarism (*aka* pre-colonial culture, eclipsed by Christianity), privileging submission to the technologies of the new civilisation. This was particularly the case for those who had made the journey from countryside to city: sister disciplined sister to toe the line, to literally think and act like an automaton, accomplish pragmatic tasks like studying, tidying up, praying, and demurring to teachers and other authority figures, all these

framed against the boding excesses of urbanity. Thus the larger civilizing and simultaneously historicizing project consisted of weaning the Philippine people away from the savagery of nature (creating in its place a sober regard for the body precisely because of its sordid uncleanness) and logically demonizing the *babaylan* for her primal, manic, if not lunatic and definitely stubbornly outsider status.

Without overstating the tug and pull between different generations, it bears noting how this behaviour proscribed two centuries ago in Urbana at Feliza continues to hold sway. People still give salutations to the elderly replete with demurring posture; use the same public codes of composure in speech, eating, washing, dress, posture. Women and younger people are still told today that we must take care not to come across as overbearingly learned. All this received knowledge is resolutely held up as appropriate for passing from one generation to the next and defines the “*proper*” way to behave.

De Loyola’s character in performance is a woman-as-flaneuse-seer and doubly nuanced by her reference to the historically iconoclastic heroine, Gregoria de Jesus/Oryang, the intrepid woman who dared bring her parents to task before local authorities. As a widow of the Katipunan leader Andres Bonifacio whose birth centenary this year thoroughly paled in comparison to Jose Rizal’s, the class affinities further heighten a sense of differentiation in her narrative. Drawing from Oryang’s poetic lamentation, De Loyola casts an anguished shadow of a figure carrying the weight of her kin’s burdens upon a body whose thrusting and spurting blood-like streams from her body suit’s many breasts suggest a spirit that refuses to be contained nor passively take on the silently suffering persona. Instead, Oryang as Mebuyan here sings with bombast, eyes piercing through the cloud of talcum and splash-stained lashes, her deeply sourced tone emanating from the gaunt figure’s gut makes an already looming presence even larger upon a bevy of attenuated senses.

This Mebuyan incarnation comes across as a striking contrast to the timid and repressed *religiosa* privileged by De Castro who appears to measure every gesture and utterance against the ominous strike of the clock hand metering ritualized demonstrations of servile acquiescence to propitiatory prayers, pushing one to scurry home to Angelus recitations at dusk and confessional recountings on Sundays. This performance stands in contrast to De Loyola’s current life as she has just recently become mother to baby Uma. In my last conversation with her, it was easy

enough to discern what was at the forefront of her thoughts as she moved into her last trimester of pregnancy. These were things like contemplating her child’s name along with perhaps other looming taxonomies that would impinge upon the new life growing within her. She and Nair have passed on to the next generation distinct messages about these different stages in women’s lives, even as they push hard against the framing of their always codified existences. Nair has recently been shuttling between Baroda and Bangkok to tend to her dying mother. And as we journey with her, we can make out the scenographic contours of other narratives emerging in this murky overlaying of scripts about artists’ lives – micro-stories creating keening landscapes beyond and closely related to the themes and life shifts playing into creatively mindful and embodied work.

**Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez is a writer and independent curator. She was a curatorial consultant of Lopez Museum (2005-2012) and is a member of the Advisory Board of Asia Art Archive. She teaches at the Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines and was a 2009 fellow of the USA National Endowment for the Arts, International Arts Journalism Institute in the Visual Arts.**

#### Notes

1. Email dated September 8, 2013 from Nair to the writer
2. Ibid