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## Paloma Polo and Radha D'Souza a conversation

When Paloma Polo and Radha D'Souza met in Manila during the summer of 2014 Paloma was working with the indigenous people from the province of Aurora in the Philippines from 2013. The indigenous people of Aurora were displaced from their ancestral lands to make way for a special economic zone for industries to produce exportable goods and services. Paloma's work as an artist impelled her to ask wider questions about the epistemologies that inform the work of artists. Do artists need an alternate knowledge base that is humane and socially transformative? This question drove Paloma to interact with other social and political movements and scholars who were engaged in development of knowledge for humane and transformative social change. The project culminated in a workshop in the Philippines attended by scholars from different disciplines, activists, writers, artists and indigenous community

leaders. Radha, a writer, academic, lawyer and social justice activist from India who works on resource conflicts over land and water, social movements, imperialism and colonialism, law, science, society and the conditions of the Third World was invited to the workshop. Paloma and Radha met in Philippines at the workshop for the first time. That meeting was the beginning of an enduring and collaborative relationship between the two women. Paloma visited Radha in London on 16 January 2015. There, on a grey London winter evening Paloma and Radha engaged in a lively conversation on a wide range of subjects. This interview is based on their conversations on that day.

What are we struggling for? Why are we unable to speak beyond our professional practices and immediate concerns? Have we lost our capacity to dream? What kind of knowledge do we need to build a just and humane society?

pp. 02, 04, 06, 08-09, 11, 13, 15

## Paloma Polo

### *A fleeting moment of dissidence becomes fossilised and lifeless after the moment has passed, 2014* set of 40 images

The series of images presented were derived from a collaborative research undertaken by Polo in dialogue with Naty Merindo, an 85-year-old Agta woman living in the Peninsula of San Ildefonso, Casiguran. The undertaking was done with the support and collaboration of Filipino botanist Ulysses Ferreras, an experienced and knowledgeable taxonomist of the Philippines.

Each plant presented is accompanied by its local name, as indicated by Naty Merindo, and the scientific name provided by Ulysses Ferreras.

Naty Merindo is the only indigenous healer living in the region, and the last one. Her extensive knowledge on medicinal plants, orally transmitted since ancestral times, has not been passed on to younger generations. The profit-oriented socialization of younger generations, compounded by the long-term discrimination experienced by this community, largely contributes to the suspension of this tradition.

Due to its practical necessity and applicability, medicinal knowledge is probably the last identifiable remnant of indigenous knowledge in this area. These communities cannot afford a visit or a treatment in a hospital.

Naty Merindo claims to know more than 200 medicinal plants. In the course of intermittent stays with her in the forest, Polo collected and photographed all

the medicinal plants the former could find. The uses of the plants and preparations were also noted down. Having collected more than 80 different medicinal plants, it became increasingly difficult to find more. The Agtas traditionally hunt, fish and gather different foods from the forest, but the devastation brought about by logging, environmental aggression and a so-called development project implemented by the national government has curtailed their ability to survive in Casiguran.

Specimens of each plant were collected and labelled according to the methodology indicated by Ulysses Ferreras. They are kept now in a herbarium in Manila and most of the plants have been identified. The several botanists and ethnopharmacologists consulted stated that a scientific validation of the plants' medicinal properties required verification from several informants and confirmation by other healers in the region.

With respect to all the material and data collected, it has only been possible to sort the plants taxonomically. Such nomenclature and classification do not inform in any meaningful way indigenous medicinal practices.

The title of this work is a line from the essay "What Can Activist Scholars Learn from Rumi?", Radha D'Souza. *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 64, Number 1, January 2014, pp. 1-24.

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## Nicoletta Daldanise poema

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## Paloma Polo and Radha D'Souza: a conversation

### TIME AND PLACE

**Paloma Polo:** In your article “The Rights Conundrum,”<sup>1</sup> you analyse the connection between the reality of displacement and the discourse of rights. You explain how the rights discourse is a necessary pre-condition and the inevitable outcome of displacement. So this is the first question. According to you, modernism transformed place, which is the condition for all existent things, into possession and property, into something measurable that became tradable and hence could be compensated for. In relation to this, could we argue that a Newtonian conception of time and space (understood as computable, regular abstract units) has been an instrument of domination and exploitation specific to a historical moment? Rather, the conceptualization and abstraction of these terms originates in the logic of economic relations. Hence, how would you propose to rethink time, place and space, nowadays in a way that accords humanely to our being in the world?

**Radha D'Souza:** We tend to think of time and space as constant categories. That is not the case. For example the division of a day into 24 hours or each hour into 60 minutes and into 60 seconds is, in historical terms, a relatively new idea. Our conceptions of time are located in the materiality of the world. For example, even in Europe, the home of the scientific revolution, in the feudal era conceptions of time followed the rhythms of nature—there was autumn, winter, spring, and summer, sunrise and sunset—those were the guiding factors for dividing time. As the division of time went hand in hand with the seasons time was inseparable from place. That changed with European modernity.

As merchants started going out to Latin America, finding new places, trading and returning home a disjunction developed between the categories of time and place. Navigation around the world throughout the year required a more constant conception of time that was delinked from places – in other words it needed standardised time that was conceptualised as a universal constant. With factory systems of production merchants needed precise time which they could use to cost the value of products made from labour. These developments in the real world changed the conceptions of time but the change did not come from a narrow mercantile logic. Rather their experiences of the real world changed the way they thought about time. The need for improved navigation led to scientific discoveries like the compass and mathematical ideas like the longitude and latitudes. Thus navigation was the key to the shift from pre-modern to modern conception of time in Europe. The compass was an instrument that transformed the world into an imaginary space by dividing it as purely mathematical lines across an image of the world as a sphere. The innovations in mathematics and instruments came first. The formalization of time followed. There is no such thing as a longitude and latitude inscribed on the surface of the planet – they are purely imaginary lines. Legalisation of time followed the mechanical inventions. Laws adopted GMT as a global standard. Laws were introduced to regulate summer and winter time. Science and the laws together allow for standardisation of time around the world. You can buy a clock in Europe and take it to the Philippines and it will still tell you the time, if you reset it according to the local laws that regulate standard time. You could not have done that with the old lunar calendars because you cannot extend your autumn to a Filipino typhoon season. Seasons are always local. These changes transform our ideas about our place in the world. The shift from Julian calendar to Gregorian calendar is a huge shift in European thinking about time. The Julian calendar is the product of an agrarian economy with cycles of time that go with natural cycles, the stars and the planets. Modern conceptions of time follow the solar cycle and has very little to do with climate or nature.

We begin to inhabit two types of time simultaneously as a result. There is the time created by the clock and the calendar. We also live in natural time simultaneously—we continue to be surrounded by changing seasons, the sun and moon rise and set, the clusters of stars in the sky change, we are reluctant to wake up early during winter months, we are more cheerful in summer. This necessity of having to inhabit two very contradictory types of time – one that is disengaged from nature – and the other that continues to be located in nature – is fundamentally disorienting to our sense of being human. Modernity corrodes our sense of the fact that human beings are a part of nature.

The important thing to note is that the discoverers, traders and the navigators acted to solve their problems about shipping, trade and navigation. Newton's theory about time followed, not the other way around. The world changes first and we theorize about it later. It is the practical problems of our lives that throw up larger philosophical, theoretical and scientific questions. It would be incomplete to stop with Newtonian time because later Einstein's theory of relativity changed our conceptions of time once more.

**PP:** But I think that was rather how Einstein's thought was misread, to the benefit of a more capitalist obfuscation of his philosophy. The idea that “everything is relative” is falsely ascribed to Einstein, it is distilled from popularized scientific accounts that emphasised the speculative aspects of his philosophy over the empirical results and distorted his theory of relativity by reading it down as something relative from an observational standpoint. Einstein was riled by these claims. His theory of relativity was an instrument to advance the comprehension of the physical world. I don't think he was the least inclined to plunge into subjectivism nor inclined to conceptualise the “absolute”. Einstein strove to expose what is constant in this world, regardless of an observer or a coordinate system.

**RDS:** A very important idea in Einstein is infinity. Once the concept of infinity is introduced then relativity which is relational (I would not call it subjective) becomes conditioned by infinity which is permanent – it encapsulates the relational and allows for dynamic changes between related objects or phenomena. Also we should bear in mind that relativism in social sciences refers to subjectivity. In natural sciences relativism refers to relations between objects or natural phenomena. So, what you say may have to do with how social theorists translated Einstein into their epistemologies.

If you take infinity out of Einstein you are left with relative time – a concept of time that is related to mass and speed. Much later, Marxist scholars begin to speak about time-space compression to describe globalisation. What is a time-space compression? Time-space compression is technology that allows you to move without any constraints imposed by time and place. That idea is derived from Einstein's concept of relativity and the scientific revolutions of the World War period like the science of cybernetics which gives us our modern day communication technologies.

Let us return to the materiality of time we discussed earlier. Around the time Einstein was writing about his theory in the early 20th century, around the 1920's, it was a period of cataclysmic changes in capitalism as it had been known for two to three hundred years. From about 1895 onwards capitalism became monopolistic – capitalists sought overseas investments and markets. Capitalist countries went to war with each other to protect their corporations and markets – and the world witnessed two World Wars as a result. The World Wars demanded a new type of science to create new types of war machines – the invention of the aeroplane for making fighter aircrafts was one such. The desire for a bomb that would be invincible drove the research to split atoms and later to make the atom bomb. The scientists of that time including Einstein were products of their societies. They experienced Hitler's racism and fascism and willingly cooperated in the search for destructive technology believing naively that after Hitler was defeated the West, being ‘democracies’, would obey the popular mandate for peace and put away the bombs and the command-communication-control military apparatuses. Einstein was so revolted by the way his science was used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki that he is reported to have said ‘I would have become a shoemaker if I knew they would do this.’ The point to note is this: at that time the best and brightest scientific minds, Robert Oppenheimer, Nobert Weiner and many others genuinely believed that nuclear fission technologies and bomber planes would be put away after Hitler was defeated.

Notwithstanding how we contextualise Einstein the person working in the context of the World Wars his concepts of atom and atomization gave rise to particle physics – which actually makes time a very fluid concept. From being a totally static concept rooted in place and nature the conception of time became related to imaginary lines on an imagined sphere delinked from real places and nature during the early capitalist development, and later with the rise of transnational monopoly finance capitalism time has become fluid and compressed into a virtual digital space. Did Einstein's theory change our conceptions of time? It did! Was Einstein's work driven by the breakdown in capitalism and the wars? It was. That is the point I want to make here.

**PP:** So then if we are to rethink time and place...

**RDS:** I don't think we can sit in a room and “rethink” time and place at a conceptual level or discursive level without rethinking the nature of the world that we want for ourselves. I would rephrase the question in the following way: what do we want the world to be like and what kind of changes in our ideas of time and place will such a world call for? What kind of social revolution will demand a new kind of science from us?

The world is pushing us towards just such a revolutionary change – will we measure up the demands of our times however? I see two possibilities: either we will continue to go down the road of total destruction of human civilisation, or alternately the fear of such destruction will force us to confront the real nature of transnational monopoly finance capitalism. Today the survival of the major economies of the world, the G7 states is contingent on two things: the production and sale of arms and military hardware, and on a casino economy which runs on fictional wealth. Both are fundamentally destructive – they are designed to destroy natures, societies, cultures and our humanity.

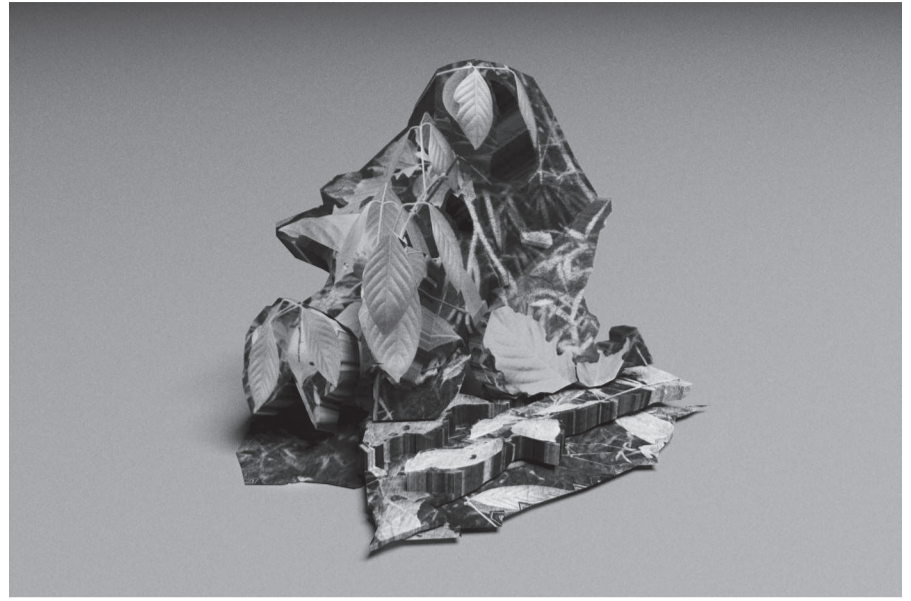
Military hardware production is one of the largest manufacturing

<sup>1</sup> *The Rights Conundrum: The Poverty of Philosophy Amidst Poverty*. Radha D'Souza. University of Westminster. January 19, 2010. RIGHTS IN CONTEXT: LAW AND JUSTICE IN LATE MODERN SOCIETY, Reza Banakar, ed., Ashgate. University of Westminster School of Law Research Paper.

CABELO AN  
MENISPERMACEAE *Tinomicium petiolare* Hook.f. & Thoms.

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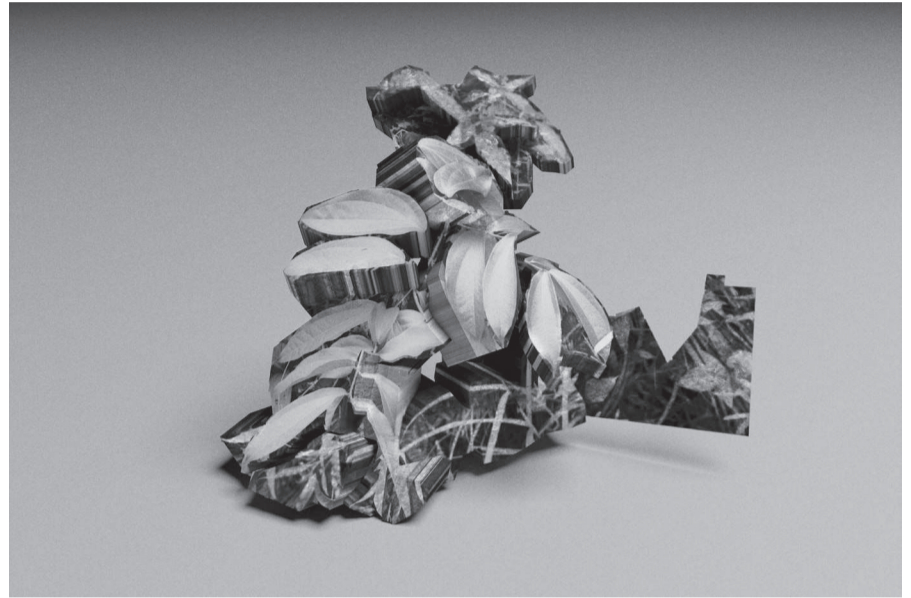
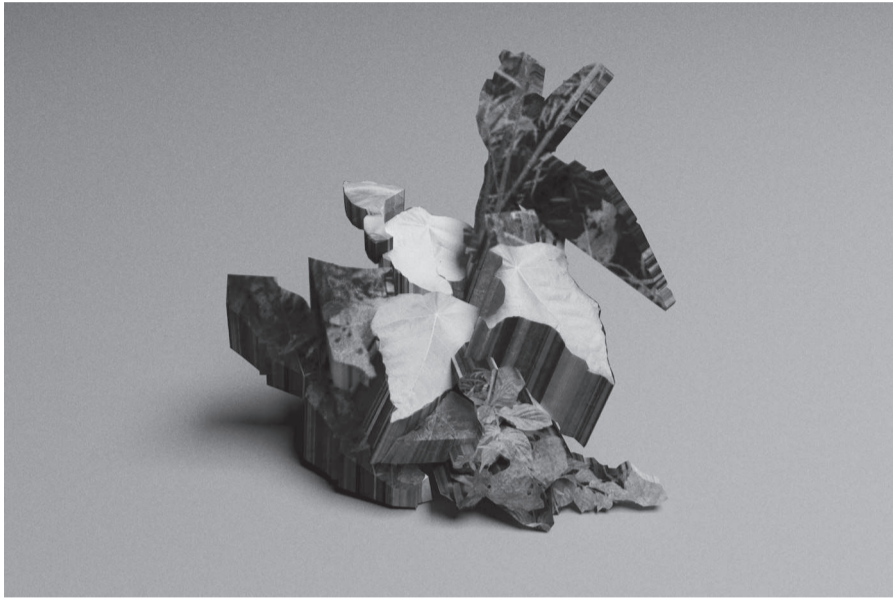
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BILANTE  
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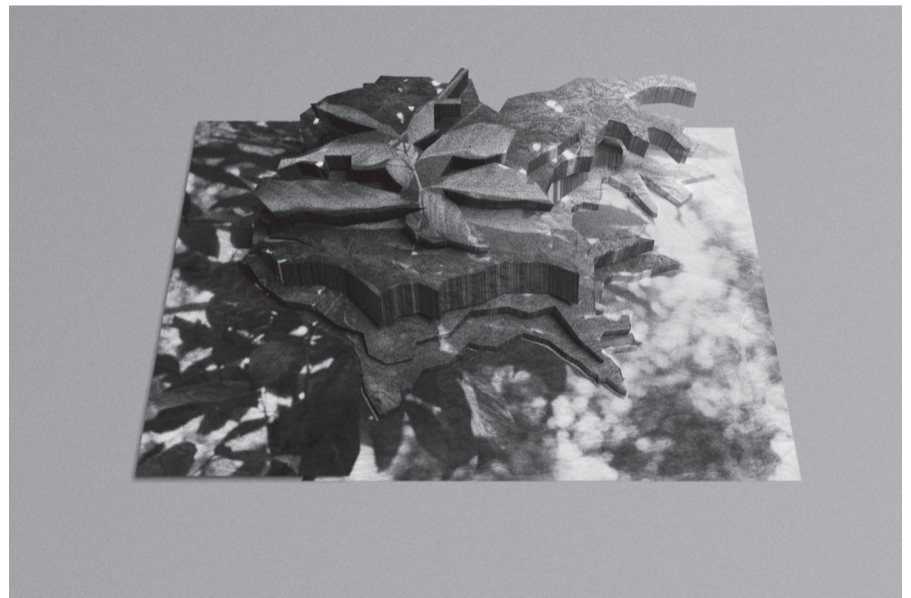
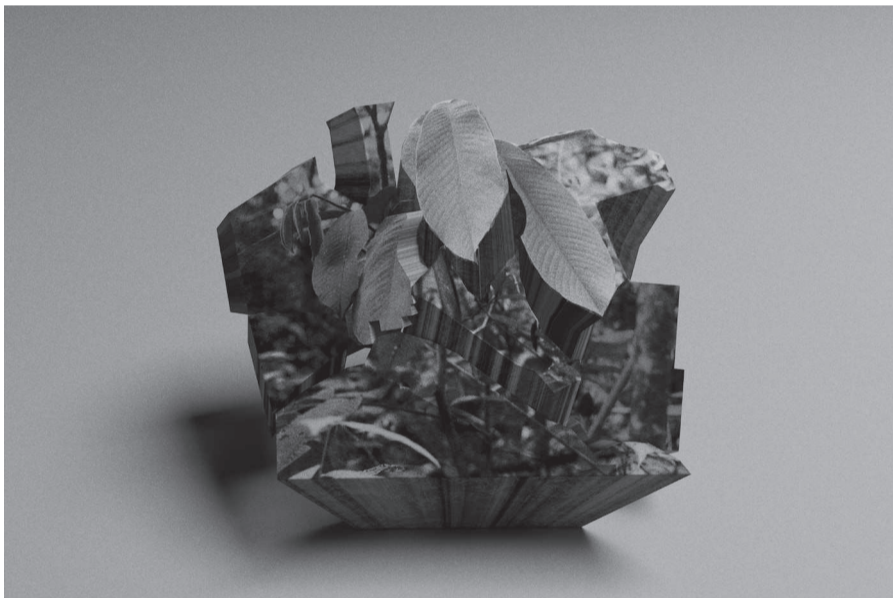
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UYA (MASO)  
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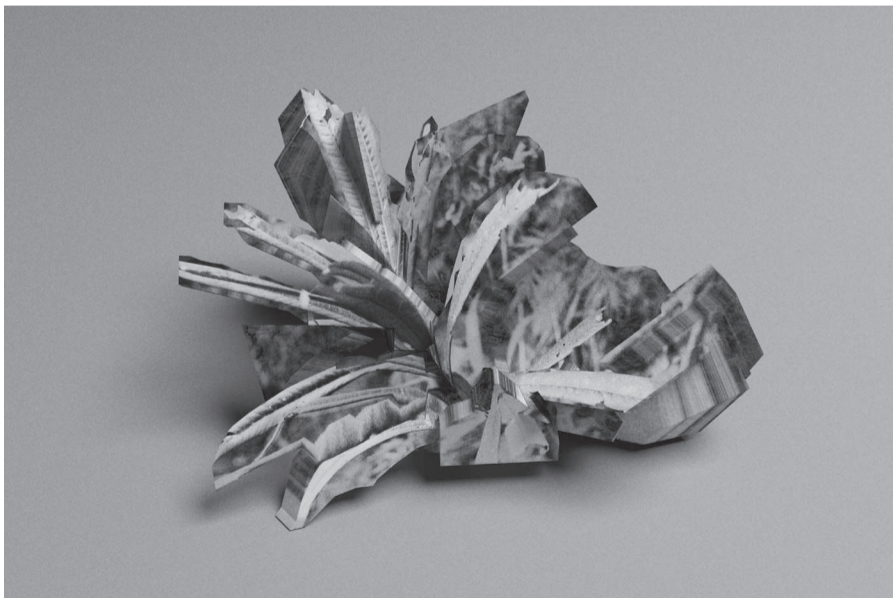
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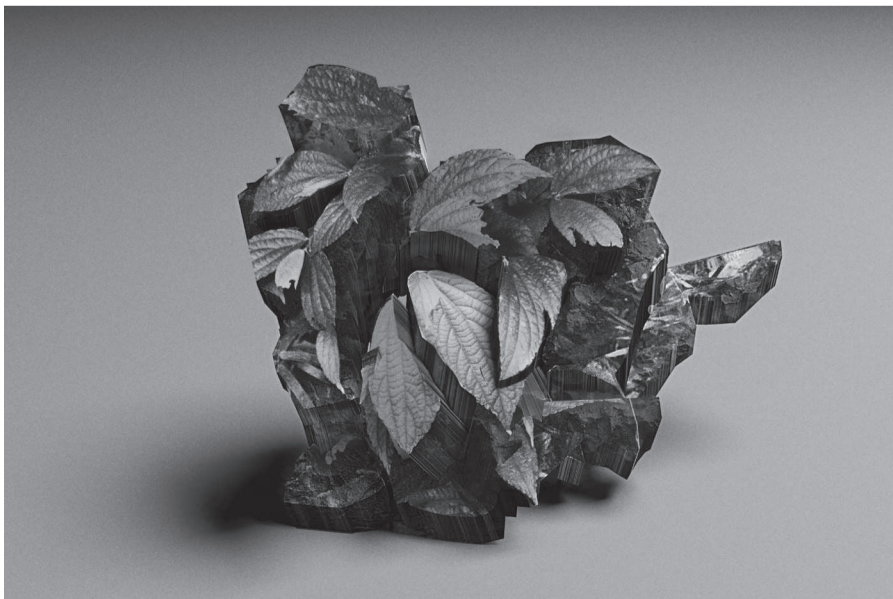
BILU BILU  
ASTERACEAE *Gynura* sp.



PAYOK POK  
URTICACEAE *Elatostema* sp.

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LIKUAN  
CONNARACEAE *Connarus* sp.



industries today. The military-industrial complex is the driving force behind technological innovations in society. The technological innovations in turn make the casino economy possible. The survival of Western societies depends on the military-industrial-technology-media complex. We have a serious paradoxical situation. The West cannot survive without a destructive economy, and yet to survive it needs to end the destructive economy. The revelations on the security apparatus that whistleblowers like Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and many others give us a glimpse of the workings of the military industrial complex. Recall the revelations that many CIA insiders made about CIA operations against Third World states around the world in the sixties and seventies. Recall the whistleblowers that blew the whistle on organisations like the World Bank and IMF in the eighties. These revelations give us just a glimpse of the institutions that organise our world.

The other pillar of the economy is the financial sector. It is a built on fictitious capital. Why fictitious? Bonds, hedge-funds, derivatives, futures trading and similar securities are legal fictions – they are not backed by any tangible wealth. Instead, they are legal instruments that work because the states and banks back them. There is no concrete asset like gold, silver, manufactured or natural products that hedge-funds for example represent. They are legal inventions backed by institutions like the Securities and Exchange Board that recognise them. These paper securities are used to trade - in currency trading, securities trading, futures trading and such – all of which has turned the world into a gigantic casino economy that operates on fictitious money. Militarism and the casino economy are pushing towards the destruction of everything. We have a choice. Either we try to fiddle with the problem at the fringes – we introduce a little law reform here, a little policy change there that will provide temporary relief. Such band-aid solutions have been tried throughout the post-War era and they have not worked. Instead, they have contributed to greater destruction of natures, more destructive wars around the world, destruction of cultures and alienated peoples everywhere. Most people can no longer make sense of the world or their place in it.

The challenge is to rebuild another kind of economy and in the process of doing that, rethink another kind of science and a different set of institutions. How can we build an alternate economic movement from this banking crisis and war – the total mess that we are in – look at Greece, Spain and Portugal – look at the Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria – look at Uganda, Rwanda, Congo – can we create a new world from this mess?

There are millions of people today in Africa, Latin America, South America, Asia, who have nothing—nothing at all! You come from Spain. You see some of them washing up at your shores everyday because they have nothing. Curiously we do not have a movement that will organize the migrants either in their home countries where they are based or in Europe in a way that will help them understand why their countries are so poor, how they are exploited by Western corporations, military and intelligence apparatuses and states – there are very few movements that tells people that the solution to poverty and displacement is to stay on their land and struggle to build another economy, another society, another culture. If such movements develop it will bring back defence of places to the centre stage of politics. It will compel people to think of alternate economic models.

When the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America begin an anti-migration political movement that is focused on building alternatives at home without the transnational corporations, global banks, European and American aid, we will need a new kind of science that aids that process – a science that asks different kinds of questions about nature and about society. Such a movement will be vastly different from the European revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Europe went through the anti-feudal revolutions, they offloaded the social crisis of Europe on the colonial world. Whenever the West is in crisis, it is offloaded on the Third World. It is happening now with the financial crisis.

The knowledge-base to intervene in the present crisis in a way that empowers people to rebuild an alternative life at home is weak. People cannot comprehend their situations without first decolonising their minds and challenging the colonial epistemologies that dominate contemporary knowledge production. That is where the problem lies and that is where the solutions need to begin.

Let me give you an example from South Asian history a hundred years ago. We had this movement called the “Ghadar Movement”. The movement signalled the beginning of the end of the British Empire. I consider them to be the first internationalist movement of working people because they organised throughout the British Empire. That movement did not begin in South Asia though. It began in United States and Canada amongst migrant workers from South Asia. They faced the kind of problems that migrants face today: racism, discrimination, violence and state repression. Looking back at the Ghadar movement a hundred years later, their solutions were very different from the solutions offered for similar problems today. They posed the question: Why are migrant workers being discriminated against? The reason for the ill-treatment of migrant workers, they argued, was because their homeland was colonised. They launched a movement in America and Canada to mobilise people to go back to South Asia to fight for the freedom of their people and country. They analysed the problem and its solution correctly. They went back and became a formidable force in the

freedom struggles of the subcontinent. It was the same in Africa. The freed African-American slaves went back to Africa and it was they who sowed the seeds of pan-African solidarity and the anti-colonial movements that were to become so formidable there.

We are not seeing comparable movements amongst refugees and migrants. That is at least partly because of the knowledge base of social movements. It is saturated with identity politics and legalism. There can be no identity without a place that recognizes you. When new kinds of consciousness and knowledge develop from amongst the migrant communities in the West, politics will begin to change from the present framework of fundamentalism which justifies securitisation to a politics that struggles to rebuild societies, places and people-in-places. We need radical knowledge that will support the movements of the disenfranchised - new knowledge that builds on past experiences of anti-colonial struggles and re-evaluates the ideas, policies and politics of economic development after formal political independence. The new always incubates in the womb of the old.

Change comes from ontological awareness, from the experience of the self and Being - in the course of life that is - because in the end, time and space are categories for understanding the world. As the world changes, we need to understand it in different ways - ontological awareness guides us through those changes because it reminds us that to be human is to live with nature, to be human is to create social institutions that sustain life not destroy it, to be human is to have a rich inner world – call it aesthetics, ethics, creativity whatever....

**PP:** Indeed. Misfortunes, conflicts and deception arise when epistemology forgets that any device employed is a tool created to make sense of the world, and instead grounds the production of knowledge on the assumption that those instruments are factual and empirical attributes of the world...

**RdS:** Absolutely.

**PP:** We need to invent tools to understand the world, but it is essential to develop a critical reflexivity running alongside it. And those tools have to progress and change.

**RdS:** Just to wrap up this point on time and space, it is also important for us to understand that different people and different cultures have different conceptions of time and space. For example in Indian philosophical thought, we “inhabit” time. Time is not something outside of us. We live inside it. It is like an envelope. It is like a cosmological envelope within which we live. So, Indians have very strange conceptions of time. For example they will say a day is divided into good periods and bad periods. For example Sunday 16.30 to 18:00 hours is inauspicious. But all hours on Sunday are not bad. On some days the configurations of planets and time make certain segments of the day extremely auspicious. One wonders where these kind conceptions of time came from. We haven’t really studied it. It is informed by a different cosmology which in turn influences the way people think about the world, despite modernisation, scientific education and all that – perhaps because Indians modes of thought are modern and traditional simultaneously.

## DISPLACEMENT AND DISPOSSESSION

**PP:** Okay. In the next question, we will continue to address time but in a different way. According to you, the temporal distance between displacement and dispossession, developed by Marx in his concept of “primitive accumulation”, obfuscates the distinction between place and possession. Moreover, contemporary Marxist theory further obscures the distinction between place and possession by adding a spatial dimension to the temporal distance introduced by the concept of primitive accumulation. So in actuality, and summarising your argument, we are being constantly displaced, as well as dispossessed, in order to be implaced precariously in market institutions, our “place” in such institutions being negotiated and organized by means of the rights discourse. From here it follows that, in order to attain freedom and emancipation, we are to transcend the economic versus human binary, that is to say, it is not enough to “expropriate the expropriators”, but it is necessary to rethink emancipation and freedom, from the point when the trajectory of the rights discourse reached an impasse. Maybe you can explain that better. Hence, can we claim that the rights discourse is a device conceived to manage and control exploitation and inequality and that, if we are to envisage the world we want to live in, we should do away with such a legal framework?

**RdS:** Let me begin by taking up the last part of your question. Is the rights discourse a way of organizing the oppression and exploitation? Yes. Now let us see why that is the case. I want to clarify or rather restate the premise for this argument. Marx makes an interesting distinction between pre-modern and modern societies that is relevant for your question about rights, displacement and dispossession. In a nutshell Marx says pre-modern societies were founded on the unity of nature and people. The concept of land or nature as something separate from people did not exist. People engaged

in economic activities – they made goods and commodities, they bought and sold them – we know that trade goes back long way before capitalism and modernity. It goes back to barter systems long before money was used as a medium of exchange. However, when societies were based on the unity of nature and people, people applied their human labour to natural resources and created products which they sold. Thus, it is the product produced by the unity of nature and labour that people sold, bartered or traded.

**PP:** The sense of purpose of the labouring activity directly hinged on the reproduction of life and the conditions afforded by the place inhabited. What about India, for example.

**RDS:** For example, India was a leader in textile trade. That is why the British East India Company came to India to trade in textiles. The village communities grew cotton, natural dyes. They used their creativity to weave beautiful patterns, invented block printing and other techniques. They made the textiles within the village economy. Textiles were the final products of their natures and labour which they sold to the outside world. Colonialism destroyed the village communities.

Under capitalism merchants invest money for the production of a specific commodity for sale in the market. The merchant's investments require the community to use nature in certain ways so that they can continuously supply the merchant with commodities for the market. Nature too becomes a saleable commodity – forests, mines, land – everything can be bought and sold under capitalism – they are bought and sold without the people who live off nature and on it. The people who are now displaced from nature must find another way of living – they sell their labour to the factories and manufacturers. In that way labour and nature both becomes saleable commodities. The system of commodity production destroys the unity of nature and people. We are so far gone into this ruptured existence that even money today is not only a medium of exchange. Currency traders trade in money as a commodity in its own right.

Marx says that commodity production and the application of capital introduces a rupture between nature and people. The first time people are alienated from nature it is by the extraneous intervention of capital. Marx says that this rupture produces all kinds of dualisms in the world—nature and culture, labour and capital, rich and poor, rural and urban. At the epistemological level, we find more and more duality, economy and society, natural and social sciences and so on. Dualism becomes the epistemological paradigm from that point onwards.

Marx calls the initial rupture of nature and labour primitive accumulation which he compares to the original sin. He calls it primitive accumulation because it is that first initial rupture that separates the producer from the means of production.

What happens to the displaced people – after the primal rupture? They don't have land or a place any longer on which they can base their lives. Instead new types of institutions come into being. These new institutions are not located in a physical space. Instead they are located in an imaginary space which we call a nation-state. The nation-state grants the displaced people citizenship but it does not give them a place or land. People get membership of institutions like the labour market or the share markets. If the displaced people manage to find a good job they can rent a house or buy one depending on what they earn. That house is their private property. What happens when they lose their jobs? They will be displaced again. However ontology requires that we have to put our two feet somewhere on this earth. Unless someone is Michael the Archangel or Rafael, we must have a place to put our two feet. Not everyone has a place in capitalist institutions like the labour market, manufacturing or service or banking sectors, the civil service or military – there is always a large section of the population who are without any entitlements to place. And this is the distinction between place and possession. Possession is property whereas place is ontological necessity.

One of the difficulties about the Marxist discourse on accumulation and dispossession is that it conflates possession and place. They continue to talk about the displaced as the dispossessed as if there is loss of 'possession' – 'dis- possess'. A dispossessed person is always a displaced person.

**PP:** So everyone in society is displaced or potentially displaced.

**RDS:** Yes. And that is why our anxiety and alienation are at levels that we have never known in human history. Poverty has always been there in human history. Peasants were poor in pre-modern Europe but they were not necessarily alienated, they belonged somewhere, they had a community, even if that community was a poor one. Where there is a community there is always culture, celebrations. Folk culture is poor people's culture, for example – and where there is community and place there is ethics – all social relationships including those between a rich feudal lord and a poor peasant are based on conceptions of ethics – and of course, the peasants had grievances about their feudal lords and about being poor. The feudal lords did not always conform to ethics of reciprocal duties and obligations on which feudal societies were based. Peasant rebelled against landlords from time to time. There was a normative order nevertheless that was located in

place and people, not just abstract laws and rules made by a state that is removed from the lives of people.

**PP:** So speaking about alienation, the working class or the proletariat would be the subject that incarnates the alienation of capitalism par excellence. However, some Marxist narratives have celebrated the proletariat as the subject that will realize itself in socialism, in contrast to the position that stands for its abolishment. What do you have to say about this?

**RDS:** That is not a new idea at all. If you look at much of Marx's writings, he is writing about the proletariat being the agent that removes itself from history. Many argue that Marx saw the proletariat as the social force in European capitalism that had the capacity to end capitalism and in doing so to end its own existence as a social class. That statement I think needs to be qualified in the light of two historical experiences. First during Marx's time radical European movements were still trying to understand capitalism and class in Europe. They had not paid attention to colonialism and its relation to capitalism. The issue of colonialism came on the agenda of Marxism only in the in the second congress of the Third International in 1920 when the national liberation movements forced the issue on the communist movements of that time. The second factor is that radical Euro-American movements never understood agriculture and agrarian societies whether in Europe or outside Europe. Therefore they never understood nature. They supported wholeheartedly capitalist ideas of science and industrialism. The realisation that there are serious problems with industrial science is a recent one since the environmental movements in the 1960s. Both these factors are important to rethink what we mean by the agency of the working class – who is the working class today? Are the workers in Europe and North America the same in relation to capitalism as the workers in Philippines or Indonesia?

**PP:** Western Marxism doesn't understand the colonized....

**RDS:** This is a question that has haunted Western Marxism throughout its history. The rural peasantry were the backbone of national liberation movements throughout the colonial world. They fought to defend the unity of land and people. In Europe too there were a series of peasant rebellions, for example in France, Germany, Ireland, Britain and other countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They did not become the backbone of anti-feudal struggles however. It is because in Europe the peasants displaced from land had an option. They could, with the support of the state, go over to the Americas, and occupy the lands there and colonise it by displacing the indigenous people from their lands. So the European anti-feudal revolutions never resolved the problem of relationship with nature or the urban-rural divide. On the contrary they exhausted the natures around the world by excessive hunting, whaling and sealing, lumber felling for use as commodities in industrial production. The discourse of science was about conquering nature. Modernity substituted God of the feudal era with science of the modern era. Science would fix the world the way God was supposed to do. Man's reason would help him become god. In the process of playing god we have lost our capacity to understand nature.

**PP:** Which has to do with the commodification of nature.

**RDS:** Absolutely! The commodification of nature and labour go hand in hand.

## FREEDOM AND HUMAN AGENCY

**PP:** In your writings, you refer to the Indian philosophical concept of dukkha, where constraints are recognized as an ontological attribute of human life and inform human agency. In contrast to liberal theory where freedom is characterized as the absence of constraints. How is a society where dukkha is essential to human life, can you provide more concrete examples as to how this applies to social relations and relations to nature?

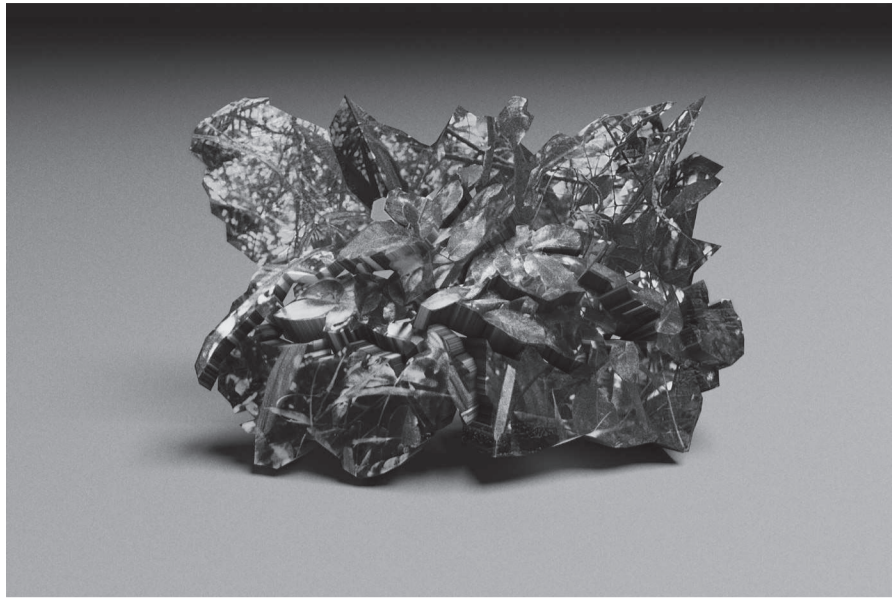
**RDS:** In many non-European societies there is some recognition of constraints as an ontological attribute of social life. I give the example of dukkha because I am more familiar with the Indian and Buddhist philosophical tradition. Confucian philosophy, indigenous philosophies, African philosophies – do not have a conception of unconstrained freedom in the world. Life without any constraints is non-existent. When European liberal philosophy says freedom is absence of constraint, as the English Enlightenment philosophers argued. It is important to recognise that this is a very modern Western idea.

**PP:** Life without constraints is a very illusory idea. One never experiences such ideal and that contradiction is very alienating.

**RDS:** The idea of freedom as absence of constraint is an oppressive idea. Take for example the Charlie Hebdo affair in France at present. Public attention has focused on the freedom of speech and expression of Charlie Hebdo and his colleagues (who were killed by radical Islamists) to write and publish insulting and vulgar images and words about Islam and Prophet

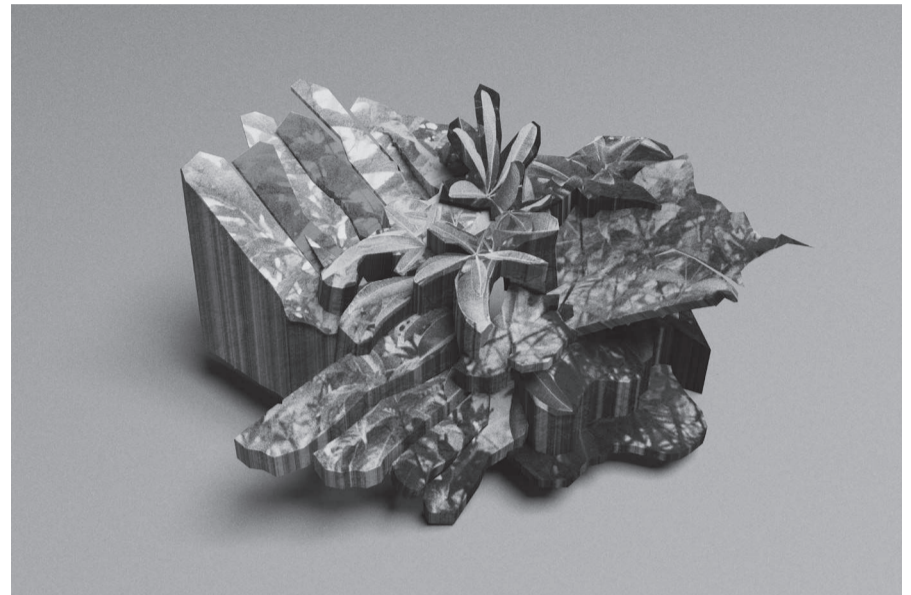
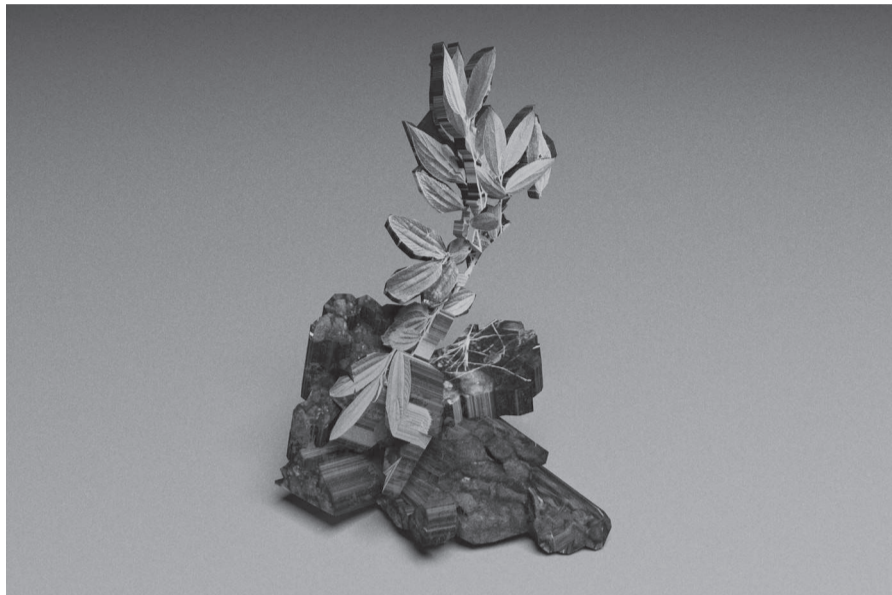
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MARABANWANG  
LAMIACEAE *Clerodendrum* sp.



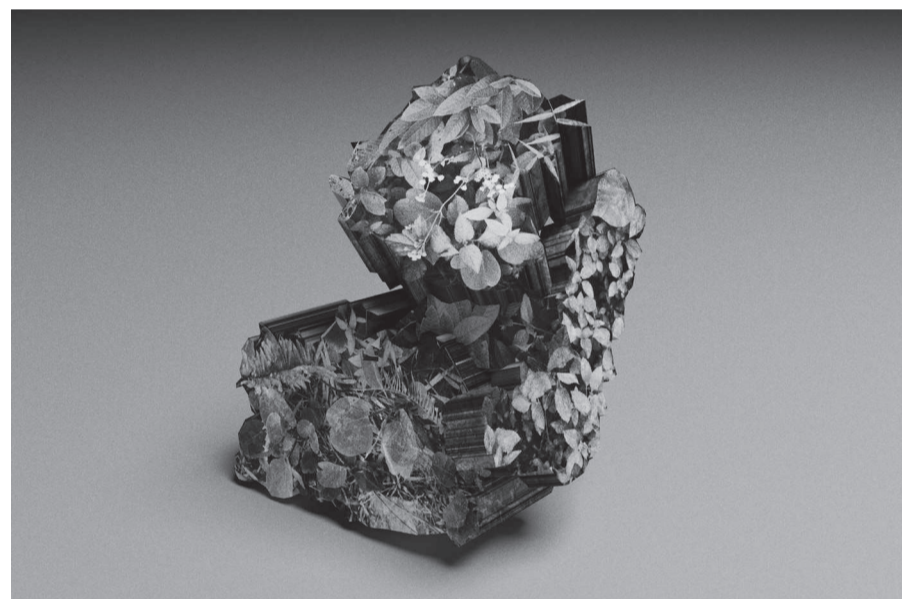
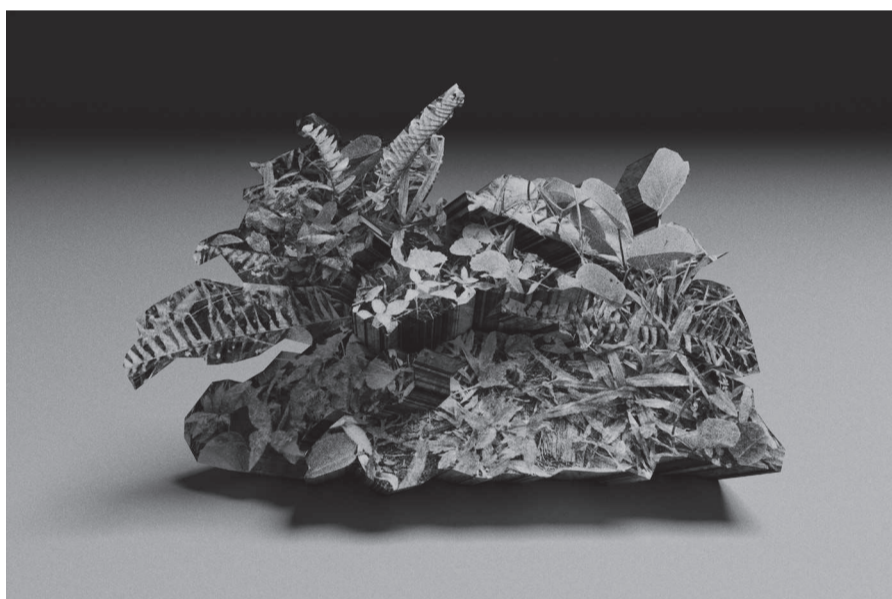
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MANOKOT  
APOCYNACEAE *Astonia scholaris* (L.) R.Br.



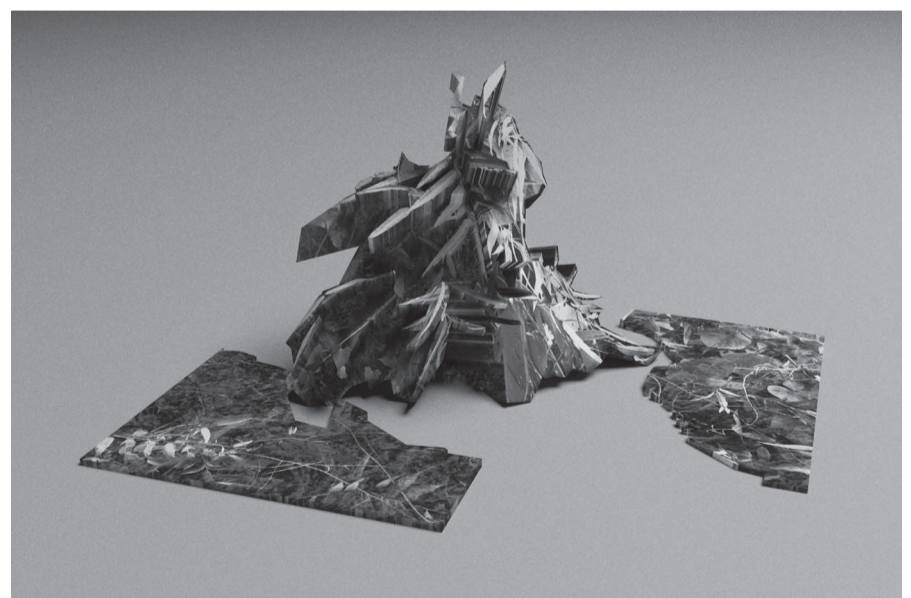
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PAYOK POK  
ASTERACEAE *Ageratum conyzoides* L.



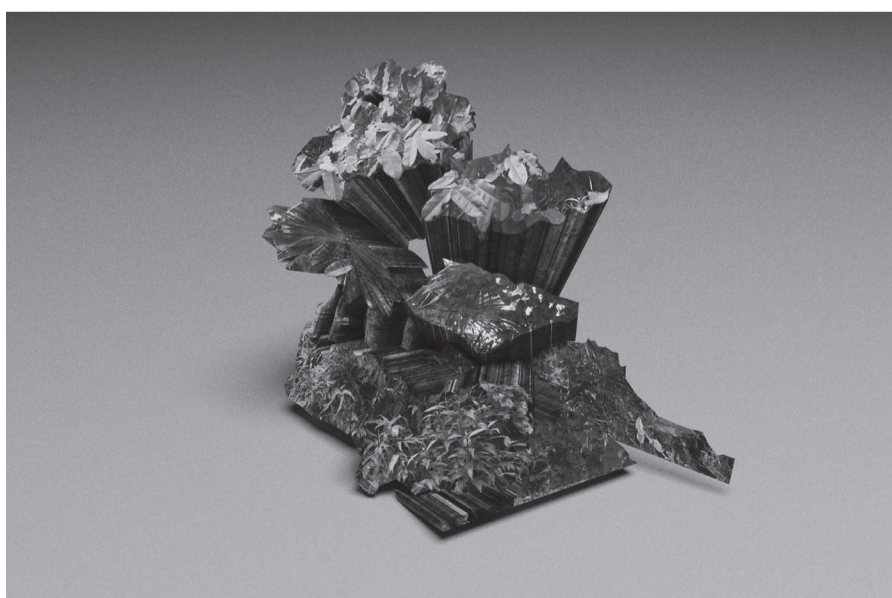
PITO PITO  
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UYA (PINO)  
ANNONACEAE *Pseuduvaria* sp.



UYA (LABANG)  
ANNONACEAE *Frisodielsia* sp.

BURREKET  
LAURACEAE *Neolitsea villosa* (Blume) Merr.



Mohammed. There is popular support for the view that freedom of speech and expression is a core value of the French republic. Soon after Charlie's killing, the French Muslim comedian Dieudonné said on social media that he felt like Charlie Coulibaly. He was arrested immediately for hate speech. Fifty four people were arrested in France for criticising the government's handling of the Charlie Hebdo killings. Charlie and his mates have unlimited freedom to insult a community in a way that is most hurtful to them but a French Muslim was arrested for putting up a comment on social media that is nowhere nearly as hateful.

The whole drama was played out not as absolute freedom of expression for everyone. Instead lawyers, policy-makers, media and many sections of the public argued about how much restriction on freedom of expression is reasonable and where the line should be drawn. That kind of argument introduces a disjuncture between liberal philosophy and liberal politics. French values become one thing in philosophy and another thing in politics. It allows for double-standards and repressive politics.

In many cultures there is a hierarchy of norms – norms like social harmony, the obligation not to cause suffering to others take precedence over personal freedoms. Their way of intervening in the events like Charlie Hebdo is informed by those higher norms. In such a system it is possible to say: Charlie Hebdo should not say horrible things about Islam and its Prophet because it hurts Muslims and causes suffering for everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims. It is our social duty to minimise suffering to the extent we can. So we should not deliberately say things that are hurtful to anyone. All human life is constrained, there is no such thing as absolute freedom, everything is dukkha. Social harmony requires we find out why Charlie Hebdo wanted to say insulting things about Islam. Such an approach invites consideration of the sufferings and actions of all persons involved in the event, the white French citizens and the French Muslims, Charlie and his killers. What we saw instead was a theatre of the absurd. The French state apparatus went into action to dramatise the event and inflict more pain on the marginalised victimised communities. They did nothing to address the insecurities and fears of white French citizens. Instead their insecurities increased with the sensationalism and politicisation of the event. There was no room to say “we should not write horrible things about Muslims because it will make everyone unhappy – the Muslims will be unhappy and their unhappiness will lead to our insecurities. The Buddha says this very beautifully,

The killer begets a killer;  
One who conquers, a conqueror.  
The abuser begets abuse,  
The reviler, one who reviles.  
Thus by the unfolding of karma,  
The plunderer is plundered.

Hate begets hate, violence begets violence. That is the reason no one should engage in insulting and hateful speech. This is an example of how recognition of constraint produces positive freedom.

If the cycle has to be broken, those who are strong and powerful must first end hate and violence. Instead what we are seeing around us today is that the marginalised and the weak are being asked to break the cycle of hate and violence. It cannot work because, again as the Buddha said, “victory begets hatred; defeat begets suffering. They that are wise will forgo both victory and defeat”. To say the powerful must break the cycle of violence and hate does not amount to pacifism. It is based on our capacity to differentiate between offensive and defensive violence, hateful actions and hateful reactions to those actions.

France cannot break the cycle of hatred and violence however. The country's political economy runs on militarism. The French state needs the arms industry, weapons sales, oil, cheap goods and services from around the world. The problem of hatred and violence in our society, the political economy of a country and people's alienation, fears and insecurities are interconnected. A dualist way of thinking does not permit us to see the interconnections. A dualist way of thinking reduces any problem to one aspect of it. It sees one aspect of a problem as the whole of it. Today all of Europe's problems are blamed on the Muslims. European culture, European jobs, European economy, European wars, everything is blamed on them. Islamophobia is based on reductionist thinking.

Some scholars who oppose Islamophobia say let us all become Buddhist or Taoist or something else because we can see that there are problems with this kind of reductionist thinking. We cannot change things through discourse alone although engagement with ideas is important. Buddhist, Taoist or other intellectual traditions were underpinned by different models of economy and society. In agrarian societies, for example in rural communities, in the Philippines you may have seen it, in South Asia, in Africa, people still settle social conflicts in the traditional way. When there are conflicts, they call everybody, they sit together, there is a meeting of elders and a formal procedure to discuss the questions and solutions. Why can't we do the same on a global scale? Why can't we do it in France or UK? You need to look at what is driving and keeping these countries on their feet. You have to come back to the materiality of these societies. Why are the people in Asia and Africa still able to adopt these communal ways of settling conflicts? Because they are still attached to place and communities are still rooted in places. They make the decisions about their communities

themselves. They do not have to leave resolution of their social conflicts to large bureaucratic state and justice machinery.

**PP:** So, if we are to synthesise -how can the affirmative and constructive appreciation and recognition of constraints as an ontological attribute of human life inform the establishment of social institutions? Can you provide more concrete examples?

**RDS:** Margaret Thatcher the British Prime Minister who was one of the first neoliberal reformers famously said ‘there is no such thing as society’. That expression encapsulates the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophy reduced society to a collective of individuals. This reductionist idea enabled them to introduce new kinds of institutions – for example the state with a large bureaucracy, professional armies with a long chain of command and control, corporations with a large corporate management structure and so on. These institutions are formal and based on legal arrangements. Contrast this with the South Asian states before colonialism. There the village was the basic social unit, not the individual. Villages were taxed, not individuals for example. At the village level there was what we might call ‘direct democracy’ today. The villages were also economically self-sufficient. They did have to pay tax to the state and they did sell the end products made from local labour and natural resources in cities or foreign countries. But they did it as a community located in place and nature.

Once individuals become a unit of law and society, the notion of society itself falls away and social institutions are removed from place and people. State bureaucracies, corporate managements, professional armies are oppressive institutions because they are disengaged from emotional and psychological dimensions of social life. The individual faces the gigantic organised power of the state, the corporation, the military establishment or whatever alone. To some extent the Chinese revolution tried to modernise the village community idea, to somehow preserve that old idea of a village community as a social unit, as an institutional structure in its own right and to incorporate the collective unit into the apparatus of a modern bureaucratic state. Why did that idea fail? To what extent did it succeed? What is the legacy of the Chinese revolution for the people today? Why are Indian village communities in South Asia so resilient even when colonialism has corroded and eroded those institutions for centuries? We need to go into these kinds of questions—such questions are important if we wish to reconnect with nature and society again.

How can recognition of constraints inform social institutions and formation of alternate institutions? I think Marx recognizes this. He says men make history but they make it in conditions that they have inherited and therefore recognition of necessity gives freedom of action. To return to my earlier example about immigrants washing up on the shores of Europe—it is important that the immigrants recognize that there is no life for them in Europe. There never was a life for Africans and Asians in Europe except as slaves, indentured and migrant labour. They must recognise that they will drown in the high seas or be locked away in detention centres. They must recognise in advance that their dignity and freedom will be vilified and attacked by the wider society – recognise the fact that the European ideal of equality, non-discrimination and such is a false one –the high standards of life that the Europeans enjoy have come from the natural resources and labour of the rest of the world. When people recognise this they will be forced to think about rebuilding their own economies and societies instead of surrendering them to transnational corporations and Western bankers. That is when real change will come.

One reason why people believe that going to Europe will free them from poverty and repression is the conceptualisation of liberal freedoms as freedom without constraint – because liberal ideology says everyone is equal people believe that is factually the case – in reality people are not equal . People think there is freedom in Europe to do what you like but that it is not true for everyone.

**PP:** Exactly. And this illusory “unfettered freedom” is perversely employed to legitimate European's wary observation of other cultures, or to snub communism, for instance. In Europe, the fear of losing this so-called freedom is constantly fuelled.

**RDS:** European freedom is founded on exploitation of the whole world. Once I was listening to Angela Merkel on television. Angela Merkel - the most powerful leader in Europe, she said something to the effect of, and I am paraphrasing here, “the population of Europe is less than 9 percent and we need to keep free trade and communications with the rest of the world because we depend on them for our standards of living here.” 9 percent versus 91 percent! 91 percent is slaving for the 9 percent. That is why it is very important for European leaders that the rest of the world thinks that it is liberal democracy that has made Europe rich and powerful. The ideology of liberalism prevents people from poorer countries from seeing the reality. Europeans will defend their illusory liberal freedoms until death because they know that if that goes, they are just the same as any African, any Latin American, anybody else. When you ask what can knowledge of constraint help us to do, I think the knowledge of constraints helps us to recognise that there is no absolute freedom. Just imagine if people start saying, “The

European dream is a false illusion. We are going to make our life here at home” – straight away they will have to deal with the mining corporations, oil companies, corrupt governments, financial speculation, and do it without the interference of European and American states. When they start doing that they will become a formidable force.

**PP:** But again, even in Europe, even for an upper class European, there exists no life worthy of being lived. We live alienated by the anxiety and fear of being displaced from market institutions, although discursively we cling to the opposite, we don't recognise that reality.

**RdS:** And this financial crisis after 2008 has really brought home the reality of this vulnerability.

## RIGHTS AND EMANCIPATION

**PP:** Indeed.

Could you advance insights whereby, we can envisage how our contemporary legal framework could be transformed or overturned in order to sustain and facilitate human agency? What would those legal frameworks be transformed into?

**RdS:** How can we transform the legal frameworks? The first thing to do is to recognize that rights discourse is the problem. It is the discourse of rights that is actually keeping people in slavery. How does that happen? Because the political economy cannot deliver the promises that the discourse of rights holds out. Let us take for example, the right to food. Many states have introduced right to food legislation after neoliberal reforms of the economy. The United Nations, the World Bank and other international organisations are promoting food security in the Third World. Many NGOs and even more radical social movements are supporting food security laws arguing that right to food is a human right. I have a very simple question. Why ask for 'right to food'? Why not ask for food, the thing itself? Why not say: "we don't have food. Can you give it to us? If you say no then we will have to take it because that is the only option we have. Either we die of starvation or we take the food we need to live." When you say there must be a law that recognises 'right to food', the right becomes tangled in a multiple global and national bureaucracies – the bankers, the Futures traders, Monsanto Cargill and their likes, the World Bank and G7, the urban elite in the Third World, everyone steps into the gap between the right and its realisation. What is the result? A child dies of malnutrition every 15 seconds according to the UNICEF. We need to demand the thing, not just the legal right to the thing.

The more intriguing question is why do people demand the right to food instead of saying I want food? Why do they demand right to employment and not say I want a job? This question is crucial to understand liberal rights. Liberal rights hold out the possibility of something. For example the right to property does not entitle you to a house if you don't have one. It simply means that if you have money, you can buy a house. When liberal rights proclaim equal opportunities for all, it does not mean women will get the same jobs and salaries. It simply means they will be considered for the jobs alongside men.

**PP:** Only those in power decide over the possible.

**RdS:** The idea of possibility gives displaced people the hope that the possibility will become reality. Take the right to property. Every small house owner of a small two-bedroom house – who will never have any opportunity in life to have properties beyond a house for their family – for which most pay a mortgage all their life – several times more than the purchase price of the house – because the bank has taken interest on it – but for that small home they will defend the right to property of everyone including those of people with billions and trillions, the multinational and transnational corporations and the mega-celebrities. The hope of those small people ends up securing the rights of billionaires and transnational corporations!

**PP:** The same happens in the Philippines. When indigenous peoples or the peasants claim the right to land titles, some live in the hope that eventually, they will be granted the right to live in their land, as paradoxical as it sounds. But when they realize that this sense of ownership, the discourse of rights, has nothing to do with their lives and that, at best, it will serve to eventually displace them, when they realise that it is a "loss-loss" situation, they act upon it. So actually acknowledging that reality is very empowering for a community.

**RdS:** Absolutely. Rights hold out hope. And as long as there is hope, people will try to defend the property and privileges of others hoping they too will, one day, have them. In our society – and this is also an important part of it – a few rags to riches stories – a pauper who became a millionaire – like football players who very often come from very poor family – reinforces the hope that liberalism offers.

**PP:** And, on the flipside of it, lies the illusion (and the hope) that, if you work hard enough, well enough, you will get there.

**RdS:** But then, there are hundreds and hundreds of very capable football players in the slums of Argentina, Brazil and African countries who are brilliant players. Not all of them are going to become super-rich football icons. Every rags-to-riches story reinforces the possibilities that rights offer. Hope is a good thing. Everyone should have hope. But rights discourse gives false hopes. And that is the problem. Equally the concept of legal rights applies to individuals. So people seek individual solutions to social problems. They start to think everyone else is hopeless but I can make it if I only connect with the right people, I do the right things, I can go up. That is also false. Social problems can only be solved through collective solutions. Poverty, lack of food, water etc are social issues and not individual issues, even if one person gets everything all the rest will continue to be in the same position.

**PP:** So then, does the recognition of constraints, as the impulse for action that brings us closer to freedom and emancipation, need a normative or regulative articulation?

**RdS:** If by normativity you mean an ideal as opposed to the real then I would say that such a conception introduces a dualism between the ideas and the real world – like the Platonic idea of ideal and real worlds for example. If by normativity you mean guidance on how we should be in this world, a guide to action – that type of normativity can only come from being rooted in ontological understanding of our place in this world and a cosmological understanding of the world. I would say it is recognition of ontological necessity that gives us freedom for action. For example, let us come back to the rights discourse. A lot of people say we can speak freely if the constitution guarantees freedom of speech. But if you look at all the struggles in the world that have happened throughout history and brought us some real freedom, none of those struggles were driven by the existence of a normative order that recognised their freedoms. If you look at the anti-colonial struggles for example – the colonised societies, the slaves and the indigenous people, they did not have any freedoms that the liberal normative ideals hold out. Yet their histories are histories of struggles for freedom and resistance to oppression. So the question of freedom, emancipation and agency becomes an important one. Do people fight because the law gives them the right to struggle? Or, do people struggle and therefore the law recognises their freedoms? Women had no freedoms until the women's movements forced law changes.

What comes first? Do the social changes come first or the law changes come first? The order in which social and legal changes occur must be clearly understood. People don't struggle for justice because the law has given them the right to do so. Look at the European trade unions for example. When the workers had no rights, a hundred or so years ago, they fought for right to fair wages and working conditions. After the law recognised their rights to collective bargaining the unions became large bureaucratic institutions embedded in the labour-markets and became a part of corporate and political power structure in society. They still have the right to strike, but how many of them did anything about job losses and fall in wages as a result of economic liberalisation?

People have this idea that because we live in a free society, the unions should do something, the consumer organizations should do something, the government should do something, everybody else except me should do something about my condition. But that is a complete misrepresentation of freedom. People fight, people struggle for freedom, because of necessity. All human beings struggle for freedom because it is an attribute of being human that we struggle against constraints.

**PP:** And actually, it is only retroactively that the conditions for such ruptures are constructed. Before any break a struggle may have sparked, the changes triggered by such ruptures would have appeared impossible.

**RdS:** That brings us back to our earlier discussion of dukkha. Human life is also about always seeking greater freedom from what we have now. Indo-Buddhist philosophy uses the concept of dukkha to develop a theory of human agency. Liberal philosophy has no theory of human agency beyond the idea that, as Hobbes said, human actions are driven by competitiveness, insecurities and self-glorification. That is a rather sad and bleak view of what it is to be human.

Within the constraints that life has imposed upon us through history what can we do to enhance our collective freedoms? Human propensity to struggle for freedom is an ontological attribute of being human and it has the potential to guide our actions. Being an ontological attribute there is no end point to human quest for freedom. It does not end with a constitutional republic, or a socialist revolution, or national liberation, or whatever. As long as we are human we will strive for freedom from the constraints that our context imposes upon us. Our context will always impose constraints upon us because we are social beings – 'herd animals' as my grandfather used to say – and social life requires some constraints. Liberalism seeks out an end point by providing a positive definition of freedom – freedom means having a republican constitution for example. That is why Fukuyama provides a rather pathetic representation of human



KAMAHILAN  
CANNACEAE *Canna indica* L.

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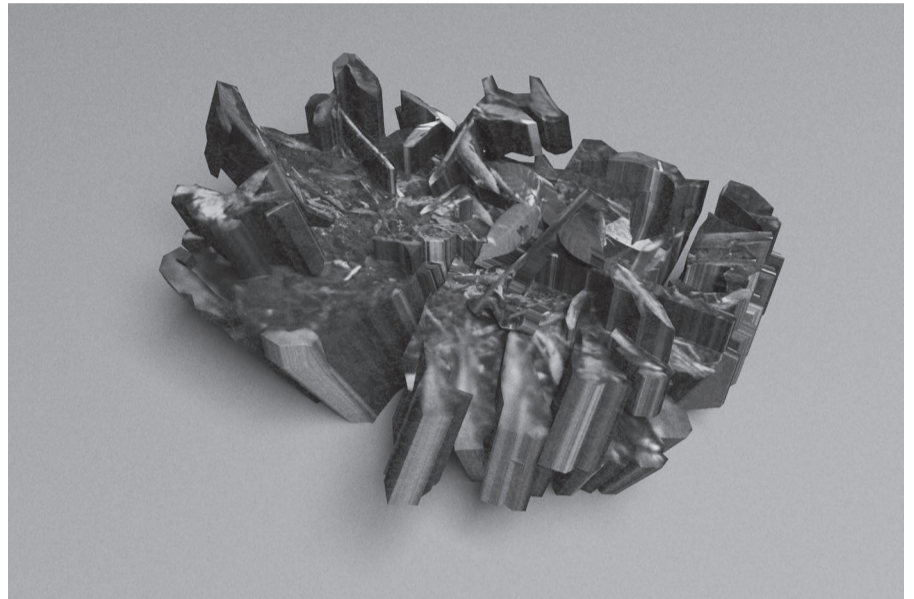
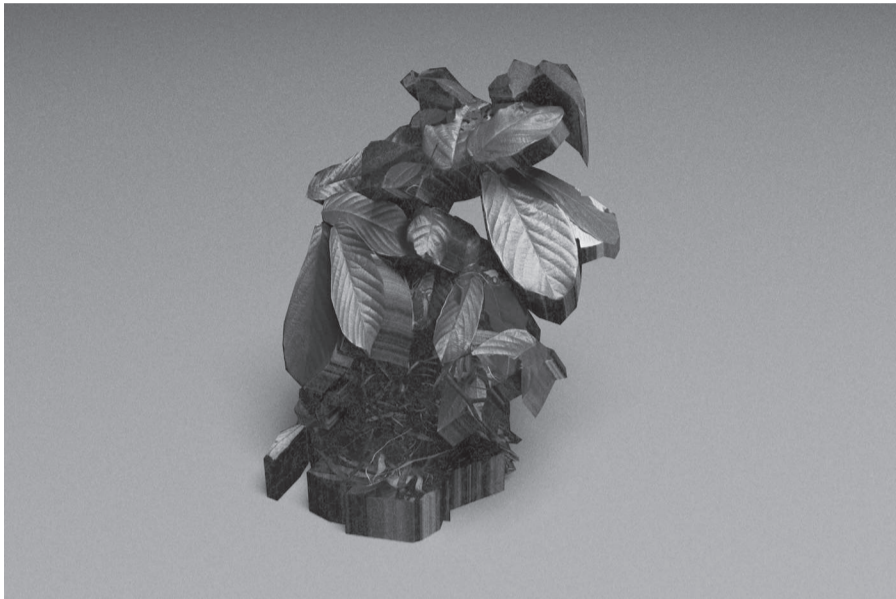
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UYA (KULUT KULUT)  
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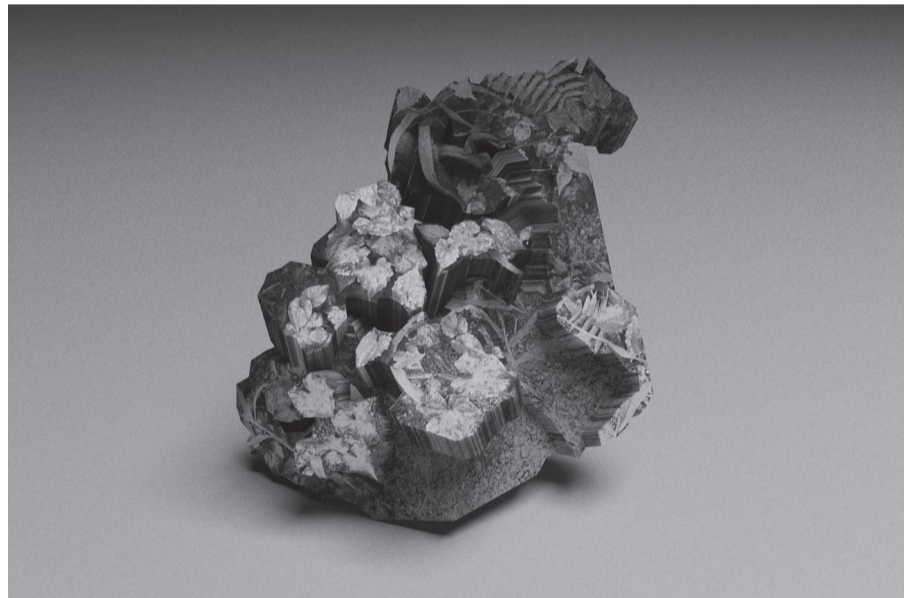
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PAYAW PAYAW  
ARACEAE *Homalomena philippinensis* Engl.

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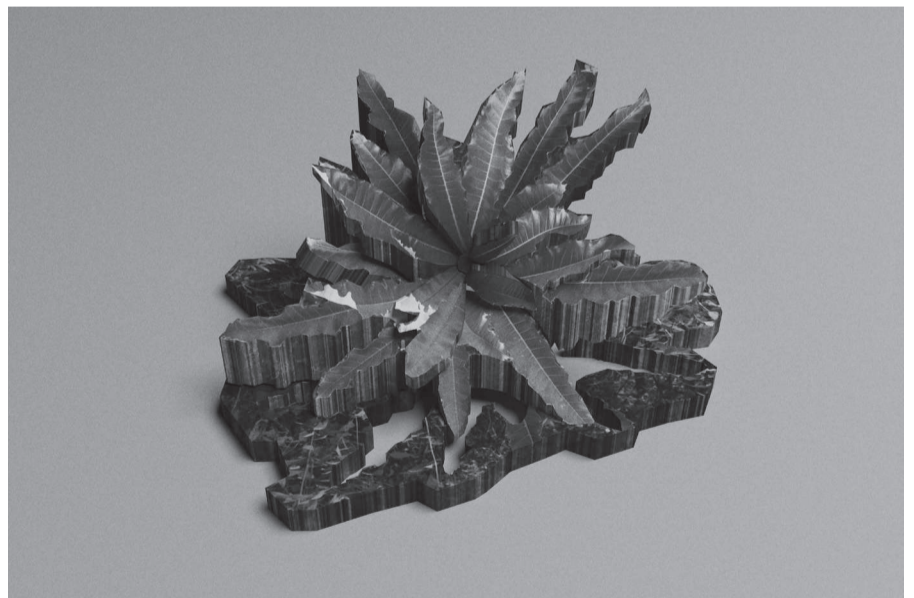
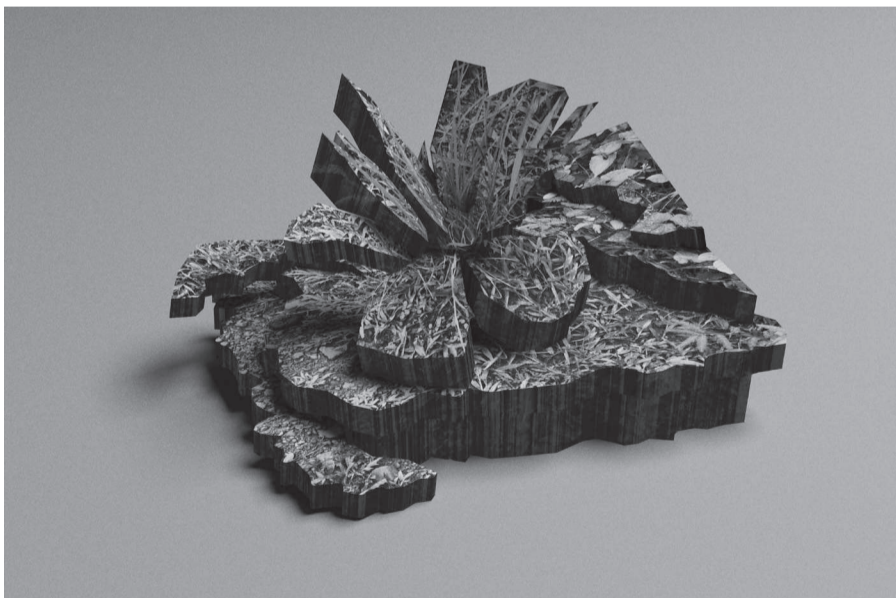
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LAMUN  
POACEAE *Eleusine indica* (L.) Gaertn.

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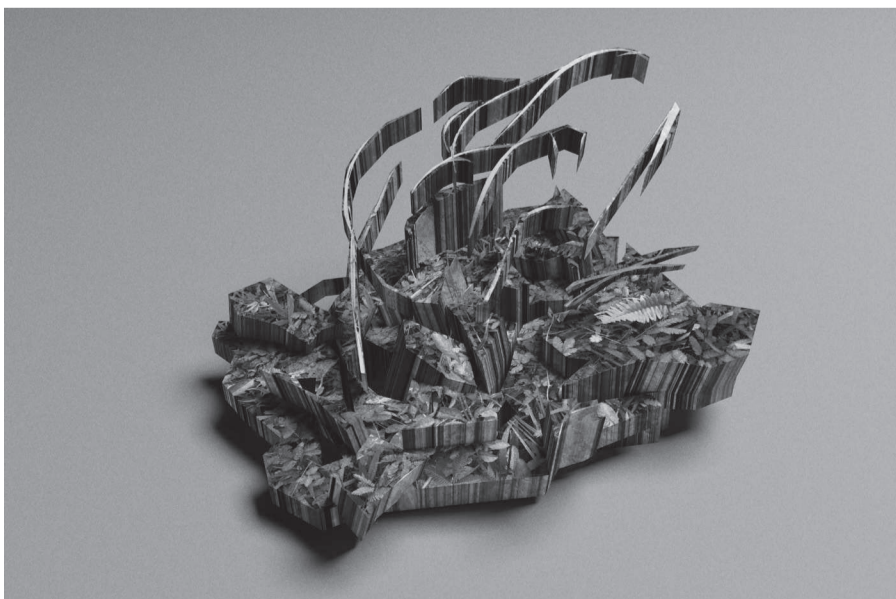
GNHOG GNHOGEN  
MORACEAE *Ficus pseudopalma* Blanco



MAKAHIA  
FABACEAE *Mimosa diplotricha* c. Wight ex Sauvalle

—

TIHAK  
CYPERACEAE *Scleria* sp.



life – that human societies have reached the ‘end of history’. There is no end to human history. We should always expect that it will keep on changing and I think that is what the concept of dukkha does. Today freedom might mean one thing, in another epoch of history it might mean something else. At this point our job is our struggle to expand freedom from the constraints that we are facing today.

**PP:** Okay. So suppose that new conceptual developments occur in rights discourse (or that it is spurned altogether) as well as in the scientific discourse which could resolve the conflicts arising from widespread dislocation and alienation of people. And, thus, we find ourselves in a condition where we engage with places more humanely, in ways that we are able to salvage a notion of place as an ontological attribute of the human being and a condition for life. How can we establish those bonds anew, given the changes humanity and nature have undergone?

**RdS:** I would like to begin where modernity begins. The European Enlightenment was a broad philosophical revolution. The merchants seeking to expand trade to become rich forced the wider society, especially intellectuals, to confront the philosophical foundations of the church, state and theocracy. The church was against usury for example, it privileged inherited rights of the landed aristocracy. The scientific revolution challenged theology and the revolution in legal theory challenged the authority of the church as the source of law. Ordinary men and women felt oppressed by the authoritarian demands of the church and the aristocracy and there were protest movements of different types throughout Europe. That is the context that produced thinkers like Marx. The social changes were accompanied by a broad spectrum of philosophical views that mirrored the different types of interest that social classes had for going against the feudal order. Today you have the condition of 91 percent of the world that is subjugated to varying degrees. Even middle class people are affected by the economic crisis. But we are not seeing a philosophical revolution that is anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, that argues for a new kind of science – a new way of thinking about nature, society and people.

In most Third World countries there are many important struggles going on—struggles of indigenous people, struggle against corporations, struggles against mining. However, the theoretical and philosophical framing of those struggles are coming from the European and American academia and intellectuals. If Enlightenment grew by challenging the feudal order – theology, church whatever – a new world can only grow from challenging the Enlightenment because the Enlightenment is old now. European intellectuals are trapped in their philosophical traditions and they are not directly engaged in transformative social and political actions to change the world order founded on Enlightenment concepts and values. That is where the gap is. There is a spatial gap in the geographies of knowledge. The theory is produced in Western universities and the struggles happen in the Third World. The theory-practice gap becomes a geographic one. That is why after working a lifetime with social movements and labour organization – the more I think about it, the more I feel that unless there is a kind of conscious philosophical revolution the transformation will not happen automatically from struggles alone. No revolutionary movement has succeeded without new revolutionary philosophical and theoretical development.

**PP:** And why do you think that doesn’t happen more spontaneously?

**RdS:** Einstein famously said no problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. Our actions stem from existing consciousness. Our actions and political practices throw up new problems or tell us something more about our existing knowledge. That is just the raw material for new knowledge. The raw material that practice throws up has to be refined, synthesized and developed into a weapon in the battle for ideas in the struggle for freedom.

Many social movements in Third World countries think that organizing around an immediate issue is the only important thing. In fairness if there is a slum demolition outside your house or land acquisition notice to take your land you cannot postpone fighting it until you have your theory right. But that does not mean that the philosophical, historical and theoretical questions must be left to the privileged in the Western universities and think tanks. Social movements in the Third World must find a way of supporting the battle for ideas. For example, let us take the problem of land acquisition. All Third World countries are witnessing social conflicts over land acquisitions. International organizations and coalitions like the International Land Coalition argue for land rights, land titles and right to compensation. By arguing for human rights to land they hold out the hope that people will get land and livelihoods with these rights. In reality the problem of displacement has arisen precisely because globalisation has allowed large corporations to buy up lands in poor countries. Human rights advocates do not say that should stop. How can there be land for everyone if more and more investors are buying up larger and larger areas of land as their private property? We can’t go on displacing people and then telling them we will find you land somewhere because land is not going

to materialize from thin air. It is not something you can expand. We need a movement of critical anti-imperialist, anti-colonial scholars thinkers – who can conceptualise the larger issues and put them into historical and philosophical perspectives.

**PP:** Absolutely. But our culture has created conditions that are particularly disadvantageous to people coming together to think, to people having faith in their capacity to change things collectively...

**RdS:** That has always been there. That is why I am saying that the idea of freedom as absence of constraints is fundamentally problematic and incorrect. Think of Copernicus, Galileo, did they not have constraints? They had constraints! The poor man was trapped into an inquisition for thinking the way he did. Did Spartacus did not have constraints? He had to be gladiator and kill another slave which was totally against his nature. And he led a slave rebellion. Constraints are ever present. At the same we should also think about the things that brings us together, which is our displacement. Who knows today we are sitting in this flat and there could be another financial crisis and we could be sitting on the pavements. That anxiety should bring us together.

Our concept of humanity has become very abstract. The television has a big role to play in this. For example, let us imagine life during the Second World War. If a newspaper carried a report that 5000 children had died of starvation somewhere in the world people would have to imagine what that might be like. They could only imagine it by imagining what it might feel like if their own child were to die of starvation. The frame of reference produces empathy for others. Television has removed that frame of reference from us. When we see images of children dying in far-away places we do not have to imagine anything. Our imagination is switched off. The image on the screen is completely objectified and removed from us. So the subjective interpretative process of trying to imagine that reality is taken away from us. With that our capacity to feel for the tragedy is also gone! So the objectification of tragedies does two things: it deadens the mother in me and it kills my capacity to empathize with another person. How do we restore that humanity in us? It is a bigger challenge. It cannot be restored by technology. It can only be restored by forming social bonds, by relating to people, by having a drink together and talking about things that matter in our collective and individual lives. That is why creating a new culture of social bonds that are direct and not mediated by technology is absolutely essential to new change that will come. Bonds mediated by technology keep our sociality tied to the developments in the military-industrial complex. Our bonds become shaped by military technologies like the internet.

**PP:** In our discussions, you argued that forms of knowledge production that constitute a threat to capitalism and imperialism get non-violently assimilated by formal institutions (or market institutions), recycled and articulated in ways that turn it almost unrecognizable for those who produced it. I found a good example of this in your writings on Fanon and your description of how his work acquired different meanings at different stages for the cultural establishment. For example, how he became a cool guy in the cultural turn of the 80s. I think something comparable is happening nowadays with the ontological turn, as well as with the attention and recognition that contemporary thinkers from all the ranges of scholarly positions are driving towards indigenous people’s philosophy. What do you have to say about this?

**RdS:** I think you are right in your observation that ontology is becoming fashionable in the academe these days. In my view these references to ontology stem from the bankruptcy of the epistemological orientation of modernism. Why do I say that references to ontology are a fashion when I consider ontology to be pivotal to our understanding of contemporary problems? Ontology remains a fashion today because the understanding of ontology is not coming from any real engagements with the existential crisis that humanity is facing today. It is a fashion because the inspiration is coming from constant demands from universities to say something different. The neoliberal reforms of universities have turned education into a global commodity. Universities have developed a set of indicators to evaluate academic publications that include novelty. Every academic is supposed to produce original and novel works within a set period at the end of which their work will be evaluated. That puts pressure on academics to say something new in everything they do. As it is impossible for everyone to develop an original idea at the end of each research evaluation cycle they end up appropriating glimpses of ideas from different places and people, say indigenous philosophy or traditional techniques and incorporating them into their work.

I used to see many students on campus wearing Che Guevara t-shirts when I was teaching in New Zealand. I used to ask them: “Do you know who this guy on your T-shirt is?” They would say: “no.” I used to ask: “why are you wearing the T-shirt?” They would answer: “Oh because it is fashionable. Everybody is selling them and so I am wearing one.” I used to sit them down and tell them about Che Guevara. It was a transformative experience for them because they did not know that the face on their T-shirts was something so significant. It is something similar with the references to

ontology. The academic understanding of ontology is not grounded in anything in the real world. Scholars may write about ecological and social distress within their academic disciplines but stop short of asking: what is the real nature of the relationship between nature and society? Instead he or she thinks: “here is something that an indigenous person has said criticising modern philosophy. That is a new idea! Let me use it.” For the indigenous person who is criticising modern philosophy for ignoring ontology the idea is not driven by the educational market. To the contrary it is driven by their existential crisis in this modern world. The idea of “concept-mining” has become popular these days. Concept-mining uses technology to “mine” concepts - - it helps you to appropriate a concept by removing it from the social or historical context -it distorts the ontological underpinnings of the concept. ‘Concept mining’ with or without the use of technology is fundamentally anti-ontology. I believe ontology is pivotal to any new philosophical revolution - but it must be real ontology grounded in social and philosophical history, contemporary struggles and recognition of the existential crisis that humanity is facing today.

**PP:** I think what is real is that epistemology is exhausted...

**RdS:** It is already exhausted.

**PP:** And the ontological turn is the recognition of this exhaustion. But then, you truly have to be ontological...

**RdS:** What is happening however is that ontological problems are being treated as if they were epistemological problems.

**PP:** And this brings me to the title of a photographic series I finished recently, which accompanies this interview. This title literally quotes a sentence from an article you wrote: “A fleeting moment of dissidence becomes fossilized and lifeless after the moment has passed.” But the whole paragraph is the following:

“Activist scholars seek to break with the modernist rules of scholarship (the research methods) but only to redefine them and reinstate them. A fleeting moment of dissidence becomes fossilized and lifeless after the moment has passed.”

**RdS:** I can give you an example. I was having this conversation with a very leading academic, someone who is well recognised as an activist scholar and deeply involved with the World Social Forum. He told me once: “You must stop talking about ontology. It is really useless. You must focus on radical epistemology. I asked him: “you defend rights of indigenous peoples and you praise their struggles, you defend indigenous knowledge ... Have you ever stopped and asked yourself, what it is about indigenous people that gives them the stamina and resilience to continue struggling even after being subjected to every kind of aggression? Since the time Columbus reached their shores until now they have held steadfastly to their ideas about the relationships between nature, society and human life. They were the first to recognise what was at stake in globalisation long before the liberal intellectuals joined the anti-globalisation movements. In spite of the fact that they have been virtually exterminated in places - they have been victims of the worst military, economic ecological violence. In spite of all that what gives them the strength to continue fighting? Have you thought about that? And he said: “what do you mean?” I said: “that is the power of ontology!”

**PP:** What did he say?

**RdS:** He was totally silent. He didn’t say anything. Three or four years later, I noticed he was using ontology in that same way that you are speaking about. So it is a good example of a leading scholar, internationally known, very famous. Now he speaks about ontology and indigenous people and all of that but it sounds very disconnected.

**PP:** If we are to engage with ontology, we need to be back in reality.

**RdS:** Absolutely. We need to be back in reality, but in being engaged in reality, we must not forget the importance of philosophy and we need to actually develop a radical philosophy that matches and enhances our engagement with the world. I think that is our responsibility as intellectuals, as authors, as people involved in intellectual fields.

**PP:** True! Okay. I think is a good way to finish, right? Thank you very much.

**RdS:** Thank you...

## Nicolleta Daldanise:

### poema

Un passo avanti, un passo indietro  
Scrivo un'introduzione che non vuole condurre.  
Trovo chiavi di lettura che non esauriscono le questioni,  
le amplificano, le contraddicono.

Documentarsi, mettere a fuoco i dettagli dei racconti,  
le lettere, i saggi, le immagini  
lascia emergere solo la cornice.  
La storia saprà offrire la giusta definizione di vulnerabilità.

La resilienza del sapere sopravvissuto ad essa,  
affidato alla voce di chi avrà più tenacia nel riadattarlo ai linguaggi,  
darà testimonianza di ciò che, minacciato nella sua esistenza,  
sopravviverà oltre le cesoie dell'interpretazione.

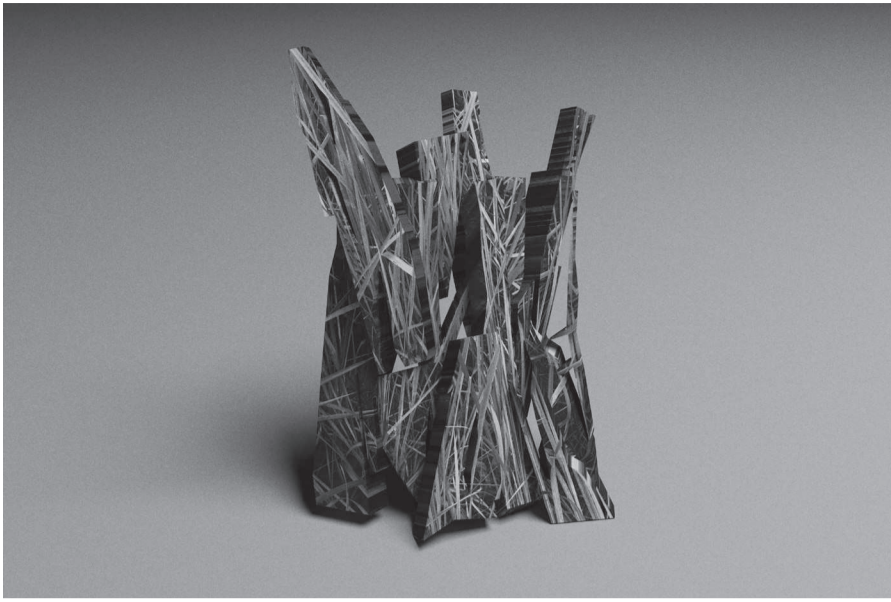
La scrittura è un esercizio di gerarchia della trasmissione,  
ma l'arte prende posizione nella zona d'ombra e si accomoda  
nel disagio delle domande irrisolte delle altre discipline.  
Restituisce democrazia agli strumenti di produzione intellettuale.

A chi osserva viene chiesto di non imbrigliare,  
di aprire le polverose teche dell'erbario,  
dove le categorie di giudizio inchiodano le nostre percezioni,  
di provare nuovi innesti e di assorbire le interferenze.

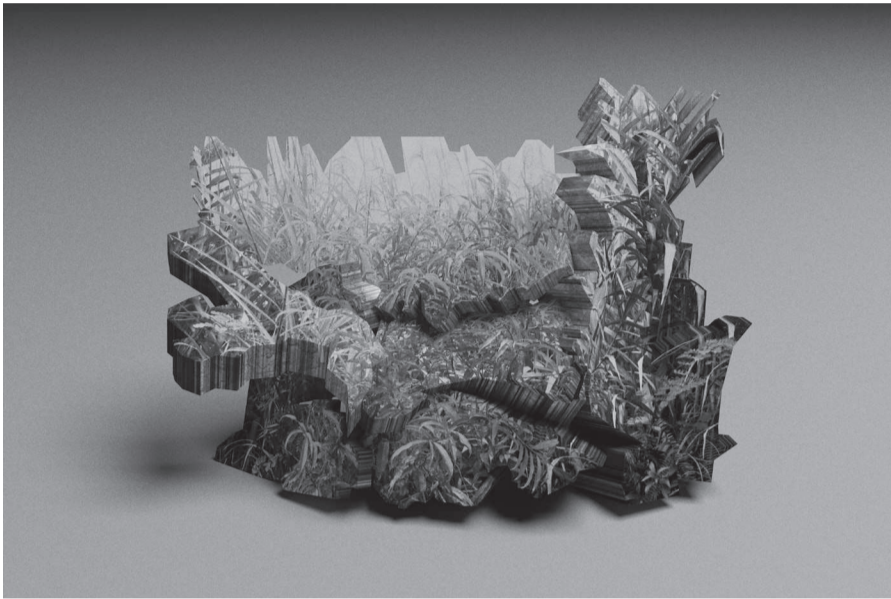
L'epistemologia di un progetto artistico non trova evidenza  
se non si lasciano intravedere i fili che legano le relazioni e le corrispondenze,  
le incertezze, i rischi e le intuizioni prima che prendano forma.  
Resistere alla tentazione di dare compimento all'opera è essenziale.

Restare in uno stato d'instabilità,  
non per indolenza, ma per accoglienza.  
Porgo l'orecchio in ascolto, lascio la parola  
Un passo indietro, un passo avanti ...

KUGHUN  
POACEAE *Imperata cylindrica* (L.) P Beauv.

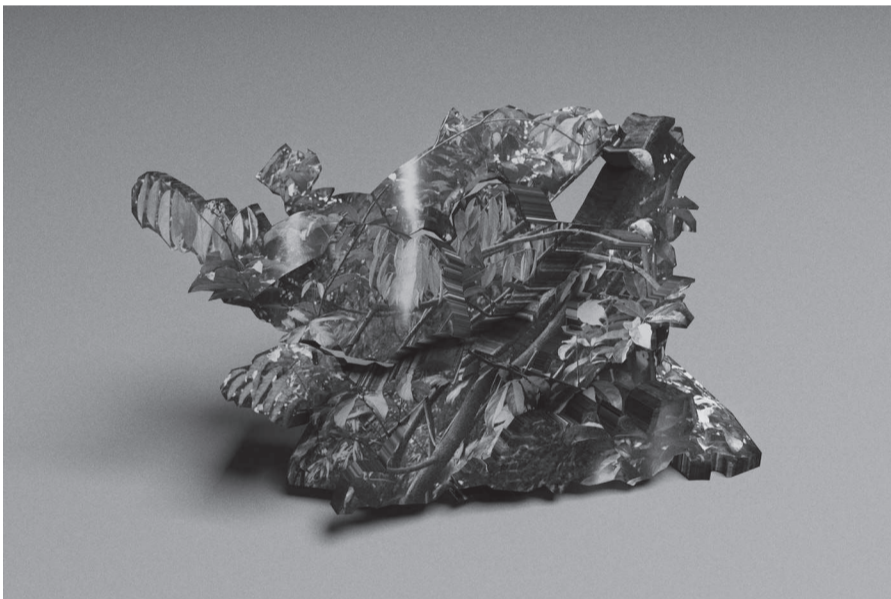


RACENG RACENG  
FABECEAE *Albizia* sp.



BIHO  
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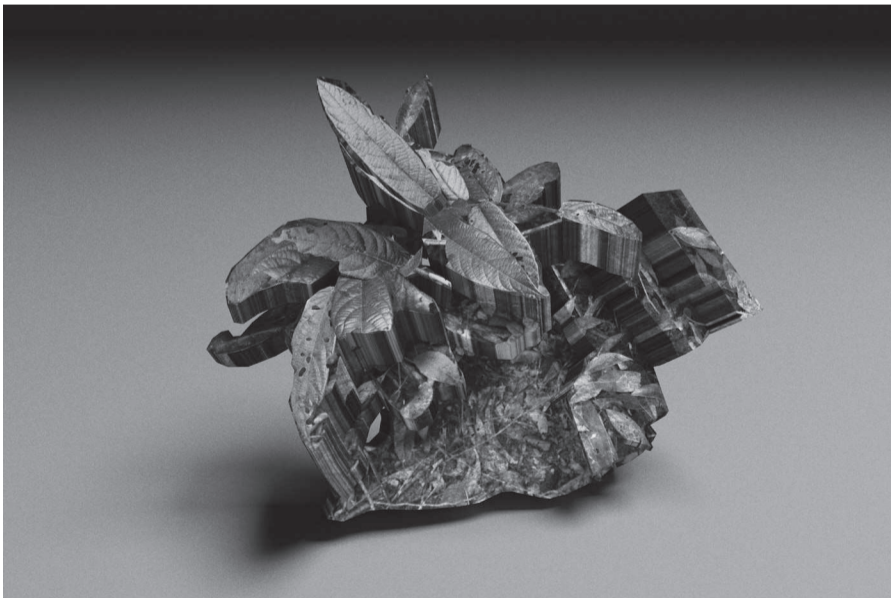
PANGHA GIPANG  
MARATTIACEAE *Marattia pellucida* C. Presl.



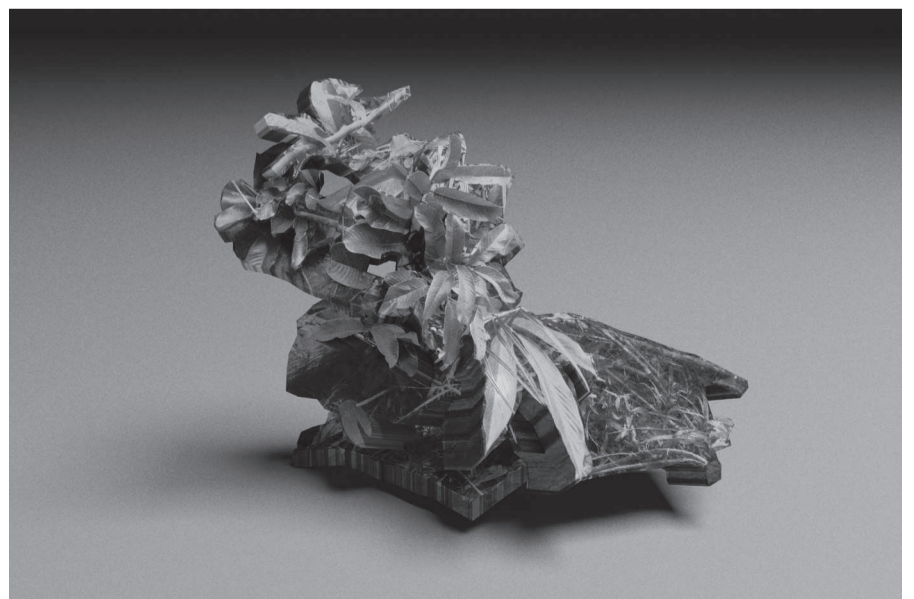
KARRAMBA  
SAPINDACEAE *Genus Indet.*

KARRAMBA  
SAPINDACEAE *Genus Indet.*

UYA (BUUK BUUKEN)  
ANNONACEAE *Genus Indet.*



KES KES  
ASPARAGACEAE *Dracaena angustifolia* Roxb.



KIDURRU KIDURRU  
unidentified

UYA (MASO)  
ANNONACEAE *Genus Indet.*