

Biologue

Trisha Baga
March 15–April 21, 2018

Trisha Baga in conversation with Aily Nash

With *Biologue*, American artist Trisha Baga extends her recent work into a new two-part video installation. Throughout the work, cells subdivide via mitosis, languages collapse into phonemes and misheard sounds, objects dissolve into detritus, and digital images shatter into pixels and artifacts. While preoccupied with these processes of fragmentation, Baga is equally invested in reassembling and recombining their elements into new narratives.

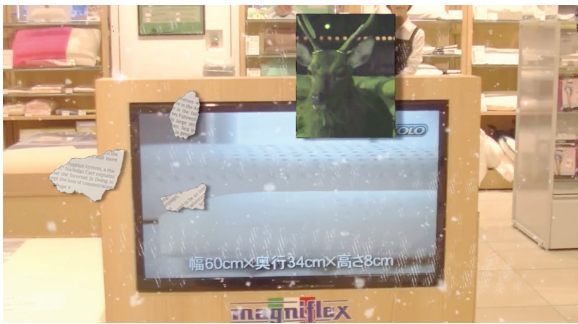
Biologue collages video footage of the artist's family road trip through the Philippines, audio from Hollywood soundtracks, and objects both readymade and hand-crafted. A circuitous journey that reflects how culture and its signs travel and shift, Baga's work alludes to Philippine history and the layers of colonialism the country has endured and considers the resulting cultural and aesthetic osmosis through repeated translations and mistranslations.

Baga collapses disparate spaces and languages, creating an immersive 3D-video environment that playfully explores what the concept of "immersion" can promise across physical and virtual space. *Biologue* invites viewers to become subsumed in its flows and to make meaning from simultaneous but diverging sensory and perceptual experiences.

In the following conversation, Baga and Aily Nash, head of programming at the Images Festival, discuss various intricacies of Baga's 3D-video *The Voice* (2017), including the ways in which the work reflects upon the ongoing conditions of colonialism and Baga's formal modes of resisting hegemonic meaning.

AN: In your work, you create relationships between digital and physical spaces that are often discussed, but your interest in cultural cross-pollination isn't usually addressed. In *The Voice*, you meld really disparate spaces. For example, one sequence includes a deer attacking you in Nara, Japan, and then there's an amazing transition to the California desert featuring Dolly Parton's voice, and then the phone rings and we're suddenly in your aunt's house. It all, somehow, becomes a psychically cohesive space even though it's clearly composed of geographically and culturally different things. We simultaneously feel the disjunctions and the fluidities between them. Can you talk about how you've approached this permeability between spaces?

TB: In one way, it's kind of like wearing your headphones while you're on the subway. But in another way, it's as basic as wanting to make a new metaphor because the old ones can feel so oppressive. It's like enabling a form of negation between conflicting elements, a negation that allows you to experience an emotion in the present rather than something that's filtered through pre-existing cultural values.



All video stills Trisha Baga, *The Voice*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

AN: So, putting two different things together negates both of them, but then something new is born.

TB: Yeah! And I think it actually returns meaning to whatever each thing is made of—beyond its history of optics and usage. Its material composition versus what its surface signifies.

AN: In a specific example: how does Dolly Parton function in this?

TB: Well, I took that audio from an introduction to her audiobook, and I wanted the clip to feel simultaneously like an inhabited and inhabiting voice, like it was flexible within its implied narrative positions. But, cinematically, I was thinking of her voice as a pivot toward the audience after the language-learning dialogue that preceded it, like a shift in camera angles: a two-shot third-person point of view turning into a one-shot first-person. That grammatical shift makes you search for a central figure—the source of the “I”—and I was hoping to loosely connect it to the accompanying video footage of an approaching bubble in the sky. Even though the landscape she describes and the landscape you see are clearly different in content, it still easily conveys a particular sense of place: making something new from negation! I mean, that’s the deconstructed version of this answer. But also, I just truly love the quality of her voice, and it probably goes great with anything.

AN: *The Voice* grapples with slippage in meaning, one's ability to understand or not understand. We encounter many forms of translation, subtitles, dubbing, footage from language lessons, and the like.

TB: I think the work itself comes from the space of not understanding language and, in that lack of understanding, having language become a different thing. It has a lot to do with me growing up and not really knowing what my parents were saying. And when I went on this trip to the Philippines with my family, they were all speaking a really regional dialect that I couldn't speak at all. I would just look at them but couldn't understand them. A lot of my childhood was just watching my mom making fun of me with her friends. I knew what was happening and understood the emotions present, but not the mechanics. I actually find that space really comforting because it just becomes—

AN: —a non-linguistic space.

TB: Yeah.

AN: When we encounter a language or culture that we're not familiar with, everything has a way of becoming abstract blobs that lack direct meaning. There's a line somewhere in *The Voice*: "It's a person!" "No, it's a poster!" Often in this work, it's not only meaning that slips and becomes abstracted, but objects are also malleable—they can go from being a person, to an image of a person, to a poster. There's this fluidity in which everything is ontologically multivalent.



TB: Yeah, I'm realizing this quality is actually a product of me being a dysfunctional component of the system. The language doesn't work because I don't understand it, and when something stops fulfilling its intended use, that's when it becomes material again.

AN: Can you talk about the reference to *The Little Mermaid*?

TB: I think I was just being really gay or something. I realized that the song "Poor Unfortunate Soul" [sung by Ursula, the

villain of *The Little Mermaid*] is the best gay karaoke song. It's also the best drag queen song. Did you know Ursula was modeled after the drag queen Divine? That song has so much to do with taking apart the body and the fluidity of identity. It takes such delicious stabs at heteronormative culture.

AN: It's so loaded: Ursula taking away Ariel's voice and giving her a *body* because she doesn't *need* a voice.

TB: Yeah. It's so bad, and so obvious. That's why it's so fun to re-inhabit. It's funny how the most fun things always lead to what you care about the most. I had that song in my head all week and then I was like, this fits *perfectly* and I need its subtitles in the work.

AN: I love what happens with these subtitles. The song is never actually in the work, so some people are going to read that text and have no idea what they're referring to, and others will be singing the song in their heads. And you transform the lyrics into homophones, so the text reads: "After all deer, what is idol babel for?" In this translation, all the previous worlds you've introduced in *The Voice* echo back and are solidified in this one sentence.

TB: Thank you! When it happened, I was like, "Ah! Thank you, thank you, Ariel!" These are really not things that I could write. Something should be said about homophones here, and how they too are a form of homo. Maybe that's all that needs to be said.

AN: In your work, you have nearly always used 3D video. How does 3D video feel integral to what is possible with moving-image work?

TB: Yeah, I can't stop. I love it. I like the timing of it. I like the texture of it. I like how your eye wanders away from the edges of things more. There are more edges in 3D so there's more... it's like why a painter uses gesso.

AN: You want it to be more shape-y.

TB: Yeah. I like how attention works when it takes so long for you to process an image. When things are flat, I feel like you can really easily see video as a composition in a rectangle. With 3D, at least consumer-grade 3D, it exceeds our ability to look at the whole picture. So it creates more potential energy for narrative and seeing. It's very important to me that it's consumer-grade 3D, because if it works too well as a hologram, it just re-contains itself. Consumer-grade 3D just can't contain itself for viewers. And I like the way it interacts with other objects more. It's like a telephone to ceramics; it has the potential to implicate things off-screen. I see it as a mode of connecting images and objects. I like it when things in different worlds can communicate with each other, like different bodies. That feels gay to me.

AN: What about the different iterations of this piece? You made an early piece called *Ghosts* that uses some of the same footage, right? And then there was *Mabuhay* and *Beautiful Lunchtime Michael* [all 2016]...

TB: Oh my god, you're like the only person who has seen all these. *The Voice* is definitely a palimpsest, and I made it while traveling around the world and exhibiting its different versions. When working with video, I don't really know where beginnings and ends are. Making and editing moving images is such an inextricable part of my life and how I process experience, so clean and traditional narrative arcs always ring false and mealy and structured by capitalism.

From the beginning, I was thinking of the work in the lineage of the mystery genre, where the first act introduces an environment where "something bad" happens or has happened, which wrenches apart a central organism. And the rest of the narrative is a pile of new composites that you sort through. You're trying to figure out which pieces of evidence contain the person that was once here, and you're trying to articulate what exactly caused the destructive force or event.

Thinking of how this work changed over time, it was actually through a very slow articulation of metaphors becoming more specific to itself. In its first iteration, I didn't understand it at all, even though it contained a lot of the same elements it does now. In its final form, the alienation and anxiety I was processing at the time became very clear, at least to me.

But who knows, that's what I say now. Everything got all fucked up because right after the second-to-last iteration of the work, Donald Trump became President of the United States. When that happened, I almost wanted to be, like, he's



the “something bad” that happened in this mystery! To name him as the destructive force in the video. But I couldn’t even look at his face. I didn’t want to multiply his face anymore, I didn’t want to further empower it. I couldn’t stop thinking about how information multiplying is a terribly toxic thing. So, I had to figure out how to point to him (or this destructive event that he encapsulates) without feeling like a conduit for the dark magic. So, I tried to cover him up with pieces of gum, which, in my mind, I thought of as Ariel’s lost voice. The gum appears after the sound of a cough—which I thought of as the moment of vocal inhabitation—or later during footage of a deer chewing with a voice-over. I wanted to refer to that old ventriloquist trope of giving someone (or an animal) some chewing gum and throwing voice into that body. Is that a trope? Maybe I just saw it in an *Archie* comic once.

AN: How does the road trip through the Philippines intersect with these ideas? How did your thinking around the cultural colonialism that the Philippines endured enter this work?

TB: I am Filipino, just in case people reading this don’t know that yet. And I’m a strong believer that you inherit traumas and histories and characters and funny stuff from your ancestors in all sorts of intangible ways. And these things are impossible to have a clear perspective on—especially when looking at yourself. Should I do a quick history lesson here?

I’m not an expert and I was born in America, but okay: the Philippines has a very long history of being fucked around by other countries, most notably Spain (1521-1898), the United



States (1898-1942), and Japan (1942-45). Arab, British, and Dutch colonizers are sprinkled in there, too. In every instance, there's a serious “these savages must be tamed” vibe. When I was growing up, the only time the Philippines was mentioned in any of my history books was in reference to locations for battles between larger powers. There was also a quote that called Filipinos “the funny happy brown people in the south,” which stuck with me.

A funny thing about being an artist is you travel all the time

and have a lot of dinners with rich people. When I do this, before people know I am an artist, it is often assumed that I am a maid or an assistant, because I am Filipino and don't wear makeup. Maids around the world are often Filipino. This has happened to me in Japan, Lebanon, Italy, Germany. It comes with a very distinct aura of invisibility, objectification, and utility. The Philippines's biggest export is human labour.

I think I'm trying to explain a very specific kind of racism, and my very personal reaction to it. My reaction is deeply connected to my resistance to reigning structures and authorities, and a desire to recognize the empowerment, pleasure, and comedy that comes from thinking about form in the absence of its function. It raises questions like: How do you resist oppression without becoming the oppressor? How does one escape the endless reenactment of one's own trauma from generation to generation? How do I participate in existing structures such as image culture while also having agency? Or not just participate, but rather: how do I believe in image culture, how do I invest myself and my love into it as though my production is not also destructive?

AN: These are incredibly urgent questions in regard to the ethics of image production and circulation. In the notes you shared with me, you said that this work has to do with "first-world leftovers, and the use of something for its material qualities over what it represents." This goes back to what we were discussing earlier with regard to objects transforming, and you resisting its given function to imbue it with new possibilities for meaning.

TB: There's a traditional Filipino handicraft that's based on cutting these very specific green Mountain Dew bottles a certain way. In the Philippines, there are a lot of fences made of soda bottles, and there's a popular street food called "adidas," which is grilled chicken feet. And "betamax" is a rectangle of pigs' blood frozen in the dimensions of a Betamax tape. Manila is the most densely populated city in the world, and since culture, biologically speaking, is made of living organisms, the rate of cultural processing there is kind of intense.

I think this use of the Mountain Dew bottles relates to the appropriation of pop culture in my work—recolonizing material to make different meanings. But also, I don't know how much all this strictly relates to the Philippines. I'm the filter that my art passes through to get made. I'm made of a lot of stuff. This could be about the Philippines, but there's a whole lot of other stuff in there, too. And a lot of the locations I filmed in are simply locations I went to because the travel was free. This also has to do with the Mountain Dew bottles mentality.

One reason I think the Philippines has been colonized so many times is because it is physically and geographically incoherent. It is composed of thousands of islands with countless dialects, and communication and transportation within the country has always been complicated. But this fragmentation is essential to its identity, and the challenge is how to bring agency and visibility to an incoherent entity—see the parallels to my work again? I made this work so that



it could exceed language. So, as much as I try, I don't think I'm going to get to the heart of it using words.

AN: You're now doing research for a new piece and thinking about Imelda Marcos?

TB: Yeah, she wrote a book about photosynthesis and how it's a process that relates to the Filipino heart. None of it makes any sense, but it has the shape of sense. I'm kind of obsessed with it. Imelda was notably Roman Catholic:

the Spanish colonization of the Philippines brought in the religion, which is an impressively image-fetishy and drama-filled religion. It's so pagan because you're, like, *literally* eating the body and blood of Christ. And I think confession has this funny function where it reabsorbs the Catholic population's sinful desires and repressed energy, which are then manifested again in the religion's imagery. Catholic imagery is so violent and sexy and graphic. The light of God.

And the Philippines is a country where people crucify themselves for show during Easter. They build a cross out of two-by-fours and stuff, they carry it up that hill, and all their friends pray and take pictures. It's just such a spectacle. The Philippines sometimes seems to behave, I think, like a cover band of other people's cultures—or like other cultures in drag. Like when Imelda and Ferdinand were ousted, she went on her balcony and sang a song in front of all these people hired to cry. It's basically the musical *Evita*. In the 1950s, American pop culture arrived, replacing the subjects within this sexy Catholic narrative. And that's how you end up with ceramics of Winnie the Pooh characters reenacting the nativity—which you can find right now at my aunt's house.

AN: How did the footage from Japan end up in this piece?

TB: It was a place I could go to for free while I sublet my apartment in New York. I'd never been to Japan. I have a real belief that I can make art out of anything, and I was excited to work with this new landscape. (Hashtag Mountain Dew bottle mentality!) After my road trip with my family, I

actually approached Japan with a hope to reconcile my own position as an outsider to language. I would go back to Asia as an artist working on an exhibition—which usually includes a certain amount of support—but the whole experience was flooded with a surprisingly enormous amount of racism in both professional and personal ways. Up until the day before the opening, they wouldn't listen to any of my installation instructions because they thought I was the assistant to the white person I was traveling with. That frustration and loneliness—specifically related to racial stuff—became part of *The Voice* after that iteration.

AN: That's really terrible to hear. Now thinking back over its various iterations, I do see how a whole new layer of complexity was added to the piece after that version. Did the abstracted sense of language that you encountered in Japan resonate with your experience on the road trip in the Philippines?

TB: Yeah. And the alphabet is different. You don't even see the letter "A" or anything. For me, the language became really far gone, moving into a space of drawing. The absence of something—in this case, the absence of literacy—is always an opportunity for creative thought. (Hashtag Mountain Dew bottle mentality!) This is something that was ingrained in the work from the start—its first iteration was called *Ghosts*, and a ghost is a thing you create from traces of what's absent.

AN: The ghost is a complicated recurring entity in this work. Did it function as a formal or narrative device?

TB: Yeah, I think a ghost is always there, as long as there are cracks. And my work is just cracks, cracks, cracks. And things slipping. Ghosts are within all those little places in your head that make you feel those pangs and stomach drops. Or, put less dramatically, ghosts are in the atmosphere of every thought, and the negative space of everything that's been forgotten, and how you fill it in. I think it's about positive space versus negative space. For example, the recalled melody of "Poor Unfortunate Souls" is also a ghost in *The Voice*. Because all you get in the film are homophones of the lyrics framed as subtitles, but if you are at all familiar with the reference, that thumping diva melody is gonna start playing in your head. And how it's remembered will be different for everyone.

AN: And I like that some people can see it or hear it, and some people can't. Because so many people are going to watch this video and never pick up any relationship to *The Little Mermaid*. But the people who *know* will see it. I think that's how ghosts work, too.

What I find really powerful and unique about your work is your ability to articulate the ghosts in language, how you manifest those gaps and resonances. You bring an abstract experience of language and meaning into a visual space.

TB: It's nice to hear that it works! I think opening these pathways is the first step to enabling radical thought. ■

Trisha Baga's recent solo exhibitions include the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (2017); 356 Mission Road, Los Angeles (2017); Greene Naftali, New York (2015); the Zabłudowicz Collection, London (2014); Gio Marconi, Milan (2014); Peep-Hole, Milan (2013); Societé, Berlin (2013); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2012). Her work belongs to the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art; Aishti Foundation, Beirut; the Zabłudowicz Collection; the Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf; the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Trento and Roverto. She was recently shortlisted for the Nam June Paik award and was featured at the Okayama Art Summit in Japan and the Biennial of Moving Images in Geneva. Baga is represented by Greene Naftali, New York.

Aily Nash is a curator based in New York. She is Head of Programming at Images Festival in Toronto and co-curator of Projections, the New York Film Festival's artists' film and video section. She served as a Biennial advisor and co-curator of the film program for the 2017 Whitney Biennial. She is a program advisor to the International Film Festival Rotterdam's Short Film section. She is currently commissioning new works by James N. Kienitz Wilkins and Lucy Raven through the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York's MOBIUS Fellowship. She has curated programs and exhibitions for MoMA PS1, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Anthology Film Archives (New York), Kiasma (Helsinki), FACT (Liverpool), Image Forum (Tokyo) and others. She curated five seasons of the Basilica Screenings series at Basilica Hudson (2012-16). Her writing has appeared in the Brooklyn Rail, BOMB, Artforum.com, and elsewhere. In 2015, she was awarded a Curatorial Fellowship from the Andy Warhol Foundation.

Biologue is co-presented with the Images Festival,
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imagesfestival.com.



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