

## RADICAL TAKES ON THE RETROSPECTIVE IMPULSE

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### **About the Author**

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Buen Calubayan's artistic practice has, over the years, delved intensely into the nature of documentation and retrospection: translating and transforming the amorphous process of artistic accounting into a tangible visual encounter.

His 2015 solo show titled *Biowork* at the Ateneo Art Gallery (AAG) represents a significant turn of events within this trajectory. The culmination of the AAG award's residency grant in 2013, the exhibition presents his life work—ranging from its attendant remains to current projects—as an entire installation. The resulting space yields a taxonomic display of objects and archival materials produced by the artist within the span of 21 years, from 1994 to 2015.

## DENSITY OF DOCUMENTATION

*Buen Calubayan: Biowork*, the catalog produced for the exhibition, distills the artist's two-year journey into a compact volume of texts, images, themes, and timelines collectively presented as a biographical summation of sorts. Sections are devoted to sharing images of the works, details of these objects, and their placement within the entire exhibition layout. The documentation is extensive, densely packed and precise: clearly an influence and extension of Calubayan's former background in museological practice.

This collection of Calubayan's work and writing is also framed, theoretically and processually, by three other texts published in this volume. Thea Garing's exhibition notes revisit the conscious positioning of the artist as archivist, stressing how this role defines Calubayan's approach to art-making. Two essays by collaborators Angelo Suárez and Susan Quimpo, on the other hand, shed light on how art therapy and self-reflexive critique, respectively, function as Calubayan's strategies for artistic discovery and production, as manifested in selected works.

Quimpo, for instance, narrates how the process of art therapy sessions with Calubayan helped to yield a 2015 oil on canvas painting series reflecting on the pilgrimage to Mt. Banahaw and a 2014 installation work made from the pages of Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution*. Meanwhile, Suárez discusses the artist's earlier and concurrent work in conceptualism: exploring texts, timelines, diagrams, and performance as means of "laying bare the contradictions on which the art industry thrives." Such texts are central to the grounding of Calubayan's work: one illuminates the processes underlying Calubayan's object-based practice while the other stresses the value of Calubayan's more transient and performative gestures as institutional critique.

But at the heart of both the exhibition and the catalog is “Vanishing Point”: a timeline with Calubayan’s personal and projected mapping of artworks from 1999 to 2020. Calubayan made its first version in 2008, revising and expanding it almost annually since then. The work recalls other iconic gestures of mapping throughout the history of art, such as the 1936 hand-drawn chart by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., illustrating the development of modern art.

Combining accounting and anticipation, the work goes beyond the act of chronological sequencing. It plots not only the production of certain works and projects within an unfolding time, but also surfaces the presence of other consequential confluences in this process: naming life events, books, authors, and thematic directions which influenced his trajectories of thinking and making. “Vanishing Point,” thus, can be seen as an attempt to chart not only a genealogy of projects and practice, but also the flux of the artist’s own ideological horizon.

#### **AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AS ART PRODUCTION**

As a publication project, *Biowork* interestingly breaches the divisions between various genres of art historical writing. As the nature of Calubayan’s exhibition is that of a critical summation of past and present practice, the book simultaneously offers the interpretative license of an exhibition catalog, the thematic focus of a monograph, and the taxonomic breadth and meticulousness of attribution of a catalogue raisonné.

The seventh iteration of “Vanishing Point” as a lengthy fold-out indicates, however, that the publication is far from a closed work of documentation or a display of one’s oeuvre. Instead, it assumes the nature of an active, shifting text in the hands of the reader: one that invites an interactive, collaborative reading of the artist’s practice. As Suárez points out, this timeline is a form that can be encountered either physically, such as within the space of a gallery or book, or virtually, saved as a digital file.

Through this document, Calubayan implicitly challenges the reader to not only seek nodes of connection between his past works and other aspects of his personal development, but also to speculate on what this complex process of linearity may lead to. In fact, he projects the timeline of “Vanishing Point” far beyond the unfolding present to the year 2020, anticipating future projects. The fold-out, thus, serves not only as a passive record of the past, but also as a speculative work: an active proof of both prediction and promise.

Calubayan's artist statement, "Instructions on Viewing the Landscape," is, on the other hand, encountered as both image and text: a conceptual diagram and a set of open-ended instructions. This underscores the critical aspect of the artist's intention: that it is again less a declaration of authorial intent for his past practice and more of a tool for framing and proposing a new way of seeing the present landscape of history, laid out before the viewer.

This dynamic shifting (and merging) of documentation towards contemporary practice—the translation of promise into reality, so to speak—is reaffirmed in recent events. For instance, several of the materials and texts in *Biowork*, including a revised or reprinted version of "Vanishing Point" and "Instructions on Viewing the Landscape," reappear in Calubayan's subsequent solo exhibition, titled *Hidalgo: Towards a History from Within*, on view at Blanc Gallery Katipunan from 11 June to 2 July, 2016. This rounds off the artist's interrogation of a nascent and formative phase in the history of Philippine art, first examined in the project, *Spoliarium* (2013).

The enactment and reenactment of the timeline frame Calubayan's broader project of interrogating assumptions within art history. It is in such deliberately designed encounters between the past and present that the import of Calubayan's surveys into self is most felt.

In consciously employing auto-ethnography as a strategy for artistic research and production, Calubayan connects the landscape of personal experience, therapy, and practice with larger questions of institutional context, archiving, and critique. The evolving timeline in *Biowork*, thus, distills the artist's expression of the auto-ethnographic process: a way of observing and plotting his own sense of being as it unfolds up to the present.

In the book *Stories of Art* (2002), art historian James Elkins outlines several ways of thinking about the "imaginative form of history," ranging from maps to organic, oscillating, and even paradoxical models of history and post-history itself. Compared to these models, Calubayan's individual timeline does not substantially deviate from traditional forms of organic or life history—charted as it is in a predominantly linear progression. But it harbors radical possibilities as a means of writing history "from below" and as an expression of agency.

The auto-ethnographic impulse is also subject to its own contradictions, which Calubayan seems to acknowledge. For instance, his attempt at self-periodization and taxonomy yields curious categories: the articulation of sub-periods, for instance, may range from "Romantic/Amateur" to "blasphemous anti-Catholic imperialist works." Such unstable, sometimes unwieldy, labels underscore the eclectic nature

of self-definition. Inscribing these in a timeline entails an openness to a certain degree of risk: of being able to acknowledge these possible areas of instability and vulnerability. The problematic yet necessary nature of mapping is thus a first step towards examining and even interrogating the process of one's development as an artist.

What transformative potential lies in this exercise? In the case of "Vanishing Point", the documentation and mapping of self transforms from the archival gesture into a keenly political act of art making and critique. In a milieu where the need for theoretical and historical grounding is too often and too tragically waylaid by supposedly more exigent and worldly concerns, Calubayan's overt privileging of retrospection and reflexivity as strategies for art-making is an implicit challenge to other contemporaries within the art world: a call to examine the structures, experiences, and motivations that have shaped the course of our own artistic production.