CHARTING THE CATALOG OF CALUBAYAN’S BIOWORK

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About the Author
Carlomar Arcangel Daoana is the author of four collections of poetry, with *Loose Tongue: Poems 2001-2013*, published by the UST Publishing House in 2014, as the most recent. His poems have been anthologized in the *Vagabond Asia Pacific Poetry Series*, published by Vagabond Press based in Australia. Daoana received First Place and Second Place honors in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the English Poetry category with his collections, *The Elegant Ghost* (2012) and *Crown Sonnet for Maria* (2013). He is a regular columnist in the Arts and Culture section of *The Philippine Star* and a contributor to various publications. He teaches at the Department of Fine Arts, Ateneo de Manila University.
An art catalog, commissioned by the artist or the gallery to accompany an exhibition (though it is not unheard-of that it sometimes materializes long after the show is over), serves a variety of purposes. The most obvious, of course, is documentation: “the show happened, and here’s a proof of that.” Usually written by a critic, an art professor, or someone who has steadily followed the practice and growth of the artist, the catalog provides direction on how to view the work, information on how it continues or departs from the artist’s stylistic or thematic trajectories, and detail on how it fits larger (usually historical and art historical) frameworks. While the tone maintains a veneer of objectivity, the appraisal is almost always approving, if not outright laudatory. Thus it is not hard to see an art catalog as a close relation to a marketing collateral, not unlike the brochure proffered by real estate agents offering well-appointed cuts of condominium units. In both, the photographs are taken by a professional, tastefully laid out, properly captioned. Capped by a list of achievements of the artist, the catalog affirms the genius of the one it heralds.

This makes it difficult to see the catalog as a work of art in itself; it remains long after the works have been sold (or possibly, returned to the artist or kept by the gallery as part of its inventory) and, by way of its medium and the arrangement of text and images, offers an autonomous viewpoint to, and a mental experience of, the exhibition. Aware of the catalog’s evidently commercial purpose, it is a fraught enterprise to treat it as a separate specimen worthy of its own dissection. But not in the case of the award-winning artist Buen Calubayan who has methodically—and obsessively—documented his artistic process as an inseparable part of his work. One may argue that the documentation—the archiving—is the work, as epitomized by Biowork, a stupendous, dizzying performance of self-reflexivity showcased at the Ateneo Art Gallery between February 24 and April 30, 2015. Hence, the catalog was (or is, with it being extant) but another work in the exhibition, a resulting element from a cumulative recording of a life predicated on the belief in art.

At 72 pages, the catalog already signals its difference from the usual with its physical heft. Opening with the essay, “Archives as Constellations of Meaning” by Thea Garing, the catalog lays the groundwork in establishing Biowork as an installation art expressed as an archive. “In the Calubayan archive,” Garing writes, “it appears as if everything is relevant, nothing is and can be discarded. Paint buckets are kept on a shelf as a reminder of the meticulous process of canvas preparation while a seemingly modernist collage work on the wall are masking tape strips used to border his paintings.” The catalog is another object that is relevant and cannot be discarded.

While Garing discusses the curatorial and museological scaffolding of the exhibition, the essay, “Biowork—The Quest for the Color Green, Light, and
Resurrection” by art therapist Susan Quimpo ventures outside the usual confines of an art catalog by discussing the psychological struggles confronting the artist in his quest for “what's next?”—and his eventual triumph over them. “Soul qualities,” how art heals “even digestion,” and how Calubayan, as a response to a Grimm fairy tale, drew light shining from a box, may sound like New Age hokum but these were demonstrated to constitute answers addressing the artist’s inertia. In fact, the art counseling sessions led to the important Banahaw series after Quimpo advised Calubayan to “go to Banahaw, as a pilgrim. Go into the Rizalistapwesto (station) with reverence knowing that the Katipuneros were once there, crawling through the tight crevices in an act of purification, and in search of their own definition of liwanag.”

After the two essays, another essay, albeit photographic, makes a rundown of the works that composed the exhibition. Significant among these is “Vanishing Point” which Angelo Suárez describes, in the essay “Documents of Sabotage and Complicity,” as a “cumulative, discursive retrospective that with institutional sanction and acknowledgment has been mounted repeatedly. Ambitiously nothing more than a timeline, it occupies—a museum and a pocket, a landscape and a flashdrive.” Previous to the exhibition, it was displayed at the Southeast Asian Platform of Art Stage Singapore in 2015. A couple of months later, “Vanishing Point” was revised for Biowork to reflect new entries. The “Vanishing Point” in the catalog (as well as in the invitation, which also contains the timeline) expresses a fresh iteration of the work. Detached from the catalog, it may be theoretically displayed as an artwork in itself.

What ultimately positions the catalog as central to the exhibition was the host of written documents which the artist made, consulted, and appropriated in the creation of the archive—art books, notes, letters, captions from posters, markings on paint buckets, hammock strips containing words from Reynaldo Ileto’s seminal Pasyon and Revolution, not to mention “Vanishing Point” which exists mainly as text. Even the titles generated ponderous attention. The exhibition established the role of the gallery-goer not merely as a viewer but as a reader as he glossed over, browsed, perused, took note of the multifarious, varied, and inescapable written materials—a role naturally extended to the appreciation of the catalog. In fact, the exhibition was as much a linguistic experience as visual, and even the conventional forms of representation, i.e., paintings, seemed subsumed under the all-encompassing and constantly expanding timeline of the artist’s biography. This is not to mention the curatorial and museological strategies undergirding the installation which, of course, had to be articulated at some point during its conception. As part and parcel of the exhibition, the Biowork catalog functions as an insistent perpetuation of an already concluded event that makes the artist’s harrowing self-examinations become omnipresent.