



**How to Respond**  
***(It's More Than That)***

By Christian Vistan

It was during a screening of works by Donna Miranda and Lena Cobangbang that followed a discussion around Green Papaya's archive with the artists, curator Allison Collins, and Green Papaya's archivist (and artist) Lesley-Ann Cao, that I recalled my brief experience in Green Papaya's Kamuning location in Quezon City in February 2020. Green Papaya was hosting an evening of performances for the 3rd Kamias Triennial called *Atchara*, named after a sweet and sour pickled condiment made from shredded green papaya.<sup>1</sup> Kamias Triennial co-curator Allison Collins joked that the title *Atchara* was a nod to Green Papaya's pending fermentation. At that time, Green Papaya was in the early stages of their (still ongoing) process of closing up shop after two decades of operations. I remember meeting and chatting late into the night that evening with Lesley-Ann Cao as the performance space slowly transformed back into a social one.<sup>2</sup> Lesley told me about how she had been chipping away at the big task of archiving Green Papaya's decades worth of programming and activities, along with other Green Papaya members, offsite.

I was a performer at Green Papaya that night, along with two other Canadian artists, Gabi Dao and Elisa Ferrari. Gabi, Elisa, and I made a new site-specific iteration of Elisa's project [lilithlithlithlithlith](#) from research that we did in the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> We changed into our performance costumes in-between the shelves of the Green Papaya archive. Gabi applied shimmery highlighter to our noses, eyelids, and cheekbones, amongst the boxes of Green Papaya's records, old artworks, and miscellaneous equipment. There was food for the performers and organizers on the other side of the wall of the archive. Filipino street food – *tokwa't baboy*, *kikyam* – was laid out in take-out containers on a table, set

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1 I've only made *atchara* once, with green papayas from my maternal Grandmother's papaya tree. I made it to bring to Canada – the classic expat/forever-*balikbayan* move of bringing pieces of our homeland back to our new home. This batch of *atchara* never made it to Canada though. It was tragically confiscated from my carry-on the moment I set foot in NAIA airport security.

2 Most nights of the week, Green Papaya shared its store front with a neighbourhood bar called Catch 272 that served food and cocktails. I once had a nice lemonade there spiked with gin.

3 For this iteration of *lilithlithlithlithlith*, Elisa, Gabi, and I visited different sites of physical and metaphorical power, including malls in Quezon City, a defunct power plant initiated by former president and dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, in my hometown, as well Green Papaya's storefront, bar, and archive.

up on the small veranda that overlooked Green Papaya's street front. Below, the evening's audience (and customers) were socializing and imbibing at tables set up before the program began.<sup>4</sup>

This memory in the archive that night is one of my main tethers to Green Papaya as a space. That evening, Green Papaya's archive resembled a green room, or a living room in the middle of a get-together. It was a space to get ready in, for the work that we were about to do, but it was also a space for conviviality, nourishment, and newly formed friendships. Thinking back, I wonder how that event and those encounters at Green Papaya resonate with what is archived – physically and metaphysically – in that space.

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4 Later that evening, I would come out to the front for a phone call that was part of our performance. I would call Gabi amongst the patrons out front to recite a series of onomatopoeic words in Tagalog. My words dissolved into fuzzy, haunting interference, as they were translated and processed by the electromagnetic sensors, from voice into electromagnetic waves.

*“I’ve worked with information and framed [it] as choreography”<sup>5</sup>*

*What information is present in the archive?*

*What choreographies are present in the archive?*

In response to this quote from artist and Green Papaya co-founder Donna Miranda, I imagine the information – the histories and ephemera from past exhibitions, performances, symposiums, residencies, and daily administrative operations – that make up Green Papaya’s archive. As we gathered, getting fed and ready for our performance that night, we moved amongst the archive, stored in shelved boxes – another kind of gathering, of information. Our presence and movement echoed past events and gatherings that are recorded in those archival documents and that rest in the memory of the space. I imagine all of the different ways that artists have gathered, organized, and configured themselves at Green Papaya in the past; performing, responding, and attending to their desires, needs, and inquiries, as well as to those of their communities. I consider this a choreography.

The assembly of community and artists is intimately documented in the liminal moments of people, artists, and friends hanging out together as captured on VHS tape by artist and early Green Papaya collaborator, Lena Cobangbang. Wedged in-between two of Cobangbang’s early video works is an interstitial scene: cigarette smoke, pipes, and words are exchanged as the camera swirls around a group of people sitting on the floor. They are friendly, talking amongst each other, and sometimes directly to the camera. I recognize some artists’ younger selves from the handful of times that I’ve spent in Manila. This social and mundane

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5 Words by Donna Miranda discussing her textual and written choreographic works. Donna works with text and written scores on paper in her dance works. She uttered these words in response to a self-reflexive question: “How do I (we) change the world I (we) live in?”

moment preserved in posterity mirrors my experiences in galleries and gatherings with other artists in Manila, in Vancouver, and in other places.

And then *Flutterbyes* (1998-1999) begins – the work that eventually turns off the lights to conclude this momentary hang. Interpersonal interactions and moments are distilled into single sentence confessions and conversations transcribed in this video. The screen is black, except for words glowing orange across its expanse. The sentences are playful, confrontational, and personal – like something you’d tell a close friend or a new one after a few drinks. They are all anonymously attributed to the letters/initials: A, C, D, R.<sup>6</sup>



*Flutterbyes* (1998-1999) Lena Cobangbang. Film Still.

In discussing these early works, Lena herself conjures the Tagalog word *pangan-gapitbahay* to describe the sociality and relationality in these videos. *Kapitbahay*, coming from the Tagalog word for “neighbour,” literally translates to “houses that are touching or holding on to each other.” This translation con-

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6 My friend M recently sent me a poem about meetings and partings, set against an image of a flickering candle. Hands cup to protect the flame’s orange glow from the elements. Words shared with friends, dates, or strangers are simultaneous meetings and partings, one followed by the other. These short bursts of touch and connection glow warmly.

tains an insistent contiguity. Boundaries touch and spaces are shared; ultimately becoming communal between its inhabitants. By turning the noun *kapitbahay* into the verb *pangangapitbahay*, the perimeters of our living and working (spaces) touch each other. It describes – and perhaps proposes – a way that spaces and resources are shared with an understanding of relationality, proximity, and our reliance on one another. *Pangangapitbahay* articulates the complex interconnectedness of our support structures.

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The interconnectivity of spaces, structures, and artists is well-articulated by Donna when she speaks about the value of autonomy when creating a place for contemporary art and dance early on in her career. Gallery and theatre spaces outside capitalist, market-driven economies and pressures were few and far between at the time in the Philippines, so she helped form Green Papaya to be an autonomous platform for independent, artist-led exhibitions and performances. They were driven by virtues of expression and experimentation. For Donna, this autonomy defined the condition of contemporaneity in dance and art.

In Donna's three solos from an evening of performances called *I like this Side* (2005), I watched a solitary body move with and through a series of physical elements that accompanied the dancer in their dance. A metal walker, sound, and light supports the dancer in a white room with wooden floors – Green Papaya's former performance and gallery space at Teacher's Village in Quezon City. These elements are multifunctional, at times acting like scaffolding, or a score, or a substance to move through. They shape the space for the dancer to move in. I see parallels of Donna's discussions around ideas of independence and autonomy in response to capitalist structures in how the dancer's body navigates these external elements. From the contortions of the body as it goes through the metal contours of the walker, to the all-over bodily experience of industrial music and noise, we experience these objects and effects through the dancer's body and her responses to them.

The primacy of how the body experiences information has always been central to Donna's work. As her practice shifts from making dance to making choreographies and scores that rely less on the traditional performer and the labouring body, other bodily considerations come to the fore.

*What does a body need?*

*What are the conditions that a body needs to live, work, make, and create?*

Currently, Donna works with and advocates for farmers and the peasant class in the Philippines. This advocacy and activism is an instinctive trajectory for her to go in as she tracks the root of the Tagalog words for “creation” and “creative” – *likha* and *malikhain* – and reconsiders these words beyond the context of art and into the world more generally. Art is something you create. Food is something you need. You cannot create without food, but at the same time, food is something that also needs to be created. This argument is pragmatic and ties these two kinds of creation together as important modes of participating in society. Food production is artistic production is civic participation is food production is artistic production. Her interrogation of autonomous spaces and the conditions for making (art) extends to these other spaces of (food) production. Cultural production is inherently intertwined with the things that make living possible.

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I keep coming back to the title of this event, *How to Survive Life and Its Disasters*, and the question that it poses, although it isn't really a question. It's more of an instructional title to a guide *-how to [insert aspiration here]*. The promise of this phrase feels so big that it seems rhetorical and a bit sarcastic, yet, it also speaks to the mundanity of struggles and failures that are a part of life. To survive is to continue after moments - weather, technologies, and accidents - that reorient our trajectories and our lives. How we survive is how we respond to these moments, but also how we respond to everything else that's happening around us at any given time. How we survive is in the ways that we organize and create opportunities that attend to ourselves and our needs and the people around us.

Something I haven't talked about yet is how this screening and discussion came to be. In June 2020, there was a fire at Green Papaya that destroyed their space and a portion of their archive. This discussion was held as the culminating public program of a project by Recollective and several Vancouver arts institutions to help digitize some videotapes that were spared from this tragedy. This sharing of resources across communities is a response in and of itself and demonstrates how we can survive, live, and hold on to each other in support of and in contiguity.

After the screening and discussion, my friend K and I went for a walk. Together, we remarked on how many of the things that Allison, Donna, Lena, and Lesley were saying aligned with our own desires as artists and writers and our own inquiries around making and community. We noted the distance between our respective homebases, Vancouver and Quezon City, and the confluence of ideas coming together through the meeting, albeit virtually. K has some familial ties to the Philippines, as do I, so we share a long standing distant admiration of the artists and the community that Allison, Donna, Lena, and Lesley spoke about. We couldn't help but notice the resonance of the questions and thoughts they were putting forth and think about what was shared between.

## Produced in Response to:

*How to Survive Life and its Disasters:  
A Virtual Discussion on Archives with Donna Miranda,  
Lena Cobangbang, Lesley-Anne Cao, and Allison Collins*  
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