

Opinion

Pondering Rituals and Considering Resolve for Queer Artists at the Opening of a New Year

Though we may be eager to move past the year's events, the reality is that they will persist. Artists share practical applications for ritual, deeply introspective thoughts on survival and approaches to remedying inequity.



by Su-Ying Lee
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Jamie Ross, (still image from) "Cate Hill" (2019) 4K video digital image Credit: All images courtesy of the artists

Preface

This article was originally commissioned by [EastEast](#). After receiving my first draft, the editors said that mentions of queer artists, and their activism related to their sexual identity needed modification due to the publication's funding by the embassy of [Qatar, a country that criminalizes same-sex relationships](#). Rather than bringing negative attention to the publication, I hope this article contributes to an appreciation of the difficult situation that many are in — aiming to make meaningful work with restricted resources, within a restrictive context. Had I been made aware of its limitations prior, I would have enjoyed working with interviewees to covertly queer the article. As creative practitioners who comprehend power dynamics and the issues involved in communicating across varied contexts, the artists, I believe, would have gladly risen to the challenge. Going back to revise the article to delete references to their identities could not be done consensually and would dishonor the conversations that were held and the individuals who entrusted me with their words. This excerpt of the original article features the three individuals who would have been censored, out of the six I spoke to. I'm grateful to Hyperallergic for acting quickly to allow the thoughts of these artists to be published without obscuring their identities.

Rituals and Resolve: We've made it to 2021. Now what?

With the incomparable 2020 behind us, I proposed to write interviews about New Year's resolutions, failing to anticipate how generative this topic would be. This perhaps reveals my short-sighted eagerness to numb the effects/affects of a year shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple threats that also increased the visibility of injustices and heightened the intensity with which they were felt and opposed. Though we may be eager to move past the year's events, the reality is that they will persist. Providing somewhat of a balm, the cultural producers I spoke to imparted practical applications for ritual; deeply introspective thoughts on survival and approaches to remedying inequity. They were asked what resolutions they'd like to see made by arts institutions and communities. I'm grateful to Jamie Ross, Isola Tong and Joshua Vettivelu for the conversations and much needed provocations.

Jamie Ross's resolution for organizations offers a tangible model for creating habitability, but first we talked about a non-Christian calendar and the benefits of ritual. Jamie Ross is a contemporary artist educated outside the university, a preschool teacher, and magic practitioner. He creates and documents queer community rooted in the artistic traditions of his cultural and biological ancestors. Jamie spoke to me from his studio in Montréal (Québec, Canada) about his movement towards the solar calendar and festivals such as Samhain (pronounced saa-wn), which are related to his Gaelic roots and his practices as a pagan and witch. Marking the end of harvest and the beginning of winter, the festival of Samhain (October 31st–November 1st) observes a threshold between worlds, and involves rituals of putting things to rest. In observance, Jamie makes resolutions to face unresolved relationships through necessary conversations. Placing great value in rituals Jamie proposes group ceremonies, a practice that entails being witnessed and held to our words, as a way to approach New Year's resolutions more meaningfully.

In our conversation about dreaming of new ways for cultural institutions to be, Jamie underscored the relationship between the [Nikkei National Museum and Cultural Centre](#) and the [Nikkei Seniors Health Care and Housing Society](#) in Burnaby (British Columbia, Canada). About 90% of the Japanese Canadian community was forced into internment camps during WWII, severing them from their livelihoods. When the war ended, many of the interred were seniors without the capacity to rebuild their lives. The Nikkei National Museum considers providing care and housing to elders one of the ways to fulfill their mandate "to honour, preserve, and share Japanese culture and Japanese Canadian history and heritage," at once quantifiably confirming its interrelationship with the community and its stewardship of cultural history, recognizing elders as the embodiment of the archive. If Jamie could make a New Year's resolution on behalf of art organizations, it would be to be more like the Nikkei.



Isola Tong, (still from) "Engkanto Summoning" (2020) single channel video

Also a practitioner of ritual, Isola Tong is a transwoman, architect, and visual artist whose work investigates the nexus of relationships between gender, ecology, power and ethnology. Isola, who is of mixed Philippine and Chinese ancestry, spoke to me from her home in Pasay (Metro Manila, Philippines). Owing to her Chinese-style upbringing, when Isola approaches the new year, she wishes for prosperity, abundance and longevity — a basic framework for forming goals specific to each year. Isola discussed her wishes in relation to the instability of living in “third-world” survivalist mode, acute pressures even for someone who is formally educated and middle class. Seeking a place where she can thrive, this year Isola aims for a scholarship to pursue a master’s degree abroad, and aims to produce art that will generate more sales and more curatorial interest. Her foremost resolution is to strengthen her body. As a babaylan (a shamanic practice of the Philippines), Isola does not believe in a body/soul duality—the strength of the body is the strength of the soul.

Isola is straightforward — her resolution is to build strength for endurance and survival. In the Philippines, the struggles brought on by the pandemic are intensified by preexisting realities including the totalitarian rule of President Rodrigo Duterte who, over these four plus years in office, has sought to extinguish the poor, activists, critics, and journalists. In the archipelago, one in five people live in extreme poverty (defined by the World Bank as a person living on less than \$1.90 US dollars per day). In November, typhoon Ulysses hit making it impossible for some who were recovering from the year’s 20 previous storms to overcome the devastation. The 350 years of combined Spanish and US colonialism and an environmental crisis caused in large part by Western overconsumption in-part dealt with by sending their trash to countries in South East Asia, including the Philippines have contributed to the vulnerability of the archipelago. HIV is a pre-existing health threat, that compounds the COVID-19 crises for Isola and others. Despite experiencing one of the fastest growing rates of epidemic in the western Pacific [HIV is largely ignored in the Philippines](#).

Isola, who is an unfaltering voice for trans and HIV positive representation, is one of many highly politicized artists in the Philippines where artists quickly organized to raise funds towards PPE for medical professionals, and aid for those who were most drastically affected by the loss of income and by the typhoon.

Lacking government funding for the arts, Filipino artists rely on what has since about 2013 been a robust art market. Isola’s resolution, for the benefit of the creative community, would be for the government to recognize and value art as a realm where ideas are tested, questioned, and explored and provide support that opens up the possibility for artists to have critical practices disentangled from the pressures of sales, market values, and commodity making.



Joshua Vettivelu, “A flag can only do this much” (2020) digital photo

Joshua Vettivelu is an artist, educator, mentor and manager of [Ryerson Artspace](#) and currently sits on the editorial board of [C Magazine](#) and the board of directors of [Canadian Artists’ Representation \(CARFAC\)](#). In Canada, a key tool for determining remuneration for artists is the [Minimum Recommended Fee Schedule](#) produced by CARFAC and updated annually.

Speaking via video call from our respective homes in Toronto (Ontario, Canada), Joshua spoke about two formative experiences in relation to New Year’s practices. As a young person living in the family home, Joshua ritually cleaned their bedroom, assessing, ordering and purging their belongings at New Year’s. Feeling trapped by unchanging circumstances — parents both living with depression and being a queer child who was not able to externalize their identity — Joshua’s room was an area where they had agency. As they got older, Joshua would disassociate, high, in front of mirrors, which they now recognize as utilizing a material resource for emotional introspection. Thus, mirror cleaning overtook room cleaning at the commencement of a new year.

For a time, Joshua made the New Year’s resolution to work towards a body that more resembled the normative ideal, which they now recognize as a pursuit to increase access to pleasure and affirmation denied to queer, brown bodies. Joshua understands the wish to be normatively desirable as in fact a wish to survive better. Recognizing the drivers behind such desires, Joshua is now led by the question “do survival methods that have brought you to this point still serve you?” At what point do they prohibit the experience of life beyond these ways of coping?

In their work with emerging artists, Joshua discovers where institutional malleability can be found and used, but is also candid about institutional power leading to exploitation. We discussed our own efforts to resist the common culture of overwork in art milieus which is perpetuated by superiors and colleagues through the manipulation of a worker’s care and the incentivization of respect. Joshua’s first resolutions for art communities is, for whoever is “the magic tired person” (over-relied-upon and under-acknowledged worker) who works as the pivot point between community and institution, to receive more compensation. Joshua’s second resolution is for institutions to learn the comprehensive history of their own formation so that they can recognize oppressive founding ideologies that operate within their mandates, programming and definitions of excellence — such as exemplified in artist [Deanna Bowen’s](#) interconnected works that make power legible by tracing institutional origins to elite interpersonal relationships in service of reproducing exclusionary systems of thought.

My own short-sighted eagerness to numb the effects/affects of 2020, mentioned at the start, have been curtailed by Joshua Vettivelu’s question about the limits of numbing as coping. Instead, turning towards the long-haul visioning required for achieving post-pandemic wellness in the art world and beyond, [a comment by Professor Frank Snowden](#) (History and History of Medicine departments at Yale) is brought to mind: that all pandemics “afflict societies through the specific vulnerabilities people have created by their relationships with the environment, other species, and each other.” Snowden’s truism, with simplicity, describes the consequences of neglecting our interdependence, applicable in all realms. The urgency to recognize that this epoch is a manifestation of unchecked ego, power, and greed that will continue beyond the COVID-19 vaccine, is upon us. Whether in regards to the way that lives are lived, practices of art are approached, or societal values are expressed the most potent resolutions are made by first recognizing the mechanisms behind our motivations.



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