

PROTEST ART IN THE PHILIPPINES: THE ACT OF BURNING POLITICAL EFFIGIES

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On the occasion of President Duterte's third State of the Nation Address (SONA) in July 2018, more than 40,000 people gathered in Metro Manila to participate in a mass protest. Among the protest imagery, one action caught everyone's eye: the burning of a giant papier-mâché construction. People were dancing and chanting around the inflamed object, while others were holding up mobile devices and digital cameras to capture every second of the burning. These spectacular videos and photos, shared via messenger applications or on social media networks, were circulated digitally within the city of Manila, the Philippines as well as globally. But, what exactly were they burning and why?

For decades, artist collectives in the Philippines have been using their artistic tools and methods to create so-called political effigies - 3D-constructions representing the President in a most unflattering and caricatural manner. The activists carry the giant puppets, which serve as objects of mockery and scorn, through the streets of Manila as a counter-event to the yearly SONA of the leading President. The act of burning the symbolic body of the President represents his downfall, as well as the erasure of, and purification from social and economic inequalities. Because of the increasing global visibility of this protest practice, ethical questions regarding the legitimacy of burning a person's representation have emerged.

Therefore, my Master's thesis poses the question: Is the act of burning political effigies a legitimate

artistic expression of contention, or rather a controversial protest practice?

To contextualize this question, I elaborated on Philippine protest genealogy, performative and bodily dimensions of contemporary protest events, the meaning of protest puppets and the current political and social landscape of the country. My media-theoretical and semiotic toolkit consisted of Marwan Kraidy's concept of the hypermedia space, media content analysis as well as the

semiotic analysis of symbols and the meaning of fire. Kraidy's take on *Creative Insurgency* (2016) offers a helpful lens to understand the boundary between art and activism and its impact on different audiences.

The spectacular character of the protest practice is obvious, as is the impressively detailed work of the artists and the increasing global visibility by new means of technology in the digital age. However, even if the Philippine political effigies can be perceived as aesthetically appealing and the protest event is carefully planned and organized like a media event - do the controversial actions of a President and the potentially negative consequences for a part of the population justify the symbolic execution of a political figure and living person? As the controversy around the burning of an effigy of a Serb politician in Croatia in March 2019 shows, this discussion is of relevance for contexts outside of the Philippines as well. Effigy burning, the burning of puppets or the burning of symbolically fueled objects, such as national flags, are common and widely distributed practices around the globe and throughout history. However, the parading, beating and burning of effigies also has an (ongoing) history as an act of humiliation and instigation of violence, particularly in the context of European antisemitism.

In my Master's thesis, I argue that the question of the ethical legitimacy of certain protest practices has to be mindful of the specific cultural and historical context. Just as the researcher has to critically examine his or her own positionality. For artists in the Philippine protest context, this may be a legitimate, non-violent symbolic act of showing

resistance. However, without any consideration of the local context, the practice of burning effigies might be seen as an aggressive, threatening act, one that transgresses the boundaries of socially and culturally accepted protest behavior. As there is no universal definition of the limits of legitimate protest, the aim of my research was precisely to offer a fresh perspective on questions and debates that arise when local protest imageries and practices are circulated, viewed and commented upon globally.



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Munkhjin Enkhsaikhan completed her MA in



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Modern South and Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt-Universität in 2019. After graduating from the University of Potsdam with a BA thesis on the power of metaphors in German and French rap music, she continued to research in the field of art and aesthetics.