

Podcast Recording: Paul de Guzman

Coco Zhou (3:51):

Thank you so much for joining us today, Paul. We're really excited to have you. I figured we could start by you telling us a little bit about your background, how you came into making art in Vancouver, and just kind of generally, how did you find yourself in the city?

Paul de Guzman (4:11):

Hello, everybody. My name is Paul de Guzman, and I'm an artist based here in Vancouver. I was actually born in the Philippines, and I lived there until close to 20 years before I had to leave because of some sort of political upheaval. At the time, my father was saying, okay, Paul, we better just ship you over to Canada now, I think it's the right time. And so that's what kind of happened. And ever since then, I've been living here in Vancouver, and I've been here since the 80s. So that's my background. And when I was actually going to school in the Philippines, I was trying to get a degree in engineering, but art has always been somewhere, something in the background, you know? I think I attributed that to my mom's family. That's why I use the name de Guzman, because de Guzman is actually my mother's maiden name. So I kind of attribute any form of creativity to my mother's side, because my grandmother on my mother's side was a piano teacher for the Philippine Women's College, and one of my uncles was a kite maker. He would actually use traditional bamboo and Japanese paper to actually make kites, and I grew up with that type of thing going on in the household all the time. So when I came to Canada, I had this skill set that's more in tune with computers and engineering and so I got myself a job there. I kind of just went and did my job, but at the same time started to go to galleries, and I became very interested in prints first, you know, like Japanese woodblock prints and Canadian prints. And then I started going to galleries and started asking questions about, how do you look at art and all that stuff? And the one thing that frustrated me was that artists never tell you anything, they don't tell you their secrets, and that's fine. But the frustration kind of led me to think that, well, maybe the only way I can actually understand art is to be an artist and so that's how I became an artist. It was very innocent really, you know, because I'm self-taught as an artist. But because of that entire time that I spent reading a lot about art, that I guess it gets to a saturation point where you just sort of learn so much that it just comes out in your work, and that's kind of how it happened. The first show I had was back in 1997. I was part of a group show here in Vancouver and I had three pieces and the gallery sold all three pieces to members of the board of directors of Vancouver Art Gallery. And I'm going, oh, that's not that hard and because of that I had a solo exhibition the next year. Then that show got a review in Canadian Art Magazine and I was going, holy shit, okay maybe I'll give this a try and see what happens, right? So I think it's really more a matter of just going in and having a look at opportunities, what opportunities are there, and then just try to see what the next step is. And that's kind of how I've been going with my current things with art, is sort of like what feels right at this moment in time. So I try not to plan everything ahead of time. You know, I don't want to lose that, I guess, the magic that you can

still have, if you can call it that, because these days a lot of artists know what the next step is and stuff like that. But I kind of want to sort of not really go blindly, but be informed and have choices. So that's kind of my philosophy in terms of proceeding with art right now.

Diane Wong (7:43):

Thank you. We didn't, I didn't know that at least, about your background and stuff so it was really interesting to learn. You've worked with Centre A on various projects over the course of our history, starting from pretty early onwards and most recently last year with your performance with the city of Vancouver. What was the most memorable instance of collaboration with Centre A for you personally?

Paul de Guzman (8:07):

Funnily enough a lot of the things that I do with Centre A have been collaborative. The first project that I did with Centre A was when Centre A was over that really large railway building over at, I think, Carrol and Hastings. There was an opportunity to collaborate with a Japanese sculptor named Yoshihiro Suda. For those of you who don't know Yoshihiro Suda, he's a Japanese artist who makes sculptures out of really light wood that resembles plants and a lot of the plants are Indigenous, endemic plants that are kind of invasive. So he would, let's say, carve a mushroom or something like that, and he would install it somewhere like in a windowsill and when you encounter it you think that it's actually a real plant, but it's not, it's actually a carved sculpture. I think for Vancouver, he carved a lot of things resembling like marijuana plants and fungus and stuff because it's so damp here. My collaboration was to actually create a labyrinth in the gallery, which is meant for you to actually walk through and get lost in, because, at the time, I was actually very interested in the Situationist Movement of the 50s and 60s with Guy Debord. One of the main things that I took away from that was saying that in order for you to know a city, you have to get lost in it. So, what I did was I created this labyrinth inside on the Centre A facilities, and all throughout the labyrinth, the other artist, Yoshihiro Suda, was actually carving his sculptures and putting them in situ within the labyrinth itself. That was a collaboration with also two curators, Makiko Hara, who is now based here in Vancouver, and Masashi Ogura, who is based in Japan, who passed away a few years ago. So that was the most memorable collaboration. The show actually traveled to the Musée d'Art de Joliette in Quebec and the person who made it happen is Gaëtan Verna, who is now the commissioner for the Venice Biennale Canadian Pavilion for 2024. So that was really great to have that sort of collaboration from one coast to the other coast, you know, going from west to east. Just the conversations that came about, you know, I felt that was very satisfying.

Coco Zhou (10:29):

That's so interesting, what you just said about the way to get to know a city is to get lost in it, and I think across many of your works, there is that thread of site specificity. I think you were

just talking about the show *Another City* and your intervention, which is to create this labyrinth for visitors to kind of lose themselves in. But also, I think as part of that architecture, there were elements that were evoking corridors or bus stops and train stations and these sort of transient, liminal places that are kind of like a no place, but also they have spare specific functions that get you somewhere else and they're so ubiquitous in kind of the urban landscape and also are part of what creates the infrastructure of mobility. And so I'm curious about, you know, how you approach the role of the urban landscape in your practice.

Paul de Guzman (11:30):

Yeah, I've always approached urbanism and concepts of architecture in a very sort of temporary and nomadic way. I think in contemporary architectural thinking, a lot of people tend to sort of think of our infrastructure as being something that we permanently build. You know, we build something to last a long time and that's primarily based on humanity's longevity. Anything that actually survives our lifespan needs to be maintained and is considered quote unquote permanent. But the reality is, if we don't take care of the buildings, they're just going to collapse anyway. So I tend to sort of look at urbanism and architecture as temporary and nomadic constructs and nomadic in the sense that there's a time element to that wherein, if you don't factor in time, then everything kind of stands still and it will stay like that forever. But that's not the case with us. I tend to embrace a lot of concepts that tend to sort of look at materials in a temporary sense. So I started thinking about that when I started doing my bookworks because books are just made of paper and I create architecture out of the books, knowing full well that these books won't last so the architecture that you see contained in them will not last for a long time, not for hundreds of years or anything like that. So I tend to sort of look, and then I kind of went further by thinking that I want to sort of look at spaces like transit shelters and walls of buildings as possible ways to actually create interventions. It's just kind of like this sense of the nomadic that I really like, embracing the sense that people are not in one place at one time, embracing the fact even though we live in cities, we are nomadic within that space, and that we have to go and travel. That's why we have legs because we walk around everywhere, right? So the sense of being nomadic tends to translate to things that are kind of temporary in nature. And that becomes more evident because a lot of the work that I do these days tends to have a very minimal spatial footprint. Like, when you look at the works that I made, there's always this temporal sense that they're not going to last that long. If a collector wants to own my work, great, but you have to realize that I don't guarantee this is going to last a long time, unlike the piece of bronze sculpture or a painting or something like that. And so I became more and more adamant about creating works that are really temporary. The work that I'm doing now, this game that I'm sharing with people, the art is the experience of playing the game, and I'll give you a game token to go with that, but that game token is not going to last a long time. So you tend to think, well, then what exactly is art anyway? Is it the game token that somebody gave me, or is it the experience that I had of playing the game with you? And I tend to look at that in terms of how we experience art. We experience art through objects, but when

you don't have the objects anymore and you still have that feeling of your experience of the artwork, isn't that considered the art as well? You know, so it's kind of like you don't have to own anything because the essence of owning something really has more to do with one's desire to own objects or power or just hoarding money or something like that. But we tend to lose track of the fact in our capitalistic society that, you know, things are owned. But if we didn't have that sense of ownership, then what is art? Can we even define what art is if we didn't have that sense of ownership, if we didn't have that sense of property? You know, so I'm kind of going back to that sensibility. I'm not saying that I'm not going to make art to sell, right? But I'm saying that the fundamental thing that I think about is that I don't think about art to sell. I just think about art, and then if somebody wants to sell it, they can sell it. Because there was a time when conceptual art was, nobody can sell it, until somebody figured out a way to sell it, right? So you can't really say anything about that. Hopefully that kind of clarifies a few things.

Coco Zhou (16:22):

Yeah, I really appreciate what you said about how your use of these transient structures, you know, draws attention to the fact that the city is also a constructed thing. You know, what becomes of the city in terms of its topography and its shape, and where things are located, there's real socio-political implications and work that goes into that. And I also think about, so this project, right, is funded by a heritage grant and, you know, when you were speaking just now about what is art, that's the question that we can also ask about heritage, right? Like we think of it as this permanent, tangible architectural or landscape thing that has always been there. But it's a political and ideological thing of what even is designated as heritage. And, you know, you were talking about your performance just now, Laro Natayo or Let's Play, which takes this traditional Filipino game of kicking this object, which is also, I think, well, in Mandarin is called Tijen, or like, you know, it's a game that can be found across many Asian cultures. And, yeah, I'm wondering how you think about the ephemerality of performance and gesture, and how that maybe complicates this notion of heritage that we commonly think about.

Paul de Guzman (17:57):

You know, I kind of think of those as more concepts rather than concrete things, or maybe it's just how I think about certain things in my practice, because I've been thinking about heritage, whether the concept of heritage is a Western concept, very much like how art is a Western concept, and how some cultures didn't even have a word for art until it was introduced. And it lands us into this sense about heritage, and these days, it's kind of getting harder and harder to sort of define that because it's also very political. For example, a few years ago, maybe five, six, seven years ago, we weren't even talking about Indigenous, Black, people of colour. But now, there's this re-addressing certain things that Western powers, I would say, are saying that we're not doing enough to sort of facilitate the Indigenous, the Black, the people of colour, in a way it is a good way of acknowledging how our societies are changing. When societies change, how do you define heritage? There's always a time stamp with regards to heritage. I

remember in the 80s, coming to Canada, I thought it was a predominantly white place. I was living in Burnaby near Lloyd Mall. But now, 20 years later, you go to Richmond, you know what I mean? It's like, okay, this is an Asian enclave, and I feel comfortable there. And then at some point, I'm going, when did that happen? When did a sea of Asian faces make me feel comfortable? Because before, it was kind of like, okay, I acknowledge the fact that I am from the Philippines, I'm going to look different from everybody else, and I have to get used to seeing a lot of white faces. And now, specifically here in Vancouver, because of the recent immigration in the last 20, 30 years, it's like, where did all the white people go? There's just no way to sort of say it, you know, I don't know if I even want to sort of deal with the political correctness of it all. But at the same time, it's kind of like, I've gone through certain episodes where I was discriminated against just because of how I look. But at the same time, I don't think the person knew that they were discriminating against me, because it was their upbringing. It was their heritage. It was how they looked at things, right? So when you talk about heritage, it's an evolving thing. And it's also very site-oriented, because it depends, of course, it's site-oriented because heritage usually has something to do with the tangible and the intangible. The tangible being the community that we live in, what the history is, the intangible in terms of the actual community, the people that populate your community and how you deal with it. So when you look at heritage, it's always something that constantly changes. And it changes with political trends, and politics, and how power is defined. So if you ask me about heritage, about me being Filipino, about me being here in Canada, I've seen a shift recently in terms of my awareness of how many Filipino Canadians there are actually living here. I'm kind of bumping into them pretty much every day, which was not the case 20 years ago. And I think I attribute that to, let's say, Canadian immigration policies, to, let's say, Philippine offshore workers programs, they're becoming more and more open, and I think with a lot of other countries, like, for example, with Mexico and some other places, they probably have similar programs. So the entire sense of heritage is changing. And I think that's just how we have to look at it in terms of the populations being nomadic and the makeup of populations changing with time. That's kind of how I see it.

Diane Wong (22:12):

Yeah, I mean, it definitely does. That kind of leads us to our next question. What is the significance of, you know, engaging with issues of place in a city like Vancouver? From your experiences, within your work, what does that look like?

Paul de Guzman (22:23):

I mean, that can actually be thought of in terms of just experiences in art, per se, or experiences with the community, per se. I'm lucky that the project that I'm doing right now tends to sort of go in and have a look at both at the same time. You know, this project that I did, or am doing, I don't know if I'm still going to continue with it, but with this project I forced myself to actually go to different communities and meet people in those communities. At last count it

was 11 communities here in Vancouver in Victoria, Nanaimo, Prince George, and Bowen Island. And so for every community, you just got to have a look and see the makeup of each community. You just basically accept what is going to come your way and I think not having any expectations helps a lot. Because if you're going to go to a place where all the rich people are going to live, or this is where all of the South Asians live or whatever, right, you're not opening yourself up to new experiences, because you will always bring in some preconceived notions of what your notions are of those places. I remember a couple of decades ago, I used to live in Kitsilano, and I never thought that I would actually go east of Main Street because of the distance, because I don't know what's there. You know, I didn't know anybody who lived in East Vancouver. I used to live in Kitsilano, and then of course I moved to Commercial Drive, and now I realize, oh, I can't see myself going west of Main Street now. And it's just a matter of the evolution of communities, right? The communities are different from 20 years ago. When you look at, let's say, Chinatown, there's a lot more Chinese businesses that are going under, because the community is actually changing, and they're all moving to different places, like, for example, Richmond. And there was a time when Richmond was just lots of malls and car parks and all that stuff, but now it's a thriving Asian community. So the traditional role of Chinatown is just there as a sort of architectural construct. It's becoming more and more of a facade than anything else. You're preserving what's in front but in the back it's all different. You don't have the infrastructure, the community that that particular place has built up. You know, what you have is a semblance of a place. It's sad because these things often happen little at a time, you know. I remember when the Chinatown night market in Chinatown, you know, they decided not to do it anymore. I was thinking, oh, great, this is just the start, isn't it? At first, they thought it was not feasible anymore. And now what else is going to be taken away? But you know, that's just how things are with neighborhoods, they change as well.

Diane Wong (25:25):

Yeah, so I was around Centre A in 2019 as well and even the difference between 2023 and 2019 is huge. I think the impact of COVID also created big changes within the community as well. I think we have one last question for you, it's actually about your YouTube channel. Could you tell us a little bit about your foray into YouTube? What does the medium of vlogging accomplish for art commentary and criticism for you?

Paul de Guzman (25:56):

You know, the thing about that process is that it drives anxiety and then when you're done with it, then you get joy. But you have to go through the anxiety, right? And for those of you who don't know, I have a YouTube channel, it's called Paul de Guzman Presents Art. Initially, when I actually started the channel, the main purpose for it was to actually look at art, not just in Vancouver, but elsewhere as I travel, and to sort of look at places that are underrepresented, like non-profit organizations, what are they doing, public art, which is often neglected, artists and organizations that you know about but they're not getting enough exposure out there. So I

thought, okay, this would be a great way for me to actually go and engage with my community. So it started off that way. It was never really about criticism. It was really more about, guess what, I discovered this place, and it's got this amazing work, and nobody's seeing it because you have to knock three times, and then you have to dance and jiggle or whatever before you get in. There's this secret handshake, you know? So there was this desire to actually share that knowledge, and I really just wanted to share what I discovered with other people. I realized that contemporary art, it's not like showing videos of cats, or unboxing videos, or how to change your toilet, or something like that. Those are popular. You're gonna get a million hits for those. Well, no, this is about contemporary art. I gave people a warning that, okay, if you came in here thinking that it's not about contemporary art, you can run away now, okay? Because it might not be for you. But if it is for you, then that's great. So every time I get somebody subscribing to it, I'm kind of like, wow, they actually subscribed, which means that they probably got to a majority of the entire video and they actually listened to my ramblings. And I'm thankful for that. Because the one thing about YouTube and any other social media is the advent of clickbait and you just don't want to be a clickbait phenomenon. What I want is for people to just go in and have a look and see if you can come away with something. There's a lot of art out there, and there's a lot of overrepresented places, and they have their own marketing thing. So I concentrate more on art that is seldom ever seen by people, because I want them to know that there's this complexity with homegrown art as opposed to wealth-driven art. There's a lot of different types of art out there, and some of them are kind of wealth-produced art, is what I call it, sort of like Damien Hirst and whatever, right? But when you see good art, it doesn't matter whether it's made of bronze or gold, or whether it's a piece of paper thrown in the garbage. It's still good art, right? But you just have to know how to discern that. What I wanted to do with a YouTube channel is to make people comfortable with the fact that you have an opinion. You don't have to read the mind of the artist in order to prove yourself to be smart and informed. No, you can actually go inside and say, you know what, I don't like this. But it's really more important for you to tell people why you don't like it, because that becomes an opening for an understanding and a conversation. But if you keep your mouth shut and you keep your thoughts to yourself, then nobody's going to know. You're not part of the engagement. You're not part of the conversation. I want people to talk about art very much like how they would talk about their shoes, or their clothes, or their cat, or their grandparents or whatever, and so I try to make it as approachable as possible. But of course, some sort of intellectual discourse might slip in once in a while. But that's just me saying, ha, I tricked you. But anyways, that's what I wanted to do with that. And it fits into the sense of the nomadic and the temporary in the work that I do, because as much as we think that the internet is here to stay, it's still a temporary construct. All we need is an electromagnetic pulse in space and it'll knock everything out. There's that sense of the nomadic. There's that sense of placement and displacement. And in a sense, when you look at, let's say, the original Greek definition for utopia, it basically means everywhere and nowhere. So I tend to look at it from that point of

view. I want my works to be everywhere and nowhere and the only way I can do that is for it to be temporary and nomadic.

Coco Zhou (30:34):

Thank you so much. That was a really beautiful place you ended on. Yeah, I mean, we're big fans of your YouTube channel in the office and I appreciate what you said about deliberately not wanting to be clickbaity because I think that comes through in a lot of your aesthetic choices. You know, you never really put yourself in the frame, right? Which already goes against the grain. In terms of like, we see all of these lifestyle vlogging formats where everything is sort of like an advertisement of the self. I just find your videos very endearing. We'll put a link to your channel in the show notes. We'll make sure to plug that. Are you working on any other projects these days? What kind of things are you thinking about?

Paul de Guzman (31:16):

I have one project, but I'm not sure where it's going to go. What I've been trying to do lately is a bit of gardening. I've been cultivating orchids that are endemic to the Philippines, and I'm trying to make them thrive here. Do you know how embassies are representations of nations? When you go to an embassy, then you're actually stepping into the country that your embassy is for. So I kind of had that connection with this pot of soil, with this Philippine orchid in it, and thinking of the pot of soil as an embassy, as a representation of a microenvironment or even a microculture, and what I want to do is I want to see if I can make this plant thrive, something that is endemic to the Philippines into here. It's also commentary on the survival of people who are migrants and immigration, coming in here and they struggle and then they finally get their footing. So that's one project, I don't know how I'm going to present that, I'm just enjoying the process right now. They're all orchids because the Philippines is one of those countries that has a really large diversity of specifically orchids and bromeliads. So that factors into my interest in gardening. I'm not sure yet what I'm going to do with my game, but we'll see, I'm giving myself a little bit of a break with that. Allow my muscles to heal so to speak.

Coco Zhou (32:35):

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