

In the summer of 2023, I returned to the Philippines to interview families affected by the war on drugs. This choice was influenced by my previous work with the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PHILRIGHTS), the human rights NGO I had assisted in 2021 in documenting the impact of extrajudicial killings. My earlier interviews delved into the challenges faced by families left behind in the aftermath of state executions. These conversations delved into the profound experiences of trauma and grief among these families, shedding light on their perspectives regarding justice and authority within the framework of the war on drugs.

The first interview took place in 2021, and the second occurred in the summer of 2023. In these discussions, I spoke with three women—the wife, mother, and niece of individuals who lost their lives due to state executions. Additionally, I interviewed a father whose son was a victim of the drug campaign in 2017. Throughout these conversations, a recurring theme emerged in their responses: their perception of time and their concept of future. When I inquired about their plans for the upcoming week or the week after, most of them replied, "I don't know. It depends on whether I can sell my products or if my neighbors provide donations. This determines if my family can have another meal." Responses of this nature led me to emphasize how the concept of the future and the ability to plan are privileges shaped by the circumstances of our birth and upbringing. Furthermore, their already precarious circumstances are exacerbated by the imminent land reclamation and the various ways in which the state encroaches on their lives. These conversations have underscored the significance of time as a crucial dimension within my project.

Since Rodrigo Duterte assumed office in 2016, he conducted a series of killings which targeted the poor under the rhetoric of the "war on drugs." During his first three years in office, dead bodies were often discovered in urban poor areas. Many of these victims have their faces covered with a sign which says, "I'm a drug pusher. Do not copy me." These induced fear among the general population, with members of the middle to upper class claiming that they felt "safer".

Another facet of the drug war I began to explore were the roles images play. This builds on insights generated through the Porosities collaboration. To fully understand the various roles images play, I employed a distinct yet somewhat analogous analytical approach—slipperiness.

From July 2016 to 2018, a collective of both local and international reporters, photojournalists, and filmmakers frequented crime scenes in the Philippines. Their goal was to photograph, document, and narrate the stories of the victims and their families. This group was referred to as the "nightcrawlers," drawing inspiration from a Jake Gyllenhaal movie in which he documented crime scenes at night.

Images, both moving and still, provoke thought. They're good objects-to-think-with since they're slippery. They're slippery since they "cannot be taken as self-evident and require explicit reference [not only] to their meaning" but also their semiotic tensions with other terms" (Ballester, 5). The photographs serve multiple purposes— they provide crucial evidence necessary to establish the existence of human rights violations and torture, but in the process, they become part of the moment of the victims' deaths. Photos also play a significant role in generating fear, since Duterte has used the same photos to instill fear and wreak havoc among communities which have effectively conducted people's behavior. These photos reify the death of the families of victims, serving as a tragic memory that continues to haunt them at present. Moreover, the materiality of these images assists in its vast circulation and how it gets used and how it generates meaning. According to the Digital 2023 report by Meltwater and We Are Social (companies that study global social media and digital trends), the Philippines ranks fourth worldwide in terms of social media usage with 84.45 million users or 72.5% of the population.

References:

Ballester, A. (2019). *A Future History of Water*. Duke University Press.