

UPON #2/2023 (EN)

Talk with Padmapani L. Perez, former Lead Strategist for Creative Collaboration from Agam Agenda (Quezon City) and the former team Carissa Pobre, Maria Faciolince

Weaving imaginaries with collaborative forms of creative expression: creativity as a companion

While Agam Agenda has many moving parts, the Agenda itself is to widen storytelling circles around the climate crisis and make room for more voices and forms of expression in climate discourse. Our women-led team of creatives designed, nurtured, and implemented Agam Agenda's initiatives over the past 3-4 years. Our work focused on bringing artists, writers, and climate activists together for creative collaboration across borders. We are no longer with Agam Agenda but the work of reimagining kinder futures goes on.

Padma: My name is Padma and I'm here to share a bit about our former work called Agam Agenda. Agam is an old Tagalog word, its older meaning is a memory or the ability to think. And nowadays when we say 'agam-agam', it's like saying you have doubts or a sense of foreboding. We received the invitation from UPON to be in conversation with Urbane Praxis just when we were on our way out of Agam Agenda as a team, so we are participating in UPON as a group of individuals that are no longer Agam Agenda. Now, the Agam Agenda continues to be under the remit of the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities. These are my fellow collaborators: Maria Faciolince and Carissa Pobre are here today with us and together with Anna Denardin, Jenny Cariño, Aina Eriksson de Guia, Mattie Balagat, Julia Javier, and Dru Ubaldo. They were a beautiful team of creative, imaginative, strong, committed and very knowledgeable individuals. We worked together on reimagining and widening storytelling circles on climate change. We sought to amplify art in the humanities and explored how we can tackle the climate crisis in a creative, restorative and kind way. We worked with scientists, youth, artists, poets, activists and policymakers in different creative collaborations.

UPON: Thank you Padma, we're glad that we reached out to you just in time. In the preliminary talks you explained that Agam Agenda has a focus on vocabulary that is used in the poems and texts related to the effects of climate change and human experiences. You mentioned that you specifically avoid using the current jargon. We also read the article from Carissa Pobre, "[The necessity of creative inquiry in troubled times](#)", that is published online on the Agam Agenda website, which we also encourage the audience to read. How can artistic storytelling and artistic inquiry during troubled times contribute to rewriting and also influencing climate policy?

UPON #2/2023 (EN)

challenges of everyday life, which for so many can be so difficult. I think it's also incumbent on those of us that have the privilege and the time for artistic inquiry to protest; that it's a privilege.

UPON: You connected artists with each other and assembled different voices that contributed to different formats. How did the collaborative process work and how did you make those formats available for the public?

Padma: In our first collaborative processes we sent photographs to writers and asked them to respond to the photos. This was first tested out in the book *Agam: Filipino Narratives on Uncertainty and Climate Change*, and then we also applied this process for the book *Harvest Moon*. Through the editors of the book we called for



By AC Dimatac

photographs from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Then we selected thirty photographs that we distributed to writers asking them not to respond as a caption, but to see where the photo takes them. That's what was started in the books and it somehow carried over to *When is Now*.

Maria: I think *Harvest Moon* and that format really became a way to thread and weave relationships and stories into each other.

A sort of potent symbol that anchored a lot of our work was that of the travelling seed, something like a dandelion or a burr and seeing it as a companion. Someone sends a seed, it will fly, it will fall on someone's lap and someone will take it over. We'll plant it, we'll do something with it. And so the stories pollinate and you end up with a chain of pollination - essentially of stories and of connections.

We applied the same method with *When Is Now* which was a global collaborative campaign. It started out with us asking certain people in our network and previous collaborators to write a short poem that started with 'when'. Then we sent those seeds to activists, muralists and poets to read, pick one line and respond. We then ended up with a sort of exponentially woven tapestry of different responses and stories that started linking with each other. Now there are murals all over the world in Canada, Indonesia, South Africa, Colombia, Philippines, and India which are responses to one of the seed poems. We opened the possibility for the public to respond through an open call.

UPON #2/2023 (EN)

UPON: Padma, in the beginning of the talk you mentioned senescence. Maybe you can go deeper now and tell us how senescence is related to Agam Agenda?

Padma: In our first talk I told you about our icon, the octopus. We call her Octavia, to honour the science fiction writer Octavia Butler. When we chose the octopus as our symbol, we wanted our work to take on the attributes of the octopus: shapeshifting, problem solving and being able to detach and regrow their limbs. They're shown to be very intelligent in science. They're also ink makers and we wanted to take that on as well. What we didn't know at the time when we chose the octopus to symbolise our Agenda's work was this whole process of senescence that a mother octopus goes through. Once a mother octopus lays her eggs, she begins to die. Throughout that process of ageing, which is a simple way of saying senescence, the mother octopus is constantly caring for her eggs until they hatch. She may die before they hatch or she may survive until all her half a million eggs have hatched. We as a team found ourselves at this point where we had to let go of the work and where we felt we had to take our lessons from the symbol this time in letting go and not knowing what's going to happen to the hatchlings and just hoping that a certain percentage of the 500,000 hatchlings will somehow survive and repeat the cycle. One lesson we can draw from senescence is that it's not necessarily a breaking down of the body or of the work or is a failure, but it's part of evolution. I think sometimes as activists and cultural workers we are not comfortable thinking about when our work is finished, because we need to believe that our work is necessary.

But in reflecting about senescence and endings as being part of life, I've come to wonder about how that might apply in the work setting, in our commitments to work and in the way we grow our work, but also that we have to prepare ourselves to let go of the work sometimes.



By Aila Molasco

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Audience: How did you find your network and how did you invite people to contribute?

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UPON #2/2023 (EN)

Maria: We didn't limit ourselves to a sector or a profession or a discipline. We looked at personal networks in the climate space like activists who weren't writers or poets or artists, but who also contributed. We also involved some muralists or visual artists. So we were encouraging people across the arts, culture work, climate justice, across different networks to contribute instead of limiting to the type of public we expected or people expected.

UPON: What are some of the lessons about creation, art and creativity that the Agam Agenda journey has given you for your own practice?

Padma: I can't imagine doing anything that isn't collaborative anymore. Every time I think of doing something, I start thinking: How can I do this collaboratively and who would I do it with? And let love be the reason we do things.

Carissa: We were able to align and attract certain partners that were also bringing other disciplines into their work, including anthropological and sociological approaches. Climate change is also really intertwined and interlocked with all of these social and political realities because in dominant systems these tend not to be talked about. Systems that constantly want to reinforce themselves, right?



By Maria Faciolince

So knowing that there are other disciplines and other ways of approaching things, including and overlapping with what we call creative processes or creative ways, was really part of what made it such a beautiful unlearning and relearning process over the course of those three years.

Maria: On my end, I guess a deeper understanding of what we call culture work is a reflection of our cultural understandings about very important things, such as revisiting the very systems and relationships that sustain life, which is a large part of the work that climate justice or anyone in the space of solidarity building is working for. **Cultural expressions of these understandings are crucial to understanding each other and the sort of pluriverse that we're immersed in. Sharing ideas and ways of seeing the world perhaps allow each other to prosper and care for each other better.** For me, it was so important to see how all of our collaborations that were spanning across so many different lands and waters are part of a larger process of healing and learning from each other:

UPON #2/2023 (EN)

attending this collective well-being that we can use art and creativity for as a companion.

UPON: What subjects do you have in mind or whether you want to focus on now?

Maria: I'm seeing this as an exercise of learning to decentralise a lot of our solidarity and creation as well as shifting the power away from a lot of centres of creativity and organisation. How does that morph into a different shape? All around ecology and nature we see examples of that: nothing ends. Everything transitions into some other form, and gives life to other forms as well. I know that I'll be embedding creativity into any process of building solidarity across borders and as a connective tissue for lived experience because a lot of what we're made of is expression. That's how we connect inherently across different borders.

Padma: A lot of ideas that we didn't get to try out are still present for us so it'll be fun to see what we can do with those. The work we did when we were with Agam Agenda belongs to no one and to everyone. **In the workshops we did with communities, whether it was online or on the ground, we really emphasised that anybody can do in any community.** I hope that people who are joining us today are already picking up seeds or ideas of things they can try out as collaborative forms of creative expression. One of the best things about it is you don't know what you're going to get and what does come out is often more than what you expected with collaboration.

UPON: Thank you! I think we can all sense a lot of inspiration by your collaborative approach to creativity, art and culture and the impact that collective expression and understanding can have both on a political and personal scale. It was a pleasure and we're looking forward to keeping in touch with you.

Hybrid Talk with Padmapani L. Perez, former Lead Strategist for Creative Collaboration from Agam Agenda (Quezon City) with the former team Carissa Pobre, Maria Faciolince and Lorene Blanche Goesele, Valeria Schwarz. The talk took place on September 6th at Floating University (Berlin).

Transcription and edition: Lorene Blanche Goesele

Proofreading: Haley More

Translation into Filipino: Beverly Wico Siy

Public Relations: Lorene Blanche Goesele, Dana Schneider

Photo credits: Tamarra and Bodhi IA, AC Dimatac, Aila Molasco, Maria Faciolince

UPON is a series of talks that reflects on urban practices from an inclusive, multilingual, context bound and feminist perspective. As a platform for reciprocal exchange and collective research about urban practices in an international context, UPON connects artists, urbanists and activists around the world.

UPON is curated and organised by Lorene Blanche Goesele (transformation architect and transdisciplinary artist) and Valeria Schwarz (artist, curator, art mediator and mother).

This series of talks is supported by the Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing as part of the expansion of the Netzwerkstelle Urbane Praxis, carried out by Urbane Praxis e.V.

