Lo-fi Freedoms and the Anti-Aesthetic Photograph

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ABSTRACT

This visual rhetorical critique accounts for the cultural positionality of "anti-aesthetic" photographs. The digital photographic projects *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* are taken as cases of contemporary visual practices that interrupt and resist aesthetic values. I engage them through an ontological approach by analyzing the rhetoricity of images *within* the modalities of visual practice. This entails encountering photographs as what Kevin Michael DeLuca refers to as *image events*— images that produce realities rather than just represent them. To locate eventfulness is to identify how images facilitate alternative ways of seeing from which new viewing subjects can emerge. I utilize contemporary modalities of glances, speed, and distraction while reworking Roland Barthes' ideas on the rhetoric of images to argue for the rhetoricity of foregrounding the denotative. Denotations work by defamiliarizing the viewer and recalibrating their sense of value towards images. I also argue that the anti-aesthetics function through a multimodality of performances. Performances of orality and silences imbue image events with sonic qualities and imaginaries while their liminality challenges notions of homogeneity in favor of instability and potentiality. To delineate its political effects, reproducibility and circulation are forwarded as crucial performative qualities that allow anti-aesthetic photos to evade commodity status and undergo transformations in their form and function. However, the anti-aesthetics' resistant positionality is not fixed. It can still acquire value and gain currency within aesthetic industries. But these "failures" of the anti-aesthetic do not equate to its impossibility. The anti-aesthetic is still a valid category of critique as demonstrated by its capability to rhetorically transform our understanding of aesthetic value and ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding. Thus, the freedoms afforded by these anti-aesthetic projects are likewise in low-fidelity— offering brief glances of complex futures.

Keywords: Anti-aesthetics, Aesthetics, Photography, Visual Rhetoric, Visual Performance

"Nobody ever discovered ugliness in photographs," Susan Sontag quips in one of her essays on photography and adds that if one did take a photograph of something ugly it would only be because they find the "ugly thing…beautiful" (65). While the absence of a specific conception of beauty, an aesthetic, may be an impossibility even in the "ugliest" of photos, Sontag seems to dismiss these unorthodox forms as a subset of beauty, seen and captured within the same frames. It is one thing, however, to take a photograph of something ugly in a beautiful way and another to take a photograph in an ugly way and *still* deem it worthy of appreciation. It is quite haphazard to assume that the rhetoric of the unorthodox and "inaesthetic" work within the same ontologies and conventions of beauty. While beauty operates by emphasizing qualities that evoke pleasure or desire, there is a need to account for visual forms that deemphasize these qualities and yet still produce equivalent effects. The discipline of visual rhetoric lends itself well to this need. In undertaking visual rhetorical critique, Kevin Michael DeLuca underscores the necessity of recognizing images as ontological (667). This entails studying the rhetoricity of images *within* the modalities of visual practice in contrast to adopting external subject positions. An ontological view suggests that

the image is an event, a thing that when encountered creates realities rather than just represents them. An encounter with an image event has the potential to produce new subjects (668), perhaps those with new ways of seeing what is beautiful. Thus, this essay will attempt to account for an ontology of image events that operate within unorthodox visual practices and potentially produce new realities and viewing subjects.

In describing this ontology, the massive circulation of images must be taken into account as a cornerstone of our contemporary digital culture. In the photo and video social networking service Instagram alone, 95 million images are uploaded daily (Broz). While the ubiquity of photo-taking devices has universalized the act of taking pictures, it is the platformization facilitated by the Internet that has democratized the curation and circulation of photographs. In this immense ecology of images, it is perhaps unsurprising to encounter visual cultures located within or that go beyond the borders of beauty. The digital magazine *Vice* has described a recent popularity of the purposeful sharing of strange and weird photographs as the Internet's "peak ugly era" and a championing of the "anti-aesthetic vibe" (Jones). They add that it is a move that distances itself from the filtered, polished, curated feeds of days past towards a visuality that is raw, individualistic, low fidelity, non-conforming, and authentic. The magazine noted that this visual culture is exemplified by lo-fi images of the mundane (e.g., a crumpled packet of chips) or strange (e.g., a dead pigeon on a sidewalk), overexposed flash-on images, blurry self-portraits (selfies), and random *photo dumps*. The last item refers to a collection of these seemingly anti-aesthetic images published together in album or "carousel" fashion, a practice that became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic when people took to the micro-documentation of their everyday lives. While they concede that this anti-aesthetic or anti-posting still works within a framework of premeditation and curation and thus, within an aesthetic style, they embrace it as a form of counterculture in increasingly homogenous digital spaces.

In this essay, I shall take photographs published under the Filipino social media pages (specifically in the platforms of Facebook and Instagram) under the banners *Picture lang* (trans. "Pictures only") and *Mga sulat sa daan* (trans. "Writings on the street") as cases for a visual rhetorical critique. Both projects fit within our initial description of a growing anti-aesthetic practice and their significant following provides ample ground in studying their eventfulness— how their visual rhetoric produce new viewing subjects and new realities for seeing photographs.

As of the first quarter of 2024, *Picture lang* has around 49,000 followers on both platforms while *Mga sulat sa daan* has around 257,000. The latter uses the handle "sulatsulatlang" on Instagram, exemplifying how both accounts subscribe to a trend of Philippine-based web pages that use the word "lang" (Filipino for "only") in their page handles. This is perhaps to signal a modest description of their work for a humorous or subversive effect. The page *Picture lang* features the photographs of artist/freelance photographer and political activist Francis Jeremiah Manaog. His body of work is composed of photographs of mundane objects (from street food to toilet bowls), makeshift architectural facades, claustrophobic spaces (of public restrooms and jeepneys), vignettes of urban life often in states of decay, transience, and even nostalgia. The page *Mga sulat sa daan* features photographs of political graffiti and various textual "vandalisms" without context (often humorous, absurd, existential, sentimental), signages of various inexactitudes, and quotes displayed in various public transportation vehicles, taken by an anonymous photographer (or possibly, a collective).

Both cases fall under the general principles of my conceptualization of the anti-aesthetic— fragmented, unfiltered, low fidelity photos (of mostly urban elements) presented in "inartistic" but consistent montages that perform a destructuring effect and occupy a countercultural position within the aesthetic dominion. The choice of the term "low fidelity" (lo-fi, colloquially) in the title of this essay is a creative appropriation of a popular descriptor for a quality or style of musical production associated with technical imperfections and a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. Adam Harper described lo-fi aesthetics as both a mode of production and a positive appreciation of what has normatively been interpreted as imperfections in musical recordings (1). Despite its sonic origins, I deliberately chose to conflate low fidelity with anti-aesthetics as they both deal with recalibrations of how art is valued. Additionally, I wanted to preface multimodality as an appropriate category for anti-aesthetics, where the sonic can overlap with the visual, the visual with the performative, etc. The works of *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* deemphasize beauty, glamor, and order in favor of obscurity, mundanity, and repetition. What then is the cultural position occupied by these anti-aesthetic images through their visual rhetoric and performance? To evaluate that positionality, this visual rhetorical critique shall unfold in two steps: 1) the identification of the features and functions of anti-aesthetic photographs within artistic and digital regimes toward 2) an evaluation of their political potentials and limitations.

Anti-Aesthetics

In its popular usage, the term "anti-aesthetic" could initially be described as a type of *internet aesthetics*. Internet aesthetics is described as a concept having less to do with the academic idea of "aesthetic" and more with the descriptions of visual art styles that showcase individuality (Spellings). The popular use of "anti-aesthetics," however, does not contradict some of the scholarly discussions given to it. Case in point, "The Anti-Aesthetic" is likewise the title and object of inquiry of a collection of essays on postmodern culture, edited by art critic Hal Foster. Foster's conceptualization of the anti-aesthetic is not of a mere negation of art or aesthetic, but rather a "critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them" (xv). He situates the anthology within a postmodernism of resistance, a counter-practice that seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes. Foster places the anti-aesthetic as a marker of a cultural position that questions the validity of aesthetic categories and as a cross-disciplinary practice that accounts for cultural practices rooted in vernacular forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm. I believe the chosen photographic projects embody a counter-practice that is aware of their subversion of traditional aesthetic qualities.

Aside from visual rhetoric, the field of aesthetics emerges as another a general site of contention. James Elkins, in his introduction to *Beyond the Aesthetic and Anti-Aesthetic* returns to the historical synonymity of aesthetics to modernism's commitment to value (1). Aesthetics is erected as a historical marker that accounts for forms and practices that operate on subjectivities, on values that cannot be reconciled purely through reason. Indeed, Foster who was also present in the seminar recalls how they construed aesthetics in the 80s as a "space of resolution," of "subjective integration and social consensus" (26) and whose conciliatory nature renders the necessity of critique. Foster was concerned with art practices that stood in opposition to these reconciliations, thus, with anti-aesthetics. Jay Bernstein, on the other hand, believes that all types of art are interrogations of how things can lodge a claim, how artworks demand feeling as a way of knowing (25). For him, there is no distinction then between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic as they are but different ways on elaborating on the autonomy and politics of modern art.

Despite the slippery slopes between these western notions of aesthetics and anti-aesthetics, I still choose to use these categorizations with an emphasis on the latter. Precisely because of its inherent contradictions, anti-aesthetics remains to be a worthwhile category in problematizing the value, autonomy, and politics of cultural and subjective forms. Elkins describes anti-aesthetics as a useful label for the activities of young students and artists who engage capitalism, neoliberalism, identity, institutions that bestow value on art, or the everyday lives of people who are not necessarily art practitioners (1). Likewise, I am interested in practices that engage outside of consensus and reconciliatory value influenced by my own preoccupation with experimental writing and performances. My goal is not to prove or disprove the possibility of an anti-aesthetic. It is simply to determine if it still has analytical use on Filipino art-making practices that seemingly reclassify the value of their products. Specifically, I will interrogate the anti-aesthetics of a contemporary visual culture not as an absence of aesthetic qualities but as an operation that challenges specific artistic and mimetic assumptions underlying the photographic mode. If all art forms lodge claims, then the disciplines of rhetoric and performance studies provide the necessary analytic resources to critique this process. I view rhetoric as a study of forms and effects on social reality, which corresponds to the objects of this paper: anti-aesthetic photographs and their respective effects on value and ways of seeing. Rhetorical effects in this context would not only refer to emotions that photographs evoke but the states of thinking, feeling, and experiencing that it demands from the viewer. These states in turn can be described through a more *performative* ontology, one that emphasizes the embodiment, events, and agencies that influence the valuation of these images. Specifically, I explore how their orality—their performances of speech, as well as the liminal states they evoke—afford agency in transforming audiences and ways of seeing.

While anti-aesthetic practice can easily and popularly be adopted by non-artists, I will focus on the photographs of these Filipino artists as I am primarily interested in the intentional and consistent use of these visual forms and rhetorical practices. This is not to claim, however, that all their works can be cohesively branded as anti-aesthetic or that they are representative of anti-aesthetics in general. In fact, I see the rubric and politics of anti-aesthetics as amorphous and evolving, qualities that are simultaneously emergent and transformable. While I shall of course attempt to describe and evaluate them in detail, I work with an awareness of the subjectivity in which anti-aesthetics realms also operate. The malleable trait of anti-aesthetics necessitates the recognition that they are prone to both reactionary and resistant politics. This challenge is key in the choice of rhetoric as a critical perspective as it puts us in a radical confrontation with subjectivities and otherness through a generalized understanding of rhetorical modes and process (Hart and Daughton 27).

Anti-Aesthetic Photographs as Rhetorical Image Events

In undertaking this visual rhetorical critique, I re-signify my alignment with DeLuca along with Joe Wilferth in their shift of inquiry towards how rhetorical theory accounts for images and how images disrupt our traditional notions of rhetoric. The latter point is compounded by their claim that rhetoric itself is dependent on emergent forms and their technologies of production, mediation, and rediscoveries. Anti-aesthetic photographs, like those produced by *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan*, are objects apropos to this attitude as they are emergent, experimental, countercultural practice. They are imbued with the potential to disrupt ways of seeing from which new viewing subjects can emerge. Categorically, anti-aesthetic photographs function as image events. Arguments towards the eventfulness of images in the Philippine context can also be found in

Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.'s critique of digital photographs during the 2016 Philippine National Elections. Serquiña illustrates how dead figures like Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. and Corazon Aquino, past presidents and opposing forces during the tumultuous period in local politics during the 1970s to the 1980s, are digitally resurrected or reincarnated through the politicization and technologization of the phenomenon of death (67). An invocation of memory and ideology occurs when their likeness is used in the visual campaigns of living political figures and so, the dead are "disseminated in multiple and infinite ways" becoming "image-event[s]" that influence historical knowledge and the people's capacity to perform this knowledge (75). Images of the dead are encountered as events, not just mere representations, that are capable of forming political bodies through ways of seeing altered by performances of memory.

To account for image events' rhetorical force, DeLuca and Wilferth warn against linguistic domestication, the impulse of a print-orientation, and the "reading" of images (a warning they heed from Roland Barthes). Instead, they advocate for an image orientation, a theory and practice situated within an image world through a unit of analysis they refer to as the image event. An image as event sees it as an ecological phenomenon with its own ontology and not mere representations of the "real." They align this with Jean Baudrillard's resistance to the moral imperative of meaning and the violence of interpretation— a refusal of meaning and representation as the end goal of critique. Borrowing from Alain Badiou, DeLuca conceptualizes an "event" as something new that ruptures a situation where a person has the potential of becoming a new subject once it is encountered. To encounter an image as an event, one must focus in the "materiality of the image," to adopt an "image orientation" in performing visual rhetorical criticism ("Unmoored" 669).

Foregrounding of the Denotative

As an image event, I posit that the Filipino anti-aesthetic photographs I have chosen in this essay function through the foregrounding of the denotative. This argument is founded on a reworking of some of Roland Barthes' conceptualizations. For Barthes, the denotative or literal message describes the state of an image without a code to refer to— the image in a state that is pure and utopian (42). In this sense, denotation is primarily a mental exercise as it is difficult to imagine or isolate it from symbolic or cultural meaning. In terms of photography, the denotative message may be imagined as the recording or capture of "what is there" rather than the transformation of the object; an adoption of a pure "spectatorial consciousness" (44). Denotation naturalizes the symbolic message through the recording of its presence (its being-there) in nature, that is to say, in a codeless state. This absence of code, Barthes adds, proceeds to a deintellectualization of the message (45). While he clarifies that there is always a bit of the denotative aspect that remains in an image once it is spectated, he maintains that it is the interpretation of symbolic or connoted message that leads to the perpetuation of ideology— to the *rhetoric* of the image (49). He seems to view denotation as an empty signifier, one that has no system to associate elements with. It is crucial nonetheless in providing the "syntagmatic flow" (51) through which connotations are spoken. I contest, however, that denotation may operate within a code and perform a function outside the formation of intelligible structures.

With images saturating public and digital realms through the "visual colonization of the surface" (Ommen 1), we are subsumed by the norm of connotations. For Barthes, human intervention places the image in the plane of connotation (44). This intervention refers to cultural codes that enable various types of readings or *lexia* (46). It can be

assumed then that it is via the rhetoric of the image where aesthetic is produced and, thus, where its valued is cultivated. What are the rhetorical possibilities then when a photograph is deliberately decontextualized and brought closer to a denotative state? The foregrounding of the denotation, if my previous logic holds water, allows a (momentary) escape from the artistic gaze and produces an image event that defamiliarizes through a rhetoric that directly challenges and negotiates with notions of taste and valuation. Denotation is no longer simply a syntagm where connotations latch themselves on, but that which accounts for the anti-aesthetic photograph's rhetorical force.

Manaog's project *Picture lang* is populated by close-up photographs of mundane things — chairs, street food, animals, trash left on streetside curbs, (unusually empty) urban spaces of gas stations, street corners, and toilets, or deliberately obscured photos (overexposed flash-on shots, or underexposed ones that abstract the subjects significantly). *Picture lang* takes a documentary approach in its production of anti-aesthetic images. Images of "what-is-there" are decontextualized through low fidelity, awkward framing, and overexposure. I argue that they are encountered as *events* that displace the aesthetic gaze commonly brought forth by connotation. The photographs have a shoot-what's-in-front-you vibe, suggesting a deemphasis on a monopolizing gaze in favor of decentralized *glances*. A gaze alludes to a prolonged scrutiny of an object, but a glance suggests speed and ephemera. In anti-aesthetic photographs, the action of a "quick look" is captured. To operationalize the study of image events, DeLuca and Wilferth scrutinize "modes of orientation" and "modes of intensities" that "see" (rather than "read") images as "relationships of simultaneous becomings." "Seeing an image" is done by analyzing contemporary modes of perceptions particularly that of speed, distraction, and glances. These practices suggest how images are encountered by contemporary audiences — in quick, distracted glances shaped by the public screens and images saturating all manners of surfaces (think of seeing billboards and advertising through a window of a moving train, or scrolling through short-form videos on various social media platforms).

The modality of glances contributes to the rhetorical force of anti-aesthetic photographs. Glancing as a type of perception foreground images through speed and distraction to produce specific affects. *Picture lang's* photograph of a blurry stray finger covering majority of the frame (see fig. 1) is probably a familiar sight to any phone-owner who has accidentally blocked their camera lens while attempting to take a picture. The blurriness and suddenness all denote the speed of how it was produced. While this type of picture might immediately get deleted from our phone galleries, seeing it on a photography account on Instagram offers a strange but familiar encounter. The photograph offers less of an opportunity for the interpretation of meaning than the recognition of the situation that is denoted: "Why is this photograph uploaded? It looks like something I might have accidentally taken." When you scroll down and see pictures of urinals or a fast-food chain closing for the night, things start to make sense. "Picture lang." Pictures *only*. It coyly keeps the promise of its name. Pictures that denote the glances you might take while returning home from work (a monobloc chair on the curb, a cat sleeping on a sari-sari store window). The encounter of the images, again, becomes an event. Steeped in its own materiality, it ruptures what we might commonly expect of aesthetic or fine art photography which causes us to recalibrate our lexia, our ways of seeing and feeling of these images. These "simultaneous becomings," the strangeness and familiarity, change our subject position from one expecting the beautiful or the sublime to one of "lesser" expectations that include the weird, the unserious, the humorous, and the anti-aesthetic. Even the physical process of looking might shift from being overly-scrutinizing (e.g., staring at a blown-up photograph exhibited in a gallery) to one that mimics glances in

gesture (e.g., scrolling quickly through dozens of similarly denotative images on the screens of our phones).

This economy of glances leads to an alternative production of value amongst images. It operates within a process of defamiliarization, a diminished capability in knowing what to look for or what to do with an image. Defamiliarization or disorientation, however, leads to the exploration of new routes of understanding. Images that denote empty spaces are common subjects for both *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan*: a streetside curb lined with trash (see fig. 13), a road near the Metro Rail Transit station (see fig. 14), an entrance to an underpass (see fig. 15), a hallway (see fig. 18). We recognize the images but are left unsure and unfamiliar with what to do with them. But the emptiness or uncleanness denotated allows the viewer to directly engage with the rhetorical principles that bind these photographs rather than preoccupy them with the semantics of individual photos. The image event invites a consciousness of the project, the purpose of its collection and display. Viewers learn to shift their valuation of photographs via alternative modalities, trough the practices of speed, distraction and glances.

This shift I attribute to the delays or limitations in the identification of meaning, or at times even the basic physical features of the subject. This is not to say that symbolic or connotative interpretation is completely absent. Again, this would be impossible even in the most obscured of images. The stray finger photograph (see fig. 1) may connote affects related to the lack of control, a toilet bowl (see fig. 6) could signify the provocateur attitude of the photographer, the literally empty hallway (see fig. 18) might evoke non-literal emptiness. Obfuscating the object or the scene, however, imbues the photograph with the quality of *artifice* which permits the perception of a work as constructed. Artifice — the awareness of a form's artificiality or its status as a product of mediation and composition — has been described as a central tenet of the process of artistic experimentation (Spinosa xx; Bray et al. 12). The tightness of the composition on the photographs of the urinals (see fig. 2) and the chair (see fig. 3) as well as their sheer mundanity announces artifice, the process through which they were taken: a photographer documenting (via a quick snapshot) what was (closely) in front of them. The limitation of a coded reference allows seeing a photograph *as photograph*, as a specific construction of a photographic act whose rhetorical ends (e.g., as an invitation for consumption or spectacle) are not immediately apparent. The chair is only a chair. The picture is only a picture. But not really. Fleeting glances reveal the denotative as experimental sites of potentialities rather than certainties. This opposition to gaze allows the photograph to evade commodity status, albeit temporarily as defamiliarization is not a permanent state. Still, this quality of the anti-aesthetic image is key to its rhetorical understanding. If the symbolic and connotative carry the aesthetic, then it is deprioritized at this fissure. The anti-aesthetic photograph can be situated in a position that is not in tune with an industry of images that rely on connotations and their rhetorical reproduction. The pictures pronounce that they are valueless (again, the name "Picture lang" is no accident). At the same time, their construction and artifice make us aware of the purpose of their display and transports us into a position with a recalibrated sense of value. It is a position that denies, or at the very least delays, the value of exchange as it refuses to celebrate or conform to an industry of aesthetic; rather, it chooses to directly question it.

The foregrounding of the denotative is also present in the project *Mga sulat sa daan*. Similarly, it employs a documentary approach, specifically of graffiti and public art often decontextualized by tight close-ups, blurry zooms, and uneven framing. Glances are evoked through the photographed texts often found on walls, posts, corners, and

crevices; on stationery but also on temporary objects like traffic barriers or signages; even on mobile surfaces such as in jeepneys, pedicabs, and other local forms of transport. Unsurprisingly, *Picture lang* features several photographs of graffiti and texts as well. These are photographs of writing that perhaps one might spot while walking or commuting in the city. It announces the quality of artifice by emulating the shoot-what's-in-front-of-you tactic.

Anti-aesthetic photographs, as prominently exemplified in the project *Mga sulat sa daan*, feature texts as visual objects. These images function through the complex fashion of *relay*. Here, I take Barthes' definition of the term relay, where text and image stand in a complementary relationship, such as in comics (41). He comments, however, that text has a repressive value on images and that while language has the function of elucidation, it is a selective one (40).

However, written texts can also function in the same plane of visuality as pictorial or iconic elements. We see texts in order to read them. Nevertheless, rather than simply functioning through linguistic anchorage, what is foregrounded in the works of *Mga sulat sa daan* are visual elements characterized by the same low fidelity and detachment found in the works of *Picture lang*. The images are bound visually by their often uneven (both in physical structure and grammar) handwritten quality or, alternatively, the run-down, urban, negative space in which they are scrawled. Humor, absurdity, and resistant politics emanate from what is written (linguistic message), but also from *how* and *where* the texts are written (aspects of the image event). The humor of the graffiti with the letters "IMY" (a popular abbreviation for "I miss you") spray-painted on galvanized fencing (see fig. 7) is not simply reliant on its linguistic meaning but also on the irony of a personal, intimate sentiment made visually available in such an unglamorous public space. The resistance of the writing "Never Again" (see Figure 15), a slogan associated with the rejection of Martial Law and the rise of the Marcos family in Philippine politics, is characterized by a visuality shaped by speed (i.e., graffiti involves stealth and agility) that cuts across a background of order (e.g., walls of private property or bridges, overpasses, and other public works). It may be argued that these analyses can just as easily refer to the actual physical graffiti rather than just the photographs. I ascribe this conflation to its similar process of foregrounding the denotative that facilitates a spectatorial consciousness. Because *Mga sulat sa daan* photographs graffiti in the same anti-aesthetic manner, we are left with the momentary glance of having-been-there. Moreover, this is compounded by the situation that graffiti are anti-aesthetic images in themselves. Anti-aesthetics, after all, could not possibly be confined to the photographic form. Graffiti disrupts the aesthetics of order and urban planning and are likewise encountered as image events. The anti-aesthetic qualities of graffiti are decidedly carried over in a photograph that specifically denotes this anti-aestheticism.

A contestation to the argument on denotation might arise from the fact that the photographs contain readable texts. This implies that these photographs already function through connotation as meaning is inevitably foregrounded in language. Barthes describes all images as polysemous, a "floating chain of signifieds" (39), of which linguistic reading is a *primary* approach. He cites captions and advertisements or even the implied text in an image (e.g., an image of a padlock brings forth associations with the word "lock" itself) as the domain of this linguistic reading of images (40). In the process of reading, interpretation and connotation are inescapable. This assumption can perhaps be carried over to inartistic photographs of graffiti which are literally images of texts. I contend, however, that these texts can also be understood within the visual ontology of

an image event in addition to the recourse of language. This is to say, texts as images. The image of text, I would like to illustrate, are likewise in the act of denoting and, thus, are imbued with the same rhetorical force as other non-textual anti-aesthetic photographs. This is not to say that we no longer understand them linguistically (which is made impossible by our own literacy). Rather, we experience them in other means, such as that of performed modalities like orality and liminality, which I argue contribute to the eventfulness of our encounters.

Orality of the Image

Straying from both linguistic and visual ontologies, I propound that it is not only visual and linguistic meaning that is imbued in these images, but a specific quality of speech: that of *orality*. Here we encounter the eventfulness of the anti-aesthetic photograph through performed multimodalities. Images are visual, of course, but they are also oral and performed forms.

A glimpse of performed modes in images can be seen in Orville Tatcho's analysis of the display, transport, and internment of Marcos's corpse during its heavily criticized burial in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Philippine Heroes' Cemetery) in 2016 which works within the intersections of death, public memory, and visual rhetoric. Tatcho argues for the materiality of the dead body (4-5), a site of memory where polysemic meanings, myths, narratives (propagated through oral means) are contained, and through which notions of power, identity, belongingness, closure, and erasure are extracted. It should be noted the public remembrance and transference of memory is a primary function of performances of orality. Walter J. Ong, for example, highlights the significant somatic component of oral memory as compared to textual memory (66) which alludes to a conception of orality that relates to performances of the body in general.

Moreover, Senko Maynard describes orality's concern with "language as performance" which also signals a non-confinement to the realm of the verbal (23). I view orality in this sense as a particular type of performance that can be present in embodied, aural, and even visual forms. In the photographs of *Mga sulat sa daan* and even *Picture lang*, orality significantly contributes to the anti-aesthetic. We "hear" photographed graffiti and writing. In stark contrast to the low fidelity of the images, their "voice" is distinct. Part of the primacy of the denotative, especially in the case of photographed writing, is the awareness that these texts were written, created, *said* by someone. This relates to a quality of artifice brought about by denotation. Maynard offers the term "fluid orality" as an alternative to Walter J. Ong's focus on primary orality (19) which does not account for the oral qualities of written, non-verbal, and digital forms. This type of orality captures a direct interactional relationship between producer/creator and consumer, a narrowing of a distance between text and reader (23). Orality and the direct interaction it espouses, for example, facilitate the in-jokes and ironic humor in several anti-aesthetic photographs. A photograph by *Picture lang* of a handwritten sign taped to a wall that reads "Wag magtapon ng mumu sa lababo, owkei?!" (trans. "Do not throw leftovers in the lavatory, okay?!"; see fig. 5) can be perceived humorously because of the alternative spelling of the word "okay." It is a type of writing and "voice" associated with popular textspeak that evokes cuteness or silliness. *Mga sulat sa daan's* photograph of a wall hand painted with the words "Actually…Bawal Umihi Dito!!!" (trans. "Actually…you can't pee here"; see fig. 8), which has been shared over 51,000 times via Facebook, is humorous because of the abrupt codeswitching in language and how one might imagine the saying of the word "actually": a slightly snooty expression, usually associated with middle-class Filipino sociolects, made ironic because of the perceived crassness of the linguistic message. Irony and humor

are evidence of a capability for staging politics via orality, a modality that subsists as an undercurrent in a sea of textuality and visuality. Playfulness in language and the articulation of anti-establishment sentiments, Maynard lists down, are some of the aspects more readily captured by orality (23). Overtly political messages such as graffiti photographed by *Mga sulat sa daan* stating "Hustisya para kay Ericson Acosta" (trans. "Justice for Ericson Acosta"; see fig. 9), which refers to the death of Filipino revolutionary and poet Ericson Acosta slain by military forces in 2022, achieve rhetorical force by virtue of both the linguistic message and the intervention carried by its orality. It functions through what I can only describe as an oral equivalent of glances. This description, however, exemplifies what Jonathan Sterne refers to as the audio-visual litany, a divide between visual and aural/oral in favor of the former, in which our vocabularies are overwhelmingly biased towards the visual (9). Nevertheless, the quality I wish to delineate refers to brief interruptions of orality through creative forms that disrupt experiences and notions of aesthetics. Anti-aesthetic photographs produce "whispers," "screams," "howls," "murmurs," or "hums" in the same way that they provoke glances. The speed and distraction of image events manifest in these oral forms.

Similar to how a "scream" or "whisper" might be "heard" from seeing political graffiti on a street corner, brief interruptive "sounds" may be audible upon viewing a photograph of the said graffiti while scrolling through an Internet platform. Reading is also hearing the word, even if the act is done mentally. Maynard discusses how digital orality texts are read silently, which led to coining term *silent orality*. She adds that "the main purpose of digital orality is to allow interpersonal speech-like communication in digitally written forms" (21). Anti-aesthetic photographs exemplify the performance of digital orality through its interruptive communication with its viewers-cum-*listeners*.

But what of anti-aesthetic images that do not specifically feature text? While it might be uncommon to find pictorial forms in digital platforms with no accompanying presence of linguistic text (a post on Instagram, for example, would always display the name of the page posting the photo), it would be a stretch to argue for their orality based on slight textual accompaniments. Rather, I would like to take a step back into other performative qualities of anti-aesthetic photographs. Orality in a more general sense involves *sonic* aspects and, as I have argued, some of these are performed through textual elements. But sonic imaginations, as Jonathan Sterne would call them, are not only evoked in language but in all facets of culture, visuality and space included. "Sound does not exist in a vacuum; it implies space," Sterne declares (91). He adds that space is the register in which sound happens and gains meaning. While oral performance might be utilized in all anti-aesthetic photographs, I propose that a type of sonic performance may resonate from certain spaces encountered in the photographs. Much of *Picture lang's* and *Mga sulat sa daan's* photographs, for example, feature presumably urban spaces that are empty, abandoned, unpopulated, and—to use another term that has crossed over from academic to popular usage—*liminal*. These liminal spaces seem to perform a *quietness* that accompanies their visual void. I shall thus attempt to link the liminality of spaces in anti-aesthetic photographs to a sonic imaginary of silence.

Liminality, a tenet of the study of performance popularized by anthropologist Victor Turner, pertains to a state of in-betweenness. Jon McKenzie describes it as a "mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic 'in betweenness' allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed" (27). He also echoes Marvin Carlson's attempt to define "performance" as an event with its *liminoid* nature foregrounded.

Photos of empty dwellings, trash heaps, dilapidated buildings, train stations at night, landscapes of urban poor communities, even public works with graffiti scrawled on capture the liminalities of the urban. They occupy the moments of in-betweenness in formal and informal settlements, legal and illegal acts of expression, development and decay, progress and stagnation, the lull before daybreak in the city. In our encounter with these image events, a sonic layer of quietness or silence pervades these transitory states which partly constitutes our experience of perceiving them.

Reworking R. Murray Schafer's influential idea of soundscapes, Emmanuel Jayson Bolata proposes the notion of "silencescapes" or places identified with or produced by silence (52). He argues that silences do not necessarily refer to the unheard or the un-spoken. Citing Ricardo Martonara, he considers silence as an abstract concept contingent to the subjective perception of humans in relation to sonic environments (51). This sonic subjectivity towards silence, I believe, is present in our encounter with liminal cityscapes in anti-aesthetic photographs. This is facilitated by the absence of people, the interme-diary nature of passageways, and the abandoned atmosphere of nighttime corners or dilapidation. Silences may be performed by *Picture lang's* photograph of an old lounge chair dumped in a heap of garbage (see fig. 13) as well as *Mga sulat daan's* photograph of an abandoned shack with the words "Don't be sad" spray-painted on it (see fig. 16) via the vacancy, abandonment, and peculiarity of the subject matter. I say "performed" as these silences work through an implied presence and not through a physical sensing of sound. Additionally, the "performance" occurs in the viewer's encounter with the image event. Silence is not as a fixed representation of the photographs. Silencescapes should be recognized as places produced by silence, Bolata argues, not places where silence is produced (53). Silencescapes are constructed in certain anti-aesthetic photographs through the subjective silences evoked by our encounter with them.

At this point, it has been established that the anti-aesthetic photograph functions not only by challenging visual modes but by introducing various modalities. It worth not-ing that orality and sound (including silence) are often relegated to unprivileged regimes of knowing, the very conditions in which anti-aesthetic and liminal practices thrive. The discussion of liminality can, of course, be extended beyond its relationship with silence. The question of space in particular merits a separate evaluation.

Urban Constriction and the Entry to the Liminal

Ironically, despite functioning with a relative freedom from an artistic gaze anti-aesthetics operate on a lack of freedom caused by its common visual subject: an in-creasingly urbanized landscape geared towards the reproduction, individualization, and privatization of spaces. There is a diminishing of "public" spaces in late capitalism in the sense of physical spaces that people can occupy freely and, indeed, space in general are but products of a social construction. Henri Lefebvre boldly claims that virtually, natural spaces are non-existent (30). The operations of decontextualization and defamiliarization in anti-aesthetic photography are direct engagements with urban construction and constriction. In the anti-aesthetic image, what is captured are glances that confront Jean Baudrillard's *simulations*. Baudrillard speaks of simulations as previously psychological, mental, and metaphorical scenes and situations projected into and lived out in a reality where they are no longer experienced as metaphorical (128). In an anti-aesthetic image, the simulacrum of urbanity is stripped away via the operation of decontextualization. To decontextualize and defamiliarize is to momentarily free the photographic object from the notions of productivity, seamlessness, busyness, and uniformity of abstract capitalist space. The foregrounding of the denotative then, also works within a spatio-temporal

plane. This is evident with how liminality as an anti-aesthetic feature is conceived through demarcations in space and time. The liminoid's association with rites of passage, transitions, ambiguity, and disorientation is precisely how anti-aesthetic photographs confronts urbanized space. Liminal anti-aesthetic photographs often feature empty spaces of transition such as roads (see fig. 14), underpasses (see fig. 15), and hallways (see fig. 18). It is interesting to note that "liminal space" photography and art has carved a niche genre in contemporary internet culture via platforms like Reddit and Facebook. "Liminal space" has been branded as an internet aesthetic discussed, appreciated, and propagated in online communities, and the projects of *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* travel along this continuum. *Picture lang's* photographs of fast-food joints during closing time (see fig. 4), uncommonly vacant roads (see fig. 14), empty restrooms (see fig. 17), and Mga sulat sa daan's lonely signages (see fig. 7), shady street corners (see fig. 10), jeepney mudgards with quotations (see fig. 11), and night buses (see fig. 12) construct spatio-temporal thresholds of rhetorical potentialities. Liminal anti-aesthetics often evoke not only eeriness, confusion, lostness, ambiguity, and horror, but also nostalgia, fascination, pleasure, imagination, and comfort. In the sample photographs, liminality is often facilitated by darkness as in the case of the garbage pile (see fig. 13) and train station (see fig. 14); spaces that lack activity like the abandoned shack (see fig. 16) or the empty restroom (see fig. 17); or more generally, spaces with large unused spaces stripped of context or particularity operating through the foregrounding of the denotative.

This range of rhetorical effects primarily situated in psychological affects in turn provides glimpses of the anti-aesthetic photograph's politics of space. Rather than abstract spaces of equilibrium and homogeneity culminating in the city capital, the anti-aesthetic project involves what Lefebvre instigates as spaces of difference or *differential spaces*. Differential spaces are potentialities of new spaces that accentuate the peculiarities that abstract space eliminates in order to reify the illusory solidity of the state (55). These include differences in country, location, ethnic group, and natural resources (64), as well as spaces excluded from the homogenous city: the city edges, shanty towns, urban poor communities, forbidden/taboo spaces, and zones of guerilla warfare (373). Working through instability and potentiality, the liminal spaces of anti-aesthetic photographs disrupt the legitimacy and wholeness of urbanity. It breaks simulations down into fragments, lampooning its proposed beauty by embracing the grotesque, and replacing its categories of order and symmetry with diverse ambiguity. However, I will not go so far as to argue that anti-aesthetic images offer alternatives spaces to capitalist abstraction. Perhaps what they achieve is simply a revelation of the seams and stitches of monolithic façade. Curtains are drawn on the constructedness of the city though *Picture lang's* depiction of gaps in economic production and absence of circulation on roads, or in *Mga sulat sa daan's* documentation of how architecture and urban works can be defaced and displaced by oralities of the strange, the sentimental, the revolutionary. Anti-aesthetic projects counter a notion of the permanence of space by entering a wormhole to deterritorialized zones where impermanence and fragmentation disorients but also provides a consciousness of aesthetic constructions and inventive possibilities.

These inventive possibilities are brought forth by the heuristic function of artifice imbued in the images by their primarily denotative qualities. This is to say, anti-aesthetic photographs can be taken by anyone as its techniques are easily adoptable, and because the images themselves reveal the instruments of their own making. We know how these photographs are taken as we take these types of photographs ourselves. The familiarity of the point-and-shoot tactic that prioritizes speed to capture glances came with the advent of digital cameras and, eventually, smart phones. Interestingly, the popularity of
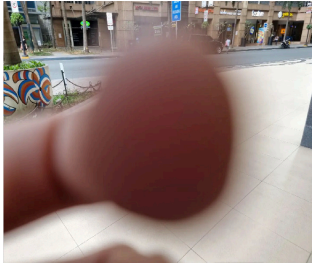
Figure 1
Picture lang, *Photograph obscured by finger*

Figure 2
Picture lang, *Photograph of urinals*

Figure 3
Picture lang, *Photograph of chair*

Figure 4
Picture lang, *Photograph of fast food chain*

Figure 5
Picture lang, *Photograph of wall sign*

Figure 6
Picture lang, *Photograph of toilet bowl*

Figure 7
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "IMY" graffiti*
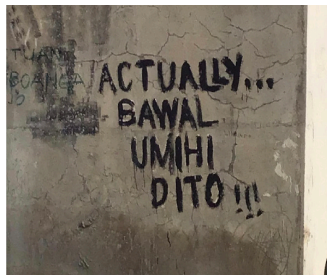

Figure 8
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "Actually…bawal umihi dito" graffiti*

Figure 9
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "Husisya para kay Ericson Acosta" graffiti*

Figure 10
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "Di tayo malaya" graffiti*

Figure 11
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of mudguard quote*

Figure 12
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of bus graffiti*

Figure 13
Picture lang, *Photograph of lounge chair*

Figure 14
Picture lang, *Photograph of train station*

Figure 15
Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "Never again!" graffiti*

Figure 16
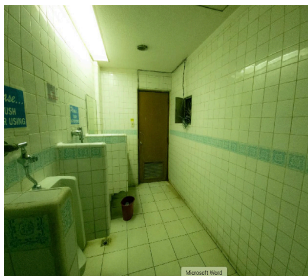Mga sulat sa daan, *Photograph of "Don't be sad" graffiti*

Figure 17
Picture lang, *Photograph of restroom*

Figure 18
Picture lang, *Photograph of hallway*

digital cameras during the early 2000s is making a comeback in terms of sales, more than a decade after their obsolescence. It has been reported that sales of digital cameras have risen to 93% since 2010 which is attributed to the popularity of "indie sleaze" aesthetic (not far off from how I describe anti-aesthetics), a revival of graininess, overexposure, and raw imperfectionism as captured in images of "crude reality" (McNeill). The result of such practices is an abundance of photographs compounded by the mass production of hardware and storage, as well as the accessibility of platforms for their circulation. While circulation and reproduction can be easily categorized as rhetorical effects, I reiterate that they can be more appropriately examined as part of the rhetorical process itself. Specifically, the reproducibility of photographs and the performance of their circulation, I posit, directly interfere with the status of the photograph as art object and commodity.

Rhetorics of Reproducibility and Performances of Circulation

Scholars like Deluca and Wilferth veer away from the study of the rhetorical circulation of images as they associate it with an iconic approach. Icons, they contest, tend to be described through histories and contexts that avert eyes away from the actual visual forms. Circulation, however, does not simply pertain to the iconicity of the visual object. Laurie E. Gries criticizes this aversion to circulation by arguing that circulatory processes are at the heart of the study of the rhetoric, ecology, and ontology of divergent and ever-unfolding images (335). This decentralized circulation necessitates attention not only to the products (i.e., the images, their form, and content) but also to the modalities of their production and distribution. Walter Benjamin reminds us that the political tendency of a work is less revealed by its attitudes towards relationships of production than its position within the process of production itself (770). An evaluation of the digital mode of (re)production of these images is imperative in apprehending both their rhetorical and aesthetic paradigms.

The rhetoricity of the anti-aesthetic image would be left wanting if its primarily digital modality of production is not accounted for. As Gries points out, virality and the massive circulation of subject images involves changes in location, form, media, genre and function and, thus, "rhetoric emerges from an image's encounters with humans and other entities" (335). Networked technologies facilitate a visual ecology where images can be published and circulated en masse in free-to-use platforms. Nevertheless, the industry of images largely remains in the realms of fine arts, graphic design, advertisement, fashion, mass media, etc. The inevitable advancement of technology (e.g., the recent rise of generative artificial intelligence), however, disrupts processes of ownership, copyright, labor, and exchange. After all, the control of circulation determines the protection of value. Quantity (not to be confused with mass production based on monopoly rather than democratic contribution), repetitiveness, and reproducibility are antithetical to these laws of exchange. Arguably then, anti-aesthetic photography as artistic production limits the exchange value of its products through sheer abundance and mundanity. *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* have hundreds of photos in their pages, available publicly, and "shareable" by users on the same platform. Additionally, it is worthwhile to note that online communities such as the Facebook groups and Reddit threads on liminal space photography have members who regularly upload their own photos and art, as well as copies of images found in the many corners of the Internet. While both *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* have participated in small art exhibitions (e.g., the *mulat: mga sulat sa daan* solo exhibition show staged on June 25, 2023) and sold prints of their pictures in independently published photobooks (e.g., Francis Jeremiah Manaog's "Banyo" photobook in 2022), they have done so in a relatively small and limited scale. Also, as it has been

established in the earlier sections, anti-aesthetic photographs, liminal space photography, and other internet aesthetics are techniques and tactics that enjoy popular and democratic use. These tactics are reminiscent of Edward Said's promotion of John Berger's *photomontage* which encourages an alternative use of photography to tell stories that challenge the official or ideological narratives of institutions of power (158). Incidentally, this may be associated with the contemporary technique of photo dumping, the publication of "randomly" collected pictures, commonly employed by both *Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan*.

The ideological narratives that are challenged do not stem from the representations of the visual elements per se but from notions of how art should be exchanged and circulated. A photograph must establish its status as art object to gain a value of exchange. This is embedded in connotation as determined by the control of production and reception. When control is relinquished or, in the case of digitally circulated images, overridden (as they overwhelm the "market" with reproducibility) then the status of art object is evaded. Here lies the rhetoricity of the reproducible anti-aesthetic image. I would like to add that the evasion of the status of art object is a common quality of contemporary experimental forms such as that of performance art. While performance art attempts to evade commodity status through ephemerality, the anti-aesthetic photograph refuses the status of art object by virtue of its reproducibility and redundancy. Therefore, I argue that the rhetorical force of the images is also compounded by the *performance* of an exaggerated form of circulation. This directly responds to this project's problematization of how aesthetic value is transformed: the anti-aesthetic photograph refuses overvaluation through the transparency of its production, a process that is openly available for reproduction and iteration.

I refer to the process of circulation as performance despite the term's associations with non-reproducibility. The reproducibility of images should not be wholly conflated with the process of circulation. Circulation is contextual, concerned with various encounters of the photograph as it moves through the digital avenues of networked technologies. As Marco De Marinis explicates, while text-in-itself can recur, text-in-situation can vary, and thus contextual reproducibility is impossible (285). Indeed, I must return to the primary assumption of anti-aesthetic photographs as image events. The eventfulness of images, as Gries notes, "can be studied as a dynamic network of distributed, unfolding, and unforeseeable becomings" (335). Image events and their quality of "becoming" rather than "being" are transitory, processual, unpredictable, and by all means, performative. When *Picture lang* or *Mga sulat sa daan* publishes photographs, they offer contributions to a stream of images that can be encountered by co-present actors behind digital screens.

These events of encounter become sites for the range of rhetorical effects I have delineated in the previous sections: defamiliarization, disorientation, oral intervention, liminal deterritorialization, recalibration of notions of aesthetics and art object, a consciousness of artifice and its heuristic functions. In short, a multimodality of performances. On the other hand, they could simply be ignored or lost to a seemingly endless river of content. The potentials of performed circulation also include the possibility of the loss and co-optation of rhetorical force. As with any rhetorical critique, an evaluation of these political tendencies proves necessary.

The "Failures" of the Anti-Aesthetic

While the image events we have discussed can decidedly occupy a resistant posi

tionality within aesthetic regimes, they do not remain in a state of permanent critique. The term "anti-aesthetic" itself necessarily refers to the code of an aesthetic. The popularity of anti-aesthetic images, albeit niche, points towards the fact that they do not completely function in the absence of an artistic gaze as I have already discussed at the start of this paper. I had discussed the delay of recognition in the process of defamiliarization, but the familiar can only be stalled for long. Because a coded symbolic interpretation is inevitable, anti-aesthetics can spill out of the emergent and be scooped up and co-opted by the dominant. The anti-aesthetic can easily become aesthetic in the flick of a switch.

A feature by *The New Yorker* on German fashion and fine art photographer Juergen Teller (b. 1964) focused on the "deglamorization," "audacious amateurism," and seductiveness of a "playful, slightly off immediacy" present in his works (Fry). Teller, who began his career in the 1980s, has established himself as a top fashion photographer through features in fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* and collaborations with designers and luxury fashion houses like Louis Vuitton, Helmut Lang, Yves Saint Laurent, Céline, and Vivienne Westwood. While his works which often feature celebrities in grimy urban backdrops, improvised sets, grainy natural lighting, and humorous casualness have been criticized as "ridiculous," "shockingly mundane," "weirdo photos," and "disrespectful" towards his subjects, it is undeniable that his brand of anti-aesthetics has achieved commercial success. In the article, this was variously attributed to a "[stylizing] of the human element without abandoning its rawness," a self-conscious critique of stardom, and the coolness of being "a little bit ugly" (Fry)— qualities tangential to how I have described the anti-aesthetic photograph. Similarly, liminality and liminal spaces have been studied in terms of how it is utilized in the market to shape certain patterns of consumption. Taheri et al. discussed nightclubbing as experiential marketing with effects on consumption constructs. They argue that nightclubs foster liminal experiences characterized by the subversion of social norms, spontaneous communitas and detachment to social structures, and the freedom/option to participate in the liminal which in turn "heightens experiential feelings of escapism and play, thus encouraging the consumer to freely consume" (20). The first case exemplifies how the denotative foregrounded in anti-aesthetic photographs can be familiarized to gain connotative currency. The anti-aesthetic crosses the threshold of decontextualization and enters the semantic with its associations of coolness and, ironically, a new kind of glamor. In the latter case, liminal social spaces steeped in their own potentials are shown to be capable of breeding escapist, hedonistic, and consumerist tendencies. A baptism occurs as they enter the market, converting their status to art object and commodity.

There is a need to confront not only the tendencies of the photographic product but also its circulation. Under communicative capitalism, Jodi Dean argues that there is a shift from the communicative unit of a message to that of a *contribution* (54). With the overabundance of images on the Internet, even the most political, subversive, and anti-aesthetic forms can become contributions lost in a stream of content rather than become messages that invite response. Networked technologies foster a fantasy of abundance where messages and images lose their specificity in a "massive stream of content… merging with and into the data flow" (58). This is evident in the appearance of numerous "internet aesthetics" relegating the complex notion of aesthetic into a mere question of style and preference (e.g., fashion styles usually denoted by the suffix *-core* and musical or visual styles denoted by the suffix *-wave*) where the "anti-aesthetic" is only one of many. Furthermore, what I have described as exaggerated performances of circulation are prone to what Dean delineates as fantasies of participation (60). She adds that the drive to contribute (ironically) involves interconnected passivity resulting in a depoliticizing

function of the circulation of communication. In performing circulation we cultivate a feeling of participation, a signaling of politics, in this case through contributions to aesthetic discourse and practice. If the politics of circulation depends on "encounters" with other actors, the image event becomes unwieldly when the flow of data becomes too massive. Moments and spaces for discussion, response, and proper politics are swept away in in communicative capitalism's stream.

So, do these apparent "failures" of the anti-aesthetic illustrate its own impossibility? To deem the improbability of an anti-aesthetic project based on the risk of its relegation into an aesthetic is to believe that a permanence of values is possible. But as it has been illustrated in this critique, the valuation of art forms is *transformable* through the rhetorical and performative functions that assert autonomy from aesthetic regimes. Value is impermanent and so the anti-aesthetic is still a worthwhile category in analyzing resistant art-making practices. Secondly, we must recalibrate our view of "failure." The exercise of politics in anti-aesthetic practices can be located in the possibilities of the ways of knowing that we can occupy as transformed audiences. These possibilities are seen in glimpses, a modality that characterizes contemporary image events. Its process and effects are fleeting and ephemeral as is the case with most types of performances. Thus, performances do not fail because of their impermanence. Alternatively, it is precisely in the "failure" of performances that possibilities arise. If the anti-aesthetic "fails," then it only proves that practices of feeling and knowing can be altered — and that politics can continue to emerge in these spaces.

Conclusion: Freedoms in Low fidelity

In this essay, I engaged in a visual rhetorical critique to account for the cultural positionality of anti-aesthetic images in term of their forms, functions, and politics. The photographic projects of Francis Jeremiah Manaog/*Picture lang* and *Mga sulat sa daan* are cases of broad and popular contemporary visual practices by artists and non-artists within the digital sphere. They are forms of counterculture that interrupt, in inventive and resistant ways, representations of order within the aesthetic industry of images. This engagement is also an attempt at a methodological shift in visual rhetorical criticism, a move from the print-oriented semantic analysis of visual elements towards an ontological understanding of image events. In locating the eventfulness of anti-aesthetic photographs, I emphasized contemporary modes of speed, distraction, and glances while reworking Roland Barthes' ideas on the rhetoric of images by arguing for the rhetoricity of foregrounding of the denotative. Subjectiveness is delayed through documentation-oriented and deliberately obscured photos that produce defamiliarizing and disorientating effects. The gaze is displaced by quick, fleeting, and distracted glances that deprioritize connotation, thereby diminishing the value of exchange and simultaneously questioning the validity of visual regimes.

Believing in the necessity of the intervention of performance studies, I also argued that the anti-aesthetics function through a multimodality of performances. First, they tend to operate through the performative qualities of orality and sonic imaginaries of silence. These performances function as interruptions to visual and linguistic ecologies through the production of oral and sonic layers.

Second, I also problematized the question of space by analyzing how anti-aesthetic images address urban construction and constriction. By capturing liminal spaces, the images become events of deterritorialization that confront the homogenous abstraction of space by entering zones of in-betweenness, instability, and potentiality.

Lastly, to delineate its political effects, reproducibility and circulation were forwarded as crucial performative qualities of the rhetoricity of anti-aesthetic images. The reproducibility and redundancy of images and their popular and democratic use permitted by their heuristic function override the control of production and reception. Reproducibility allows the anti-aesthetic photograph to avoid the status of art object and commodity. Meanwhile, I propounded that their circulation can be better understood as performances — ephemeral, unpredictable, transitory processes that promote the encounters via which the rhetorical effects can be exercised.

However, the resistant positionality of anti-aesthetics is not a fixed one. It is possible for the foregrounded denotative to acquire meaning via familiarization and thereby gain currency and exchange value in aesthetic industries. Liminal spaces can be fashioned to satiate escapist and consumerist tendencies. The depoliticizing effects of the performance of circulation need to be reckoned with because they are prone to the fantasies of communicative capitalism. These "failures" of the anti-aesthetic, however, do not equate to its impossibility. The anti-aesthetic is still a valid category as demonstrated by its capability to rhetorically transform our understanding of aesthetic value and practices of seeing, feeling, and understanding. The ephemerality of anti-aesthetic performance points toward the potential of political possibilities.

As with any type of artistic production involved in a particular rhetoric or politics, the task is not simply to instigate but to maintain action. The freedoms afforded by these projects are likewise in low-fidelity — offering brief glances of complex futures. The anti-aesthetic operates on contingent principles, subject to shifting subjectivities, dominations, and subjugations. As the dominion of the aesthetic is constantly in flux, so must the inventive resistance of the anti-aesthetic.

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