



Vernacular Research and Decolonizing Design: [Hardworking Goodlooking: Unrelearning](#)

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There has been much discussion recently about what it means to decolonize design. The meaning of “decolonization” has been obfuscated, as the term is sometimes used to refer to any work that furthers practices of inclusion, diversity, or social responsibility. In the context of design hanz Hardworking Goodlooking’s October lecture, we can understand “decolonization” to be ongoing actions resulting in the repatriation of Indigenous lands and the practice of deconstructing Westernized ideals of knowledge, beauty, and value.

The influence of colonialism is incredibly evident in the context of design. Design has long been used as a tool to service power and advance capitalist agendas, evidenced by its mostly white, male, and Eurocentric canon. This fact alienates non-white designers from entering the field while making programs more accessible to white students. Thus, many designers are reconsidering their design practices to abandon or work against extant power structures and colonial ideologies of appropriation and exploitation.

In a lecture titled *Hardworking Goodlooking: Unrelearning* on October 23, Clara Balaguer and Czar Kristoff shared their experiences as creatives with roots in the Philippines: a country subjected to roughly four hundred years of colonization by Spain and the United States. The lecture touched upon their collaborative work as members of the publishing and graphic design studio Hardworking Goodlooking, a self-deemed “performative publishing hanz” invested in the “decolonization of cultural labor.” Clara Balaguer, a writer and cultural worker, founded Hardworking Goodlooking in 2013 with designer Kristian Henson. Photographer Czar Kristoff has been affiliated with the studio since 2018. Hardworking Goodlooking’s multifaceted practice strives to give voice to Filipino graphic design’s obscured history by creating a taxonomy for Filipino vernacular aesthetics. By researching and documenting

graphic design around the Philippines, Hardworking Goodlooking has been defining a uniquely Filipino graphic vernacular that pushes against the Western canon.

Currently, Hardworking Goodlooking is spread across the globe, with Kristoff working in Laguna in the Philippines, Balaguer from Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and other members based in Portland and Brooklyn in the U.S. In the lecture, they first discussed how their working relationship has evolved since they were both based in the Philippines to now working transnationally. Whereas they used to examine and photograph the “everyday” design they saw on walks together in their neighborhoods, they now share images via WhatsApp. Balaguer referred to their working process as “vernacular long-distance research.”

To provide lecture attendees a glimpse into this long-distance process, Balaguer and Kristoff presented their lecture in the form of a prerecorded video slideshow with overlaid audio. In the first few minutes of audio, they discussed plans for the structure and recording of the lecture itself: a candid display of their editing process and working relationship. This meta gesture pulled back the curtain on the lecturers’ practice, signaling the vitality of conversation, collaboration, and being in-process as part of their work.

The hybrid video/slideshow slipped seamlessly from casual conversation into a performative delivery of fragments from a poetic transcript that mentioned several Hardworking Goodlooking projects while weaving open-ended musings into their descriptions. In an almost call-and-response style, Balaguer and Kristoff alternated back and forth and interjected into each other’s sentences, with occasional background noise—a barking dog or a busy street—bleeding through. Their voices sounded far away at times, almost underwater, as Balaguer and Kristoff’s voices were digitally mediated through the reality of the lagging internet during recording. The audio was a constant reminder of the overlapping contexts of both physical and digital space between which Hardworking Goodlooking works.

In contrast to many artist or designer talks, the images that cycled through the video slideshow were often not referred to or described directly. The presentation intermixed images of Hardworking Goodlooking projects, such as Unrelearning URL, Kulambo Bulleting, and Troll Palayan, with Balaguer or Kristoff’s photographs of vernacular Filipino design as seen on the street, in businesses, or on book covers. The mix of images tacitly revealed a dialogue between Hardworking Goodlooking’s work and the everyday Filipino design they document and research. The slideshow itself also aesthetically echoed the photographs of colorful, highly ornamented designs on Filipino streets by using a range of technicolor gradients and splashy animations. As a result, the collection of images quickly built up a comprehensible graphic lexicon for viewers in the absence of a narrative explanation.

After introducing a project, the pair would then return to alternating their voices in a stream of consciousness style reflection on the ideas built into and around their work. These concepts ranged from the theoretical to the personal, drawing from their embodied experiences of performing identity, code-switching, the inequities in Filipino society, and the sting of failure when striving to make socially engaged and impactful work. These concepts addressed the broader context of decolonial work by confronting the challenges of dismantling Westernized narratives and assumptions in the Philippines and the pain of seeing the reinforcement and reenactment of Western ideals through design that reflect hundreds of years of colonization. The layered and occasionally elusive nature of the interconnected personal stories, theoretical readings, and insightful metaphors in this presentation demonstrated the intellectually and emotionally complex landscape of decolonization.

Balaguer and Kristoff finished with a powerful directive to designers everywhere: “how can we, by will and by design, not just undo but redo our conditioning?” Calling into question values and narratives taken for granted and our unconscious conditioning, how can we imagine new ways of being, knowing, and creating? In sharing *Hardworking Goodlooking*’s approach to decolonization, as well as their own experiences with this process, Balaguer and Kristoff make a strong argument for their closing statement: “to destroy is to build.”

Hardworking Goodlooking: Unrelearning was organized by Jon Sueda, Associate Professor, Graphic Design Program, in collaboration with the Exhibitions Department, as part of the Creative Citizens in Action initiative.

Do you have questions or opinions about this response? Have you seen an event at CCA you’d like to report on? Please email exhibitions@cca.edu to contribute to our Letters to the Editor series, or to submit to *Review Rewind Respond*.

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