

**REAL
ART WAYS**

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Step Up 09 is a series of six solo exhibitions open to emerging artists living in New England, New Jersey or New York. The *Step Up* open call series seeks to provide emerging artists in our region with an exhibition and publication at a critical moment in their careers. The *Step Up 09* jurors were Susan Cross (Curator, MASS MoCA); Andrea Grover (Founding Director, Aurora Picture Show); and Deborah Willis (Professor and Chair of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University).

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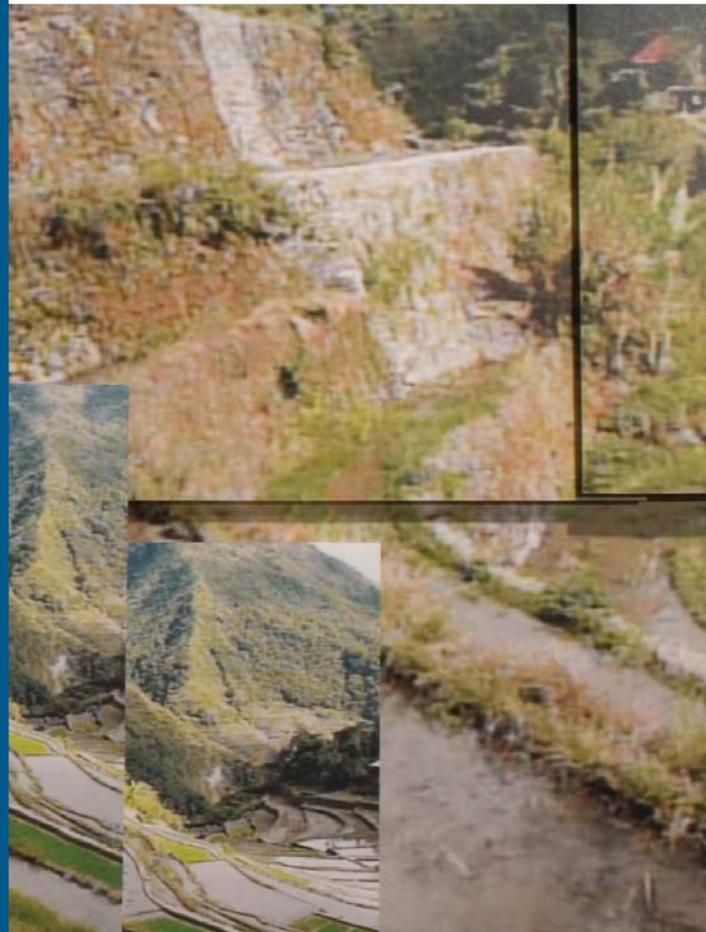
Real Art Ways is an alternative multidisciplinary arts organization that presents and supports contemporary artists and their work, facilitates the creation of new work and creatively engages, builds and informs audiences and communities. As Real Art Ways grows, our commitment to supporting young and emerging artists remains a touchstone of the organization.

Founded in 1975, Real Art Ways celebrates its 35th Anniversary with events in 2010 and 2011.

On the cover: *Considering Rice*, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, 2010 (detail).

All images courtesy of Real Art Ways. Staff photographer John Groo.

Elaine Gan



Considering Rice, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, 2010 (detail).

Contours of the Grain

By Steven Lam

Meeting with the New York-based artist Elaine Gan, she tells me about her research on the Ifugao Rice Terraces, a centuries old system of irrigated rice production in the northwestern cordillera of Luzon, Philippines. She went to investigate local rice production and its subsequent decline, documenting the economic and environmental history of the territory. These contoured rice paddies in the mountainous regions of the Philippines are cultivated and owned by families who have worked there for centuries. Despite its historical, cultural, and agricultural sophistication, the Philippines has become one of the largest importers of rice and many farmers of the Ifugao are migrating to urban centers to assume jobs in industry. The ongoing migration from this site as well as the adverse effects inflicted by climate change has caused UNESCO to add the terraces to the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger in 2001.

We speak about the food crisis of 2007–08. Was food scarcity manufactured we ask, and will it happen again? During this crisis the cost of rice reached an all-time high. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Philippines achieved rice self-sufficiency so that by 1993, the country's abundance of rice became a net export. However, within the last few years rice went from being an export to an import. Now, the Philippines is the largest importer of rice and policies prioritize the planting of cash crops.¹

Economists offer several explanations for the food price crisis, pointing to natural limits such as droughts, increased demand of bio-oil fuels, and rising costs of fertilizers, but these seem to

Elaine Gan's artistic practice has earned her grants and fellowships from organizations that include the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York Foundation for the Arts, Jerome Foundation, New York Department of Cultural Affairs and the Puffin Foundation. Her projects have been exhibited at art venues that include the Soap Factory in Minneapolis, Toronto Free in Ontario, Canada, Third Guangzhou Triennial in China and in New York at Artists Space, Exit Art, Bronx Museum, P.S. 122, Socrates Sculpture Park and the Armory Show. Gan currently serves on the Artists' Advisory Committee of the New York Foundation for the Arts – Interdisciplinary Arts. She participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program in 2006–2007 and holds a BA in Architecture from Wellesley College. She is from New York and Manila.

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only represent one truth. Often not considered are the financial speculators who purchase tremendous amounts of futures and wait for prices to increase, which creates an artificial shortage while numerous people are deprived of food security. The appeal of rice for speculators is that it is easy to store and transport, and for the Philippines, as Gan explains, it is an "agriculturally-rich nation unhinged from its own rice cycles [which has become] increasingly vulnerable to world markets, hoarding and commodity speculation."

At this point in our conversation I want to speculate with something physical. I reach into a nearby jar, pulling out a handful of rice grains, feeling their texture and brittleness. Some fall through my fingers. Others gently roll toward the center of my palm. I inspect their tiny topologies. No two grains are alike. Their contours appear similar, while a few are discolored, broken, chipped, withered. This reminds me of a saying that grains of rice should be like two brothers, close but not stuck together: resemblance and proximity without sameness and generalization.

Of all the things we eat, rice grains are noticeably small. It's not their size that is striking, but their singularity and distinctiveness which are evoked through their miniature scale. Gaston Bachelard wrote in the *Poetics of Space*, "when descriptions tell things in *tiny* detail, they are automatically verbose." In other words the details of the minute compel and attract attention. For literary critic and poet Susan Stewart, "the procedure by which description multiplies in detail is analogous to and mimetic of the process where

space becomes signification, whereby everything is made to 'count.'"² Acknowledging details as seen through this microscopic lens is a transformative form of knowledge production. The gigantic may appear ever present because it is viewable from a distance, but it abstracts and generalizes. In contrast, there is a poetic exactitude when perceiving smallness. "That the world of things can open itself to reveal a secret life...outside the given field of perception...this is a daydream of the microscope."³

While in Batad in 2009, Gan documented her travels on video and used still images to create *Considering Rice*. The display of printed stills mounted on foam core are assembled to create a 180-degree panorama depicting one of the amphitheater-like terraces at Ifugao. This constellation of photographs are sculpted like the terraces themselves. Cinematically, during a pan, the camera slowly turns its head creating an impression of seamlessness. When exported as individual stills and layered in a three-dimensional arrangement, these images become fragmented. Details duplicate, time concretizes, individuals, vegetation, and architectural structures reappear in multiple stills. The detail and fragment are key to Gan's installation, interfering with the totalizing gaze of



Reproduction of the Philippine 1,000 Peso bill included in *Considering Rice*.

the tourist, cartographer or preservationist. Additionally a set of photographs collected during research present another ecology of images. These include a reproduction of the 1,000 Philippine Peso bill, a news photograph of an individual guarding sacks of imported rice during rice shortages in 2008, the breakdown of rice monocrops, the sign announcing the terraces as a World Heritage Site and other visuals that form and inform what constitutes the Ifugao Rice terraces. These images map a web of exchanges from interspecies relations, climatic conditions and documents of village life and displacement.

Considering Rice tells the story of the big, such as ecological disasters or economic crises, through the narrative of the small, like a grain of rice. How can the contour of a single grain metonymically and allegorically connect to the contours of the Ifugao rice terraces? This project seeks to imagine an entangled history

of the environment, which not only includes people but also the diverse species of plants and animals that inhabit these fields. How can we learn from the small, local and particular, especially for a moment that values a mastery over nature, prioritizing the management and measurement of economic success at the expense of everything else? In a statement Gan writes: "How might a small work of art attempt a different kind of story, make visible a different kind of map, charge different sorts of circuits?" *Considering Rice* looks to the terraces not as an isolated historic ruin, but as having perpetual relevance. Gan's world is not flat. It is terraced, differentiated, and on it biodiversity thrives: this ecology represents a complex interconnected web of both dependent and interdependent relations downplaying human exceptionalism for the sake of future multi-species generations.

Steven Lam is a curator, artist, educator and the Associate Dean of The Cooper Union School of Art in New York City. He has an MFA from the University of California, Irvine and currently teaches performance and sound theory in the Art History and Theory Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Lam was a Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program as well as a Lori Ledis Curatorial Fellow at Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, and was a research curator for the Third Guangzhou Triennial (2008) with Gao Shiming, Sarat Maharaj, and Chang Tsong-zung. Recent curatorial works and collaborations include ...in a most dangerous manner with Sarah Ross at SPACES Gallery, Cleveland, OH (2010); Tainted Love with critic Virginia Solomon at La MaMa La Galleria, New York City (2009); Free as Air and Water with Saskia Bos, The Cooper Union (2009); and For Reasons of State with Angelique Campens and Erica Cooke at The Kitchen, New York City (2008).

Installation view of *Considering Rice* at Real Art Ways.



¹ Bello, Walden. "Creating A Rice Crisis in the Philippines." *The Food Wars* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 54.

² Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 47.

³ Stewart, Susan. *On Longing*. 54.