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"Floating Nationality: A Review of Tromarama at Document"

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## Floating Nationality: A Review of Tromarama at Document

JULY 5, 2021 AT 7:00 AM BY NICKY NI



*Tromarama, "Beta," Installation view at DOCUMENT, 2021.*

For their first solo exhibition in the United States, Bandung-based artist collective Tromarama anchors the exhibition space of Document with a sophisticated installation, "Beta" (2019), reconfiguring the white-cube gallery into an artificial banyan tree, with melodicas and elongated digital prints hanging from the ceiling like aerial roots.

As I open the street-level door that leads to the gallery complex upstairs, I hear discordant sounds, as though a group of elementary school students were getting ready for their music class, casually making sounds on instruments. These sounds come from about a dozen hanging melodicas and a few soprano recorders on microphone stands. A minuscule fan is connected to a transparent tube that feeds to the mouthpiece of every instrument; when turned on, the fan blows air to the instrument to make acoustic sound. These fans are then plugged into a computer that tells them when to switch on or off.

The metaphors behind the work are as intricate as the installation itself, and the riddle begins with its homographic title. "Beta" has different meanings in different languages. In English, it indicates the final testing phase for a piece of gear or computer software. In Malay, it is a mostly obsolete form of addressing "I" or "myself." The algorithmic "I" residing in this artificial organism, the "brainwork" that decides when to pump air to the melodicas and recorders, is a program that captures every tweet hashtagged with "nationality." The program translates text into binary codes; the codes output commands to the fans. The whole process is completed without delving into the actual content of the tweets. It treats the word "nationality" as a floating signifier and takes full advantage of its being a buzzword on Twitter. This artistic decision nevertheless accurately reflects the discursive discussions on social media that are hashtag-driven. We put our advertisements, ideas or snarky comments in the form of a tweet, and we tag it liberally and excessively, without fully investing in the meaning and significance of these labels. "Beta" recycles these bits of language and abstracts them. In the end, the texts are transformed so much that all we hear is a series of intermittent atonal chords, a little dejected, almost nonchalant. The performers are bored, and I can't quite decide whether their laissez-faire attitude under the appearance of some cute, toyish musical instruments makes me chuckle or sigh.



*Tromarama, "Beta," Installation view at DOCUMENTA, 2021.*

“Playful” and “humorous” are common descriptors of Tromarama’s work. Founded by Febie Babyrose, Herbert Hans and Ruddy Hatumena in 2006, the collective started off by making stop-motion video work, including music videos for Indonesian bands, such as electronic pop group Rock N Roll Mafia and heavy metal foursome Seringai. Since 2015, Tromarama has shifted toward a more multimedia- and program-based mode of art-making, producing elaborate installations that frequently involve computation, real-time technology, videos and everyday objects. What threads these different phases together is their love for animation, which, by its broad definition, means to conjure a sense of liveliness out of still images or immobile objects. Tromarama’s work is full of this liveliness, regardless of medium. Their earlier stop-motion animation, “Ting\*” (2014), choreographed white, identical tableware sets into a dance of unity and harmony. “Soliloquy” (2018)—animation reincarnated into installation—inhabits the exhibition space with flocks of table lamps that turn on and off at an idiosyncratic rhythm, choiring a silent song of light. But the lure of Tromarama’s work lies in its ability to endow banal things with a spectrum of personalities: amiable, impish, quirky and unapologetic. They are things that accompany us, partake our lives, and over time, they take up some of our identities and become emblems of our histories. The melodicas and recorders, for example, are popular instruments for early music education, particularly in Asia. And for a period of time, they were required as part of the elementary-school curriculum in Indonesia; students were mandated to learn how to play several Indonesian national songs in order to graduate. For an elementary school student, the concept of “national identity” is probably as intangible and ambiguous as the clouds. The melodica ensemble in “Beta,” animated but refrained from expressing any liveliness, is a delicate metonymy for this confusion that is coupled with an innocent submission. We can grow out of our old selves, but this confusion remains. We are still in constant search of ever-changing identities, personal or national, and willingly (or unwittingly) submit our true selves to the image of how we present ourselves. The “I” is always in the beta phase. (Nicky Ni)

*“Beta” by Tromarama is on view at Document, 1709 West Chicago, through August 8.*