

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Corporate Vampires of San Francisco

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Binders full of entrails. (Image by the author for Hyperallergic)

SAN FRANCISCO — Bella and Edward from the *Twilight* series revived pop culture's recent association of vampires with sex and seduction, but the idea is an ancient one and extends to many other cultures. In the Philippines, for instance, there is a popular legend of the *manananggal*, a flesh-eating creature that can take the form of a beautiful woman. But when it's on the hunt, its upper torso separates from its legs and flaps around, searching for the guts of human beings and fetuses to feast on. And as in Western literature, this creature can be a former human being with an unfortunate fate.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

The manananggal is the punny referent of Manananggoogle, an art project framed as a “corporation” founded in Silicon Valley in 1898, with the simple slogan of “divide and conquer.” As part of Southern Exposure’s *The Long Conversation* series, Manananggoogle recently hosted an “Onboarding Experience” at the Global Fund for Women, targeted toward new hires — the audience — with the express goal of inculcating them into company culture. “The market operates on natural selection; it demands survival of the fittest; evolve or risk extinction,” noted the company’s “CEO”, R. Immaculata Estrada in an interview with *Hyperallergic*. “We see Manananggoogle as the next stage in the evolution of the modern corporation, the top of the food chain, if you will, with female executives at the helm.”

Indeed, with the executives wielding riding crops and stern faces, the piece can be read as a critique of popular anxieties about women in power. In one phase during the onboarding, they took aside women and women-identified individuals, telling them “we want to talk to you about the gender gap” and led them through a series of exercises inspired by popular corporate literature.



The Manananggoogle board room. The image at left depicts the manananggal’s ability to separate its torso and flap around hunting for flesh. In Manananggoogle’s words, it’s a separation of “tops and bottoms.” (image courtesy The Mail Order Brides/M.O.B.)

For a while, the women practiced power poses, *a la* the research of Amy Cuddy, while the men were taught to “feel ashamed, as you should” by a blonde male assistant named Renfield who told them to keep their shoulders hunched and eyes on the ground. In another exercise, the women were taught to lean in at the board room while the men watched from the sidelines. The genders weren’t always separated; they all sat together for faux corporate training videos (like a gothic remake of “I Will Always Love You”) and slideshows that alternated slick Excel charts with grotesque images of horror and body parts.

The performance is the brainchild of the Mail Order Brides/M.O.B., a three-person performance art troupe based in the Bay Area. They sprinkled in elements of both Southeast Asian and Western vampire myths amongst the accoutrements of American corporate tech culture, with binders containing internal organs, coffee mugs bearing the Mananagoogle logo, and, of course, giveaways of the Mananagoogle Glass, a visor equipped with fresh human remains.



The Mananagoogle executive team leads the onboarding session. Assistant Renfield stands in the back corner. (image by the author for Hyperallergic)

The Bay Area, long a haven of hippies, queers, and immigrants primarily from Asia and Latin America, has been undergoing a transformation in recent years with an increased tech industry presence. The performance’s mix of camp, sadomasochistic undertones, and Philippine folk legends feels like slices of pre-tech San Francisco communities speaking to a contemporary influx. A recent *New Yorker* article looked in-depth at this gradual shift, one that some have said is changing the culture of the city:

San Francisco is an industry town. This industry is usually called “tech,” but the term no longer signifies what it used to. Tech today means anything about computers, the Internet, digital media, social media, smartphones, electronic data, crowd-funding, or new business design. At some point, in other words, tech stopped being an industry and turned into the substrate of most things changing in urban culture.

“Most people in the Bay Area art community seem less anxious about tech itself,” explained the Brides, who have been living and performing in the Bay for years, “and [they’re] more [anxious] about the wealth disparities, shifting

social norms, and cost-of-living crises that tech industry prosperity has aggravated locally in recent years.” A recent article in NPR, for instance, explored the challenges of rising rents, as a city famous for its counterculture deals with the reality of rents starting at \$2,400 for a one-bedroom apartment.



Thea Tagle and Raquel Gutiérrez pose with their Mananangoogle Glasses. (image by the author for Hyperallergic)

The Brides, who have engaged with technology frequently with pieces involving live video feeds and social media, are not blind to the dichotomy of citizens’ love for technology — which can bring voice to marginalized peoples — and the influx of the industry into the city. “It’s not uncommon to experience someone wailing about the outrageous rents and mass evictions here (all attributed to tech money) ... ,” they noted, “while doing this via a link posted on Facebook from his/her iPhone.”

As in many times in history, then, vampirism here serves as a vehicle for exploring these tensions — women and power, tech and tech culture, a city of immigrants facing its latest influx of migrants. Unlike most creatures of horror, vampires are often associated with seduction and allure alongside their more destructive characteristics. They can end your life or grant you eternal youth; they can be friend, lover and protector, or they can be a living nightmare. They can be all these things at the same time.

Mananangoogle’s CEO waxed poetic — but firm — when asked about growing anxieties from the Bay Area community:

[This anxiety] is perhaps a symptom of those who feel a lack of control over how the world around them is evolving. It reflects their position in the evolutionary hierarchy, powerlessness over the unnatural spell cast by advancing technology and the firms responsible, which take on the aspects of (dark) magic. Bottoms, not Tops.

Southern Exposure’s The Long Conversation runs until Friday, October 26.