

Panel 17
The Visual, Sculptural and Material

The Destruction of Metaphor: David Medalla

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An internationalist queer artist, the late David Medalla (1938-2020) was born in the Philippines and moved to the United Kingdom, where he was based for decades, and he traveled extensively throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Medalla was known for projects and happenings that dissolved borders between object and spectator and between the perceived and the perceiver. In his 1965 manifesto, Medalla wrote that he wanted to make “sculptures that, on certain seasons, will migrate en masse to the North Pole.” He made what he called “biokinetic” sculptures that transform the spectator into a “sensitive stranger.” His *Cloud Canyons* sculpture, dubbed “bubble machines,” delicately pumped foam in unmistakably phallic columns, foam that could be affected by viewers’ breath or body temperature. He proposed artworks that threatened to destroy any gallery or museum, like his sketches for the unrealized “Lava Machine.” In his project *A Stitch in Time*, participants are invited to sew whatever they like onto a large swath of cloth in order to leave a trace of themselves behind, creating what one critic calls an “endless story.” As the critic Yve-Alain Bois puts it, Medalla’s strategy of “superabundance” sought to “annihilate any metaphoric centre by the sheer vastness of possibility.” This paper takes seriously Medalla’s use of excess to achieve the destruction of metaphor. Was Medalla successful in this attempt to undermine the ground—hermeneutic, aesthetic, and epistemological—that metaphor provides? What are the ramifications of such an assault on the representative and the symbolic?

Biography

Sarita Echavez See is Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside; and author of the books *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York UP/Ateneo de Manila UP) and *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (U of Minnesota P).