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INTRODUCTION

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The present collection represents at least three distinct modes of approach to or treatment of "popular art/culture" and its instances: critical, aesthetic, and semiotic-proxemics. While at some points conflicting underlying assumptions become evident, as in the question of obliterating objects or facts in dealing with signs or constructs, the positions held by the authors concur on the following points: 1) rejection of the underprivileged status assigned to "popular culture;" 2) recognition of the competence of popular artists and audiences to articulate and/or respond to their own values, ideas, and tastes; 3) vigilance of the ways power moves in constructing categories of social, cultural, and artistic practices; 4) recognition of the impact and the active role of cultural and artistic products (construed as whether signs/constructs or object-signs/constructs) in reinforcing or resisting a prevailing socio-cultural system.

The arrangement of the essays is primarily intended to sustain the interest of the readers: a theoretical critique, followed by a relatively short but engaging study of an architecture which uses semiotics and proxemics, and then by an article which demonstrates how a method in aesthetics can be applied to a particular practice and consumption of painting in order to prove their validity and legitimacy; the next piece which concerns "alternative music" is a post-modernist, feminist critique, while the last which concerns billboard is primarily a product of field research written with undertones of post-colonial criticism and punctuated with semiotic commentary.

Patrick D. Flores's *Pop and Circumstances: Some Operative Premises* interrogates Marxist negative contruals of popular/mass culture (particularly those of Lukacs and Althusser), by exposing the determinants in their mode of constructing categories of social practices and their system of legitimizing institutional networks. According to Flores, the inadequacy of the Lukacsian and Althusserian aesthetics rests on their "fascination with aesthetic form/art object as frame of reference" or their advocacy of "form as poetics." This means that formalistic artness/articity is a necessary condition for anything to merit serious theoretical discussion and "cultural capital." Because "popular culture" supposedly lacks this quality, Lukacsian and Althusserian aesthetics renders it "void ab initio." Flores further claims that such privileging of the form-category implies universalization of valuing subject and "unhistoricized historicity" represented by "the form as the mode of production intricated within the text." He argues against the primacy assigned to object, mode of production and class as determinants of practice by bringing to the fore subject-positionality, Dirlik's "global culture," Bordieu's theory of the "habitus" and mechanics of consumption, and by invoking the "recuperative" agenda of current British cultural studies. Flores emphasizes "the irreducible overdetermination of the subject" and the need for "reterritorialization of mobile positionalities" and thus suggests a thoroughgoing consideration of the "habitus" of the popular audience, "the internal economy of popular culture, (and) the inscription of hegemonic relations."

Basically thinking along the same line with Flores, Flaudette May V. Datuin, in her *Dissonant Notes on "World Beat Music with a Filipino Lilt"* deconstructs the term "World Popular Music-Filipino" and critiques the assumptions, the practice, and the current direction of the so-called "alternative music" in the Philippines. She exposes the "unequal power relations between the Manila-based Center and its "peripheries" in the attempt of the "World Beat-Filipino" musicians to make accessible the "indigenous" or "native" to mainstream audiences. She argues that in the process of popularization and contemporarization of the "native," which mangles the original characteristics of the "indigenous" music, the "World Popular Music-Filipino" musicians unwittingly colonise their own "backyards." Says Datuin: "While the apparatuses of the Manila-based nation-state continue to disenfranchise and marginalize the peripheries politically and economically, the same nation-state continues to import its cultural artefacts, as loot, to the Center." Commenting on Pedro Abraham's description of the latest cassette of his *Kontra-Gapi*, Datuin reiterates her point: "Isn't the alter-native mere icings on a pre-dominantly Western, Manila-centered cake?"

This brings her to her second point — the impossibility of remaining true to the source in the process of appropriating indigenous music. Echoing Flores's subject-positionality and "objects" as constructs, Datuin argues: "No amount of 'research' and 'more authentic' approaches, by natives and non-natives alike, will bridge the gap between one mode of production and another; between object and symbol. For even as the artists go on to identify the various elements of the indigenous, they are inserted and overdetermined by the complex interaction of processes and modes that the so-called indigenous undergoes. Perception and grasp of 'authentic' characteristics are unavoidably filtered and mediated through eyes that proceed to reconstruct and re-image 'data' the very moment they are perceived."

While maintaining the impossibility of perceiving data objectively, Datuin, however, uses qualities and elements of sounds — "the fluidity, the dissonant and melismatic," "dramatic microtones and polyphonic textures," "diatonic scale," "bel canto harmonizations" — as examples to support her critique. She relates this second point to another problematique, that of "smoothing over" of the "difference" in the process of defining nationhood or the insertion into international network. This is made possible, according to Datuin, by the nation-state's still pivotal role as "a guarantor of space for the smooth flow of commodity." Datuin resists such harmonization in the category of race and insists on difference.

In Pearl E. Tan-Punongbayan's *Doing Aesthetics and the Case of Mabini Art*, the author applies axiology by showing that valuation, or the establishment of aesthetic criteria, can be derived from evaluation, or the judging of artistic qualities. Subjectivities are recognized, especially in the acts of perception and evaluation of artistic qualities, but the objects are not thereby effaced. Tan-Punongbayan believes that while perceptions vary, the range of possibilities is suggested by the properties of the medium. "Valuational qualities" is defined as "the perceptible traits of actually existing or occurring specific artistic objects, processes or acts," and "valuation" as the process of abstracting the standard-scales along which or the categories within which the valuational qualities may be ranked. Thus, while maintaining the subjectivities of the audience, the method of doing aesthetics is analytically objective.

The validation of the subjective valuational qualities and the abstracted aesthetic criteria similarly appeals to actually existing contexts such as personal and educational background of both the artists and the consumers, the artists' manner of acquiring skill in painting, the function of painting to the consumers, etc. Thus, subjective specificities are anchored on the particular objective conditions. In no way is objectivity equated with universality or

absoluteness or permanence. The task of explaining art is an objective-relative method with the subjectivities recognized in relative contexts, avoiding arbitrary subjectivism or normativism. The strength of this method of explanation are: 1) its tenability rests on logic without invoking universalization; 2) it can claim relative truths which can be validated or falsified and thus generates more adequate understanding or superior knowledge, in contrast to extreme subjectivism in interpretation, which renders different "readings" insecurely equal and knowledge purely a mental exercise.

It is this clear distinction between subjectivity and relativity (which eludes currently fashionable practice of criticism) in pursuit of objectivity in relativity without negating subjectivity which Tan-Punongbayan applies in doing the aesthetics of Mabini Art. The validity and legitimacy of the determined aesthetic criteria are then established by applying the logic of this concept.

The study of SM Megamall made by Ma. Cecilia Tuble in her **SM Megamall: Semiotics, Proxemics and Phenomenon** sounds convincing because of her ability to establish the relationships between signs and meanings which are actual conditions, experiences, or realities. Says Tuble: "These significations are not arbitrary but based on our psychophysical experiences of leaves, trees close to the earth, and mountains as high places: the top, apex, summit." She extends this concept in her study of the proxemics of SM Megamall: first, values are determined from space, levels, symbols, and meanings which are grounded in "biological oppositions and asymmetries;" secondly, the values in these "psychophysical experiences" are applied in the definition of social relations, particularly in the use of space in the SM Megamall.

The third and last section of Tuble's article points out the contradicting significances of the phenomenon of malls: 1) that of simultaneously affirming "the Post-Modern concept of pluralism and eclecticism" and negating it by its "function and

claim as a "Center" of human activity; and 2) that of SM Megamall being "a great equalizer" of classes and at the same time a reinforcer of hierarchical structure. Thus, says Tuble: "(O)n one hand,...it appeals to all kinds of people from all walks of life. On the other hand, it creates, defines, and structures social distinctions and relationships..."

The concluding article **From Work to Text: Film Billboard as Advertisement, Aesthetic Object and Cultural Sign** by Alden Q. Lauzon brings forward a number of points about billboards: 1) its "pedagogical absence in academic institutions" or lack of written materials about it which is rooted in the kinds of art institutions established during the Spanish and the American rules; 2) by virtue of the "Saussurean concept of differences" billboards can be regarded as "practice possessing artistic merits; 3) billboards are not "mere appendage of the film industry" such that they only reproduce prevailing social values; rather, they actively participate in the construction of values by means of privileging certain representations. By providing a historical context to the phenomenon and practice of billboard painting in Manila, and by "inserting" billboard study into academic discourse, Lauzon's pioneering efforts are indeed a welcome contribution.

From the summaries here set forth, it is clear that the contributors intend to take an active part in establishing "popular art/culture" as an important subject of study, regardless of differences of opinions and approaches. Its glaring presence, to which we owe much of what we are now, can only be ignored at the expense of advancing knowledge of our times, of ourselves, and of others. The Art Studies Journal, even in its fledgling state, is committed towards self-determination of worthwhile subjects of inquiry, armed with vigilance to resist any form of institutional and academic imperialism.