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OBJECT¹

FLAUDETTE MAY V. DATUIN

In this presentation, I excavate the “Object” as both noun and verb. As noun, Object refers to the overlooked, the unimportant, the ordinary, neglected, presumed dead, until found, and singled out as “thing” or things that have lives of their own (Appadurai). Through the object as noun, I present microhistories told by my colleagues in the disciplines of art and Philippine Studies and bring to light for consideration the chamber pot, the watercraft, the dress, and the stone. These objects are triggers and platforms of interest that may or may not fall within the ambit of modernity and may or may not directly address the questions of this panel, but may in turn give life to certain other questions. As a thing that comes alive, the object thus becomes an active force (Winterson 19): the Object objects.

I will start with the chamber pot—*arinola* in Tagalog. The chamber pot, along with other objects of everyday life, was exhibited in a community museum in Bago City, Negros Occidental in Central Philippines, as part of a project by a colleague, Cecilia Sta. Maria De La Paz. The *arinola*’s journey started, not with the collection of objects, per se, but with the recruitment of participants from the local community, who were taught various research methodologies called cultural mappings and cultural calendars. “But the interview method was redefined,” she writes, according to “their traditional concepts of *kuwentuhan* and *kapihan*” (De La Paz 162), meaning storytelling and having coffee. Data were processed through workshops and dialogues, with everyone going around each other’s villages or barangays and becoming interested in each others’ problems. Finally, they were asked to gather objects that would have “value” for the people of their barangay, one of them being the *arinola*, an object

identified with excess and its expulsion, with bodily relief at a very basic level, especially at the dead of night, for instance, when the rest room is not readily accessible, or, in another instance, with whim and luxury, as exemplified by the anecdote about a former president who was said to harbor an *arinola* made of gold in his bedroom. If President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III has his Porsche, an ill-advised purchase amidst grinding poverty, President Elpidio Quirino has his gold *arinola* (Ocampo). On one hand, the *arinola* is a “found object,” probably like the urinal-turned-*Fountain* (Marcel Duchamp 1917). Both satisfy the two criteria of found objecthood outlined by WJT Mitchell: (1) A found object must be “ordinary, unimportant, neglected and (until its finding) overlooked,” taken for granted, hidden in plain sight, like Edgar Allan Poe’s purloined letter; and (2) “its finding must be accidental, not deliberate or planned” (114). It is presumed that the urinal and chamber pot were not sought; they were *found*. Or perhaps better, they found the founders, and in their place of display, are now looking back at us, wanting, demanding, desiring something from us, as animated vital objects.

Unlike the urinal-turned-*Fountain* however, the *arinola* is not a canonical, modernist, or modern artwork; it is not signed, lit, and put on a pedestal as an object of contemplation, or as an object of study in art criticism, art history, and aesthetics, under the rubric of “conceptual art.” The *arinola* and other objects found and displayed by the community of Bago is less an object of artistic reflection in the fine arts domain, than a totem, a community rallying point that turns the “elitist” space of the museum (in general and specific terms, in this case, the

former residence of a wealthy elite)² into a “space of engagement,” from where memories from below can be reclaimed, remapped, and retold. The *arinola* comes alive as a member of a community of objects that “illuminate their human and social context” (Appadurai 5), directing attention, not to provenance, origin, and histories as museum objects, but to “relation of artefacts to other objects, to people and cultural practices” (Henning 9).

Is there a place for the *arinola*, a most humble and maybe even embarrassing object, in the “great” museum being envisioned in this symposium?

The second object is the *watercraft*, big or small, around which I weave two stories. In one story, the vessel is possibly a boat or raft carrying a box containing the image of the Virgen Milagrosa de Badoc in Ilocos, Northern Philippines, which may have originated from Japan during the time of the persecutions of Christians in the Momoyama Period (1582-1598) and may have been stealthily dropped off at sea to let the ocean currents and the winds decide its fate. Norma Respicio speculates that the boat, the box, and the Virgen may have strayed into the shores of Ilocos, carried by warm currents that ply along the West Philippine Sea³ greatly aided by northeasterly winds or *brizas* and southwesterly *vendavals*.

Another story is set a long, long time ago, and speaks, as told by the archaeologist Jesus Peralta, of “remains of the large boats excavated in the vicinities of Butuan City in northeastern Mindanao dating to 1230 AD, which led to the further discovery of more plank boats the earliest of which was dated

to 320 AD” (10). These boats bear an affinity with the *lepa* of the Sama Dilaut of southern Philippines. The *lepas* are highly sophisticated, Peralta says, and he cites one type of sail—the *lamak boa-an* or sail with the mouth—which “enables the *lepa* to tack at a very shallow angle almost directly into the wind, enabling the boat to sail regardless of the direction of the prevailing winds, when other boats with conventional sails would flounder” (10). If the sails of the *lepas* are any indication, the ancient boats may have facilitated long-distance travels, port-to-port alliances, intra-regional conquests, trade relations, and perhaps even intermarriages between chiefdoms and kingdoms giving rise to what James Warren (1975) describes as the “segmentary state,” a slippery and fractured polity, characterized by a multiplicity of centers and networks of loyalty. Foreign incursions into this region and subjugations which took centuries to unfold were made possible, not just through outright conquests but by forging diplomatic, economic, personal, and social connections, sometimes deliberate, like perhaps giving and exchanging gifts of gold and golden *arinolas*, and at times, in conjunction with the direction of prevailing winds and ocean currents.

Perhaps this inter-island mingling can be mapped into what John Clark refers to as “horizontal relations between parallel branches of the genealogical trees” (406), distinct from vertical relations, which revolve around notions of transfer as origination and derivation, and of asymmetrical power relations between receiver and origins. While horizontal relations point towards families or differences or groupings characterized more by structural resemblance than common origins, vertical

relations homologically resemble modernity’s linear, developmental model of progress.

It is interesting to note however, that such mapping of horizontal relations could remain resistant to the shaping of an integrative vista for Asian history. What we have instead is an unwieldy, porous, fluid map resistant to modernity’s neat periodizations, as well as interstitial, interregional transfers of particular objects and relics, as we see in the mutation of the Virgen, purportedly washing ashore from Japan, and its adoption as a local object of veneration in a context already primed by Christianization. Perhaps even John Clark’s metaphor of a genealogical tree is equally problematic, because of the top-down orientation of the arboreal image, an objection I appropriate from Deleuze and Guattari who prefer and proffer the metaphor of the rhizome instead. How can a museum, with aspirations to greatness, give shape to this waterborne, waterlogged geography? What metaphors or models can best describe this watery topography, one that is navigated by watercrafts, big and small? And in these days of flooding and reclaiming of lands by the rivers and seas, how does one make sense of makeshift rafts, which inspired Mark Salvatus’ *C-rafts* show at the University of the Philippines Vargas Museum, a modernist institution in architecture and temper?⁴

Makeshift alliances forged through stealth boats, and makeshift rafts made of consumer items like the inflatable bed remind me that the movement across waters is fraught. Waters make their claim and, as it is believed in some societies in the Philippines, they are peopled with spirits who embody the forces of nature, which giveth (as capital and livelihood providers)

and taketh. Animals continue to be sacrificed to propitiate and appease the spirits' demand for a share, but even these offerings cannot quell their appetite and periodically lay claim to people's lives. The Pasig River, that smelly body of water that runs through several municipalities in Manila, is known to claim its own share of mortals, and in 2009, the river, its tributaries, and the Laguna Lake washed away houses, killed people, and damaged crops and infrastructure along their banks as they swelled from floods of typhoon Ondoy (international code name Ketsana). And if we are to bear in mind that the river is but a small (25–27 kilometers long), though important, portion of a bioregion called the Pasig River Basin, then we are talking of close to a million people adversely affected.

Spirits making their claims are mysterious presences, different—as pointed out by the philosopher and ecologist David Abram (13)—from “our Western notion of ‘spirit’ (which is so often defined in contrast to matter or ‘flesh’)” as occult, supernatural, or pagan figures assuming anthropomorphic forms. The spirits of traditional societies are “primarily those modes of intelligence or awareness that do *not* possess a human form” (13). Interestingly, among the Ivatans of Batanes in the northernmost part of the Philippines these beings are called “the unseens”; they cannot explain who and what they are or what form they take, only that these unseen presences are powerful beings that the Ivatans venerate along with the Catholic God.⁵

In the literature on the Pasig River, on the other hand, so much is written about the *Mutya ng Pasig* (Pearl of the Pasig), the romantic and orientalized

feminine figure of lore, art, and tourism. In various guises and incarnations, the spirits don the cloak of Culture, becoming symbols of nationhood or cityhood (it is rumored, for example, that at least two municipalities are competing for the Mutya as their symbol or icon) construed by a Filipino nationalism that is continental, male, and imperialist, which is encoded in the figure of Jose Rizal, our America-sponsored National Hero, whose 150th birth anniversary we are celebrating this year. I will return to him in a while. Meanwhile, in the process of colonization and Christianization, the spirit, which I describe as pre-modern, is made to don a feminine form as it transforms into what Marian Pastor-Roces refers to as a “costumed identity” (“Text and Subtext”). Coopted by patriarchal nationalism, very much organic to modernity, the costumed identity is an emasculated decorative icon, devoid of its own animate power and agency.

This point brings me to my third object: *dress, costume, clothing*. Clothing wields and tames the body, as we have seen in the feminine costumed identity. The *baro't saya* of the elite (a traditional costume approximately translated as blouse and long dress), the exquisite and often butterfly-sleeved ensembles of silk and embroidered pineapple cloth, neatly—yet shakily—held in place with jewelry pins and clasps, the bikini bits of cloth of the nightclub dancer, the loose-fitting *dasters* (loose, flowing dresses) of poor women in the cities and countrysides, the “uniforms” of laborers and “maids” tending the homes of strangers in strange lands, and even the homes of privileged Filipinas are repeatedly worn by the Filipina in art as emblems of an unproblematic identity. In whatever pose and clime,

the emblematically clothed Filipina is permanently dressed as “Culture,” wearing ornaments and clothes of stereotypes and identities that transcend history.

However, Pastor Roces also takes note, in a paper delivered for a conference on Rizal in 2011, that while elite Filipinas are identified with the traditional *baro't saya*, Jose Rizal, our nationalist icon, is garbed in the European overcoat, and is seldom, if at all, seen in the vernacular clothing. The overcoat is marker for the *ilustrado*, a term referring to young Filipino elites in the 1800s whose preferred site for professional and higher study is Europe. At the same time, so-called “primitive” Filipinos, wearing nothing but their g-strings, had to endure the cold while being exhibited at the 1884 Madrid Exposition of Fine Arts, an event which angered Rizal. Clothing—or lack of it—thus speaks of civilized/uncivilized, modern/primitive, mind/body, culture/nature, *ilustrado/indio* binaries embedded in what John Clark refers to as vertical relations and top-down modernist genealogies. Clothing also speaks of the checkered career of the *ilustrado*, epitomized by Rizal as continental, a Europeanized hero/villain, a world-class traveler, a polymath, and even the first ever Overseas Filipino Worker or OFW.⁶

Before his execution, Rizal wrote “*Mi Ultimo Adiós*” or “My Last Farewell,” a moving poem now carved in stone, the fourth object in my presentation. Enshrined at the Fort Santiago, where Rizal was held prisoner before he was shot nearby, the poem was meticulously “written” on sandstone, imported from Italy and executed by a maker of gravestones from Romblon, Central Philippines, home of the best marble and marble artisans in the Philippines. Pastor Roces, who was part of the curatorial team

tasked to make shrines dedicated to the hero during the centennial year of the Philippine Revolution in 1998, reveals that in the process of monumentalizing the poem, “we aimed for *materiales Fuertes*, the best materials and the most difficult of techniques, the kind of technique that leaves no room for mistakes” (“Text and Subtext”). However, 13 years later, at a conference on the hero, one of many activities dedicated to his 150th year, Pastor Roces reflects, and I roughly translate from the original Tagalog: “Despite the joy of having flawlessly carved and inlaid the poem, a germ of doubt nested in my heart. The poem is so beautiful it moves one to tears, but casting it in stone, drains it of life” (2011).

I recall that in the Renaissance, it is the sculptor’s duty to free the life form imprisoned in the marble and bring it to life. The stone and—if I may bring in another object—the glass cases in museums are bearers of the dead, which could be awakened, in which case they are not actually dead for all eternity but are somehow alive, perhaps in suspended animation. However, in Pastor Roces’s meditation, the poem, once alive, is now very definitely dead, killed by the modernist, secular idea and its process of memorialization. How can the poem come to life again?

I have no ready answer, but I turn to Michelle Henning for a possible option: that is to take as a starting point the idea of modernity as “fundamentally, if unevenly, transformative” (2). And if there is any preliminary conclusion I can take from this cue and from the objects and stories I excavated, it is this: instead of scrounging around for “other” modernities, or as the panel brief for this Symposium puts it: “different traditions of Asian art [that] could

be considered modern even before encounters with Western art,” I would rather bring to light the “other side of modernity”—the tendency of objects, four (or five, if we include the glass case) of which I singled out here, to exceed their designated roles, and to resist their integration into a coherent narrative of progress and their reduction to documents, texts, or representations. The feminine costumed identity, here imaged as the docile mermaid in a city logo, might fight back, and assume violent forms like the monstrous mermaid. The unseen spirits imprisoned in human form continue to claim their share. The *arinola* continues to foment a rebellion with other household implements and argue among themselves and scream, not only at each other, but at us. Rizal’s overcoat and the elite *baro’t saya* might begin to ask uncomfortable questions, and the poem might leap at us and demand to be touched and be held. Objects cannot be tamed, although our responses to them, under the shadow of modernity and its stone and glass cases, can be. I will end with a final question then: How can a museum, with aspirations to greatness, make us and our vital signs come alive and object?

Notes:

¹ This essay is a modified version of a paper that was originally presented at “Making a Great Art Museum: Contending with Southeast Asian Modernities and Art,” a symposium held on 13 July 2011 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, LASALLE College of the Arts and organized by the NHB Academy (now The Culture Academy, Singapore) and the Institute of Policy Studies.

² Balay ni Tan Juan Community Museum in Bago City, Negros Occidental is named after Juan Araneta, a sugar baron who fought in the Philippine Revolution of 1898.

³ This is where the Spratly Islands, currently disputed among several countries, including the Philippines, are located.

⁴ The artist Maria Taniguchi hinted at and interacted with this strain of modernity as it is seen in the Vargas Museum in her site-specific exhibit entitled *Echo*, in May 2011. In her video at the West Wing, she mounted two screens which screened 11-minute documentations of the carving *Dawn’s Arms* by a marble artisan in Romblon. *Dawn’s Arms* replicates the arms of the statue *Dawn* by the artist Georg Kolbe, which was exhibited at the German Pavilion of the Barcelona Exposition in the 1950s. The result of the Romblon artisan’s efforts was a photograph of *Dawn’s Arms*. Taniguchi is linking two modernist buildings, the German Pavilion, constructed by Mies van der Rohe, and Vargas Museum, and makes a sly reference to its faux marble flooring.

⁵ These insights emerged from a documentary research I conducted with filmmaker Nick de Ocampo in Batanes, Northern Philippines, 2009-2010. For fuller details, please see my essay “For the Birds” for the exhibition catalog of *The River Project* exhibited at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, Australia in 2010.

⁶ For a fuller discussion on the changing meanings of the term *ilustrado*, see Caroline Hau’s “‘Patria e intereses’: Reflections on the Origins and Meanings of Ilustrado.” In this essay, she elaborated on the resignification of the “ilustrado” as Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) in the prize-winning novel by Miguel Syjuco.

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