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REFLECTION: ART AND ITS PUBLIC (OR, HOW PUBLIC CAN ART GET)

ANA MARIA THERESA P. LABRADOR

The idea of discussing the "public" for this third issue of the Art Studies Journal was put forward by some members of the faculty who felt it was appropriate given that decisions are needed to be made on the direction the Department was to take, as well as the current progress in Philippine cultural studies. The curricula of courses being offered and the subject areas are presently on review. This process is tedious and also contentious. The changes will mean having to go through University bureaucratic requirements, evaluation and restructuring certain constructs of naturalized notions, and justifying the changes proposed to merit the required hard work. Having to reeducate themselves is also not an easy task for academics who struggle with the economic realities of the profession. The main justification is the concern for its public, specifically the students, the would-be students, and those affected in other areas of concern such as film, theatre, museums, art galleries, festivals, among others.

The dwindling numbers of students enrolling or staying on in the arts courses are the main source of worry. To their credit, colleagues began immediate self-examination discussions. Part of their attention also focused on the changing conditions outside the academe: perceptions of art's role in society, appropriation of images from traditional sources, the misuse and/or abuse of art in the name of interest groups, and the politics of representation. These are far loftier than the basic

question of "what is art?" Among current academics this question is just as valid as the other issues. But a closer examination on who is asking the question and the reason for asking is now part of the investigation.

This third issue pays close attention to the theoretical approaches in studying art, and at the same breath explores the different webs of causes that entangle art into a baffling myth. In the influential book, *The Social Production of Art*, Janet Wolf proposes that the vocabulary of "creation," "artist," and "work of art" should be replaced with "cultural or artistic production" (or "manufacture" — Mayakovsky), "cultural producer" (or "scriptor" or "compositor" — as Barthes and Macherey say) and "artistic product." She believes that this does not lower the aesthetic to the mundane. Rather, writes Wolf, "it is a way of ensuring that the way in which we talk about art and culture does not allow or encourage us to entertain mystical, idealised, and totally unrealistic notions about the nature of this sphere, which the sociology of art has shown to be unacceptable." (1981:138) In this sense, the entanglement belongs to the value attached to words until we do not notice it has turned static and normative.

In his article "Remapping the Terrain of Philippine Colonial Art History," Patrick D. Flores challenges naturalized assumptions about Philippine colonial art history, framing Philippine art

as a category. His focus on the colonial period sharply scrutinizes the institutions of the archive and the agencies of culture and art worlds. He blames them for regulating practices such as data gathering and turning them into a "theoretical worldview that conceives of reality as natural and so neutral." The meticulous essay admirably explores the different canons that for a while became the dominant approaches in the same academic institution where Flores was educated and is currently a member of the faculty.

The fear of maintaining an uncritical art historical paradigm has spurred Flores to persevere with this position, translating it into his Master's degree thesis. Taking the view that the introduction and institutionalization of painting in the Philippines is a social practice, Flores poses the question of why "must art history privilege Luna and Hidalgo. Furthermore, why must colonial art be charted according to an evolutionary process and not according to a revolution or ruptures/resistances against canonical consolidation?" His solution is unrelenting towards those who subscribe to the formalist orthodoxy and dismisses the arbitrary construction of art history.

The task of art history, specifically of Philippine colonial art studies, is to theorize on the various aspects of the construction of art historiographical, art historical, art theoretical, art critical knowledge on, of, about Philippine colonial art, with the view of evaluating the effects thereof to multiple audience ethnographies that comprise the contradictory constituencies of the canon.

The production of art is an important component within the sphere of our investigation. It is the activities which provide the means to devise, create, and articulate perceptions of the world through symbolic and metaphorical ways, using narratives and/or abstractions. The way we look at this mode depends on the particular dynamics of human life which enable us to see individuals as part of different cultural groups. It seems that in all types of groups, activities of this kind are part of their existence. Along the line of this argument, art is presumed to be part of everyone's life, while everyone is a member of the public or a community. At what point is it that art becomes a public activity or domain? This is the debate which contributors

of this Journal take up.

Quite a few grounds encourage the production of art. Approaches in new art history tend to cover much of this area. But this does not compare to or as compelling as its distribution and subsequent consumption. These have profound effects on art making and the hierarchy of values foisted upon it. Value, in this sense and no matter its contentious arbitrariness, is often taken for an aesthetic appraisal. It has become the reverse, however, the more art became detached from the social milieu. Increasingly, critics of culture are demanding to restore the social character of art. Aesthetic judgements, they reckon, are characteristic phenomena of collective activity. Hence, art should be freed from the isolation to which it has often been condemned.

Dichotomies in the artworld abound: private versus public art; fine art versus craft; and, high versus low art. It is in this division of artistic mode of production where one form is privileged as true or authentic art over the other. This form of legitimacy is now being questioned as a model sanctioned by élitist vanguards. The current demand it seems from the contributors's articles is to begin to construct theoretical frameworks by which to understand the phenomena or the uniqueness of the position of Philippine art vis-a-vis other unconventional art forms, colonial history, the society, the region, and even the world.

More importantly, the writers are relating what some of us suspected all along: the power of art consumers comes from the public sector. They validate art forms by appropriating what is perceived as high art, fashioning them according to their needs or use. This of course is a contemporary experience as patronage is increasingly coming from a large, segment of an anonymous society, receiving products of art which are mediated or reinterpreted in their own language and sometimes consumed differently from the artist's original intention.

Mediation occurs during distribution and since there is a plethora of agents available to distribute texts, images and sounds, the contexts of how they are received become part of the meaning. As one of the possible destination of

artworks, museums alter the meaning of already existing objects that were made for other places. The same artwork will be perceived differently when viewed in television arts programs or glossy magazines or coffee table books. There are presently more chances for the public to encounter art in a variety of ways from a number of venues.

In a uniquely structured essay entitled "Notes on Some Footnotes Regarding Art Publics and Classification of Arts in the Philippines," Pearl E. Tan-Punongbayan draws multimedia examples to draw attention to her point. It starts off with notes which are conventionally found at the end of each page or the entire article. Apart from it being an obvious rethinking in form of what we expect of essays, the substance of her arguments exposes the arbitrary boundaries presented by neat classifications. It is in these sorts of taxonomy which academics easily succumb. By presenting her arguments this way, she is suggesting that the oversimplification will not do when using a contemporary appraisal of the highly textured diversity of the public as consumer.

In trying to establish relationships between art and its publics, we discover a network of interstices punctuated with nodes and circles of various densities, intensities, and extents...Uses, contexts, venue, medium, and the artworld are only five of these mediating variables that influence the distribution and consumption of the arts, which inevitably affect their production and classification, too...Indeed, the flows through the consumer-producer networks are circular and mutually inclusive, and more and more the phrase "art and its public" seems like a misnomer.

Supporting the same argument, Cecilia B. Sta. Maria pushes the argument further on by translating the format of her essay in a synopsis of a play, as well as writing it in Tagalog. In "Pagsasalarawan ng Karanasan," she recounts her experience while conducting a theater workshop for the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) in Gasan, Marinduque, two years ago. Marinduque is popular among people who are familiar with the *Moriones*. This festivity, surrounding a little known soldier of Pilate, involves the townspeople running after him on the Easter Sunday. In the spirited chase all over the town, he

is beheaded (or a full head mask is brought to bear for all to see).

What is interesting in her discussion is the ethnography of the interaction and the clashes of the insider (townspeople) and the outsider (PETA). There are no marked distinctions between the theater-goer and the performer because in this popular tradition called *Pugutan* actor and audience are one. Despite interventions from outsiders like tourists and the desire to legitimize this art form by having a renowned playwright write its script, the ritual endured. As Sta. Maria points out that part of the reason is that Longinus is a folk hero among the mostly peasant community. He is also a symbol of honesty which is a virtue they value highly.

The PETA team soon found out that doing background research was not enough. They had to accept that the people have very definite ideas of how they want their ritual conducted. It is not after all an empty exercise, but an annual ritual involving oaths and sacrifices. During the preparation for it conflict occurred; Sta. Maria realized her team was beginning to impose their aesthetic baggage upon the very people who had been celebrating it for most of their lives. Such arrogance did not go unchecked, and they went away thinking that people's theater advocates are fortunate to have a public that involves an active community of participants. Hence, her use of Filipino seeks to find a public for her essay which is beyond the academe.

This does not mean that the focus on popular art, for instance, as a more public form of art is a desire to claim it to be egalitarian. The pecking order is present even in products of "mass culture." Varnedoe and Gopnik made this distinction in their introduction to the exhibition catalogue for "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture." After having adopted the word "popular" as a label of convenience, they qualified that they do not mean to imply that there is something democratically appealing about all this material. "Advertising and comics, for example — both clearly commercial enterprises, making images for sale or to promote selling — are aspects of what we might call an "overlord" culture, directed by a few people toward a broad audience. Caricature

and graffiti, by contrast, seems to belong to what we might call "underbelly" culture, a tradition of social criticism or raw, outlaw drawing. (1990:13)

What the articles in this journal have taken into account are the multiple histories which link art to people's experiences. We are also drawn in to understand the plurality of the arts' public so that we may appreciate how it has affected production and distribution. Seeing these causes from the ground is to recognize the teleological nature of the activity.

Taking the line of this argument, the community is one of the categories which belong to the arts public but has taken on more political and less of a social tone. Community practice has moved on as an action of resistance to homogeneity, giving opportunities to those whose voice(s) were suppressed and whose spaces were appropriated in the past by mainstream culture. This community refers to minority groups who are struggling for both a voice and a sense of identity. In cases, however, where an art bureaucracy is involved (as in the experience of Australia and wealthier counterparts), "communities have been 'constructed' to fit the rationale for developing policies and directing the distribution of funds. (Binns, 1991:11)

The past is interesting in this sense, since it offers legitimate history which is documented, published and given material evidence. Yet it is also interpreted as an account of what people believed in and the shared experience handed down through oral history. No matter the method of its preservation or translation, history turns controversial once new materials are found to disprove long-held notions. In "The 1886 London Colonial and Indian Exhibition: Displaying goods, displaying people and how the British public was taught about the 'Empire'," Cheree A. Quizon saliently points out that the "cracks in the discourse previously seen as seamless have been dramatically opened up by a search for that which is not said." She is referring to another kind of public whose taste was conditioned by the times where the Britons are surprised by the natives on exhibit wearing civilized clothing.

Quizon's contribution is her detailed grounding of the Victorian culture which led to understanding the framework the British used when exhibiting objects and people. Her investigation yielded part of the answer: Victorian England preferred trade and not acculturation. This informed most of the exhibitions around this period:

Authenticity or cultural honesty, though not a sufficient condition, was necessary in making the master narrative irrefutable. The plotting of Victorian novels have often been remarked upon as tending to an overabundance of simultaneous narratives; the paintings of the time have an equally curious epic tendency to narrate, allegorize, preach and monumentalize a maze of melodramatic sentiment. These discourses inform the colonial displays of people in 1886, but in a peculiar way: the sentimentality consists primarily of the Britons' (not the native's) ecstatic embrace of the symbols of the Crown; the heroism of the "native," however lies not in symbolic feeling but in pragmatic action. If the main labor of Britain and Britons was to be great, then the work of greatness was the cultivation of faith as a nationalistic idiom. The work of the colonized, depicted much like the Victorian painters' "navvy" as iconographic "type," is the processing of raw material.

The wider arena of what constitutes the public is inextricably linked to Antonio Gramsci's formulation of the civil society. This is part of Ivan Karp's argument in the book, *Museums and Communities*, where he and other writers examine more contemporary perceptions of the museum. Challenging old notions of the static and insipid monoliths, Karp defines the ideal role of museums as "places for defining whom people are and how they should act and as places for challenging these definitions." (1992:4)

A reference point for this discussion is Gramsci's definition of the functional differences between civil society and political society. For Gramsci the institutions of political society exercise coercion and control, while civil society creates hegemony through the production of cultural and moral systems that legitimate the existing social order.

From this point of view, the cultural parallels to coercion and control is hegemonic relation. If Gramsci were writing in the 1990s, Karp believes "that he would think of civil society both as a site for the production of hegemony, that is, as an intellectual and moral commitment to the way a society is ordered and governed, and as a site for contesting assertions about who has the right to rule and to define the different identities in society."

Although the effect was in the least desirable, the "conjugal dictatorship" of the Marcos years reinforced the hegemony of image-building through the arts and to gloss over economic problems. Martial law and inter-nationalism became a springboard for arts and culture. This assertion was advanced in Maria Victoria T. Herrera's essay, "The Marcos Years: Creating a Cultural Center for the Public." As a subsequent basis for a Masteral thesis, her detailed archival work and interviews reflect the growing concern over the implication of this particularly disputable period of Philippine history.

She cites for instance the extra-legal arrangements created for the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) to reinforce the role of Imelda Marcos as the patroness of the arts. Herrera's scrupulous documentation of legislation around that period reveal that laws for the CCP were made up as they went along. This has given Marcos and her cultural arm more than enough to push through with her own arts agenda. Most of today's infrastructure, finance and budget pattern, bureaucracy and arts policy owes an odd attachment to the Marcos years. This has made Herrera pose a difficult question on the relationship between the effect of government patronage during that time and on the current practice of artistic promotion: if that sort of patronage was so terrible why aren't we condemning the Marcos cultural framework?

The status enjoyed by the Cultural Center through the years has truly been a privileged one. On the surface, it seemed that the state has been benevolent with respect to culture. By extending the jurisdiction of the CCP, the government has assured the arts with its constant support...What the executive has actually done was to ensure a conjugal control over a major cultural institution,

its operations and moreover, its funds...To justify its agenda for culture, the government created the viewing public whose taste was in consonance with Western sensibilities. With the state's thrust towards marketability in the international community, art and culture became part of the national agenda for trade, diplomacy and tourism.

This argument reverberates in Belen Ponferrada's well-illustrated essay with some surprising findings. Government has supported the arts in a big way, especially financially. This was the main legacy of the Marcoses as pointed out by Herrera, making public expenditure in the arts unprecedented. Out of 71 museum respondents, 64% operate chiefly on taxpayers' money which contradicts the perceived notion that government has largely ignored promotion of culture and the arts in the last decade. Within the larger scheme of things however, Ponferrada is shocked that government allots only 3% of the national budget towards the establishment, promotion and maintenance of state-owned museums.

While the lack of funds maybe a problem, another area of concern are the level of competence and qualification of museum workers. An incredible 87% of them have had only on-the-job training in the government museums. The same is true for more than half of those in private museums. Ponferrada believes that among other things, a way to remedy this situation is to institute a formal academic program in museum studies.

...The matter of entrusting to museum workers our country's cultural, artistic, historic and scientific heritage cannot be underemphasized. Museum workers must be better prepared for their respective jobs and responsibilities these jobs entail...It is therefore imperative that all statistics which have bearing on the professional practice of museology in the country should be studied seriously in order that the necessary steps can be made in addressing the urgent concern of Philippine museum and its workers.

Art, museums, art museums, exhibitions and festivals assemble only a fragment of civil society. They belong to the complex of social consciousness in which we act out our lives and through which we shape our identities. Within this

framework, art museums should forsake the posture of pretending that art is purely an aesthetic experience and, by its own nature, essentially self-referential. This attitude, found in (late) Victorian values, negates the multiple social and political contexts within which the creation and preservation of art take place. This denial does not merely shore it up against interference but, in the long run, to marginalize it as the preserve of those with privileged education and exclusive cultural assets.

Philip Wright laments that art museums do not do more "given the exponentially increasing sum of information and knowledge becoming available to their potential visitors in the world outside." (1989:144) It may make life simpler for curators, but it insults the vision and the unconscious 'engagement' of artists as observers of, participants in, and commentators on the world which they inhabit, and it censors the meanings that their work may have for contemporary and subsequent generations.

The Filipino art public is not homogeneous and passive. We have been informed by the rich cultural heritage as well as the thoroughly researched essays above that the public is actually a recent construction of increasingly complicated economic relations. The cultural life also tends to reflect the rise of a more clearly defined division of labor. Hence, the dichotomy exists between

audience and performer, and between fine and popular art. It would be unfortunate if we succumb to the pressures of the borrowed system from advanced economies which has been the death knell of flourishing, lively and critical cultures.

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