

Drawing from the Psychic Lodes

Contemporary Art And Its Socio-Political Content Among Filipino Artist
Paper for Kalam, seminar in Jakarta Aug. 1999

Modernism replaced academic realism in the early 20th century as the established international genre offering numerous dilemmas for progressive Filipino artist in the Philippines. In the post war 50's the Art Association of the Philippines the oldest art organization in Philippines had a schism between the "conservatives and the moderns" the former, artist who are schooled in the academic realism style. The Moderns are mostly "pensionados" US govt. scholars who brought home the modernist ideas they learned from US schools. Led by artist like Victorino Edades, Guillermo Tolentino, and Vicente Manansala among others. This led to a walkout of the "conservatives" many of whom ended up churning tourist paintings for American servicemen and tourist. The "moderns" saw abstraction and non-objective paintings pure, utopian and individualistic. "to Asian artist the foreign origins of these forms and their lack of links with Filipino cultural traditions meant that this paintings had no immediate local audience beyond the internationally oriented cognoscenti. The progressive artist and media embrace the "advance art" of the west as a liberation from the naivism that romanticized the rural past and imprisons the Filipino in that mode. The modernist movement had peak in the sixties with artist like Napoleon Abueva, Jose Joya, David Medalla and began to level out in the 60's. New social conditions were taking shape. Nationalist politicians promulgated many laws too instill a sense of nationalistic pride. Modernism paved the way for new art to emerge, young nationalistic artist reacted to the lack of Filipino identity in our visual arts. Many progressive artists were drawing images from the rapidly growing middleclass and the cultural tensions of agricultural base economy to an agric- industrial based economy.

The rise of nationalist sentiments in the 60's was a catalyst for the Filipino artist to recover indigenous values, re-evaluating our colonial past to define the Filipino identity through the arts.

As a young student in the University of the Philippines in the late 60's, teachers encouraged budding artist to find their original style in abstraction and become identified with it. Many of our teachers were painting in the non representational manner Constancio Bernardo one of my teachers is a student of Joshep Albers and he painted in similar fashion although he claims to be influence by the Jeepney folk art decor. Many corporations were early sponsors of art events and competitions shown in car showrooms and hotel lobbies. On the other hand were the nationalist movements that were active in disseminating anti-imperialist stance which was needed in a

country rock by economic and political crisis, the Vietnam war the bureaucratic corruption, economic domination by multi-national corporations, rallies and demonstrations were a common sight in those days. A strong impression was made by David Medalla on a talk in our university on a visit to Manila in 1970. He talks about performance art and installations as new forms of expression in the visual arts. Together with others artist the disseminate an art tabloid called "Masterbate" they were harassed by Marcos officials and David Medalla was sent out of the country. On Sept.21, 1972 President Marcos declared Martial Law and changed our lives and the course of our history.

Imelda Marcos' project "The Cultural Center of the Philippines" jumped start the appreciation of contemporary art to a broader audience with the construction of new museums like the Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Philippine Art among others. A young Museum director the late Ray Albano favored avant-garde works and supported works of young artist who were veering away from the mainstream art. Many experimental artists benefited from his generous patronage. Censorship was indirect and anything critical or political is not exhibited. The new rich (people who amassed wealth during the Marcos regime) started to collect art among the established artist of the day. Despite Imelda's agenda to use culture to enhance their image and to forget their poor origins, many artists benefited from her patronage and others dedicated their exhibitions to Imelda Marcos. All these were overshadowed by their plunder of the Philippine economy.

I remember submitting a piece of work for a show at the Cultural Center called "Writings on the Wall" a syllabary of ancient writing as a metaphor for Marcos regime. It was hanged hidden by a huge post in the spacious gallery that is easy to miss.

Others used their art to oppose the oppressive regime of Marcos. Artist like Ben Cab, Jaime De Guzman and Danny Dalena set new standard in the visual arts. "Their art spoke of a people struggle against tyranny and exploitation, neocolonialist structures, and dictatorship. They created a resonant modernist discourse for nationalist themes, demonstrating beyond any doubt that art could be exciting, modernist and political."¹ They pointed the direction to a succeeding generation of artists in conditioning people's minds in resisting the Marcos dictatorship. Some joined demonstrations and made fast paintings on the wall with social realist pictures as the demonstrators march while being cordoned by demonstrators to prevent arrest.

People's power revolution democratizes the cultural institutions of the country. New people who were more progressive took over as taste molders of the country, mainly the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Outreach programs were instituted and regional arts councils were organized. Cultural Non-Government Organization's, workers and volunteers were encouraged. They formed the cultural vanguard in promoting the arts in the

countryside. These organizations become impresarios in staging events of cultural value promoting artist and their works outside Manila.

In 1987 together with other Baguio based artist we organized the Baguio Arts Guild whose aim is to promote art and culture in our city. Many of the out of school youth who started with us are now holding out on their own in the art scene exhibiting here and abroad.

Pres. Corazon Aquino signed Executive Order 118 creating the National Commission on Arts and Culture. In 1992 the Presidential directive was turned into law. The law mandated to formulate policies for the development of culture and the arts encourage artistic creation, develop and promote Filipino national culture and arts, administer the national endowment fund for culture and the arts. Although at its infancy these institutions are not spared by partisan politics and becomes impotent in delivering efficient cultural services to the artists and their communities.

Today some Filipino artists are engaged in the rewriting our pre-colonial history and reframing the effects of colonization to understand who we are now. Who is Filipino? What constitute a Filipino's distinct makeup? The indigenous tribes, the Igorotes and the Muslim having resisted the colonial incursions of the Spanish conquistadors and friars had less cause to question their identity. Even the Americans are a little more successful than their predecessors had only nominal control in their respective areas.

Today that tradition of resistance to outside influence continues. Layers of Filipino culture dominate the political, economic, cultural and social life in many parts of the Philippines. The centralized government in Manila is cash strapped to develop the regions of the country to its full potentials. Traditional structures of patronage of people in power stunt the growth of progressive ideas of the population. These develop pockets of resistances to the dominant cultures from Manila and abroad. The demand for more autonomy from Malacanang by local governments, the growing insistence among cultural workers and creators on re-evaluating whom and what exactly they look to for ideas and inspiration, echoes the rethinking of political alliances to suit regional aspiration.

"The domestic shift in political and cultural emphasis is manifested globally by the resurgence of ethnic based nationalism and the revival everywhere of homegrown art, that is art more evidently reflective of the artist own history. In its extreme it leads to repugnant phenomena such as ethnic cleansing that must be condemned unequivocally; an irrational, fratricidal attempt to turn the clock back and reinvent both peoples and culture."²

In terms of cultural production, Manila has been largely the breeding ground of many artist who as critic Marian Pastor Roces in a recent essay "Ethos BathosPhatos" are fully committed to Euro-American art history, and who produce work precisely calibrated vies a vies that history" with the caveat that "this person will likely remain shunted out of existing centers of art cum political power."

Regional artist from Baguio to the southern islands of Mindanao are drawing from their home turf telling their own local stories, their own symbols and

traditional ideas in instilling pride and empowerment to their own people. Many organizations like the Baguio Arts Guild, Black Artist of Asia, Pangpanga Arts guild, Davao Arts Associations and other loosely organized groups of artist across the archipelago have seen their influence and affectivity as a group. It is quite easy to misread regional art so that it is possible, in the fever of elevating our "rationality" that the works be consumed for the wrong reasons. In a culture where the critical mass (that is the premises and language of criticism) has been largely shaped by western culture, such danger is omnipresent. A noted Filipino writer, historian and cultural critic Anding Roces tells it succinctly: "... there is obviously a parallax problem. It deserves reiterating that the perception machine imposes it's own parameters. Those parameters hemogenically constituted, do not allow for the possibility that many Filipinos are not quite "readable" within those self same parameters".

The best of contemporary art reflects the times in which it is created, since Philippines independence, art with political and social content has been part of many protest movements. Many of these protest groups whose artist developed protest aesthetics out of necessity. Their art took varied forms that were immediate, spontaneous, and accessible to a broader local audience. The notable ones are Ega Tulusan Fernandez, Adi baens Santos, Antipas Delotavo, Renato Habulan.

The Filipino Diaspora was an effect of political and economic failure of the government to provide livelihood among its own citizens. Long lines of queues at the US embassy testify the reality of immigration from economic or political plight of many Filipinos. Filipinos cover the globe because of their ability to adapt in foreign shores with greater ease. Filipino artist living in more advance countries draw inspiration from their personal experiences in immigration, memories of home. Interesting examples are work by Manuel Ocampo who lives in the United States, Lani Maestro, Joey Santarromana among others.

President Ramos deregulated the communication industry and the trade liberalizations opened the gates to easier access to new technologies that is revolutionizing our lives. The use of digital technology is democratizing information with a bigger audience and server as a faster way to disseminate information of ideas for many artists. This expanded the playing field for low budget organizations. This new technology used as a tool to propagate our cultural productions from our own point of view can greatly enhance new possibilities of our artistic production.

The past decades saw a tremendous interest in Asian artist through easier communication and travel. Art from outside the centers are more visible and discussed. As a result, the most basic assumptions about art, its practice and purpose are being reexamined. Strong and articulate voices from the margins are speaking out.

"If contemporary art internaticially is to have a more vital function of cultural sustenance, then it must reexamine the terms of internationalism itself as a frame work and aspiration for its highest endeavors. Art must

seek conditions more deeply grounded, more vitally connected to the actual diversity and spheres of operation of differences in contemporary life. Art needs its regional and local connections. Contemporary art needs to enrich its immediate sources and recontextualize its circuits of connection, while not surrendering its attention to the wider world, in which all peoples are vitally implicated in the task of cultural survival."³

The task of educating and developing our own audiences locally depends largely on the media, artist and cultural workers. For the literate populace there are a dozen dailies in MetroManila and half a dozen are circulated nationwide. Radio frequencies are jammed with stations in English and vernacular languages. Yet there is an ignorance and lack of interest in arts writing and critical discourse in the arts and culture. Many people who appreciate the arts are often misguided by the media into appreciating what is popular. If we are to claim turf in the power centers of the arts and influence taste molders we should define our own aesthetics and parameters of what is good art. Critical writing disseminated to students and art enthusiasts can help educate mass audiences to appreciate and give value to good art.

New mythologies are being forged by contemporary Filipino artist to point the way to the Filipino nation towards the new century. Indeed many Filipino artist are fortunate enough to sit on top of deep artistic tradition and resources. The exciting artist today are tapping into the communal psyche to show the rest of us what treasures lie in these invisible cultures in the mind. The rediscovery of the small, the communal, has been a gut reaction to the global and corporate and the slickness of many contemporary representations.

As a Filipino singer Joey Ayala says it all " let us create new roads and carve our history on stone"

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Footnotes:

1. Alice Guillermo, "Filipino Art at the Centennial of the revolution and into the 21st Century" 1998 Home and Abroad, 20 Contemporary Filipino Artist, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco
2. Bernice Murphy, "Introduction to the Exhibitions" in Localities of Desire: Contemporary Art in an International World, 1994, p 13
3. Luis Francia, "Old Lamps for New" 1993