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“Total Community Response”:

Performing the Avant-garde as a Democratic Gesture in Manila

PATRICK D. FLORES

“This nation can be great again.” This was how Ferdinand Marcos enchanted the electorate in 1965 when he won his first presidential election at a time when the Philippines “prided itself on being the most ‘advanced’ in the region”.¹ In his inaugural speech titled “Mandate to Greatness”, he spoke of a “national greatness” founded on the patriotism of forebears who had built the edifice of the “first modern republic in Asia and Africa”.² Marcos conjured prospects of encompassing change: “This vision rejects and discards the inertia of centuries. It is a vision of the jungles opening up to the farmers’ tractor and plow, and the wilderness claimed for agriculture and the support of human life; the mountains yielding their boundless treasure, rows of factories turning the harvests of our fields into a thousand products.”³

This line on greatness may prove salient in the discussion of the avant-garde in Philippine culture in the way it references “greatness” as a marker of the “progressive” as well as of the “massive”. “Greatness” refers to physical prowess and intellectual acumen, a transformative capacity to turn condition into potential. To conceive of something as great is to invest it with the transcendent and, in the same vein, to make it speak to the common, to the mass of people who must make it real with audacity. The other word

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that deserves attention in the mantra is “again”. It speaks to a return to an idealised past or to a repetition of a turn, a movement or “possibility”, in fact, a revolution however the term is grasped ideologically. This idealised past feeds into the global present in the global south as Marcos was seriously committed to the idea of a third world as a system of politics and economies. In 1976, he hosted the ministerial meeting of the Group of 77, a coalition founded in 1964 within the United Nations to look after the interests of developing nation-states. In his remarks to the ministers, auspiciously titled “Manila and the Global New Society”, Marcos invoked meetings and declarations such as the Bandung Conference (1955), the Algiers Charter (1967) and the Lima Declarations (1972 and 1975) by way of context, and proposed the transformation of the Group of 77 into a third-world economic system.⁴

This fantasy of greatness gained ground and took flight because it was imbricated in the discursive densities of development, identity and democracy. To be great may have meant to emerge, to fulfil the project of rendering the self coherent and to guarantee opportunities of equality to everyone. This being said, while these densities endure as the lasting heritage of paternalist nation-state visionaries, they are also lifted up with the lightness of political feeling that invariably translates into pride, thrill, expectation, belonging. All this collects under the dynamic of performing the script of the democratic, suffused with the promise of freedom, participation, entitlement and even heroism. This entailed a mixture of play between the codes of the aesthetic and the statist; the pageantry and melodrama of local colour and collective sentiment on a national scale; and the epic of the passage from a deep past into a future of plenty.

The “avant-garde” in this situation was an investment in “culture” as a mode of agency: the Filipino as an expressive force, and relationality as a scheme for the gathering of energies. It converged in the performative, in a *palabas*, that is at once spectacle and ruse.⁵ Even resistance to this consolidation was built around such a performative, counter-appropriating the spectacle by way of para-sites and ludic critique.

This article lights up the formative context of art and culture orchestrated by the Marcos government from the angle of the intertwined discourses of development, identity and democracy. It begins with some discussion of context, before shifting into discussion of works of architecture and performance. The discourses of development, identity and democracy exemplify the logics and the feelings of being modern and international by being progressive, being true to an imagined authentic origin (a civilisational hubris, in the words of Geeta Kapur) and being liberated. For sure, these sensations of the modern are prone to the instrumentalisation of the state and its agenda

of reform and revitalisation, of constantly ameliorating and refining the self-conscious Filipino. These same sensations, however, sustain the energy of another formative context that is critical of both art and culture as enlisted by the state. These tendencies of formation are not set up as binary oppositions here. They are, rather, meant to inflect each other so that a possible theorisation of, let us say, the avant-garde, a valorised rubric of transformation, may arise without being too beholden to the illusion of autonomy, on the one hand, and without being too taken by the overinvestment in radical change, on the other.

Development

Development is broadly conceived, implicating the economic policy of the Marcos government in the 1960s and 1970s and its immense outlays in infrastructure for culture as part of social development and to “fulfill the potential of the human personality”.⁶ An economist in the Marcos government explained in 1974 that the development of the Philippine economy included reorganisation of the government machinery, reforms in the tax and tariff structure as well as in banking and finance, liberalisation of foreign investment, export expansion, regional dispersal of industries and labour intensification of production techniques, among others. He projected that two years hence, the economy would be growing by 7 per cent annually and the rest would be rosy: “When the full impact of the New Society’s reforms are felt and domestic and foreign resources are adequately generated, the economy will move toward the 10 percent growth stage, and ultimately toward an industrial society.”⁷ This development was the lynchpin of Marcos’s New Society, and vice versa.

In rousing the people to cast their lot with this newness, Marcos stressed that the “new society is, first of all, a community of equals”, wrought by “an element of coercion” that is necessary to forsake the “old society”, which is to be supplanted by an “authentic society” premised on “equalization” and the “conquest of poverty”.⁸ This was the landscape of development in which was emplaced the effort of the state to coordinate architecture and design to endow the hardware of development and the goods of the economy with cultural distinction. According to reports, between 1972 and 1977 the Marcos government invested around 450 million dollars in infrastructure, and a good part of it went to the projects of First Lady Imelda Marcos.⁹ After all, Imelda Marcos was not only First Lady. She was also Governor of Metro Manila, Minister of Human Settlements, patron of culture and her husband’s envoy to the world. Moreover, she had access to government pension and insurance

funds to underwrite her reveries.¹⁰ Development in this context is related to the political economy and aesthetic of nation-building, of the sense and scale of the formative. Imelda Marcos was decisive in this respect as she embedded the feeling for the national in the formation of the state, and so in her hands, the “nation-state” was as much a political as an aesthetic category in a more heightened and deliberately palpable way, and partly because everything seemed to have congealed in her “beauty”, the conjuncture of the aesthetic and the state.

Identity

Through centuries the Filipino had been putting on a mask in order to confound his conquerors. When the time came for him to take off the mask because it was no longer needed – he found that it had become part of his face. This is the commanding image of our crisis of identity.¹¹

This is how Imelda Marcos cast the cultural malaise afflicting the Filipino or, better still, the malaise that is culture. Identity is moored in an ethnic particularity, in which the native and the national tend to conflate. This identity is, at the outset, a critique of the colonial or the western. Imelda Marcos has also been often quoted as saying that her duty as First Lady was to make a home out of the house that her husband was building.

This notion of the ethnic may translate into the spectacle of diversity in exotic representations that cogently convey what may well be the archipelagic effect through what James Clifford calls “ethnographic surrealism”. The opening of the Folk Arts Theater in 1974 presented a grand parade called *Kasaysayan ng Lahi* (History of the Race), a two-and-a-half-hour parade depicting the entire range of Philippine history and social development, from the Stone Age to the New Society. While Clifford thinks of the notion in deconstructive terms and within a utopian framework, it is co-opted here to tap the potent force of both ethnography and surrealism repurposed by a nation-state to ordain a new order, so to speak. As Clifford puts it succinctly: “Reality is no longer a given, a natural, familiar environment. The self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may, a predicament, evoked at its most nihilistic, that underlies both surrealism and modern ethnography.”¹² It is the refusal of the impediments of the old society and the re-knowing of the self in the “new society” of Marcos that underwrote the frenzy of Marcos’s scenography of art and culture by way of an ethnic phantasmagoria.

Democracy

In a book published in 1971, on the eve of Martial Law, Ferdinand Marcos declared that the Filipinos lived in a “revolutionary era”, one marked by “swift, violent, often disruptive change”.¹³ Against this proscenium of turbulence, he would brandish an unprecedented mandate of two successive terms as president alongside the exploits of his government: “More than 80,000 new schoolhouses were constructed, 6000 kilometers of roads built, along with numerous irrigation systems, which, by actual count, exceeded all the irrigation systems set up from the time of the discovery of the Philippines by Ferdinand Magellan up to my first inaugural in 1965.”¹⁴ This inevitable revolution, phrased by Marcos in an excess of flourish, is “democracy”. Democracy is a mission and stance, a worldview, a philosophical system in the time of the Cold War. It is a negation of the socialist, on the one hand, and of the oligarchy on the other. Marcos portrayed himself as someone who would break the stranglehold of the elite in Philippine social life and stem the tide of communism in Southeast Asia. The democratic, therefore, professed at once to an American paradigm of free enterprise and the agenda of overcoming traditional feudal politics by providing mass access to representation in government and in culture.

Political economists argue that in the Philippines, the state apparatus is captured by “an anarchy of particularistic demands from, and particularistic actions on behalf of... oligarchs”.¹⁵ It is exemplary of the patrimonial state in which “power does not originate from within the agencies of the state, but from social elites with an independent economic base and regional or local electoral office. In contrast to the strength of the military bureaucrats in Indonesia and Thailand, in the Philippines the bureaucrats are largely beholden to the oligarchs”.¹⁶ Marcos sustained his power over what he called the New Society through “economic liberalization, pursuit of productivity gains over comprehensive land reform, and the use of executive and military agencies to shape society”.¹⁷ He declared Martial Law in 1972 to save the republic from interests that he characterized as Marxist, Leninist and Maoist.¹⁸

The conjuncture between development, identity and democracy plays out within a more extensive framework in which an instinct of the “free” and the “total” is distributed across subjectivities within the polity. The “free” and the “total” make up “greatness”, the sweeping, magisterial command of radical change. In Marcos’s imagination, this change transposes into the “conquest of poverty” through a “progressiveness” that leads to development. Furthermore, this notion of the “free” and the “total” liaises with competing interests and may come to construct conditions of, let us say, “free enterprise” that underpins capitalism or “totalitarianism” in the guise of constitutional

authoritarianism or strongman rule. Whichever way, it instils a sense of “prosperity” or “well-being” or even “bounty” under the aegis of a formative, developing and free self. Then, this “free” and “total” self, as opposed to the colonised and fragmented entity, partakes of patrimony, the difference of being a Filipino who is suffused with a democratic ethic, to participate in the production of a developing nation.

This article builds these three discourses—of development, identity and democracy—around the fundamental self-consciousness or even conceit of the avant-garde: the assumption that the total, whether condition or change, is knowable and can be cognitively mapped and aesthetically generated. These condense in the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the main edifice for culture in the Marcos government and Imelda Marcos’s brainchild. Such a sortie into the theory of the avant-garde in a locality is demonstrated not only by siting the avant-garde in the institution but by contending that inscribed in the facture itself of the institution are certain aspirations to the avant-garde. This assertion is plotted along three criss-crossing nodes that hopefully foreground tropes of, as a resonance of Marcos’s pledge of return to greatness, what the curator Raymundo Albano described as a situation in which a world was “suddenly turning visible”.¹⁹ This suddenness of turning and the possibility of the visible, or better to say, the geopolitical economy of the visible, might be the figuration of the avant-garde in the Philippines. These nodes lie across the network of the gesture of the democratic performative as an instantiation of the avant-garde. This performative habitus is not restricted to an internal history of the avant-garde; rather, it galvanises a spectrum of initiations within the expansive terrain of sensible life, including a history of colonialism and the modernity it has spawned and altered.

The term “gesture” is salient. It plays on the state of semblance. A gesture is allusive, maybe even allegorical. Also, a gesture is performance, a moment in theatre. Finally, a gesture, in the Brechtian contemplation of *gestus*, is pedagogical, a crystallisation of a social arrangement involving social actors. It is of interest that one of the most diligent commentators on the avant-garde, Peter Bürger, also resorts to the term “gesture” as a way of portraying the aporia of art within modernity. As he would put it: “Art’s attempt to assimilate itself to political agitation is the impossible gesture that must be for ever enacted and then retracted. The new life will not come, but it remains an alternative we must continue to suggest.”²⁰

The three nodes include the following projects that flesh out the performative gesture of the democratic through (a) the production of infrastructure for culture; (b) the formation of a mass of people listening to Philippine music; and (c) the protest of an artist against the structure that had made all this possible.

I

First, is the reclamation project that allowed the government to transform an appreciable part of the Manila Bay, 77 hectares of foreshore land, into a cultural complex. This initiative in public works and architecture may lead us to ponder the basis of the need of the state to participate in the process of internationalism and modernisation. In her speech to the delegates of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting in 1976, Imelda Marcos was unerringly clear about her vision and gave full play to its montage:

You have come to our country at a most exciting time though at a somewhat awkward stage when we are negotiating the challenging transition from a traditional order to a progressive humanist society. This new complex of buildings erected on land reclaimed from the sea stands in dramatic contrast to the slum areas that blight our city. The contrast of shrine and shanty symbolizes the shining future against our impoverished past.²¹

The architect Leandro Locsin shaped the building in the “International Style”, perhaps an abstraction of the native house, with its façade encrusted with crushed shells sourced from the sea nearby and mixed with concrete to suggest a brutalist effect. The Cultural Center, which opened in 1969, cuts a buoyant mass against the Manila sunset, its silhouette marked by “a block of travertine marble floating above a sculpted podium ... tossed into the air by the strongly arched beams”.²² It was meant to fascinate, according to the architect: “a complex of pavilions ... interspersed by plazas, lush gardens, serene reflecting pools, and shaded covered areas ... the public is beguiled at every turn as new vistas unfold”.²³

The idea of expanding the land area of the city of Manila through the reclamation of land in Manila Bay began brewing towards the end of the 1950s. An American businessman named Harry Stonehill first proposed an entire new city by the sea similar to San Francisco’s Fisherman’s Wharf. Far more ambitious than the one executed by the Marcos administration, the project required the reclamation of some 7,000 hectares of land from Pasay to the province of Cavite, which would greatly increase the land area of Manila from 15 to 264 square miles. Under the guidance of Dutch advisers, Mayor Arsenio Lacson of Manila presented the plan, budget and timetable for this undertaking, which was met with opposition due to its environmental impact as well as its legality. Imelda Marcos turned this dream into a reality during the Marcos administration, though not as large and extensive as the original proposal. On 12 March 1966, Presidential Proclamation No. 20 authorised

and approved the construction and development of a 28-hectare reclaimed area along the shore of Manila Bay to be the site of a centre dedicated to the promotion of national heritage.²⁴ Undaunted by concerns over its environmental impact, Imelda Marcos ensured that the construction of the complex commenced immediately after Executive approval.

This realisation of the plan to reclaim Manila Bay testifies to the immense power that the Marcos apparatus wielded at that time. Symbolically, reclaiming land from water and creating a tract of land where there was none before can be interpreted as an act of remaking nature, altering its ecology. On the other hand, it concretises the political power acquired by the Marcoses as the construction of the project entailed the repeal of laws limiting the possibility of such a project, foreshadowing the absolute power that Marcos would secure upon the declaration of Martial Law in 1972.

To translate her vision into a built environment, Imelda Marcos tapped the expertise of architect Leandro Locsin, giving him full artistic licence in experimenting with architectural form. She found his architectural style responsive to the ideas of progress and modernity that the government was trying to project; at the same time, it related well with the notion of Filipino identity crafted by the state based on the appropriated aesthetic of the precolonial, traditional and vernacular. As early as 1961, Imelda Marcos asked Locsin to design the theatre for the Philippine American Cultural Foundation. Locsin thought of a massive rectangular slab rising above the ground. As the said theatre was never built, the design was then adopted for the Main Theater of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). This theatre illustrates Locsin's conception of architecture as monumental sculpture. The feeling of lightness and buoyancy was achieved through the use of cantilevered supports, which curve gently to appear to vanish from afar, such that the entire slab seems to be levitating. The horizontal orientation of its façade is balanced by a reflecting pool in front of the building, which doubles its height.²⁵

Comprising the largest part of the budget was a grant from the US Congress through the Philippine War Damage Special Fund for Education (SFE). A portion came from the fund that Imelda Marcos raised herself from renowned businesspersons and the elite, a style which the late Senator Benigno Aquino, one of the staunchest critics of the Marcos administration, described as "sophisticated extortion".²⁶ Still, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos were assiduous in seeing the enterprise through, because it cemented their rationale for a kind of democracy and development that invested in the Philippine potential. The First Lady, in her characteristic coyness and bravura, envisaged the Center as a "sanctuary of the Filipino soul" and "shrine of the Filipino spirit". She further noted:

It shall be our Parthenon built in a time of hardship, a spring-source of our people's living conviction on the oneness of our heritage ... It is highly symbolic that this Center whose mission it is to reclaim from the past the things that belong to our present and our future should stand here on land reclaimed from the sea ... (so that) that our works in stone and story ... may remain, for all time, a testament to the goodness, the truth, and the beauty of a historic race.²⁷

She then refers to the President who saw it as “a place where the Filipino can discover the soul of his people, and relate the saga of his race to the vast human experience that begins in the past and advances into the limitless future”.²⁸

As the construction of the complex unfolded, problems and controversies arose. The construction budget increased from the original proposal, incurring foreign debts for the government, which raised concerns over its sense of priorities. The CCP project was seen by the critics of the Marcos administration as highly capricious, and a waste of the nation's resources. Four years later, on 10 September 1969, the Main Theater of the CCP was opened. California Governor Ronald Reagan and his wife witnessed the occasion as the official representatives of President Richard Nixon of the USA.

The original plan of the CCP complex designed by Locsin in 1966 was composed of three main groups of structures: a theatre for performing arts, an art museum and an amphitheatre. These structures were laid out in a gridiron street pattern and axial roads, interspersed with tree-shaded open parking areas. Of the three structures, only the theatre for the performing arts (Main Theater) was built as planned. The proposed amphitheatre was replaced by a roofed arena-type theatre named the Folk Arts Theater. However, the original 28-hectare reclaimed area had grown to 77 hectares of landfill. Other buildings later erected in the complex include the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC), Philippine Plaza Hotel, Design Center, Philippine Trade and Exhibits Pavilion, Tahanang Pilipino or Coconut Palace and Manila Film Center. The complex is bounded by a 77-hectare government financial centre in the north, the coconut tree-lined Roxas Boulevard on the other side, and water in the rest of the environs. The edifice of the Center delivered on the promise of a nation-state to radically revise natural landscape (the sea, for instance) and transform it into a cultural fortress. This may well be an analogue of exploiting natural resources into infrastructure, which attests to a mutating technology of facture. This morphing is best imagined by the heady atmosphere at the Center itself, which was simultaneously ethnic and cosmopolitan, in other words, “Philippine”, which is most acutely expressed in the second project, *Ugnayan*.

II

The citation or the renewal of the ethnic through a kind of musicology that encrypted the local in the language of the avant-garde amid a huddle of people summoned by public radio sustains the logic of the second project of the aforementioned discourses. This is best exemplified by the seminal efforts of Jose Maceda, a pianist trained in Paris, who initiated instances of avant-garde music in Manila. The watershed project *Ugnayan* (Connection) is instructive. Its sources were “musique concrète (atmosphere, waves, clouds, electronic technology) and shared labor and cooperation of large numbers of people as a form of technology”.²⁹ It aimed for the synthesis of “ethnomusicology and composition as well as temporalities (that is, the past and the present)”. According to Ramon Santos:

The construction of *Ugnayan* consists of twenty (20) 51-minute layers of recorded sounds (mostly from ethnic instruments), each layer to be broadcast by one of the 37 radio stations authorized to operate in Metro-Manila. All stations were to be synchronized to start the broadcast exactly from 6:00 to 7:00 p.m. on New Year's Day of 1974, during which no other sound would be heard on Philippine airwaves. A nation-wide campaign called for people to come out of their homes, bring their transistor radios, and congregate in parks, community centers (*barangay* centers), and other public places at the appointed time.³⁰

This was a project undertaken by the Cultural Center and it was Imelda Marcos who gave the piece its title; she basked in the fact that the Filipinos were the first in the world to crystallise such an endeavour. The source of this avant-garde, according to Maceda, was European: “A motivation in a search for a new theory of music comes not from the aesthetics of Asian court musics which seeks permanence with little change. Rather, the impetus originates from the very nature of European music which seeks a constant alteration, an evolution which now needs ideas not necessarily a part of its tradition.”³¹

Here, the foreign is not feared or construed as an outside, but as a continuum in which the local finds or, in fact, merits its place. The underside of this neo-ethnic music or an equivalent avant-garde music from the Philippines was, as earlier mentioned, “ethnographic surrealism”, or a collage of fragments of culture in the form of pageants, the stylisation of the primeval and the miniaturisation of the archipelago of 7,000 islands in a park.

Prior to *Ugnayan*, Maceda had already been experimenting with avant-garde musical compositions that harnessed community participation on a

mass scale in the creation of sound environments, which would provide the basis for his most renowned venture in contemporary Philippine music. In 1968, he conceived a piece featuring the fusion of sounds coming from loudspeakers being played from thousands of cars cruising in the freeways of large cities, such as Los Angeles. The project, however, did not materialise as it failed to receive commitment from international funding agencies, though he was able to concretise *Pagsamba* (worship) at the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice at the University of the Philippines, which was itself an architectural breakthrough by virtue of its circular and open structure. Then, in 1971, he premiered his first attempt in utilising an electronic device in his compositions. Titled “*Cassettes 100* (Study in Sound: Sound in Various Densities, Dispersions and Concentrations)”, the musical piece involved a hundred cassette tape recorders staged at the lobby of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Though it received mixed reactions from the public, “*Cassettes 100*” was a signpost for Maceda, after which he immediately proposed the idea of an even larger musical event to Lucrecia Kasilag, the then president of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Inspired by the result of “*Cassettes 100*” and drawing from the inherent electronic character of *musique concrète*, Maceda once again utilised electronic devices, namely, the electro-magnetic recorder and the transistor radio, in the production and performance of the composition. Originally titled *Atmospheres*,³² this project was later renamed *Ugnayan* by Imelda Marcos who commissioned and directly supervised the implementation of the work as one of the flagship projects of the Marcos administration in culture and the arts. The name *Ugnayan* was derived from the Tagalog *ugat natin iyan* (these are our roots), a phrase freighted with national and ethnic connotations.³³

Ugnayan, according to Ramon Santos, was significant in Philippine contemporary music as it presented a synthesis of two separate disciplines: ethnomusicology and production. On one hand, the recorded sounds in *Ugnayan* were sourced from traditional musical instruments and vocal sounds identified with prehistoric, indigenous and ethnic traditions in Asia and the Philippines. On the other, it involved the collective effort of a large community of people, which simultaneously assumed the roles of spectator-listener and producer of sound through the transistor radios that they brought along with them. This position presented a challenge to the perceived nature of musical compositions as the product of one person’s creation.³⁴ Also, drawing on one meaning of the word *ugnayan* in Tagalog—“interlinking”—the musical piece brought together many aspects involved in its production: musical, social and the ideological underpinnings of an administration with its own political agenda that gave its all-out support to such an experimental undertaking.

According to Maceda, the number of 20 music stations was arrived at because at the time the music was initially conceived, there were about that number of stations in operation in the Metropolitan Manila area. Each of these radio stations was to broadcast a layer of the pre-recorded music. The simultaneous playing of various layers in a given area would, in turn, create varying densities of each sound layer, producing different versions of the music across different locales.³⁵

To ensure maximum participation of the people, on which the success of the project greatly depended, a massive campaign and promotion was carried out in both print and broadcast media. On the designated time and evening of the musical event, it was estimated that between 2–20 million people tuned in to the participating radio stations in 142 centres in Metro Manila and six surrounding provinces. Each *Ugnayan* centre was estimated to have an audience of some 15–35,000 people.³⁶ In the recorded music, seven basic types of indigenous musical instruments were used, such as the bamboo zither, bamboo nose flute, bamboo horn, brass gong and *bangibang* (a yoke-shaped bamboo bar played by hitting with a stick).³⁷

Though some people perceived the musical event as a disorganised combination of various sounds, the music was very much structured: *Ugnayan* entailed a logical and well-thought-out plan that took about nine months to prepare. The writing alone took more than a month and the recording of the layers took about ten days. During the actual performance, music students, mostly from the University of the Philippines, interpreted the written score under the direction of Maceda himself.³⁸ The information office of the Marcos government hailed *Ugnayan* as a milestone: “the sum effect of the 50-minute program was a memorable reflection of the nation’s musical heritage, dazzling in its totality of musical sound enriched as never before by large-scale audience participation and active involvement”.³⁹ Surely, while *Ugnayan* was a compelling critique of “worn-out musical language” and a vision of “spiritual consciousness for change”, it was entangled in the Marcos programme of national consolidation, collectivity and cooperation.⁴⁰

The gathering of different art forms at the Center was part of Imelda Marcos’s vision of the “seven arts”. This interdisciplinary inclination found expression in experiments that sought to convene a wide range of materials for art, a mixing that was, in many ways, a translation of foreign forms. Two instances may be foregrounded in this respect: the curatorship of modern and contemporary visual art and the translation and staging of “classics”.

Experimental art found hospitable ground at the Cultural Center through the curatorial and artistic practice of artist-curators Roberto Chabet and Raymundo Albano. Albano explains that “there was a need ... to opt for a

learning center type of a Museum, but which would not in any way paralyze contemporary artistic concerns especially those of the young artists. Thus started what we call, ‘developmental art’. By “developmental”, he clarifies that he had meant “fast-action” just like how the government of the day carried out the “building of roads, population control, or the establishment of security units”. He elaborates that the museum’s curatorial policy was that of “stimulating public minds and at the same time allowing the artists to question and investigate with their work” and that it resulted in a “total community response”.⁴¹ He organised this programme of developmental art according to three principles:

Principle I: Exhibitions should be alive, not church-like, quite high in festive ambience. It should be entertaining.

Principle II: Exhibitions should be thematic, dealing with current visual interests.

Principle III: Exhibitions should be stimulating, controversial but not scandalous.⁴²

Albano worked as director at the Cultural Center of the Philippines from around 1972–85, during which time the museum set out to advance programmes on the art of regions beyond the capital, Manila. Albano organised a series of annual exhibitions with clear curatorial motivations and published the bi-monthly magazine *Philippine Art Supplement*. He wrote poetry, designed posters for the Center, encouraged the recognition of photography as contemporary visual art and coordinated exhibitions based on reference points that ranged from Imelda Marcos’s diplomatic initiatives (for example, socialist realism from the Soviet Union, contemporary art from France, photography from Romania, among others) to experimental happenings. Finally, he promoted the work of Filipino artists abroad (such as at the Paris Biennale or the Fukuoka Asian Art Show).

At the heart of Albano’s approach to art and curation is a certain authenticity of local expression perceived from a postcolonial perspective, though filtered through a strangely nationalist rhetoric. This approach kept in step with the effort of the Marcos government to sort out a Filipino identity located somewhere between a cultivated native civilisation and an international vocabulary of modern art. These rough edges are finessed in “installation”. According to Albano: “If one were to consider a medium’s intimacy to folk patterns, installations are natural-born as against the alien intrusion of a two-dimensional western object like painting.”⁴³ But then again, “installation” is also not exclusively Filipino. Albano proposes that it is “continental, but the

disguise is thin as one realizes the works have charming shortcomings, such as reduced scale, over or under control, humor, et cetera”.⁴⁴

Certainly, the technology of installation proved to be a key vehicle for mediating between an audience and the “new” and the “now”, and not only in the Philippines. An installation of the kind that engaged Albano could also serve as an index to the local, often incendiary, milieu and co-opted the grammar of an international and cosmopolitan contemporary art, taking bits of both the gritty and the cool, the authentic and the self-conscious, the “anthropology of the far” and the modernity of the familiar through the performance of the ethnographic and the universal.

Together with this conceptualism, the conversation with the local and the global involved the translation of modern dramatic texts as a testament to the translatability of the foreign as well as the competence of the vernacular to appropriate it. In the works of Rolando Tinio, the director of the resident theatre company of the Cultural Center, modernist texts like Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* were translated and staged. Tinio believed that the “classics of the world are like natural resources; we mine them and manufacture from them products for local consumption, first and foremost”. His theory of translation expressed faith in the local language as an equivalent epistemic structure. According to him:

Expressing in a language what was originally conceived in another language requires a process of re-conceiving it within the given terms of the second language. One has to find the unique arrangement in Pilipino which corresponds to the unique arrangement in English, German, French, and so on. But before that can be done, understanding reality gained through the foreign language must be so clear and vivid that it will survive the loss of foreign words.

Tinio also translated the operas *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*. In his notes on the translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Tinio remarks that Filipinos translate foreign literature written in another time not to interfere in the thinking of what had gone into the text but to glean that mentality through our experience.⁴⁵

This disposition to assimilate and appropriate western fine-art expression does not only produce *mestizaje* or hybridity, but in many ways also mastery, with the Philippine artist feeling entitled to the “western” and making such an entitlement an intimate part of the artist’s polytropic talent and temper. Such a process played out exceedingly well in the field of music⁴⁶ that was heavily supported by Imelda Marcos, as evidenced in, among other endeavours,

the commissioning of symphonies and chamber works; the establishment of the National Music Competitions for Young Artists; and the promotion of world-class virtuosi like the Philippine Madrigal Singers and pianists Cecile Licad and Rowena Arrieta, who could sing and play like natives of empire and compete with those born into the culture of the forms needing expression, from Palestrina to Chopin to Tchaikovsky.

III

Finally, the third plane of the avant-garde implicated in the life of the Cultural Center is resistance to the institution itself, or to the centralisation of culture under the auspices of the state. This comes by way of the performance of David Medalla at the opening of the Cultural Center in 1969. Medalla, who later moved to England and became well-known for his kinetic sculptures, taking part in Harald Szeemann's exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* in 1969, spread out banners in the foyer of the building and staged an impromptu performance. He confronted security personnel; talked to himself in his seat, annotating the gala presentation; and delivered a speech in front of the magnificent fountain outside after the ceremony. Medalla was disturbed by the alienation generated by the state policies of the Marcos government, and his intervention at the Cultural Center was a way of recovering some kind of nexus between himself and others.

The poet and journalist Jose Lacaba filed a detailed report on the incident for the *Philippines Free Press*. He describes Medalla as wearing a bright orange shirt and the versatile tube-shaped fabric Muslim *malong*. Medalla, Jun Lansang and Marciano Galang positioned themselves at one of the balconies overlooking the main lobby where the President, Imelda Marcos and their guests were expected to pass before entering the Main Theater. The protesters unfurled their banners painted in psychedelic colours which read: "We want a Home, Not a Fascist Tomb"; "*A Bas La Mystification*", "Down with Philistines"; and "Re:Gun Go Home". Amid these unflattering lines were placards praising the CCP, held aloft by supporters of the regime: "*Mabuhay* (long live) *si Imelda*"; "*Mabuhay* (long live) *ang Cultural Center*"; and "Only Prosaic Persons Object to CCP". Outside the CCP were students who had their own banners: "Stop Prostituting the Arts" and "*Hoy, Nagugutom ang mga Pilipino, Cultural Center Panlason sa mga Isipan ng mga Api*" (Hey, Filipinos are Hungry, the Cultural Center Poisons the Minds of the Oppressed). Government security collared Medalla, who was asked to leave. He lashed back: "Isn't this supposed to be a home for artists? Do you know who we are? We are artists, and we have come here as artists." He pointed to his banner and said: "This is a work

of art, and I have every right to exhibit it here in the home of the arts.” Imelda Marcos glimpsed traces of this ruckus and “turned away with an embarrassed smile”.⁴⁷ It is said that late that evening, a hearse was roaming the streets of Manila in search of Medalla.

Medalla’s critique of the CCP was not isolated. At the Philippine Senate on 10 February 1969, Senator Benigno Aquino, whose assassination in 1983 would precipitate the uprising that deposed the Marcos government in 1986, rose to speak on the legal and moral implications of building and operating the CCP, which he christened a monument to shame, an unmistakable foil to Imelda Marcos’s phrase for the CCP as a monument to the Filipino soul. As Aquino, who referenced Evita Peron in his speech, asserted:

I have risen at the risk of her rage, because out there, barely 200 meters away from the fabulous Imelda Cultural Center, a ghetto sprawls, where thousands of Filipinos are kept captives by misery and poverty. Father Veneracion, the reformer-priest of Leveriza, will tell anyone who dares have his conscience stricken, of the cases of malnutrition and starvation in his parish-ghetto. He will tell you ... of how poverty makes of men social outcasts and anti-social criminals.⁴⁸

In a book on Medalla, which comprehensively tracks his oeuvre and relates it to a range of efforts in global conceptualism, Guy Brett quotes the artist as talking about the Philippines in the age of Marcos as marked by “nerve-wracking fragmentation”.⁴⁹ In this context, it might be instructive to situate this protest within the spectrum of the artist’s work in the period of participation art from 1967 to 1976. Brett explains:

These works explore the possibility of interplay between phenomena traditionally considered, in western society at least, as firmly opposed: the creative artist and passive spectator, communal and individual production, instrumentality and fantasy (play), work and leisure, the part and the aggregate, the ‘street’ and the ‘museum’ view of culture, and so on. Playful analogies of social basics: production, exchange, festivity, marriage, enslavement. Raw materials of these collective works were either the most ancient and primary (earth/clay, thread), or contemporary, all-pervading and worthless (refuse and waste).⁵⁰

It is notable that during his sortie into the CCP, in fleshing out his idea of participation, Medalla would again do so impromptu. It is possible to construe

as an example of this protean, aleatory form his running commentary while watching the inaugural presentation titled *Golden Salakot* (native hat), a play directed by Lamberto Avellana on what could be the apocryphal tale of the Barter of Panay in which the chieftain of a Philippine island traded his domain for, among other treasures, a golden *salakot* from ten Bornean sovereigns. The play was profiled as a *dularawan*, a neologism that combines the words *dula* (play) and *larawan* (picture). It aspired to be total theatre, some kind of ersatz *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the Wagnerian mode in which local elements of metrical romance, myth, recitative, music, dance, poetry and tableau contrive a spectacle of sorts. Medalla was suspicious of this artificiality. He annotated it in his seat at the CCP:

Look, that's just like a Noh play ... Now this one is a Balinese dance ... It's a *balagtasan* ... But that's a Viking ship, not a barangay! ... If our ancestors were as inert as these people, they could never have crossed from one end of the Pasig to the other ... That dance is straight out of Martha Graham ... Now we have Cecil B. DeMille ...⁵¹

Outside the CCP after the play, “David shouted to the waters of the gigantic fountain and the scattering of people around it: ‘It’s a great big bore! The *dularawan* is a great big bore! There, that fountain is more beautiful, more exciting!’”⁵²

Finally, in an interview with the author, Medalla confides that he had confronted the architect Leandro Locsin about the CCP, chastising him for building an edifice that would ruin the view of Manila Bay. For Medalla, the bay was a constant source of inspiration for his kinetic machines; it was part of his neighbourhood in Ermita. In the end, his avant-garde inclinations would clash with Imelda Marcos’s own. The First Lady was portrayed by the National Artist Nick Joaquin as a “connoisseur of the new, a patroness of the avant-garde, an arbiter of experiments in the arts”.⁵³ Medalla claims that the impulse of his forays into kinetic sculpture had always been Philippine. “The Bubble Machine was initially inspired by my memories of clouds over Manila Bay”, according to him. The Sand Machine, on the other hand, summoned memories of rice terraces in the Mountain Province and its bamboo structure was reminiscent of the “outriggers of our canoes”.⁵⁴

In the euphoria of people power, the uprising that forced the Americans to betray Marcos and compelled him to let go of power and seek exile in Hawaii, the new dispensation at the CCP thought of an exhibition aptly called *Piglas* [To Liberate]: Art at the Crossroads. Anyone claiming to do art on the theme of social change could bring into the once revered monolith of art nearly

anything antithetical to the elegance of Arturo Luz, the dominant Marcos-era tastemaker and cultural administrator or the trickster self-consciousness of Raymundo Albano, indeed commensurate with the atmosphere of “change” in the air. This was a scene akin to barbarians crashing the gates, a come-one, come-all invitation to a potluck party, as it were.

Marian Pastor Roces, who was working at the museum of the CCP on behalf of the director Nonon Padilla, wrote the best source on the exhibition; it explains the curatorial premise of the initiative. In her notes, she recounts that its genesis was a wake “in a chapel where lay the body of slain ex-Governor Evelio Javier”.⁵⁵ There, she met Norma and Fred Liongoren; the former was “selling me the vision of a Cultural Center wrapped in yellow cloth, its interiors filled with yellow balloons”.⁵⁶ Roces recalls that this post-uprising event had been presaged by plans of Cesare and Jean Marie Ricafort Syjuco and similar efforts as the one held at the Philippine National Bank. But the stars were to be aligned at the axis of the CCP, the scene of the crime, as it were. In the summer after Marcos was overthrown, “the Syjucos, the Liongorens, Bencab, Phyllis Zaballero, Eva Toledo, Edgar Talusan Fernandez, Brenda Fajardo, Mercy de la Cruz, and other artists decided to hold Art at the Crossroads at the CCP instead, to accommodate as many artists as possible”,⁵⁷ and adopted the title “Piglas”. Perhaps in keeping with the mood of the time there were no rules governing the exhibition, in direct opposition to the strict curatorial schemes embodied by Marcos curators Arturo Luz and Roberto Chabet. In gist, the principle was primitive: “Anyone who claims to have made the work or an about the state of the nation, who claims to be an artist, can give one work.”⁵⁸ This impulse to cover as much ground and enfold as many agents as possible resisted curation, prompting Roces to say that, at the end of the day, “it was, to say the least, impossible to ‘curate’”.⁵⁹ Still, it is telling to note that those who convened this exhibition came from across a broad coalition of the art world.

It is from the catalogue essay of the Philippine art critic and historian Alice Guillermo, known for her commitment to the political persuasion of art, that we get a sense of the exhibition. She prefaces it thus:

A new phenomenon is taking place: instead of art running away from history to seek a mythical realm, no man’s land, where neither time nor country matters, present art is now running to capture history, which in recent times has been exceedingly fluid. Most artists are now out entrapping bright luminous moments, insights, from the quicksilver flux of lived history.⁶⁰

The critic in the midst of this hope was fully sanguine, believing that the event was not only a “celebration of the new democratic space made possible by the Aquino government, but it likewise marks the uninhibited breaking through of art as a valuable expression just beneath the raw skin of our thinking and feeling selves that it must register every bruise, every wound inflicted on our body politic”.⁶¹ A gamut of forms, from painting to performance to installation, was scattered across the spaces of the CCP, from the main gallery to the hallways: it was, without doubt, carnival time. On the back cover of the catalogue is a manifesto that reads:

The Cultural Center of the Philippines during the Marcos era was marked by elitism and autocracy, while it also discriminated against cultural events that were in any way critical to the government. The Marcos regime has now been toppled and the new government has taken power in the name of the people, promising amongst other things, democracy, consultancy and integrity. The Filipino Art Community has felt this new air of freedom, and has been led by the new government's promises to aspire for a CCP that, in contrast to the past, is fully democratic in every aspect of its structural and artistic existence.⁶²

This polemical pause recalls antecedent textual production of the same persuasion. We take note of the 1976 *Kaisahan* Manifesto, presumably written by the core of what will later be known as social realist movement and Guillermo herself. This crucial text includes the line: “We shall therefore develop an art that not only depicts the life of the Filipino people but also seeks to uplift their condition. We shall develop an art that enables them to see the essence, the patterns behind the scattered phenomena and experience of our times. We shall develop an art that shows the unity of their interests and thus leads them to unite.”⁶³ Such a kernel of an ideology is further explicated by Guillermo in a seminal presentation, “How Can We Generate the Social Realist Aesthetic Proper to this Country?” at the First National Convention of Artists in the Visual & Plastic Arts in 1981, in which she delineates the contours of the aesthetic of social realism:

Social realism may prove to be an art too stern and severe for a regime that solicits images of harmony and prosperity and conducts beautification projects that would banish grime with a stroke of the brush and a bucket of white paint. For social realism, as different

from art of a broadly social theme, is based on struggle and social contradictions. As such, it can never be ingratiating, complacent, or self-indulgent, nor does it engage in puerile exercises of national self-adulation. It is not an art of myths because it is an art of the dynamic present.⁶⁴

Apropos Avant-garde

This discussion on the avant-garde offers several insights into the procedure of constellating the various contexts of what it meant, in the 1970s Philippines, to animate the potential of art to “identify” or be proximate with “culture” and “society” or the “people”. This scaling of distance with the socius might have been the performative logic of the avant-garde, its gesture. Surely, it was productively negative. It critiqued the very basis on which the notion of art had been founded: the West and the project of colonialism, on the one hand, and the kind of elite rule that had perpetuated the hegemony, on the other. The state, in this regard, would coordinate a transcendence of the colonial and the feudal through military power and the resources for development.

The first insight into the fraught conditions of a possible avant-garde in the Philippines is the cognitive mapping of a sense of a totality, a singularity towards which art tries to approach and touch. This might be broadly characterised as the “Philippine” at the levels of an identity mediated by and mediating the West through a reassertion of locality and the translation of the universalised western tradition into a local language. It is tempting to interpose here with the case in Senegal in the 1960s through the avant-garde programme of the poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor, philosopher of Négritude and the École de Dakar, who enlivened the nation-state with the animus of postcolonial contemporary art. According to Senghor, the African culture has to intervene in the production of art, so that “we can answer ‘present’ at the rebirth of the world”.⁶⁵ In this earnestness and alacrity to be “present”, scaling oneself in relation to the monuments of culture might have been a necessary technique, as may be discerned in the actions of David Medalla, alternating between Europe and Manila; in the improvised and the exhibitionary deemed worthy of Harald Szeemann’s curatorial imprimatur; and in the preposterous and the agitational.

Second, is the political economy of nation-building that is linked to the geopolitical strategy to shore up the defence of an American-styled republic in Southeast Asia. The parlaying of monies into the infrastructure of art and culture was part of this process.

Third, is the dispensation of democracy under the aegis of a paternalistic patron like the Marcoses and the investment in beauty as embodied by Imelda Marcos. The filial and aesthetic context of this clientelist relation rendered the art intimate and therefore closer to the culture, the society and the people. It finally fleshed out pretensions to democracy in the “grassroots” through the local social units called the *barangay*, a term derived from the early settlement that was also a boathouse, and the spectacle that would be generated when the nodes are tethered for an archipelagic sequence of freedom, totality and future.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

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- ⁴ Ferdinand E. Marcos, "Manila and the Global New Society" (Manila: Government Printing Office, 1976).
- ⁵ See Patrick D. Flores, "Palabas", *Ctrl+P Journal of Contemporary Art*, 11 Mar. 2008, www.ctrlp-artjournal.org/pdfs/CtrlP_Issue11.pdf [accessed 20 Dec. 2015].
- ⁶ *Development for the New Society: The Philippine Economy in the Mid-Seventies* (Manila: Bureau of National and Foreign Information, 1974), p. 136.
- ⁷ Gerardo Sicat, "The Philippine Economy and Development Strategies in the 70s and the 80s", in *Development for the New Society: The Philippine Economy in the Mid-Seventies* (Manila: Bureau of National and Foreign Information, 1974), p. 17.
- ⁸ Ferdinand E. Marcos, "The Conquest of Poverty", in *Development for the New Society: The Philippine Economy in the Mid-Seventies* (Manila: Bureau of National and Foreign Information, 1974), p. 1.
- ⁹ Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth and Marcos State Architecture* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), p. 52.
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- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 41.
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- ²¹ Ileana Maramag (ed.), *The Compassionate Society and Other Selected Speeches of Imelda Romualdez Marcos* (Manila: National Media Production Center, 1973), p. 57.
- ²² Nicholas Polites, *The Architecture of Leandro V. Locsin* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), p. 226.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Lico, *Edifice Complex*, pp. 84–5.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 89.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 91.
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- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.
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- ³¹ Jose Maceda, "Introduction: A Search in Asia for a New Theory of Music", in *A Search in Asia for a New Theory of Music*, ed. Jose Buenconsejo (Manila: University of the Philippines Center for Ethnomusicology, 2003), p. ix.
- ³² Jose Maceda, "What is Ugnayan", *Philippines Quarterly* (Mar. 1974): 45.
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- ³⁴ Maceda, "What is Ugnayan", p. 46.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 45.
- ³⁶ Orosa, "A World Happening in Music", p. 40.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
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- ⁴⁰ Ramon Santos, "Ugnayan: Music, Technology, and Power", in *FO A RM 5*, n.d.
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- ⁴⁵ Rolando Tinio, *Ang Trahedya ni Hamlet: Prinsipe ng Dinamarka* [The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark] (Manila: University of the Philippines Press, 1991), p. vii.

- ⁴⁶ For further discussion, refer to Christi-Anne Castro, *Musical Renderings of the Philippine Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
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- ⁵³ Aquino, "A Pantheon for Imelda", p. 225.
- ⁵⁴ Cid Reyes, *Conversations on Philippine Art* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1989), p. 150.
- ⁵⁵ Marian Pastor Roces, "Notes on the Exhibition", in *Piglas: Art at the Crossroads* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1986), p. 5.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
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- ⁶⁰ Alice Guillermo, "Art in Search of History", in *Piglas*, p. 7.
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