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The Abstractions of Critique:

Alice Guillermo and the Social Imperative of Art

PATRICK D. FLORES

Abstract

The essay reflects on the practice of the Filipino art critic and art historian Alice Guillermo. Surfacing in her practice are such theoretical concerns as the social presence of art and the specificity of the artistic material in relation to its contexts. This revisit to her work since the 1970s contributes to the study of art criticism in Southeast Asia. It may be argued that this art criticism has significantly informed the writing of both art history and art theory. Furthermore, it sheds light on how an art critic in the region has been able to circulate her discourse through intersecting platforms within and outside her national location. A focus of this essay is the debate between Guillermo and the philosopher Domingo Castro De Guzman on the political implications of abstraction in art history and socialist politics.

Alice Guillermo (1938–2018) once asked in a forum of a ‘people’s culture festival’ in Manila: “But is there more to the work?” It was the end of 1983 and the beginning of the fall of Marcos. By “more” she meant that which is not reducible, the work’s meaning being a “totality, in the luminous structure of value, thought, feeling, mood, atmosphere, and imagination”.¹ In her writing, meaning is meaningfulness in an extensive sense, indexing the “larger vistas

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of human signification”.² The “human” is surely central, too, in her mind, because it is the human as maker who signifies the meaningfulness or value of art. Inevitably, human value takes precedence in the conception of art’s power to herald the “new liberating order”. This, for Guillermo, the human fully deserves, stirred up by the resistance against exceptional refusals to which this very same human is subjected.³

In a rare interview in the 1980s, Guillermo calls attention to the centrality of values in the production of art and the critical appraisal of it. It is of interest that the interviewer would unravel insights into art criticism as she observes her subject’s domestic universe and picks out details like a local flower with the scent of ginger. In fact, the article includes images of Guillermo posing in her living room, surrounded by paintings and baskets, and her lush garden in her modest house in Manila’s northern suburbia. Such a scenario may imply that values thought to accrue to art belong to the abode itself of the critic, so that the personal and the critical, the intimate and the social become in her words a “thought-feeling complex”.⁴ When pressed for comment on the view that art blissfully suspends itself in some rarefied ether, she would retort:

Art is not a laboratory one enters with sterilised gloves; it provides an experience in which form and meaning are fused, which should help us to better realise ourselves as total and sensitive persons in our individual and social aspects [...] I think that if one truly cares for something, art in this case, one can find true satisfaction only if it engages one in a total sense.⁵

This “total sense” for Guillermo may be homespun first before it can be worldly, nurtured like plants in the garden or food in the kitchen or in writing about something one “truly cares for”. This poetics of the critical raised in the manner of a woman tending the home that opens into the grounds of an ample social world reveals itself in the critic’s own affection for the poetics of the artist and the politics of its visceral form. This is poignantly glimpsed in how Guillermo discusses *Sidapa’s Yardstick* (1986), an early work of Roberto Feleo whose original inspiration she thinks is the “archipelagic dawn”:

Here the principal image is that of the indigenous deity Sidapa, shown full figure, lying on a dark ground. To give the figure its distinct appearance, the artist used an original medium consisting of sawdust, acrylic, and emulsion lending itself to molding by hand. The resulting form is quite unusual: a transparent vermilion figure

in quasi relief—one marvels at the internal organs softly glowing within its body [...] There is still one more important element: on the upper section above the glass is attached a guava branch (a found object) which is equal to the length of the recumbent figure. This branch cut from a living tree is the deity's own yardstick by which it measures the things of the world, including art itself: the confluence of the divine and the human, the essential vitality of the handiwork springing from the energies of nature.⁶

Concomitantly, a conception of the artist and the critic as social beings, the ethical tale of the creative and critical citizen itself, surfaces in an incipient text of Guillermo on social realism. Here she portrays the artist as “setting aside his accustomed middle-class conveniences to experience at first hand the life of the masses in the city as in the countryside in a mutual learning process. He develops a fruitful interaction with the people and at the same time acquires a truer understanding of the Filipino national identity more than if he were confined to the middle-class circuit. He becomes a totally integrated person as his artistic and political personalities coalesce”.⁷ In this operation, the subjective is never pitted against the objective; rather, it is integrated or made to coalesce with a whirl of forces that suffuses the ultimately political person.

As an attentive and diligent annotator of art for six decades, Guillermo wrote cogently and with acuity. In so doing, her commitment to a certain “horizon of meaning” or “cognitive mapping” may in retrospect appear unerring. But a more careful consideration of her corpus should cast her claims with more complexity: meaning and meaningfulness for her alludes to a panoply of mediations. That being said, her work ceaselessly struggles with the determinations of ideology, on the one hand, and the idiosyncrasies of expression, on the other: “totality” and “structure”, yes, but “luminous” in the same vein. This struggle cannot but always lead her back to the panoply, which decisively foils the plot to reify, alienate and reduce.

In much of her textual work, Guillermo pursues the materialist imperative by staging the brisk interaction between art and history. She emplaces them as coordinates and therefore are made co-extensive and intersubjective, open to reciprocal conversions. In this scheme, she stays with the tension between the breadth of sensible life and the specificity of creative form. Across this field are her investments in the history of art, on the one hand, and the history of culture, on the other. She confronts these demands to historicise sensible life and creative form in various ecologies. And wherever she finds them, she is keen to explicate the materialisation of work and the work

of materialisation, so that ultimately cultural work, in the sense of Mao Zedong's Yan'an Forum, and artwork, perhaps in the sense of the Frankfurt School, may concretise in some kind of conjuncture.⁸

The problematic that emerges is the mediation of the critic. In this regard, three modes tend to converge. First is the sensing of the image and the production of meaning. Image is rudiment here as a device of distance that allows the interlocutor to discern and interpret it through the semiotic. The post-colonial critic's relationship with the image is tricky: it is at once the basis of colonial discrimination and the method of modern representation, as it is with culture that is the construction of the colonial as well as the impulse of the national and its identity-effects. Guillermo's critique of colonial recuperation has been trenchant as may be gleaned in her rebuke of *Culture and History: Occasional Notes on the Process of Philippine Becoming* (1988) by writer (and National Artist) Nick Joaquin (1917–2004) and E. San Juan, Jr.'s *Subversions of Desire: Prolegomena to Nick Joaquin* (1988). Underlying this is her uneasiness over how Joaquin instrumentalises the concept of culture and civilisation to endorse a "dominant Christian Filipino chauvinism" and the "claim that the history of the Filipino begins in 1521",⁹ when Ferdinand Magellan, the Portuguese mariner under the auspices of the Spanish crown, took possession of the islands to be christened the Philippines. San Juan, Jr. brings to bear on the novels of Joaquin the heft of First World academic theorising to recuperate a utopian allegory of a national synthesis. Guillermo refutes this manoeuvre and instead contends that the "people's drive towards a free, just, and human order" thrives on the "real and humanly demanding revolutionary enterprise in our all-too-real, specific, and immediate society".¹⁰

Second is what Guillermo foregrounds as the "frisson", the thrill, the excitation of the aesthetic. And finally, the writing, the acumen of the critic to intuit the elusive dynamic between art and its social world in the textual, or the writerly. She elucidates:

My political view of art has always been interlinked from the beginning with a deeply hedonistic feeling for art. Thus, art criticism for me is not purely discursive but has always been infused with the pleasure of discovering the serendipitous insight or the calm felicities of contemplation, quickened on occasion by the frisson esthétique.¹¹

Guillermo's body of work in writing may be organised around three areas: art criticism; art history; and cultural theory, or reflections on Philippine culture. The ballast is shaped by reviews of exhibitions for newspapers,

magazines, journals and catalogues. There was regularity in her output in the 1970s through the 2000s; she was the most prolific among the writers, alongside Cid Reyes (b. 1946), who is also an abstract painter. And she had the widest sympathies in terms of the forms with which she engaged. She reviewed mainly the visual arts, but also film, theatre and literature. This exposure to the spectrum of the arts inevitably underwrote her ventures in art history, specifically in providing a framework for particular modes of making art. To cite a case, her work on social realism steadily morphed into seminal volumes on political art in the Philippines through *Social Realism in the Philippines* (1987) and her dissertation, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990* (2001).¹² Her hand in weaving the discourse of social realism in the Philippines, as opposed to socialist realism elsewhere, is unmistakable. The 1981 essay “How Can We Generate the Social Realist Aesthetic Proper to this Country?” retroactively conceptualises the aesthetic and political disposition of the manifesto of the Kaisahan (1976) whose members in Guillermo’s estimation formed the core of the social realists. Her intellectual interlocution through the rubric of social realism consolidates the poetics of a political style, its material and social effects, across history and beyond the reckoning of practitioners who may have not fully appreciated the encompassing vista, from the colonial period to contemporary time, of the style. In other words, the sweeping nationalist and democratic desires of artists for art that is “scientific” and “mass-oriented” would be subtended by the program of social realism via Guillermo. The legacy of this nomination has been lasting in art history and cultural discourse. All this would be situated in a more copious survey of art history. The latter found its way into catalogues of large exhibitions organised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Japan Foundation; textbooks from universities; and sourcebooks from cultural institutions.¹³

Guillermo, besides being an active writer, was also an academic. She taught French, the humanities and art history for both the Fine Arts and Humanities departments of the University of the East and the University of the Philippines (UP), where she earned her doctorate in Philippine Studies and retired as Professor Emerita. Her duties as a teacher prompted her to constantly parse the language of theory and criticism to parlay it into the more accessible pedagogies of both the humanities and politically aligned cultural work. Art and culture would be remarkably meshed in the human and the historical, and therefore, in the assuredly Marxist matrix.

Guillermo obtained an education degree, after spending years as an English major, from the College of the Holy Spirit (formerly College of the Holy Ghost) in 1957 and took courses in Comparative Literature in UP.

She once confided that a stimulating teacher at Holy Spirit brought her to the world of art.¹⁴ She was a French government scholar of French art history and literature at the Université d'Aix-Marseille in Aix-en-Provence, completing the Certificat d'Études Littéraires Générales, the Certificat de Séminaire d'Études Supérieures, with Honours ("avec la mention assez bien"), with a study of the French *nouveau roman* ('new novel'), "*La Modification* par Michel Butor: Thèmes et Structures", and the Diplôme de Langue et Lettres Françaises, also with Honours, in 1967.

Guillermo started out as an Assistant Instructor in English at the Department of Humanities, College of Agriculture, at UP in Los Baños in 1963. She moved to the Diliman campus to teach French in 1967. She was Assistant Professor in Humanities at the University of the East from 1969 to 1978 and Assistant Professor in Art History and Theory at the UP College of Fine Arts from 1978 to 1985. In 1986, she transferred to the Department of Humanities (later renamed Art Studies), which she chaired from 1991 to 1994. Previously, she taught in the Manila campus for around a decade beginning in 1968.

Guillermo's first essay on art saw print in the *Philippine Collegian*, the activist organ of the University of the Philippines, at the instance of the consummate critic Petronilo Daroy. It was on the modernist Paul Cézanne. Her first art review was on the exhibition Salpukan! [Collision!], held at the Red Gallery in Cubao. It was published in *Graphic* in 1972, on the eve of the declaration of Martial Law. In the middle of the 1970s, she wrote on the politically conscious artists Orlando Castillo (b. 1947) and Antipas Delotavo (b. 1954), and contributed to the cultural magazine *Archipelago*. In 1976, she was conferred an Art Criticism award from the Art Association of the Philippines, an organisation of Filipino artists founded in 1948; and in 1979 she was recognised by a literary competition for the essay "Ang Kaisipang Pilipino Batay sa Sining Biswal" [The Filipino Worldview Sourced from the Visual Arts].

A review written in 1976 of books published by the Bureau of National and Foreign Information of the Department of Public Information would already suggest Guillermo's anxieties about art's salience and her persistent pursuit of this. She takes issue with how in the book *The Printmakers* (1975), fellow critic Leonidas Benesa (1928–84) puts premium on the international validation of local art and how Benesa diminishes the printmaker Manuel Rodriguez's (1912–2017) endeavours to reach out to a broader public. According to Guillermo:

But printmaking is meant [...] to reach a larger audience. And because of its wider circulation, the art of the print needs to be

meaningful to the numerous people it can reach. Here, art is no longer confined to a single original canvas on a privileged collector's wall, but shared among a larger number. Benesa also gives much space to participation in foreign biennales [...] taking them as the high points in Philippine printmaking [...] giving the impression that its history in our country is inextricably linked to if not dependent on, foreign grants, biennales, etcetera.¹⁵

In the same text, she likewise calls out how Manuel Duldulao's *Philippine Contemporary Art* (1972) rhapsodises on the "art boom and its huge investment potential". Such "glee" in her view should be consigned to "collectors' magazines" as "art books should serve to guide the reader in the appreciation and understanding of artistic and cultural values" and not perpetuate "the elitist concept of art" and ratify the taste of a "small economically able class".¹⁶

The final cavil in Guillermo's critique of Benesa's and Duldulao's texts is reserved for the common foreword of their volumes that, in her view, unduly finesses the unnerving historical experience of the Philippine post-colony. The foreword reads:

By force of circumstances a blend of East and West, Filipinos had once tended to be either unduly proud or needlessly apologetic about this ambivalence. That they are now beginning to accept this ambivalence in a matter-of-fact way is a measure of the cultural self-confidence they have attained in recent years.¹⁷

To this Guillermo wryly counters: "Indeed, the centuries of colonial history and political change in the Philippines are all boiled down to the little phrase, 'force of circumstances'".¹⁸

In the 1980s, Guillermo submitted articles to *Observer, Who, New Day* (later, *Business Day*), *We Forum, New Progressive Review* and *Manila Times*. In the next decade, she turned in essays for both the culture and opinion pages of *Daily Globe*, and in the 2000s, she was a writer of *Today, Business Mirror, Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*. The last two publications allowed her to write longer pieces and extend to a foreign readership. Her work in criticism eventually led to monographs on artists such as Jose Blanco (b. 1932) (1987), Anita Magsaysay-Ho (1948–2012) (1988), Alfredo Carmelo (1896–1985) (1990), Onib Olmedo (1937–96) (2007), Agnes Arellano (b. 1949) (2008), Diosdado Lorenzo (1906–84) (2009), Duddley Diaz (b. 1962) (2009) and Galo Ocampo (1913–85) (2013), among others. The critical essays were anthologised in *Images of Change: Essays and Reviews* (1988), *The Covert*

Presence and Other Essays on Politics and Culture (1989) and *Image to Meaning: Essays on Philippine Art* (2001).

The collection *Covert Presence* testifies to how her criticism in art is inscribed in her criticism of mystification in general: it dismantles the apparatus of the discourse of the 1986 uprising in the Philippines and exposes it as largely an exploit of the comprador class. No other writer was able to accomplish this all-important critique of culture and power in the midst of the much-vaunted post-Marcos democratic space, which paved the way for the vigorous return of the pre-Marcos oligarchy.

Guillermo wrote surveys on Philippine art in a range of formats including *Mobil Art Awards* (1981), *A Portfolio of Philippine Art Masterpieces* (1986), *Art Philippines: A History 1521–Present* (1992), *The National Museum Visual Arts Collection* (1991), *Tuklas Sining: Essays on the Philippine Arts* (1992), the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art* (1994) and *Tanáw* (2005), a book on the visual art collection of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines). From this sprawling mapping of Philippine art, she would focus on particular aspects of the history through essays that discursively supported the exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila: *Modang Modern: A Change Begins* (1990), which scanned the development of modernist art in the Philippines, and *From Anito to Assemblage* (1990), a history of sculpture in the Philippines before, during, and after three successive colonialisms. These efforts would then be channelled internationally through publications like *Modernity in Asian Art* (1993) and *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand* (1995).

It was partly by way of Guillermo's appreciable interests that the terms of reference for visual arts expanded in Philippine art history. She spoke at the first two symposia on ASEAN aesthetics in 1989 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and in 1993 in Manila, prospecting the region's cultural intelligence via what may be acknowledged as indigenous and traditional aesthetics. Her pioneering work on 'traditional' and popular culture includes considering local comics or *komiks* as visual art in "Ang Komiks Bilang Sining Biswal" [Komiks as Visual Art] (1990) and configuring the lifeworld of colour in *Color in Philippine Life and Art* (1993). Her work *Cebu: A Heritage of Art* (1991) is one of the first few to have gone further afield in terms of scoping the art of the country across its islands.

As a working critic who wrote steadily and reviewed the scene with inquisitiveness, Guillermo was tirelessly in search of "challenging" work.¹⁹ Equally challenging for her was the translation of academic and art-critical language into the parlance of periodicals. She was patient in this vocation. According to her: "While we seek to popularize the appreciation of Philippine

art, still I think that it's also important to become a venue for learning more about art and art criticism. So gradually, one introduces certain concepts and values which will later on be imbibed more naturally by the reading public".²⁰ This wide-eyed curiosity and squinting astuteness about what is amiss or afoot distinguished Guillermo even as she found herself working on the material of a different generation. Her reading of Manuel Ocampo's (b. 1965) punk lineage is telling in its mindfulness: "What makes Manuel Ocampo distinct as an artist is that, like no other in recent times, he is one who has effectively disabled his superego, the mind's censor that sifts through images and concepts which would not pass the test of civilization and social consensus".²¹

Guillermo came into the scene of art criticism with a faith in art's responsibility and competence to catalyse transformation. Her modality of critique differed significantly from that of her peers because it valorised the social in conjuring the aesthetic without sacrificing instinct, fantasy, *jouissance* and *frisson*. The latter relay of stimuli possesses integrity and yet in the same breath are threatened by instrumentalisation. Guillermo was aware of this dreaded tendency and so tried as much as she could to delicately discipline the surplus of both art and society. This was a tough act for her, one that did not always yield the ideal ensemble of art/society. It nevertheless overcame the temptation by her contemporaries to foster the connoisseurship of the Philippine modern as introduced by the artist-writer Fernando Zóbel (1924–84), who held sway among the tastemakers of the time like the patron Purita Kalaw-Ledesma (1914–2005) and poet-critics Leonidas Benesa and Emmanuel Eric Torres (b. 1932).²²

Furthermore, as a woman critic in a substantially patriarchal system, she had to mediate layers of social roles in the household and the art world, symptoms of the distribution of masculine hegemonies across public life. Indeed, the questions of woman and identity in relation to art and the modern culture were carved in high relief in the 1970s. A fellow essayist, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil (1922–2018), who passed in the same year as Guillermo, likewise wrote on these concerns. An advocate of the emerging modernism in Philippine art in the 1950s, Nakpil imbricated the discourse of art and gender in the modernity of an assertive Filipino culture. In the essay titled "Asianization", she concludes: "It is a glorious apostasy indeed from the once dearly held faiths in Spain and America. It will be a relief—when the change is complete—to be able to turn at last from the feeling of being possessed, of being a sham and a charlatan to being in command of oneself".²³

At the heart of Guillermo's critique of art are the highly mediated ties between image and meaning immersed in the social context that suddenly

turns into a semiosphere. To at once elaborate on and differentiate these criss-crossing moments, the critic gathers the “meaningfulness of the sensible” from the erstwhile “image and meaning” formulation in the semiotic. Guillermo’s work on the semiotic may have found watershed when she began to converse with the ideas of the Russian semiotician Juri Lotman (1922–93) in *Semiotics of Cinema* (1976). She reviewed this book (in “From Automatism to Meaning”), where she quotes passages that may well delineate her own annotations on the vicissitudes of the artistic text. For instance, she appears drawn to how Lotman unhinges the artistic medium from “automatism”, a procedure that may be cognate with how she herself comes to grips with any form of mechanistic reduction or capture of meaning by technique or technology. She quotes Lotman:

Art does not simply render the world with a lifeless automatism of a mirror. In transforming images of the world into signs, it saturates the world with meanings [...] The aim of art is not simply to render some object or other, but to make it a carrier of meaning.²⁴

She is, in the same review, also attracted to Lotman’s notion of art speaking in more than one voice, like a “complex, polyphonic chorus” in which it forms part of the “struggles of the culture and art of its era”.²⁵ With her alertness to the material condition and sensitivity to the processes of making sense of reality, Guillermo finds a fulcrum in the semiotic. It would afford her the latitude of relative autonomy, on the one hand, and the amplitude of affective indeterminacy, on the other.

While invested in the materialist imperative, Guillermo was able to nuance her approach towards the artwork in relation to the inflections of the socius, as well as her negotiations of the commodity and market functions of the same work. It was thus quite striking that the philosopher and poet Domingo Castro de Guzman would challenge this talent and this politics. It all began when De Guzman, who staked out his philosophical career at 17 when the *Philippines Free Press* in 1968 published his essay “The Sophism of Pseudo-Philosophers”, wrote a lengthy essay on abstract art. Guillermo responded with interest.

De Guzman provocatively titled his essay “Abstract Art and the Masses”. At the outset, he shares Guillermo’s insistence on the cultural character of the critique of art: that art criticism is simultaneously cultural criticism and that in turn cultural criticism “requires a philosophy of history [...] an articulated stand on all the fundamental questions of existence”.²⁶ Furthermore, he remarks that “the social is the ontological structure of vision and speech”.²⁷ This is a rather daunting task cut out for art criticism, which he

feels has been dissipated in light of the ascendancy of abstract art. For him, abstract art, which is a generalising and not a historicised cipher of a specific type of aesthetic utterance in the history of art, “deals exclusively with ‘pure’ aesthetic relations and correspondences” and as such has permitted “any opportunist to pose as an art critic without even a hint of philosophy”.²⁸ Clearly, De Guzman takes exception to abstract art as much as to the enterprise of criticism itself. He deems this criticism, along with the art of abstraction, to be politically bereft.

Guillermo carefully crafted a riposte to this essay in “Abstract And/Or Figurative: A Wrong Choice”. Undoubtedly, both Guillermo and De Guzman were struggling with a dialectic built around “abstract art” versus the “masses”, and “abstract” versus “figurative”. Correspondences within this binary for Guillermo are in the long term unproductive, superseded by aesthetic processes in the history of art that may have surpassed the antinomy. For De Guzman, however, it is praxiological, that is, fundamental in claiming a “philosophy of history” and a political programme on “existence” itself. In his view, abstract art is a “flight from the real, from existence”.²⁹ Its “ideal terminus is nihilism”.³⁰ With this flight comes the negation of the real, of existence, of content. Absent the latter, the dominant order can only be affirmed through negation. Its necessity has expired, exigent only as the “negative moment in a constructive, revolutionary dialectic, as for instance in Picasso. It has no future because it is already exhausted, a carcass”.³¹ According to De Guzman: “Today, in this epoch of neocolonial exploitation and critically exacerbated class domination, what is specifically demanded of a progressive, humanist, liberationist aesthetic is first of all the maximum articulateness for the maximum articulation of the depiction, critique, and denunciation of imperialist class oppression”.³² If the future is the progressivist politics of art, the only present is the “progressivist artistic articulation of socio-political reality”.³³

Guillermo offers a different politics. She thinks such dualism to be not “decisive in the matter of the politics of art”, mainly because it is not granular enough to reference the “incipient or latent forces and energies within the categories” and far-reaching enough to implicate the “historical dimensions in which alone they assume full meaning”.³⁴ This “wrong choice” may neglect the fact that figurative art in fact has been enlisted by the ruling class: “The history of art will bear out the fact that the Western despotisms created and strengthened the classical Academy, as against spontaneous individualising styles, because classical figuration supported the image of the absolute and the permanent that they wanted to project of their regime, which, through art, would obtain the sanction of venerable tradition”.³⁵ On the other hand,

to dismiss the form of abstract art is to fall into the “snares of formalism”.³⁶ Her example here is Jackson Pollock, who in her calculation would resist “formal abstraction typified by Neo-Plasticism” and posit “the values of the spontaneous and personal gesture, the physical energy and kineticism of the individual artist”.³⁷ Pollock thus exemplifies a kind of defence against stasis and structure to privilege the elusive and the unruly. De Kooning, too, is foregrounded, his depiction of ugliness marked as disrupting the “common expectations of the beautiful in art”.³⁸ In sketching out these instances of practice, Guillermo historicises the abstraction that De Guzman totalises in his belief that the political resides in totalisation rather than in “discrete appearances”, something to which Guillermo actually subscribes in pursuing an analysis of “scattered phenomena”.³⁹ In the political syntax of De Guzman, “abstract negation” is the “rejection of history” and “concretely prevents the crystallization of the revolutionary outlook itself, and where it already subsists, weakens it. It rejects rational-historicist totalization both directly and through its rejection of totalization itself”.⁴⁰

Guillermo’s history of art and art history frustrate De Guzman’s philosophy of history. She presupposes that “since art continually evolves, there are always redefinitions and syntheses, as new aesthetic issues are raised which at the same time convey values of direct or indirect political import”.⁴¹ For both, no critique of art or art criticism can survive or anticipate a future without this relationship to history. It is a history that in the calibration of Guillermo is textured and dense, more complex art historically than De Guzman’s philosophical assumptions about abstraction. For instance, she points to how Russian artists of abstract inclination would respond discrepantly to industrialisation: the suprematist’s “purely hermetic exercise without any socio-historical dimension and outside the larger arena of human experience” and the constructivist’s “progressive politics which gave full support to the Revolution [...] with the cooperation of artist, architect and scientist-engineer”.⁴²

The exchange between Guillermo and De Guzman demonstrates the spirited discourse in the Philippines on art and its historical context, and how this discourse is made to mutate in the larger atmosphere of the socialist project sustained by popular movements and the armed revolution.⁴³ Furthermore, this materialist thinking in art complexifies the “cultural” and the “conceptual” and, to some extent, thwarts the mystification of culture as identity and art as libertine experiment. With this materialist mediation, the desire for the Filipino and the international would be re-signified through art criticism that is nimble enough to move between academic and activist registers, grappling with the vagaries of the market, the regulations of the

state and the exigencies of everyday life. Guillermo was fully convinced that it is the “national democratic articulation of the concept of national identity which alone can bring together the rich pluralities of the people’s culture, the ethnic, the linguistic, and the religious, to a true unity and solidarity. The key to the meaning of national identity lies in a politicised and decolonised consciousness fully self-aware, critical, and engaged in the pursuit and praxis of national liberation”.⁴⁴ Such conviction found a place in the widespread discussion of culture that was Filipino however this term was considered philosophically and politically. For Guillermo, this Filipino is nationalist but not nativist; international but surely not solely Western and definitely contra-imperialist. These declensions of the national played out in various ways in which the Filipino would be theorised and made to ramify in anthropology (Filipinology through Prospero Covar), historiography (For Us/By Us Perspective through Zeus Salazar), psychology (Filipino Psychology through Virgilio Enriquez) and art (People’s Art through Felipe de Leon, Jr.).⁴⁵

In this respect, Guillermo might have been in dialogue with T.J. Clark in his investment in the ‘modern’. She recognises it as a paradigmatic shift comparable to Einstein’s theory of relativity “in its new interpretation of the universe and reality as against the static and mechanistic concepts of Euclid and Newton”⁴⁶ in her assessment of the likes of Paul Klee. She reveals that her fascination with art was “awakened not by Amorsolo and his rural genre [...] but by the artists of the School of Paris, the impressionists, the surrealists, the expressionists, and the cubists, who offered new and fascinating imagery”.⁴⁷ Clark for his part asserts that modernism “wanted its audience to be led toward a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity, which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed”.⁴⁸ It is uncanny that Clark would consider Cézanne and Pollock the “touchstones” of this zeitgeist, figures who were vivid in Guillermo’s own art historical archive. It is uncanny, too, that Clark would assert that socialism “occupied the real ground on which modernity could be described and opposed”.⁴⁹ At this point, the frisson returns to stage culture more urgently as a field of battle, this time as a catalyst of contestation that charges the “terrain in which take place the ideological battles corresponding to the conflicts, dissensions, and schisms at the material base”.⁵⁰ The problematic of culture, therefore, transposes into a programmatic of change: “The new culture is certainly no longer passive reflection, but, as it is seized by the masses, a potent material weapon for historical change to which we are all both witness and participant”.⁵¹

It should be fitting to end this exposition of Guillermo's critical practice by revisiting her essay on the artist Federico Aguilar Alcuaz (1932–2011), who was, so to speak, ambidextrous, that is, adept at both the figurative discipline and the abstract idiom. In this passage, we see the critic evoke an allegory of the life form itself: the enchantment and allure of appearance; the materiality of its condition; and the writing that performs the melancholy of tracing its presence. In the response to De Guzman, Guillermo would imagine Vermeer's interiors to be structured by geometry, light and shade; and a baroque precursor to a paramount abstractionist in Mondrian: "We can only surmise how much these interiors with their precision and clarity provided the basis for Mondrian's balances".⁵² In limning Alcuaz's room that is verisimilarly a still life, she homes in on the desiccation of a fruit's flesh, the humbling attrition of its valiant nucleus:

A side table holds a shallow wicker basket containing a variety of fruit, but again not fresh and plump with a juicy ripeness, but dry and sere, months even years old. What was once a living orange has become surprisingly weightless, a tough, wizened, and leathery purplish shell concealing an unseen stone—how it rattles disconsolately within its empty space where none, insect or human, has ever intruded. Alcuaz picks up a dried *macopa* to show me, his eyes glinting with an odd pleasure, how the fruit has shrunk to less than half its size, but has kept its bell-like, dimpled form.⁵³

As the critic asks what is more to the work, so does she come to terms with what is left of it.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

- ¹ Alice Guillermo, "The State of the Visual Arts", in *The Politics of Culture: The Philippine Experience (Proceedings and Anthology of Essays, Poems, Songs, Skits, and Plays of the MAKIISA I, People's Culture Festival, December 28–30, 1983, Dulaang Raha Sulayman, Fort Santiago, Intramuros, Manila)*, ed. Nicanor G. Tiongson (Manila: Philippine Educational Theater Association, 1984), p. 44.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Alice Guillermo, "Abstract and/or Figurative: A Wrong Choice", *Who* (24 Aug. 1983): 32.
- ⁴ Guillermo, "The State of the Visual Arts", p. 45.
- ⁵ Pet G. Cleto, "Alice Guillermo: The Critic's Eye", *Celebrity* (15 Oct. 1981): 45.
- ⁶ Alice Guillermo, "Roberto Feleo: Connecting Myth and History", in *Image to Meaning: Essays on Philippine Art* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001), p. 120.
- ⁷ Alice Guillermo, quoted in Cristina P. del Carmen, "Method and Message: Art Critics Tell Us How They Pan and Praise", *Who* (11 April 1981): 19.
- ⁸ See Patrick D. Flores, "Lineage: Leonidas Benesa and Alice Guillermo", *Pananaw* 6 (2007): 8–15.
- ⁹ Alice Guillermo, "In Praise of Conquistadors", *Daily Globe* (29 Jan. 1989): 10.
- ¹⁰ Alice Guillermo, "Subversions of Desire as Metatext", *Daily Globe* (23 Oct. 1989): 13.
- ¹¹ Alice Guillermo, *Image to Meaning: Essays on Philippine Art* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2001), p. ix.
- ¹² See Patrick D. Flores, "Social Realism: The Turns of a Term in the Philippines", *Afterall* 34 (Autumn/Winter 2013): 62–75.
- ¹³ See, for example: Yeo Weiwei, ed. *Realism in Asia: Volume One* (Singapore: The National Art Gallery, 2010).
- ¹⁴ Alice Guillermo, interviewed by Karen Galarpe, "Alice Guillermo", *The Art Manila Newspaper* 3, 2 (2002): 6.
- ¹⁵ Alice Guillermo, "The BNFI Art Books: 'The Forces of Circumstances'", *Cultural Research Bulletin* 1, 4 (Feb.–March 1976): 23.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Guillermo, "The BNFI Art Books": 24.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Guillermo, interview with Karen Galarpe, 6.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Alice Guillermo, "Reviving the Punk Scene", *Today* (31 Aug. 2003): W8.
- ²² See Patrick D. Flores, "To Rear the Philippine Modern: Purita, Zóbel Arcellana, and the Circulation of Discourse", in *The Life and Times of Purita Kalaw-Ledesma*, ed. Purissima Benitez-Johannot (Quezon City: Vibal Foundation, 2017), pp. 51–83.
- ²³ Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, *A Question of Identity* (Manila: Vessel Books, 1973), p. 66.

- ²⁴ Juri Lotman, quoted in Alice Guillermo, “From Automatism to Meaning”, in *Image to Meaning*, p. 73.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ²⁶ Domingo Castro De Guzman, “Abstract Art and the Masses”, *Who* (15 June 1983): 34.
- ²⁷ Domingo Castro De Guzman, “Abstract Art and the Masses: Part II”, *Who* (22 June 1983): 38.
- ²⁸ De Guzman, “Abstract Art and the Masses”: 34.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*: 35.
- ³¹ Domingo Castro De Guzman, “Abstract Art and the Masses: Part III”, *Who* (6 July 1983): 41.
- ³² Domingo Castro de Guzman, “Towards an Aesthetic of Liberation: Part I: The Discourses of Silence, or Why Abstract Art is a Weapon of Oppression”, *Who* (21 Sept. 1983): 39.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Guillermo, “Abstract and/or Figurative”: 30.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*: 31.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ See “Kaisahan Declaration of Principles”, in Alice Guillermo, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press), p. 244.
- ⁴⁰ Domingo Castro De Guzman, “Towards an Aesthetic of Liberation: The Fetish of Spontaneity or the Ideology of the Instant (Part V)”, *Who* (19 Oct. 1983): 41.
- ⁴¹ Guillermo, “Abstract and/or Figurative”: 32.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ For further reading, see: Jose Maria Sison, *Philippine Society and Revolution* (Hong Kong: Ta Kung Pao, 1971), and Patricio Abinales, *The Revolution Falters: The Left in the Philippines after 1986* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996).
- ⁴⁴ Alice Guillermo, *The Covert Presence* (Quezon City: Kalikhasan Press, 1989), p. 35.
- ⁴⁵ For further reading, see: Zeus A. Salazar and Ramon Guillermo, “The ‘Pantayo’ Perspective as a Discourse towards ‘Kabihasan’”, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, 1 (Jan. 2000): 123–52. Prospero Reyes Covar, *Larangan: Seminal Essays on Philippine Culture* (Manila: National Commission on Culture and the Arts. Manila: Sampaguita Press, Inc., 1998). Felipe de Leon, Jr., “The Roots of People’s Art in Indigenous Psychology”, in *Indigenous Psychology: A Book of Readings*, ed. Virgilio G. Enriquez (Quezon City: Akademya ng Sikolohiyang Pilipino, 1990), pp. 31–327. De Leon’s essay was originally a paper delivered at

- the Continuing Education Seminar conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Asian Center, University of the Philippines, in Sept.–Dec. 1981.
- ⁴⁶ Guillermo, “Abstract and/or Figurative”: 31–2.
- ⁴⁷ Guillermo, *Image to Meaning*, p. vii.
- ⁴⁸ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 9–10.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁵⁰ Guillermo, *The Covert Presence*, p. 11.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁵² Guillermo, “Abstract and/or Figurative”: 32.
- ⁵³ Alice Guillermo, “Federico Aguilar Alcuaz: A Portrait”, in *Image to Meaning*, p. 182.

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