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CONTEMPORARY ART PUBLICS: MAPPING PHILIPPINE CONTEMPORARY, MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND PUBLICS

The *Poleteismo* installation by Mideo Cruz included in *Kulo*, the commemorative exhibit for the 150th Anniversary of Philippines' National Hero Jose Rizal at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in 2011 brought forward the question of contemporary art in the country. The installation made use of religious, political, social, and cultural imagery in the collage that covered an area of the exhibition space, as well as the objects that surrounded it. Cruz superimposed such images and objects in three walls of the exhibition space and enclosing it in the fourth side with a wall space open on two sides. Some of the superimpositions included an image of Uncle Sam, Mickey Mouse, rosaries, crucifixes, car plates, CDs, foreign and local political posters such as Barack Obama (US President) and Fernando Poe Junior (popular Filipino actor and one-time presidential candidate before his death), religious posters and calendars, cursive writing board materials often found in elementary schools, educational posters, prints of artworks with religious themes, calendar posters of sexy stars, posters of Philippine heroes, penis ashtrays which are popular tourist souvenirs, condoms, and twinkle lights. It was an overwhelming

combination and superimposition of images within the room-sized collage, a form taken from the homes of informal settlers of the Philippines. Such homes, often made with thin plywood and scrap roof materials, would be reinforced against extreme heat or harsh rains by piling on posters, plastic tarpaulins, and any material the informal settler can acquire. Such practice results to an amalgamation of images similar to Cruz's installation. The transformation of the pictorial language from an informal settlers home to the art space and into the internet and social media, caused discomfort and outrage to the audience unfamiliar with it, particularly to the publics that rely on the framing of the mainstream media of the installation and the event that followed such controversial framing.

The controversy began when the installation was framed and aired as a support for the contested Reproductive Health Bill in a criminal investigation show *XXX* by a major television channel ABS-CBN. The show focused on frames that included religious imagery such as Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary superimposed with condoms and popular penis ashtray souvenirs. The debate about the installation was then aired in different television channels, published in several newspapers, and shared in various social media sites. The popular discussion anchored on blasphemy and the disrespect of religious imagery within a dominantly Roman Catholic country. The controversy led to the premature closure of the exhibition and a public senatorial inquiry. Administrative and criminal cases were filed against the artist, the curator, the Visual Arts Director of the CCP, and the CCP Board of Directors. The administrative case was eventually dismissed by the Office of the Ombudsman in 2013, dismissing the criminal case along with it.

The installation and the controversy brought forward important questions about contemporary art and its publics in the Philippines. Articles written

about the installation and the public controversy often pointed towards the basic questioning of the definition and qualification of art. The tenuous public also played a key role in the development of the discourse, as well as the technology where the discourse was located. Discussions, often started by the traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers were shared and interpreted in social media by fluid and often anonymous publics. This new publics located within new media, though difficult to exactly frame and locate, were created and unified in the discussion of art and discourse. The publics were talking about art and discoursing the qualification and expectations of art.

Locating Poleteismo as Contemporary

Poleteismo was first exhibited as part of *Hardware 1* at the Vargas Museum in the University of the Philippines in 2002. It also served as the backdrop of the Stonefree music video *Anghel sa Lupa* in 2006. *Poleteismo* was also a part of *TuTOK: NEXUS* exhibited at the ground floor lobby of the Loyola House of Studies (LHS), Ateneo de Manila University in 2007. Cruz previously used some of the components of *Poleteismo* in other works such as *Santong Pinagpasasaan* (2005) and *Colonial Conception in Sungdu-an 3: Making the Local* (2003) (Placino, in-press). As mentioned earlier, it is an installation that used various materials including product advertisements, election paraphernalia, educational materials, religious objects, and many others. Mideo Cruz's other works were included in the installation such as *Altar* (2005), *Poon* (2005-2010), and *Relics* (2004). *Altar* is a wooden container used for religious saints and filled with differently colored plastic piggy banks commonly owned by Filipino children. *Poon* is a sculpture where the figure of Mickey Mouse was juxtaposed with a common Christ figure. *Relics* is a life-sized cross surrounded by everyday objects, with

convex mirror placed in the middle. Upon looking at the mirror, *Poleteismo* would be reflected along with the looker.

When XXX reported about the installation on July 28, 2011, the host framed it as the artist's protest in support of the contested Reproductive Health Bill (RH Bill). The RH Bill was a very divisive issue in the Philippines back in 2011, with religious conservatives adamant to keep the status quo in the name of morality, while those who supported RH Bill demanded to be freed from religious restrictions and be able to access health benefits as part of human and legal rights. The focus of XXX was on the altered images of Jesus Christ and the Holy Family, rosaries and crucifixes, and the various penis ashtrays combined with religious relics and images. Such presentation gave rise to the discourse of blasphemy anchored to the already controversial RH Bill. The investigative report not only interviewed witnesses in a similar vein of a crime investigation but also representatives from the Commission on Human Rights, the Catholic Church, and the CCP itself. This quickly exploded as a controversy when the Youtube Video of the XXX episode was widely shared, along with the articles in different newspapers. Bloggers were also quick to make their own judgements and write-ups, and these were widely shared within social media sites as well.

Locating *Poleteismo* and the events that surrounded the installation within the tangled and contradicting constellation of contemporary art in a global, national, and local setting is complicated but necessary. *Poleteismo* occurred within frictions, pushing and challenging the potentials and conceptualization of contemporary art amidst political, religious, and media discourse. Images and discourse that occur within an art space for the traditional art public became challenging and unacceptable, as it was burdened with religious leanings and political agendas when presented by

mass media to varying publics. Smith¹ pointed out that, "Mapping, accurately, the specific frictions of this world making—the actualities, the potentialities of it—is the most pressing task before contemporary art history. Relating such maps to the larger scale frictional machinery of the current world (dis)order—identifying, again, the actualities, the potentialities—is the main challenge facing cultural theory today." Smith² discussed the art world's responses to friction between three antinomies that have come to dominate contemporary life:

(1) globalization's thirst for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (the multiteity that was freed by decolonization), for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities, and for continuing exploitation of natural and (to a degree not yet seen) virtual resources against the increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain this exploitation (for these among other reasons globalization is bound to fail); (2) the accelerating inequity among peoples, classes, and individuals that threatens both the desires for domination entertained by states, ideologies, and religions and the persistent dreams of liberation that continue to inspire individuals and peoples; and (3) an infoscape—or better, a spectacle, an image of economy or "iconomy," a regime of representation—capable of the potentially instant yet always thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere, but which is at the same time fissured by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialist, closed-knowledge communities, alongside open, volatile subjects, and rampant popular fundamentalisms.

¹ Smith, T. (2008). Introduction. In T. Smith, O. Enwezor, & N. Condee (Eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. p.17.

² Smith, T. (2008). Introduction. In T. Smith, O. Enwezor, & N. Condee (Eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. p. 16.

Oftentimes, contemporary art was located in a drastic politico-economic shift, particularly with the events of 1989—the Fall of Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square Massacre, Cold War, and the beginnings of the World Wide Web. Smith³ pointed out that during this time there was a “decolonization of the Third World, the implosion of the Second World, and the globalization of the First World”. The contemporary condition “requires, at minimum, a better understanding of contemporaneity—the ability to think and act, simultaneously, in three registers: across the global sweep of the world picture, within the place-specific domain of the local, and through the subtle skeins between these two”.⁴ *Poleteismo* as an installation, a form commonly accepted in a global contemporary art world, became questionable within the local context, as newspaper critics looked for oil and more traditional artistic forms for beauty. *Poleteismo*’s contemporaneity within global and local registers became a tumultuous positionality, especially given the contemporary conditions of the Philippines.

Locating contemporary art amidst political and social change, the rupture happened a few years earlier in the Philippines—in 1986. The EDSA Revolution, widely believed to be a revolution of the people, toppled the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and changed the political landscape of the country. This was one of the first revolutions of its kind, in which people marched against violent dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and violence was widely prevented. It was generally believed as a peaceful revolution on account of the people’s solidarity. EDSA Revolution was also broadcasted and witnessed around the world, signalling the beginnings of a technological influence within such political shifts.⁵ This ended the dictatorship and began a revolutionary government that was eventually

³ Smith, T. (2011). *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p.105.

⁴ Smith, T. (2011). *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p. 258.

⁵ Pertierra, R. (2012). *The New Media, Society & Politics in the Philippines*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

turned into a democracy. Such democracy, however, would be plagued by oligarchy and the development of capitalism, tying the country together within such global phenomena.

1989 signaled the breakdown of communism and the beginnings of capitalism.⁶ This shift was carried over to the Philippines, with art in the locus. The Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) was built by the Marcos regime, particularly with the interest of the First Lady Imelda Marcos.⁷ The CCP, as an institution, was the vanguard of Philippine art, valuing modern and conceptual art, and largely ignoring the social realist movements outside the institution.⁸ The institution valued a particular aesthetic value—*Katotohanan* (Truth), *Kagandahan* (Beauty), and *Kabutihan* (Goodness) and was referred to as the “sanctuary of the Filipino soul”.⁹ This valuation was reflected in the demands for the *Poleteismo* installation. Despite the shift in the political landscape, the same qualifications were demanded of art. The growth of capitalism did not change the call of the CCP during the Marcos era years. The key inquiry here is on the development of art after the breaking point.

The *Poleteismo* controversy opened up the questions and queries on art, particularly of contemporary art. As mentioned earlier, CCP held on to the notions of *Katotohanan* (Truth), *Kagandahan* (Beauty), and *Kabutihan* (Goodness), and the public discourse centered upon this point. Yet, contemporary art in the Philippines developed within the global moment.

⁶ Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (1), 28-41.

⁷ Lico, G. R. (2011). On this Site Will Rise: Nation Building and Marcosian Architectures. In Reuben R. Cañete (Ed.), *Suri Sining: The Art Studies Anthology* (pp. 171-184). Philippines: Art Studies Foundation, Inc.

⁸ Flores P. (2013). Social Realism: The Turns of a Term in the Philippines. *Afterall Online Journal*. Issue 34. Retrieved from <http://www.afterall.org>.

⁹ Lico, G. R. (2011). On this Site Will Rise: Nation Building and Marcosian Architectures. In Reuben R. Cañete (Ed.), *Suri Sining: The Art Studies Anthology* (pp. 171-184). Philippines: Art Studies Foundation, Inc.

Though the CCP was founded in 1966 through Executive Order No. 30 and was inaugurated on September 8, 1969 during the Marcos Regime, it has since moved on to become a venue for contemporary art and recognizing notable contemporary artist annually through the *Thirteen Artists Award*. Mideo Cruz himself was an awardee in 2003. Yet, the visual challenge of *Poleteismo* was stomped out of the discourse as it was widely debated on what is good and proper to be displayed in a public gallery. The CCP prematurely closed *Kulo* on August 9, 2011 after relentless attacks from mass media, social media, and various publics and stakeholders.

Poleteismo as an instance of Philippine contemporary art upheld the challenges within a culture that was unused to contemporary art discourse. Placino¹⁰ states that, “The markers that editorials and columns demanded of art included goodness, craftsmanship, originality, and ennoblement. Such critics are informed by media-driven images rather than aesthetics, theories, and discourses from the contemporary art world.” Philippines, still with a need to develop a strong museum-going public, needs further engagement with the art and discourse of contemporary art, especially confrontational and challenging ones such as *Poleteismo*. For Smith¹¹, “This is how the contemporary art world—its institutions, its beliefs, the ensemble of cultural practices that go into making it a *socius*, a “scene”—answers the Contemporary Art question: it is what we say it is, it is what we do, it is the art that we show, that we buy and sell, that we promote and interpret. This scene is self-defining, constraining on practice and constantly inviting its own self-representation”. *Poleteismo* as an installation and as an event challenged the institutionally accepted notions of art and pushed the

¹⁰ Placino, M.P.O. (2012). Spilling into the Public: Poleteismo and Contemporary Art Discourse. *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society*, 9 (1), 85-90. p.88

¹¹ Smith, T. (2009). *What is Contemporary Art?*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 243.

boundaries of possibilities, particularly with the notions of the contemporary located within a local and global moment.

The contemporaneity of *Poleteismo* that went against the expectation of art was framed within the already controversial Reproductive Health Bill. RH Bill during the *Poleteismo* controversy had been languishing in Congress for more than 10 years, since it was first filed in 1999. This time was the height of the RH Bill debate, from the House of Representatives to the Senate, including its various publics. HB 4244 *An Act Providing for a Comprehensive Policy on Responsible Parenthood, Reproductive Health, and Population and Development, and for Other Purposes* was a substitute bill to five different RH bills filed by proponents led by Congressman Edcel C. Lagman. The consolidated/bicameral version of Reproductive Health Bill HB 4244 and its Senate counterpart Senate Bill 2865 was signed into law on December 21, 2012 as Republic Act 10354 *An Act Providing for a National Policy on Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health*, a year later after the closure of the exhibition. *Poleteismo*, framed within a volatile context, became a rallying point against the issue. The controversy and framing resulted in a senatorial inquiry on August 16, 2011 after its premature closure a week earlier. Various stakeholders attended the inquiry, in which the CCP Board faced threats of dismissal and removal of public funding. The inquiry ended with the decision to wait for the criminal and administrative cases filed with the Office of the Ombudsman to be resolved.

Manuel Dayrit filed an administrative complaint against CCP Board of Trustees Members Emily Abrera, Raul Sunico, Florangel Rosario-Braid, Jaime Laya, Isabel Caro Wilson, Zenaida Tantoco, Maria Cristina Turalba, Antonio Yap, Carolyn Espiritu, and CCP Visual Arts and Museum Division Head Karen Ocampo Flores for violation of Section (a), (b) and (f)1 of Republic Act No. 6713 (Code of Conduct and Ethical Standard for Public

Officials and Employees), while Eusebio Dulatas Jr. charged Abrera and Sunico for Grave Misconduct and Conduct Unbecoming of a Public Officer or Employee. Dayrit and Dulatas also filed separate criminal complaints for violation of paragraph 2(b), Article 201 (Immoral doctrines, obscene publications and exhibitions, and indecent shows) of the Revised Penal Code (RPC) against Mideo Cruz and the previously mentioned CCP officials. Ombudsman Conchita Carpio Morales later dismissed the administrative and criminal cases in a 34-page Joint Resolution and a 30-page Joint Decision, both signed on February 28, 2013. The Office of the Ombudsman ruled that *Poleteismo* does not belong under obscene exhibitions and censoring the artwork would fall under prior restraint prohibited by the Philippine Constitution. Ironically, it was the Office of the Ombudsman who upheld *Poleteismo* as art in 2013 even when the CCP failed to do so in 2011:

Citing *People v. Go Pin*, the Joint Resolution found that the context of *Poleteismo* – as part of the Kulo exhibit that aimed to showcase the artists’ contribution to the discourse in art and social reality in line with Jose Rizal’s 150th birth anniversary – was intended to provoke thought and discussion on the perception that society has adored the gods of money, personalities and sex; as to consideration, the exhibit was not for profit or commercial gain, since the artworks were not for sale and no entrance fee or venue fee was collected from the public or participating artists; and as to audience, it was intended primarily for people interested in the art, and it was placed at the far end of the gallery with an exhibit advisory that some artworks may not be fit for viewing by minors as well as *Poleteismo*’s accompanying text explaining “idolatry and deconstruction of neo-deities.

The controversy that surrounded *Poleteismo* is not necessarily a negative event, as controversies are “symptomatic of social change”¹². Such

¹² Kammen, M. (2007). *Visual Shock: A History of Art Controversies in American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books. loc 78.

controversies reflect the changing role and expectation for art in a democratic society, as well as its potential for a change in perspectives and opinions.¹³ The social changes and shifts demanded by *Poleteismo* within the shifting contemporary art discourse in the local and global moment need to be addressed not just in the art world but also with the growing and shifting publics that engage not just within museums and galleries but also through criticisms, mass media, and new media. Though the premature closure of the exhibition limited the engagement with the publics and the art world, the resulting discourse including the law that supported the art is a landmark case that could shift the perception and action towards contemporary art and possible controversial art in the future. The potential to strengthen and develop contemporary art is present amidst the challenges and limitations imposed upon it.

Philippine Contemporary Publics and Shifting Technologies

Poleteismo's publics were informed by various media, particularly mass media and social media, yet there was a very belated response from art critics, art historians, museum and gallery workers, and art institutions in general. The publics were not able to engage with contemporary art discourse that could have been presented by the art world. They had to rely on media-driven images that restricted the aesthetic education of the unfamiliar public of contemporary art. There was a failure for the public to begin the discourse through art, rather, they had to engage with the images and perspectives given to them through mass and social media. The contemporary art visual language was lost in the controversial presentation of the installation.

¹³ *Ibid*

Historically, the development of contemporary art discourse expanded towards the inclusion of wider publics through the development of discourse and engagements located within shifting technologies. The 1955 walkout during the 8th Annual Art Exhibition of the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP) due to the win of the moderns of all the prizes resulted to media attention.¹⁴ The intense media coverage of the debates between the conservatives and the moderns' notions about art was witnessed by growing publics. Though the publics remained at the periphery watching the debate unfold, it was a beginning of public's participation in the engagements in art discourse. The development of technology has deep implications in the diversification of publics. Part of the limitation of response in 1955 is the limitation of access to technology. Only institutionalized writers may publish their opinions on the notions and definitions of art. The delay in the publication time also created the limitation in publics. On the other hand, the development and increase of technology usage changed the platform of the publics immensely.

Technological shifts drastically affected the attitudes and engagements of the Filipino publics, from politics, everyday life, and spilling over to art discourse. The EDSA Revolution in 1986 was televised and witnessed live globally. Despite the limitation in public access at the time, it was still one of the first revolutions that unfolded in the public eye due to the technology of the television.¹⁵ The television also caused the shift in visual language, particularly after the coverage of the 9/11 attack.¹⁶ The publics witnessed a presentation of tragedy live on the screen, thus changing the presentation and representation of violence. The image gained a liveness, a living terror

¹⁴ Flores P. (2010). Temerities. *Pananaw 7: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, 7, 18-25.

¹⁵ Pertierra, R. (2012). *The New Media, Society & Politics in the Philippines*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

¹⁶ Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

on the screen. The EDSA 2 in 2000 was participated in by a more technologically active publics. This revolution that caused the ouster of President Joseph Estrada and the rise of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was brought about by the cellphone technology. Cellphone owners texted each other and spread the word to go to EDSA Shrine that resulted to the mass of people that congregated there.¹⁷ The participation of the publics that were once relegated as an audience changed the perception of their roles in politics and technology. The shift of technology, from witnessing events unfold live to being part of the unfolding event, is a key shift in Philippine history.

During another controversy involving art discourse, in the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS) purchase of Juan Luna's *The Parisian Life* from a Christie's auction in Hong Kong in 2002, the debate became more inclusive, as the publics argued about the prudence of the purchase. Juan Luna, a 19th century Filipino painter, is a critical figure in Philippine art history, thus a homecoming of his work is a subject of celebration. Yet, the public's reaction were varied due to the prohibitive cost of the painting purchased using public funds. The astronomical cost of the painting in the context of the economy at the time proved the purchase problematic.¹⁸ On the other hand, in the case of Ronald Ventura, the publics celebrated his record-breaking sale as a victory in a Sotheby's auction in April 4, 2011.¹⁹ In contrast, the art world was more critical of the sale and discussed the

¹⁷ Pertierra, R. (2012). *The New Media, Society & Politics in the Philippines*. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung., Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change. *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (1), 28-41., and Warner, M. (2005). *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

¹⁸ Flores, P. (2006). "A Piece of History": Juan Luna's *Parisian Life* and the Production of Property. In J. Clark, M. Peleggi, & T. K. Sabapathy (Eds.), *Eye of the Beholder: Reception, Audience, And Practice of Modern Asian Art* (pp.56-71). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. and Sison, M. (2002, November 13). Philippines: Feed the belly or feed the soul? *Asia Times Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.atimes.com>.

¹⁹ Zulueta, Lito. (2011, April 11). Ronald Ventura's tour-de-force work sells for \$1.1M at Sotheby's, setting new. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from <http://inquirer.net>.

implications of such sale. There were critical differences in the discourse of the publics in these cases, particularly with regard to usage of funds. The expenditure of public funds by a government institution was seen as problematic, despite the importance of the artist in Philippine art history; while the earning of a large amount of money was seen as a subject of pride, despite the questions in the actual importance of the works.

The publics were also observed in the controversial awarding of the National Artist Award in 2009 and 2014. In 2009, then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo by-passed the process of selecting the National Artist Award and conferred Carlo J. Caparas, Jose “Pitoy” Moreno, Cecile Guidote-Alvarez, and Francisco Mañosa along with the recommended artists Federico Aguilar-Alcuaz, Lazaro Francisco, and Manuel Urbano (Manuel Conde). She also removed Ramon Santos who was recommended by the body for National Artist for Music. What resulted was an outrage, especially from the art world. National Artist Awardees Virgilio Elmira, Bienvenido Lumbera, Napoleon Abueva, and Arturo Luz petitioned against the decision in the Supreme Court, in which the Supreme Court issued a status quo ante (SQA) which stopped the conferment of National Artists in 2009.²⁰ Publics were divided from those who shared the outrage to those who particularly support Carlo J. Caparas, a popular figure. While in 2013, the National Artist Award caused another controversy as President Benigno Aquino Jr. removed Nora Aunor from the list of recommended awardees due to her alleged history with drug use.²¹ These events were participated in by publics, engaging in their qualifications of an acceptable notion of an artist. The publics exhibited a growing confidence in their analysis of art and art discourse as they debate in their conceptions of art.

²⁰ Avedaño, C. (2013, July 17). SC voids Arroyo’s 4 Picks for National Artist Award. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Retrieved from <http://inquirer.net>.

²¹ San Pedro, D. (2014, July 1). PNoy: Nora Aunor not deserving of National Artist Award because of ‘drug conviction’. *InterAksyon*. Retrieved from <http://interaksyon.com>.

Art publics were often observed in times of controversy—the debates of 1955, the GSIS purchase of a Luna painting, the Ronald Ventura auction sale, National Artist Awards controversies, and *Poleteismo*. The discourse, however, expanded immensely. The debates in 1955 centered on the opinions and notions of the art world. This limitation was slowly broken down as publics became more capable of responding and creating their own arguments. Whether they condone, such as in the GSIS purchase; or celebrate, as in the Ventura auction success; the publics became a louder stakeholder when it comes to art. The controversial National Artist Award, in which the events were personality-centered, livened the public discourse even more. The fans of Carlo J. Caparas heatedly debated with his critics, particularly in the comments section of newspapers. In a similar vein, critics and fans of Nora Aunor, a popular movie star, engaged in the discussion of what art is, and more importantly, the qualifications of a National Artist.

Poleteismo's publics, similar to the previously discussed cases, vary. The traditional publics of art, such as the member of the art world, has always been there. Yet, the discourse about the art was started by mass media—the investigative show *XXX*. The show itself, which focused on crimes and criminal activities, already framed the installation as a crime. Though allowed to shoot inside the CCP Galleries, the show made it appear as if the shoot was an undercover job. The framing further developed the notion of crime, as it was presented as a campaign to support RH Bill, an already controversial discourse for the Filipino publics. This created the notion of a crime inside the art space, and the publics responded sufficiently.

2011, the year Arab Spring and Occupied Movements were empowered by social media, was also the year that CCP closed *Kulo* because of *Poleteismo* and the controversy that ensued. The controversy caused by mass media that spilled over social media became a key argument against the artwork and

the exhibition. The potential for emancipation, as displayed by Arab Spring and Occupied Movements, also displayed the potential for repression. There was a demand from the publics for the art world to respond, but the response of the art world proved to be too slow and inadequate to the demands of the publics looking for live updates. The desire of the publics to be in the moment, developed from the continuing advancement of technologies, was not fully satisfied.

Placino²² stated that, “The immediate and harsh judgements on *Poleteismo* could be due to the lack of discourse provided by the museum and art institution. Even though popular media have preempted, framed and misinformed the public about the art, the public may have been able to decide with more insight had options and discourse been provided by the art world.” The premature closure of the exhibition by the CCP as the controversy was ensuing heated debates that would have helped in the development of contemporary art discourse rather than ending the discourse with blasphemy of the work and demonization of the artist. The publics and the artworld missed a critical point in the engagement and maturing of critical art discourse beyond the controversy.

The art discourse of *Poleteismo* was led by mass media. This often creates conflicts as pointed out by Andras Szántó²³: “(a) arts journalists write for uninformed readers²⁴, (b) arts news is easily hijacked by those with non-arts agendas²⁵, (c) arts journalists have to resort to hype, dramatics, and

²² Placino, M.P.O. (2012). Spilling into the Public: Poleteismo and Contemporary Art Discourse. *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society*, 9 (1). p.89.

²³ Szántó, A. (2001). Don't Shoot the Messengers: Why the Art World and the Press Don't Get Along. In Lawrence R. (Ed.), *Unsettling "Sensation": Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy* (pp. 181-197). New Brunswick, New Jersey, & London: Rutgers University Press.

²⁴ Ibid. 182

²⁵ Ibid. 183

simplification²⁶, (d) news organizations engage in "pack journalism" and stereotyping²⁷, (e) when art becomes politics, it ceases to be art journalism²⁸, and (f) the news media relax their standards when covering the arts²⁹." These circumstances were present in the media coverage of *Poleteismo* and such perspectives were the starting point in the coverage and discourse observed in social media. Observed from the discourse on *Poleteismo*, Szántó's observations are reflected in the local context. Admittedly, there is still a need to develop a strong museum-going public, as well as strong art education curriculum in both basic and advanced education. The coverage of *Poleteismo* was not just hijacked, it was developed for the agenda of a controversial discourse on RH Bill. Writers hyped up and framed the installation in a controversial manner, diverting the discourse from contemporary art into blasphemy and support of the contested RH Bill. It also became a rallying point for some members of the Philippine Senate to display religiosity and garner support for their anti-RH Bill agenda. There were threats of removing the funds for CCP as well as the demand for the resignation of its Board Members. The relaxed and uncritical coverage of the mass media, combined with relative absence of the art world in the discourse, created volatile publics that were mostly unable to engage in contemporary art and remained isolated from the possible criticality of the installation.

The publics observed here are not necessarily the public as a social totality but "the kind of public that comes into being only to texts and their circulation".³⁰ In the case of publics of *Poleteismo*, they were bound by the issues and controversies that surround it. There were the publics that were

²⁶ Ibid. 184

²⁷ Ibid. 186

²⁸ Ibid. 187

²⁹ Ibid. 188

³⁰ Warner, M. (2005). *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books. p. 66.

solely present because of the controversial presentation through mass media and the eventual proliferation of such discourse in new media. Though the publics are difficult to qualify, they are present as the discourse and arguments about *Poleteismo* and the issues that surround it are present. The challenge is to create a discourse centered on *Poleteismo* and the concepts of contemporary art that engage with the growing and shifting publics rather than ending with the controversial presentation hijacked by mass media, politics, and religion. According to Warner³¹, “A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*”. He further discussed that “The way *the* public functions in the public sphere (as the people) is only possible because it is really *a* public of discourse. The peculiar character of a public is that it is a space of discourse organized by discourse. It is self-creating and self-organized; and herein lies its power, as well as its elusive strangeness”.³² With the intensification of the internet, such publics became more elusive, yet loudly present. The publics demand engagement, quickly and intensely, that is often difficult to cope with for the art world. Such engagements are often catered to by mass and new media that are able to be online and manage to control the discourse. During the senatorial inquiry of *Poleteismo*, the hashtag “art” became a trending topic on Twitter, a rare phenomenon in Philippine art discourse and engagement. This volatility needs further analysis and engagement of the art world, rather than taking a distanced stance when it comes to an art discourse outside of journals, books, magazines, and newspapers. Again, the publics were created and centered around the discourse, rather than around an institution, “A public sets its boundaries and its organization by its own discourse rather than by external

³¹ Ibid. 67

³² Ibid. 68-69

frameworks only if it openly addresses people who are identified primarily through their participation in the discourse and who therefore cannot be known in advance".³³ Such unpredictability in a inconsistent environment of the online world increased the vulnerability of *Poleteismo* and the unprepared art world towards the publics of art and discourse, missing critical opportunity for engagement.

Mass media and social media often reflect each other creating massive discourse but without much diversity of perspectives, such as in the case of *Poleteismo*. The publics were created by the discourse surrounding *Poleteismo* but were often limited to the stance of mass media. The mass media's framing of the installation through RH Bill and the resulting discourse on blasphemy resulted to the same pervading opinion amongst the publics. The reliance on mass media projected images and discourses defined the discourse of the publics, often resulting to the rejection of the art and demonization of the artist, sometimes resulting to incessant online harassment and death threats. There is a need to learn to respond and engage with the popular and social media resulting from the mass media projections of the art discourse. Though often nebulous, the publics need engagements rather than dismissal. Lev Manovich³⁴ sees such development as an "information society" and states that:

I believe that the exponential growth of information available to us is one of the main pressure points of contemporary culture and that this pressure will only continue to increase. The cultural effects of this information is diverse. By situating my investigation within the context of the "information society" I want to highlight a new cultural dimension that so far has not been part of our critical vocabulary: scale. In other words, while normally we think of

³³ Ibid. p. 74

³⁴ Manovich, L. (2008). Introduction to Info-Aesthetics. In T. Smith, O. Enwezor, & N. Condee (Eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (pp. 333-344). Durham & London: Duke University Press. p. 339.

culture using qualitatively different categories such as authorship, collaboration, reception, media type, ideology, and so on, we also now need to start considering something purely quantitative: the dramatic increase in the amount of media available. We no longer deal with “old media” or “new media.” We now have to think through what it means to be living with “more media.

The change in the circumstances of the publics, particularly with the shift and development in technology requires a shift in the strategy of engagements. From the periphery as an audience, the publics created through the art discourse are starting to demand increasing roles and voices in art. Though the increase in the presence and scrutiny of the publics was deemed alarming in the case of *Poleteismo*, such circumstance may be turned around in a more positive light, depending on the management of the debate.³⁵ Szántó³⁶ further pointed out that “a policy of openness and scrutiny is the only way of assuring that the public gains a proper understanding of museum management and thus preventing controversies based on political manipulation from erupting in the first place”. The publics’ potential perception and engagement with contemporary art such as *Poleteismo* could have prevented mass media’s hijack from art discourse into the discussion and framing of art within RH Bill.

³⁵ Szántó, A. (2001). Don’t Shoot the Messengers: Why the Art World and the Press Don’t Get Along. In Lawrence R. (Ed.), *Unsettling “Sensation”: Arts-Policy Lessons from the Brooklyn Museum of Art Controversy* (pp. 181-197). New Brunswick, New Jersey, & London: Rutgers University Press.

³⁶ Ibid. 194

Moving Forward

Moving forward, what are the strategies that can be applied in the engagement with contemporary publics of art? Patrick Flores³⁷ said in an interview that the exhibit *Kulo*, wherein *Poleteismo* was a part of is a “potentially productive situation, but I [sic] did not turn out that well...”. He further explains that:

It was an opportunity to show why art is important—because it is only art that will give you that chance to initiate a collective discussion that overcome instrumentalization, that provides a community of sensing and sensing agents willing to share their affective lives—this is the promise of the aesthetic and, to some extent, of modernity. You are either touched or moved or inspired or repulsed by art. You have emotional investment so you talk about it and you talk about the form and your feeling—and prevent the institutionality of art from taking over. Why did I feel inspired or repulsed? And then you begin to discuss, and at some point, there might be a transformation in terms of your beliefs in whatever, a sensitivity that you are in the world with others. So that was an important opportunity missed by the CCP, by the artist himself, maybe by the community that was not ready because there was no concerted effort on their part to put up a united front. They didn’t have to agree with Mideo [Cruz]. They only needed to defend the relational autonomy of art from the assault of the church and the state.³⁸

Poleteismo as contemporary art should’ve been defended amidst the criticism and attacks by the institutions and the publics of art. Art has its own territories that should be defended. It’s autonomy and power of resistance against the dictates of popular taste should be upheld.³⁹ The counter-publics who hold opinions and desires outside the commonalities of the publics must be represented together with the publics led by mass

³⁷Osentel, D. F. (2011). Curatorial Voices: Q&As with the County’s Leading Curators. *Contemporary Art Philippines*, 19. p. 60.

³⁸Ibid. 60

³⁹Groys, B. (2008). *Art Power*. New York & London: New York University Press.

media.⁴⁰ *Poleteismo*'s controversial points should be discussed in detail, rather than repressed and quieted to end the controversy. Key to the discussion is the continuing participation of the art world and stake holders in the public art discourse. Warner⁴¹ states that:

Publics have an ongoing life: one doesn't publish to them once for all (as one does, say, to a scholarly archive). It's the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric.

Warner wrote in 2002 about the lack of archiving in the Web discourse that heavily relies on hypertext and search engine. This technology improved through time though long-term effects are yet to be observed, especially in the permanence of text online. Another layer to the problem is the clamor for an online web presence, particularly from the art world and the stake holders. With the instantaneous demand for response and discourse, how quickly does the art world need to respond? Though presence in mass media and social media in order to engage in art criticism and discourse with the publics is necessary, this should be approached with caution and criticality.

Social media in particular has become an important factor in the discussion of immaterial labor, Lesage⁴² cited that, "Today, the concept of permanent performance is nowhere as clearly implemented as in the sheer amount of time that people have been spending on various social network sites since their respective creations, with *myspace* (2003), *Facebook* (2004), and *twitter* (2006) considered—at least for some time and with some dispute—

⁴⁰ Warner, M. (2005). *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.

⁴¹ Ibid. 97

⁴² Lesage, D. (2012). Permanent Performance. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 17(6), 14-21. p. 20.

as the triumvirate". The demand to respond and be present in social media could potentially become the norm in contemporary art discourse. In the case of *Poleteismo*, there was pressure for the presence of the artist and the art community to engage, particularly in social media where the discourse of the various publics was present. Social media was markedly designed for such purpose, according to Lesange⁴³, "By designing the Facebook pages of its users as CVs, Facebook urges its users to take the concept of 'permanent performance' bloody seriously. If they do not, the evaluation of one's performance, in terms of one's 'social impact factor', might turn out to be negative". The insistence on social media presence could increase the prospective for engagement but could also be a trap to participate in a permanent performance framed and potentially hijacked by mass media discourse.

Year 2011 was a key for contemporary art and social issues in the Philippines, as well as for various emancipatory movements around the world. For Žižek⁴⁴, "2011 was the year of dreaming dangerously, of the revival of radical emancipatory politics all around the world. Now, a year later, every day brings new evidence of how fragile and inconsistent that awakening was, as the signs of exhaustion begin to show... What are we to do in such depressive times when dreams seem to fade away?". *Poleteismo* brought attention back to art in 2011. It was framed with RH Bill by mass media and the oppressive discourse was further developed in social media. The emancipatory potential of social media displayed in the Arab Spring and Occupied Movements was thwarted and used instead as a repressive tool. Yet, *Poleteismo* also became a landmark case in the discussion of art and censorship in 2013, a year after the RH Bill, the reason for the framed controversy, was signed into law. Though the case was legally resolved in

⁴³ Ibid. 20

⁴⁴ Žižek, S. (2012). *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London & New York: Verso. p. 127.

favor of contemporary art, the closure and inadequate discussion were still missed opportunities for the art world to engage. After several ruptures in Philippine art and history, it remains to be seen how the art world and its publics would develop the engagement in art criticism and discourse. Would the developing technologies such as cellphones, internet, and social media be used as a repressive tool or does it really have real and sustainable emancipatory potential? Moving forward will necessitate continuing engagement with the changing and shifting publics amidst developing technologies, political upheavals, as well as the reshaping of aesthetic valuation.

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