

UNSOLICITED COLLABORATIONS
AND UNDERCOVER AGENTS:
NOTES FROM A LOCAL UNDERGROUND

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Stephanie Syjuco
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“Green Ride,”
digital image printed as
lightjet chromogenic print,
2005

“For all the while, in African cultures, there are those who will not see themselves as Other. Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music, and visual art all thrive. The contemporary cultural production of many African societies—and the many traditions whose evidences so vigorously remain—is an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonialist novelist.”

—Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*¹

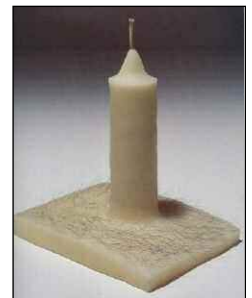
I choose this Appiah quote with great care as it has been mulling in my mind for several years and brings things back full circle as I consider the tendencies in my art practice. His words are an incredibly generous and hopeful vision for all forms of cultural production made within postcolonial Africa in particular, and by extension the developing or “Third World” (however its constituents choose to call it). It is a quote I come back to even when I am not directly working with it as subject matter, which is most of the time. However, after over ten years of art making, I am starting to see not only the conceptual threads of addressing the “center” and “margin” in my work, but also of how I am trying to articulate being an ambivalent subject of forces larger than myself—politics, global economics, capitalism, and the corporate culture machine—all the while maintaining that there is a way to mutate a given set of laws, icons, or imagery, and place them at a new and different service. Perhaps it is about creating my own “antidote to the dark vision” Appiah refers to.

I began as a painter but became a sculptor, partly because I felt there was more power and immediacy in objects than images. An object physically takes up space and asks to be related directly to bodies—objects implicate others by *being evidence*. Tools were the first fashioned objects, and totems were powerful human reminders of greater forces at work. Although I now use a wide variety of media (photographs, drawings, video), somehow I still consider they have “object-hood” and most of them refer to spatial or physical connections in some way.

It was primarily the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Gober that woke me to the possibilities of incorporating the personal with the public, and the formal and conceptual with the particular. For me, their work sidestepped the shrillness I sometimes found in the worst forms of identity politics work and went beyond the remedial-education tone found in even the best. During my last year of undergraduate work at the San Francisco Art Institute I took classes with artists Nayland Blake and Paul Kos, both of which affected me substantially—Nayland for his provocative forms displaying submerged yet insistent investigations into black identity and sexuality as well as his intellectualism, and Paul for his hard-line stance on the conceptual and aesthetic importance to detail when presenting work.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.),” 1991. Multicoloured candies individually wrapped in cellophane, endless supply ideal weight: 175 lb, overall dimension variable



Robert Gober, “Candle,” 1991



Adrian Piper, “Funk Lessons,” 1982-4

The early work of Adrian Piper and the entire body of work of David Hammons were also heavily influential for me, for their earnest but often humorous explorations of perceived ethnic identity. I found in them a way to begin thinking, and not just reacting.

Hybrid Forms and Undercover Identities: the Global Filipino Underground

“He’s a citizen of the world, he’s in all the villages and capitals, bringing his guitar and *bagoong* (salty shrimp paste), his *walis na tingting*, his *tabo*, his *lolo* (grandfather) and *lola* (grandmother).”²

I have taken to joking that Filipinos are the world’s best “undercover agents” in that they seem to be everywhere in the world and yet completely invisible. Like secret agents they have infiltrated all nations and have blended quite seamlessly into the background, masquerading to the general public as something other than what they are—usually Latino or ethnic Chinese, depending on skin tone or surname. Being a country of over 7,000 islands, and having endured almost four centuries of Spanish rule (1521-1898), a bloody lost guerilla war with the U.S. after the Spanish-American War, a Japanese takeover during WWII, and a return to American influence until the end of the Marcos presidency in 1986, the Philippines is a country of mixed allegiances and mongrelized pedigrees³. Spanish is still spoken amongst the upper classes as a sign of gentility, and English is commonly spoken everywhere, not to mention the multitude of local dialects in use.

According to official figures, almost 10% of Filipinos are “exported” as overseas workers (OSW), 7 million out of a total population of 80 million⁴. Upwards of 250,000 Filipinos are employed as seamen—more than any other nationality—and they crisscross the globe on ocean liners and cargo ships⁵. This odd form of “forced cosmopolitanism” due to economic opportunities abroad and domestic hardships at home creates a rupture of a “localized” or homeland-based Filipino identity.

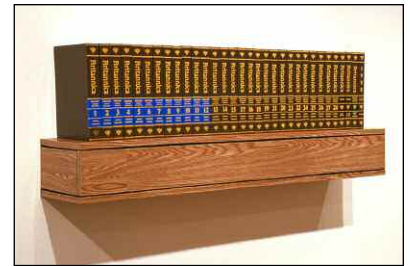
“(James) Baldwin once remarked that being attacked by white people only made him flare hotly into eloquence; being attacked by blacks, he confessed, made him want to break down and cry.”

—Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Black Man’s Burden”⁶

In my adolescent years, and even up until rather recently, I was confused by my inability to be recognized by Filipinos and Filipino-Americans (Fil-Ams) as “one of them.” Saddened and hurt, even. Until age 26 I had a Filipino passport and was a Filipino citizen—didn’t this make me Filipino? Like being a card-carrying communist? I had my proper papers. Why wasn’t I granted entry into the secret undercover world of the global Filipino underground? I lacked, and still lack, the right passwords, the right accent or inflection due to my Americanization. The cadence of my voice is all wrong, not to mention my facial features⁷. The work I produced in my early 20s sometimes reflected this internal struggle, and while directly influenced by identity politics work, I was also searching for a way to address things in a less specific or ethnically authoritative manner, as I felt I had no claim to cultural authority. Rather than being able to speak *of* or *for* the Filipino community I was more interested in articulating the state of being “between” things.⁸

In trying to visually depict this “between” space, I began creating objects and surfaces that looked strangely familiar, manipulating conventions of style and structure. Using mostly cheap materials like foamboard, contact paper, tape, scrap wood, and laserjet prints—I have made works that reference architectural or scientific diagrams, electronic equipment, cityscapes, mass-produced goods, and contemporary art. I consider the results a kind of collage of references which urge the viewer to consider multiple possibilities and meanings.

Generally, it is important that the craft of fabricating objects be just enough to create a convincing representation, but not too much. While trying to avoid a *trompe l’oile* effect, the work has to at first glance “read” as one thing, and then become betrayed by its own making on closer inspection (wood as contact paper, etc), in much ways a similar manner to how I consider *myself* being



“Britannicas,” foamboard, contact paper, velcro, 1999.



“Books and Disks,” foamboard, contact paper, 1999.

“undercover”. Sometimes this is a difficult balancing act—to create an object that is privy to a set of representational rules but then ultimately tries to break or elaborate upon them.

In “**Condensed Home Entertainment Systems**” (2001) I created prop-like and “flattened out” sculptures, referencing “products” while at the same

time playing at basic formal concerns of color, line, and volume. Heavily inspired by 60s and 70s Minimalist sculptors such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Richard Artschwager, Bauhaus architecture and design, and commercial product displays at showrooms such as Circuit City or the Good Guys, I was attempting to create objects



“Condensed Home Entertainment Systems (Index Display),” foamboard, contact paper, 2001.

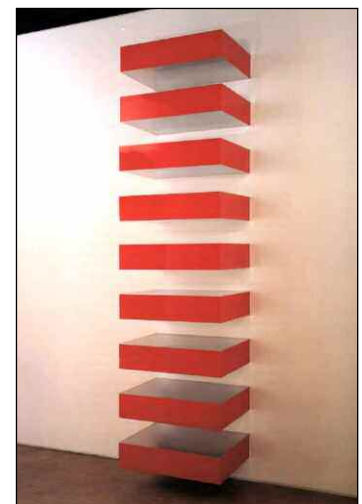
that could suggest multiple functions. Foamboard, my material of choice, functioned as a cheap and light-weight building material, but also served to conjure references to the architectural model, maquette, or prop. As much as I admire minimalist sculpture and am seduced by their surfaces and shapes, I feel a need to include an additive process in creating work which

references past art movements, so that they self-consciously addresses their own resuscitation.

I considered myself a self-imposed “factory worker,” producing multiple forms of the same product on a home-made assembly line—essentially “pumping out” foamboard and contact paper-covered objects resembling consumer products but occupying a shadowy world as a proxy or stand-in. In referencing Warhol’s Factory (in which he may or may not have been directly making his own work), and the “traditional” factory



“Werkstatt,” foamboard, contact paper, velcro, 1999.



Donald Judd, “Stack,” 1973

production that happens globally, I wanted to implicate myself in both types of labor—the “high end” labor of art production, and the more “low end” labor associated with factories and assembly plants⁹. I delighted in that I was essentially an imported/migrant Filipino worker located in America and mimicking the motions of machine production—only the resulting items were the antithesis of “useful” objects. Indeed, I often describe the units as “functioning differently”—the vagueness of the shapes work to conjure fictional or multiple purposes.



Factory workers in Asia

Is it a speaker unit or a remote control? A VCR or a DJ station? A GPS unit or a hearing

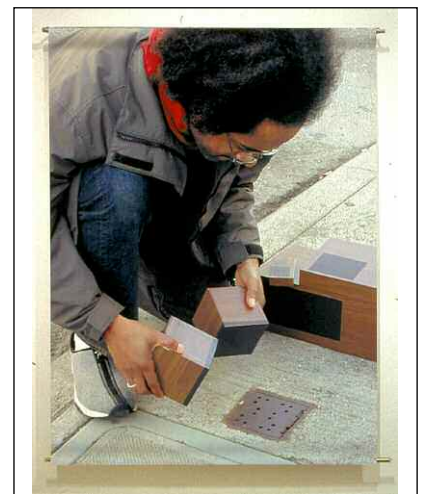


“Multi-User Interface A,” foamboard, contact paper, LED lights, batteries

aid? Could it be all of the above? How are people supposed to relate to, purchase, or utilize these proxy products? For me, they build on the language of Minimalism yet complicate the objects to include references to contemporary electronics factory production (“product units”), the natural and the artificial

(wood-grain contact paper surfaces) and gender (being a female artist as opposed to, say, a male engineer).

As companions to the components, I created a series of photographs that displayed the objects posed with people in various situations, reminiscent of commercial product shots. Part science fiction and part advertisement. I was also trying to push against the idea of these forms as being “copies” as they functioned for me as being newly designed products pregnant with the past, but built for an as-yet-unknown future.



“Suggested Use: Reading,” commercially printed advertising banner, 2002

The “Hello Kitty Effect”:

From the Overwhelmingly Global to the Strikingly Local

“Filipinos love to copy everything. Singing stars copy the styles of pop idols. Movie makers pirate movie plots. Restaurants, shops, fashion, architecture, and interior design and glossy magazines copy all the latest foreign trends. Is it our colonial experience? Imitation can be a learning experience, or it can turn you into a Xerox machine.”¹⁰

—in *Pinoy Pop Culture*, 2001

“Popular culture engages people in fantasy and play; but to whom do the games belong? Especially in the debate over the impact of the media, the view is often strongly expressed that through radio and television, mass journalism and advertising, and other related information technologies and cultural forms, the cultures of North America and Western Europe threaten other cultures in the world with extinction, a sort of deadly diffusion...I believe there is room for a more optimistic view of the vitality of popular expressive forms in the Third World...The world system, rather than creating mass homogeneity on a global scale, is replacing one diversity with another; and the new diversity is based relatively *more on interrelations* and less on autonomy...We must be aware that openness to foreign cultural influences need not involve only an impoverishment of local and national culture. It may give people access to technological and symbolic resources for dealing with their own ideas, managing their own culture, in new ways.”¹¹ (my italics)

—Ulf Hannerz, *The World In Creolization*

I’ve been using the aftereffects of *imperfect* translations: in language translations of writing, it is acknowledged that there will be inherent differences between the “original” and the translation. What interests me are the *mis*-translations or *mis*-appropriations (be they purposeful or accidental) that happen when an image or concept is shifted across their correct territories, and especially when it happens from the “top” (i.e. the global) on “downwards” (localized communities). Sometimes this has involved creating odd fusions of forms and materials—crossing office furniture with gothic cathedrals



“Doppelgangers (Gothic Objects),” foamboard, contact paper, velcro, flourescent lighting, plastic plants, 2000



"Set-Up (Lean-To)," 2x4s, crocheted doilies, mixed media, 1999

(*Doppelgangers*, 2000), outdoor landscapes with domestic materials (*Set-Ups and Spoils*, 1999; *A Little Death*, 1998), and fabricated crime scenes (*Evidence*, 1997; *After-Hours Office Interventions*, 2000-1).

These strange spaces of *mis*-takes are ruptures in the orderliness that can be imposed by consolidated

power, and can possibly work to grant new meanings and a type of agency-reclamation for those who choose to repurpose images that hold that authority.

In December 2004 I traveled to the city of Merida, in the Yucatan area of Mexico. The central marketplace was abuzz with vendors and amid the rows of stalls I came across a small stand selling hand puppets sewn of felt and cloth. I fingered the cartoonish giraffes, hippopotamus, puppies, and rabbits—all bearing the hand-stitching of yarn, thread, and calico cloth—and looking like a medley of odds and ends found on the cutting room floor of a garment factory. It was the handmade puppet that bore the distinctive features of Hello Kitty, the Japanese Sanrio cartoon character, that jumped out at me, her white moon-face and red bow jauntily balanced on one cute felt ear. Her six black whiskers were cut out of strips of black felt and glued down haphazardly. Her dress was made of a printed pattern that was awkwardly



Hello Kitty Jr.



Hello Kitty, Sr.

gauche—not at all her usual streamlined outfit. It was here that the highly globalized cartoon figure of Hello Kitty collided with the materials and the means of the local—a kind of Third World manifestation of Hello Kitty brought about *by any means available*. Magdalena, the grandmotherly woman who had made the puppets was also the vendor, and she proudly displayed her home-made doppelganger with a broad smile.

I have since dubbed this “localization” of a global icon as “the Hello Kitty Effect”—the instance in which an item of production (i.e. a handmade puppet) is at once a marker of a global cultural or iconographic “cosmopolitanism”¹² and also intricately embedded with specific and localized reinterpretations. For me, the handmade Hello Kitty was neither better nor worse than the “real” Hello Kitty. It can be argued that Hello Kitty Jr. is a pale and rather poorly made shadow of Hello Kitty Sr., and indeed the daughter does not follow the design rules laid out by her Japanese-born mother. And yet the unsanctioned and unauthorized Mexican offspring is *attempting to occupy a similar space*—as a marker of “Hello Kitty-ness”, it *functions similarly* in that it conjures to mind the same associations of product/commodity, cuteness, and the social language and cultural arena in which its mother occupies. Sanrio’s Hello Kitty is a global phenomenon that has come to colonize all corners of the world with her enlarged head and mouthless face. And yet, without her consent she has probably birthed countless daughters all over the world. Magdalena’s Hello Kitty is all that her mother was, and more.

At times people say that I “make copies of things” or that I make “fake” things. I would like to propose that there is something else going on under the surface of my work that may be similar to the unsanctioned marketplace doppelganger. For instance, to read Hello Kitty Jr. as *similar* to, the *same* as, or even a *copy* of Hello Kitty Sr. is to ignore the particularities and peculiarities of time and place—that the economic and social conditions under which each are made are incredibly different. The translating filters at work with Hello Kitty Jr. mark her an “illegal alien” of sorts. As a knock-off or bootleg item that infringes on copyright likenesses, she is working outside the proper channels of global flow of capital, pilfering money from Sanrio.



“After-Hours Office Interventions,” photographic documentation of leaving hand-made computer disks at people’s workstations, Exploratorium museum, San Francisco, 1998-9

The Order of Things

“...It would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real one. For the latter only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas the other interferes with the very principle of reality. Transgression and violence are less serious, for they only contest the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous, however, since it suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation.*”

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Precession of Simulacra*

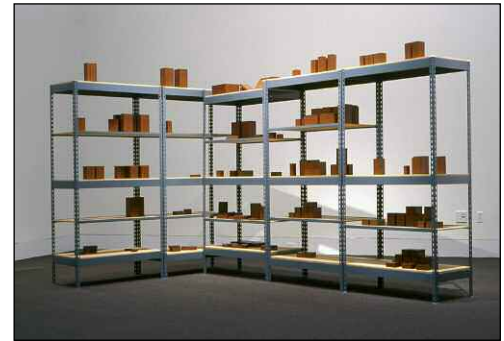
“Mimicry reveals something insofar as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. ..It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but being against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”

—Jacques Lacan, “The Line and Light,” *Of the Gaze*

My work at Stanford brings a satisfying closure to the earlier “product unit” pieces and also opens up new directions in materials and concepts. I began the program making objects that were at once counterfeit and paradoxically unique, but this time in an attempt to flesh out a more personal investigation: the “antidote to the dark vision” spoken of earlier. Prior to this, I felt I had hit a “baroque” period in my work, where I had trapped myself into visually reinscribing a type of personal decadence in how I had perfected my materials. Indeed, discussions of my work kept circling around the craft of faux-ness and the perception that what I was exploring was a nihilistic tech-noir or lack of “aura”—far from the question I was trying to pose: could simulation still offer a chance to be “infinitely dangerous” to the order of things as Baudrillard suggests? In an attempt to talk about history and resuscitation of meaning, I began to remake *other* artworks that held either a conceptual or historical significance for me.

I remade (or “covered”—as in what a “cover band” does¹³) a large-scale Joseph Beuys installation “**Wirtschafts-werte (Economic Values)**,” but using my own

visual vernacular and updated materials. I used a single image of the work taken from a book and scaled it up to what I thought would be the right size, and to the best of my ability. Originally executed by Beuys in 1980, “Wirtschafts-werte” used everyday packages of food (rice, dried peas, etc.) from East Germany as a symbol for units of social exchange



“Wirtschafts-werte (Economic Values),” contact paper, foamboard, industrial shelving, 2003

—the worker’s productive and creative power, and the distribution of the product itself being alluded to in the work. As an updated and “covered” 2003 version of this work, I am using my own “products” (the handmade foamboard “components” I’ve produced for several years now) to insert myself into a dialogue of how to re-address issues of social and productive exchange in a further complicated world of global capitalism and commodity exchange. For the duration of creating this work, I christened my studio the “Autonomous Manufacturing Zone” or AMZ, again bringing to mind the factory-like scale of production I was attempting, and specifically referencing Free Trade Zones (FTZs), also known as export processing zones¹⁴.

In “T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy and Poetic Terrorism,” author Hakim Bey argues for people to consider themselves within

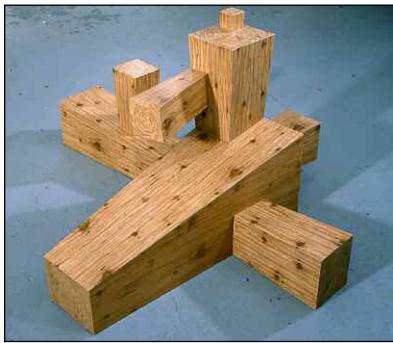


Joseph Beuys, “How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare,” 1965.

“nomadic encampments”—or Temporary Autonomous Zones—in an attempt to resist state control. Similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, the TAZ is a (temporary) node that is constantly reconfiguring and repositioning itself in order to enact “hit and run”-type resistances. In an attempt to rework an exploitive contemporary institution I simply labeled myself an autonomous node of the manufacturing sector—autonomous as worker, owner, and distributor of the goods. How does one begin to approach Beuys’ ideas on social utopias, political activism,

materials, and creative expression today? Can materials and commodities still be called upon to symbolize worker creativity? How have my own commodities/products/artwork entered a marketplace? As a reconfiguration of Beuys' original work, I wanted to address the potentially generative and resuscitative applications of his social concepts several decades later, while also self-consciously positioning myself as yet another "producer" of goods in the artmarket.

"Unsolicited Collaboration with Shaun O'dell," (2004) is a three-dimensional sculpture based on a drawing I downloaded from the internet¹⁵. Shaun is a San Francisco-based artist achieving national success in exhibiting a distinctive style of drawing that explores his personal cosmology. In this "unsolicited collaboration" I used



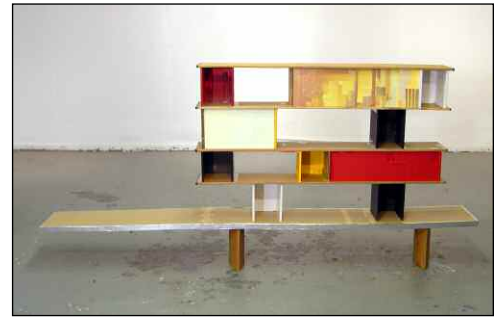
"Unsolicited Collaboration with Shaun O'Dell," foamboard, contact paper, framed 8"x10" print of jpg, 2004

materials familiar to my own work (foamboard and contact paper) to create an un-asked for artistic interaction between us. I was curious of the limits of authorship, collaboration, and personal boundaries when making art. I am friends with Shaun and went to school with him, but did not ask his permission to "work" with him. The final piece consists of a floor-based sculpture and an 8" x 10" framed printout of the downloaded JPG of Shaun's drawing. Technically, there is an optimum van-

tage point to viewing the sculpture so that it looks similar to the drawing, but I am also delighted that it's possible to see the backside or the "behind" of my sculpture, something which Shaun would not have to consider when creating his image. In the past I have also worked as a fabricator for other artists, or have myself hired others to create my work, and this piece treads dangerously close to not being "mine," which also excited me.

As explored in previous work, I have a weakness for modernist design and minimal art. I'm seduced by the geometry, the cleanliness, and rigorous aesthetics, but find it hard to ignore the social and cultural history of the period. Following through on the lineage of "covering" other creations, **"La Maison Tunisie"** 2004, was a resuscita-

tion of a modernist shelving unit by French designer Charlotte Perriand, a colleague of le Corbusier—but this time executed in cardboard, paper, glue, and tape. As a gorgeously designed work, Perriand’s 1950s shelf had the hallmark clean lines and materials of the modernist era. For my own piece, I



“La Maison Tunisie,” mixed media, 2004

was more interested in attempting a similar effect, but with more “local” materials—in this case only the materials available at-hand in my studio. To make the work I was not allowed to buy, purchase, or otherwise acquire any materials outside of the studio, *my own little sphere of the world*. Partly to break myself out of my over-use of foamboard, I set about scrounging and using only what was at hand—I taped together cardboard and scrap board, used glue and wheat paste to adhere surfaces, and cut colored pieces out of magazines to create fields of color. The resulting collage effect was a direct representation of my “local” territory, and became evidence of the stuff that immediately surrounded me.

“La Maison Tunisie” brings for me a plethora of references beyond simply being an exploration of modernist form. My memories of the Philippines includes cityscapes dotted with architecture in the International Style, of which Perriand was a study.



Le Corbusier, “Villa Savoy,” Poissy, France, 1929



Shanty construction, Philippines

The irony of seeing these crumbling, decades-old buildings at times shoulder-to-shoulder with slums and shanties built of cardboard and tin brings together not only an interesting clash of architectural building techniques, but of social eras. The International Style indeed *went international*—to the Third World—and then, like any other architectural moment, sits as a dated design that

eventually starts to acquire the patina of age and disrepair—the physical manifestation of the weight of reality and time (some would say even the *humanity*) coming to bear on the modernist vision of progress. Like the buildings of Brasilia, the Brazilian capitol’s experiment in architectural envisioning of the future, they stand as melancholy reminders of a history of social and spatial engineering. “La Maison Tunisie,” or *The Tunisian House* is a French designer’s modernist reinterpretation of Tunisian architecture—perhaps even a colonial fantasy or projection as Tunisia was a French colony until 1956. Built using the same conceptual strategy as one would build a shanty (with whatever’s *at hand locally*), “La Maison Tunisie” 2004 tries to pull together the history of style, place, and social space and to implicate the many layers of translations at work on both the “original” and the “cover”.

Generally, my creative process involved an initial conceptual idea, and then a fairly straightforward execution process that left little for on-the-spot improvisation. I even build maquettes, diagrams, or computer models prior to the building process. But this piece was different—making it was an incredible experience that brought back the pleasure of working fast, cheap, and directly with different and unexpected materials¹⁶. With “La Maison Tunisie” I decided up front that I was only going to perfect the construction up to a certain point—and ride the edge that kept it from collapsing into not being recognized as a Modernist work. And the conceptual decision to define my “local” was an exciting strategy to open up my field of materials but also lay down specific boundaries of what could or could not be used.

Another updated Perriand work, “**Untitled**” is again based on an image downloaded from the internet, but this time executed simply in cardboard and paper mache. This larger work stands almost 6 feet and has several layers of shelves that radiate from a central symmetry. I decided to



“Untitled,” cardboard and paper mache, shown with Blue Painting (Tarp),” 2004

use an incredibly basic construction method to again strive towards achieving an effect of modern style with minimal means. The resulting work has gently waved curves where there should be straight lines, a condition of the structural limitations of paper mache. I view it as a beautiful, almost elegiac look at attempting a perfect form. Almost human, the piece slouches slightly forward, the weight on top pulling downwards like the weight of history, and the surprisingly nuanced shades of brown and beige creating a camouflage pattern effect.

Hand-making modernism and the commodities that accompany late capitalism is at once an homage and a critique. An homage in that I *do* enjoy rarified aesthetics



David Hammons. "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," New York City, 1983

and have a not-so-secret appreciation for shopping, fashion, and consumerism. I am not beyond or above these things—I am directly implicated in its cycle. I would like to think the work addresses reclamation as well—claiming the agency to partake of a rarified aesthetic dialogue and the power to metaphorically (if not economically) participate in capitalism, in an attempt to change both at some level.¹⁷

Within the Philippines, the black market flow of goods is found in the explosively profitable selling of bootleg CDs and DVDs. That the culture machine of America has spawned what it considers a healthy market desire overseas for its products (music and movies), but is married to an unholy means of acquiring it (bootlegs), is an example of an "illicit" form of capitalism in action. Untaxed and unlicensed, these bootlegs straddle the strange position of being a conveyer of Western cultural icons and values to the developing world, while at the same time sidestepping the conventional flow of profit to the multinationals. Filipinos, according to a popular saying, are the world's best mimics and copiers—is the rampant spread of bootleg music and movies within the Philippines simply a natural extension of this logic? Is this form of "petty capitalism" a resistant and ultimately subversive form of trade in opposition to the macro capitalism of

the transnational corporation? If the art world has already come to terms with issues of postmodern appropriations, it appears that transnational corporations have yet to see the humor in their own products' appropriation overseas. Indeed, recent news coverage of the “threat” of black market economies suggests that the readiness of the American media to equate counterfeit goods with terrorism (Al Qaeda) smacks of both fear-mongering and yet another way to demonize the trade in goods that circumvent the “proper” channels of capitalism. Capitalism, if interpreted in this manner, works only when it enriches the “right” people and is based on copyright rules established by certain countries (mainly the US and Europe). In the case of Filipino piracy, corporate capitalism and “free market” rules are rewritten to serve not the upper levels of policy makers and governments, but the individuals themselves who constitute the growing global audience, essentially putting them at the forefront of *singly minor but cumulatively threatening challenges to consolidation and control over capital.*

Currently I am working on a series titled “**Black Market**” that consists of altered images downloaded from the internet, as well as sculptural reconfigurations of commodities. I use images of marketplaces in the Philippines that have an array of goods being displayed by vendors, and “black out” the products digitally so it essentially

removes the commodities—mainly produce, foodstuffs, and other commonly traded items in villages. In thinking on the global control of goods and capital exercised by multi-national corporations, I began to speculate that the term “black market” could not only come to refer to knock-off or imitation goods, but any item being sold or produced that falls outside of the “sanctioned” channels of capitalism. The very idea of a “black market” implies that, on the flip side, there is a proper and regulated way to consume and produce¹⁸, a definition that is increasingly tilted towards global export and import.



“Black Market,” digital image printed on Fuji lightjet print, 2005



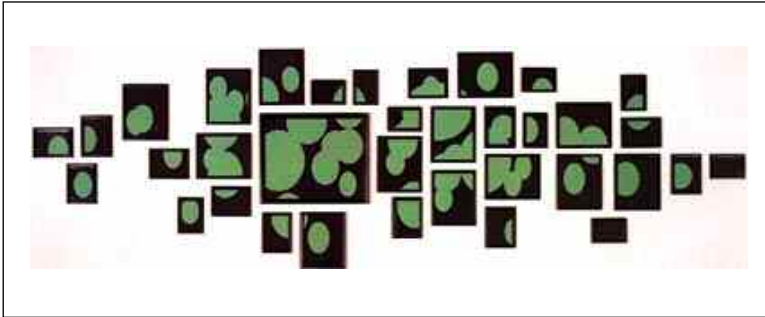
"Black Market," digital image printed on Fuji Lightjet print, 2005

Could it be possible that traders and small farmers who grow and sell their goods in local (farmer's) markets, by virtue of not participating in a global or corporate flow of capital and production, are creating *their own black market*, as it could come to be defined? The term itself conjures up images of contraband weapons, drugs, illegal merchandise,

human trafficking, and shady backroom deals. What if produce and local handicrafts were seen to be just as dangerous? And, by extension, with the advent of gene patents, can inhabiting specific bodies come to be considered an illegal act?

The resulting images from the "Black Market" series depict both the absence and the overwhelming presence of the goods for sale, as it is hard to ignore what is being blatantly blotted out. I also find these shapes aesthetically pleasing and they remind me of shapes found in painter Ellsworth Kelly's work. Accompanying the images will be "black market" items—sculptures that look like oddly provocative blobs of varying shapes and sizes. Painted black, they are covered in layers of paper mache to form a hard skin and protective coat. Inside are "ex-products": items that were at one time commodities but are no longer so (by either being cast-out, broken, non-functioning, or obsolete), which are then bound together in some manner to form strange shapes before being covered in an outer skin. The *blobjects* will be laid out on the floor or on raised surfaces and platforms of some kind, to suggest an outdoor market or display area. I envision an interesting array of strange shapes that may or may not suggest what they contain inside, and are re-purposed *ex-products* that have entered into an alternate form of production and consumption apart from their initial use.

There is a dearth of writing exploring issues of conceptual art practice and its reception within the Filipino community. In searching for examples of how artists have articulated their positions within their cultural community and the art world at

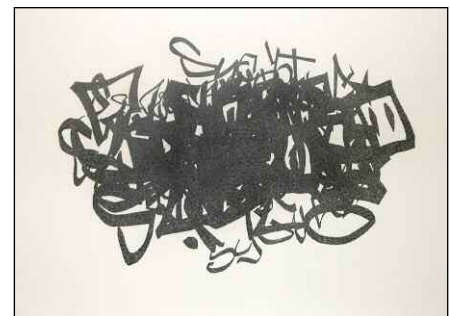


"Portrait Series II," chalkboard, paint, frames, 1997

large, I have turned to the extensive writing on black art in America, as well as contemporary art of Africa and the African diaspora for directions on how to theorize my own

work. While the particulars may be different, I find incredible similarities as to the predicament of how and why to “represent.” Unlike other Asian countries, the Philippines occupies the strange place of having been almost continually colonized for the past 500 years, and while not a people displaced by slavery, has been forced into their own form of “cosmopolitanization” perhaps similarly. Issues of audience and the difficulty of receiving critical readings and interpretations are thoughtfully examined by writers such as Okwui Enwezor, Nigerian critic and curator of Documenta 11. The quarterly publication “Transition,” a collection of essays on black and African cultural production, has been an amazing source of inspiration for how artists and writers in East Africa collectively begin to see themselves articulating a new, postcolonial identity. Today’s theorizing on “post-black” art and even “post-feminism” is an invaluable way for me to reconsider the totalizing effects of scripted identities.

Recently, I have come to the conclusion that the diasporic Filipino community (or at least their old cultural guard) has got it all completely, tragically wrong in that they do not realize how large their community has grown and how their worldwide presence is an invisible cultural force. The Philippines as a *psychological space* has expanded beyond the physical territorial borders of its own geography—since it has exported almost 10% of its population, it can be argued the country’s own boundaries have in effect grown to take over generous portions of the Middle



"Personality Conflict," pencil on paper, 2004

East, North America, Asia, and Europe—a sort of reverse colonization, even if happening unwillingly or unwittingly. The Philippines is now a bigger place. To argue that there *is* a unifying Filipino identity is to deny the lived realities of the millions (like me) who have assimilated and absorbed portions of their host-countries. I have succeeded in being even *more* undercover than others, and in fact melt in so well that I am camouflaged from my own community. Oddly enough, I feel this can bring me to a privileged place not bound by formalities of how I should or shouldn't be, and have the freedom to have my artwork speak for and about a multiplicity of concerns.

And yet despite this freedom there is the burden of representation I want to ask of myself which weighs heavy at times, and can pose a particularly heartbreaking predicament. As much as I want to be “just an artist” there are forces at work around me which insist I articulate *what type* of artist, and *to whom do I speak for?* Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes of the stickiness of artists being asked to “represent:”

“In the case of (black) artistic elites, the issues of representation arise with a vengeance...To the extent that black British cinema is represented as an act of cultural politics, it then becomes vulnerable to a political reproach as elitist, Europeanized, overly highbrow; *as a black cultural product without a significant black audience, its very “blackness” becomes suspect...*It has been argued that we should supplant the vanguardist paradigm of “representation” with the “articulation of interests.” In such a way, we can lighten the “burden of representation,” even if we cannot dispense with it.” (my italics)

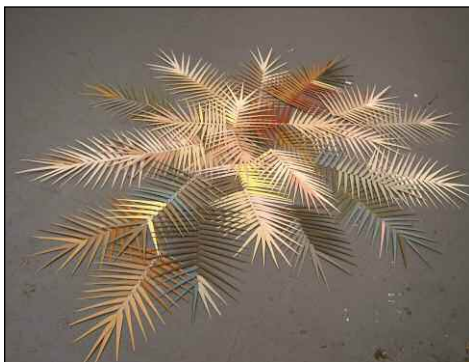
It is true I cannot dispense with considering representation, as there are so few images of Filipinos which circulate, either in the world in general, or the art world in particular. So is it an injustice for me to essentially “make up” and imagine a fictionalized Filipino identity for myself as I go along, and as I have been doing, since I am removed from the cultural center? There are parts I find useful in allying with identifying, and others that I feel are not. I revel in the idea that in essence, “no matter where I go, there I am.” In other words, no matter how far I stray from articulating any Filipino-specific interests in my work, I cannot be

expelled from the “global underground” as I am inherently a part of it—an insistence that acts like a metaphoric thumbing-of-the-nose at those who may attempt to disinherit me and claim that I lack the right culture. If my Filipino-ness is suspect, perhaps it is because it is truly fictional. George Orwell wrote, “Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” I fictionalize my own allegiances in an attempt to be *autonomous*, in a similar manner as my AMZ (Autonomous Manufacturing Zone) or Hakim Bey’s TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) attempts to be autonomous.



“Bamboo Forest,” cardboard tubes covered in images of bamboo downloaded from the internet, 2004

Gayatri Spivak has written of the problems of postcolonial representation by those who wish to articulate it from the inside, and the problematics of attempting to reclaim a collective cultural identity. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she argues that the resulting paradox of such attempts is a totalizing reinscription of essentialist ethnic mythologies “that doesn’t account for the heterogeneity of the colonized body politic.”



“Designer Vietnam,” colored paper, 2004

In my own work I feel I have been struggling to articulate ideas for a dual audience—the Filipino/Fil-Am community, and the contemporary art world—and have found resistance to specific readings of my work from both fronts. Filipinos do not consider my work “of them” or speaking to them as they do not find any “recognizable” ethnic imagery (pictorial portraits,

brown faces, explicit political, social, or cultural concerns)¹⁹. On the flip side, the contemporary art audience can easily skip over the trail of markers I leave like small breadcrumbs pointing to an un-mythologized (un-romantic) undercover, and perhaps gleefully inauthentic Filipino identity that I claim as my own.

So it is within this space of triangulated inattentions in which I operate—the willful forgetfulness of general history on American intimacies with the Philippines, Filipino negligence in recognizing the breadth and cosmopolitanism of their own global constituency, and my own dismissal of minding or paying homage to the “proper” channels of being Filipino as an artist. And yet I *do* seek to address these inattentions perpetrated by all sides. Not with educational lessons conveyed by imagery in an attempt to remedy them, but by articulating the conditions of heterogeneity in which I exist by *example or method* and within the form of a conceptual art practice. French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari speak of a radical restructuring of how we perceive edges and boundaries, a deterritorializing of orders and structures. In thinking of how I want to proceed and of which dialogues I want to participate, I can think of no better place to speak from than the space “between things.” Deleuze and Guattari use the analogy of the interdependency of the wasp and the orchid:

“It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, etc.)...At the same time, something else is going on: no imitation at all, but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp...There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying.”

I take this to heart when thinking of my attempt to essentially liberate the signifier from the signified in my work, and of the either/or poles that generally frame the questions posed to both myself (“What are you? To whom do you speak for?”) and of my work (“What is it? What does it speak of?”). If I operate from the middle, or from the between, it is to try to create a space for multiplicity, but to still throw out markers

towards both specific histories and social realities, to implicate us all in the process of translation, interpreting, and even *misinterpreting*.

“The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and *picks up speed in the middle*.”²⁰

—Deleuze and Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Notes

- ¹ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 157
- ² Gilda Cordero-Fernando and M.G. Chavez, *Pinoy Pop Culture*, Bench/Suyen Corpl, Philippines, 2001
- ³ I myself am a good example of this: *Syjuco* is a Spanish pronunciation of a Filipino name that originally came from China. The *j* is similar to the sound in *Julio*. *Sy* is the original Chinese surname, and *co* seems to be a common addition to Chinese-Filipino family names.
- ⁴ The Philippine government does not classify overseas workers as “immigrants” to foreign countries as they hold work visas, not immigrant visas, and are expected to return.
- ⁵ Bacon, David, “Filipino Sailors Challenge Ocean-Going Colonialism,” published online at: <http://dbacon.igc.org/Phils/03Sail.html>
- ⁶ printed in *Black Popular Culture*, by Michelle Wallace, edited by Gina Dent, Dia Center for the Arts, 1992, p. 79
- ⁷ I have recently discovered that I am a minority within a minority. I asked my mother once why I looked different from other Filipinos living here in the U.S., as my features are especially light-skinned and I am overwhelmingly mistaken by other Filipinos as being Japanese or Chinese. In contrast, many Filipinos or Filipino-Americans have darker complexions and wider, flatter noses, looking more Thai or Indonesian. She told me that the Chinese Filipinos—the “chinoy”—of which my absent father is one, are generally very wealthy in the Philippines and thus do not migrate to the U.S. for better economic opportunities. It’s the lower classes, the people with rural backgrounds (from the “provinces,” as she put it) who comprise the bulk of Filipino/Fil-Am stock here. Thus, many don’t recognize me as one of their own, and I am an alien to them. In fact, Filipino *chinois*, while part of the economic and cultural upper class, are often marginalized in a similar manner as American or European Jews are by Anglos.
- ⁸ A fascinating Filipino-American contemporary who also operates as an undercover “secret agent” is the New York artist Paul Pfeiffer. As an internationally renowned art star, much has been written about his work but incredibly little attention has been paid to what may be informed by the in-between space he operates within as a Filipino. Further complicating any “clear” messages is the addition of his gay identity. Both the contemporary art world and the Filipino community refuse to acknowledge his background, a topic of importance for him based on our conversation in 1999 when we were both included in the exhibition “At Home and Abroad: Twenty Contemporary Filipino artists.”
- ⁹ Early conceptual artists like Sol leWitt claimed to be “acting like machines” but made a distinction from “being a machine.”
- ¹⁰ by Gilda Cordero-Fernando and M.G. Chavez, published by Bench/Suyen Corpl, Philippines, 2001
- ¹¹ in *Readings in African Popular Culture*. Edited by Karin Barber. Indiana University Press, 1997.
- ¹² “The term *cosmopolitan* refers to an individual who retains cultural roots in his or her country of origin, yet has adopted a wide taste for other cultures, and so lives both a “local” and “global” life...It is sometimes misused to mean only “the global”...In biology, “cosmopolitan” refers to an animal or plant found all over the world, under wide-ranging ecological conditions.” From the online Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com)
- ¹³ Music “covers” are not “copies” but independently recognized articulations that reference previous articulations. At times covers can be more successful than the initial articulation and wind up superceding it in terms of public popularity and social currency.
- ¹⁴ “Most FTZs are located in third world or peripheral countries. They are special zones where (some) normal trade barriers such as import or export tariffs do not apply, bureaucracy is typically minimized by outsourcing it to the FTZ operator and corporations setting up in the zone may be given tax breaks as an additional incentive...These zones are often used by multinational corporations to set up factories to produce goods such as clothing or shoes.. Often the (host country’s) government pays part of the initial cost of factory setup, loosens environmental protections and rules regarding negligence and the treatment of workers...” from the online encyclopedia www.wikipedia.com
- ¹⁵ I have a habit of relying on what I call “second-source research”—mainly internet-based research *with the knowledge that some of the information available to me may be imperfect or even wrong*. I find the possibility of making a mistake or mis-translation to be an intrinsic part of my work.
- ¹⁶ It felt similar to the process I had used during the making of “I Love Technology and Technology Loves Me,” which was also about attempting to create within the limits of a specific place—in that case, a village in the Czech Republic.

¹⁷ I have made attempts outside of the “normal” channels of art to address alternate forms of capitalism and consumption. I created a knock-off handbag line, “Cheap Copy” that created hand-made versions of couture labels such as Chanel, Prada, Gucci, etc., in order to “dilute” the fashion houses’ product lines. I attempted to “flood the market” by selling them incredibly cheaply. A year ago I started “Anti-Factory,” a clothing label dedicated to re-using and re-configuring cast-off clothing to transform them into hip fashion and to divert money from sweat-shop labor, of which much contemporary clothing takes advantage of. I hand sew each garment and keep prices surprisingly low so that it is affordable for most (much to my surprise, Anti-Factory has become extremely popular and is a good source of support!). Also, for two years I became an Ebay seller of vintage clothes to make money and keep the flow of capital away from new clothing and direct it to the “little guy” (as opposed to factories and department stores).

¹⁸ A direct inspiration for this project came from research done for my paper “Illicit Capitalism: Media Bootlegs in the Philippines and the Revenge of the Marketplace” written for my Spring 2004 class “American Workers and Global Capitalism.” In it I discuss the language used to shape the debate over media piracy in the Philippines and how it has come to define “correct” and “incorrect” forms of capitalism, depending on who practices it, with the multi-national culture and entertainment industry overwhelmingly being classified as “correct” and the small vendor as “incorrect,” illegal, and renegade.

¹⁹ I see this as a similar predicament to the one faced by hyphenated artists working today who choose to avoid direct issues of ethnic representation (like Martin Puryear or Paul Pfeiffer).

²⁰ Deleuze and Guatarri, from “Introduction: Rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

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