Preface, from *Art and Society*

Art as discussed in this book covers the wide range of human artistic expressions—from oil painting to basket weaving, from shamanistic chants to contemporary pop. While the art object is contemplated and experienced visually and/or aurally, its understanding and appreciation include taking account of the conditions and processes of its production within a social context and, therefore, also of its social meanings and effects.

Because art is situated within society and history, its proper study is oriented towards clear objectives: to foster the independent and critical faculties, involving the heightening of the capacity to discern strategies; to distinguish and evaluate aesthetic and cultural positions in the light of our needs and interests; to privilege the Filipino point of view in art and cultural studies, thereby, contributing to the development of our national culture and art. At the same time, we do not lose sight of the international perspective which includes contributions, influences, as well as the interaction of forces and interests from within and without. The study also foregrounds discourses, cultural and artistic expressions and forms which in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and race have been hitherto marginalized by the dominant canons and discourses.

The following may be considered as the basic premises:

First of all, art is a signifying practice which is grounded in society and history. As such, art has its own specificity—that is, the elements of art, forms, media, techniques, styles—which distinguishes it from other fields. As found in works of art, these make up the signs consisting of signifiers (material data) and signifieds (concepts) which in their relation to one another in the visual work or text produce meaning. Traditionally, one might easily say that this constitutes the formal aspect of the work. However, and here is the difference from the traditional approach, the elements of art and its other material aspects are regarded as signs that have a meaning-conveying potential (deriving both from human psychophysical experiences and cultural codes) which becomes realized in the entire relations of the work, since the material aspects or signifiers are intimately tied up with the conceptual aspects which are the signifieds. A merit of this approach is that it makes a more solid grounding for the study and interpretation of the art of the Philippines and other countries. Such an approach finds a common ground for interpretations on the universal plane, that is, human psychophysical experiences which are universally shared, and the national or local plane, that is, the cultural codes shared by members of a particular society.
It is not, however, the case that in the semiotic approach one seeks to arrive at a unified and seamless meaning at all times. For it is possible that a work of art may reveal contradictions that reflect underlying ideological tensions. Or the surface of the work's dominant discourse may reveal gaps and fissures in a symptomatic reading. It is through these gaps and fissures, the silences and unsaid or the "unconscious of the work" that contrary elements break through. In this case, the viewer/critic does not make haste to reconcile or absorb these contradictions into a structuralist/functionalist whole. As Eagleton writes, "the task of the critic is not to gloss over contradictions but to foreground them" in order to show the work as a charged terrain of contention. In the complex relation between work and viewer/reader, one does not find a single unilateral thread of meaning but one finds a rich polyphonic text on different planes and different voices. Meaning then is not the essential kernel that discloses itself after one throws away the husk which is the form. We refer instead to the work's "horizon of meaning," following Eagleton, which takes into account the various possible meanings that operate within the problematic of the work.

Second, and again this is how one differs from the formalist approach, the work of art as sign is viewed in the dialogic situation of the work and its viewer. In this semiotic approach, it is necessary to emphasize that the work of art is seen not as a closed hermetic text but as an open work in which the signs are referred back to their referents in the real world. For like language, we affirm that art, too, exists in a dialogic situation in which an exchange takes place between the work and the viewer/listener. Thus, the visual text is not purely self-referential--and here we choose to differ from the theoreticians of the "infinite play of signifiers" and the postmodernist proponents of the pure surface texture--rather, one chooses to forestall the formalist closure of the work by resituating it as visual sign and text in its grounding in the real world. Furthermore, the concern to bring out the worldviews and ideologies of a work does not end there but proceeds to investigate how these ideas, values, narratives, discourses, worldviews have a bearing on our lives and interests, and our social context as a whole, and as to whether or not they enhance our humanity and further the goals of freedom and justice.
Another implication here is that one moves beyond the original artwork-and-historical-background approach because now the work is shown to be profoundly imbricated in its socio-historical context, and thus the relation of work and context is not merely mechanical or incidental—a point which has a bearing on the teaching of art history.

**The work of art as human construct and the result of the process.** By this we mean that art is not "the natural reflection of the world it delineates nor the spontaneous expression of the author's subjectivity." What the concept of construct basically involves is the demystification of the traditional notions of art. For instance, the concept of art as a "transparent window to the world," as classic realist texts assume it to be, has been subjected to critique.

Countervailing the tendency to collapse art into sociology, the Russian Formalists sought to define the specificity as such and to "bare the process of the text." Brecht as a Marxist expanded the formalist project and gave it a political/instructional dimension by developing the strategy of "defamiliarization" which operates in the alienation-effect of his epic theater, changing the relationship between actors and viewers, and moving from the empathy of realist theater to a critical and participatory experience.

Likewise, the concept of art as construct also questions the earlier notion of art as the spontaneous expression of the artist's subjectivity. Artists are constrained by the possibilities of time and place; they are also limited by the language or Symbolic Order (the way of ordering the universe) that they not only use but in which they were born and reared, and therefore profoundly implicated. Human experience is shaped by social institutions and ideological discourses. In Brecht as in other theories, the element of the subjective becomes played down to foreground the role of language and other social forces, institutions, conventions, and discourses. This perspective effectively does away with notions of genius and of the artist as a privileged being above ordinary mortals and therefore as one to be revered and never questioned. It also does away with the notion of art as a mysterious ineffable creation rather than real work in the real world. However, in Western contemporary theory, the phasing out of subjectivity in structuralism and postmodernism has led to the "crisis of the subject" and to the extreme theory of the "death of the author/artist," a theoretical issue which poses certain problems in our specific context which we will later take into account.

Again, "art as construct" also implies that art has its own mode of production. This includes the
resources of art, their mediums and techniques, their properties and problems of availability, as well as artistic production as a material process. Such considerations also imply art patronage and its influence, salutary or otherwise, on the art work, as well as the market forces that impinge on artistic production. With respect to the traditional arts, it is important not only to appreciate the qualities of the work, such as handwoven textile or an earthenware vessel, but also to resituate it conceptually in its original community, and to consider the conditions and problems of its production, such as forced resettlement from ancestral lands by decree of dominant groups or conditions of exploitation and scarcity of resources.

From the social and historical contextualization of the work, we can proceed to state that art has social import. Since the material facts of the visual work or iconic sign have a semiotic or meaning-conveying potential drawn from human psychophysical experiences and the cultural codes of a particular society, they become value-laden. And values, in turn, which constitute the axiological aspect of art, are derived from material fact. In other words, facts are not neutral but value-laden and values themselves arise from the facts and concrete conditions. Color, for instance, is not neutral because it is enmeshed in the symbolic systems of a society. Likewise, the traditional principles or organization, such as harmony and proportion, formed part of the classical canons. Because of the axiological aspect of the visual work by which it becomes a bearer not only of concepts and values, but also and especially of worldviews and ideologies, art plays an important part in human endeavors as it, directly or indirectly, supports the status quo or interrogates it, instills attitudes or persuades one to assume positions within a range of interventions--from acceptance to denial, espousal to rejection, with respect to concepts, issues, events, or various social phenomena. Also because art conveys values, it assumes different social functions, including healing and therapy.

There is likewise a need to rethink art history with respect to new assumptions proffered by contemporary theory. History is not just a narration of events of the past, but is a constructed narration or representation from a particular point of view with its particular social concerns and interests. Thus, there are many, even conflicting histories, in the same way that the culture of a country is not homogenous nor harmonious. In the case of colonized societies, there is the history written by the colonial masters, and the oppositional history written by the subjugated people. It is the history of the people narrated from their point of view that unites them in their anti-colonial struggle. Thus, the plurality of historical narratives does not redound to pure intertextuality or the formal interrelationship of texts on a single plane, for the historical text continually refers to real struggles in the real world, thereby inviting partisanship and alignment.

Part of the project of demystification in art studies is the assertion that aesthetics has its own history as a distinct discipline which in the West had evolved from its classical origins to the present. It does not consist of principles and canons which are true for all people and for all time, contrary to what classical aesthetics asserts. In fact, we can say that each society and community has its own aesthetics, so that there is not just one aesthetics which is that of the Western tradition, but many different aesthetics all over the world. Furthermore, within each country and society exist different aesthetics or aesthetic discourses, on one hand, the dominant and canonical aesthetics associated with the ruling classes and, on the other hand, those of the folk to which Mikhail Bakhtin ascribed a carnivalesque character subversive of the dominant canons. When we recognize that there are many different aesthetics and histories of
Our colonial experience which had laid down the academic canons of art has left a tradition of suppressing sectors of Philippines expression, such as that of the Muslim Filipinos and the animist ethno-linguistic groups. The dominance of Western-oriented elites has sought to marginalize the rich folk culture of the peasantry. And only recently has the academe recognized popular culture, such as the comics and film, as a valid field of serious study. Moreover, our long tradition of patriarchy in which male cultural managers distinguished between "high art" and "low art" marginalized a large section of women's work and cultural expressions related to everyday life. All these suppressed voices, discourses, expressions should be recognized and brought to the fore in our studies.

Because these large sectors in our country and in Asia as a whole have traditionally suffered prejudice, neglect and suppression--sectors and entire societies that the dominant Self (Western, white, ruling class, male)--has constituted as the Other, it is important that these colonized and marginalized sectors find their voices in their struggle for self-determination. Thus, in our own particular context, postmodernist concepts such as the "crisis" or even "death of the subject" or the "disappearance of the signified" raise problems of validity. For, as in the case of the women's struggle, what is crucial is for women to achieve active subject position from her traditional status as passive object. As Catherine Belsey stated, "To be subject is to be able to claim rights, to protest, and to be capable, therefore, of devising a mode of resistance more sharply focused than prophesying, witchcraft or murder. It is to be in a position to identify and analyze the nature of women's oppression" and so to begin the struggle for change. In the case of the people of neocolonies or colonized societies, it becomes imperative for them to constitute themselves as Subjects and active agents to be able to carry out the liberating enterprise. It can only be from this firm positionality that we can be able to problematize traditional and contemporary concepts in relation to our context and to contribute original theorizing on our culture.

It is with respect to our cultural context that we cannot too strongly emphasize the need for original research and field work as important components of a vital scholarship. So much in our culture needs to be documented, recuperated, and invigorated with new enthusiasm and interest. This retrieval of traditional forms will result in bringing into our consciousness and that of the larger public elements of our culture that would otherwise be neglected or irreplaceably lost, as well as in piecing together and reconstructing the complex tapestry of our culture. At the same time, this culture is not static but develops in relation to the historical process, as its most dynamic aspects participate in the people's struggle.

It thus becomes clear that we must position ourselves as Filipinos and lay claim to a soci-historical ground from which we respond or act with regard to external influences and
interventions. It is a position which foregrounds our interests, needs, struggles, and aspirations as a people vis-a-vis the hegemonic strategies of the West.

In this project of assuming the Filipino point of view, we necessarily discard the colonial distinction between high or fine arts and low or applied arts. All forms and genres, including paintings, posters, assemblages, and handmade weaves have their own standards of quality. Freed from academic hierarchies, we are thus able to privilege the indigenous arts of the people, the expressions of the folk that link us to the original matrix of Southeast Asian culture. At the same time, the Filipino identity is not found reified in the past, such as in the pre-colonial period or in the 19th century Propaganda and Revolution, but is a dynamic concept that is elaborated with the historical process. Our folk/ethnic expressions that grow out of the oral traditions constitute the underlying stratum of our cultural identity. Our contemporary arts, such as painting and sculpture, also form part of our national heritage, especially in so far as they show the judicious appropriation and indigenization of foreign influences.

To assume the Filipino viewpoint, however, is not a simple matter, for although the principal subject of our studies is indeed Philippine culture and art, this by itself does not guarantee a Filipino orientation. Given our colonial education, we have unconsciously and unwittingly assumed a baggage of "orientalism" which consists of Western and imperialist concepts and discourses of and about the Third World, stereotyped presuppositions, representations and expectations with which traditional Western scholars view Asia and our part of the world. So that it becomes possible the while we investigate our own culture, we may bring to bear upon it an alien point of view which reproduces colonial attitudes, biases, and canonical judgements. One common orientalist tendency, for instance, is to consider the large bulk of the artistic productions of the Third World, especially of its suppressed peasant population, not as art but exclusively as anthropological or ethnographic artifact for display in ethnographic and not in art museums.

Thus we assume a nationalist position in the definition and development of a national art and culture that is consistent with our interests, needs, and aspirations, particularly the needs of the large majority of laboring Filipinos--a culture which is not a shadow or a mimicry of Western culture. Part of the nationalist point of view valorizes as important fields of study and documentation the large majority of the people's cultural and artistic expressions--in terms of geography, from the North in the Cordilleras to the South in the Sulu archipelago, the lowland Christian Filipinos, the Muslims of Mindanao and Sulu, and in terms of class, the progressive/revolutionary cultural and artistic expressions of the workers, peasants and fisherfolk, aside from those of the petit-bourgeoisie, expressions that advance the people's true interests.

Doubtless, a nationalist point of view does not exclude foreign influences; rather, it can indigenize what is usable and applicable to its context. For it is also important to recognize that our contemporary art and culture have an international dimension which makes possible fruitful exchanges. It is also on the international plane that we link up with contemporary developments in progressive theory and criticism and, even more, with the struggles of people all over the world towards realizing the full human potential. (Alice G. Guillermo)