

Movement

by Patrick Flores

As it should be, and true to critical form, the NExSE (Northeast by Southeast) collective of artists marks its presence with a daring aspiration and ultimately a daunting project. Claims like this are vital in staking out ground for a subjectivity to emerge and to persist. It is not an identity ready-made by tradition, exploited by nation-states, made to appear to need preservation by the heritage industry, or milked by the free market for spectacle or facile nostalgia. It is rather a subjectivity that risks a position even as it is honed by the forces that shape it. In turn, this subjectivity shapes the said forces through action, assembly, and discursive assertions partly in the form of a statement that begins: “We are a group of nine Filipino artists. Our diverse intergenerational immigrant experiences are what inspire our artwork, along with our shared vision to decolonize the art world.”

We discern traces here of the ways by which a migrant experience creates a collective condition. Whether framed in terms of exile or diaspora, fleshed out by refugees or contract workers, spurred by a nomadic or cosmopolitan ethos, the migrant departs, leaves traces, and settles. The migrant misses home, wherever and however it is reckoned, but also forges new kinship and solidarities in what Foucault calls the “sudden vicinity of things.” Nine Filipino artists have decided to come together, to release themselves from the confines of their solitary studios and individual careers, from the comforts of their singular trajectories. They recognize “diversity” as a marker of plurality that defines a community or a constituency. This many-ness is “shared” and is productively reciprocal for those who partake of it.

The other important term in this formulation is “intergenerational,” which references transformations of the subjectivity through the years, so that the term “Filipino-American,” for instance, becomes unstable and is unhinged from normative conceptions of what it means to fuse those two seemingly coherent identities even if

they are known to be messy and oftentimes ungovernable. Finally, we sense the procedure, that is, to “decolonize.” This is very compelling but also very tricky. What does it mean and what does it take to decolonize? How does one conceptualize or theorize the colonial? What does the prefix “de” really stand for and what expectations does it burden the agent who is moved to activate it in relation to an obstinacy like the colonial? Does it have a great deal to do with blasting false binaries so that a third moment can be anticipated? Does the act of decolonizing presuppose a radical break from the colonial? If it were so, what might be the afterlife of the decolonial? What happens to the colonial’s prehistory? And what does the colonial resist in the first place?

A recurrent trope in the affective life of migrancy in contemporary art is invisibility. It is invoked in the statement when the artists state that while “Filipinos in the US make up the second largest Asian population group...[their] art remains invisible. Working to carve out a permanent space in the art world, we are interested in representing the complex nature of our community.” This is where the political work of art finds its trenches: in “carving” out that “space” so that artists can explicate the “complex nature” of being together.

This was the same predicament that bedeviled Carlos Villa, the Filipino-American firebrand in the sixties in California: artist, teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), activist, organizer, curator, thinker. When he asked about his lineage as a Filipino in the history of art, he was told there was none. As Mark Dean Johnson and Sherwin Rio point out: “Villa often recounted the story that when he was a student at SFAI in 1958 and had asked his professor about the art history of the Philippines, he was told that there wasn’t any. Villa’s preoccupation to deliberately forge an aesthetic path that articulate a Filipino diasporic aesthetic would become the artist’s central goal, but it would take a circuitous route over his career that spanned six decades.”

Surveying the practices of the NExSE artists, we are initiated into their interest in imagery, media, and even some aspects of performativity. All this constitutes the materiality of the migrant condition as articulated in practices that gain currency in contemporary art. Some tendencies surface:

There is a strong investment in the image that is culled from either the archive or everyday life. The image offers context as it absorbs historical processes like colonialism or revolution. The image may be an icon or it could be a figure; and there can be mixture, the better perhaps to reference hybridity or competing modes of production in both painterly and graphic terms as can be gleaned in the work of Francis Estrada. The body surely is foregrounded as a vector of affliction, struggle, and violence; and may be mediated by computer technology, networks in the mediascape, and hints of the future as Mark Ramos proposes.

Related to the image is the specter of memory that is recalled with longing and exigency, sometimes in flimsy pigment as if to impede the easy recognition of truth or the past if we heed Benjamin Iluzada. Fragmentation is also a mode to suggest the differences that comprise the complexity, or in the case of Mic Diño Boekelmann, the melancholy of the self and its documentation in portraiture.

Ornament and abstraction are instructive details, too, in the repertoire. This may constitute a symptom to move away from iconography or delay the capture of typical representation and an exploration of a visual language not so routinely instrumentalized by ideology or identity as indexed by the efforts of Eva Marie Solangon. These modes may also probe popular culture and the legacies of modernism in relation to design and text, as well as the everyday material of migrant labor in Julio Austria's intermedia production in which workplace and home cohabit the visual space. For her part, Maria Stabio extends the motif to the performative, stemming from the shift in the condition of the formal to become tropic and "decolonial."

Ritual is prominent, permeating the aesthetic of artists who try to either align with a more primordial Philippine cosmology or the quotidian techniques of weaving and knotting and lashing together found and discarded materials in the re-possessive, mutating corpus of Ged Merino. And Jeho Bitancor implicates "class" in this return to the local atmosphere and the global sensorium.

Finally, in rounding out the complexion of the artists of the collective, it is imperative that their biographies render their forms denser and more robust. The lives of

artists do not merely contrive a proscenium against which their oeuvre plays out in the foreground. Rather, in a migrant context as it is in others, the maker of the art is intertwined with the art that is made and made to circulate. And so, we ask: What are the contexts of the migrant situation? How do artists mediate this situation individually and with others? How do they choose materials and artistic languages to represent and perform this situation? What sorts of archives are formed in their practice: memory, documents, art studies, art-world discourses, field notes in their engagements with a fluid social life, and so on? What is their conception of the Philippines and the United States and how do they conceptualize movement and mobility between spaces? What kinds of conversations do they participate in as part of their continuing attempts to understand their shifting locale? This is the relay in which art and artist move. It is an ecology that in a diaspora becomes the basis of survival and source of inspiration to transform the material condition. The tools and the themes of the work get entangled in this mangrove and from it comes the expression of the migrant maker who negotiates the techniques of production in the course of navigating the circuits of encounters.

As *Northeast by Southeast* ponders its directions, it might be productive for this initiative to look back on the 1998 exhibition *At Home & Abroad: 20 Contemporary Filipino Artists*, an endeavor that convened artists from both the Philippines and elsewhere and was organized in the United States and the Philippines. It was part of the commemoration of the Philippine revolution against Spanish colonial rule from 1896 to 1898. One of the curators, Dana Friis-Hansen, would tease out a distinction of Philippine art: “In spite of ancient Asian roots, Filipino artists, because of their indigenous and colonial histories, their recent political wrestlings, the pleasure they clearly take in popular culture, and their cycles of emigration and return, make decidedly different art from their Asian colleagues.” Jeff Baysa, another curator of the exhibition, echoes this sentiment: “The artists chosen...share the processes of expatriation and displacement, whether forced or desired, from their homeland culture and other communities of Filipinos, in contrast to those who left the Philippines and then returned or those who fiercely belonged and never left.”

But closer to the northern terrain of the artists is Santiago Bose, native of Baguio of the northern Cordilleras in the Philippines and once a sojourner in New York. He, too, like Villa, was a hunter and gatherer, so to speak, a bricoleur of people and things. In 1985, the artist Jimmie Durham wrote an essay on Bose in New York titled "A Shaman Hits the Island: Lower East Side Report." Durham chronicles: "Santiago likes to work with material at hand, with subjective themes from whatever is his situation at the moment. His window installation at Zone looks like anarchy at first, made of mud and large timbers from the vacant lot across the street from the gallery, and an old photograph also from the vacant lot because the photo was taken the same year he was born...The piece has all sorts of echoes, like not yet being completely in a place, or emergence, development, and possibly homesickness for some more tropical place. Maybe transformation. Or you pass by the window and you stop and think, now what's this guy up to."

Durham asked Bose if projects "specializing in the works of a particular minority group tend to 'Ghetto-ize' the artists." Bose was initially adamant, only to be ambiguous in the end: "No, it is really not an issue at all. Show like this enable artists to put their work forward, which always difficult for minority artist. If the individual work has integrity, it will be able to transcend any tendency toward isolation. Of course, it is easy for an artist to get stuck in one place or another but that is always a danger for any artist." In one of his notebooks, Bose wrote: "I think people move from art into life. There are many artists...who choose to work outside the art world altogether, in hospitals or with farmers or with homeless people. Art as social action. Some artists move back and forth. Some try to stay in between."

Another cipher that may be considered in reckoning the northeast as some kind of a locus of practice would be David Medalla, the wunderkind world-maker who steered an idiosyncratic course for the contemporary in the sixties in Europe and the United States. Of particular valence in his oeuvre might be the Mondrian Fan Club founded by Medalla and his longtime collaborator Adam Nankervis in 1992 in New York. According Nankervis's account "Mondrian who lived in NYC, was the inspiration, and New York

City's back drop, where Medalla and Nankervis met at the Chelsea Hotel in the winter of 1990, inspired actions primarily in the city, and over time." He continues that the project might have begun "with a helicopter ride around NYC. (The following day the helicopter smashed into the Hudson River with four German tourists on board, all safely rescued!)...We did undocumented street actions all over Manhattan. Creating impromptus in homage of Mondrian, from posing with squares of fencing around sapling trees of red, yellow, blue plastic ties, to dancing the Boogie Woogie Victory alone, no audience but passersby in Times Square. We flaneured NYC for over a year, leaving our marks in wet cement...creating inflatables out of found balloons, and...detritus that corresponded with either one or the three primary colors creating ethereal moments that only both of us shared..." Such a vision could only be germinal and poignantly fascinating.

NExSE emerges on its own as a vehicle for deliberation and a collective method of prevailing in an increasingly global and vernacular art world. As a vehicle, it can only be a nexus, a word signaled by how the artists call themselves via two geographical, and ultimately geopoetic, coordinates. They are on the edge of a practice that hopefully moves beyond the conveniences of conceptualism and confronts the limits of identity politics and the profound, if not systemic and ingrained, refusals of particular persons built around color, class, origin, and erotic commitments. Put all these in the milieu of the migrant, and there is a potentially persuasive argument for an art alighting from the intersecting and stirring poles of subjectivity, from the global north to the global south through the east and the other way around.

As the statement ends: "This point of origination is simultaneously a point of divergence, as we explore, express, and investigate different avenues of what our heritage means to us in this particular contemporary moment."

The wistfulness of migrancy is also its urgency.