

檔案轉向：東亞藝術史的當代性

Other Worlds:

The Native, the National, the Non-Objective

異世界：

本土、國家與非具象

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Abstract

The essay reflects on the work of the university art museum as it responds to the archival imperative. Such imperative prompts the museum, which is situated in the context of the university, to create conditions for its materials to interact discursively and aesthetically through research and exhibitions. More specifically, the essay looks into a possible trajectory of the Philippine modern through conceptual frameworks evoked by the categories “native,” “national,” and “non-objective.” The latter are referenced by three figures who were active in the first half of the twentieth century in the Philippines: the collector and bureaucrat Jorge Vargas, the sculptor Guillermo Tolentino, and the critic, curator, and poet Aurelio Alvero. With regard to Philippine modernity, it revisits the notion of the national in the context of a desire for distinction that is not necessarily governed by the tropes of western modernism and instead traces its arguments to a more cosmological and cosmopolitan source, thus the terms “native” and “non-objective” are foregrounded to complicate the “national”.

Keywords: archive, modernity, nation, non-objective painting, museum, collection

摘要

本文旨在反思大學美術館為回應檔案化要求所採取的作為。此種要求促使在大學脈絡下的美術館透過研究與展覽，為其館藏創造出論述性與美學式的互動條件。更確切地說，本文藉由「本土」、「國家」與「非具象」三個類別所引發的概念架構，研究菲律賓現代性的可能軌跡。這三個類別分別由三位在二十世紀上半葉活躍於菲律賓的人物所體現，包括收藏家暨官員豪爾赫·巴爾加斯(Jorge Vargas)、雕刻家吉列爾莫·托倫蒂諾(Guillermo Tolentino)，以及評論家、策展人暨詩人奧雷利歐·阿爾維洛(Aurelio Alvero)。關於菲律賓的現代性，本文在渴望尋求差異的脈絡下，重新檢視「國家」這個觀念；這種渴望並不必然受到西方現代主義理念的支配，而是追溯其本身的論據至一個更為宇宙論式與世界主義式的起源。「本土」與「非具象」這兩個術語因而被突顯，以使「國家」概念複雜化。

關鍵字：檔案、現代性、國家、非具象繪畫、美術館、典藏

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In responding to the concerns of a conference on the archival, I turn to the archives of the Vargas Museum, or the Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, where I work as a curator. In the museum's desire to activate, or better to say, to excite the archive in relation to the permanent art collection and the contemporary art program, it had conceptualized the para-site exhibition called *Track Changes* in which materials from the archive would be gathered in uniform vitrines and inserted into the exhibition space.¹ It is part of the effort of the museum to offer another layer of discourse besides the collection and the contemporary. The contemporary is another form of intervention in what I envision as interpenetrating planes of materials in a space which has been freed from the obsession of the white cube and soaks up the external landscape, the natural light, and the rest of the rooms of a building that is, thankfully, mostly glass and aluminum.

The first of this series of initiations focused on the materials of the museum donor Jorge Vargas; the sculptor Guillermo Tolentino; and the poet, collector, and political operative Aurelio Alvero to trace a nativist strain in Philippine modernism. Here, the role of the archive is marked as contemporaneous with the collection and current art, and then situated in the larger project of art history. In the same vein, art history is located in the more extensive reflection on a possible theory of the modern in the context of the museum that historicizes its material and inscribes itself in the ecology of contemporary sensible life. By nativist I provisionally mean the breadth of articulations that may be considered not-yet or never-to-become colonial and therefore potentially national or nationalist, or perhaps, the basis of the exemplary folklore that is the nation. This anxiety over the native implicates a gamut of similar perturbations. For instance, is the native symmetrical with the indigenous? And does its politics feed into the politics of the decolonial? If the native is the indigenous, can there be a post-colonial episode in the dramatization of its struggle? If it does feed into the politics of the decolonial, how does it politicize the Philippine

1 *Track Changes* is a curatorial experiment that tries to explore the process of making exhibitions within the permanent collection of the Vargas Museum. It seeks to initiate conversation between the collection and memorabilia relating to sculptor and National Artist Guillermo Tolentino, and curator-poet Aurelio Alvero (with the nom de plume *Magtanggul Asa*), both having nativist dispositions, and whose works performed key roles in defining the "Filipino" through the modernity of art and the ethic of collecting its representations. Relating Tolentino and Alvero to Vargas is particularly intriguing as it gives us a glimpse into the aesthetic and political implications of making art, making nationalisms, and making museums in a time of war and rising from its ruin.

without ratifying the colonizing dynamic through inversion or reversal? Or does the native altogether inaugurate its own political operation beyond the dialectic of the post-colonial and the decolonial? Surely, all this unease condenses in the fraught expectation or anticipation of being modern, that is, in a state of awareness of being within the ambit of axiomatic recognitions: history, culture, society, nation.

What I am going to present to you in this paper is a proposition in support of a theory of the Philippine modern through the thought and practice of Vargas, Tolentino, and Alvero. They are constellated as a way to elaborate on their investments in the project of shaping the aesthetic of the distinct and sovereign Filipino by making, collecting, curating, and annotating art, all of which are but cognate modalities of distinction and autonomy akin to the "state of fantasy" that is the nation. Vargas collected Tolentino and Alvero helped Vargas cobble together his collection. Furthermore, the archives of Tolentino are in the University of the Philippines, which administers the Vargas collection and of which Vargas used to be a student of its first law class and later a regent. Relating Tolentino and Alvero to Vargas is particularly intriguing as it gives us a glimpse into the aesthetic and political implications of making art, making nationalisms, and making museums in a time of war and rising from its ruin.²

The constellation of the figures Vargas, Alvero, and Tolentino demonstrates the first moment, carving out a corpus of initiations that has sought to produce a collection and a collective. The second moment pertains to the relationship between expressions of the Filipino across three registers: the native, the national, and the non-objective. In this sequence of categories, the notion of the modern is rendered complicated, subjecting it to the interpellations of an ethnic, racial, and civilizational conception of a category nominated as Filipino. The latter rubric is then disciplined by the national and then let loose in another atmosphere called the non-objective. The theoretical problem I see in this constellative gesture is the way the modern might overdetermine or colonize the problem of self-consciousness. And so I ask: Is there another way to reflect on this condition beyond the province of the modern? What if we replace the modern with the idea of the

2 See Rose.

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archipelagic to move away from a continental, hegemonic thinking and consequently turn to a more dispersive, migrant, inter-island sensibility? What if we just characterize the project as Philippine, retaining the category of the post-colony, the country, the nation-state, and the implications of this cycle of identifications and yet insinuate its precarity as a term, with the Philippine being cast as a figurine, originally a diminution of Felipe, the King of Spain, after whom it was named? The Philippine cannot be conflated with the more doxic Filipino.

Let me now begin with Jorge Vargas. Jorge Vargas (1890-1980) was born on August 24, 1890 in Bago City, Negros Occidental. In 1907, he led a student rally in the city of Bacolod as a tribute to the opening of the First Philippine Assembly in Manila. In 1909, he became a member of the Junior Philippine Assembly. During this time, he entered the University of the Philippines (UP) in Manila. He received his law degree from UP in 1914, graduating valedictorian. He was then appointed in 1915 as law clerk of the Philippine Commission and private secretary to Commissioner Jaime C. De Veyra. From 1918 to 1919, he worked as aide and secretary to President Manuel L. Quezon as chairman of mission and executive secretary, First Philippine Independent Mission in Washington, D.C. In 1920, he became Secretary to President Manuel Quezon, a position that was modified in 1935 as Executive Secretary to the President of the Philippines. When the Japanese invaded the Philippines, he became in 1941 the first mayor of the newly created city of Greater Manila. From 1943 to 1945, he was the first Filipino Ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Japan and concurrently the Chairman of the Philippine Executive Commission. He was an active patron of the scouting movement and sports and was a diligent collector of all things Philippine, or the array of what may be termed Filipiniana (Jorge Vargas Archives).

In the archives of Vargas are two important texts in which he explicates notions of the Filipino peasant and the role of the University of the Philippines, the university established by the colonial American government in 1908. In “The Philosophy of the Filipino Peasant,” he denies any agency in his subject, portraying the peasant as, all at the same time, indigent, indolent, and nearly inert. In the mind of a landowner like Vargas, the peasant, who is distinguished from the town worker, is a creature of Spanish colonial

history and can only be redeemed by the enlightenment of American culture. In this maneuver, Vargas attempts to offer both an ethnographic description and a historical analysis of the peasant, beyond which he stages an argument for the modernity of the Filipino under the auspices of the Americans. He concludes that the Spanish regime has “forestalled” ambition and has left the peasant “nothing more than a sort of vegetating human animal” (Vargas 126). On America’s watch, “the philosophy of the Filipino peasant will be the philosophy of an awakened, enlightened nation,” according to Vargas (126).

It is also to America that Vargas speaks when he writes “What is the University of the Philippines?,” written two years after the Americans opened the university in Manila. In this essay, he imagines the institution as a milieu that gathers a polyethnic archipelago at the instance of a colonial regime, one that has to inevitably cohere into a nation-state to be governed exclusively by Filipinos. This agenda of Filipinization was for him the lynchpin of the University, the crucible to hone a “self-governing people” of a “homogeneous nation” that brings about a “self-dependent, national existence” (20-21).

This imagination for the collective may well have formed Vargas’s premise for an art collection. His founding documents would yield references to cultural heritage as vital for a “young Republic” and the logic of art as a kind of “accumulation” that serves as a “gauge” of a “level of culture” (20-21). The discourse and the institutionality of the university further confounds Vargas’s commitments, which prefigure the establishment of the Vargas Museum in 1987 in UP that amalgamates the “university museum” as a consummate template of the modernist absorption into reflexivity.

Important texts in the archive of Guillermo Tolentino tend to inflect this trope of the Filipino *bildung*. Tolentino, however, probes a deeper stratum to reference an ancient ethnic and racial community and continuity beyond the strictly colonial and imperialist civilization. Tolentino (1890-1976) was born on July 24, 1890 in Malolos, Bulacan. His early years in art were spent with the American teacher H. A. Bordner. He then attended the School of Fine Arts of UP. and studied sculpture under Vicente Francisco. As a sculptor, he collaborated with the painter-architect Juan Arellano for the tomb of the

Palma clan at the Cementerio del Norte. Still with Arellano, he designed relief figures for the façade of Casino Español on Taft Avenue in Manila. He graduated from UP in 1915. In 1919, he travelled to the United States, where he enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in New York for advanced classes in sculpture. He worked as assistant to American sculptor Gutzon Borglum. He completed his studies in 1921, after which he went around Europe. He studied at the Regge Instituto Superiore di Belle Arti di Roma, graduating in 1923 with honors. Upon return to Manila, he opened his studio in 1925 and a year later was appointed instructor in sculpture at UP. Tolentino is distinguished for his public monuments, including the *Bonifacio Monument*(1993) and the *Oblation*(1939). He was named National Artist in 1973 (Paras-Perez *Tolentino* 107).

In *The Language and Alphabet of the Tagalog* (1937), he begins by laying out an almost encyclopedic account of the Philippines, through the different systems of knowledge, describing flora, fauna, and people in lofty and idiosyncratic Tagalog, an ethnolinguistic marker of a community organized around the capital of Manila. The language is the basis of the consolidated national language, which is Filipino. This is the context of his discussion of the Philippine language and script. It opens with an epigraph referencing Mahatma Gandhi, who asserts that “if any language can become India’s national language—and some one must become India’s national language if Indians are to become a nation—that language is Hindi” (Tolentino *Wika at Baybaying Tagalog* i). The book offers an homage to the Tagalog poet Francisco Baltazar or Balagtas through the organization called Balagtasiana that declares itself to be “never to be dedicated to a place, state, sect, and faith,” an invocation of the universal via negativa (i). Tolentino illustrated some pages, including the one imagining how the Tower of Babel might have looked from a planetary perspective and in the context of the birth of Tagalog as one of the world’s languages (i).

In *Rizal* (1957), he writes a biography of the National Hero. At the end of the book is a story of Rizal’s sister Trinidad’s séance episode with Tolentino, who deciphers the patriot’s message. Here, we are led to weave the strand of the paranormal, the esoteric, or the occult, the animate image and the animist belief with the rationality and artifice of the national. It also reminds us of what David Teh calls the preter-national, that is,

“a field defined in relation to nation, yet not reducible to its terms or its logic,” thus constantly haunting its hegemonic stature (175).

The labor of Tolentino to foreground ethnological knowledge may be part of a broader design to form a Filipino matrix of national independence and aesthetic freedom. This takes shape aesthetically, as far as Tolentino’s practice is concerned, in the drawing *Grupo de Filipinos Ilustres*, which he did in 1911 and was transferred onto lithographic stone by the artist Jorge Pineda in 1912, pulled in sepia, and had a first edition of 1500 copies. According to the Philippine scholar Resil Mojares, the work may be linked up with the 1908 law on the construction of the Pantheon of Illustrious Filipinos. He adds that this came at the time of the formalization of national identity through symbolic production, from art, scholarship, monument making, and the standardization of the Tagalog orthography. Such an imagination of Tolentino’s illustrious, Mojares adds, is “male, heavily Tagalog, Creole and Chinese-mestizo in descent, and metropolitan in character” and not to mention mainly in western suits (181).

Megan Thomas further widens the frame of this discussion by identifying the fixation on the ancient as an obsession of Orientalist scholarship that was based on ancient text, which was made the index of authenticity and the defense against civilizational decline. The Philippines, however, presented a different scenario, as no watershed could be cited and hence no decay could be marked simply because “the deep pasts of their people were text-less, thought to be among those without history” (Thomas 33). This is the impulse of the overinvestment in language by the elite and amateur interlocutor in the Philippines, which generated a desire for a unifying language anchored in Tagalog for “this polyglot, modernizing, and increasingly cosmopolitan archipelago” (169). Tolentino participated in this scholarly discourse that brought together the ethnological and the folkloric, the systematic and the everyday, the better for a self-consciousness of history and pretensions to nationality could take deeper root.

Elaborating on this aesthetic of the national are the monuments of Tolentino. These are condensations of the local in a classical-romantic visual language of heroism and history. Works like *Filipinas in Bondage* and the *Oblation* (1939) pursue this tradition of

visualizing the Philippine condition allegorically in the grammar of classical statuary. Firstly, Tolentino thought of antiquity as modern. Secondly, he evolved a language of monument making from the strictly academic as in what is presumed to be his work on heroes to a neoclassical approach that quotes Philippine folk life. The *Commonwealth Triumphal Arch*, which was originally conceived by the alumni of the University of the Philippines of which Jorge Vargas was the President, is a case in point. In Tolentino's own explanation of the design: "The various figures would support the arch in the manner of transporting a nipa house from a temporary location by means of *bayanihan*, the native way of mutual cooperation; on opposite bases...the whole Filipino people, Christians and non-Christians alike from all regions of the Archipelago. So these figures, in the same manner mentioned above, transport their semi-independent government from its shaky or sandy location to a permanent solid foundation of the Republic of the Philippines" (Paras-Perez *Tolentino* 107). Aside from the reference to the *bayanihan*, Tolentino also depicts the arch as reminiscent of the "native *singkaban*" or festival arch.

It is at this moment when the folk meshes with the classical that we discern Tolentino's inclination to mix and to abstract, which leads me to the third figure of this paper: Aurelio Alvero (1913-1958). He was born on October 15, 1913 in Tondo, Manila. He was the son of Emilio Alvero, who was a painter, glass artist, and interior decorator, and Rosa Sevilla, who was a writer, educator, social worker, and founder of Instituto Mujeres, one of the oldest schools for girls in the Philippines and the first Filipino-run lay Catholic school for women. He was at the Ateneo during high school and attended the University of Santo Tomas (UST) for his degrees in education in 1935 and law in 1937. He was an accomplished orator and took up law and education simultaneously. He was a published poet, publishing his first book of poems *Moon Shadows on the Water* at the age of 21. He taught English, history, and the Tagalog language. He was tried as a Japanese collaborator and was imprisoned from 1945 to 1947 and from 1950 to 1952. He co-founded the Young Philippines, a fringe nationalist party of the 1930s advocating "The Political Salvation of the World Lies in Dictatorship Rather than Democracy." The other founder was Wenceslao Vinzons who in 1929 in Manila delivered a speech titled "Malaysia Irredenta." It sought to recover a potentially extensive Malaysia that in his mind had been "circumscribed by narrow national boundaries" in the long process

of the struggle for "emancipation from foreign control" (Gaité n.p.). In his compelling address, he urged his audience to work towards a "renewed racial vitality" that would "give birth to a new nationalism, that of Malaysia redeemed" (Gaité). Vinzons conjured a "Malaysian" continuum, "extending from the northern extremity of the Malay peninsula to the shores of New Guinea, from Madagascar to the Philippines and the remotest islands of Polynesia" (Gaité). Two of the members of Young Philippines were delegates to the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung: the future Philippine President Diosdado Macapagal and the diplomat-writer Carlos P. Romulo.

Alvero founded as well a "quasi-fascist, blue-shirted" organization, which was modelled on groups in Germany, Italy, and Spain (Goodman 96). He went by the name of Magtanggul Asa, which in the local language meant Defending Hope and wrote prodigiously on Philippine culture. In one monograph, he recounts how the Asa Museum began as a collection of reproductions he bought in 1930. In 1933, he acquired a house for himself and his ten real paintings. In 1944, the collection grew to a total of 550 paintings, a large part of it was lost during the battle for the liberation of Manila in 1945. In 1955, he sought to restore it with 350 paintings alongside sculpture, stamps, coins, ceramics, and ethnological artifacts. Alvero helped the foremost wartime collector in Manila, Jorge Vargas, who was a political figure in the successive imperialisms of the United States and Japan. Like Vargas, he had a complicated relationship with the Japanese ideology of orientalism and pan-Asianism and at some point became a dubious person among the Japanese, the Americans, and his fellow Filipinos. All told, Alvero was a man of very broad sympathies: numismatist, philatelist, bibliophile (he was one of the organizers of the Philippine Booklovers Society, and was secretary at the time of his death), historian, artist, playwright (he won the Palanca Memorial Award for the best play in 1955), writer (poetry, fiction, essay), art critic, curator and art collector, script writer (he wrote "Buhay at Pag-ibig ni Dr. Jose Rizal" filmed by Balatbat and Bagumabayan Productions), and businessman (Asa [Alvero] *Tagalog Trilogy* 100-104).

A case deserving closer study is the *First Exhibition of Non-Objective Art* in Tagala in 1953 in Manila. In this project, the idiom of western abstraction would be realigned twice: first through the term non-objective and second through "Tagala," a reference

to the dominant ethnic society in the country that is appropriated presumably as an alternative to the colonial appellation of the archipelago, which is the Philippines. Like Tolentino, Alvero was an avid promoter of Tagalog culture as evidenced in the books that he wrote and published.

The said non-objective art exhibition consisted of 28 paintings from 11 artists. According to the release in the newspapers at the time, the non-objective is a “plastic statement of the artist’s subjective feeling, emotion, attitude, and/or reaction to objective stimuli. What matters is not external reality anymore, but its transformation into a new kind of reality in terms of shapes and lines and colors interacting... in space. It approaches the quality and condition of music in the sense that musical ideas are expressed with musical means, and once so expressed, musical statements or compositions are not wholly translatable into other art forms” (Newspaper release, no details).

It is not very clear who curated this exhibition. But there is very good reason to believe that it was Alvero who organized it at the Philippine Art Gallery. First, Tagala is a peculiar term that had figured in Alvero’s earlier work such as *Art in Tagala*, a catalogue of his collection of Philippine art published in 1942 and 1944 where he described both the life of the artist and the quality of the artistic corpus. Second, Alvero wrote a monograph on the exhibition. This monograph is the most extensive documentation of the project and one that explicates the basis of the non-objective as a category of analysis in art history and art criticism in the Philippines. Recent research, however, has revealed that the title of the exhibition was the “First Non-Objective Art Exhibition in the Philippines,” and that Alvero changed Philippines to Tagala.

In assessing the term non-objective, it is productive to revisit the term that preceded it, which is neo-realism. The shift from neo-realism to non-objective traces the kind of relationship that Philippine modernists had with modernism. The renewal of realism and the negation of objectivity are salient processes of mediating the modern by expanding the scope of realism, on the one hand, and, on the other, exceeding the boundaries of the empirical world, which is reckoned as objective. Neo-realism is a rubric that seems to have been invented within the Philippine art world and claims no ties to any western visual arts

movement of its time. It betrays a nuanced engagement with realism, which is not totally abandoned, only calibrated perhaps to channel the urgency or materiality that it yields or the social context that it accesses. Does the situation in which realism is revitalized, or re-animated, and the objective is supplanted by subjectivity cast a particular form of the native that may not necessarily be the national but may however be a vector of the international without supplementing the western colonial? Does the non-objective then facilitate the entry of the native into the inter- or transnational?

The oeuvre of the Philippine artist Hernando R. Ocampo may prove be a good barometer of how modernism had been weathered in the post-colony. It begins with what critics called his “proletarian phase” in which he depicts the workers of an emerging city; he then sorties into a more eclectic modernism beyond post-Impressionism and mainly of cubistic propensity, and then into non-objective painting. Ocampo was also a writer in English and Filipino (poetry and fiction) with robust political sympathy. Rodolfo Paras-Perez explains these transmutations within realism and beyond: “The Neorealists of the immediate postwar years did not see painting as an act independent of reality. They were aware of what was going on in New York. But they looked at reality in the same way the cubists looked at reality: as something to be abstracted, a point of departure. Thus, H. R. Ocampo, the most articulate of the Neorealists and later, the most nonobjective or nonfigurative painter in the group, insisted that his works were always inspired by nature—the openings between the boughs of a tree, the shape of a dancing flame, etcetera” (“Man and Carabao” 110).

The shift in the tempers of Ocampo complexifies the theorizations of the native and the Philippine among artists, curators, and collectors in the scene from the forties onward. The native and the Philippine might have found a feasible liaison with the international by way of abstraction as mediated by the non-objective, which to a significant extent made possible by the American turn in the art world. It should be worth noting that in the 1962 and 1964 iterations of the Venice Biennale, Philippine art was represented by abstraction honed partly by American abstraction: Fernando Zobel in the Spanish Pavilion in 1962 held out oriental calligraphic paintings and in 1964 Jose Joya and Napoleon Abueva inaugurated the Philippine participation in Venice with abstract expressionist paintings

and modernist sculptures respectively. But antedating this American specter hovering above the Philippine modern was the postwar landscape of ruin and reconstruction, a kind of dread and flux to which, on the one hand, abstraction lent well and, on the other, something that abstraction could not contain. As Paras-Perez interjects: “But there was nothing abstract in Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (“Man and Carabao” 109). Surely, the series of wars—Pacific War, Cold War, Vietnam War—confounded the Philippine abstract language, transiting from neo-realism to non-objective and transcoding the discourses of the international and the Philippine through the post-colonial that was deemed, like Ocampo’s form, natural and native and therefore international.

Alvero would foreground the non-objective as a kind of linear movement away from realism and a culmination of the struggle for subjectivity as opposed to objectivity, of which according to him photography was emblematic. This departure from objectivity was coincident with the art historical trajectory premised on the modern, a critique of the Academic style and the series of transformations through western-derived styles of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and the School of Paris. Surely, much nuance is elided in this art historical rendering of the story of modernism; that said, the drift towards non-objectivity proceeds from this history. Alvero contends that the non-objective movement in the west found its conjuncture in the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Isamo Noguchi, Natsuke Takehita, and Piet Mondrian. In the Philippines, he would identify Hernando R. Ocampo as one of the earliest exponents of non-objective art. According to him, non-objective painting consists of “things that existed in the mind’s eye, irrespective of the actual physical or visual nature of the objects” (Asa [Alvero] *Non-objective Art in Tagala* 5). The artist, he continues, “did away with the depicting of the external...and went into the internal... (and) eliminated cognizable representation”(5).

The term non-objective was harnessed by Baroness Hilla Rebay, painter and polemicist who was adviser to Solomon Guggenheim and was instrumental in building up the collection of the Guggenheim Museum. Rebay curated the first exhibition of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, the precursor of the Guggenheim, that was titled *Art of Tomorrow* in 1939. Rebay, in mobilizing the term non-objective, was said to have

been “shaped in part by her studies in theosophy and Vasily Kandinsky’s writings, among other influences” (Veil 120). She would also compare non-objective painting to music: “These paintings are harmonious, beautiful, and restful. They elevate into the cosmic beyond where there is no meaning, no intellect, no explanation, but something infinitely greater—the wealth of spiritual intelligence and beauty” (“Hilla Rebay and the Museum of Non-Objective Painting”).

In Alvero’s interpretation of non-objective, the notion of plasticity is central. Alvero quotes the American abstractionist Hans Hofmann as an epigraph to his monograph. According to Hofmann: “A plastic idea must be expressed with plastic means just as a musical idea is expressed with musical means, or a verbal idea with verbal means. Neither music nor literature are wholly translatable into other art forms, and so a plastic art can not be created through a superimposed literary meaning” (Asa [Alvero] iv). What is important to tease out here is a modernism that moved from Post-Impressionism to abstraction and to informel, with a certain inclination to music as a condition to be aspired.

Second, non-objectivity may have conversed with Rebay’s interest in spirituality and by extension addressed the search for mysticism. In this regard, Tolentino’s practice as a spiritist who conducted séance sessions may well be germane. He presided over the Union Spiritista Cristiana de Filipinas, which was affiliated with the World Spiritist Foundation. In one essay on the organization, he counts as part of the motley coterie of spiritists the likes of Moses, Plato, Buddha, Christ, Kant, and Edison. He describes the mediums who compose the organization as doing the “impossible” when in trance; they can “heal the sick locally and telepathically, arrest the spread of epidemics...still others operate without any surgical equipment but their bare hands” (Tolentino “Spiritism Marches On” n.p.).

In this effort to discuss Vargas, Tolentino, and Alvero, I tried to assemble a theoretical framework of the Philippine modern that considers the aesthetic, artifactual, and discursive implications of the archival material. I did this mainly to probe the constitution of the collective: the ethic of collecting as embodied by Vargas and the process of a national formation in relation to the emergence of a post-colonial Republic

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imagined by America, the possibility of an Oriental nation envisioned by Japan, and the desire for Philippine independence crafted by the tropes of civilization, racial particularity, and the national spirit. These tropes tend to harden, even coarsen, and typify into culture but at the same time get loosened up or released into some kind of mystical ether, dissipated in the cosmos of the non-objective that breaks up the coherence of the national so that it can yield again the native or the antique and open up to the international or the modern; recover some entitlement to the classical and romantic tradition of the heroic and the monumental; and finally inhabit the space of the worldly, the immaterial, and the afterlife—all this without being burdened by the empiricism and idealization of identity. Within this conjuncture, the category of the Philippine is somewhat dispersed from the sediment of nation or nationalism. It mutates across the spectrum of various political valences: the anti-colonial, the universal, the oriental, the democratic, and so on. In many ways, this enables the discipline of post-colonial art history to resist the pressure of having to name a modern thing called the Philippine through an existing taxonomy or typology that has become expedient in the history of art brought forth by imperial projects. It instead encourages the scholarship to patiently annotate the procedure or process of formation that weaves in and out of a more complex textile of the production of art wherever it is woven and unravels. What might be risked is the act of contemplating the modern, finally the post-colonial modern, in terms of scale and relay, a form of current that alternates and therefore can be successive without being progressive or a reflexive range that is constantly calibrated or a shifting scape of theaters, locales, or schemas that keep the modern always-already emergent like some kind of excited archive.

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