



A CONVERSATION WITH CARLOS QUIJON, JR.

This transpired online from 15 October to 28 November 2020.

B.B.P. HOSMILLO: Hello Carlos. Thank you for this opportunity to have a conversation with you. Eight years ago, your chapbook *DECOMPOSITION* was published. In recent years, you were a research fellow at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and the Transcuratorial Academy. Creative writing and curatorship—what do you get from these practices? How are they similar and different from each other?

CARLOS QUIJON, JR.: My entry point into curating is research and writing, particularly, an interest in contemporary theory, the essay form, and modes of knowledge production. More than my actual writing practice, I think my work with *transit*, a small press and online intermedia journal that I co-founded with designer Gerick King and writers Michelle Esquivias and Bea Mariano, was instrumental in the way the trajectory of my practice expanded to curating. I wanted to create a venue that accommodated more experimental and propositional approaches to writing and that made use of the production economy of the small and alternative press. This interest and sensibility I still pursue in other projects such as *tractions*, an online journal I started (with animator Ben Sy designing) this year while on lockdown.

I think curating and writing are congruent practices in the way both articulate or inaugurate relationalities. What I like about curating is that for me it requires the practitioner to shed off the self-referentiality and self-sufficiency that tend to saturate creative writing, especially as taken as a discipline in the Philippines. I like the vulnerability that curatorial practice brings to authorial urgencies. You are working with space, artists, resources, and other variables that are mostly not in your control.



B.B.P.H.: “Experimental” and “alternative”—what do these terms bring in the ways we experience literature and art? Once used as lens or structure of art-making and worlding (or world-making), how do you think texts relate to conventional forms of writing?

C.Q.J.: I think in the disciplinary history of writing, especially in the Philippines, there has been a reification of ideas about form wherein it becomes a matter of rules or rubric. We see this in how rigid we study genre and how we restrict form to a sense of it being pre-given, unchanging, timeless. I think, at least in literature in English, this is also attributable to the desire to perfect the colonizer’s language or terms of rhetoric. This reification rendered attentiveness to form an esoteric venture. For me, it is the total opposite of that. I would like to think that concerns of form are necessarily experimental and propositional as they always involve asking your reader to assume a specific disposition about the material and the world. Form is always social and for me, this is the basis of experimentation. I started *transit* to host kinds of writing that might not be welcomed in the existing publications then. It also asked contributors to consider a different approach to writing: starting with a conceptual prompt from other artists and practitioners.

B.B.P.H.: What brought you to curatorship and the study of art?

C.Q.J.: My mentor Patrick D. Flores, who is also my professor in an art criticism class in graduate school, encouraged me to continue writing about art. He also took me under his wing coordinating exhibitions he curated.

B.B.P.H.: And how is this work fulfilling you?

C.Q.J.: I see curating as a compelling extension of my interests in questions of knowledge production and knowledge economies, from editorial work to exhibitions. I also like how curating is more a method or a framework of



thinking than a specialization. There is a requisite openness and an acknowledgement of one's own intellectual limits in curating that for me is challenging and exciting.

B.B.P.H.: Curatorship appears to me as an artistic practice, too. Just like here in *Queer Southeast Asia*, the making of this journal, curating it, significantly it is a matter of composition. It matters how it looks like, where a photograph appears, what words should be highlighted, what words to use—in your curatorial practice, do you always pursue queerness? What are things you value the most?

C.Q.J.: What I have learned from my own practice and from working with other practitioners is that the curatorial is an agency that convenes disparate elements and places them in relation with other elements. It definitely exceeds the form and materiality of the exhibition. The practices of Wong Bing Hao and Renan Laru-an are exceptional in this regard. I would like to think that this convening is inchoate and formative. It creates its own socialities—between subjects, objects, situations, contexts.¹ This is where I find a productive intersection between queerness and the curatorial. In many ways, both cultivate and thrive in this formativity. Both the curatorial and queerness are troublesome agencies, in the way that they upset coherent and already schematized ideas of autonomy, radicality, criticality, or universality.² I think this is what I have learned to discern in my current practice. My thinking on queerness is based on possibilities of this sociality if it is allowed to thrive, instead of how it is usually defined or categorized. So it is less “I pursue queerness” than I allow things and thinking to thrive and to gain their own traction. There is much to unlearn about how we think about histories, texts, objects, in terms of how we frame our imaginations. The critical and the radical

¹ See Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008).

² See Wong Bing Hao, ed., *Indifferent Idols* (Taipei: Taipei Contemporary Arts Center, 2018).



I think are always rendered suspect (in the best possible way, I think) in this sense especially with the ease they have indexed propriety or desirability in any endeavor that we do in contemporary times.

B.B.P.H.: It feels so good to be reminded that queerness is a kind of agency, for through we can stretch out the failures of heteronormativity as a structure of expression and life. I remember, one time I was studying about disability, victimhood, and the American war in Vietnam. Crip theory via Robert McRuer and Margrit Shildrick importantly historicises the addictive fantasies in contexts that hold reproduction as a sign of the normal body. But when you look at it, that time for instance after the war in Vietnam, when the body was perceived more iatrogenic than ever, when people started developing skin and bodily malfunctions due to their exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicidal compound once used by the Americans against their enemies, there certainly was a problem in embracing that sort of common thinking that reproduction, for a body to be rendered normal, should be the objective. Of course, one is not a monster because they can't or don't intend to reproduce. But you "allow thinking to thrive" in the way you mentioned this, I find, is quite personal. How does this happen in your case?

C.Q.J.: I think a resonant idea that informs my thinking and practice is the resistance to self-mastery or self-sufficiency. It is a recognition that practice and concepts have trajectories, or lives of their own—in relation to how they mutate through time or how other agents mobilize them within particular frameworks and with their own premises and contexts in mind. It discerns how my thinking is shaped by human limits and contingencies and is shaped by affective and social considerations. I feel that the curatorial, because of its essentially social agency, is an apt site where this can be played out and that is what makes it an exceptional practice for me.



B.B.P.H.: Queerness—how does this usually translate into art? Have you encountered something that conveyed nothing of queerness at all until a second or another look?

C.Q.J.: I think queerness plays out in sociality. Something that I have been thinking about is a slight reworking of the tension between minoritarian and universalist understandings of queerness that the brilliant critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has articulated early in her writings. I am interested in imagining queerness not as a hardened and discrete tradition but also without forsaking an interested queer agency. In my practice I find that this is a very productive problem. I think the necessity for a second look is cultivated in this tension. It works against the normativity of categories and the hegemonic logic of binaries that tend to fix meanings within more stable matrices. Is it even possible or desirable to understand queerness *in toto*? It doesn't mean that we then subscribe to a freewheeling kaleidoscope of meanings to answer in the negative. I think it is a more necessary, and because of this, more difficult, task to be keen and sensitive to how socialities create identities, materialities, forms and to resist the ease with which coherent narratives give us comfort. Resist the ease, but definitely allow ourselves to recognize comfort and thus problematize it most sensitively. For me this is a crucial aspect of thinking about queerness: why do we insist on things and categories to be seamless and coherent? Life thrives in contingencies and complexity and this is what sociality teaches us.

B.B.P.H.: Would you say that a tangible piece of art is queer even if its creator isn't?

C.Q.J.: This is an important question. I think though that the question is a trap, in the sense that phrasing it this way, we are made to frame a work of art, talisman-like, as meaningful in its mere existence. I think this is where the idea that queerness exists in sociality comes in. I think about the criticisms on Sedgwick who was this cis-woman who wrote the most sensitive monographs



on queer culture. Who is to say that one is queer, or that one is queer enough to create a queer work? What even is a queer work? It is a slippery logic that taken to its logical conclusion limits and polices understandings of what it is to be queer. And again, this is not an argument for anything and anyone is queer. I just think such a question traps us into the very same binary that heteronormative arguments about our existence subject us. I am suspicious of these kinds of syllogisms. Who is to say that one is queer? Or that not all queer subjectivities are exemplary of queerness? Instead of essentializing what constitutes queerness, I think it is more productive to account for its effects, the structures it enables, supports, or neglects, the agencies it allows to proliferate. Perhaps it is more productive to create spaces and enable more hospitable infrastructures for the host of queer subjectivities to write about and for themselves. I would like to imagine that in thinking about queerness playing out in socialities, we resist this simplification and allow the complexity of subjectivities, desires, ways of life to thrive.

B.B.P.H.: I think this is truly an important discussion to have. I'm more inclined to look into this as a question of ethics the way Foucault discussed subjectivity as an ongoing assembly and disassembly, an aesthetic struggle, which brings us the notion that identity is a political project. In my view, it is important that we maintain questions such as "who is queer" and "what is queer art" unanswerable for it to be ethical. Amongst other things, queerness dissolves boundaries and norms, so thinking of the self or art as a fixed and settled matter goes against the very thread of what queerness is all about. But the difficulty here, which I myself deliberate upon all the time, how that very capacity of queerness re-invents a sense of complicity to the oppressive ideals it aims to shatter in the first place. I'm thinking about white queer writers who talk about black queerness in their writing. I'm thinking about LGBTIQ+ allies, let's say women visual artists, who can name their exhibition "lesbian art" or "trans art". I was once in touch with a Southeast Asian male author whose work I found in a queer issue of an international publication and when I invited



this author to submit to *Queer Southeast Asia* he told me “I am straight”. I mean, how does that happen? I think a significant part of maintaining the aforementioned questions unanswerable is thinking that queerness has a political goal, and one that is about emancipation. How do you think of these things?

C.Q.J.: I definitely agree with the way you think about queerness as a question of ethics and a politics of emancipation. Perhaps what I deem should be most important in these discussions is the recognition that if we think of queerness as a political project we should think about what its articulations perform and who performs such articulations. It is clear that queerness is entangled in all sorts of currencies and contingencies in the contemporary moment, which makes it all the more necessary to parse its political efficacies in the most sympathetic way possible. I think this can enrich the Foucaultian conceptualization that you mentioned. Having said that, I think for the most part the examples you cite point to the shortcomings of a discourse of queerness that centers on representation or visibility or even identity. What we have to account for are the ways in which these impulses are typically premised on (heteronormative) logics of coherence or self-sufficiency which adhere to most ideations of identitarian or representational discourse. This primacy of coherence or self-sufficiency I feel needs reconsideration. A reframing of questions we ask will be beneficial in this sense. What lies beyond visibility or representation as queer political life? How do we think about a queer political life, even? I feel that the project of emancipation, for it to make sense, must necessarily complicate representational or identitarian commitments and must necessarily challenge the structures that traffic in minoritarian niche currencies and these will only be possible if queer people, practices, and infrastructures are enabled in earnest.



B.B.P.H.: Developing connections and linkages—how crucial is this in the survival of art?

C.Q.J.: One of my favorite thinkers of my generation, Renan Laru-an, has written about scenes of knowledge vis-à-vis sites of knowledge.³ I like the former phrase very much because it necessitates thinking about knowledges, situations, phenomena in scenes—time, space, relations. An ongoing project (a series of exhibitions and discursive programs) that I am working now looks at the possible affinities between Africa and Southeast Asia. This is something that is not quite articulated in common historical accounts and these accounts, in turn, have limited how we imagine how these two regions are comparable, congruent even. In foregrounding and developing connections and linkages we expand our capacities to relate to and sympathize with others. This is not a mere question of the survival of art, but more the imagination of a commonality among humanities and cultures and the survival of people we have been taught to deem *other*. What is interesting for me is that the connections and linkages we emphasize change the way we imagine our contexts and our histories. I think this is what is most valuable in these endeavors—the way understanding human history is always complex and difficult, and this is not something one skirts around in favor of simplified statements. We take into account the vibrant vitality of life by imagining a proliferation of connections and linkages, and with these an elaborate entanglement of agencies and urgencies that are always simultaneously exceptional and exemplary.

B.B.P.H.: How important is it for art to have an audience?

³ See Renan Laru-an, “Criticality seems the only capital that we have,” interview with *Open Place*, 6 August 2016, <https://openplace.com.ua/en/pevno-krytychnist-yedynyj-nash-kapital/>.



C.Q.J.: I am of the thinking that audiences are constituted alongside works of art. Because artworks are social things, it would not exist without an audience. It is not that art needs to have an audience, but that it always has an audience. This is a slight revision of how we typically think about audiences. Art always exists as a form of address. Maybe the more interesting question is how artworks find, address, and constitute this audience, this attentiveness and responsiveness to sensible form.

B.B.P.H.: What of Manila makes it an interesting site of artistic expression?

C.Q.J.: The Philippines is an interesting site of artistic expression, and I think I can say this about most of Southeast Asia, because it has always been forced to recognize the complex workings of coloniality and how it requires us to be patient in parsing the vitality of agencies that flourish in this context of colonial violence, resistance, but also survival—the way we have imbibed manifold ways to deal with colonialism, both in neo- and post-. The late critic Alice Guillermo talks about how we have become “active self-determining subjects” and that “the region can confidently assert itself in its art and aesthetics that are being built on its own terms, exigencies, historical and material conditions” without disavowing the colonial sources of concepts like modernism.⁴ Flores writes about “colonialism as critical inheritance” where coloniality becomes “materialization of oppression *and* a prefiguration of its end through resistance.”⁵ In all this we are forced to be keen on how forms of life and intelligences embody potent agencies that move through, in, and across entanglements of coloniality.

⁴ Alice Guillermo, “Affirming ASEAN Cultural Integrity in Art and Aesthetics,” in *The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions: A Documentation of the Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics* (Manila: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1994), 4.

⁵ Patrick D. Flores, “Homespun, Worldwide: Colonialism as Critical Inheritance,” in *36 Ideas from Asia: South-east Asian Art* (Manila: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2002), 17.



B.B.P.H.: What project are you working on now?

C.Q.J.: I am currently working with Singapore art historian and curator Kathleen Ditzig on developing a series of exhibitions, film and discursive programs for 2021-2022 on Afro-Southeast Asia affinities. The collaboration is inspired by an extended fellowship we both did titled Modern Art Histories in and across Africa, South and Southeast Asia (MAHASSA), a project spearheaded by the Asia Art Archive, Dhaka Art Summit, and Cornell University's Institute of Comparative Modernities, with support from the Getty Foundation's Connecting Art Histories initiative. We are set to have an exhibition in Singapore in January 2021, and are working out further iterations in Manila in the same year and Busan in 2022. The project looks at Maphilindo (acronym for Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia), a shortlived confederation based on a Pan-Malayan ethnos that historical annotations have nominated as heir to the ethos of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955. This is a regional imagination set in the midst of the Cold War and that played out a complex theater of colonial control and sovereign aspirations of these states of Southeast Asia, that in this timeframe recognized similarities and affinities with the newly independent states in Africa. It simultaneously implicated the geopolitical configuration of the region that we recognize today as Southeast Asia and also the initiations of a geopoetic imagination of Malay worldmaking. Most recently, I was asked to be part of the student working group of the Global (De)Centre for Diversity, Mobility, and Culture, "a growing network of scholars from across the world committed to producing new knowledge and using different epistemologies and methods by working collaboratively with a broad range of partners." In all this, I think queerness for me becomes a way to think in a world that because keen on surviving, is always vulnerable to complicity and instrumentalization. It is a way to recognize this but not get helplessly mired in it; a way to sympathize with those who despite being faced with these difficulties refuse to lose the faith of flourishing in a queer future.



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