

# New media in the cradle of modern art

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The orchestrated embrace of Philippine modern art and new media in “Decode” presents us with an intriguing bifurcation of use of technologies in art. The varieties of methods by which artists use digital and electronic media and integrate other materials in their work provide opportunities for study of the principles of their production. This enables a scrutiny of the components of digital and electronic images and their extensions as representational systems. By looking at the relationships between Philippine new media and modern art, we could trace how new media takes art in new directions. This may also help us identify exactly what makes “new media” new.



The new media artists in this exhibition freely selected those pieces from the gallery’s permanent collection that they felt their work elicited the most meaningful dialogue. The resulting repertoire is diverse, from Manansala to the “Madman” from Mallilipot, Albay. Such diversity interpreted within the continuum of cultural production permits a testing of material, cultural and historical critique of art that uses new technologies. Such diversity also presents art audiences the opportunity to look at Philippine modern art through and alongside the popular media by which they regularly conduct their lives.

Therefore, this exhibition may be important in providing catalytic questions, if not answers, to theoretical discussions that easily split between the tensions of either material critique of the methods and practice of new media or the appropriation of critique from other media disciplines.

Recent discussions in new media theory, for instance, include Lev Manovich’s use of cinema (the traditional moving image) in the analysis of new media objects. The approach resulted only to small success in developing a language specific to new media for two reasons: (1) because Manovich deliberately focused on a single model, cinema, in his analysis of new media; and (2) because an approach specific to the medium in question has many limitations. The limitations become evident in the term itself “new media” which indicates a material always in flux. It is not easy to pin down a moving target.

So what Manovich offers, pending a sequel to his theory of new media, is a post-media aesthetics, wherein the concept of software (rather than the concept of medium) is used to discuss past media:

“Post-media aesthetics should adopt the new concepts, metaphors and operations of a computer and network era, such as information, data, interface, bandwidth... As an example of such approach, we can describe Giotto and Eisenstein not only as an early Renaissance painter and a modernist filmmaker, but also as important information designers.”

Such anachronism easily drew its critics, and especially criticism from practitioners in the field of new media whose separatist attitudes (novelty, autonomy, radicalism) demand a distinction from past media. But in many of these debates it is rare to see issues raised on the ideological and political forces that surround technologies. The issues are negated because they are believed to only obscure the preferred mapping of new media developments with specificity to media (material). The approach towards developing a critical tool for new media is often the same: to ask about what kind of user’s information operations a particular medium allows for.

To elevate the concept of software to past media strikes me as boneheaded digital formalism. Post-media aesthetics, however, offer some utility in the analysis of software art. For example, in the formal aesthetics of code or software art, critics would have to possess a strong understanding of both formal instruction code (software formalism) and cultural concepts of software (software culturalism). With a working knowledge of programming we know that software art today no longer writes its programs out of nothing but works within an abundance of available software code. There are also many different

software development disciplines and many different programming languages that all have different roles in defining the aesthetic process.

While both media-specific and software-centered paradigms have their advantages and disadvantages separately or as connected critical tools, I propose that our emergent paradigms be more sensitive to human rather than technological complexity.

Google, the popular Internet search engine, for example, is often used by those who regard it as computational media as a yardstick for measuring the popularity of ideas. You enter the keywords and instantly get results based on an objective computational process. But by knowing that algorithms are manipulable, we are able to endow it with the power of the meme:

“... no algorithm is neutral; they are written by people with opinions. Results have the bias that humans write them to give. To bias the results, and thus bias culture, just tweak the algorithm.”

Google has more than once been accused of deception and “Googlewash.” As computational media, Google is just another search engine. As symbol-processing media, Google could be the ultimate software art.

In an analysis of the works in “Decode”, we should be able to appreciate the differences and relationships between new media as symbol-processing media and new media as computational media, and not merely as simple opposition of analog and digital, of paper and computer code. What makes new media new is neither digitality nor computation; media chauvinism has limited utility.

In “Myth, Mind and Meaning in New Media” I pointed out that the ubiquity of new media in Philippine society is not in the pervasiveness of its devices, but rather, in its value as symbolic performative human expression. In the Philippine and Asian context, I would go further to read what modern western culture calls an “orientalized technology” as the resilience and resurgence of pre-modern representational systems. That the ancient I Ching (a binary system) inspired Gottfried von Leibniz in his development of binary mathematics used by today’s digital computers, tells us about a cultural continuity now often discarded through the privileging of “high technology.” But

“[t]he emerging new media technologies are not important in themselves, nor as alternatives to older media, but should be studied for what they can tell us about the principles and evolution of human expression.”

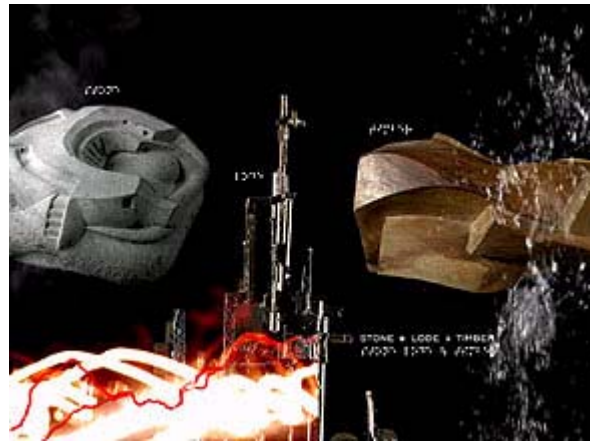
### **The Mathematics of Style**

The pursuit of a single artistic style (the distinctive way in which materials, techniques and elements are used together in an artwork) has been observed as typical of artists with mathematical foundations in their work, a contrast to the continuous revolution that was for example the artistic life of Pablo Picasso. Many computer-based works are as rich and varied as non-computer-based works but a persistent kind of aesthetic may be discerned in the bodies of work by new media artists. In “Decode” we have the rare opportunity to scrutinize such stylistic persistence from three generations of new media artists.

In the ten-year distance between Alfredo Manrique’s laserprints and his recent VCD-based “DeVag”, we find a stylistic continuum - the use of digital images from the Internet and the iterations of symmetry in the plane. Going through the thousands of digital images Manrique produced in the exhibition, he is obsessed with, among other things, visual perception as integral entities. What he calls “parol” in his



moving images are iterations of the symmetry group of rosettes. Rosettes also belong to a continuous symmetry group that dates back to prehistoric art representing one of the oldest examples of human desire to express beauty. If the Alab petroglyphs of Bontoc represented the pudenda as the visual aspect of a public ritual, Manrique's ritualistic "DeVag" sought to agitate public perception towards social mores. The rituals of the past become the shock of the present.

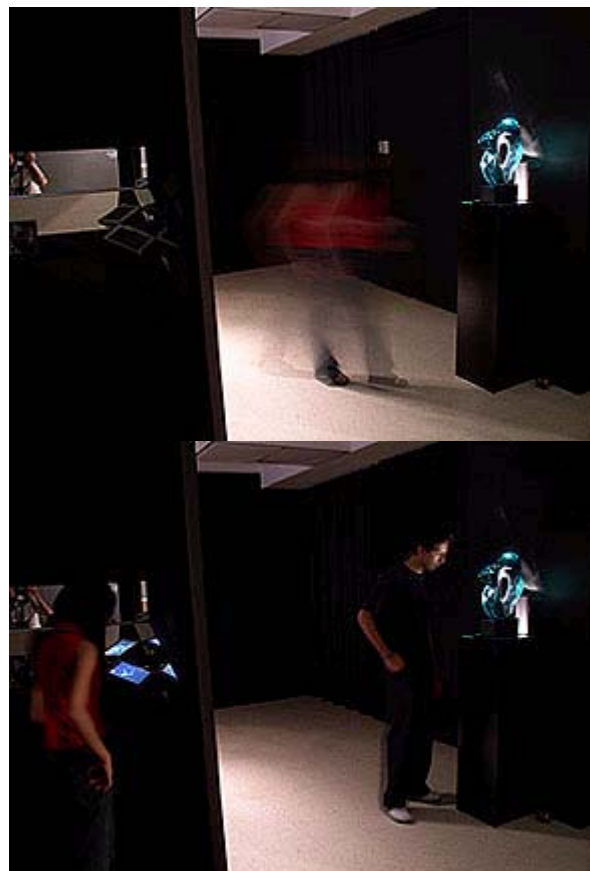


JOHN MARIN FLORES  
*Stone, Lode + Timber. 2003. Interactive Virtual Reality Video. Collection of the artist.*

A persistent aesthetic may also be observed in the works of Rodolfo Samonte, with thirty years in between, "Experimental Cube", silkscreen, and "Spheres of Time # 5", giclee on canvas. Although both works are prints that involve different media and processes, the artist's preoccupation with the grid, repetition and redundancy in printmaking gravitated to his works in digital media, now with the exploitation of color and scale. Color is key in Samonte's "Spheres" and he manages an inner radiance often lost in the translation from light to pigment.

Both Samonte and Manrique share an artistic structural concept that broke away from relational or compositional design, opening up the possibility of non-preferential or non-hierarchical organization. Thus, Samonte explains, "art can now be viewed as a totality rather than looking at the elements as relational parts."

The younger generation of new media artists articulate yet another flavor of a single artistic style. It is a vector-oriented look, akin to the "sublime and cold sensualization of the material" that Josh Nimoy manifests in his interactive installation "Zerowave@function" in response to Ramon Orlina's glass "Athena". Even Nimoy's miniature BX-24 chip-based game "Minipong" which the artist describes as "the simplification of the form and idea and re-appropriation into expressive pragmatic modularity" in response to Nena Saguil's "The Island", is designed with the minimalist abstract representation. Although "Zerowave@function" is largely software art (custom software from C++) whereas "Minipong" is an assignment in "getting physical" with electronics, both works share a minimalism attributable to the practice of programming in the former and economy in the latter.



CLARO RAMIREZ. *Morph. 2003. Multimedia installation. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.*

In "Generation Flash", Manovich presents an interesting analysis of this new generation of artists' cultural sensibility, a generation of artists who write their own software for art:

"The result is the new modernism of data visualizations, vector nets, pixel-thin grids and arrows: Bauhaus design in the service of information design. Instead of the Baroque assault of commercial media, Flash generation serves us the modernist aesthetics and rationality of software."

The “Flash generation” is a reaction to commercial software-driven art. The current generation of new media artists have little concern of the media critique of their predecessors. Rather, they dabble in commercial software critique, and see programming as a means to become empowered.

*MARTIN GOMEZ. D\ILAW. 2003. Custom software from Java, webcam. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.*



The result is a complete circle, where the earliest analog computer generated images of the 50's are duplicated in the software art we see today. The pioneers of computer art have always been writing their own software in the 50's and up until the 80's before desktop computers and packaged software became broad consumer products. Today, the reactionary artist resurges: the new Modernist who seeks to liberate art from commercial media.

There is also a Romantic bent to this modernist picture. Writing software is the new media artists' claim to originality and genius in an age of pastiche, imitation and simulation. In “D\ilaw”, Martin Gomez describes his work as “collaborative systems, networked installation, interactive video, original software; in a word, Postdigital.”

However reactionary, we may perhaps return to the medium for a more substantial explanation of the minimalist abstractions of software art. Manovich offers an explanation:

“The vector oriented look of “soft modernism” is not simply a result of narrow bandwidth or a nostalgia for 1960s design - it always happens when people begin to generate graphics through programming and discover that they can use simple equitation.”

Insofar as computer-based visualizations are concerned, perhaps it was Picasso who has presented us with the most compelling elucidation:

“Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.”

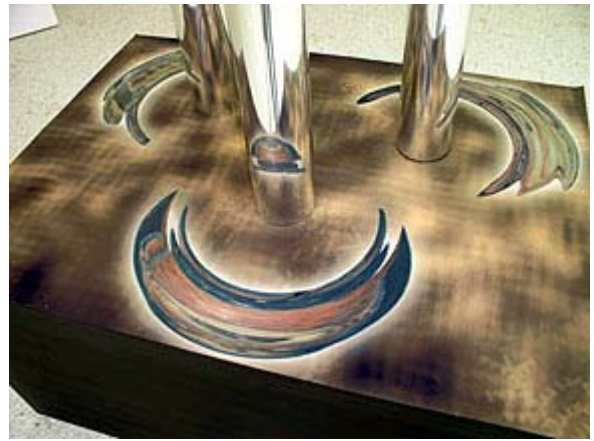
*NÖELL EL FAROL. Borders of Time. 2003. Multimedia installation. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.*



As computational media, computers do precisely that - compute, give answers. It is a process based in mathematics. The process is also an abundant source of amusement. In “Some Issues in the Development of Computer Art as Mathematical Art Form,” Richard Wright describes the mind-boggling speculations wrought by a problem in combinatronics: “by raising the total number of colors available in one pixel by the total number of pixels addressable, this number is immense (16 million raised to the half million), and this number is very much larger than the total number of particles in the known universe (about 10 to the 80) ... the



faces of everyone who ever lived, a page of two of text from every book ever written, a copy of every painting executed and all possible variations of each, as well as all sorts of mathematical graphics and diagrams ... [S]upposing someone generated all these pictures and exhibited them in a large gallery. What would this mean? Would it mean that they had solved all problems of the plastic arts? No, because it makes no sense to talk of solutions without a clear understanding of the problems. It is rather like an ultra-Formalist philosopher of mathematics who believe, that all mathematical theorems are just combinations and permutations of symbols, or that painting is merely the business of placing marks on a canvas.”



MARC SAN VALENTIN. *Three*. 2003.  
*Reflective cylinders, electrostatic print on polyester nylon.*  
*91.44 x 121.92 x 92.52 cm. Collection of the artist.*

### Roots of New Media, Construction Lessons

The decline of Platonism as a philosophy and the demur of its attendant conviction in the intuitive axioms of Euclidean geometry strengthened the logical basis of mathematics. Mathematical objects received validation only if they were derived logically and consistently from axioms. Beginning with what turned out to be an indefensible approach through set-theoretical logic, mathematicians turned to the logical consistency of mathematical language - a Formalism in the realm of mathematics. Although Formalism avoided the Platonic absolute character of mathematical existence and gave mathematicians the freedom to explore alternative axiomatic systems, it denied that mathematics was ‘about’ anything and tended to empty mathematics of meaning by concentrating on the logical syntax of the language.

Such a philosophy was to achieve the status of a dogma in spite of Kurt Gödel’s 1931 Incompleteness theorem, defeating David Hilbert’s Formalism. Formalism demanded of any proposed finite scheme the famous terms: consistency, completeness and decidability. Gödel had shown that consistency and completeness could not both be attained. What Gödel left outstanding in Formalism, decidability, presaged the automation of mathematical logic pioneered by Alan Turing in his 1936 paper “On Computable Numbers.” Turing’s work provided the principle of the post-war electronic computer and marked the beginnings of computer science.

The strong Formalist strain in mathematics became the official philosophy by the mid-twentieth century, and Turing was a Formalist whose foundational thought machine for computing saw mathematics as a game without connection to the outside world:

“In the Turing model, thinking became the activity of shuffling abstract symbols; this might be described as not so much the ability to think as the ability to dream.”

So by its very origins, computational media is bound to churn out visualizations that share an artistic style - programming to generate and control abstract images - often described as a kind of sterility.

*JOSH NIMOY. Zerowave@function. 2002. Custom software from C++. Collection of the artist.*

Before the advent of computers, many of the Constructivist artists dealt with “formal relationships” and produced similar results described as sterile and impersonal. I would like to



introduce an explanation of such shared aesthetics through the concept of faktura, and later, factography. Such modernist concepts present us with interesting insights about many of the works in “Decode.”

*JOSH NIMOY. Minipong. 2002. BX-24 microcontroller, electronics. Collection of the artist.*

The Russian avant-garde used the term faktura from the 1910's to the 1920's, and was a significant modernist paradigm of the early stages of the movement. The term is translated as “material” or “physical texture.” It is defined as:

“The form of a work of art derives from two fundamental premises: the material or medium (colors, sounds, words) and the construction, through which the material is organized in a coherent whole, acquiring its artistic logic and its profound meaning.”

The agenda of early Constructivism was the substitution of faktura or the artist's facture - the painterly quality of the artist's brush marks and gestures - with impersonal materials, scientific procedures, and engineering techniques. The Constructivists wanted to stress the logical, practical and scientific, and because faktura allowed the artwork to be a form of subjective self-expression associated with emotion and the spiritual dimensions of the creative process, it had to be replaced. The artist was now an engineer organizing material elements, substituting composition with construction.

Can more computing power shift new media artists from sterility to a kind of facture? But isn't sterility the faktura of computational media as it was the mark of early Constructivism?

As a dialogue with Jose Joya's “Granadean Arabesque,” young hybrid artist-engineer-designer Gomez created “D\ilaw” through custom code from Java. The work takes a video of the gallery space with the viewer and Joya's painting as the background. The video is then re-rendered in real time as digital images broken down into what the artist describes as “new forms of abstraction of an abstract form.” Gomez also proposes a means by which to “personalize” the computer-generated images through “an option to save a scene rendered ... and send it to the participant's e-mail inbox ... Each of the image that are to be sent is personalized to the viewer with an accompanying trademark of the gallery.” “D\ilaw” demonstrates the substitution of the artist's facture - the substitution of Joya's broad strokes and impasto of oil, sand and sesame seeds - with the colored pixels of computer visualization. While the Constructivists defaced the faktura in the emphasis of the logical and scientific, Gomez sought to recuperate his work with the option to “personalize” the output.

Claro Ramirez's “Morph”, an installation of video camera, mirrors, image projection and sound, employs a similar “you're on candid camera” technique, not for “personalization” but rather the amplification of technological surveillance: the observer observing the observer through a camera and a mirror looking through the facture of Orlina's cold cut glass “Athena.”

Jose Tence Ruiz's “Adhesive” is a dye-sublimation print on chiffon installed into the shape of a cruciform. It aptly veils Vicente Manansala's “Dambana.” Instead of a substitution, “Adhesive” veils the facture of “Dambana” with sheer dye-sublimation. And because the “Dambana” that we encounter here is in fact a digital reproduction, “Adhesive” takes the next step in the Constructivist paradigm: factography.

The closure of faktura by factography in Constructivism represented a significant shift away from radical modernism towards the formation of a visual culture appropriate to post-revolutionary society. From the impersonal, non-objective construction, Constructivists envisioned a new visual culture that could reach a mass audience through the factographic capacity of photography. Illusionist depiction was re-introduced and the Constructivists appropriated images and techniques from advertising and popular culture.

The shift in the Constructivist programme was motivated by the need for a new visual culture that responded to new social needs. Ruiz's “Adhesive” reflects a similar socio-anthropological agenda.



John Marin Flores's "Stone, Lode+Timber" is a work that may also be seen as a vivisection of the *faktura* in modern art, this time, in sculpture. "Stone, Lode+Timber" is interactive virtual reality video of three sculptures: Abdulmari Imao's "Animal Monument" in adobe, Ildefonso Marcelo's "Construction" in metal, and an untitled piece by Ben-Hur Villanueva, in wood.

Stone, Lode+Timber is precisely about "material" and "physical texture" and "construction" - all fundamental premises in the concept of 'faktura'. Flores, however, renders not a substitution but rather, an articulation of the materiality, the volume and space of the sculptures. Interactivity is used as a means to give the user control of what happens on the screen - to allow the user to explore the 'faktura' of Imao, Marcelo and Villanueva in decoded, pixelized form.

*JOSE TENCE RUIZ. Adhesive (Paraisado). 2000. Mixed media installation with dye sublimation print on chiffon. Collection of the artist.*

It is tempting at this point to bring up yet another Constructivist programme - the concern with the role of the audience in the perception of art. This is best manifested in Nöell El Farol's "Borders of Time."

Constructivism dramatized the relationships between the object and the viewer out of a need to reach a wider public audience rather than the elite minority familiar with modern art. In El Lissitzky's "Demonstration Rooms", for example, the work's appearance changed when it was viewed from different viewpoints. El Farol's "Borders of Time" also utilizes multiple viewpoints. Still images projected against the installation of earth, leaves, water and other materials in the room generate moving strata. Different viewpoints present the viewer with different illusions of distance, motion and scale.

The work, which includes a performance by the artist, proposes a dialogue with santo sculptures by the "Madman" from Mallilipot, Albay. The santo sculptures are involved in "Borders of Time" as artifacts with a life history built and formed in tradition, thereby articulating authenticity in the methodologies of interpreting excavated site and situation in a given interior space. Essentially, El Farol's installation is a multi-media reconstruction or a "sampling fraction" of cultural evidence.

In correspondence, young graphic designer Marc San Valentin's "Three" uses three reflective cylinders to allow the viewer at certain viewpoints to decipher three digitally distorted print images of santo sculptures by an unknown carver and by the "Madman" from Mallipot, Albay. This anamorphosis in the catoptric form, bears the symbolism of the religious image as a monstrous distortion - the *imágenes repulsivas*.

Employing simple technologies, the works by El Farol and San Valentin explore the fertile ground where past and new media overlap. Their works, I think, are philosophic contemplations on how we perceive the beauty of the archaic santo sculptures - by problematizing seeing as "direct" perception of reality and exposing the bias of our mind's eye at the sight of flaw, distortion and the unfamiliar.

When Constructivism abandoned a sterile and impersonal programme that in a sense required self-annihilation and the extinction of art, it was ready to learn the aesthetics of ugliness and irrationality,



ready to trudge from sterility to human imagination. In DECODE, the introduction of new media in the Gallery, not only side by side, but in direct dialogue with the Gallery's permanent collection of Philippine modern art, offers an investigation of the nature and realities of technological developments through critical forms of expression. DECODE seeks to bring us much closer to the cultural significance of media technologies. So perhaps by being in the cradle of modern art, new media learns to age gracefully and become human once again.

*RODOLFO SAMONTE. Experimental Cube. 1973. Silkscreen 5/20. 39 x 50 cm. Gift of the artist.*

*RODOLFO SAMONTE. Spheres of Time #5. 2002. Giclee on canvas, artist's proof. 101.6 x 152.4 cm. Collection of the artist.*

*RODOLFO SAMONTE. Spheres of Time #2. 2002. Giclee on canvas, artist's proof. 101.6 x 101.6 cm. Collection of the artist.*

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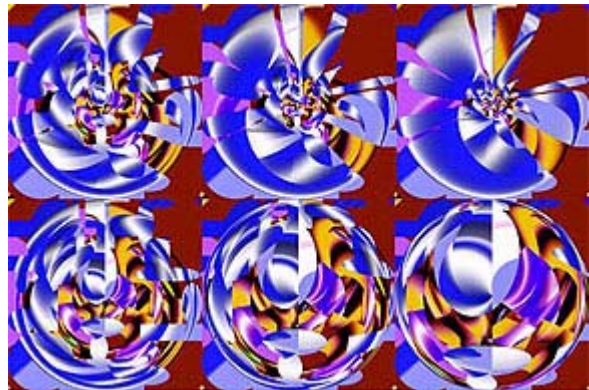
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*AL MANRIQUE. DeVag. 2003. Video CD.  
Collection of the artist.*

## **DECODE: new media and Philippine modern art**

**(For "ArtSpeak", August 28, 2003,  
Ateneo Art Gallery)**

**by Fatima Lasay <fats@up.edu.ph>**

"Wege zur Computerkunst" (Towards Computer Art) is perhaps the first public exhibition of computer art in the country held at the Heritage Art Center in the mid-80s. This exhibition presented to the Philippine art audience works by mostly German artists hatched way back in the late 60's at a joint meeting of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Technological University of Berlin.

"Wege zur Computerkunst" is an important exhibition because it was not only about computer art. The exhibition, as it began traveling in 1968, was the first time where computer-generated graphics (those generated by both early analog and digital computers) and apparatus-related graphics (the application of machinery for visual data processing) were shown together. So in this exhibition, digital graphics produced with FORTRAN IV programs processed were placed side by side with typewriter graphics and chemigrammes (the use of chemical reaction on a surface of a photographic emulsion to produce a visual structure).

Such a juxtaposition of computer-generated and apparatus-generated art in "Wege zur Computerkunst" aimed to show the logical connection between computer graphics and other mechanical non-computer-related creative methods. That there is a logical connection between computer art and art produced by other machinery is what is most interesting in that exhibition. The premise was that geometrically-oriented computer images did not evolve accidentally. They are, rather, the logical outcome of long-term tendencies in the field of mathematics even before the advent of modern computers. The artworks in that exhibition were also formally classified as Constructivist.

In my essay for the DECODE exhibition at the Ateneo Art Gallery, I drew that connection again between new media art and Constructivism. But there is a more energized connection today especially when we take into account the full range of development in the Constructivist movement: from Constructivism's beginnings as a purely abstract art that reflected modern machinery and technology, rejecting the idea that art must serve a socially useful purpose, to its foray into realist renditions as response to the needs and concerns of a new visual culture.

Within the milieu of technological developments and the attendant growth of a new visual culture, Constructivism embodies the spirit of modernism in Philippine art. I draw such a parallel because the journey of Constructivism from a directive to construct art as technological, impersonal and without



social utility, to a more socially responsive, expressive and human art form, could be seen as a journey intimate to what Dean Leovino Ma. Garcia describes as “the art of becoming human.”

In his essay for “Zero-in: Private Art, Public Lives” entitled “Refiguring Modern Philippine Art”, Dean Garcia defines the modern experience of subjectivity, that “to grasp what is “modern” is to realize that there is a new experience of being a subject, a new consciousness of being a self, an I.” He articulates:

“What is this new experience of being a subject? It is to think as a human being. I am thinking as a human being when I go beyond calculation and representation. Neither the computer nor the animal thinks. What is unique to the thinking person? Feeling. Only feeling constitute what is unique to human being. Neither the animal nor the computer feels. Feeling presupposes that I feel not only the felt but the feeling itself - that I am aware that I am feeling it, that I am affected by it. And being affected demands that I express what I experience and how I experience it. Thus I also express the “I” who experiences. Only feeling allows me to think as a human being.”

Indeed, to be a thinking feeling human being is to be modern.

As the only museum in the country dedicated to the collection, display and interpretation of modern Philippine art, the Ateneo Art Gallery cradles the spirit of modernism. In DECODE, connections are made between modern Philippine art and art that employs new technologies.

Although new media art and art that uses computer technologies have been presented in art institutions before (notably computer photoetching by Lenore RS Lim at the Ayala Museum in 1991 and 1993; Al Manrique’s laser prints at the CCP in the 1993 exhibition “Limbag Kamay”; a solo exhibition of vector drawings by a very young artist, Ricky Aragon, at the Ayala Museum in 1995; and the virtual art gallery put together on the Internet by the University of San Carlos in Cebu City in 1993), DECODE is significant because it is staged at a period in Philippine art, when art is increasingly opening up towards new media practices, and when the bastions of “gallerism” has reached that point wherein it must bring into its doors these new autonomous technology-based practices in order to serve new and future market requirements and to remain relevant to a society that continue to assimilate a technology-based culture.

DECODE is also significant because of the dialogue between modern Philippines art from the Ateneo Art Gallery’s permanent collection and new media - and this would not have been possible without the Ateneo Art Gallery and the vision of its curator, Ramon ES Lerma, that is to mount at least one exhibition each year “that creates an atmosphere of open engagement unmindful of the canons or pantheons that commonly implicate and complicate the relationships between and among artists and their works by placing selected works in the gallery’s permanent collection side by side with works from other collections.”

But in DECODE, we certainly move further in this vision because we do not simply select works from the gallery’s permanent collection and select works from other collections and put them together in a common space. The connection, we explicitly point out, does not happen only in the mind of the art historian or the art theorist or the curator, but it also happens in the mind of the new media artist and in the mind of those who come to see and experience the exhibition.

As curator of DECODE and as a new media artist, I also considered it essential that the exhibition enfold beyond the confines of the gallery space and embrace the Internet as viable and important space for art. In fact, one of the very first new media art exhibitions I curated, which was in the year 2000, was based on the Internet; and even more antiquated, the very first digital art and electronic poetry projects I’ve put together from 1995 to 1997 were nurtured in virtual space, in Philippine bulletin board systems (BBS’s)

Cyberspace and an electronic network are viable and powerful spaces for the collection, display and interpretation of new media art. It is for this reason that I tasked Martin Gomez to curate an online



component of DECODE, drawing together Filipino artists working on the Internet to produce works that shared the aims of DECODE - the juxtaposition of net-based and modern Philippine art.

So in DECODE Online, Martin has put together an exhibition by very young new media artists engaged in a dialogue with modern Philippine art, from the paintings of Roberto Chabet and Virginia Flor Agbayani to the mixed media work of Jose Tence Ruiz. I think what is valuable in this exercise is that such a dialogue enabled the young new media artists who participated in the online exhibition to see the significance of their technological art practices within the tradition of modern Philippine art. Even Martin himself, who proposes a dialogue between his work and a painting by Jose Joya, has become busy reading, together with his programming books, essays by Alice Guillermo on Jose Joya. In the 1960's, Marshall McLuhan, who was then dubbed the Dr. Spock of Pop Culture, wrote:

“When new technologies impose themselves on societies long habituated to older technologies, anxieties of all kinds result ... I believe that artists, in all media, respond soonest to the challenges of new pressures. I would like to suggest that they also show us ways of living with new technology without destroying earlier forms and achievements.”

As guest curator of DECODE, my job was to work with the Ateneo Art Gallery in orchestrating this embrace of new media and modern Philippine art, of past and new media technologies, enabling and ensuring a symphony suited to a fine rigodon between art and technology. I also had to make sure that this exhibition presented the diverse methods by which artists use digital and electronic media and other materials in their work - so in DECODE, we have software, projected images, digital print, motion graphics, electronics, sound and net.art.



The artists in DECODE were selected for their questioning and challenging approach to new technologies, in correspondence with the gallery's pursuit of offering modern Philippine art, the art of our time, as both reflective and critical lenses through which we are taken closer to the cultural significance of technological developments.

In DECODE, the new media artists freely selected those pieces from the gallery's permanent collection that they felt their work elicited the most meaningful dialogue. The resulting repertoire is diverse, from Manansala to the “Madman” from Mallipot, Albay. Such diversity interpreted within the continuum of cultural production permits a testing of material, cultural and historical critique of art that uses new technologies. Such diversity also presents art audiences the opportunity to look at modern Philippine art through and alongside the popular media by which they regularly conduct their lives.

John Marin Flores' “Stone, Lode+Timber” is an interactive vivisection and reconstruction of three sculptures from the Ateneo Art Gallery's permanent collection: Abdulmari Imao's “Animal Monument” in stone; Ildefonso Marcelo's “Construction” in metal; and an untitled piece by Ben-Hur Villanueva in wood.

“Stone, Lode+Timber” is an interactive virtual reality video with sound that allows the viewer/user to investigate the material, the physical texture and the construction of the three sculptures within virtual space. In his work, Flores goes further by imbuing the three sculptures with three distinct abstract values represented by three natural elements.

Hence, Imao's stone is mixed with smoke to articulate spirituality and the various religions, presenting the “Animal Monument” as an edifice of mythology, genesis, of sins and virtues. Marcelo's metal is kindled by Flores in fire to articulate the state, technology, globalization, modernization and war. Marcelo's metal construction, as it is constructed out of component parts using industrial materials and techniques, is presented by Flores as reflections of machine technology and industrialization. And finally, Villanueva's sculpture in wood is submerged in water to represent the fluidity of the organic form, the body and the environment, the flow of human history and civilization.

John Flores' work is important in this exhibition as it presents us with potential applications of Quicktime Virtual Reality Authoring or QTVR in art, and as expressive media with much educational potential. At the intersection of commercial photography and new media technology, QTVR moves the photographic image from the flat, 2D world into a more immersive experience with 3D imagery and interactive components. These allow the viewer to explore and examine detailed virtual worlds, directly manipulating and interacting with the media content.

This process of interactivity may be defined as cyclic, that is, the user or the viewer can become an "actor" in the work, responding alternately to the visual and aural content of the work. Such a cyclic process is also seen in the work of Claro Ramirez.

Installed in the inner gallery, "Morph" is a complex physical construction that employs mirrors, a video camera, a monitor and motion sensors - as such, the work may be seen as the amplification of surveillance technologies, wherein the user/viewer is not entirely conscious of the cycle of interaction.

Approaching the booth in "Morph" you will be able to see yourself reflected in the mirrors, but once you are within the booth you will no longer see yourself but the space around you. In the left and right side mirrors, it is the person behind you who will be able to see your face. Approaching the booth will also trigger the monitor, showing a video image of Ramon Orlina's glass sculpture "Athena" placed in another side of the inner gallery. The video image is rendered as an "echo", that is, as a repetition and fragmentation of Orlina's abstracted image. But the video image will only be seen in full clarity when someone enters the inner gallery and approaches the glass sculpture to trigger a light onto the sculpture. Inside the booth, there is a mirror above, reflecting not yourself but the "Athena." The booth, in effect is a periscope, and the person within it is immersed in a mediated sense of space.

Exiting the booth and moving towards the Orlina piece, light is triggered. An upward gaze will reveal a reflection of the word "gaze." Moving forward and further to see, you will catch a glimpse of the words "to learn."

Claro Ramirez's use of two devices for seeing, the reflective mirrors, and the camera (also called "magic mirrors"), and the use of light to cast a reflection of Orlina's glass upon one side of the booth, present a manifold cycle of seeing and of representation. Ramirez states that in producing the work, he sought to approach it in the same manner that he envisioned Orlina approached the "Athena" in glass.

Martin Gomez's work "D\ILAW" engages a dialogue with Jose Joya's painting the "Granadean Arabesque." There are two screens in Gomez's work - one is a mathematical visualization of a video image of the gallery space. In this visualization, the color and movement within the gallery space is recorded by a webcam hidden behind the wall. This video is processed in real time into a visualization that resembles a three-dimensional bar graph, presenting a moving visual topology of changes in color and movement in physical space.

The second visualization consists of an endless construction and deconstruction of a digital image of Joya's painting and a video capture of the gallery space. In "D\ILAW", a dynamic visual structure is proposed by a blend of a static image of a painting and the dynamic space around it.

Gomez's work which was produced by the artist through Java programming, presents us an aesthetics of mathematical visualizations. Gomez's work and process is important in this exhibition as it shows how programming skills are also relevant art production skills. Gomez's work, together with works by Josh Nimoy and Noëll El Farol, demonstrate how disciplines outside of the arts such as computer programming, nanoscience and archaeology, are touched and enriched by artistic production.

The works of both Noëll El Farol and Marc San Valentin, located in the inner gallery, propose a dialogue with the santo sculptures from the gallery's permanent collection. It is quite amusing to think that the archaic santo sculptures would be exhibited for the first time in the thirty-nine years that they were in storage because of an exhibition of new technologies.



Nöell El Farol's "Borders of Time" manifests concern with the role of the audience in the perception of art. Relationships between the object and the viewer are dramatized out of a need to reach a wider public audience. El Farol's "Borders of Time" utilizes multiple viewpoints by which the work is seen. Still images projected against the installation of earth, leaves, water, bubbles and other materials in the room generate moving strata. The viewer, looking through wide-angle door viewers and magnifying lenses installed into the wall, present different illusions of distance, motion and scale.

The work proposes a dialogue with santo sculptures by the "Madman" from Mallilipot, Albay. The santo sculptures are involved in "Borders of Time" as artifacts with a life history built and formed in tradition, thereby articulating authenticity in the methodologies of interpreting excavated site and situation in a given interior space. As El Farol is an artist involved in archaeological studies and actual excavations of prehistoric gravesites, he uses images from his archaeological expeditions, from aerial photographs to skeletal remains, in this multi-media reconstruction and "sampling fraction" of cultural evidence.

In correspondence, young graphic designer Marc San Valentin's "Three" uses three reflective cylinders to allow the viewer at certain viewpoints to decipher three digitally distorted print images of santo sculptures by an unknown carver and by the "Madman" from Mallipot, Albay. This anamorphosis in the catoptric form, bears the symbolism of the religious image as a monstrous distortion - the *imágenes repulsivas* - that is, the more repulsive the religious image, the more powerful it is.

Employing simple technologies, the works by El Farol and San Valentin explore the fertile ground where past and new media overlap. Their works become philosophic contemplations on how we perceive the beauty of the archaic santo sculptures - by problematizing seeing as "direct" perception of reality and exposing the bias of our mind's eye at the sight of flaw, distortion and the unfamiliar.

The US-based Filipino-American artist Josh Nimoy presents two works in this exhibition.

Nimoy's "Zerowave@function" presents us with the didactical potentials of interactivity in new media art in its intersections with other non-art disciplines. The installation, in fact, was initiated from the goals of Victoria Vesna and Jim Gimzewski, both professors at the University of California in Los Angeles, to make Nanoscience more accessible and understandable to the broader public. "Zerowave@function" was produced by Nimoy through C++ programming, and the work is an interactive visual representation of the physical properties of the bucky ball, which is the structure of a carbon atom used as a basic mechanical resource in researches of new nanotechnologies. (The Buckminsterfullerene is the roundest and most symmetrical large molecule known to man. The molecule is named after the American architect Buckminster Fuller who designed a geodesic dome with the same fundamental symmetry).

This interactive light projection represents these molecules as large playful underwater-like single-cell animals. Nimoy proposes this work as a dialogue with Ramon Orlina's "Athena" in its sublime and cold sensualization of material. The interactive component of the work was enabled through what Nimoy calls "shadow technology" or to be more precise, a bitmap to vector conversion process, which he developed as a student of the German artist Christian Moeller.

In keeping with the education agenda of "Zerowave@function," anyone interested can set-up the entire installation with the requisite hardware. People can download the installation software, make changes in the configuration with simple Python scripting, and follow set-up instructions thru the UCLA ZEROWAVE website (<http://notime.arts.ucla.edu/zerowave/physical/>).

Nimoy's other work in the exhibition is a miniature BX-24 chip-based game "Minipong" which the artist describes as "the simplification of the form and idea and re-appropriation into expressive pragmatic modularity" in response to Nena Saguil's "The Island." "Minipong" is the output of an assignment in a Physical Computing class attended by Nimoy at New York University conducted by Prof. Dan O'Sullivan (Dan O'Sullivan was also the originator of Navigable Movies which became the product QuickTimeVR which John Flores uses in his work in DECODE.)

The class assignment, as an introductory course to Physical Computing, was to create something with a microcontroller, in this instance, the BX-24 chip, which is basically just a very tiny and cheap computer. The students have to build their own circuits but they can program the microcontroller in Basic. The class looks for interesting transducers like photocells, motors and thermistors for converting between

electronic signals and the many types of energies like light, pressure and heat that your body can create or sense. In Nimoy's "Minipong" project, he uses pressure through a pinhead as joystick to play the game.

Jose Tence Ruiz's "Adhesive (Paraisado)" is a dye-sublimation print on chiffon installed into the shape of a cruciform (Digital dye sublimation is a way of printing photo quality images or bright spot colors onto polyester materials). The work, produced in 2000, was exhibited in the 7th Havana Biennale and sought to draw a connecting line, thus an adhesive, between the two countries colonized by Spain - the Philippines and Cuba. The work, as it is presented in DECODE today, deepens its concern with constructions of an adherence to colonized faith. Here, the cruciform shape aptly veils a digital reproduction of Vicente Manansala's "Dambana."

"Adhesive (Paraisado)" is a work that presents a construct of faith, of the trappings, the paralysis, the paraisado, in our illusions of paraiso or heaven. The use of chiffon, a sheer material, implies a construct. The top portion of the chiffon cruciform is printed with the image of a cathedral. On closer inspection, the cathedral is entirely made out of arms, weaponry, and ammunition. In Ruiz's "terminated Catholic socialist agnostic standpoint," arms and weapons reinforce the dominant culture - the message is that we were colonized by force of arms and violence, not by faith.

The sides of the chiffon cruciform are printed with a cloud formation of surgical instruments, hardware, devices and other products of industry. These objects complete a set-up of a construction of faith in that we are conditioned in our illusions of heaven by the industrial age.

Overall, the chiffon cruciform is a kulambo, that protective installation within which a person sleeps. The use of the kulambo symbolizes the reality of wakeful dreaming, an imprisonment of faith rendered to the comforting numbness of paradisiac protection.

The installation of dye-sublimation print on chiffon is placed in a darkened room lit only by black lights that dramatize the eerie glow of white surfaces. The lighting transforms the room into a universe of a falling constellation of letters that form the word "paraiso." The texts serve as a visual celestial mystery, a sky formation, a part of the illusion of paradise. The repetitive process of pasting the letters on the walls and ceiling of the room, and the labeling of the empty plastic containers on the floor served also as a mesmerizing mantra to reinforce the illusion. Looking at the mass of empty plastic containers on the floor, we perceive shells emptied of souls, bleak and no longer human, dehumanized by the industrial age and technologies that treat people as mere numbers with the ability to exercise electronic credit.

Ruiz's work in DECODE is a critical artistic form of expression that uses technologies in order to allow us to scrutinize the nature and realities of technologies. Ruiz's use of dye-sublimation print into a visually stunning mixed media installation is also a demonstration of how the artist is able to masterfully direct his material outside of their conventional uses.

DECODE presents another digital print technology used in the arts, this time by Rod Samonte. Almost thirty years in between, "Experimental Cube" is silkscreen print, and three works from "Spheres of Time" and a work entitled "Blue Composition", are giclée's on canvas.

Giclée (pronounced "zhee-clay") is a French word meaning "a spraying of ink" - which is basically what an inkjet printer does. Giclée's have the highest apparent resolution available today and the image permanence of the prints is very stable - giving fade and color shift resistance for seventy-five years or more under average indoor light conditions. In addition, since no screens are used, the prints have a higher apparent resolution than lithographs and a color range that exceeds that of serigraphy. Giclée editions are usually smaller in number than lithography, serigraphy, or off-set printing, making them much more valuable. And unlike traditional printmaking processes, the last printed image in a giclée edition will be as vibrant and clear as the first one. Samonte's works are printed on white cotton duck canvas. Editions of the work are currently on display at his newly opened Art & Books Gallery in California, USA. These are all artist proofs, and the work "Spheres of Time # 5" is half of a larger piece of work.

Although the silkscreen and giclée prints by Samonte in this exhibition involve different media and processes, the artist's preoccupation with the grid, repetition and redundancy in printmaking gravitated to his works in digital media, now with the exploitation of color and scale. Color is key in Samonte's "Spheres" and he manages an inner radiance often lost in the translation from light to pigment. Here, Samonte "fills his canvases with the pulsating energy of deliriously imploding or exploding worlds of

myriad forms and curvilinear shapes: ovoids, circles, semi-circles in lambent colors and tonalities, all controlled and subsumed in spheres within squares, finally resting and formalized in a structured grid.”

The grid is artistic structural concept that broke away from relational or compositional design, opening up the possibility of non-preferential or non-hierarchical organization. Thus, Samonte explains, “art can now be viewed as a totality rather than looking at the elements as relational parts.”

In the ten-year distance between Alfredo Manrique’s laserprints and his recent VCD-based “DeVag”, we find a stylistic continuum - the use of digital images from the Internet and the iterations of symmetry in the plane. Going through the thousands of digital images Manrique produced in the exhibition, he is obsessed with, among other things, visual perception as integral entities. What he calls “parol” in his moving images are also iterations of the symmetry group of rosettes. Rosettes also belong to a continuous symmetry group that dates back to prehistoric art representing one of the oldest examples of human desire to express beauty.

Onto prehistoric art, “DeVag” reminds me somewhat of the Alab petroglyphs of Bontoc, wherein, as Dr. Jesus Peralta explains, the pudenda is used as the visual aspect of a ritual. Manrique’s “DeVag” is not entirely different - what seem to be decorative multi-colored lantern images, are actually vagina images placed within the context of a history of ritual abuse against women. This setting is established by the inclusion of documentary photographs of the US-military sustained sex industry in Olongapo and Clark from the 1950s to the present time. These photographs come from Usenet postings by US servicemen previously based in the Philippines. The parol images are, of course, representative of the large lantern-making industry in Pampanga, and are seen here as a gaudy, grandiose, and fake celebration.

The photographs include images of early architecture and development in Olongapo - bars, cinemas and other buildings constructed largely for entertainment and the flesh trade. There is also a map of the US military police wherein all the bars are listed along Magsaysay Drive. The map is used not only by the police to keep watch of violent activity in the area but also used by US servicemen as guides to bars and available sex tours. The Mt. Pinatubo images following the photographs pose the question, after the US bases what next? The entire Philippines, Manrique delivers, become Olongapo.

The morphing of the vagina with the ube leaf in “DeVag” is a look into issues of censorship. The leaf, we know, is often used to conceal what is deemed visually offensive. The judgment of what is and what is not obscene is also investigated by Al Manrique in his work - in the series of images in “DeFlora,” the viewer is already conditioned to look for obscene images - when in fact, there is none.

Al Manrique is a social realist, as can be seen in the 1993 laserprints included in this exhibition; but in “DeVag” Manrique deploys abstraction to articulate reality.

DECODE is a boldly speculative and experimental exhibition. The works are diverse, from sculpture to software, and the exhibition space unfolds beyond the gallery, into the Internet. Such openness and hybridism enforce the museum’s unyielding commitment to engage distances between tradition and innovation, between human and technological complexity, between art and life media. In DECODE, the introduction of new media, not only side by side but in direct dialogue with the Ateneo Art Gallery’s permanent collection of modern Philippine art, sets the stage for an interpretive framework for an art form that is always in flux. With new media in the cradle of modern art, critical insights and connections ignite, revealing how new media takes art in new directions.

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