

The bulul and the economy of patience. (Musings on sustainability through contemporary art in the Philippines)

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The term 'sustainability' has come to be associated as a kind of 'must have' criterion to signal a commitment to ethically directed futures. And the notion of what might constitute 'sustainable cultural practices' has come to be linked to environmental, social and economic factors. However, this paper argues, there may be a sense in which such descriptions limit and regulate creative diversity.

The argument traces the age-old links between ecology, society, economy and culture in the Banaue rice terraces in the Philippines and looks at the way this framework has influenced the development of alternative forms of contemporary art practice in that country. It uses these examples to argue that creative practices in general arise from a will towards sustainment in the broadest sense, and that they should not be regulated by epithets that prescribe particular outcomes.

1. 'Sustainable culture' – what do we mean?

There's an urgency that's come to be attached to any notions of sustainability; a sense that anything we might decide to do now will be absolutely critical to the possibilities of anything else that might happen from here on in. Responsible governments and public planners have drafted blueprints for futures that are based on an awareness of the fragile nature of the environment. In Australia, one of the most influential of these has been a paper by John Hawkes, author of *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning*, in which he argues that culture should be recognized as the important fourth consideration for all planning towards globally and locally sensitive futures.

While this has been a helpful move in terms of garnering increasing recognition from governments about the way culture is intrinsically tied to economic, social and environmental considerations, there may also be a sense in which the notion of a 'sustainable culture', one identified as separate to the ongoing practice of experimental, innovative and critically responsive cultural practices, may inhibit the breadth and diversity of cultural inventiveness in general.

Hawkes' argument recognizes culture as the important 'fourth pillar' alongside

ecological, social and economic sustainability as the primary considerations that must be taken into account in terms of planning for sustainable futures. And there is a sense in this session itself that the term 'sustainable' is emerging as a driver for the particular kind of cultural practices we want to foster in design, art and education.

And I have to be transparent about the extent of my own involvement in this adoption of the term 'sustainable': the research focus group I am involved with at Griffith University also includes the word in its title: SECAP – Sustainable Environment through Culture, Asia-Pacific. The term 'sustainable' is one that has become attached to a sense of worthiness as much as it has to a sense of urgency, but it may also be a term that is worth treating with some wariness.

No matter how urgent and real the need is for us to consider the ways through to more sustainable ecologically diverse relationships with our environments and with each other, the danger that the term 'sustainable culture' may perform the role of a benevolent shackle, persists.

If they are to continue to produce outcomes that may lie outside and beyond that which has been produced to date, creative practices need to perform themselves in wanton, non-apologetic ways, outside and beyond the dictates of even the most worthy ideals. This consideration is basic to the fostering of cultural diversity – a diversity that invites and includes the possibility of hybrids and wild seeds that may take root amidst contexts and audiences that lie beyond the established frameworks, genres and orders of the day.

All active, vibrant cultures are fuelled by the potential that they can create dreams and forms and ideas that may currently be out of earshot, out of sight and beyond the realms of what has yet been imagined. And yet if that is true, then many of those outcomes will not be able to be accommodated or assessed within known criteria.

It may well be that it would be more helpful to view all creative practices as inherently valuable in working towards new notions of how to re-imagine relationships between ecologies, societies and economies rather than view some as inherently more conscious of sustainability than others. In this model, cultural practices would not assume the role of the 'fourth pillar', but instead would be imagined as the bedrock - the experimental and imaginary matrix from which new possibilities of sustainment might emerge.

This section of the paper argues, then, that all creative practices arise from deep

responses to the needs of sustainment in some form or another.

Ethnographers such as Benedict Anderson (Benedict.A, 1993, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*) have reinforced our understanding that culture and communities come together and coalesce through processes of sharing: sharing ideas, imagination, symbols and particular practices that become the tangible ties of cohesion. These practices and beliefs arise from practical as well as imaginary responses to the environments and contexts, and they form frameworks through which to interpret and understand the relationships between these circumstances. They come from intellectual and objective, as well as from intuitive and subjective responses. They are practices based on practicalities that can demand responses that are both rational as well as seemingly irrational and imaginative. They offer us transient, mutable frameworks through which to interact and respond and invent, and through which to imagine new roles and inter-relationships within a wider social sphere.

This sense of belonging – to a family, a community, a place, a time and a past – with all the particular challenges and problems that come with these contexts – is what can give our lives a sense of having some kind of meaning, however liminal, however fragile. And, through shared memories and inherited practices and lore, it can also give us a sense of continuity with the past, and a sense of rich kinship with those who have gone before but whom we have never met.

This model of understanding creative cultural practices interprets the myriad ways in which they arise from a commitment to: they sustain and reinvent the ways in which we relate to place; they sustain and reinterpret the ways in which we relate to the past, and they sustain and recover possibilities for working together with communities in new reconfigurations.

Perhaps this is most clear in indigenous cultures, where the relationship between cultural practice and the land and the law and the past are interwoven and contiguous. It's difficult to prise the different categories apart. In such societies culture is the binder between these realms; it provides the codes of lore and images and practices that enable all other elements of experience to be sustained and to inter-relate. Within such cultures creative practices are understood to be sustaining at a fundamental level.

And in this sense it seems fair to suggest that all creative practices grow from the

very *will to sustain*. And that while artistic expressions may also be motivated by a range of personal or communal needs, there is also a sense in which they are driven at some deeper level by the will to communicate, and thus to connect.

2. An example of culture: the Ifugao rice terraces



In his description of the rice terraces of Northern Luzon in the Philippines, the Filipino historian and critical writer Renato Constantinoⁱ outlined the ways in which cultural expressions are inextricably linked to environmental and societal relationships.

These rice terraces, estimated as having been maintained for at least two thousand years to the present by the peoples of Ifugao, are the most vast in the world.

Extending over ten thousand square kilometers of mountainside, they are fed by an ancient irrigation system from the rainforests above the terraces. Winding back and forward in gracious arcs from the peaks to the foothills of the chain of mountains known as the Cordillera massif, some have estimated that if the total length of their channels were to be unraveled, they could be stretched out to reach the moon.

The *bulul* is the rice god of the Ifugao people.ⁱⁱ Carved wooden and stone statues of *bulul* are found scattered all across the region, watching over each and every interconnected rice paddy and each fallow field. Inevitably portrayed as solemnly squatting, with both hands supporting a slightly elongated head, the rough hewn forms of the *bulul* are cast in a pose that suggests a preparedness to put in long hours of watchful waiting. The element of time as measured according to seasonal changes that affect the growth of plants, animals, weather, is one that lies deep in the understanding of cultural practices of the region. The very forms of the *bululs* suggest the importance of this aspect. However this particular relationship with time, one that suggests an *economy of patience* - is rarely factored in as being of long-term benefit within internationalized western analyses of growth and production.



The worship of the *bulul* is tied to dancing and rituals associated with the gong – a metallic musical instrument that has beat out the slow rhythms for community dancing and rituals for centuries, and these cultural practices, along with particularly fine, time-consuming basketry weaving, intricate blanket making and tattooing patterns have formed central motifs for Ifugao identity for as long.

The complex meandering detail of the designs used for tattoos, basketry and weaving can all be directly related to the designs of the rice paddies, where the linearity of the channeling has been laid down with a mesmerizing meandering that is meticulously developed. Even the fields used for crops in between the rice paddies are ploughed into the same complex series of parallel lines, so that the water buffalo yoked to the heavy ploughs them seem trapped in intricate furrowed mazes.

The tribes of northern Luzon that have used these cultural markers and practices to define them for centuries are well aware that these practices set them apart with a tradition that has bound them to their place. And they are proud of their tradition of refusal to be colonized by successive waves of cultural domination from the Spaniards and the Americans, unlike the tribes-people of the lowlands.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, more recent forms of colonialism have all but destroyed their age-old cultural traditions and practices. The rice paddies of this highland region have produced short-grained, ‘meaty’ grains of mountain rice that are especially nutritious. The paddies traditionally produced only two crops of this red rice per year, but the grains were well able to sustain the needs of the communities who performed the role of custodians of the land.



However, according to Renato Constantino, when IRRI, the International Rice Research Institute discovered the potential of the people of the area to be more highly productive, it introduced new species of rice to them that could be reaped four times a year. The farmers were lured with the offer of double the money, for a type of rice that was palatable to a wider market.

However, there were catches: (a) the introduced rice was dependent on herbicides to keep away mites and bugs and (2) the terraces would be dependent on artificial fertilisers in order to be able to sustain the new grains at the increased rate demanded. An added embargo lay in the fact that each of these new ingredients was only able to be supplied - at crippling cost to the farmers - through the company – IRRI – that supplied the new grains.

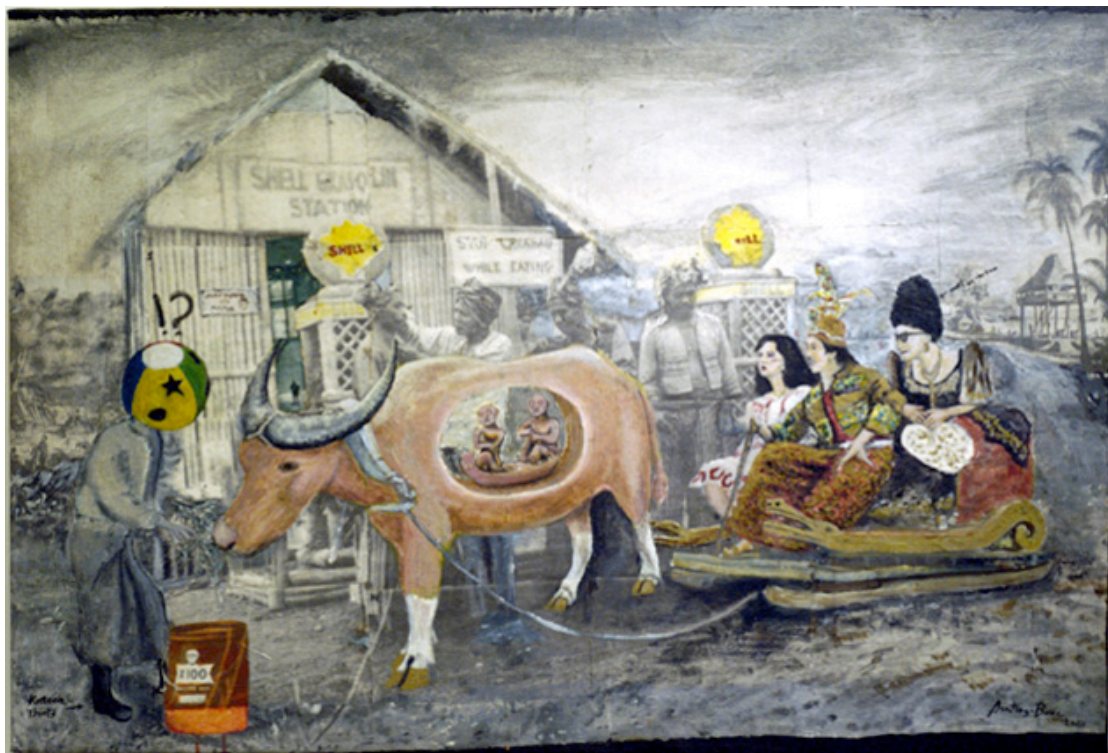
But the final clinch came after a few seasons of productions, when the carefully maintained ecosystem of the Ifugao terraces began to break down. The channels and soil could simply not sustain this kind of artificially enhanced production, and the exquisite engineering of the Ifugao rice terraces – claimed by many as the “eighth natural wonder of the world” began to crumble and fall apart.

In the interim other things had begun to fall apart as well. The rhythm of the seasons that had allowed times between planting and harvesting had provided periods that were set aside for joining the community through associated cultural practices – such events that included weaving together, dancing together, eating together at *canaos*, where water buffalo would be slaughtered in a ritual way and where the future could be foretold on the basis of readings of their innards by the local shaman.^{iv} The escalating demands of higher rice productivity meant that these rhythms were

severely disturbed, to the point that the social, economic and cultural aspects of life of the communities were being corroded at approximately the same rate as the soil of the terraces.

Constantino's description interprets a system where the creative invention of the Ifugao rice terraces provided a framework that has underpinned all other aspects of sustainability in that region. He describes a creative landform that was built from a need to sustain culture and agriculture. The challenge for the future will lie in the capability of the region to develop new creative cultural practices that can reinterpret the imaginative and productive potential of the region in terms that can remain meaningful for the future.

3. The role of contemporary art in sustaining environments, societies and economies: the Baguio Arts Guild and sustainable cultural futures



Santiago Bose, *Juan Tamad* 2000, mixed media

The Ifugao rice terraces in Banaue have also been described by the late Filipino contemporary artist Santiago Bose^v as “the biggest open air installation in the world”. While fully understanding the value of the terraces to maintaining traditional practice, Bose moved the argument about the necessity of maintaining the man-made landforms into the future by claiming that the ongoing maintenance and

custodianship of the rice terraces are as much part of contemporary visual art practice as they are about maintaining an ancient tradition.

He used the terraces as a metaphor for the importance of cultural diversity and site-specific awareness when he established the regionally based Baguio Arts Guild, and along with fellow artists that included the late Roberto Villanueva, he used the motifs of the rice terraces as the means through which to advocate that cultural resistance to homogeneity comes from grass-roots initiatives that are enmeshed in relationships that bind people to each other and to place.



Roberto Villanueva *Cordillera Labyrinth* 1989

For Bose, as well as Constantino, could see how the leveling effects of international dependency corroded environment, societies, cultures and economies alike.

And yet he was not opposed to participation in the internationalized world of culture. He lived in New York as a visual artist for eight years, and maintained an active role in emerging international debates that came to be gathered under the 'post-colonial' umbrellas for several decades. He used his own participation as an invited artist in the world of international biennales, triennales and survey shows as leverage through which to advocate for local cultural determination, and fostered generations of artists who continue to use their art to speak of the rich cultural expressions of their homeland. His practice as a contemporary artist linked the international world to local practices through participation and the sharing of knowledge and skills.

That linkage was a two-way thoroughfare: through his collaborative management of the Baguio Arts Guild and the bi-annual Baguio Arts Festival he invited international artists to participate in an event that was claimed by many to be 'the only

international biennial arts festival run on a third world budget'.^{vi} The influx of new ideas and forms that came along with the artists from overseas was a catalyst to the artists in the local community. But, unlike those herbicides and pesticides on which introduced species of rice were dependent in the Banaue rice terraces, the new information and influences that came from elsewhere did not generate dependency. Rather, during the long months between the festivals, they were adapted and re-translated to suit local conditions in the Cordillera region. And in turn, the success of the events and the Guild artists influenced a growing confidence in other regions in the Philippines that locally grown, community supported contemporary art forms could be successful both locally and internationally.

Here it is worth saying that the criteria for gauging the success of contemporary art change according to context. The local market for contemporary art in the Philippines is not able to pay the high costs demanded by the international art world, but at the local level artists are able to glean influence and agency in ways that would otherwise be impossible in a class-striated society. In turn, local governments and NGOs commit funds and resources to initiatives that encourage a diversity of grass-roots initiatives.

Beyond local shorelines, there has been a steadily growing international interest in the work of contemporary art from South East Asia has fomented that was established around the mid-nineties, when the inaugural Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art held at the Queensland Art Gallery was among the first international survey exhibitions to focus on the work of artists from this area.

In the first of these triennials in 1993, there was an especial focus on Filipino contemporary art, when a disproportionate percentage of artists from that country were included in the exhibition (nine artists were represented from the Philippines from a total of sixty-five artists included in the exhibition total).^{vii} While the reasons why this was the case is open to debate, it would be fair to argue that a high proportion of the contemporary artists from the Philippines were already grappling with the ideas of cultural imperialism in ways that contested the ideals behind internationalised cultural homogeneity, and that this kind of creative energy and focus was highly appealing to the curators during this period when the theories of post-colonialism were gaining attention in the contemporary art world.

It is worthwhile remembering that the exhibition itself was a high-risk venture in terms of having to provide evidence of the institution's belief that the contemporary art of

the region was every bit as engaged, critically responsive and creatively dynamic as art being produced in other, better understood, more highly developed and more consistently marketed regions south of the equator. It was equally an attempt to include Australia's representation as a cultural partner within the region, and it was important to showcase works that were focused on issues of shared importance. Therefore more traditional or decorative or less critically engaged works were not showcased in the exhibition.

A grass-roots commitment to guilds and cultural NGO's had, even by that time, produced groups of artists with a will towards cultural diversity that was not driven to the same extent within the main universities (the various campuses of University of the Philippines, University of Santo Thomas, etc.) at the time. Instead, many of the artists who participated in that original APT had fostered their practices through connections with local cultural groups in 'the provinces' or in localized *barangays* in the metropolitan areas.

There had also been a general awareness and interest in the use of 'indigenous materials'^{viii} as a way of circumventing a reliance on highly expensive, western manufactured materials. Along with this heightened interest in the use of alternative materials came a renewed interest in using localized subject matter to express broader issues, or to employ the use of westernized modes of representation and genres in ironic and critical, often subversive ways so as to draw attention back to the localized sites of production.

Artists like Junyee, Roberto Villanueva, and Santiago Bose used such 'impoverished' materials to reinforce an insistence on the specific cultural origins of their particular productions through creating installations that reflected the materials and products of local Filipino environments and markets. Other artists at that event, like Nunelucio Alvarado, who used more traditional western media like oil on canvas, reinforced contextual evidence of production through the use of real bullets as part of the installation. His experience of long years of local insurrections against land monopolies by metropolitan based elites provided the heroic subject matter for so much of his work. The imagery of his works, which at face value appear like decorative representations of picturesque urban peasants, turn and twist in meaning when looked at for a longer time, whereupon the details of 'peasant' insurgency and uprising are woven in like barbs into the seemingly innocuous subject matter.



Nunelucio Alvarado, *Tabig* 2002 oil on canvas 183x152 (left)

Julie Luch Dalena, *Maranao Women*, Clay Sculpture 1993

And Edgar Fernandez' oil paintings had served a number of roles other than decorating the white walls of first world galleries: they had also been used as banners for political activism as well as shelters for temporary street refuges. The images of Lazaro Soriano's also reinforced the importance of local community involvement and participation. Female representatives Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Brenda Fajardo and Julie Luch-Dalena mined traditional Filipino folk lore for references to the pervasive strength of female roles in upholding and sustaining cultural difference, resistance (to imperialism) and maintaining contact with the environment.



The growing national and international attention on the work of these emerging contemporary artists was able to be used as leverage in promoting the benefits and support for local NGOs and welfare industries that fostered the ongoing diverse cultural practices across the region. And in turn, the growing international recognition of definably Filipino contemporary art traditions generated a wave of confidence in younger and emerging artists, many of whom choose to continue to participate at grass-roots levels with local communities and NGOs and guilds at the same time as they jostle for attention in the national and international events and exhibitions.

While it cannot be claimed that this culturally based example of sustainment has led to any challenges to the imbalances of economic trade in the Philippines, it can be argued that the formation of Guilds and NGOs for education; the production of informed, highly sophisticated visual languages through a range of media; the establishment of events, exhibitions and undertakings that focus on artist and community participation have raised consciousness about the need for ongoing inter-relationships between broader society and local environments have been highly successful in terms of investment for ongoing culturally led resistance to the effects of homogeneity and to artistic and agricultural monocultures in general.

This paper provides a very brief outline of an example of how cultural practices are by their very nature sustaining, and that that sustainment is the mortar that is used to enrich and heighten consciousness about how we can reconfigure new ways of interacting with our environments and societies in ways that can continue to sustain

the valuable aspects from the past into the future.

Notes

ⁱ CONSTANTINO, RENATO, (CO-AUTHOR LETIZIA R. CONSTANTINO), 1988, *DISTORTED PRIORITIES: THE POLITICS OF FOOD*, FOUNDATION FOR NATIONALIST STUDIES, PHILIPPINES.

ⁱⁱ “Bulul plays an important role in the agriculture of the Ifugao people. It is involved in the ritualistic aspects of rice production, from rice planting up to the safekeeping of the harvest in rice granaries. The sculpture is made mainly as guardian of a rice granary.” (<http://thefinestwriter.com/bulul.htm>)

ⁱⁱⁱ “..we may say that the earliest resistance of the people to Spanish colonization was characterized by nativism... It was natural that the oppressed people should express their rebellion by pitting their old deities against the God of their conquerors...” from *Identity and Consciousness: The Philippine Experience*, paper delivered before Symposium 3 o the VIII World Sociology Congress, Toronto, Canada, August 20, 1974, quoted on p. 97, CONSTANTINO, RENATO, (NO DATE), *HISTORY: MYTHS AND REALITY*, KARREL, INC. PHILIPPINES ISBN 971 8719-02-7

^{iv} for a more recent example of a canao used at fellow Baguio artist Ben Cab’s new museum, see Perez, Padmapani, 2009, *Mambunongs, Mumbakis, and National Artists*, Philippine Daily Inquirer (http://services.inquirer.net/print/print.php?article_id=20090502-202726)

^v “Bose was the founding president of the Baguio Arts Guild in 1987. He became president again in 1992. The Guild is an active cultural association in the northern Cordillera region, emphasising regional tribal traditions and the importance of using indigenous materials. Bose played a formative role in establishing the Baguio International Arts Festival”, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santiago_Bose)

^{vi} “On each occasion, the festivities were ran and organized on a third world budget, but the hospitality and sheer passion for contemporary visual arts, music, dance, and theater more than made up for the lack of resources. The 1993 Festival for instance, is described as “a remarkable achievement, fuelled by truly heroic efforts from Guild members, inventing energy other organizations have to budget.” (Ewington 1994, 17)” Datuin, Flaudette May, 2002, *Land, Locality and Communion: The International Baguio Arts Festival*, in PANANAW 4. Philippine Journal of Visual Arts. ed. Florina Capistrano-Baker. National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Manila.

^{vii} *THE FIRST ASIA-PACIFIC TRIENNIAL OF CONTEMPORARY ART*, CATALOGUE, 1993, QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY, AUSTRALIA.

^{viii} “The trend in indigenous materials has also considerably enriched installation art in the country. Most installation artists, such as Santiago Bose, Roberto Villanueva, Genara Banzon

and Alan Rivera, have used organic materials from the environment with which they create art spaces, especially since these materials are evocative of natural and cultural significations.” Alice Guillermo, *Development of Philippine Art*, p. 81 in Turner, Caroline, 1993, *Tradition and Change. Contemporary Art of Asia. and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, Australia