

# Spilling into the Public: Poleteismo and Contemporary Art Discourse

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A Review of

**Mideo Cruz's *Poleteismo* exhibition**

**at the Main Gallery of the Cultural Center of the Philippines**

The Poleteismo controversy racked the art world and the country, culminating in the closure of the exhibition on August 9, 2011 at the Main Gallery of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and ending with a senatorial inquiry. Or is it the end? The vanishing point is merely the beginning of critical discourse. The disappearance of *Poleteismo* is the ultimate cause of its critical visibility.

Though there were numerous art controversies in the Philippines over the years, such as the National Artist Award debates and the GSIS's purchase of Juan Luna's *The Parisian Life*, contemporary art practice and theory have largely been undisturbed and out of the public's attention. For Smith (2009), "This is how the contemporary art world—its institutions, its beliefs, the ensemble of cultural practices that go into making it a *socius*, a 'scene'—answers the Contemporary Art question: it is what we say it is, it is what we do, it is the art that we show, that we buy and sell, that we promote and interpret. This scene is self-defining, constraining on practice and constantly inviting its own self-representation" (p.234). The *Poleteismo* controversy stirred demand for active discourse, not just within the art world, but also in the public sphere. The Philippine art world needs to re-assert itself and its context of contemporaneity as an entry point in the discussion of contemporary art. At the same time, the art world needs to be critical of itself as it faces the challenge of its own contemporaneity. The criticisms on *Poleteismo* displayed this lack of criticality in the present condition of contemporary art discourse.

Media play a central role in the controversy of contemporary art, such as in the cases of the Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, David Wojnarowicz, and more recently, Chris Ofili. Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, exhibited as part of Sensation: British Artists from the Saatchi Collection shown in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, was widely controversial due to the political, religious, and cultural debates it sparked. The controversy and media attention began with then-New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's press conference on September 22, 1999 and was eventually joined by various stakeholders, such as the media, the church and the public (Rothfield, 2001). In *Poleteismo's* case, the creation of the spectacle came from the traditional media itself, starting with the framing of a documentary show, which then spilled into broadcast and print, and then spread further through the vehicle of new media. The media spectacle created a large and passionate public for art discourse in terms of news, editorials, columns, opinions, statements, blogs and comments that covered the controversy.

The main question here is: how does contemporary art create art discourse in the public? The problematic components of contemporary art discourse in the public include: Who is the public of *Poleteismo*? What is the role of the public in contemporary art discourse? How does contemporary art address the public? How does this public address contemporary art in return? What art discourse does contemporary art and the public engage in?

Art discourse in the public is situated in the media. The concept of the public could be traced to Habermas' public sphere, which deals with a "space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (Fraser, 1993, p. 2). This point is taken further by revisionist historiographies dealing with the public sphere as a space for political domination. Fraser (1993) further states that, "The official public sphere, then, was—indeed, is—the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination" (p. 8). This hegemonic public is the visible public that is repeated and represented by the media. It should be noted that media are not a simple entity: "*A medium is both a system and an environment.* The notion of media is derivative of a more embracing concept of 'mediation' that goes well beyond the materials and technologies of art and mass media... A medium, in short, is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that 'mediates' between individuals. It is a complex social institution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals, and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces (stages, studios, easel paintings, television sets, laptop computers)" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 213).

The first criticisms on *Poleteismo* happened after the July 18, 2011 broadcast of the magazine show *XXX* (Chavez, 2011, July 18). The installation was framed as a statement of the Reproductive Health Bill, rather than as a part of the *Kulo* exhibition for the commemoration of Jose Rizal's 150th Anniversary. The broadcast caused considerable strain on the art world and the public. The art world remained detached from the controversy instead of providing critical art discourse. The art world's attempt to engage the public happened after weeks of media coverage during *Dakdakan*, the CCP forum on the *Kulo* exhibition. The controversy reached its peak on the closing of the exhibition, as decided by the CCP Board of Directors on August 8, 2011 and publicly announced by the media on August 9, 2011 (e.g. Balana & Tubeza, 2011). It is in this closure that a critical discourse ensued in the art world. Unfortunately, the media, with weeks invested in the controversy, had a louder voice and a stronger footing. The media became the accepted art writers as they published news items (e.g. Aquino, 2011; Cabrera, 2011), editorials and columns (e.g. Alampay, 2011; Araneta, 2011) while art critics, scholars, and academicians were absent from providing discourse.

Contemporary art, especially in the case of *Poleteismo*, created a public that was not there for most artworks. Similar to other artworks, people who had seen the art object became its public. But in the case of *Poleteismo*, the object created a public that was absent in its presence. The artwork created a wider public, from those who went to the CCP and experienced it, to those who experienced it through various media. Even members of the media, such as F. Sionil Jose in his column *The CCP Jesus Christ Exhibit: It ain't art*, depended on images found online to critique the art, rather than experiencing the art itself. He says, "The exhibit should not have been shown at the CCP. If submitted to my old gallery, I would have rejected it. It is not — I repeat — it is not art! It is an immature and juvenile attempt at caricature. I have not seen the exhibit itself but I have seen pictures of it and they are enough to convince me of the validity of my conclusion" (Jose, 2011). Despite the lack of direct presence with the artwork, the experience of the artwork through the discourses of various media made them a public of contemporary art. The exhibit was closed more than a week earlier than scheduled, yet the artwork created more public for itself because of such a closure.

The controversy of *Poleteismo* as part of the *Kulo* exhibition displayed similarities to global controversies, such as the *Sensation* exhibition, particularly with the relationship of contemporary art, media, and the public. Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* is the center of polemic debates in the said exhibition, similar to the setting of Mideo Cruz's *Poleteismo*. The problematic art discourse

in the public as represented by the media is observed by Andras Szanto (2001) in his essay *Don't Shoot the Messenger: Why the Art World and the Press Don't Get Along*, "(a) arts journalists write for uninformed readers (p.182), (b) arts news is easily hijacked by those with non-arts agendas (p.183), (c) arts journalists have to resort to hype, dramatics, and simplification (p.184), (d) news organizations engage in "pack journalism" and stereotyping (p.186), (e) when art becomes politics, it ceases to be art journalism (p.187), and (f) the news media relax their standards when covering the arts (p.188)." These issues were clearly presented in the editorials, columns, and other media texts on *Poleteismo*, such as F. Sionil Jose's *The CCP Jesus Christ* exhibit: It ain't art, The Philippine Daily Inquirer's Editorial *Art as Terrorism*, and Isagani Cruz's art column series. Szanto (2001) further observes that, "...the newspapers did not engage in 'enterprise journalism' of the sort that teams up an art critic with a courtroom reporter to draw on the talents of both. Instead news reporters and editorial writers often tried their hand at art criticism" (p.188). This was discerned in *Poleteismo's* media texts, wherein editorial writers and columnists (e.g. Alampay, 2011; Cruz, 2011), lacking in-depth knowledge of art history and theories, framed themselves as "experts" on the subject and played the role of the art critic. The media discourse on the artwork is the visible art discourse.

The public, informed by various media, still needs to hear from the museums and art institutions in general. Unfortunately, the silence imposed by the Cultural Center of the Philippines led to a silence of the museum rather than a development of aesthetic and art discourse, depriving the antimony of the museum's voice. While the debate ran rampant in new media (e.g. De Veyra, 2011; Silverio, 2011), there were very few aestheticians, art critics, art writers, art historians, curators and art writers involved in new media, or even in the traditional media, to enter the debate. This represents a slanted viewpoint. Similar to observations of Szanto (2001), even traditional media columnists played at being an art critic, since there is an absence of such from the art world. For instance, National Artist for Literature, F. Sionil Jose, framed himself as an expert in visual art, defending formalist discourse without engagement in contemporary art discourses. Isagani Cruz attempted aesthetic criticality through logic, but failed to cite concepts of contemporary art and contemporaneity. The markers that editorials and columns demanded of art included goodness, craftsmanship, originality, and ennoblement. Such instant critics are informed by media-driven images, rather than aesthetics, theories and discourses from the contemporary art world. The media-driven images restricted the aesthetic education of the public because of the lack of access and discourse. A wider perspective is needed: "That is why it is necessary to

keep the museums and, in general, art institutions as places where the visual vocabulary of the contemporary mass media can be critically compared to the art heritage of the previous epochs and where we can rediscover artistic visions and projects pointing toward the introduction of aesthetic equality” (Groys, 2011, p.18).

The discourse of media and the public has a unique relationship with art. Even if media play a central role in the creation of the spectacle of the controversy, art still has “an autonomous power of resistance” (Groys, 2011, p. 13). Groys explains, “The variety of images circulating in the mass media is much more limited than the range of images preserved, for example, in museums or produced by contemporary art. That is why it is necessary to keep the museums and, in general, art institutions as places where the visual vocabulary of the contemporary mass media can be critically compared to the art heritage of the previous epochs and where we can rediscover artistic visions and projects pointing toward the introduction of aesthetic quality” (p. 18). In the discussion of contemporary art, the art is the entry point despite being made into a spectacle of controversy by media. It is part of the character of art, particularly contemporary art.

The immediate and harsh judgments on *Poleteismo* could be due to the lack of discourse provided by the museum and art institution. Even though popular media have preempted, framed and misinformed the public about the art, the public may have been able to decide with more insight had options and discourse been provided by the art world. Unlike the *Kulo* exhibition, the *Sensation* exhibition was defended by the Brooklyn Museum of Art and was extensively debated by its varying stakeholders—the art world, government, media and the public. Hale, Tiso, and Yi’s (2001) initial study on the public attitude towards controversial art showed the acceptance of the audience, “One legitimate goal of contemporary art is to unsettle and disturb the audience, to push the limits of what is morally, politically, and socially acceptable” (p. 137). The silence and belated response from the art world in a highly discursive context of contemporary art deprived *Poleteismo*’s public of information and critical insight that could have affected their decision and experience of the art, especially of the public deprived by a live experience and had to solely depend on media and discourse for their experience of the art. The removal of the art is merely the beginning of discourse. Through a thickening of the present and the enrichment of the contemporary, public discourse is beginning an engagement of antinomies, not just from the media but from the art world and the art itself.

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