
Adventures Past Circuits: Sociality in Philippine Conceptual Writing

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Abstract

There is not much of a tradition of conceptual writing to speak of in the Philippines. A descendant of, and arguably a less popular exponent of the Western avant-garde, conceptualism is usually associated with Sol Lewitt's sentences-as-manifesto, and the more contemporary works of Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place. This paper looks at two works by Angelo Suarez, a writer, artist, and activist, who at some point markedly identified himself as a proponent of conceptual writing in the Philippines. Through a close analysis of *CIRCUIT (The Blurb Project)* and *Maliit Lang Yung Sa 'yo, Itabi mo, Magpadaan Ka: Adventures in Parataxis*, this paper aims to show the potentials of conceptualist practice in positing anew, and reframing old debates related to cultural production. Doing such can also expand the categories usually deployed in cultural analysis (form, content), bringing to the foreground the more obscured but no less important considerations such as the materials used in, or situations informing the work, or the very materiality of cultural work. *CIRCUIT* and *Maliit Lang Yung Sa 'yo* make explicit how one's social networks can figure in artmaking, and how a seemingly trifling event such as riding taxis can lead to the meaningful redistribution of roles in literary production. The paper will also try to establish possible links, however indirect, between the more long-standing oral tradition in the Philippines and Suarez's

conceptualist works, particularly *Maliit Lang Yung Sa 'yo*. In all, conceptual writing can reintroduce the social aspects of art objects and production, after having been effaced by an overemphasis on what does art convey, and how does it convey it.

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The artist rides a taxi, carrying a tape recorder with him; he will use this to record the verbal exchange that will take place between him and the taxi rider during the ride; he will transcribe the exchange afterwards “in paragraph that downplays attribution on who says what” (2012, 3). The artist contacts his peers—“writers... w/in the curator’s contact list or ‘writing circuit’—and asks them to write a blurb for a book of, and about blurbs, including the blurb they will give, and then calls it a “critico-creative exercise in closed-circuit self-reference whose output would be a poem” (2013).

The artist, Angelo Suarez, is “pushing for conceptualist & performative poetics,” certainly not a menial task in the context of a poetic tradition whose main limitation for me is not so much the categories it employs and enlivens—form, content, poetic voice, among others— but the ways these categories and their relations are conceived, and then played out. In the midst of the possibly teleological—art for what’s sake?—and the formal—what is the conflict, what are the elements, and how do they relate with one another?—questions imposed on art, conceptualism attempts to shift and extend the field of vision and consideration. Instead of either merely interiorizing or exteriorizing the work—that is, either look at art or cultural works based on their self-enclosed elements, or look at them based on their outward directions or purpose—conceptualism can call attention to the diverse relations and issues the work puts to play and mobilize. This can be a more productive approach since it complicates and vigorously untangles the situation where art works reside, and hence avoid either reductive or programmatic attributions.

This paper looks at two of Suarez’ conceptual works: *CIRCUIT (The Blurb Project)* (2013) and *Maliit Lang Yung Sa 'yo, Itabi mo, Magpadaan Ka: Adventures in Parataxis* (2012). The former

collects blurbs from Suarez's network—self-referential blurbs in that they are about the very book containing all the collected blurbs. The latter collects verbal information during Suarez's various taxi rides around the metro. Both works are downloadable for free in the file-sharing site, and online bookstore *Lulu*. Both released almost a decade ago, the two works can be classified as belonging in Suarez' middle, experimental phase—superseding his early success as a young poet, and preceding his stage of greater commitment to the National Democratic movement.¹ Particular attention is given on what these works signify within the larger tradition of artistic and cultural production in the Philippines. A cursory glance might nod to the proposition that Suarez' conceptualist practice is heavily derived from Western traditions. This paper seeks to qualify or extend this proposition by also underlining the affinities between Suarez' works and Filipino cultural practices. Finally, in unveiling the different dynamics put to work in the creative process, the paper zooms in on how the texts treat, and act on their materials. All these discussions can then help elaborate, and map new trajectories for artistic production in the country.

¹ This periodization is just mine. I am also manifesting here a critical interest in the "trajectory" of Suarez' poetics and politics—something the current paper will not cover, and a future one can explore more thoroughly. He was famously dubbed as "the Kobe Bryant of Philippine poetry" (Yuson 2002), having joined the 41st Silliman Writer's Workshop when he was 17, and published his first poetry collection, *The Nymph of MTV*, at age 19. He would then publish another poetry collection, else it was purely girls, before releasing less traditional, more conceptual works like *Philippine English: a novel*, and *Poem of Diminishing Poeticity*. Somewhere in between, in 2007, he collaborated with Constantino Zicarelli to stage "Criticism is Hard Work" which "asked street kids to go do some wrestling in a boxing ring set-up in one of the CCP's spaces" (Stuart Santiago). This was an "event" I only peripherally encountered, as a fresh graduate, and only after the fact, maybe early 2010s, when there were no "newsfeeds" yet, and the Internet was not yet as ubiquitously diurnal. It was around the second half of the 2010s that Suarez would be more openly supportive of the ND mass movement. He is now active in SAKA (Sama-samang Artista para sa Kilusang Agraryo), a group of artists campaigning for peasant issues.

From Author to Curator

Conceptual writing, says Kenneth Goldsmith, has “no claim on originality... employs intentionally self and ego-effacing tactics” (quoted in Paris 2012, 189). This can be read as another iteration of the typical critique of the romantic Genius which conceptual artists also rail against. However, if this Genius, embodied by the artist, is the fount of all ‘fine’ creative works, the expressive mechanism that enables the formulation of organic or complete works, what happens at the moment it is debunked? It can be noted that not only conceptualists, but also postmodernists railed against, and called to revalue the idea of the “genius.” Instead of picturing the authorial genius as struggling to voice out a coherent message—a move that can be seen as a defense mechanism for a self, an ego destabilized by its social environment—the postmodernists depicted it in stutter mode, unable to dish out either a complete or a unified message but embraced this inability nonetheless instead of being disconcerted.

How does the conceptualist response differ from the postmodernist one? I posit that the postmodernist version is still heavily, if not fully immured in the realm of the linguistic or the textual. It reformed the Genius in terms of what it can(not) postulate and what is its attitude towards these postulations. Hence, the shift from the coherence to the open-endedness of cultural works. On the contrary, conceptualism not only altered what the Genius signifies but more radically, emasculated it. Marjorie Perloff, one of the leading theoreticians of the conceptual, and to whom Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin dedicated their thick “anthology of conceptual writing,” *Against Expression*, spoke of “a poetry that plays down ‘originality’ in the sense of Wordsworth’s ‘overflow of powerful feelings’ in favor of framing, recasting the always already seen/read as something new” (Bayot 2013, 116). Stress must be given to the word “framing”—or more aptly reframing—tenably a principal method in conceptual writing. This method is applied not just on what is “already seen/read” but more generally on what is already out there: the already experienced, already said, already sensed. Following this, the creative output pertains less to an ‘original’ composition than an old thing or composition put in a new context, given a new use.

Hinting at social relations, Groys' description of conceptualism is relevant here as well. With conceptualism, "we can no longer see art as primarily the production and exhibition of individual things. Conceptual artists shifted the emphasis of artmaking away from static, individual objects toward the presentation of new relations in space and time" (*Global Conceptualism, Revisited*). Both the romanticized, individual genius, and the postmodernist image of this debunked genius embracing its stuttering are located in their proper historical and material contexts. This is reminiscent of Ranciere's discussion of Balzac's two kinds of poetry: first, the artificial, "poet of words ala Byron [who] expresses in verse the poet's intimate torments and the troubles of the times;" and second, the poet ala Cuvier the geologist who "reconstructs cities from out of a few teeth, repopulates forests from out of ferns imprinted on fossilized stones," making words out of things (16). Attention is shifted from the individual expression to both the material locations of, and the materials utilized for such expressions.

Again, if seen in the Philippine context, the conceptual tendencies can serve as a diversion, perhaps a much-needed one. The uproarious debates surrounding cultural works have mostly been framed in various dichotomies: emphasis on form, or on content; art for art's sake or socially committed art, among others. Often lost in these engaging, and not exactly futile exchanges is the issue of the materials fashioned to be cultural works, and the processes or methods applied to them during such fashioning.

The shift of emphasis to the process of cultural production aligns with the shift in the role of the creator from author to curator. The materials proffered to the author—previous artistic traditions, personal experiences, other texts or works, among others—are often left muted or vague—whereas the materials which the curator works on, and with, are more precise and mundane, concretely identified and identifiable.

For instance, in *Maliit Lang Yung Sa'yo*, the contents of the work are completely derived from Suarez's—or, curated completely from his—exchanges with taxi drivers. In this way, the resulting

materials are unpredictable even if, via the governing concept formulated by the curator at the onset, they are predetermined. The flow of the conversations can wander aimlessly or in a roundabout manner, but this is something that the work itself has desired, something that the work has set for itself.

In these conversations then, the accidental and the expected merge. The conversations can touch on unsurprising matters such as the drivers' knowledge of traffic situations in various locations at various times (*Tapos Buendia, matrapik din du'n e. Lagi naman hong matrapik yata sa may Buendia e*), complaints about the boundary system or the paperwork involved in operating public vehicles (*Fare matrix nila kung tawagin. Five fifty ang bili do'n Ano lang din naman 'yon—parang karton lang na itinype—Oo nga. Na nilalagyan lang ng plastic. Five hundred fifty sisingilin nila sa taxi driver sa—sa isang jeep*), or both taxi drivers and passengers' various observations and encounters on the road such as accidents (*Sumalpok ako sa EDSA. Saan? Diyan sa EDSA, pasahero ko Koreano, wasak 'yan. Naku, ano ginawa nu'ng pasahero? Ano, ano siya, may dugo gawa ng mga bubog, okey naman, hindi naman grabe. Buti naman! E kayo? Wala, wala namang nangyari sa akin.*), drug-racers or tricycle drivers getting on their way. They can also wander on, talking about the personal lives of the drivers, previous excursions (*Parang sabik na sabik sa ano, e masarap pa man din magbitaw ng manibela sa motor. A talaga? Oo, hangin kasi e. Makakatikim ka ng semplang, isang semplangan din, ayoko na, sabi ko, ayoko na magmotor.*), the hidden entrances in motels for one-night-standers, among others, sometimes prompted by a taxi driver's spouse calling (*Teka, Sir, excuse. Hinahanap na 'ko ni Misis. Hello? O? Bakit? Bumiyahe ako e. Ano'ng 'pabibili mo? Naku, hindi ko—oo. Tara—oo, oo.*)

With this, it can be said that Suarez's works have affinity with surrealism in that there is the element of chance and of surprise, but the presence of the concept or the curatorial procedure that not only precedes but governs the process of creation can reassure that the output will still be controlled. Hence, the vitality of curation is reasserted, paving way for the diminishment of the role of the creator in the creative process. That is, instead of creating

something out of nothing—or, more truthfully, out of ideas fashioned from old traditions and previous works—the artist-turned-creator will have the easier task of creating something new out of something that is already there.² Yet this is a rather simplistic way of describing how creatorship becomes curatorship. The creator engages in a curatorial process that only reveals the multiple layers of work that should be applied in conceptual projects. First, one comes up, builds, solidifies an idea, a governing concept—ride a taxi, record the conversations; select a book, copy the last sentences of each chapter. Then one enacts it, actualizes it. And then after the phase of data-gathering, of collecting the materials, one can start to think about the curation: how to assemble, how to organize, how to present these culled materials. A less linear logic can be put to work as well, so that it is not clearly mapped which step comes ‘first,’ which ‘third,’ which second.

Usually, the concept at the beginning has been greatly transformed once the latter stages are reached. The evolution of the concept need not be stated; the final outcome itself can demonstrate it.³ In Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo, one can have a glimpse of the diverse ruminations and remonstrations of the taxi drivers. While they are kept within the bounds set by the work’s concept, one can be sure that they have not been predicted beforehand.⁴

² Related here is the idea of “undiscovered public knowledge” which Don Swanson coined in the context of knowledge production at large, specifically knowledge that can be used in solving practical problems. Against the tendency of research to be overly specialized and highly abstracted, the suggestion is that problems “may be tackled effectively not by commissioning more research but by assuming that most or all of the solution can already be found in various scientific journals, waiting to be assembled by someone willing to read across specialties” (Lethem). Applied in the more modest field of art production, one can envision the (re)discovery of the legion of previous works and their reworking or recombination to arrive at new works.

³ In a way then, this is a miniaturized variation of Sol Lewitt’s 19th sentence on conceptual art: “The conventions of art are altered by works of art.” How this works in Suarez’ Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo is roughly as follows: the constraints of the work (the taxi rides, the conversations with drivers) are altered by the execution of the work (the content of the conversation, the curation of these contents afterwards).

⁴ Notice the shades of uncertainty here, for instance, manifested both by the driver and the passengers, collaborators of this project: “Saan ko dadaan? Di ko kabisado d’yan a. A, magyu-U-tum yata ulit. Ba’t nila hinaharangan? Kabisado ba niyo d’yan, may daan ba tayo d’yan, bossing? Di ko rin kabisado e. Baka mawala tayo rito, tangina. Hinaharangan pala ‘yun... Ba’t kaya nakasara ‘yon?’ (Suarez 25).

Thus, the content of the work—the exchanges between the drivers and Suarez—enliven the concept as much as they exceed it. A transformative procedure was prepared, and then actualized. The exploration of the “paratactic relations between taxi driver and passenger” has fulfilled its promise and in doing so, it has exposed a multifarious collection of content: attitudes or thoughts on certain things, or observations about culture, and fleshly, living encounters: “kaya nga tayong mga Pilipino, alam na lubog na, nilulubog lang lalo” (6). “One week, sa GSIS patay na ‘yung tao, di pa makuha” (6). “Yung iba naman, pinoprublema, nagli-leak ‘yung LPG” (11). Meanings leaking, private conversations inside the cab leaking out: Suarez’s *Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo* puts to life Claire Bishop’s reimagination of the artist as “producer of situations” (2). These situations have been produced, designed beforehand, even though how they will take shape, and play out, remain open, unforeseeable.

This is one of the ways by which conceptualism has reopened the matter of the constitution of cultural works: alongside content and form are concept and method, and the relations among these elements. With these categories surfaced, a more complex field has emerged which can similarly complicate the ways cultural works and their manners of production are understood.

What we can see in *Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo* is a mode of surpassing—the method and its resulting content surpassing the concept which at the onset shapes the method. I fancy describing the process as the work surpassing itself, a self-surpassing. This mode is enabled by the very contact between abstract and foundational (hence untested, ungrounded) concepts and their various, vivacious, and unpredictable material and methodical enactments. Hence, revelations and engagements are made in more than a singular level: the work, seen as self-surpassing and self-developing could not attain such point without being enacted, without being situated in a particular social environment or scenario (taxi rides, blurbs asked from one’s networks). In turn, this social environment ‘speaks’—through the individuals that speak in it, and through the personal exchanges this environment enables.

From Conventions to Institutions

In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster forwarded that the “historical avant-garde focuses on the conventional, the neo-avant-garde... on the institutional” (1996, 20). This formulation can also serve as basis for analyzing the way conceptualism has shifted the concerns and preoccupations of cultural practice. Following Foster’s formulations Suarez’ *CIRCUIT: (The Blurb Project)* exemplifies the neo-avant-garde. In the blurb, it found its focal point, its object of critique, and much of its content. As a feature of book publishing, blurbs mostly aid its predominant objectives: the marketing of books, attesting to their quality or whatever kind of value ascribable to them—literary, commercial, fetishistic. With their selective, if not also superficial treatment of the books they talk about, blurbs unsurprisingly fail to call attention to the larger and deeper issues involved in book production.

One can also speak of the trifling character of blurbs, how they act as a kind of matter comparable to a dispensable and useless surplus—for books can still be books without blurbs—or how they can misrepresent what the book really offers. As such, there is no clear-cut way of understanding and doing the blurb; there are diverse vantage points and contexts from which it can be comprehended. *CIRCUIT* can then be read as a way of mediating in this diversity, engaging the very field where blurbs operate and which they also sustain variously. To reiterate Suarez’ description of the project, it is “a critico-creative exercise in closed-circuit self-reference whose output would be a poem.”

A defining feature of the work, its reflexivity merits an elaboration. What differentiates *CIRCUIT* from other works containing a reflexive feature is that here, reflexivity permeates the entirety of the project. In other works such as Brechtian plays, or novels where narrators or characters talk as if aware of the constructedness (as a novel) of their situation, or French new wave films where characters look at the camera to ‘address’ the audience, reflexivity is manifested only in moments, only episodically. Instead of defining the work as a whole, these episodes serve only a stylistic purpose which mostly jar the readers

and alter their way of relating to, and comprehending the work as a whole. In these works therefore, the moments or episodes of reflexivity do not account for the point of the entire work (the play, the novel) but remain crucial to its formation. On the contrary, the entirety of *CIRCUIT* is self-reflexive.

If it is the case then, how can we make sense of its reflexivity? In the case of works where the reflexive is only a key feature, the reflexive parts can be interpreted with the rest of the work as background. How about *CIRCUIT*, what constitutes its background, the background which can help us contextualize, and make sense of what it has constructed, what it has done?

To answer the first: the concept behind the work serves as its background. This is pertinent to the postulation above about the multiple layers, neither coincidental nor parallel to one another, which figure in conceptual works. The concept is different from the content of the work. In *CIRCUIT*, the concept corresponds to the “procedure” Suarez belabored at the beginning. He spoke of “the attempt at a circular structure & the inescapable constraint that all writers involved were w/in the curator’s contact list or ‘writing circuit.’”

The mention of “constraint” resonates with the Oulipian axiom that Vaclav Paris mentions in “Poetry in the Age of Digital Reproduction”: “A text written according to a constraint describes the constraint” (2012, 87). *CIRCUIT* is about itself—a book of blurbs which arguably also functions as a constraint, for as Suarez described its making, “the book would talk about itself even before the book was complete, the participants **working blindly or w/ what few blurbs** were already available for their use” (my emphasis). Hence, one can add that if *CIRCUIT* is about itself, it is also about its own constraint. It strives to fulfill itself in the face of being constrained. With something that is not yet out there, not yet complete (the book to be composed by all blurbs), serving as its ‘speculative background,’ it completes itself gradually, even one by one, for it can be assumed that the project’s participants did not submit their contributions at once.

The same constraint does not apply to Suarez' own introductory note to this project; however, it presents dual functions, and mediates between two normally separated categories. After detailing "the procedure for assembling this work," Suarez begins the second paragraph of his curatorial note as follows: "The cover itself sports an introductory note by the curator, doubly functioning as the first blurb among over 60 more." This portion attunes with Terry Eagleton's point about the inseparability of the Searlean categories of the constative and the performative functions of language: "Constatives and performatives are interdependent not just in the sense that to make claims about how things are is itself performative, but because performatives tacitly involve accounts of how things are" (2012, 135). Hence, we can posit that Suarez's introductory note makes explicit what is an otherwise taken-for-granted, if not submerged idea. We can read *CIRCUIT*'s performance in the same light. It brings to the fore a host of ideas and statements about the blurb, a common textual feature among books variously deemed as extraneous or auxiliary, or conversely, aggrandizing or value-conferring. *CIRCUIT* mobilizes the blurb not exactly to reflect about its hidden importance but precisely to investigate its various forms of importance, and interrogate its simultaneous muteness and bombast.⁵

Additionally, I wonder whether *CIRCUIT* can be considered as partaking in a kind of institutional critique, in particular, a critique of book production in the guise of exposing, or enabling a meditation on one of its features, one tenably allied with the marketing goal, the profit-driven orientation. Robert Fitterman's description of Institutional Critique (IC) prompted this thinking.

In "Notes on Conceptualisms," Fitterman defined IC as an undertaking "in which organs of art galleries, museums are critiqued via appropriating or simulating an institutional aspect in a new content... to expose the mystique or inner workings of the

⁵ In her analysis of the novel *Democracy*, especially how the male, white, upper-class protagonists can both write off and talk about historically colonized regions and their people, sharing "major lessons in Southeast Asia," Elaine Castillo also describes the "typical, classically Didion line... [as] meant to say everything in the hopes that no one will notice it doesn't really say anything."

institution" (Fitterman 2009, 49). Can the same be said about *CIRCUIT*; that is, can we speak of the work "appropriating or simulating an institutional aspect in a new content" to say something about it, or offer an alternative way of valuing it? My surmise leans closer to the positive: *CIRCUIT* contributes to exposing the "inner workings" of blurbs in particular, and book production in general. Teetering in terms of its substance—to anoint the writer, or heap praises upon the work, to locate both in the larger literary traditions, to invite readers, or otherwise make them lose interest—the blurb correspondingly has ambivalent relations to the book-as-object and book production in general.⁶

All these processes remain in the saddle of Suarez but only as the curator of the numerous responses he received, not the principal or sole author. Given this, the ways of substantiating—either the notion of the blurb and its practice, or the book of, and about blurbs—are exploded. The resulting contents exemplify the diverse treatments and responses to the openings offered by the project. Others concentrate on the notion of the blurb itself: as "the back of the book. The glucose paste from the tree of History" (2); "these marginal annotations provide the prospective readers with a set of expectations regarding the significance of the books" (31).

Others play around the project's very reflexive trait: "the next blurb you read will be printed in ink in this very same book" (32); "This is a thirty-six lettered blurb if it says so" (66). While some others try to comment on, and make sense of the work itself: "blurb-ing for a collection of blurbs is to accent the emptiness of blurbs" (73); "never has a book before put the writer's 'block' on the witness stand and praised it as much as this one" (56).

⁶ Notice how these two already transgress the notion commonly associated with the book: the book-as-text, a collection of words (cf. Stewart). One can also recall Patricia Jurilla's scholarship, focusing more on "The History of the Book... the book as a physical object, in the materials and processes used in the manufacture of texts. ... But the History of the Book is just as concerned with the multiplication, distribution, and reception of texts. It studies relationships among authors, publishers, booksellers, librarians, and readers as well as their histories, functions, and systems of operation (118).

With this explosion, can we also speak of a collapse of coherence, a flirtation with the liberal-pluralist that is not unlike what post-structuralism celebrates? What are the implications to hermeneutics of this kind of conceptualism? Put differently, what interpretive capacities and categories can be applied to this kind of conceptualism for it to be read productively? Maybe some conceptualisms will just give a snort and dismissively say, Nah, we don't care for readings and hermeneutics. But no conceptualist hermeneutics is yet to grow and even if there is, that does not stop other frameworks from getting their interpretive forks and knives to work on the conceptualist food that is out there—whether there is really something out there or not.

Making Sense of Conceptualism

How can conceptualist writings be interpreted, especially in a Philippine tradition that has seen not much earlier iterations then? It is not hard to argue that despite the efforts from the likes of Suarez, conceptual writing in the Philippines remains immensely marginalized, unknown, unpopular, or all the above. One can resign and say that conceptual writing in the Philippines is just incipient, without a long and solid history and tradition informing it, and which can guide our understanding of it. But taking even a few works such as the ones discussed here, some affinities can be observed, starting points in describing how Suarez's conceptualist works can be located in—if not continues—specific cultural traditions and valuations in the country.

For instance, the oral mode of *pakikipagkuwentuhan* in *Maliit Lang Yung Sa'yo* can be said to recall the important role of orality in Filipino culture. Barring a nativist reading, it should be clarified that orality here pertains not solely to precolonial, indigenous cultures, if at all. In various guises, forms, and settings, Filipino oral culture evolves based on historical junctures and urgencies. Orality figures prominently in the research methods developed for *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*: such as *pagtanong-tanong* and *pakikipagkuwentuhan* (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 60). Alongside these two are other methods—*pakapa-kapa*, *pakikiramdan*, *nakikiugaling pagmamasid*, *pakikisama*, among

others—which suggest not orality, but being-there, being with the research participants, being with one’s co-researchers (59, 60). Scholars and researchers, as much as artists, are expected and encouraged to immerse in concrete situations with the wider public to supply substance and meaning to their scholarly and artistic works.

In her Introduction to *Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities*, Meñez Coben characterized the varied forms of indigenous verbal art as “modes of social action” (1), echoing the familiar point about indigenous art practices being embedded, and participating in the daily lives of people, not mere objects for contemplation. The word emerges in social situations as much as potentially transforming them.⁷ The more specific link between orality and indigenous poetry/verbal is evinced in a passage from Reyes’ *Ang Huling Dalagang Bukid at ang Authobiography na Mali*: “Si Lakandula... ay isang taong makata (madaldal), na siyang pangagalingan ng salitang makata. Ang mandudula ay dapat na gumagawa ng dula. Ang gumagawa ng tula ay dapat na tawaging manunula (tulaero) pero tinawag na makata.” (50).

Chapters later, Reyes stresses the tension in his belonging in his barrio in Hagonoy, Bulacan: “Batang palabasa? Lumabo ang mata kababasa? Kakaiba. Oral tradition pa rin ang alam ng baryo. Doon, ang lahat ay pinag-uusapan, problemang personal man iyon o panlipunan. Ang balita ay ikinukuwento, araw-araw, walang patlang. Hindi iyon binabasa ni isinusulat. Manunulat sa panahong oral?” (129). Suarez’s *Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo* relies on, and rehearses this orality ingrained in Filipino culture. He modifies it however, so that the verbal exchange has only two participants, and it takes place in the more ephemeral site of taxi rides in the capital city.

⁷ On the function and efficacy of the word “kanu” in Ifugao rituals and performances, for instance: “Kanu, a marker of referentiality in ordinary speech, frames the entire performance of myth as the re-creation of a cosmological moment, ‘an instance of an ancestral type of action... one that may constantly recur’ (Meñez Coben 107). Kanu is vital not just in being repeated, but also for the significance of its repetition: invoking something ancestral, re-creating something past, as if reanimating them.

A look elsewhere can further characterize conceptual writing as it operates in Philippine letters and posit some of its possible limits, potentials, and future trajectories. In the West, one of the more dominant approaches to conceptual writing is by associating it with “strategies of copying and appropriation” (Against Expression, xviii).

For Goldsmith, the advent of Internet and the computer has greatly contributed in paving the way for these strategies to come about.⁸ In the Philippines, ostensibly on the losing end of the global digital divide, and where there is an internal digital divide as well, the hurdles in the fuller development of conceptualist undertakings are much greater. Even if we choose not to adopt the Internet-reliant modes of conceptualism outside the country, old problems such as anemic or institutionally dominated book production, and arguably lackadaisical reading culture also present themselves as negative conditions.

In the face of these, how does the future of conceptual writing in the Philippines hold? Maybe there will be more taxi rides and blurb solicitations; more efforts to explicitly bring to the cultural products themselves the expansive terrain where writing and culture-making take place. For at best, conceptual works foreground the processes of cultural production; worst, they elevate them as having the same importance as the products themselves. Accentuating the processes mobilizes the larger field of sociality, and reveals the multiple social relations shaping and influencing the work and which the work itself also engages. This reveals and unfolds a novel dynamic. It is no longer just the authorial creator grappling with writer’s block or dallying with the Muse to bring to fruition yet another magnanimous magnum opus, ridiculously redundant in its razzle dazzle. It is no longer just the

⁸ The chapters on his *Wasting Time on the Internet* can likewise be read as various odes to the Internet, often confronting the bad reputation it has received—not unjustifiably so—in the last decades, i.e. as exacerbating our sense of social isolation, as making us more digitally illiterate, as facilitating the onrush of both online scams and ‘unintelligent’ content, among others. It provocatively claimed that “Our devices, if anything, tend to amplify our sociability,” having allowed us to engage in “parallel play” and “fully interactive” exchanges (Goldsmith). It names our browser history as “the new memoir,” digital archiving as “the new folk art.” Generally, it hails how the Internet has multiplied the possibilities not just for making art but also the relationships that can be generated through it.

committed artist answering the call of the times, concretizing it through confrontation (opposing the oppressive system) or elevating the too isolated and specific by interlinking them (condemning lavish BBM parties, or the death of Jennifer Laude in the hands of an American soldier).⁹

What I risk positing is that conceptual writing can be an instrument in excavating and exposing more painstakingly and more subtly the intricate and nuanced elements of, and interrelationships within the social totality. This potential begins with how conceptualist writing understands and enacts cultural practice. Conceptual writing counts not just form and content—however ill-defined, however erroneously deployed as divided categories—as its elemental occupations. It pauses to think seriously as well about the materials, the sources and methods of its production, so that these will no longer just be ‘ideas’ extracted from one’s mind or from personal experiences, they will be more given or found in the concrete, part of the tangibly out-there, the tangibly already-there. It takes time to think seriously as well about the methods, the machinations that will be made on the materials.

These will not be limited to the concretization of the abstract (idea) in the act of writing; these could involve transcribing, recording, soliciting responses, sending emails, retyping old information, modifying the constraints as materials start coming.

Would it be farfetched to analogize these two—materials and method—to the object and the subject respectively? The materials as concrete objects which the method chosen or designed by the curator will transform. The transformation will no longer be just from the abstract to the concrete, but from the concrete to another

⁹ Other variations of what is calling: the nationalist cause in the case of emerging, or young literature (mostly, the literatures of the newly decolonized nations). Pascale Casanova: The central question... around which the majority of literary debates are organized in emerging literary spaces (to differing degrees depending on the date of their political independence and the scale of their literary resources) involves the nation, the language, and the people” (191). Conversely, a variation of that variation: the absence, the erasure of a “nation” (Czech Republic after the Russian invasion in 1968) Milan Kundera rues in his interview with Philip Roth, and which serves as background of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

concrete form, with abstract thought mediating the process. With this new level of transformation comes the possibility of unearthing an added, if not higher plane where cultural production can dedicate its efforts. Transforming a preexisting concrete to a new kind of concrete can be infused with the goals of demystification, or even negation. In Suarez' works, the mundane experience of taxi riding is refashioned as "adventures in parataxis," consisting of verbal attempts—deliberate or not—to make sense of an array of social events. The mundane and often marginalized feature that is the blurb is simultaneously affirmed, interrogated, and outstripped in the creation of a platform for ruminating them.

Conceptual writing inaugurates shifts that are not just limited to this explication of materials and method—with the former expanding the "what" answered by the question of content, and the latter expanding the "how" answered by the issue of form. We can also reckon the way it transforms the distribution of roles in cultural production. In *Maliit Yung Sa'yo* for instance, both passenger-curator, and drivers supply what would be the work's contents. Authorship goes beyond the singular, even as the curator displaces the author. In *CIRCUIT*, the authors are as many as the possible roles they play. Some play the role of mere contributor; others act as interpreter or critic, annotator or mere "blurber," blurb-giver. These transgressions when it comes to the roles in cultural production also point to refreshing possibilities. For one, the work become internally discursive and the basis for its organicity, if one wishes to insist on its presence, will come less from its formal construction than its prior conceptual or situational configuration, its enactments, and enacted possibilities. Again, primacy is given to the enactment (of the concept) and the specific frames of situating such enactment.

This should prepare the final pronouncements: conceptual writing has the huge potential to trumpet both its materiality and the materiality of the social environment where it takes place, to which it responds. In this trumpeting, it is improper to conclude that conceptual writing forsakes the work itself to highlight only what are external to it. It would be more accurate to state that conceptual writing redefines the constitution of the work so that what are seemingly external to it are seamlessly incorporated into

the work itself. The work explodes its possibilities by literally taking in the concreteness of life and society to its own constitution. It follows that a more direct, more discernible, though no less complex relation can be established between work and life, between art and society.

Finally, Ramon Guillermo: in *Pook at Paninindigan*, he said “ang pag-aakda ng daigidig ay nangangahulugan din ng pag-akda ng mismong pang-akda” (2009, 76). Of all potentials attributable to conceptual writing, this is what I seek to underline the most: conceptual writing is not just about writing; it is also about writing its own writing tools, its own writing conditions. This second type of writing not only exposes, but also extends and contends with its tools and conditions. Conceptual writing attains this by asking us to look both at its inside and its outside, its outsides and its insides, the work and the context, the text and the constraint, its inside and its outside to the point that we conflate the two, grasp their animated relationships. It calls attention to the “akda” as much as the “pang-akda,” the sociality of the former emphasized with the exposure of the sociality of the latter.

The conceptual in *CIRCUIT* is the social in *CIRCUIT*: blurbs by writer-friends for a book of blurbs to be filled by blurbs of writer-friends, with sociality embodied by the participating writer-friends—an activation of the curator’s social network—and their reactions to the very social act of blurbing about blurbs, and for a book of blurbs.

The conceptual in *Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo* is the social in *Maliit Lang Yung Sa’yo*: multiple exchanges between passenger and taxi drivers, with all the verbal accessories prompted by the social environment finding their way in the work: “napaaway na ba kayo sa tricycle? Minsan, du’n sa Balara, bwisit na bwisit ako, maayos naman ‘yung takbo ko pero singit nang singit tapos ihaharang ‘yung paa. Ginawa ko, talagang tinuluyan ko. Tabi siya e. Humabol, galit na galit. Sabi ko sa kanya, maliit lang ‘yung sa’yo, itabi mo, magpadaan ka, hindi ‘yung humaharang-harang.”

The social is always there – *humaharang-harang* – defining the configurations of the enactment of any writing, any cultural work. What the works can do is to embrace this very configuration, *itong*

harang na ito mismo, this very limit posed by the social, in fashioning itself, in constructing itself. In the process, not only the specific obstacles but the larger social setup can be adjusted, paving way for new obstacles to face, and surpass.

No one will pave way for conceptual writing. No one will give away a cash prize, an academic degree, a hold of power. Nothing will give way, nothing gives away: we make our way to earn things; we make our way to create things; we make our way by creating things. Maybe it will bring us closer to this realization: the circuit may go round and round and—one more—round, but it has something outside it, there is something beyond it. We will make our way.

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Bionote:

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