

Curating an Indigenous Peoples' Art Work Exhibition: *Notes and Initial Lessons Learnt*

It was a privilege to work and be part of the project initiated by the Kalinawa Art Foundation and its partners --- the Institute for Indigenous Peoples' Education and the Panan-aw Art Group of the Ford Academy of the Arts, specifically the open exhibition of IP art works --- done in Davao City.

On one hand, the project affirmed that there is a growing number of Indigenous Peoples' visual artists who have delved into contemporary art forms. On the other hand, the project had expanded the advocacy for Indigenous Peoples' rights and welfare as it tried to interface visual art and social enterprise through the use of the new technology.

With some expertise in exploring the cyberspace, the Kalinawa Art Foundation project endeavors on new routes in building and expanding constituencies to help Indigenous Peoples' communities. I realized that the primary objective of the project is raise awareness on the Indigenous Peoples' artists --- their works and socio-cultural contexts --- among the international community of art patrons and benefactors. This is indeed laudable.

On the other hand, since the art works need to be displayed for actual public viewing in addition to the public auction in the internet, my participation was sought to perform the role as the curator for the exhibition dubbed --- "Indigenous Peoples' Open Art Show."

Part of my task as curator of the event is to draft some notes on the process of setting-up the exhibition. Hence this document, which describes the work that my team has done and some insights and hind-sights. I must admit that the narrative serves also as a feedback on the event and a feed-forward to the future projects that the Kalinawa Art Foundation might undertake.

Basically, I had tried to zoom into the domains of the curator as I experienced in this specific project. I hope that these reflections could help in substantiating the curator's role --- to help provide the relevance of Indigenous Peoples artists and their works in the context of cultural survival of the indigenous.

The First Organizational Meeting

I was summoned to my first working meeting with the sponsoring institution in the afternoon of November 27. How I wish that meeting was called at an earlier date in order for me to acquire a better orientation on the workload expected of me. By that time, I had witnessed a significant number of artists who underwent the

registration process. The art works that they submitted were so diverse in terms of themes, techniques, media, sizes, etc.

The meeting was cordial, casual and brief. I was clarified on the three vital tasks to assume:

- a) Set-up the display of the art works;
- b) Advise the artists (from display of their works to pricing); and
- c) Advise the sponsoring organization on the mechanics of curating the works and to closely work with an IP person to share insights with and to learn from the actual hands-on experience (although this last sub-task was not feasible considering that there was no time to scout for the IP person since I immediately delved into the work).

I found out the tasks were easy enough and the project was exciting and challenging. Likewise, it is open enough for me to input my own brand of advocacy.

However, I also found out that I had barely 28 hours to set-up the exhibition and the time frame includes the organizing of the technical staff, procuring the display panels, categorizing the works to be exhibited, drafting the ground plan and the finalizing of the exhibition concept and design.

Indeed, I don't have to emphasize that curating the Indigenous Peoples' visual art works for this particular exhibition had to be urgently done.

The Exhibition Plan and Design

Mentally, I had to execute a contingency exhibition plan and design as I delved on the first necessary steps of organizing the support technical staff. It was a relief that I was not doing the inventory and labelling of the art pieces as these works were done by the staff and volunteers of the sponsoring institution.

The first priority was to procure exhibit panel boards simultaneous with the recruitment of persons to compose the technical work force: 1 carpenter, 2 painters, 2 installers, 1 driver, 2 utility personnel and an assistant curator-cum-peer-critique. I knew I need somebody to do the electrical work for the lighting but this could wait until the following day when all the panels had been put to place and all the art pieces are displayed in the designated spaces.

I relied on the network of support from partner institutions and friends to provide the panels and personnel to work with. By sun-down, the first sets of exhibit panels were delivered to the venue and my friends had signified their commitments to work with me. However, the exhibition concept and design were

merely mental sketches drawn on a tiny piece of paper --- the details of which were all stored in my personal memory.

Knowing the Artists and the Art Works

One of the crucial aspects that the curator needs to muster is to know the artists and their art works. However, as we engaged ourselves in the actual installation work more and more art pieces were submitted. In fact, only about 80 per cent of the numbers of art works in display were in place the day prior to the opening of the exhibition.

Even in art competitions, deadlines for submission of art works is set at least a few weeks before the actual exhibition and judging.

In this particular exhibition however, it was only a few hours before the opening time that I realized there were about one hundred and five (105) visual art pieces and more than a dozen of traditional crafts to exhibit.

I was lucky enough that two of the faculty members from the Ford Academy for the Arts --- Mr. Desiderio “Banjo” Satorre and Magtanggol were with me from the evening of December 27 until the early hours of November 28. Their company allowed me some glimpses of the background of the participating artists and their corresponding art works.

Hence, the process of knowing the artists and the art works was akin to a roller-coaster ride with its energizing ups and downs.

Creating a “New Space”

From experience, I knew that alternative art shows in Mindanao are most often done in non-conventional venues. And this particular art show was not an exception. The exhibit venue was a multi-purpose session hall of the partner institution --- the Institute for Indigenous Peoples Education.

The designated main Exhibit Hall had approximately fifty-six square meters. The height of the ceiling however was ideal. The two sides of the main hall were all open windows providing ample ventilation. Thus we were left with two walls to utilize. The second wall however was an array of office cabinets which were all turned-around so that we can use the back as display walls.

Since this particular exhibition focused on Indigenous Peoples’ visual art works, initially I wanted to create an environment that captures a distinct sense of Indigenous Peoples’ spaces. This idea had to be discarded immediately considering the number of art works to be displayed and the limitation of the given exhibit halls. At the outset, it was very clear that my domain of work does

not include “to edit” the submitted art works. This means I have to display all the 105 works submitted for the competition.

Thus, together with the other members of the team, we had to determine and devise an extension exhibit area as the main hall can barely accommodate half of the total number of art pieces.

The selection process as to which work are to be hung in the main exhibit hall and which works have to be exhibited in the extension exhibit area was not rigid. “First come first” was apt to guide us in the process of selection.

However I also did some deliberate decisions. The works displayed in the main had collectively portrayed the unwritten theme that resonates with the distinct conditions of the indigenous i.e. “identity and diversity, complexity and change”. Moreover, most of the framed and huge works were chosen to be included in the main hall.

At this writing there were indications that we had transformed the multi-purpose session hall into a “new space”. However, I reckoned we were not successful enough in re-creating a more appropriate Indigenous Peoples’ sense of space --- like crossing borders between indoor and outdoor as well as allocating special spaces for spiritual functions.

From Design to Execution

Albeit all difficulties, the project had successfully mobilized the exhibition technical team --- carpenters, painters and other crew members. No curator can do any magic without them.

I recalled that the senior adviser of the main sponsoring institution had once mentioned to me the importance of “planning the event” to assure that the desired outputs are achieved in the most cost-effective manner. But to do so, the plan should include the work force that would do the actual execution of the exhibition design.

In this particular project however, we have to deal with the exigency of the event and its givens. Thus, until the opening night, the exhibit design and the installation work were all in-progress.

Even the lighting installed with the end view of creating an ambience was not neatly planned. I really wanted to use some track lighting but I could not mention this to the sponsoring organization as this entails more expense. I wanted to prove that setting an exhibition would not be that expensive --- provided however that detailed planning and massive resource networking had been done in order to realize the exhibit design as creative as possible.

The Exhibition Notes

One artist friend commented that the exhibition is very mixed. I found the comment thought-provoking though I don't want to delve into the many connotations engendered in the comment.

There is however one thing that I, as the curator failed to undertake --- the writing and display of the exhibition notes, which in the first place was proposed by me, due to time constraints. It would be best that the curator could be integrated in project in its early phase. An exhibition notes could have helped in presenting the unifying thread amidst the diversity of art pieces being displayed.

There were very clear ideas on my head as we undertake the hanging of the art pieces. I was thinking of arranging the art works along the main theme mentioned above --- "identity and diversity, complexity and change". However, I had also thought of ways to clearly substantiate the theme focused on the socio-historical contexts that confront the indigenous peoples in Mindanao.

In the vernacular, Indigenous Peoples are referred to as "lumad" --- meaning rooted-ness. This idea kept on recurring in my mind during the entire twenty-eight hours of work that we did.

Most of the works featured in the event speak of the complexities of the "lumad". On one hand, the subject chosen by some of the artists clearly depicted the rooted-ness of the indigenous. Some also portrayed the conditions that had "uprooted" them. On the other hand, a number of art works substantiated the process of "regenerating the roots".

The exhibition notes that remained tentatively scribbled in my mind could have helped in firming-up a unifying theme of the exhibition and also help in describing the social context of the new art forms engaged by the indigenous. Likewise, it could emphasize the significance this new advocacy --- the interface of art and social enterprise towards advancing the Indigenous Peoples rights and welfare.

Moreover, part of the curator's work is the appropriate labelling of the art works and the publication of the exhibition catalogue. This was not also done considering that we have only twenty-eight man hours to maximize.

Target Guests

A definitive guest list, if available days before the actual exhibition, could also help us in refining the exhibition concept and design. This is very basic in campaign work --- defining "who is our target?" I was informed however that the guest come from various sectors and classes --- artists and advocates, policy makers and patrons, etc. etc. etc.

But this was very general for me. I wanted a priority list so that I could be helped in refining the concept of how the art works are displayed and labelled and what exhibition notes and promotional materials to write and publish. For me, one of the successes in curating the exhibition is how effectively we convey to the particular target audience the relevance of “contemporary visual art” to the cultural survival of the indigenous.

In this way, the exhibition could help in building the right constituency in advancing the IP rights and welfare.

Promoting the Exhibition

Another crucial component of the curator’s domain is promotions and publications, which I also did not undertake. It would have been good if some art catalogue or artists’ directory is printed and some Press Releases are circulated. Moreover, I even did not notice if an exhibition “Guest Book” is in place.

Opening Night

The rites and ceremony during the Opening Night were appropriate and just right. However, as a theatre director and dramaturg, I was a bit uncomfortable with the “cultural treat” as the context of the performance of the elders from an Indigenous Peoples’ community were not consistently and comprehensively annotated while the performance of the urban children inspired by the traditions of the Indigenous were likewise not provided with concrete contextualization. This thought could be a substantiated in length in another paper.

The exhibition of Indigenous Peoples visual arts needs to be packaged with a good blend of rituals and performances during the opening night --- something that would facilitate better understanding. The cultural program must also be a two-way process of communicating and learning from peoples of varied ethnicities and ways of living.

Some Ending Notes

In summary the curatorial work of an art exhibit is essential in many aspects and necessary in achieving the desired impact and effect. Hence, it is recommended that the curator should phase-in in the earlier stage of project conceptualization and implementation.

The curator should be given time to familiarize himself / herself on the works and the venue and must be given time to prepare a written exhibition notes before the exhibit opens.

Moreover, the objective of transferring the knowledge and skills in curatorial work to an Indigenous person should be a top priority. Perhaps, in the next event, the foundation could find a timely strategy to realize this objective.

NESTOR T. HORFIILA

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Comment:

As noted above, as part of the agreement with the *Kalinawa Art Foundation*, Mr. Horfiila was asked to provide this report. It must be clearly understood that in doing so, he has far exceeded the expectations of the *Foundation*. This is not surprising, given his remarkable work on the Indigenous Peoples' Visual Art Show in Davao. On this report, there are three comments to be made.



First, Mr. Horfiila is unduly harsh on himself for not undertaking activities (the audience, the notes on the exhibit, etc.) for which he given neither authority nor responsibility by the *Foundation*. As well, it should also be understood, that he is being more than generous with his remarks about the project. For example, from the point of the initial discussion, he tried to begin the work, but for a variety of reasons, was impeded from doing so, mostly related to organization issues of the *Foundation*. I accept the responsibility for both of these problems.

Second, his report, in addition to providing a guide for the *Foundation* for future activities, is also a remarkable opportunity for learning. From it, one of the key lessons to be discerned is that while there may be the “freedom to act” (that is to say, the *Foundation* has freely chosen to undertake certain activities), the obligation to act responsibly in exercising that “freedom to act” must not be forgotten. Thus, the standards to which the *Foundation* should be held accountable for its activities will be raised. In doing so, the *Foundation* may not always succeed, but it will have a concrete and clear guide as to not only **what** should be accomplished, but also **how** to accomplish it.

The final point is also related to learning, but the lesson is somewhat different. In Mr. Horfiila’s work on this report and on the event itself (as well as the positive consideration to work with the *Kalinawa Art Foundation* on future projects) he has demonstrated an important point: a little bit of passion and commitment goes a long way to accomplishing things. Even with all the difficulties and the potential for problems, which were very clear given his knowledge and background, and the apparent lack of specific rewards which might be anticipated as motivation for an activity, Mr. Horfiila went ahead and undertook the work.

Carlton B. Hughes

Kalinawa Art Foundation

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