

El Spoliarium with its Others: Philippine Art History and its Discursive Contentions¹

Reuben Ramas Cañete

The place of art history was always multiple: the disciplinary practices lazily parceled out by the casual observer among various schools or methodologies turn out to be multiple and often contradictory... (These) rhetorical battles... owe their marching orders as much to the agonistic fragmentation naturalized by the modern disciplinary knowledge as to substantive theoretical differences: As we have seen, the art historian is as much an artifact of the discipline as are its ostensible subjects of study. Discipline, as Foucault has poignantly reminded us, work above all to discipline desire. Our task here has been, at the final instance, to understand the history of the desires disciplined by art history.

This lengthy passage from Donald Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History: Meditations of a Coy Science* (1989) presents the dilemma that the contemporary art historian faces at the first

instance of disciplinary introspection: every approach or “theory” that has girded and circumscribed the manner by which art history is to be produced is seen as a “discourse” (better yet, to use Jean Francois Lyotard’s term, a *grande recit*) that is as equally valid—or invalid—as any other discourse. This poly-positionality of productive enunciations are not only unveiled as complicit to the production of a privileged discursive/“authorial” position (*the* art historian as the “Speaking I/Eye”), but that such a process is also countered or contravened by equally insisting/inserting/asserting voices that contradict other utterances in an act of revoking the previous dispensatory schemes, or transform them to suit the newer order of things. That “desire” has been specifically identified by Preziosi as the “governing logic” (to paraphrase Foucault) of art history is to understand the nature of art’s history as, initially, a predicative by-product (texts concerning) of a primary, subjected set of para-disciplinary governance (art objects/works); and eventually, drawn into the dialectic propagation of history’s textual reproduction, becomes “disciplinary” by its ability to linguistically frame its subject—while simultaneously sealing its lips—with the declarative agency of its writer/speaker, whether it be, in Michael Baxandall’s estimation, “explanatory” or “descriptive” (Baxandall:1985).

This rearrangement of the subject positions from “I, the work of art” to “I, the art historian speaking of a work of art” also transforms the dynamics of study from a professed investigation of “what works of art are, and what is its history,” into an investigation of the manner by which art history has privileged certain norms of speaking, addressing, pointing, and framing *of/about* works of art. Thus, the method and manner of presentation and subsequent elucidation of “art history” are delimited at the first instance by its discursive terrain. It is therefore no surprise that the method of critiquing the subject of art history is often through the critical tools first elucidated in literary theory, for art history is as much a subject framed by its own literary discourse as the set of objects and topics that it attempts to privilege, that is, works in visual art. This privileging,

crucially, is usually done through an often linear type of narration, and as such, the mode of addressing the reader already precludes the kind and nature of works of art that its historian has chosen to frame—and fix—his narrative.

It is therefore no surprise that the tropes of art history, as it has been written since the Enlightenment, closely follows, and is often contemporary to that of the dominant or emergent forms in philosophy and literary theory of the same period. Positivist Humanism infused with a Hegelian predestination is often thought to characterize the works of such art historians as Jacob Burckhardt or Alois Riegl, which closely followed similar discursive formations in the social sciences, such as history and anthropology. On the other hand, the rise of the social history of art under Arnold Hauser, and continued to a certain degree by Timothy J. Clark, also parallels developments of Marxist theory outside of the social sciences during the 20th Century.² Often, though, readers complain of a “lack of fit” between the discursive framework of an art history, and the contexts of production and reception of works of art. This gap shows itself when discussions of works of art focus on very specific “autonomous” parameters (form, content, subject matter, composition, etc.) that does not integrate its “objects” within a position outside of the dominant narrative, as when other interpretive positions (or “reading acts”) are ignored or suppressed in order to foreground the validity of its claims. It is this disjuncture between narrative and interpretation that this study pursues in Philippine art history, for this subject has yet to yield its claim of empirical validity about what art in the Philippines “is all about,” and has, until recently, insisted on its interpretive monologue as art history of the Philippines *tout court*.

I have decided to concentrate on the narratives surrounding Juan Luna’s canonical painting *El Spoliarium*, primarily to the centrality that the practices and techniques of Western art (painting) have been made to “speak of” the social,