



'Oo (Yes)', 2009. Installation view, UTS Gallery, Sydney. Mixed media. Courtesy the artist.

CONSTANT OSCILLATION

MARIA CRUZ'S 'OO (YES)' | ANNA GIBBS

The title of the recent survey show of Maria Cruz's work from the last decade or so—'oo yes'—sounds like a squeal of delighted joy in English, but 'oo' means yes (in all its possible inflections) in the Philippines' Tagalog. The title, like most of the works selected for the exhibition, points to the processes of cultural translation that are ubiquitous in everyday experiences of the modern world, and that form one of the nuclei of Cruz's work. Brought about by the forces of globalisation, migration, mediatization and tourism, these constant translations of the quotidian cross media and cultural forms, vernacular and high culture, commerce and art. Cruz is adept at creating constant rapid oscillations between two sides of the same coin, or two sides of the same story, an undecidable difference and/or

sameness that makes for complexity, ambivalence, and the kind of irony created by the invitation to the Sydney version of the show. This bears an image on the verso that seems to contradict the recto—a detail of Cruz's painting of Yoko Ono's 'noooo': a gothic and cartoonish scream of horror and refusal.

The yes and no, separated and conjoined by the invitation, are both dominated by the 'O', one of those innumerable yet constantly counted and accounted round things—letters, coins, bottle tops—which so fascinate Cruz. These round things form circles that open ambiguously onto a void or a vortex, portal to an abyss or to bliss, form signs which might mean nothing, zero, zilch—or might encompass everything. If some of these works remove coins from the exchange value of the market and obliterate the face value of the currency, they nevertheless insert the coins into other systems where their value is less determinate. Like the art system, for example, which incorporates them both as signs and as material components in works whose value is, strictly speaking, incalculable. Or it catches them up in a relational gesture, which argues for value as both subjective and intersubjective, subject to complex negotiation and exchange between the artist and an audience so involved they are complicit, if not collaborating in the production of the work. Perhaps, like a kind of voodoo—that 'oo' again, now mimetically redoubled as if by the sympathetic magic of contact or contagion—coins can conjure more coins in a kind of wishful thinking, a sympathetic magic of contiguity this time, a mimesis potentially multiplying itself indefinitely into the future.



Poetry, 2009. Detail. Batik texts on cloth. Courtesy the artist.

... Maria Cruz's work shows how the sheer proliferation and pervasiveness of signage weakens the imperative and makes for contradictory injunctions, for confusing ambiguities ...

Words, like coins, are subject to fluctuations in value according to exchange rates and economic regimes. As text they form graphic elements in Cruz's paintings, and they also perform various roles as part of the composition—but perhaps more importantly, they point as well to a certain ductility between writing and painting. The legible, writes Martine Reid, is always in danger of reverting to what is simply visible, 'mere drawing'. This is because 'it follows the train of thought to which it gives body and movement'.¹ Graphic signs, whether in words or images or words as images, evoke the kinematics of gesture and through them the 'elusive qualities... captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as "surging", "fading away", "fleeting", "explosive", "crescendo", "decrescendo", "bursting", "drawn out" and so on...' which infant researcher Daniel Stern terms 'vitality affects'.² And they evoke incipient and often unconscious mimetic responses in the viewer who must oscillate between reading and looking, as she has been made to oscillate between languages and cultures—though the proportions of reading and looking obviously vary from work to work. When the language we are looking at is not one we understand, the shape and form of the script and the material on which it is printed, as well as its location, are aids to a kind of somatic translation, even if the direct translation of the meanings of words remains impossible. The dripping script so often used in horror genres crosses cultures,

sometimes suggesting not only the enjoyable blood of popular entertainment, but also more sinister spillages.

It has been said that the advent of print displaces our ability to read the signs of the natural world, but the dense signage of urban spaces, to which Cruz's work constantly refers, forms part of the script of the city as second nature. Walter Benjamin—the great diagnostician of modernity—writes of print being forced to rise up from its bed on the horizontal of the page and into the 'dictatorial perpendicular' of the sides of buildings on the streets³, but Maria Cruz's work shows how the sheer proliferation and pervasiveness of signage weakens the imperative and makes for contradictory injunctions, for confusing ambiguities (is the plumber in the ads on the sari-sari shop a prostitute or not?). Does the red and white handmade logo mean that the shop actually sells coca cola or simply that it sells things, *like* coca cola, that sari-sari shops in Manila usually sell? Handmade, recycled, cobbled together, multi-purpose—signage, décor, and shield against the weather—these signs translate

the global into the local via a process of making do in which the manufactured is imitated by the handmade: but they also do the opposite, translating the local into the global so that, if the global seems to colonise the local, the local also effects a subtle subversion of the global—what some corporations might see as an undermining of the brand.

Cruz's text works on fabric use simple batik techniques to form phrases taken from protest banners, street announcements, magazines, newspaper photographs and 'The Genius of the Crowd', a poem by Charles Bukowski found by the artist on Google. They suggest a subtle process of the transformation of the global by the local, of resistance to the sameness which the needs of branding might want to impose. Cruz takes from Bukowski a series of similes—*like a tiger; like a mountain, like hemlock*, and so on—'like' indicating similar, but not the same. The idea of difference inserts itself slyly into the scene and opens new possibilities in it. Bukowski's poem speaks of the evil genius of the crowd, brilliant at doing the opposite of what it says, wanting only sameness, and afraid of art which needs solitude and which produces both a critical distance and a critical difference. The crowd is the quintessentially urban phenomenon, as writers from Charles Baudelaire through Gabriel Tarde and Walter Benjamin attest, and being alone in the crowd is the quintessentially modern experience. The popular image of the artist epitomises such apartness, but Cruz's video work, 'Poetry', militates against this idea by convening a communion of twelve artists (a last supper before all life is rendered virtual, or before what, exactly?) and has them perform lines from Bukowski's poem in a collaborative act of appropriation and repetition. This generates a series of shifts in the meaning of lines as the different intonations of the different speakers and the precise geographical and temporal location of the performance seem to interact to create a series of almost oracular commentaries and reflections on the world outside the room, just beyond the window, which can never be clearly or directly observed by the watching audience on whom the work performs a voodoo. ■

notes

1. Martine Reid, 'Editor's Preface: Legible/Visible', *Yale French Studies*, no.84, 'Boundaries, Writing and Drawing', 1994, pp.1-12.
2. Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Development Psychology*, (1985), 1998, p.54-56.
3. Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, NLB, London, 1979, p.62.

Maria Cruz works between Berlin, Sydney and Manila. Anna Gibbs is an Associate Professor with the Writing and Society Research Group, University of Western Sydney.

'Oo (yes): selected paintings & projects, 1996-2009' curated by Jo Holder and was shown at the University of Technology Sydney, 27 October – 27 November 2009.



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from top: 'Oo (Yes)', 2009. Installation view, UTS Gallery, Sydney. Mixed media; *Rosalin's Store*, 2009. Hand constructed translation of Manila's 'sari-sari' stores, timber, commercial and hand painted advertising materials, paint, papier mâché lights, chicken wire. Various dimensions. Courtesy the artist.