Nomads are known to be rooted in myth, legend, and folklore. [...] To them art has two essential factors: (a) the ability to consolidate the community through ritual and performance and (b) collective participation in their dramatized, spoken, and artistic forms. By their intensity both in communication and the immediacy of their memory, nomads reflect par excellence the lifestyle of a free people.

—Teshome H. Gabriel (1990:396)

I hope the word “queer” can mean for a few years more what it means to me now, despite its trendiness, writing in the summer of 1993: a militant nonessentialism with the distinct possibility of alliances in unlikely places.

—Catherine Lord (1995:228)

Bayanihan (bá-ya-ne-hán), n. 1. a cooperative endeavor in community development, mutual aid. Syn. tulungán, usungán, damayáan.

DIWA Arts' Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo consummated Bayanihan Transition, a two-year (1994–1996) series of public installations investigating the Filipino immigration experience in the San Francisco Bay Area. Sponsored by Capp Street Project,¹ these works cumulatively explored the traditional custom of bayanihan—when a Filipino farmer literally moves his nipa hut home from one field to another with the help of neighbors, families, and strangers. Bayanihan connotes any instance when members of a community offer each other mutual support, regardless of their personal differences. This essay excavates the visual and conceptual layers within the Bayanihan Transition installation and the Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo performance in particular, introducing readers to the nomadic cultural practices of DIWA Arts, an artists' collective whose camp posturing challenges ethnic stereotypes while denaturalizing homogeneous notions of their diasporic community.²

In Bayanihan Transition, DIWA Arts represented the experience of Filipino immigration as one requiring what cultural critics Teshome H. Gabriel (1990) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1996) have characterized as a “nomadic” sense of glo-
DIWA Arts’ Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo at the Capp Street Project, San Francisco, 1996.

(Photoby Leo Bersamina)

1. DIWA Arts’ Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo performance, inspired by a traditional religious pageant that takes place annually in the Philippines.

By adopting such diverse personas as the Virgin Immaculata, a pantheon of imaginary local and traditional Catholic saints, General MacArthur, transvestite beauty queens, and bodybuilt he-men, the DIWA performers toyed with ways that Filipino, Filipino American, and international gay subcultures intersect—social zones that have remained virtually absent in visual culture. While Jessica Hagedorn (1990) and other writers conjure images of these complex identities through their novels, very few visual artists or scholars have attempted to represent them. Even a respected revisionist historian like Ronald Takaki, who advocates an expansive vision of multicultural America, has failed to speculate on the manifestation of gay Filipino American culture. While his important book, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (1989) addressed the history of 20th-century Filipino immigration to California, there is not one word or image suggesting the existence of a gay subculture. Once again, it seems, there is something obscured from our collective view. That which proliferates “inside the visible” is what DIWA Arts represents and brings to life through their postcolonial performance activities.

Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo alluded to the fact that cross-gender behavior and uncloseted identities are “naturalized” in the Philippines as an inevitable part of the social order, yet gay Filipino Americans do not enjoy the same status in the United States. DIWA Arts engages performance work as the means to reveal, grapple...
with, and revel in these cross-cultural tensions, which exist within their artistic collective as much as within their broader Bay Area community.

To convey DIWA Arts’ nomadic spirit and complex cultural references, I will ally diverse and often disparate theoretical frameworks in a critical analysis of their work. Interwoven will be “floating” quotations by novelists, cultural studies scholars, queer theorists, pop stars, and political revolutionaries—each offering ideas that correspond to issues raised by Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo. While I do not mean to suggest that these writers should be understood in a decontextualized manner, I have tried to open the formal style of my critical methodology so that it more closely replicates the structure of DIWA Arts’ work. My goal is less a seamless, coherent argument than it is a playful layering of ideas and images that offer a syncretic, interdisciplinary, and international perspective.

First, an introduction to the artists’ collective and the Bayanihan Transition project as a whole: DIWA Arts, whose name refers to the Tagalog word for “spirit,” has staked its reputation on its sculptural installations and performances that address Filipino culture and history. Previous projects raised issues about the invisibility of “Filipino-town,” the history of immigrant agricultural workers in California’s Central Valley, anticolonial resistance in the Philippines, and stereotypes within their diaspora. While their size has fluctuated during the past ten years, the collective currently includes nine men and women whose economic background, race, sexual orientation, nationality, and individual aesthetic practices vary widely. Originating in 1986 as a group of young Filipino American undergraduates affiliated with the University of California, Berkeley, DIWA Arts came together to foster artistic dialogue and create opportunities to exhibit their work. The very existence of their artists’ collective is evidence of cultural bayanihan in that its diverse members sought creative support after choosing to be artists, an atypical vocation within Filipino American culture. What began as a series of dinner parties and group art exhibitions in community centers transformed by 1990 into formalized artistic collaborations in established art venues. Inspired by higher-profile models of artists’ collectives such as Group Material, Gran Fury, and the Guerrilla Girls (whose collaborative installations and performance works were becoming increasingly visible in mainstream art journals when the DIWA artists were students), DIWA Arts has consistently worked on a project-to-project basis. The group’s undertakings do not replace but rather complement each member’s studio practice; artists come and go from the group according to their personal goals and professional schedules, since they also act as arts administrators, curators, and teachers throughout the Bay Area. This flexibility in size, aesthetic skill, and personal sensibility is also a form of bayanihan in that it allows the group to maintain a fresh vision while encouraging individual members to develop a variety of cultural practices. Moreover, the collective has successfully secured grants and exhibitions that would have been much more difficult (if not impossible) to access as individual artists, even in the age of institutionalized Multiculturalism.

DIWA Arts created Bayanihan Transition within the xenophobic political climate that culminated in Proposition 187, California’s infamous anti-immigration bill. It raised the questions: Does the traditional Filipino custom of bayanihan translate metaphorically when Filipinos immigrate globally? Is there a bayanihan spirit of cooperation practiced within the Filipino diaspora? If so, how does it manifest itself in the context of contemporary American culture? How do Filipino Americans cope with their internal differences in class, nationality, generation, gender, and sexual orientation while performing as a collective social body here in the United States? As in earlier projects, DIWA Arts
involved Filipino Americans who were not artists in the creation of *Bayanihan Transition*. The artists researched and ultimately sited their project in three locations frequented by the Filipino American community: initially, at the Philippine Airlines terminal at San Francisco International Airport (gateway for new immigrants and traveling expatriates); secondly, at the Filipino Restaurant in the Mint Mall (where several immigrant-owned small businesses and social services can be found within the city’s historically Filipino-populated “South of Market” district); and thirdly, at the Gran Oriente Filipino Hotel (a low-cost residence serving recent immigrants since the 1920s), located in the newly gentrified “South Park” neighborhood, where Capp Street Project recently re-located their nonprofit exhibition space. In each site, the artists interviewed recent immigrants about their diverse experiences of cultural transition, diasporic longing, and community identity. Translating fragments of the interviews into both English and Tagalog, they transferred these poignant thoughts onto scrolling, red-lettered LED signs, visible to the constituencies within each location. Texts floating on the walls, ceilings, and windows revealed sometimes contradictory phrases like: “Bayanihan spirit is more minimal in the U.S., we are more individual here [...]”; “Filipinos, very hospitable, even strangers try to help [...]”; “American money is worth a lot more in the Philippines [...] and it comes down to homesick versus dollar [...].” By using electronic sign boards, formally reminiscent of works by Jenny Holzer, DIWA Arts defied any popular conception associating artists of color with traditional craft media. Alongside the LED signs at each site they installed videotapes of themselves interviewing Filipino Americans to gather the transcribed testimonials. The video component gave a human face to these computerized visual voices while simultaneously calling attention to the constructed nature of their documentary work. The videos also suggested how the creative process behind *Bayanihan Transition* was itself an ongoing performance by a collective of artists.
working to forge new relationships among Filipinos of different ages, classes, nationalities, and genders.

Bayanihan Transition’s fourth and final site was the Capp Street space itself—an arts institution virtually unknown to Filipino Americans in the neighborhood before the project. DIWA Arts ironically “christened” Capp Street Project a “Filipino space” by performing their outrageously irreverent version of Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo. In the Philippines, this annual springtime floral street festival honors the Virgin Mary by synthesizing precolonial pagan rituals with an ostentatious procession of Catholic and folkloric saints, as well as a lavish transvestite beauty pageant. Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo offers gay Filipinos an opportunity to extravagantly transform themselves into hyperfeminized persons to be reified and lusted after by the local community. Romel Padilla, a gay DIWA member familiar with this camp tradition through frequent travel between California and the Philippines, suggested that the group publicly address Filipinos’ celebration of gay identity by staging a similar event in San Francisco. In their reenactment of Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo at Capp Street Project, DIWA Arts appropriated the festival’s traditional structure and flamboyant spirit while parodying its sacred character. It functioned as a carnivalesque celebration complementing their otherwise “straight” Bayanihan Transition works.

Queen of beauty queens, Miss Universal Universe, Miss Bituin, Madame Galactica, Madame International, Maganda, Pearl of the Orient, Pacific Rim Regina, Mother of Asia, Land of the Morning, Miss Bahay Kubo, Miss Manila, Lunaretta, Moonlight Sonata, Binibining Filipinas, Jet-Set Ambassadress of Adobo and Goodwill, whose un wrinkled face reflects the shining love, the truth burning in her heart, […] Mother of Smooth Alabaster Complexions, Hairdo of Eternity, Calculating Mother of Noncommittal Mouth and Eyes. […] O Perennial Indifference! O Lizard-Pouch Chin! Defiantly held up for the cameras, every photo opportunity seized […].

—Jessica Hagedorn, Dogeaters (1990:218)

As the audience packed into the pristine, 900-square-foot Capp Street Project space and waited for Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo to begin, they encountered ceiling-mounted monitors and large-scale video projections on the gallery walls of DIWA Arts members who had transformed themselves into color-saturated, saccharine-sweet angels, blowing kisses down from above and flying in gargantuan proportion behind the performers onstage. As the piece began, the audience parted to make way for the procession of imaginary sanctified beings who posed as “Patron Saints” of Bayanihan Transition’s public-art sites. Rico Reyes, the sassy MC, cross-dressed as the Reigning Effervescent Binibining Miss DIWA Baby 1995 and narrated the evening’s event. With Verdi’s “Aida” and Vivaldi’s “Gloria in Excelsis” blasting in the background, he smoothly introduced the four pseudo-sanctified, site-specific “Santas.” They included:

Santa de la Balikbayan Box, Patron Saint of the San Francisco Airport site. This saint, played by performance artist Reanne Estrada, embodied the phenomenon of the balik (back) bayan (home) box, a prefabricated shipping container that international travelers, resident aliens, naturalized citizens, and immigrant Filipino guest workers typically fill with American products to take back to the Philippines for their friends and families. These fetishized boxes, a contemporary cargo cult transported by Philippine Airlines or the U.S. Postal Service, facilitate
the transnational flow of consumer goods. Filled with canned foods, electronic gadgets, T-shirts with American insignia, among other items, the boxes augment the desire for American products in the Philippines and contribute to the wealth of the local economy. Costumed in materials associated with packaging (duct tape, bubble wrap, twine), this Santa was carried through the procession by bare-chested, “oiled and buffed” Leo Bersamina and René de Guzman—two straight men in the collective who donned wrestling masks and assumed hypermasculinized “bouncer” identities during the performance. Muscles flexed, they transported the Santa de la Balikbayan Box within a rectangular reliquary that included a pillow made from multiple cans of SPAM.

**Santa Theresa D’Ecstasy**, Patron Saint of the Mint Mall. Dressed in a nun’s habit, laden with dangling shoes and loudly moaning in ecstasy, Terry Acebo Davis represented the Catholic saint famous for her erotic proclamation that “the ecstasy of the Lord’s vision was like an arrow piercing my groin.” The fetishistic shoes, a ubiquitous reference to former queen Imelda
Marcos, represented “the eighth deadly sin and the source of her perpetual orgasm: shopping!” In the Philippines, the *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo* is recognized as a ritual of conspicuous consumption, an “orgy of devil-may-care spending,” according to Filipino writer Nicanor G. Tiongson (n.d.).

**La Illuminada, Our Lady of the Panhandle** (painter and community muralist Johanna Poethig) acted as the Patron Saint of the Gran Oriente site, where she was reputed to have miraculously “kept their lightbulbs forever lit and their utility bills down” during the time when the LED signs adorned the residential hotel’s windows. Decked out in a makeshift, sparkling, gold lamé gown, La Illuminada posed under an excessively illuminated canopy.

**Santa Maria, Virgin Immaculata** (Romel Padilla, who scripted and directed the entire performance) represented Capp Street Project’s Patron Saint. Cradling a naked plastic doll, he “ascended into heaven” by climbing up a stepladder and posing iconically beneath a blue swag, flanked by golden angels. He wore the Virgin’s traditional sumptuous Marian blue-and-white garb—“blue for Queen of the Heavens and white for her almost-virginity.” Blessing the crowd with the gesticulations of a Pope, Padilla seemed to mimic the virtuous and nurturing role that Capp Street Project played in fostering DIWA Arts’ work.

Each saint posed tableau-style within her altar, with the audience invited to wander between each heavenly post. A choir sang slightly off-key, setting an unctuous tone in the room. After a brief intermission, three men from the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance appeared as The Lee Sisters to lip-synch a choreographed rendition of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.” In the second half of the performance spectacularly outfitted beauty queens, representing a range of Filipino diasporic constituencies, competed for the Miss DIWA Baby 1996 beauty contest. These “lovely Reynas” included: Reyna Columbia (a.k.a. Margarita Tequila Marijuana Cocaina Cartel), a hedonistic “queen” whose runny nose spoofed international drug lords as well as the drug-laden disco culture that thrived in both the United States and the Philippines during the Reagan era—a time when most DIWA members were coming of age; Reyna de la Buenavista, played by a British man who took on the guise of a DIWA artist for the evening and embodied “San Francisco and all its panoramic views seen from her knees”—an allusion to Buena Vista Park, renowned for gay cruising and discreet blow jobs; Reyna of the Pineapples, who wore a stereotypical coconut-shell bra and represented the large Pinoy community in Hawaii, a favorite vacation mecca for Americans and wealthy Filipinos; and Reyna de las Philipinas, queen of “the virgin islands of the Philippines,” who claimed to be the only other undefiled character besides the Blessed Mother. Her long blond locks epitomized Filipinos’ fetishized Nordic Other, a WASP queen-wanna-be. Finally, Johanna Poethig, an Anglo-American DIWA artist who grew up in the Philippines speaking Tagalog, ironically transformed from her earlier role as La Illuminada into General Douglas MacArthur. Confidently smoking his famous pipe and cross-dressed in uniform, Poethig parodied her own condition as an American “invader” in the Philippines while simulta-
neously ridiculing American colonial power and masculine military might. Collectively, these beauty contestants indulged themselves as narcissistic icons of desire with MacArthur and the audience as their voyeurs. The latter section of the performance included a “talent show” where queens and the DIWA Girls performed American “hit parade” songs cherished in the Philippines. Together they performed as The Village People, a popular band who embraced drag culture and parodied gay stereotypes during the late disco era. Their classic hit “YMCA” provided an opportunity for DIWA Arts’ cross-dressed “men” (including MacArthur) to competitively “vogue,” each striking outrageously seductive poses reminiscent of a fashion magazine photo spread.10

Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo ended with an awards ceremony and the passing of the Miss DIWA Baby crown to “the most beautiful of these lovely youngish womanish people,” but not before the executive director of Capp Street, as well as the director of the Public Project and a staff intern were appointed the beauty contest’s judges. As the judges were escorted onto the stage by the two bare-chested DIWA artists, the MC accused them of lustng after these he-men and accepting bribes. By casting them into the role of corrupt authority figures, DIWA playfully denaturalized their administrative power.11

You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance.

Throughout Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo, DIWA artists hyperbolically embodied the sexual and cultural differences within the collective while paying homage to their community-based Bayanihan Transition public-art installations. Their outrageous posturing called attention to its own artificiality, mocking traditional images of gender, racial, and national identities. Use of the physical body as a medium to resist social stereotypes is a widely engaged practice among contemporary visual artists. Along with critics and art historians, artists have long acknowledged that the body, while being the site of inscribed political power, maintains the capacity for recalcitrant and alternative self-representation.12 In establishing feminist performance practices in the 1960s and 1970s, artists like Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Lynn Hershman, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper used their bodies to reclaim sexual agency, to challenge conventional definitions of “Woman” and “Other,” and to expose patriarchal mechanisms that allowed for the oppression of women and people of color. Often using drag, humor, and parody, they challenged the fixed nature of these socially prescribed categories. These artists were firmly ensconced within contemporary art history courses by the 1980s, when DIWA Arts’ members were students at the University of California, Berkeley, helping to shape their burgeoning notions about performance art as a site of social resistance and revision.
Beyond the challenges to scripted femininities like the saintly martyr, pious virgin, or beauty queen, *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo* offered a complex array of masculine imagery, from drag queens to bodybuilders. The self-conscious, apparently macho attitude of a muscle-man may function, as cultural critic Martin F. Manalansan IV (1994) has argued, to resist the hegemonic stereotype of an “Oriental” male—regardless of his sexual preference or nationality—as being a passive, feminine, asexual being. The stereotype of Asian male sexual impotence combined with that of the “geek” or “nerd” is so pervasive in American culture that Antonio De Castro, a sociologist from San Francisco State University, marketed a critically acclaimed 1991 pinup boy calendar that presented “images that will shape in a fundamental way the perception of the Asian Pacific Islander male and in the process knock your socks off” (1991:1). These men featured, among others, one of DIWA Arts’ members flexed in a conventional bodybuilding pose.

Drag performers do not just pretend to be women. Like Marilyn, they pretend to be Woman—to incarnate the ideal rather than the particular instance. For drag to work, an audience must admit to harboring some shamefully incorrect image of femininity, and even to feeling nostalgia for this Woman who never existed in reality. [...] Drag is an extremely unstable form of irony, shifting meanings according to the differing sensibilities and sensitivities in its audience, and sensitivities are particularly tender when the joke is about sex.

—Bernard Welt (1996:47)

The latent and coded as well as blatant eroticism was ubiquitous in both the “sacred” and “sublime” sections of the piece. Not only was this conveyed through conventionally fetishistic imagery, materials (long blond wigs, satin fabrics, high-heeled shoes, etc.), and lascivious bodily gestures, but also through erotic word play. The Miss Cumgenitality–Kiss Ass Award was just one of the

7. Johanna Poethig transformed her role as La Illuminada into General Douglas MacArthur in a parody of her own condition as an American “invader” in the Philippines. Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo, Capp Street Project, San Francisco, 1996. (Photo by Charles Volorosso)
many puns within the hybridized Tagalog-English script narrated by the MC. When Miss DIWA Baby 1995 took her final walk of the evening, she thanked the public for giving her the opportunity to spread the message “that we should celebrate coming together, coming together as a global family.”

By reenacting this hallowed and sublime annual ritual, one steeped in transvestism, mockery, camp aesthetics, narcissistic role-playing, and a healthy dose of debauchery, DIWA Arts represented how easily mestizaje Filipino culture accommodates cultural complexity—and, in fact, ritually revels in its densely layered syncretism. The performance brought to mind the carnivalesque world of contemporary Filipino American novels, especially Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990). Both works limelight the artificial boundaries separating: the local/global, first world/third world, sacred/profane, spirit/flesh, serious/silly, sublime/seedy, mystical/rational, traditional/contemporary, fine arts/popular culture, religious rite/performance art, and masculine/feminine. Witnessing DIWA Arts’ performance, such binary structures dissolve.

My mother calls Panchito “Chito.” He is her personal dressmaker, her modista, and probably her closest friend. He is always at our house, sewing away on an antique Singer my mother bought especially for him; he and Salvador come only when my father is at his office or playing golf at Monte Vista. My father loathes Salvador and Panchito, and refers to my mother and her pals as “The Three (dis)Graces.” […] Uncle Panchito likes to wear dresses and other women’s clothes from time to time. He often wins “Most Original” at those transvestite beauty contests he goes to with my mother. Like the time he wore my mother’s leopard-print shirt tied in a knot at the waist and her black capri pants, for example. He
Camp Out

calls it his “Calypso look.” He’ll say: “I’m feeling very Caribbean today. Put on that ‘Day-O’ song, would you?” [...] “My God—you make a really pretty girl!” my mother once exclaimed. Panchito was not impressed. “I am who I am,” he said, with dignity.

—Jessica Hagedorn, Dogeaters (1990:80–1)

Despite the dominance of Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, Filipino culture naturalizes cross-gender behavior in a way that allows uncloseted gay identity to flourish. Drag beauty pageants and fashion shows are extremely popular activities for the general public. Considered “good, clean, family entertainment,” they merit sponsorship by Kiwanas and other civic clubs (Whitman and Mathy 1986; Tan 1994). There are no local terms distinguishing between hetero/homosexual acts; rather, gender is defined according to the degree of effeminacy a person enacts or the extent of their participation in the “feminine” realm of culture. For example, a sward identifies a middle/upper-class, educated gay person who is knowledgeable about the arts and culture—a socially sanctioned individual who typically channels his professional talents into a career as a fashion designer, beautician, or entertainer. While swards must endure some social resistance and discrimination, particularly among straight Filipino men, they are not regarded as dangerous or subversive, and are widely supported by Filipino women. They are conceived as part of the “natural” social order and especially valued for their contributions to the Philippine economy.

You’re born and the rest is drag.

—RuPaul (in Isaak 1996:195)

In Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), Judith Butler argued that all genders should be conceived as fluctuating, multidimensional identities that are performed rather than inherited through biology. The image of the drag queen is the first to come to mind when imagining what it might mean to “perform gender.” For many heterosexuals, as David Bergman suggests, “the drag artist is the least threatening and most visible part of gay subculture and consequently the first element of gay social practice that straight people are willing to confront, probably because they feel superior to it” (1993:6–7). Consequently, it is only recently that drag performance has been theorized by feminist/gay/lesbian critics as anything but a shameful sign of unrecognized self-loathing. Now drag has been reinterpreted as a radical cultural act in that it reveals the artificiality and fragility of “fixed” identities (see Tyler 1991; Case 1993; Millet 1971). Adopting this perspective, DIWA Arts’ work can be understood as politicized drag performance. The artists not only cross-dress to queer naturalized gender identities, they also coyly coax the audience into seeing how gender, historical specificity, the nation-state, and transnational capital all merge in an individual’s performance of identity. Seen in this manner, DIWA Arts enacts performance art with a postcolonial sensibility. Such work asserts cultural complexity while subversively calling attention to its political position in a global context. No gender identity, authority figure, or cultural phenomenon is spared from what Bakhtin (1968) characterizes as the “carnivalesque”: they take aim at femme beauties, macho men, drag queens, angelic fairies, and virgins alike, laughing at their malleability. DIWA Arts spoofs the idealized Woman (i.e., sex goddess/beauty queen) while calling attention to its universalistic character by even more specifically mimicking the idealized Filipina (namely, the “Maria Clara-type,” a passive
and pious virgin popularized by José Rizal’s 1887 novel, *Noli Me Tangere*). They employ drag to ridicule America’s puritanical fear of eroticism while spotlighting the absurd degree of hedonism that flourished internationally during the “disco era.” *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo* both acknowledges and resists the phallocentric authority of American colonial and economic power by mocking General MacArthur and reveling in the fetishization of the products of American capitalism. Moreover, it challenges the aesthetic authority and economic practices of art institutions by resisting commodification and using the project to establish stronger social relationships within the Bay Area’s heterogeneous Filipino community rather than merely within the art world.

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world—that is a world of reciprocal recognitions. […] I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

—Frantz Fanon (1986:218, 229)

*Bayanihan Transition* is a project dedicated to addressing ways that diasporas must *desire and imagine* their sense of identity before performing it. Refusing to envision Filipino society as culturally “pure,” homogeneous, or ideologically harmonious, DIWA Arts resists nostalgically representing the Philippines as a utopian homeland. This generation of 20- and 30-something artists are neither naive nor romantic; they came of age in a postmodernist intellectual milieu and positioned themselves firmly within a complex multicultural discourse that was thriving in the Bay Area in the late 1980s to 1990s—one that yearns for a deeper sense of community, albeit a nonessentialist one.

Political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective. Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you “beyond” yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present.

—Homi K. Bhabha (1994:3)

As members of a diaspora, DIWA artists are interested in considering their individual and collective connection to the Philippines in terms of history, ethnicity, economics, and visual culture. While they allude to these relationships by appropriating the *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo* ritual, they hybridize it with so many local references that it cannot be mistaken for some “pure” folkloric expression. Like their artistic contemporaries, whose works also address a diasporic condition—Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Coco Fusco, Carrie Mae Weems, Hung Liu, Sutapa Biswas, to name just a few—DIWA Arts migrates spatially and temporally between San Francisco/the Philippines and between the past/present. Through incongruent “period” images, music, and bilingual wordplays, they represent how European and American colonialism—be it religious, military, economic, or cultural—has informed the rela-
tionship of Filipinos to one another and Filipino Americans to their home-
land.

Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo allowed the collective to critically engage what
Homi Bhabha has called the “past-present”:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic prece-
dent, it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space,
that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The “past-
present” becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (1994:7)

In their work DIWA Arts reflects on traditional Filipino ritual, but also on the
entire history of the artists’ two-year Bayanihan Transition residency project.
The performance offered them an opportunity to represent aspects of their ex-
eriences working in the public arena to an art audience accustomed to experi-
mental aesthetic production. By celebrating and ironically symbolizing the
specific sites of Bayanihan Transition, as well as the institutional forces that had
brought the project into existence, Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo pointed to
what lies at the heart of American bayanihan: the ability of Filipino Americans
to embrace seemingly contradictory belief systems, to reinvent their identities
through role-playing, and to subversively laugh at and find pleasure in the queer.

In nomadic thought, art has three sides: it has functional, aesthetic and
spiritual dimensions. One side of this triangle never rules out the others.
[...] “Reality” is both tangible/seeable and untouchable/unseeable. [...]
The nomadic view is that the spiritual entities and the realities of human
existence are fused together, in an interactive creative relationship. [...]
The coexistential perceptions of these entities evolve a symbolic world or-
der which defies separateness, segmentation, and isolation. In this in-
stance, something is always present and absent at the same time.

—Teshome H. Gabriel (1990:397)

Not only does DIWA Arts’ work traverse temporal, cultural, sexual, and
national borders, it also challenges us to consider how we understand a rela-
tionship between sacred and secular spheres. Their performance represents, after all, revered images from both heaven and earth. This metaphysical border-line is perhaps the most elusive level to consider when exploring the multiple and transient meanings in Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo. Diwa translates from Tagalog into English as "spirit," "vital force," or "consciousness"—but how are we to imagine the nature of DIWA Arts' spirit? Is it purely ironical? Does it playfully represent a "Filipino Catholic spirit"? An erotic, irreverent "camp/queer spirit"? A philanthropic "community-oriented spirit"? Does it echo Bhabha's "spirit of revision and reconstruction"? How do these artists attempt to de-theologize and re-politicize their notions and practice of "the spiritual" in their performance art?

By adopting a traditional religious ritual, DIWA's performance inevitably raised questions about the contemporary politics of Roman Catholicism, particularly as it impacts members of their gay community. While steeped in enough irony to disrupt the patriarchal authority of canonical law, Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo can be understood as an attempt to offer a postcolonial perspective on spirituality in the age of AIDS. By choosing to reenact a Filipino version of this Catholic ritual—in which saints, drag queens, and beauty contestants comfortably share the same plane of transcendental ecstasy—DIWA reminds members of the Filipino American community how syncretic and sexually permissive their religion can be in the "motherland." While Roman Catholicism colonized and repressed pagan spiritual systems in the Philippines, it never erased their erotic power, especially as it reappears during popular street festivals like Santa Cruzan.

Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth. [...] It liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. It unveils material bodily principles in its true meaning. Laughter opened men's eyes on that which is new, on the future.

—Mikhail Bakhtin (1968:94)

The performance of Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo also explored contemporary spirituality on a more personal level. DIWA member Romel Padilla, who authored and directed the Capp Street piece shortly before dying of AIDS, took the opportunity to queer Catholic ritual while contemplating its role in his imminent death. Casting himself as the Immaculate Virgin and an elegant beauty queen (whom the judges crowned Miss DIWA 1996), he theatrically staged his ascension into heaven while symbolically "blessing" his friends and colleagues from the "heavenly post" he had created in the gallery space. Padilla, whose health was failing at the time of Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo, chose to make fun out of representing the elusive border territory between life and death, to assert its erotic charge, and to inspire collective pleasure. Through this performance piece, Padilla was able to harness what Bakhtin (1968) characterized as the liberatory power of laughter. For those who knew the artist, a founding member of DIWA Arts who had greatly shaped a decade's activities, the irony of such a transcendence and the power of its sublime humor was not lost.

Terry Acebo Davis, also a DIWA Arts member, described how Padilla's orchestration of the Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo performance helped to prepare members of the collective for his imminent funeral. Not only was he expressing great pleasure in his final collective artwork, "it was as if he was showing us what we needed to do, how we needed to ritualize his passing," said Davis.
After he died, DIWA members placed a gilded framed photograph of the artist as Santa Maria, Virgin Immaculata behind his coffin at the Mission Dolores Church. His impersonation was so real that "only those of us involved in the performance recognized it as Romel in drag [...]" (1996).

Ave Maria Full of Grace. That’s DIWA, baby.

Notes


2. An exception to this observation is the video work of Filipino American artist Angel Velasco Shaw. In *Nailed*, the artist represents her experience of witnessing the annual reenactment of the crucifixion ritual in a Filipino village, in which a woman plays the role of Christ and is literally nailed to the cross. My thanks to Lisa Bloom for bringing this work to my attention.

3. Projects include *Extended Family: 250,000 Filipinos* (1990, New Langton Arts, San Francisco), an installation of over 5,000 family snapshots documenting the Bay Area’s Filipino community; *Asparagus: A Tribute* (1991, Davis Art Center), highlighting the little-known history of the *manong* (first-generation Filipino) agricultural workers who immigrated to California’s Central Valley between 1910–1940; *Truth or Consequences* (1992, Richmond Art Center), addressing the anticolonial murder of Magellan by Filipino hero King Lapulapu; *Pinoy = X* (1993, San Francisco Art Institute/Walter McBean Gallery), a work mocking the formulaic nature of stereotypical ethnic identity.

4. Historically, educated Filipino Americans have opted for careers as engineers, health professionals, or businesspeople. The wave of immigrants in the 1960s (i.e., the parents of several DIWA Arts members) were trained professionally in the Philippines and were able to practice their vocations upon arriving in the United States.

5. In 1990 the city of San Francisco launched *Festival 2000*, a controversial affirmative-action arts program that encouraged institutions to sponsor work by artists of color and underrepresented communities. Aware of the possibility of exhibiting given this sponsorship, DIWA Arts approached New Langton Arts and created their first collaborative installation, *Extended Family: 250,000 Filipinos*, with the enthusiastic support of then-director Renny Pritikin. The exhibition was critically well received and many curatorial invitations for the collective followed, although *Festival 2000* itself failed due to financial mismanagement.

6. When DIWA Arts first approached Capp Street Project with residency proposals, they suggested a public project to build alliances with the Filipino gay community, but this project failed to secure funding. Nonetheless, in orchestrating *Santa Cruzan/Flores de Mayo*, DIWA Arts found a way to incorporate these goals by inviting non-Filipino friends, as well as other gay and straight Filipino organizations, to collaborate on this final performance piece. The “special guests” included Teatro Ng Tanan, who sang as the church choir during the sacred procession, and members of the Gay Asian Pacific Alliance, who lip-synched a choreographed number during the performance.

7. After the performance the artists displayed their costumes, ritual "artifacts," and video documentation in a shrine-like installation, transforming Capp Street into a reliquary and thus augmenting its role as a "temple of art." They reconfigured the LED signs from previous sites into crosses on the gallery wall, and installed pews within the space. Audience members and others who made a pilgrimage to the gallery could see that the creators of the spectacle had moved on to other places, their vestiges remaining as priceless icons that resist commodification.

8. For a rich discussion of the lives of Filipino workers overseas, particularly in the Gulf States, see Roces (1993).
9. Later in the performance, one DIWA member makes this fixation with commodity fetishism clear by bragging, “Like the dress? It’s a Jessica McClintock, fourth floor, Macy’s […]”

10. “Voguing” is a stylized dance that flourished in gay clubs during the 1980s; it became popularized in mainstream culture when Madonna appropriated the dance in her music videos. Along with voguing, the DIWA Girls also serenaded MacArthur with the popular postwar hit, “I Will Follow You (he is my destiny...).” After performing its original 1950s version, they repeated it in its up-tempo 1960s form, which required choreographed dance motions like “the swim,” learned by the artists as children in both the United States and the Philippines. DIWA Arts’ use of music and dance suggests how we can historically locate ourselves through familiar associations within popular culture, linking personal memory with sociocultural events occurring in that moment.

11. A Miss Cumgenitality–Kiss Ass Award was given to Santa de la Balikbayan Box, who bitterly exclaimed in a martyred voice: “All I can say is that I gave everything I had and I deserve this award!” Ultimately, Santa Maria Immaculata was crowned Miss DIWA 1996 in a tearful and melodramatic climax.


13. On bodybuilding and cross-dressing as strategies of symbolic resistance to colonial stereotypes within the Filipino gay community, see Manalansan IV (1994). (Manalansan uses the term “Oriental” in the manner favored within American popular culture, where it designates a pastiche of East and Southeast Asian phenomenon, rather than the “Orientalism” of Edward Said, which refers to the Islamic world.) For other informative writing on male bodybuilding as an expression of masculinity, see Ian (1996:188–205); Klein (1993); and Dyer (1997).

14. This is what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe as “grammatica jocosa,” a sexually charged literary style in which “grammatical order is transgressed to reveal erotic and obscene, or merely materially satisfying, counter-meaning” (1986:99).

15. Another term for a gay man is bakla, a linguistic contraction of babae (woman) and lalaki (man); bayot, a more general term, combines babae with uten (penis) (Tan 1994:209).

16. Frederick L. Whitman and Robin M. Mathy describe how Imelda Marcos presented a prestigious public award to a community of fashion designers and employed coteries of gay hairdressers and designers at the royal palace (1986:146).

17. See, for example, Villa (1994), as well as the debates that surrounded the founding of the Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens in October 1993, where DIWA Arts member René de Guzman serves as visual arts curator.

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