

ASSESSING POTENTIALS: THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY WRITING AND THEORIZING ON ANG KIUKOK WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ART RESEARCH IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the state and nature of existing Philippine art writing on the late National Artist Ang Kiukok for the prospect of future theory building. An inquiry into ten representative works on Ang Kiukok is evaluated in order to determine the actual state and nature of the existing literature's contribution to empirical knowledge and theory building. Following this assessment, discussions on various local Filipino theoretical works on art history and criticism will be forwarded. The results from this will serve both as a potential starting point and a trajectory towards a more comprehensive and critical/theoretical (re)presentation of the life and work of Ang Kiukok.

Keywords: Philippine art writing, Philippine art history, art criticism, literature review & Ang Kiukok

Introduction

It has often been surmised that the state of art scholarship in the Philippines is in its infancy. In some respects, such hasty generalizations may preclude and preempt objectivity.¹ Yet the unfortunate truth is, such notions are oftentimes affirmed simply because of the lack of substantive or academic literature on Philippine visual art. This harsh reality is such that Philippine art scholarship has not only produced an infinitesimal amount of work in terms of its quality and quantity but the entire process of critical art writing is found wanting as well. To a large extent, what is commonly and popularly considered to be an "art book" in the Philippines is perceived to be nothing more than an expensive, over-sized coffee table book; usually devoted to a particular established artist and characterized by a disproportionate number of pages devoted to color plates at expense of the text. These publications are often written and presented in a non-technical manner with the intent of giving delight to the eye of the connoisseur as well as to expose the general populist on the artists and their work. It is also interesting to note that the history of Philippine art books is a fairly recent phenomenon.² However, if one dares to venture into the more challenging domain of academic research or theoretical works on Philippine

art, one would be hard-pressed to identify a mere handful of titles much less locate these works due to the restricted numbers produced to begin with.

In my personal effort to learn more about the late Philippine National Artist, Ang Kiukok,³ I was greatly frustrated yet challenged in the process. The initial challenge involves the arduous task of finding and locating a substantive list of literature pertaining to the quiet and taciturn painter with a loud and powerful oeuvre of angst-filled iconography (See Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Although there are numerous articles on Ang, the bulk of these sources are in the form of newspaper or magazine art reviews, chronicling and reacting to the various exhibitions and highlights of the artist's career. Since these articles were published in ephemeral configuration and have been long out of circulation, locating these would mean hours upon hours of going through vintage microfilms in specialized libraries and archives. Apart from these sources, the little that remained are essentially a handful of exhibition catalogues, essays in more recent art-related publications and a few of coffee-table art books of various qualities. These work, though few in number, contain essentially all that is written about the artist and his works. Faced with this dilemma, I asked the question, is this all that can be said about Ang Kiukok and his angst-filled artwork? Is there more that can be explored, theorized, and written about the genius of this artist and the virtuosity of his works as discourse? If so, how and where does one begin?

In the attempt to understand and theorize Ang, one needs to begin with a survey of what is already written. Therefore, this paper seeks to accomplish three things. First, to evaluate a sample of the available literature on Ang Kiukok and determine what they actually say about the artist and his work. Second, to ascertain from these sources the extent in which they engage in critical theorizing and

Figure 1: Crucifixion



1976 Oil on Canvas, 152 cm X 89 cm (Mr. & Mrs. Tiong Rosarios' Collection)

Figure 2: Dogs Fight



1974 Oil on Canvas, 86 cm X 102 cm (Ms. Annette Lee Esparaz's Collection)

Figure 3: Man on Fire



1980 Oil on Canvas, 102 cm X 89 cm (Culture Center of the Philippines' Collection)

contribute to our theoretical understanding of Ang Kiukok and his works. And third, from what is presently available in current models of art theory, derive and assess the potential towards a more comprehensive and critical/theoretical framework from which to present and engage in the theorizing of Ang's life and his art.

As a starting point, ten representative sources⁴ will be accessed for their empirical and theoretical contributions. These sources reviewed are among a wide range of works including one monograph; two “coffee table” books, one exhibition catalogue, five essays and one transcribed interview on the late Chinese-Filipino artist, Ang Kiukok. A general preview and overview of these sources in terms of their scope and emphasis may be seen in the comparative charts below (See Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: Comparative Chart of the 10 Representative Works on Ang Kiukok

Sources/ (Date of Publication)	Type/Format	Author	Intended Audience	Nature of Work	Scope of Work
E. Torres' <i>"Kiukok Drawings"</i> (1975)	Monograph Illustrated Art Book	Curator Art Critic Writer	General Art Lovers Art Collectors	An Introduction, Biographical, focus on Ang's Drawings	General overview of Ang's themes
E. Gatbonton's <i>"Kiukok, the Artist and His Works"</i> (1991)	Illustrated Art Book	Art Writer Art Collector Close friend of Ang	General Art Lovers Art Collectors, Collectors of Ang's Works	An Introduction, Biographical Focus on Ang's Paintings	In depth discussion of Ang's themes
A. Roces' <i>"Deconstructing Despair"</i> (2000)	Illustrated Art Book	Art Critic Art Writer Close friend of Ang	General Art Lovers Art Collectors	An Introduction, Biographical Focus on Ang's Paintings	General overview of Ang's themes
Jolico Cuadra's <i>"The Vision Is Missing"</i> (1969/1972)	Essay for a Magazine	Art Critic	General Art Lovers General Non- Art Audience	Review of Ang's 1969 Exhibition of his Crucifixion Paintings	Critical Appraisal of Ang's Works
Ma. S. Limbo's <i>"Ang Kiukok: Beyond the Thorny Path"</i> (1990)	Essay for an Exhibition Catalogue	Art Critic	General Art Lovers	An Introduction, Biographical Focus on Ang's Paintings and Drawings	General overview of Ang's themes
E. Torres' <i>"Ang Kiukok's Icons of Pain and Struggle."</i> (2003)	Essay	Curator Art Critic Writer	General Art Lover and Non-Art Audience	An Introduction, Biographical Focus on Ang's Paintings	General overview of Ang's themes
A. Guillermo's <i>"Ang Kiukok: An Art of Human Concerns."</i> (2001)	Essay	Art Critic Art Professor	General Art Lovers Art Scholars	An Introduction, Biographical Focus on Ang's Paintings	General overview of Ang's themes
A. Ang's <i>"Ang Kiukok: The Cynic, the Idealist."</i> (1997/2008);	Internet- based Essay	Writer Daughter of Ang Kiukok	General Art Lovers General Public	Introduction to Ang's Personality and Motivation for his art	Very General overview emphasis Ang's personality traits
T. Ang-See's <i>"Huaquiao Becomes Tsinoy"</i> (2000)	Essay	Activist Former Student of Ang	General Art Lovers, Collectors of Ang's Works	Introduction to the Chinese as Filipino: Ang as Tsinoy	Dwells on Ang's ethnicity and identity as a Chinese in the Philippines
C. Reyes' <i>"Conversations with Ang Kiukok"</i> (1989)	Transcribed Interview	Art Critic Artist Art Writer	General Art Lovers, Collectors Art Scholars	Introduction to the Personality of Ang	General Interview about Ang's career and work

Figure 5: Comparative Chart of the 10 Representative Works on Ang Kiukok

Sources	Work's Distinctions	Views of Ang's Personality	Methodology	Empirical Contributions	Theoretical Contributions
E. Torres' <i>"Kiukok Drawings"</i> (1975)	1 st and only Monograph on Ang's Drawings	Quiet, Complex, Genius with Inner Demons	Descriptive Historical	Yes	No
E. Gatbonton's <i>"Kiukok, the Artist and His Works"</i> (1991)	Most in-depth work on Ang's Style, First full-colored book on Ang's work	Complex, Multi - dimensional	Descriptive Historical	Yes	No
A. Roces' <i>"Deconstructing Despair"</i> (2000)	Most comprehensive work on Ang to date	Quiet, Reserved Complex, Multifaceted	Descriptive Historical	Yes	No
Jolico Cuadra's <i>"The Vision Is Missing"</i> (1969/1972)	Among the most critical review of Ang	Not Exemplary Conventional	Interpretive Critical	Yes	No
Ma. S. Limbo's <i>"Ang Kiukok: Beyond the Thorny Path"</i> (1990)	Insightful analysis of Ang's work through the use of the trope (<i>Thorns</i>)	Complex, Genius with Inner Demons	Descriptive Historical	Yes	Some (Semiotics – Metaphor "The Thorn")
E. Torres' <i>"Ang Kiukok's Icons of Pain and Struggle."</i> (2003)	Originally written as a citation for Ang's induction as National Artist	Complex, Creative Genius	Descriptive Historical	Yes	No
A. Guillermo's <i>"Ang Kiukok: An Art of Human Concerns."</i> (2001)	The most theoretical work on Ang to date	Symbolic of the Universal Man Struggling against Injustice	Descriptive Historical	Yes	Yes (Marxist Semiotics)
A. Ang's <i>"Ang Kiukok: The Cynic, the Idealist."</i> (1997)	Written by Ang Kiukok's daughter, most intimate depiction of Ang	Cynic, Idealist, Social Critic, Anti-Establishment, Real	Historical Interpretive	Yes	No
T. Ang-See's <i>"Huaquiao Becomes Tsinoy"</i> (2000)	Interprets Ang's work as an expression of his ethnic identity	Archetypical Chinese in the Philippines, a Victim of social injustice	Historical	Yes	No
C. Reyes' <i>"Conversations with Ang Kiukok"</i> (1989)	Reveals more from what was unsaid than what was said	Quiet, Weird, Eccentric, Anti-establishment	Interview	Yes	No

Following this general overview and assessment of contributions of the ten works, a section will summarize and evaluate what these sources collectively say about Ang and his works, after which a brief survey of some recent initiatives by Filipino art historians towards alternative possibilities of problematizing and theorizing of art will be discussed. Through the assessment of potentials, the paper will conclude with some perspectives on possible trajectories towards the future theorizing of the life and work of Ang Kiukok.

An Overview of the Ten Representative Works on Ang Kiukok

Curator and writer Emmanuel Torres' long-out-of-print monograph on Ang Kiukok's drawings was the first among the three full-length books devoted to the works of the artist. Published in 1975 by the Bureau of National and Foreign Information under the Marcos regime's "democratic revolution,"⁵ this book celebrates the draftsmanship of the Chinese-Filipino artist at the wake of the newly established Sino-Filipino diplomacy.⁶ Torres' intent in writing the book was a pedagogical one in that it would serve as an "illuminating introduction to the complex art of Kiukok – his themes, his inventive resources and sensibilities as an artist."⁷ At the same time, this work also serves as a much-needed contribution to local art scholarship in that it "add(s) to the less-than-a-foot-wide shelf devoted to published collections of drawings that appeared since the 1950s –."⁸

Although only fifteen pages in length, the text on this work does serve its intended purpose of tracing Ang's personal experience, local and foreign artistic influences and stylistic tendencies. This in turn serves as the impetus towards the formation of the various themes and genres often depicted in his art. In many ways this method of analysis is very much in line with the Positivist-Structuralist paradigm where artistic expressions are inherently linked with external influences encountered by the artist. In essence, this "cause and effect" or "form and influence" way of theorizing Ang's drawings is very evident in this work as the author seeks to provide a logical rationale and explanation as to why Ang was so keenly interested in creating such discomforting images. Perhaps this is the reflection of Torres' theoretical orientation evident through his response to Cid Reyes during his original 1972 interview which was reaffirmed and updated in 1988. During the interview Torres was asked: "How would you describe an art critic?" He replied:

"–His first job is to deal with the art object itself, its sensuous quality and its *form* – that is, its composition, or construction – and to point out what this form is telling us about the artist's mind, vision or way of seeing. His second job is to tell the conditions under which it was made, its social and historical factors, its *influences*, its relation to the artist's other works or a particular art movement, and so on."⁹ [*Emphasis mine*]

However, because the scope and nature of this work was restricted to its intended audience of art lovers and collectors, the degree of theorizing was essentially non-existent. The strength of this monograph lies in its descriptive analysis of the various phases of the artist's life and influence, which was successfully woven into a narrative for a brief introduction to Ang's drawings. Since this is first and foremost a book devoted to Ang's drawings, the reproductions of a hundred thirty one rarely seen sketches and drawings serve as an important contribution in its own right.

Esperanza B. Gatbonton's highly illustrated coffee table book produced in 1991 was the first full-length and full-colored work devoted to the art of Ang. It is no surprise that this privately published book by the prominent Philippine art collector Paulino Que is dominated by the beautiful color plates. However, it does

contain two important essays. The first essay written by Esperanza Gatbonton sought to introduce and interpret the various genres of Ang for the primary purpose of connoisseur appreciation. Her treatment of each genre of Ang's subjects was to examine and extract its meaning as she verbally dissects them in its raw form. Her descriptions of the work reveal a deep understanding and affinity with the artist's experiences that affords one with an intimate feel or connection for Ang's work. Her journalist husband, Juan Gatbonton, who presented a sketch of the artist from his perspective as a close friend, wrote the second essay.

The value of this work lies in its readability and the author's deep understanding of Ang Kiukok in her moving account of the man and his art. The roles of the color plates were not merely for the appreciation of those who cannot afford an original Ang artwork; rather these pieces were carefully selected since these serve as the representative works alluded to in the text's descriptive analysis. Since this work's intent and purpose is not for the academe, it is therefore understandable that the place of theorizing is not to be found here.

Alfredo Rocés' massive monograph/coffee table book *Deconstructing Despair* represents the most recent and comprehensive single work produced on Ang Kiukok in terms of sheer size and presentation.¹⁰ Rocés' tone in this work was one of sentimental remembrance as well as critical appreciation for an old friend and fellow artist. It tells the story of a Chinese immigrant's son and chronicles his process of becoming an artist throughout a long and arduous career spanning nearly half a century. Published under the auspices of the Finale Art File, Manila's exclusive dealer and authenticator of Ang's art works enables unprecedented access to many private collections which made this volume the most definitive collection of reproductions of Ang's works representing his entire artistic career that encompasses all its phases and oeuvres. In essence, this work does not only provide one with an intimate glimpse into the world of the artist through one who knew Ang, but also, the cornucopia of the artist's works reproduced in this volume enables one to gain a deeper sense and perspective of the artist's inner sensibility.

Although humbly acknowledged by the publisher that this work is "just another attempt to document and understand the great and fascinating art of Ang Kiukok,"¹¹ this work is far from humble. The nature of this work tends to be more of a biographic history tracing the life and career of Ang Kiukok by someone who knew him. In this sense, this work serves as a very valuable contribution not so much as a book of history but as a rare chance to understand a rather reclusive and enigmatic artist who is known for being the embodiment of the proverbial "man of few words" or "the sphinx"¹² as Rocés fondly calls him. As a historical work and a coffee table book par excellence, this work essentially serves to acquaint us with an artist and introduce us to his art in the most beautiful way. However, in terms of theory making, this book is not a contributor to a theoretical understanding of Ang's works.

Filipino art critic Ma. Salva Limbo's essay "*Beyond the Thorny Path*" is featured in a catalogue for a major multi-institutional exhibition paying tribute to three Filipino figurative expressionist artists: Ang Kiukok, Onib Olmedo and Solomon Sapid.¹³ Primarily written as a companion text for a gallery exhibition of Ang's art, this essay uses the trope of the "thorny path" and "spike" to describe Ang's artistic sensibilities, development and aesthetics. In line with the theme of the show, Limbo aligns Ang's works in the traditions of the expressionist. Through the "thorn

motif”, Limbo depicts Ang’s works as a discourse on dissonance within the core of human existence manifested and revealed by the realities of anguish and suffering.

Given the size, scope and purpose of this essay, it takes on a rather limited view focusing primarily on Ang’s expressionist ideals as seen through his angst-filled paintings and drawings. This work is also understandably limited since it takes into account the exhibition’s curatorial orientation and framework situating Ang among the other two figurative expressionists. The value of this work, as in the previous works already mentioned, has to do with acquainting, introducing and perhaps reducing the initial shock of the uninitiated toward an understanding of the disturbingly real and grotesque world of Ang’s art. In terms of theory, this work understandably does not contribute anything substantial.

Jolico Cuadra’s short and scathing review of Ang’s 1969 exhibition¹⁴ on his now-famous *Crucifixion Series* first appeared in the Culture and Arts Section of a local Manila newspaper¹⁵ and later was reprinted in Alice Coseteng’s 1972 *Philippine Modern Art and Its Critics*. In this short review, Cuadra questions Ang’s artistic vision and critically dismissed Ang’s highly distorted and disturbing Crucifixion paintings by asserting that it was “not in the psyche of Mr. Ang to paint Crucifixions”¹⁶ in turn the critic suggests that the artist should explore other areas, presumably something more in tune with his psyche. Such negative assessment may be attributed to Cuadra’s personal sense of aesthetics or preferences of what constitutes the beautiful as well as his seemingly biased outlook towards Ang’s identity as a Chinese-Filipino painter. In terms of aesthetics, Cuadra did not consider Ang’s expressionist interpretation of the Crucified Christ as proper or fitting since it obviously does adhere or conform to the norms of traditional or classical depiction of such. This sentiment is quite apparent as Cuadra critically compares Ang’s Crucifixion paintings with the masterworks of Soutine, Bacon and Sutherland who were known to influence Ang’s own works. Thus he concludes:

“Where the paintings of the three-named artists are works of art, I cannot say the same for Mr. Ang’s. His looked to me like the opened-up carcasses (to use the word body here is grossly inappropriate) of human beings glorified in the workshop of Mr. Ang’s mind. Glorified because the colors he applied to them only enhances the hideousness of his subject matter. The human body when dissected is not at all a beautiful spectacle to look at.”¹⁷

This assessment may perhaps be related and impaired by Cuadra’s rather intolerant sentiments towards Ang’s ancestry. To Cuadra, the majority of the Chinese in the Philippines including Ang was construed negatively as self-perceived victims of Filipino injustices. This is telling since Cuadra begins his essay by stating:

“In the Philippines, there are, so it seems to me, two kinds of Chinese. The first kind believes that the Filipinos are their crucifiers (this kind are a majority but wield no power); the second believe that they are the crucifiers of the Filipinos (this kind are a minority but wield power). — Now then Ang Kiukok living in the Philippines (and if he is the artist that I take him to be), belongs inevitably to the first kind of

Chinese, one among the many who believes that Filipinos are their crucifiers. Here, imagine yourself, Mr. Ang: today's artist; Spiritual Jew; harrowing living in the ghetto of his art; earnestly waiting to be crucified to the cross of Society."¹⁸

Besides his apparently skewed critiques of one of Ang's exhibitions, there are no significant empirical contributions to our understanding of Ang's life and work or contribution towards theory building in this review. In short, this work may be viewed as one of those inevitable negative press reviews, a discouraging moment and part of the process of development within Ang's long artistic career.

Emmanuel Torres' 2003 essay "*Ang Kiukok's Icons of Pain and Struggle*" appears in a joint publication by the CCP, NCCA and Anvil Publishing Inc. entitled, *The National Artist of the Philippines 1999 – 2003: Volume Two*. Just like the other essays in this collection, this work serves as a general introductory biography on distinguished individuals who were proclaimed National Artists of the Philippines. On one level, this work is consistent with the aim and purpose of the book, so this essay essentially serves as a citation and tribute to one who has been blessed with the distinction of attaining the country's highest award. However, upon closer reading, this work bears many similarities to Torres' earlier work on Ang's drawings. Torres' interest lies in the stylistic development of the artist as informed by his Formalist-Structuralist grounding and orientation. Once again, this updated account of Ang's biography served as the springboard from which his stylistic development stemmed. In terms of contribution, this work represents a very concise and well-written account of Ang's stylistic orientation and evolution. Yet, given the nature of this work as one intended by its editorial committee to "inform", "entertain" and "inspire" a wide audience towards national pride and nation-building,¹⁹ one cannot expect much in terms of an in-depth analysis of Ang's techniques and aesthetics, much less the rigors of theory building in this work.

Art professor and critic Alice Guillermo's essay "*Ang Kiukok: An Art of Human Concerns*" was originally published in the Hong Kong-based *Asian Art News* in 2000 and reappeared a year later in her collection of critical essays on Philippine visual art, *Image and Meaning: Essays on Philippine Art*. Consistent with her sketches of other artists in this collection that she has written and published elsewhere previously, she does not merely narrates the story of each artist and their respective accomplishments and distinctive works. As an academic dedicated to the tenets of Marxist aesthetics, her rejection of the traditional "form and content" approach of viewing and understanding art is quite evident in this work. Rather, she proposes an alternative approach to situate her aesthetics and theoretical orientations in which she humbly calls a "simple semiotic-based approach" rooted in "a material base" of viewing and understanding art, contending that art should serve as a reflection of the political situation as well as a "catalyst for change,"²⁰ hence in line with the Marxist perspective summarized by Feuerbach.²¹ Guillermo sees artistic images not merely as pure emotion-based expressions, as the proponents of the "art for art's sake" would ascribe to, rather she views art as something "situated within its socio-cultural context" and that "an active and continuous interaction takes place between the art and its context through numerous forms of mediation."²²

Her methodology for interfacing with Ang's life and work in this essay is undoubtedly influenced by the theoretical framework she came to be associated with.²³ For Guillermo, the work of Ang is not only about what is visually present in the most conventional and formalist sense. The work of Ang in all its unsettling, angst-filled representation signifies something that is grounded and connected to the mundane realities of the real world and not apart from it. Hence, predictably to Guillermo, Ang's often-disturbing but powerful repertoire of visual iconography was made possible simply because "— Ang Kiukok believes that art is a vital part of life and should be linked to human struggle."²⁴

Arlene Ang's 1997 short Internet-based essay²⁵ provides the reader with an intimate look into the heart and soul of the artist. Writing as an insider, the youngest daughter²⁶ of Ang Kiukok portrays his father as a cynic, critical towards the harsh realities of life and society in the Philippines with all its idiosyncrasies. The source of his cynicism was generated by his strong and underlying sense of idealism. Ang also reveals that Ang Kiukok was a person wholly dedicated to his artistic vision as well as one who is skeptical of the passing trends and whims of those who seek to exploit him. Because of his seemingly endless preoccupation with the darker side of human existence and his introverted personality, many regard him as a soft-spoken and enigmatic. Aside from being an insightful insider's look into the character and inner nature of Ang Kiukok that would certainly contribute towards an intimate understanding the man and his art, his short essay does not offer much in terms of theory making or theorizing.

As a former student of Ang Kiukok,²⁷ Teresita Ang See's essay serves as the Epilogue for Alfredo Roces' weighty volume *Kiukok: Deconstructing Despair* which seeks to depict Ang Kiukok's artistic expression as a response of the archetypal Chinaman who has endured centuries of prejudicial treatment in the Philippines. Writing as a civic leader in the Chinese Filipino community²⁸ and not as an arts person, Ang See shies away from technical discussions about art or aesthetic; instead she focuses her essay on the little-known and often unseen world of the Chinese in the Philippines. Her account of the "Chinese Experience in the Philippines" from the Spanish era to present time was one characterized by expulsion, exclusions, and marginalization by the mainstream society and powers. Likewise, Ang See cites and underscores Ang Kiukok's own personal experiences as realities typical or common to many Chinese families living in the Philippines. As a consequence of such inequitable treatment, Ang's angst-filled art is nothing more than the representation of the collective cathartic expression of the minority Chinese community protesting the centuries of abuse perpetrated upon them by the mainstream Philippine society at large.

Although this is not a typical work about the life and art of Ang Kiukok, it does however serve the purpose of bringing in the dimension of Ang's identity into the complicated world of his intriguing personality and his equally mystifying art. Therefore, the value of this essay offers an alternative way to view Ang that will perhaps aid us toward a better understanding of his inner struggles and motives for painting angry images on the canvas. In terms of contributions, this work offers some intriguing prospects and perspectives into the little-studied domain between Ang's identity as an ethnic Chinese of a particular generation and the

representations in his art. However, in terms of theoretical contribution, this work does not offer much.

The final work is Filipino artist-critic Cid Reyes' transcribed interview with Ang Kiukok presented in his book *Conversations on Philippine Art*.²⁹ This unique oral history of Philippine art features a compilation of interviews with over thirty Filipino artists and art-related personages conducted by Reyes through the course of several decades. The range of questions asked was related to the artist's life and career as well as art in general in the Philippines. Among these was an extraordinarily short interview with Ang Kiukok. In most of the responses to the questions asked, Ang, who is known for his reticence, would reply in the most direct and sometimes obligatory fashion answering questions with a simple "yes" or "no" or at best, succinct phrases. Although this was by far the shortest interview among the thirty recorded in this book, what was unsaid was perhaps more revealing and interesting than what was said.

This alternative source allows one to see the inner personality of Ang. His seemingly anti-social attitude is clearly pronounced, at the same time one can also sense his sense of urgency as he appears to be embroiled and preoccupied with a conflict within. Throughout the interview, Ang was not concerned about how people viewed or accepted his work,³⁰ since his work is both personal and necessary. One can also observe Ang's identity through this alternative discourse. Furthermore, Ang uses English as well as Filipino to express himself through the entire interview. For Ang the artist, words were not his choice medium of expression; instead he expressed himself eloquently through his paintbrushes. From the text, one can also sense that though he was born in a traditional Chinese home and grew up in a Filipino environment, Ang was not bound by such trivial and relative imaginations. Rather, when seen through his art, Ang suddenly becomes transcendent. His sense of identity as revealed through his art shows that he is above and beyond cultures and identities. Although his preoccupation is not with the typical parochial limitations, yet his work is imbued with an overpowering sense urgency for the universal human concerns, especially the darker, disturbing realities of human existence which seems to be quite consistent with his seemingly reposed being and yet very violent work.

As a collection, this volume does shed light and reveal many subtle nuances about the inner workings of the man behind his cryptic oeuvre. However, as a theoretical contribution to art literature, this is beyond the scope and purpose of this work.

Assessing the Contribution of the Existing Works

Through the course of surveying, evaluating and comparing these ten representative works on Ang Kiukok, one can readily notice three significant themes beginning to emerge. This in turn reflects the present state and nature of Philippine art writing and theorizing in general and particularly in the case of Ang Kiukok.

The first and most obvious feature reveals that for the most part these sources were primarily written as introductory materials to acquaint and inform a general audience about the person, life and work of Ang Kiukok. The range of topics covered

are fundamentally similar consisting of: 1) basic information about various aspects of the artist's personal life (i.e., his birthplace, formative years, family, quiet personality, etc.); 2) his artistic influences and career (i.e., local influences by Manansala, the UST art school, his foreign influences including masters such as – Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Matthias Grunwald, Graham Sutherland, Rufino Tamayao, Rico Lebrun as well as his affiliations with the Philippine modernist and neo-modernist traditions, etc.); 3) his artistic and stylistic development and tendencies (i.e., Cubist, Expressionist, etc.); 4) his themes (i.e., his still life, animals, human figures, mother and child, lovers, crucifixion, etc.); 5) his artistic sensibilities and ideals (his preoccupation with the human condition, angst, despair, injustice, etc.) and so forth. Although there are slight variations in these accounts that may be attributed to the writer's emphasis as well as the writer's perspectives on the artist, by and large, these sources are essentially presenting the same thing. Collectively, their greatest contribution serves to introduce us, enlighten us and provide us with a basic understanding and appreciation of Ang Kiukok, the artist and his works.

The second noticeable characteristic these sources have in common is that they all struggled to make sense of Ang's enigmatic persona and artistic sensibilities in relation to his discursive language of pain and despair as represented in his angst-filled art. In the attempt to understand and discover its etiology, the authors sought to psychologize and psychoanalyze Ang in their own way. As a result, they all developed their own unique perspectives, insights, theories and interpretations as to what drove and possessed Ang Kiukok to paint the way he does. The authors who knew Ang well (i.e., his daughter, Arlene Ang; his friends, Esperanza and Juan Gatbonton, Alfredo Rocas, etc.) do provide valuable insights into the person of Ang and offer revealing and fascinating perspectives; however, the multifaceted complexity of the artist continues to challenge, baffle and elude classification and containment. Their attempt to bridge the apparent discontinuity between the reserved and soft-spoken artist with his dynamic and disturbing works is often left wanting and unresolved. This somehow adds to the mystique and excitement in the pursuit to discover the art behind the man. Such unresolved conditions are sure to open new possibilities and invite further inquiry and research.

The third characteristic has to do *not* so much with what was written or presented about Ang Kiukok but what was not; that is - theory building. For the most part, the domain in which these sources have engaged in appears to be devoted to the construction and defining of who Ang Kiukok was as a person, as an artist, and as the creative genius behind all the wonderfully grotesque and angst-filled images that he has come to be famous for. In this sense, these sources have thoroughly accomplished this as previously discussed. Through this endeavor, these sources have established the task of answering the question of "what". In other words, they have been successful in contributing to our basic empirical understanding of Ang and his works through their presentation of pertinent and sometimes fascinating anecdotal facts and information concerning a specific artist, his works and world. However, what was not presented or evident in these sources is their failure to answer the question of "*So what?*" This means, once we are able to understand and know who Ang Kiukok is, the deeper question would inevitably be, "*So what (about him/Ang)?*" In essence, how do we situate Ang Kiukok and all

that he represents (his art, his private vision) in the context of other discourses or frames of reference? This has to do with a theoretical process and the task of inserting and viewing Ang's iconic narratives and its implications into another context, system and framework of constructing reality.

Alice Guillermo's attempt to locate Ang's life and work in the Marxist context (materials base) through a semiotic framework marks the first known attempt to venture into this new frontier. Besides this pioneering effort, there were no other attempts toward theory building elsewhere in the representative literature surveyed and evaluated regarding Ang. Because of this, one is forced to conclude that the place of theoretical work pertaining to Ang Kiukok and his art or at least what is presently available in the Philippines today is still essentially an unexplored terrain with exciting prospects for future research.

Potentials and Prospects for Future Theorizing

The challenge of that, the "so what" question and proposition, raises the prospect of new knowledge and perception of Philippine art through critical and theoretical investigation. However, how does one commence in this academic exercise? Fortunately, a small but emergent group of Philippine art scholars have recently begun to ask such questions and write insightful theoretical works in Philippine art history and art criticism. They approached the subject of Philippine visual arts from different tangents with a predilection towards specific theoretical traditions and orientations (i.e., Marxist, Postcolonial, Feminist, Historiographical, Indigenous (*Pilipinolohiya*, *Pantayong Pananaw*), etc.). Collectively, these studies and publications represent particular elements of Philippine art being critically appraised and reviewed in light of a different system of understanding, an alternative set of presuppositions based on another scheme of viewing and conceptualizing art in a particular context.³¹

For instance, art historian Patrick D. Flores' landmark 1998 study of Philippine Colonial Art through a Postcolonial perspective was able to challenge, deconstruct and transform the venerable understanding and notions of seemingly passive and innocuous "Hispanized form and content" of colonial Philippine paintings to become one that is both discursive and subversive.³² From this, Flores was able to reconstruct and reconfigure a history from the viewpoint of the traditionally marginalized, hence silent Other, the Filipino artists and craftspeople. Similarly, Filipino feminist art historian Flaudette May Datuin's reconfiguration and realignment of the history of Philippine women artists through a Feminist framework was able to empower this traditionally silent subaltern and their artwork into a discourse, a voice and a sense of representation and participation in the larger world of Philippine art history.³³ Similarly Cebuano historian and literary scholar Resil Mojares used a more conventional though imaginative approach in reconstructing and resurrecting the lost traditions surrounding the artistry and performance of the Cebuano *Linambay* practiced during the early 20th century through the use of archival research and inter-disciplinary theorizing.³⁴ Such reconfiguration and re-contextualization of an antiquated art form with its forgotten socio-cultural context was made possible through the insightful and creative application of Marxist

theoretical paradigm coupled with careful historiography and textual analysis. Likewise, it was through the use of the indigenous theoretical construct *Pantayong Pananaw*³⁵ which enabled Filipino artist and art scholar Brenda Fajardo to identify a particular, internal schema from which to offer a deeper significance and meaning to her study of the life and world of the wood carvers and practitioners of other folk art traditions of the famed artisan town of Paete in the province of Laguna.³⁶ In short, these works demonstrate the rich potentials and exciting prospects for future (re)appropriation, (re)construction and (re)orientation of Philippine visual art and art studies.

In view of the great potentials and inspirations brought forth by these local theoretical works in their quest to understand the place and meaning of art, one may choose to simply adopt and expand on the frameworks mentioned above. Yet, the question that remains is: Which theoretical framework do we appropriate? The answer to this question lies in the intent and purpose one wishes to address.

Therefore, if one wishes to examine and view Ang's art as a discourse of human pain and suffering brought forth by hegemonic oppression and social injustice, then the most logical theoretical construct would be in line with the Marxist or the Postcolonial theoretical perspectives. Or if one seeks to understand how Ang views women or gender, one should just simply focus on how he depicts his female subjects in his art (i.e., his lovers series, mother and child series, or even harvester series). One may utilize the host of theories propounded by Feminist or gender related theoretical paradigms or semiotics to provide insights and alternative prescriptions for viewing and conceptualizing how Ang views and depicts the female or issues pertaining to gender in relation to his inner vision. For those who want to investigate the question of Ang's sense of personal identity as revealed through his art, one may choose to employ the semiotics or the Filipino indigenous theoretical frameworks (i.e., *Pilipinolohiya*) to delve into and analyze in the micro-level how Ang's art and context which may reveal deeper insights into his sense of being a Chinese, a Chinese-Filipino or as a member of the human race. Such approaches merely signify the initial sampling of the virtually unlimited trajectories that the study of Ang may take.

However, in the process of theorizing, one must be mindful that it is a dynamic process. When theory meets time and representation it becomes a constantly evolving process. The mere transposing or formulaic application of theory precludes the notion that new theories may not be created or developed. Hence, the challenge of theorizing art is unlimited in relation to what has been done in the past and future scholars should to take up the challenge of creatively formulating and employing new theoretical approaches to explore the largely unstudied and potentially fertile terrain of Philippine visual arts in which Ang is a mere representative.

Conclusion

After assessing and reviewing the representative works on Ang Kiukok, one may conclude that the state of Philippine art is indeed in its infancy as evidenced by the quantity and quality of works that has been produced. For the most part, the nature

and purpose of these works are generally biographical and historical, aimed to supply general empirical information. Often written in journalistic fashion, the objectives of these works merely seek to answer the basic questions of “who”, “what”, “when”, “where”, and at times “why” but ultimately falls desperately short in terms of answering the deeper question of “so what –”. Needless to say, the bulk of these works merely reflect the prevailing state and conditions of the Philippine art world where the production and consumption of art cater largely to the enjoyment and commoditization of the privileged but unenlightened few. Moreover, visual arts in the Philippines has for the most part been conceived and received in isolationist and essentialist terms often far removed from its social and cultural realities and its manifold dimensions.

However, the advent of the new art historical traditions³⁷ along with its theoretical paradigms offer exciting possibilities for the study of Philippine visual arts. The recent works by the handful of pioneering art historians and scholars ushered a positive new era in art studies and art writing in the Philippines. Collectively, their works not only critique and challenge the prevailing hegemony in the norms of conceptualizing and viewing art but they also offer divergent perspectives thus enabling art to be subjected to greater depths of analysis through the systematic engagement of the complex conditions of representation - oftentimes involving “the aesthetic as well as the social orders.”³⁸ Once art is viewed through the lens of such contextual theoretical constructs along with its corresponding praxis, art then becomes liberated from the exclusivities of its artifactual mode. Through this, art becomes freed from its association and bondage to a particular time, space and signification often impinged upon them through age-old conventions. Consequently, through this way of viewing and theorizing art, the reading and understanding of Ang and his work is poised to take on a whole new dimension where it becomes alive thus empowered to challenge and engage, critique and inform the present realities of human existence. In short, the rigors of theorizing and context-based theoretical applications hold exciting potentials toward the production of new knowledge and alternative imaginations. This in turn offers illuminating new perspectives and insights toward realizing not only the mysterious discontinuity that exists between the artist and his works, but with art and the ever-changing discursive landscape of socio-cultural reality.

Endnotes

¹ Recent advances in Philippines art studies have enabled art scholars to engage in the theorizing of art from different perspectives. Since different scholars are prone to have their own theoretical tendencies and inclinations, some have argue that comparatively, the state of Philippine scholarship is still relatively primitive in the sense that it is still very much informed by a Classical-Formalist aesthetics and orientation of art. Therefore, this notion would particularly apply to the general populace, the lay or casual art lover who is not familiar or exposed to recent academic trends in art history or criticism.

² Popular Philippine art writer, Manuel D. Duldulao noted that prior to 1972, the production of literature on Philippine Art was for the most part limited to a short list of magazine articles and specialized catalogues on individual artists and their works. Among the most significant work produced prior to 1972 are: a collection of essays devoted to specific artists entitled *The Art of the Philippines*, edited by Winfield Scott III and released by the Art Association of the Philippines in 1958; a survey of the history of various forms of visual arts in the Philippines since the Spanish times by University of the Philippines Art Professor Dominador Castañeda entitled, *Art in the Philippines* published in 1964; a collection of pamphlets on Alcuaz, Saguil and Abueva in *The Philippine Art Series*, released by Alberto Florentino in the late 1960s; and the short but rarely seen German-sponsored work co-authored by Leonidas V. Benesa and Rodolfo Paras-Perez entitled *Philippine Painting* which appeared in 1970. Duldulao attributes some of the reasons for the dearth of art books in the Philippines to factors such as the complicated and arduous process of compiling an art book, the high cost of production and problems in financing, and the lack of art patronage and readership. See Manuel D. Duldulao, *Philippine Art Scene*, (Hong Kong: Toppan Printing Co. Ltd., 1977), pp. 141 – 145.

³ The Chinese-Filipino visual artist Ang Kiukok (1931 – 2005) is one of the most important figures to emerge in 20th century Philippine visual art. Proclaimed as the National Artist in Visual Arts in 2001, Ang's impressive body of work resonates with power and intimacy as he probes the darker themes of the human condition. His artistic portrayal of a wide range of subjects included junkscapes, androids, plants, furniture, fruits, domestic animals, Roman Catholic symbols and most of all people in various stages of life, love and suffering. Stylistically, his subjects are intentionally distorted in the manner of the Cubists yet conveyed the passionate emotion of the Figurative Expressionists in dramatic angular forms. His composition is often framed in tight and constricted borders highlighted by the use of raw and chromatic colors thus further accentuating the unmistakable feelings of anxiety, loneliness, suffering and rage.

⁴ Since most newspaper and art reviews are preoccupied primarily with episodic aspects of the artist's life and career such as the accolades and condemnations following an exhibition, the selection of these sources was based on the degree of its reliability and comprehensiveness in the treatment of the subject. For the most part, these sources represent the major "canonical" materials presently available on Ang Kiukok. The ten representative sources reviewed in this paper includes: Emmanuel Torres, *Kiukok Drawings*, (Manila: Bureau of National and Foreign Information, 1975); Esperanza Gatbonton, *Kiukok, the Artist and His Works*, (Manila: Paulino Que, 1991); Alfredo Roces, *Kiukok: Deconstructing Despair*, (Manila: Finale Art Gallery, 2000); Ma. Salva Limbo, *Ang Kiukok: Beyond the Thorny Path*, (Manila: Galleria Bernice L and Galleria De Las Islas, 1990); Jolico Cuadra, "The Vision is Missing," in Alice M. L. Coseteng (ed.), *Philippine Modern Art and Its Critics*, (Manila: UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines, 1972); Eric Torres, "Ang Kiukok's Icons of Pain and Struggle," *The National Artists of the Philippines, 1999 – 2003*. Vol. 2, (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines; National Commission for the Culture and the Arts and Anvil Publishing Inc., 2003); Alice Guillermo, "Ang Kiukok: An Art of Human Concerns," *Image to Meaning Essays on Philippine Art*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001); Arlene Ang, "Ang Kiukok: The Cynic, the Idealist," http://www.kulaydiwa.com/ang_kiukok, (Accessed 20 April 2008); Teresita Ang-See, "Huaquiao Becomes Tsinoi," in Alfredo Roces (ed.), *Kiukok: Deconstructing Despair*, (Manila: Finale Art Gallery, 2000); and Cid Reyes, "Ang Kiukok," In *Conversations on Philippine Art*, (Manila: Sentrong Pangkultural ng Pilipinas, 1989).

⁵ This is in line with President Marcos' "Democratic Revolution" which required a humanist dimension; in essence, a cultural and artistic dimension. In the Foreword to this work, the Chairman of the Board of Editors for this series of publications on Philippine Art and Culture, Francisco S. Tatad cited President Marcos as he expounds, "a revolution without a *humanist* dimension, without cultural roots, is nothing more than a struggle for material things. And we are struggling for more than rice in our bellies and the clothes on our backs. We are fighting for our pride as a nation and individual as human beings." see Emmanuel Torres, *Kiukok Drawings*, (Manila: Bureau of National and Foreign Information, 1975), foreword.

⁶ The Philippines under President Marcos established formal diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China during his visit to China in June 7 – 9, 1975.

⁷ Emmanuel Torres, *Kiukok Drawings*, 1975, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ Cid Reyes, "Ang Kiukok," p. 110.

¹⁰ This book contains a total of 426 pages with 836 full-color reproductions of Ang Kiukok's works covering all genres that spanned his entire career from his student days at UST during the 1950s until the publication date of the book in 2000.

¹¹ Roces, *Kiukok: Deconstructing Despair*, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ Joint exhibitions were held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and at two private art galleries (Robert Hong's *Galleria Bernice L.* and Robert Lane's *Galeria De Las Islas*) from June 1, 1990 until July 15, 1990. For this occasion, Alice Guillermo also wrote a companion volume for the CCP.

¹⁴ This exhibition was held at the Luz Gallery in Manila from October 22 to November 2, 1969. See Roces's *Deconstructing Despair*, p. 414.

¹⁵ This article first appeared in the *Manila Chronicle*, November 2, 1969.

¹⁶ Cuadra's "*The Vision is Missing*", 50.

¹⁷ This is a rather typical reaction when one encounters Ang Kiukok's Crucifixion paintings from the typical classical depictions of this often-depicted Christian icon. The passage is cited here to show the degree of disgust in the eye of the reviewer who viewed this sometime in late 1969. Cuadra's "*The Vision is Missing*", 50.

¹⁸ Cuadra's "*The Vision is Missing*", 49.

¹⁹ Eric Torres "Ang Kiukok's Icons of Pain and Struggle," p. xiii.

²⁰ Alice Guillermo, *Image to Meaning Essays on Philippine Art*, p. ix.

²¹ The Eleventh Theses of Marx on Feuerbach declares: "*Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, the point however, is to change it.*"

²² Guillermo 2001, *Image to Meaning*, p. ix.

²³ Guillermo developed and used this theoretical model initially in her doctoral dissertation involving the study of the Philippine Protest and Revolutionary Art under the Marcos era. Through the course of time, this theoretical model was revised and enriched. Originally in her 1995 dissertation, the model that she calls a "Semiotic Analysis" scrutinizes the actual visual works both in original and reproduced forms through the use of three planes of analysis. These include the basic semiotic plane, the iconic plane and the thematic plane. The semiotic plane takes into account the expressive elements in visual art that is universally shared by the particular socio-cultural codes and conventions of a particular place and time through the study of the signs and signifiers in the work. The iconic plane represents the study of the image's physical aspects through the analysis of its subject, composition, color and style. The thematic plane situates the work in its social grounding and seeks to explore the contextual dimensions of the art and its socio-political background. In the ensuing years, Guillermo added another dimension, a fourth element called the evaluative plane, which appeared in her introduction to her 2001 *Image to Meaning* aptly titled, *Reading the Image*. This fourth element grapples with the issue of values and evaluation of art. She posited the notion that since the art object are values-laden and those who view and critique art are not value-free and are understood from different perspectives, art once again needs to be situated in its context and understood through the conventions of the ever-changing dialectical forces of its socio-historical milieu. See Alice G. Guillermo, "Protest Revolutionary Art in the Marcos Regime," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of the Philippine., 1995). A revised version of this dissertation with slight revision to incorporate the work of Philippine Social Realist artists through the Aquino Years was released in 2001 as part of a book entitled, *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970 – 1990*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001).

²⁴ Guillermo, "An Art of Human Concerns," In *Image to Meaning*, p. 40.

²⁵ This article first appeared in 1997 in a niche-oriented local Philippine magazine entitled *Men's Zone* but has since been posted on several Internet-based sources including http://www.kulaydiwa.com/ang_kiukok, Accessed 20 April 2008 introducing Ang Kiukok's works to a wider net-based community including the citation listed in the bibliography. See Roces, *Deconstructing Despair*, p. 418.

²⁶ The writer does not explicitly acknowledge this fact in her article; instead, she reveals that she was born in Manila to Chinese – Filipino parents. However, we do know from outside research that Arlene Ang was born on September 7, 1974, the youngest among Ang Kiukok's four children. See *Ibid.*, p. 413. In an informal discussion with Sylvia Golanco-Gascon of Finale Art File, she mentions that this fourth child of Ang Kiukok was also the only artistic one among her siblings and took after his father. Her art is writing.

²⁷ Ang Kiukok taught basic art course at the Chiang Kai Shek High School in Manila from 1963 – 1964 to subsidize his income as a young artist. During this time, Teresita Ang (See) was a high school student who reluctantly took art with the committed but sometimes frustrated teacher.

²⁸ Teresita Ang See is the founding president of Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran Inc., an organization of Chinese Filipino dedicated to the active pursuit and promotion of integration of ethnic Chinese into the Philippine mainstream. Ang See is noted in the Philippine Chinese community as the fearless spokes person in matters concerning equity and justice for the often-silent and underrepresented Chinese populace. Her advocacies as the chairperson of the Movement for Restoration of Peace and Order and work as the spokesperson of the Citizens Action Against Crime has won her praise as a crime fighter and the voice of the Chinese community.

²⁹ See Cid Reyes, "Ang Kiukok." In *Conversations on Philippine Art*, (Manila: Sentrong Pangkultural ng Pilipinas, 1989), pp. 91 - 94.

³⁰ Throughout this interview, Ang often answers in terse statements such as "I don't mind" and "I don't care." Reyes, *Conversations*, pp. 91 – 94.

³¹ A good and non-technical introduction and discussion to this may be found in Anne D'Alleva. *Methods and Theories of Art History*. London: Laurence King Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 46 – 87.

³² Patrick D. Flores, *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art*, (Quezon City: UP Office of Research Coordination and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1998).

³³ Flaudette May Datuin, *Home, Body, Memory: Filipina Artists in the Visual Arts, 19th Century to the Present*, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2002).

³⁴ Mojares employed this training in historiography along with literary criticism and cultural anthropology to reconfigure and reconstruct an imaginative account of the social life surrounding local theater tradition.

³⁵ See S. Lily L. Mendoza, "Theoretical Advancement in the Discourse of Indigenization," in Atoy Navarro and Flordeliza Lagbao-Bolante (eds.), *Mga Babasahin sa Agham ng Panlipunang Pilipino: Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Pilipinolohiya at Pantayong Pananaw*, (Quezon City: C & E Publishing, Inc., 2007), pp. 241 – 297; and Zeus A. Salazar, "Philippine Studies" and Pilipinolohiya:" Past, Present and Future of Two Heuristic Views in the Study of the Philippines," in Zeus A. Salazar (ed.), *The Malayan Connection: Ang Pilipinas sa Dunia Melayu*, (Quezon City: Palimbagan ng Lahi, 1998), pp. 301 – 323.

³⁶ Brenda Fajardo V. *Ang Inukit na Kaalamang Bayan ng Paete*, (Manila: Pambansang Komisyon para sa Kultura at mga Sining, 2003).

³⁷ Art historian Hans Belting provocative 1983 essay, "The End of Art History?" in Eric Fernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1995), pp. 291 – 295 posits the notion that art history had experienced a split in the 19th century as the modern artists rejected the earlier conventions of perceiving and writing about art. Thus, art history took two streams of traditions, where the older views art as self-contained as opposed to the newer view where art is situated in the historical and cultural context. Moreover, Belting warns that contemporary art historians should seek to avoid the dichotomizing of the two traditions but seek to bring the two traditions together to diffuse such artificial binary oppositions between art and life, representation and reality.

³⁸ Svetlana Alper cites an example of the complex and multi-faceted perspective from which artistic representations may be engaged and interpreted in her classic 1983 essay "Interpretation without Representation, or The Viewing of the Las Meninas," in Eric Fernie (ed.), *Art History and Its Methods*, pp. 285 - 290.

