

# Who will represent the Philippines in the 2017 Venice Art Biennale?

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Lani Maestro's ruby-red neon installation, "No Pain Like This Body" (2010/2017). Maestro, along with Manuel Ocampo, will be representing the Philippines in the country's pavilion, curated by Joselina Cruz, this year at the Venice Art Biennale. Photo courtesy of LANI MAESTRO

**Manila (CNN Philippines Life)** — On February 2, 1963, Benedict Anderson had what he called "a strange experience." He was at the University of Indonesia for the honorary degree reception of Sukarno, the country's president at the time. Sukarno gave a speech about nationalism, in which he spoke of the last name most people would think of upon mention of the subject: Adolf Hitler. After calling to attention the Nazis' "Dritte Reich" or "Third Kingdom," the former president said, "How clever Hitler was ... in depicting these [nationalist] ideals!" to which Anderson felt a bit sick, or experienced a "dizzying moment."

Anderson knew Sukarno as a man of the Left, aware of the horrors of Hitler's rule. But in this speech, he seemed to regard these horrors "with the kind of calm with which a devout Christian contemplated the centuries of massacres and tortures committed in His Name," as Anderson wrote in the introduction of his book, "The Spectre of Comparisons."

A man of Irish and English descent, Anderson felt a kind of vertigo. He had never heard anyone talk about "his" Hitler in this way. For the first time ever, he saw Europe through what he called an "inverted telescope."

Twenty-five years later, Anderson opened a copy of Jose Rizal's "*Noli Me Tangere*" and found a good name for this dizzying experience. Upon reading the novel's 8th chapter entitled "*Recuerdos*," Anderson saw himself in the character of Crisostomo Ibarra, who, upon returning from the gardens of great labor and harvest in Europe, looked out to the sickly gardens of Manila, which to him looked like an anemic "girl wrapped in the garments of her grandmother's better days" (as translated by Charles Derbyshire in 1912).

This vertigo, or double vision, was what Rizal called "*el demonio de las comparaciones*," which Anderson translated to "the spectre of comparisons." This became the title of his collection of essays about Southeast Asia published in 1998.

In the same year, National Artist for Literature Virgilio S. Almarino would release Filipino translations of Rizal's most seminal novels. Little did he know that this year, as the chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) — which presents the 2017 Philippine Pavilion in the Venice Art Biennale, along with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Office of Sen. Loren Legarda — Almarino would reunite with the ghost of Rizal once again.



"The Spectre of Comparison," the exhibition, puts forth the practices of Lani Maestro (left) and Manuel Ocampo (right), both of whom have lived and practiced outside of the Philippines, but have maintained active engagement with the country throughout their careers. Photos courtesy of LANI MAESTRO and MM YU

This "spectre of comparisons" is the very framework for the Philippine Pavilion — the commissioner for which is Almario — in this year's Venice Art Biennale. This serves as the momentum for the Philippines' participation in the 2015 Biennale in its 51 years of absence after 1964, when the now National Artists Jose Joya and Napoleon Abueva first represented the country.

The Philippines' comeback in 2015 was envisioned and spearheaded by Sen. Loren Legarda, with the exhibit "Tie a String Around the World," curated by Dr. Patrick Flores and featuring the works of Manny Montelibano, [Jose Tence Ruiz](http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2017/02/17/art-fair-2017-cover.html) (<http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2017/02/17/art-fair-2017-cover.html>), and the late National Artists Manuel Conde and Carlos Francisco. And in 2016, the Philippines presented [a pavilion for the Venice Architecture Biennale](http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2016/05/18/venice-art-biennale.html) (<http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2016/05/18/venice-art-biennale.html>) for the first time ever.

Now, for a fourth participation in the Venice Biennale, the Philippine Pavilion features "The Spectre of Comparison," curated by Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) director and curator Joselina Cruz, featuring the works of Lani Maestro and [Manuel Ocampo](http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2017/02/21/manuel-ocampo-archivo-exhibit.html) (<http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2017/02/21/manuel-ocampo-archivo-exhibit.html>).

Sen. Legarda remains the principal advocate of the participation. "We must no longer put arts and culture, as well as heritage preservation, on the hindquarters of our nation building, because in truth, we are ready to let the world hear our truths and our visions," she says.

This sole focus on nation building and representation topples any appraisal that the Venice Art Biennale is regarded as the "[Olympic games of the art world](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TRAVEL/06/08/biennale.di.venezia/)" (<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/TRAVEL/06/08/biennale.di.venezia/>). It is, after all, the world's oldest art festival, but according to Cruz, "The Spectre of Comparison"'s mere representation of the Philippine nation is what makes this year's Philippine Pavilion special.

"To represent a nation is very different, particularly because it's [the] Philippines, not [because it's the Venice Art Biennale]," she says. "It's because you're representing a country. You're working with artists but you're also thinking of how it works within the context of representing a nation. That's the one that makes [the Venice Art Biennale] special. The fact that it continues to talk about 'nation' via the voices of each nation."



Joselina Cruz is the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), and the curator of "The Spectre of Comparison." For her, curation is about revolving on artists practices as inspiration for ideas. Photo courtesy of JOSELINA CRUZ

However, Cruz acknowledges that it is not all about representation, and that the exhibit, as well as the whole Biennale itself, also explores nation as "a fraught idea," and the more complex ideals and contexts with which it lives in. She adds, "That's why I say that Anderson says, this is how nation lives — by comparison."

Though the idea of "the spectre of comparisons" goes perfectly with such a goal of nation building, Cruz stresses that the exhibit puts more focus on the artists' practices. "I don't want the phrase, 'the spectre of comparisons,' to overburden the works of Lani and Manuel, because the works are not about that. The phrase is about their work, not the other way around. It is embodied in their process, in their practice."

And for the MCAD director, this is what curation is all about — the idea as inspired by the practices and philosophy of the artists. "A lot of people don't realize this. They always think it's the idea first," she adds. "Well, sometimes it is, but most of the time, I see work which I really like, and that's where the exhibition jumps off from. That happens more often that the other way around. At least for me, that's what [curation] is about."

The curator of the entire 57th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Art Biennale, Christine Macel, would agree. Entitled "*Viva Arte Viva*," her curatorial idea puts in the middle the artists' processes, which according to Cruz, hasn't been happening in the Biennale in a long time. "All of the Biennales before were about politics, intellectual [concepts], it was about this, or that, but never about the artist," says Cruz.

The exhibition puts forth the practices of Maestro and Ocampo, both of whom have lived and practiced outside of the Philippines, but have maintained active engagement with the country throughout their careers. As Maestro shuttles between Canada, France, and Manila, she moves fluidly through various forms of artistic engagements and media, such as sound, film, text, and photographs. The quiet yet powerful reverberations of Maestro's work gives its interaction within its context a shifting and ambiguous political ground, which both goes perfectly and contrasts with the bold and stark works of Ocampo.



Manuel Ocampo's "Immigrant's Daughter" (1997). Photo courtesy of MACBA COLLECTION/MACBA FOUNDATION

A painter by trade, Ocampo had developed his practice in the United States in the early '80s, incorporating various iconography in religion and pop culture, among others, to create his commentary in visual form. With both artists and their body of works thriving in criticality against systems, "The Spectre of Comparison" celebrates their processes, and shows how Maestro and Ocampo go about their own "inverted telescopes."

A double vision can induce confusion, dizzying yet sobering, but can also open a different perspective, which many put forth as art's greatest function. Some translated "*el demonio de las comparaciones*" to "the demon of comparisons," but it is also a "spectre," a presence, a confusion that may be caused by endless questioning, in which an answer, if there is at all, never matters. "It's this flipping back and forth that allows for us to be in that space of questioning. That site of comparison, the spectre, the devil, is actually a site of criticality," explains Cruz.

"[...] Local and global, inside and outside. For me, it's not an answer. The space of an exhibition always allows for questioning ... For most of the exhibitions I curate, you're supposed to enter it, and you're supposed to leave it thinking, but not [necessarily] having answered something. It's a continuous questioning. That's what art is supposed to do."

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*The Philippine Pavilion in the 2017 Venice Art Biennale, will hold its vernissage on May 11 and will open from May 13 to Nov. 26 at Space A of the Arsenale in Venice, Italy.*