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Philippine Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

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Lani Maestro, ces *MAINS*, 2013. Installation with blue neon, variable dimensions; street view, Bijouterie Murat, Saint-Martin-de-Valamas, France. Photo: Phoebé Meyer. Courtesy of the artist.

Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo

The Spectre of Comparison

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The title of this exhibition *The Spectre of Comparison* is drawn from the novel *Noli Me Tángere* by the Filipino National Hero Jose Rizal. Originally written in Spanish as "el demonio de las comparaciones," this enigmatic phrase is a framework for the practices of Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo, artists representing the Philippine Pavilion.

The phrase encapsulates the experience of Rizal's protagonist, Crisostomo Ibarra, when he gazes out to look at the Botanical Garden of Manila while simultaneously remembering the gardens of Europe. This double-vision of experiencing events up close and from afar, no longer able to see the Philippines without seeing Europe nor gaze at Europe without seeing the Philippines, was pointed out by historian Benedict Anderson in his essay "The First Filipino" (1997): "Here indeed is the origin of nationalism, which lives by making comparisons." Rizal, the nineteenth century *indio* from the colony, with some melancholy, comprehended the colonising European other.

With this as pivot, Lani Maestro's and Manuel Ocampo's practices, aesthetically worlds apart and produced through a multiplicity of contexts, have at their core this "spectre of comparison." Both artists were politicised by the specific moments of their departure from the Philippines: Maestro leaving at the height of the Marcos dictatorship, Ocampo during the 1980s, after the Marcos regime was ousted in a revolution mounted by a society deeply dissatisfied with the ensuing corruption that followed Martial Law. Although their practices developed at different moments, they were forged within the "collective" experience of the émigrés spectre.

Maestro's practice moves fluidly through various artistic engagements incorporating sound, film, text and photographs. While Ocampo paints canvasses that criticise systems through forceful figurative images. The exhibition looks at their practices as emblematic of the experience of Rizal's "spectre of comparison," with the juxtaposition of their works as a manifestation of sociopolitical commentary on the Philippines and of the many localities where the artists have based since, as seen "through an inverted telescope."

Rizal's understanding of Europe and the connections he made as he flipped back and forth between the contexts of home and the foreign crystallised the double—consciousness experienced by a colonial émigré of the nineteenth century. This exhibition at the Philippine Pavilion likewise accords this gaze to Ocampo and Maestro as artists of the fragmented global—a discursive imagining, constructed through a consciousness built across temporal and geographical zones. Within the twinning of their practices is the experience that haunts contemporary imaginations, as well as the "nationalisms" fraught with colonial and imperialist pasts.

The Philippine Pavilion is commissioned by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, with the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Office of Senator Loren Legarda. It is curated by Joselina Cruz.