

Language Subverting Violence: Lani Maestro at Venice Biennale 2017 | COBO Social

cobosocial.com Updated Jun 21st, 2017

Language Subverting Violence: Lani Maestro at Venice Biennale 2017



Photo: Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project



Installation view of Maestro's work at Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project





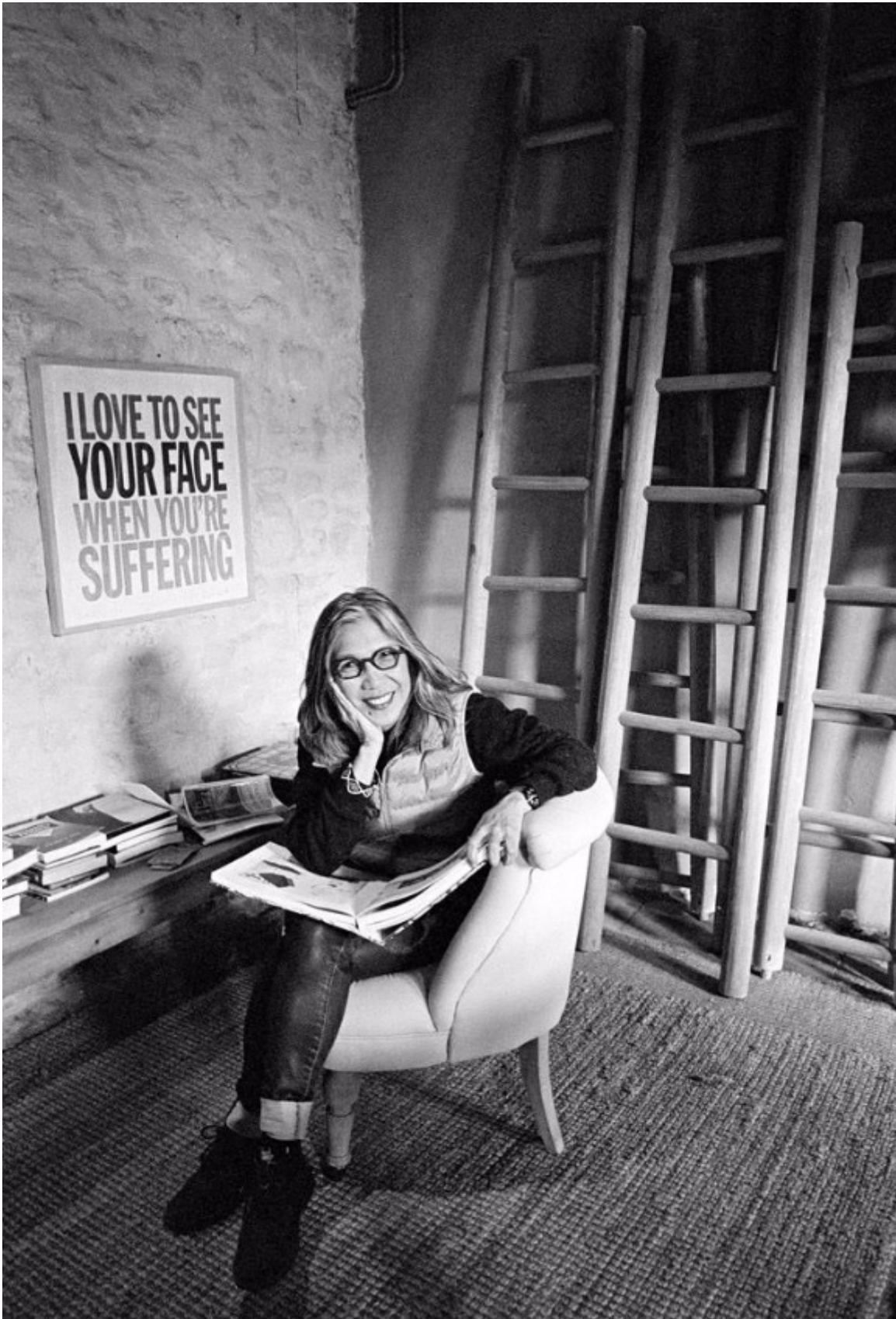
Installation view of Maestro's work at Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project



Philippines Pavilion, with Maestro's work on the left and Ocampo's work on the right. Photo: Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project



Manuel Ocampo's work presented in Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca.
Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project



Lani Maestro at her studio. "The piece on the wall is by the artist, John Giorno who has been very important to me."

21

Jun

[Naima Morelli](#)

[30](#)

63475

1630

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

[View Profile](#)



Lani Maestro was one of the two artists representing the Philippines at the Venice Biennale. We chatted with her about her practice, the work she presented at the Biennale and the power of language.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

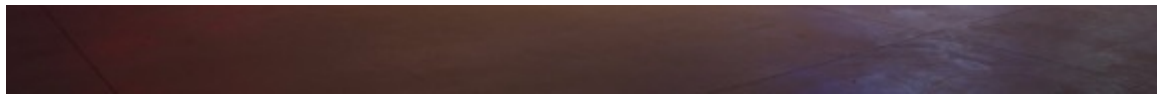
IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist and Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project



Photo:Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project
Each one of us, even those who don't carry notebooks in their bag - *especially* those who don't carry notebooks in their bag - keep a certain storage room in their mind for quotes and bits of sentences. These can be from our past, told to us by a person we loved, or by person we still very much hate. We might have overheard them in a song, in a movie, in a poem, or even read on the cereal box. Sometimes these words become our way of thinking about ourselves and our life. They become a way to relate to the word not in a scientific perspective, but rather through meaning.

Perhaps this is the way Lani Maestro used language in the neon installations she presented at Philippines Pavilion for the Venice Biennale. Of course we must take into account that space, as well as our personal background, determines interpretation of an artwork and its emotional resonance.





Installation view of Maestro's work at Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca.

Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project

This year the Philippines Pavilion took place in the Artiglieria – the space inside the Arsenale warehouses where soldiers used to keep fire weapons. On the door, a statement was shining in a deep blue: “If you must take my life, Spare these hands.” Who could have said that? To my mind, already impressed by the century-old military space, a myriad of possible stories started emerging. Together with them, also an emotional understanding of the illogical which so clearly makes apparent the contradictions of our souls.

Turning sideways, a bulging red writing also played on the juxtaposition of two opposite concepts: “No Pain Like This Body / No Body Like This Pain”. It reminded me of the idea of considering pain as something you can detach from, objectify and working with, becoming its friend or its enemy.

No Pain Like This Body was originally made in 2010, and Lani told me that the context of the Arsenale within the Venice Biennale, somewhat changed one's perception of the work, which was first shown in an impoverished part of the city of Vancouver: “It easily becomes personalized as one is left with oneself to pose or answer questions.”



Installation view of Maestro's work at Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca.

Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project

The name and concept from the work came from a title of a book by Harold Sonny Ladoo, a Canadian immigrant from the Caribbean. When Lani read that book, she deeply emphasized, as she was also a new immigrant from Philippines to Canada: “I felt that his writing was like seeing a film or experiencing art,” she said: “it just got under my skin. I remember saying then than reading his writing felt like eating mud!”

Lani has always been deeply affected by her readings and inspired by literature. It seems like a natural continuation of her private practice to have curator Joselina Cruz basing the concept of the Philippines Pavilion's on the theme, “Spectre of Comparison,” from a novel of José Rizal called: “Noli Me Tangere”. The novel's protagonist, Crisostomo Ibarra, visits the botanical garden in Manila and realizes how the city has transformed drawing

garden in Manila and realizes how the city has transformed, drawing comparisons with European capitals.

To be honest, it was hard for me to draw a direct connection between the curatorial theme of the show and Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo's work in the Pavilion, if not for the artists' backgrounds. Being both expatriate artists, the decision of having them representing the country lifted a few eyebrows.

"There has been some criticism in the Philippines about Manuel Ocampo and myself representing the Philippines. This was because we have worked outside of the Philippines for a very long time," explains Lani, "But how Filipino can one get? In a way, our presence also poses this profound question even just amongst the people in the Philippines."



Philippines Pavilion, with Maestro's work on the left and Ocampo's work on the right. Photo: Paolo Luca. Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project

"The question of origin and authenticity became very important for me and my art works in light of postcolonial theory and debates in the early 90's. It really pushed me to question my own subjectivity and that of others. By this I mean it situates all these questions about nation, origins, exile, belonging etc. in a more complex landscape and collapses the conventional relations to nation, nationalisms and identity. Perhaps, the mere fact that I am participating is already a challenge or a question to this old idea of nationhood."

How did you react when you first knew you would represent the Philippines at the Venice Biennale? Was it ever a goal of yours when you first started making art?

I was surprised and pleased. I have been in many international exhibitions but this is the first time that I would be representing the Philippines. It was never my goal when I first started making art, and I did not know about the Venice Biennale, coming from a country with a culture and art history much different from a Western tradition - and that was a time when technology didn't allow for easy access to the international contemporary art environment. My awareness of a globalised art world only happened much later, after many years of being an artist and studying abroad.

In the beginning of my practice I focused on developing art as a way of thinking, as a way of understanding the world and discovering things that I did

not know that could be part of language – an artistic language. Of course, if people can see the value of what I’m doing, that creates more conversation and discussion and this happens through exhibitions, reviews etc. I’m pleased, but making it to an international exhibition like the Venice Biennale per se was never my goal.



Manuel Ocampo’s work presented in Philippines Pavilion. Photo: Paolo Luca.
Courtesy of the Philippine Arts in Venice Biennale Project

How did your work dialogued with Manuel Ocampo’s? Did you guys had already exhibited together in the past?

This is the first time that I have exhibited with Manuel Ocampo. I am thankful for this chance to get to know him a little bit more as a person, as an artist. I realized soon after I met him that we are coming from similar histories or “interests”, posing questions about our own subjectivities in the process of making artworks. His paintings come across with so much force with his employment of violent imagery but his knowledge of his craft of painting also brings out the complexity of such representations and our relationship to this so called violence. My work comes across as quiet and ephemeral but there is also some kind of violence in the emptiness and disappearance of things. This is akin to the melancholy of exile.

There is violence in the language that I employ but it is also a way of subverting language itself; in its construction, phrasing etc. where i try to make the voice of the speaker more evident while it is simultaneously anonymous. I hope that these various approaches reveal positions of authority, of power and pose this question: where do we situate ourselves when we are confronted with this? In the Arsenale, the installations were conceptualized with much consideration of how our works could keep the feeling of being “in conversation”. At the same time for me, how to expand the work physically in the space as a body experience. This is all tied up to internalized colonization and the depth of its violence. I think we both look at how we speak about power, history of colonization and imperialism in its tangible manifestations.

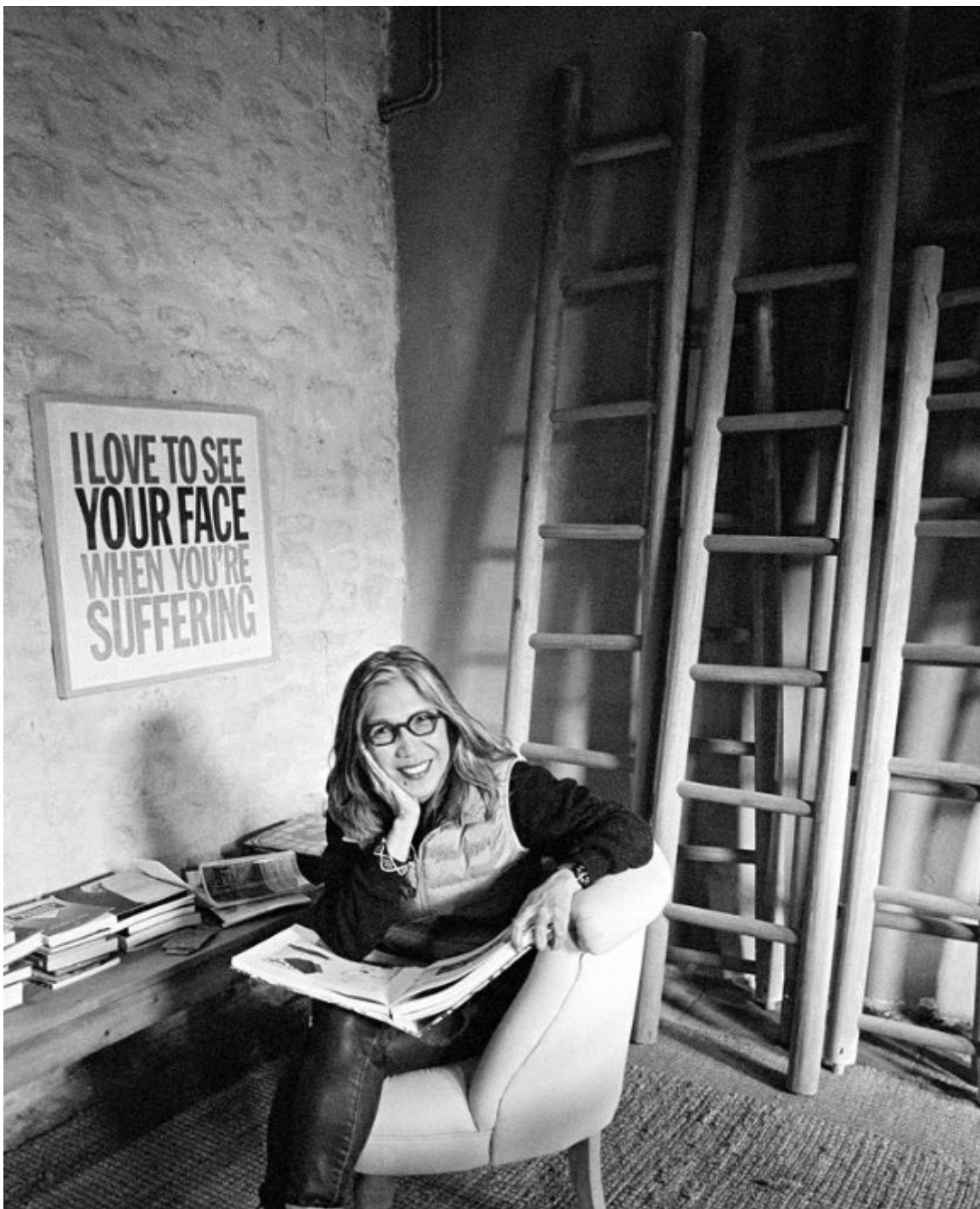
Did you observe any reaction from the public – and can you recall some reading that perhaps surprised you?

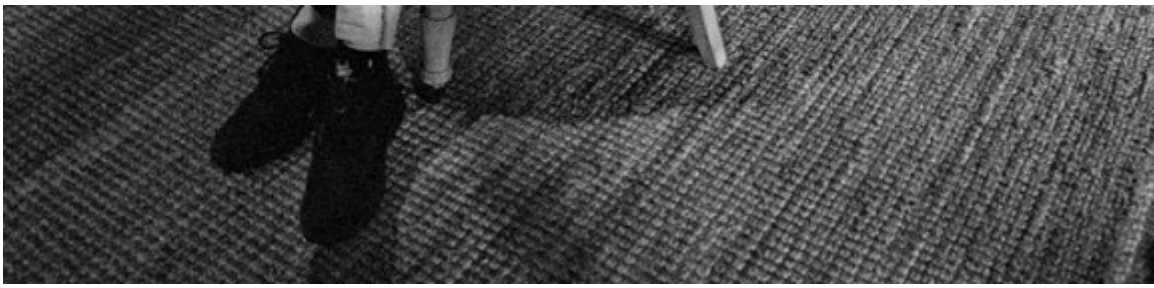
Yes, I did observe the public. I was curious as to how so many people wanted to take pictures of the installation or themselves with it. One person took me aside and told me that she felt that the text spoke about victimization. It’s the

first time that I heard someone say that, as that was not the intention at all. It is possible that it is a literal reading on her part. It is the language that I want to “complicate”. I want people to stumble or fumble when they read these phrases because it is a process that slows time and make a space for reflection or question. We read so many headlines in media or elsewhere and assume that we understand, but this is not necessarily true. On the other hand, I was very pleased at how people spent a lot of time to look at our works, individually and in conversation with others. Of course, the work “meronmeron” – the benches at the center of the pavilion – was also intended to hold people in space and facilitate this communal feeling.

What’s up for you in terms of next projects or upcoming shows?

I am working on a few projects. In September, I have been asked to collaborate with another artist in the Philippines to create an installation holding a performative piece by the late Filipino composer and ethnomusicologist, José Maceda. It’s 20 years the work, “cassettes 100” has not been performed in the Philippines, until February this year, where it was performed at a different venue. This time around it will be performed again at the cultural centre of the Philippines in Manila. There are other exhibitions scheduled in two galleries in the Philippines for the beginning of 2018 and some in Canada. I also have ongoing projects that I’m continuing to be working on; one of them involves the notebooks of the late Canadian philosopher, Samuel Mallin, who was an important inspiration for my artistic life.





Lani Maestro at her studio. “The piece on the wall is by the artist, John Giorno who has been very important to me.”

About the Artist:

Lani Maestro was born in Manila, Philippines where she began working professionally as an artist in the late seventies until she immigrated to Canada in 1982. Her expanded art practice includes exhibitions with installation and sculpture, incorporating writing and book works, drawing, video, photography, sound and film. In the early nineties, her collaborative engagement with artist and critic, Stephen Horne launched Harbour Magazine of Art and Everyday Life, a journal of writing and artworks by artists which she co-edited and designed. This editorial project expanded to produce burning books, artists' books which also accompanied works in exhibition at galerie burning, an itinerant gallery space she co-directed in Montreal, Canada.

Lani Maestro's work has been shown extensively and has gained the respect and admiration of a diverse international artistic community for its poetic minimalism, its subtle but forceful engagement. Maestro has participated the Biennals of Canada (1998), Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2009), Busan, Korea (2004), Shanghai, China (2000), Sydney, Australia (1998), Istanbul, Turkey (1997), Havana, Cuba (1986/1994) where she received the Biennial prize.

Lani Maestro lives and works in Canada, France and Manila.

The Spectre of Comparison Lani Maestro and Manuel Ocampo

Curator: Joselina Cruz
13 May - 26 Nov 2017
Philippines, Arsenale, Venice

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

[#artist interview#Lani Maestro#Manuel Ocampo#Naima Morelli#Venice Biennale 2017](#)

Leave a Comment

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.