



No Shoot Policy

By: Serena Coccoli English Translation: Cristina Smith

Scandals III: Walk With Me is the title of the installation of the Italian debut of Josephine Turalba hosted by the European Cultural center in the charming location of Palazzo Mora.

Turalba, born in Manila in 1965, where she lives and works, offers within this group exhibit "*Personal Structures – Crossing Borders*"; a production made of two elements previously presented in 2013 at the Lopez Museum in Manila, and the following year at Roving Eye in Istanbul: there are some typical oriental sandals made of bullets and rifle cartridges for the audience to handle; in a backlit screen there's a running sequence of slides from the 30s portraying Filipino natives, altered by the artist inserting images of those same sandals handled by the audience.

In the context of the Art Biennale of Venice the installation, as a result of Turalba's reflection on themes like Existence, Time and Space, *Scandals* is not set in a large hall this time, but in a narrow corridor with a parquet flooring; the slippers, or "Alfombra", in many Asian cultures are the most used footwear inside one's home. The ancient practice, still in place, of leaving shoes outside one's own home, translates into a symbolic as well as psychological intention of separation between private and public space, between social and family boundaries.

The narrow space of the installation forces the audience to climb a couple of steps and choose to wear the hand crafted slippers or not and *leave* their shoes. The first level of this interpretation invites one to perceive this intent as an invitation to relax being in a more comfortable physical state that allows the audience to feel at home. However, upon closer inspection, one experiences the unpleasantness upon one's own feet and reflects on the meaning the artist wants to .

The 2'47' video that we see in the same corridor, with a sequence of glass negatives found by the artist at the Lopez Museum¹ that portray inhabitants of the Philippines in the 1930s, directs us to a second level of interpretation: documentation of an anthropological colonial view. Josephine Turalba, using photographic manipulation of the images and the addition of colored sandals in the black and white images, emphasizes the one common condition between the native being shown and the audience of this exhibit; and were it not for the colored detail, the object of the "scandal" (the sandals) may not be considered anachronistic. The narrow corridor is translated, metaphorically therefore, in a transition passage towards greater awareness on the theme of colonialism, both in the traditional and contemporary sense of the word; and the footwear being worn become a clear exhortation to place oneself in their shoes, or rather, *Walk with...* the inhabitants of the Philippines of the 1930s, moving from the concept of "no shoes policy" to a view of "no shoot policy". This story is not unique to them, as we continue to have current global territorial issues interwoven in the race for control of wealth and power.

The use of bullets as primary material for her artistic research and production is the original signature of the artist Josephine Turalba. The body of her work straddles between performance, video and installation, and extends to assemblage², sculptures³, and paintings⁴. At twelve years old Turalba ventured into art, joining group as well as holding solo exhibits since the Nineties. After obtaining her degree of Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from UP Diliman in 1988, the artist earned her M.F.A. in New Media in 2009 from Transart Institute validated by Donau-Universitat Krems in Austria.

¹ Anthropological images courtesy of Lopez Museum & Library and Ambassador Jose O. Teodoro.

² No Man's Land of 2011 and Russian Roulette of 2013 among others.

³ For example Shell Shock +K9 of 2013.

⁴ The Ricochet series of 2013.



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The artistic turning point happens a few months after the homicide of her father who died of four shotgun wounds from a 45, the artist finds the strength to channel the suffering and the obsession from the trauma and use it as fuel for her artwork. After reading a writing on the artist Niki de Saint Phalle that attributes to his habit of shooting his sculptures of masculine appearance a therapeutic function, Turalba in March 2007, goes to the shooting range: this cathartic “shock therapy” will forever transform the object of pain (the bullet) into the central object of a wider reflection on violence that is intrinsic to existence. Considering the diverse and cyclical usage of artistic techniques and materials in the last eight years, we can proceed to study the works of the artist based on the prevalent themes. Beyond violence that may be considered the *fil rouge* of her entire production, in various work like the performance *Female Male and Double Bind* as well as the sculpture *General Mariana* the theme of gender is analyzed.⁵

Taking inspiration from the fact that in Manila the population is often found in conditions that create separate groups between men and women (in malls, in train stations), Turalba, in a place of the city with a high flow of people, creates *Female Male* (2007), a position of auto-sorting wherein citizens must decide to follow the sign to the right “Kontento” (satisfied) or the one to the left “Hindi Kontento” (not satisfied) both for both sexes. At the center we find the artist herself, with a police hat and a stick⁶ to incarnate authority that oversees this unexpected classification, noting above all, the unqualified habit of the population to be inspected for security.

In the video performance *Double Bind* (2010), she explores the feminine rite of passage as a Mangyan custom, a pre-colonial tribe where the women traditionally wear a skirt called *lingeb*, made of long strips of cloth wrapped around the abdomen. The upper cover, *ulango*, is made of palm leaf. The artist tries this clothing on herself, feeling on her own body the constriction that the strips inflict on the abdomen, as the bond suffered between woman and her society, of which she is both a daughter and a hostage. Another category of Filipino women, the wives of the generals are placed in the spotlight with *General Mariana* (2007), following the scandal that happened in the recent years within the high ranks of the generals. Maria is the most common name in the Philippines, being a country that was colonized for three hundred years by Spain, and therefore, became Catholic: the sculpture of the immaculate Virgin Mary is wearing a general’s suite, dressed with more than five hundred pieces of metal coming from bullets of various caliber, rifle cartridges, brass, copper and gold.

Josephine Turalba has perfected working on bullets by hand, unique in its kind, creating from 2008, real outfits with more than four thousand pieces that she wears during performances. The object that caused trauma in her life now becomes a component in great demand, sought for, observed, studied and re-processed, with its heavy and hard nature that make up the gowns (about 20 kg) that the artist wears as if they were her “cross”, her past.

In *Mighty Ballistic* of 2008⁷, Turalba walks in the streets of Manila interacting with its people. The artist holds the curative effect of revisiting places and narrating stories

⁵ With regards to the theme of gender and, above all reflections on mourning and violence the artist finds inspiration in the writing of the American post-structuralist Judith Butler (1956, Cleveland), particularly *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* of 2004.

⁶ In the Philippines there are security guards who use wooden sticks (similar to a conductor’s baton), as an instrument to aid checking the bags of those who enter malls, cinemas, trains and other public places.

⁷ Public showings:

Yuchengco Museum, Manila, Philippines 2011;

Künstlerdorf Schöppingen, Germany 2011;

M1 Singapore Fringe Festival 2012;

Nuit Blanche, Paris, France 2013;



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countless times; therefore she goes forth with the slowness of a ritual wearing this gown made of bullets waiting for questions from the people, for curiosity and criticism, ready for everything. Reactions are manifold: some people ask if this is to promote war, some think that it denounces it, some simply ask if the bullets are sold by the kilo, some ask to try the outfit, others leave alms. In this case, an object of destruction and death is transformed into an object of protection from the world.

Borrowing from Walter Benjamin's analysis on *flâneur* of Baudelaire's poetry⁸, we can define the artist an urban explorer, who examines places through long walks in areas that betray individual memory and collective mythology⁹. The video *Diwata* (2009) was shot in the capital of the Philippines, shown in the following years together with the dress that was used¹⁰, that explores the concept of *Genius loci*: Diwata in Philippine mythology is the goddess keeper of the place. The contraposition between this protective-redeeming function and the material used in making the dress of the goddess denounces the current condition of the country of exploitation of the territory and the struggle for riches and power. The Genius loci still exists but her clothes are made of the same material used to subjugate the place that the goddess would like to protect. This situation is not just typical of the Philippines, but it is highlighted in Manila as well as in Berlin, even in Manhattan¹¹, meaningful cities due to the particularly violent memories wherein Josephine Turalba creates a version of the performance¹² and finding bullets was a lot simpler.

The reflection on the audience's universal memory in certain areas, running parallel notions with the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs¹³, produces two more video installations: in the performance *In Wonderland* in 2011¹⁴ Turalba becomes a modern Alice in wonderland (as well as southern countries of the "third world") and evokes a wonder that no longer exists; *Out of the Echoes* (2013) is set in one of the main cities of the Great Silk Road, Samarqand, pervaded with echoes of nostalgia for a city forgotten in the name of progress.

The impact of the soul of a place on the artist's sensibility is made clear in the creation of her work *Winged Scarab*, a dress made right after her visit in Egypt in 2010¹⁵, with the appearance of the ancient symbol of the scarab God. Khepri is he who pushes Ra

⁸ Flâneur, a term made famous by Charles Baudelaire, indicates a gentleman who roams around the street of the city, feeling emotions in observing the landscape. The concept of flâneur is likewise significantly present in the work of Walter Benjamin that defines a person who leaves space to non-rushed exploration and of plan-free. Benjamin adopted this concept of urban observer both as an analytical instrument and lifestyle, describing flâneur as a product of modern life and the industrial revolution.

⁹ Clearly in the case of Josephine Turalba, the image of the urban explorer undergoes a further enrichment of precise social and political intents.

¹⁰ Public showings:

12th Biennial of Cairo, in Egypt 2010;
Yuchengco Museum, Manila, Philippines 2011;
South Hill Park, Bracknell, UK 2011;
Künstlerdorf Schöppingen, Germany 2011;
KIT Kunst-im-Tunnel, Düsseldorf, Germany, 2011;
Substation Theatre, Singapore 2011;
Pier-2 Art Center, Kaohsiung, Taiwan 2012;
M1 Singapore Fringe festival 2012.

¹¹ New York City, the heart of America, Ground Zero.

Ground Zero is an English term with which, since bombing Japan in 1945, the place earth or sea location perpendicular to the epicenter of a nuclear explosion is designated; later on the term Ground Zero was used, improperly, to identify the focal point where a massive deflagration happens, such as the epicenter of an earthquake or other disasters. The term, after 11 September 2001, became by definition the southern area of Manhattan (New York City, USA) on which, before the terrorist attack, the twin towers, part of the World Trade Center complex, stood.

¹² Diwata uber Berlin in 2009, Manhattan Reloaded in 2011.

¹³ Born in Antwerp, Belgium) in 1959, lives and works in Mexico City.

¹⁴ Shown at Künstlerdorf Schöppingen in Germany in 2012.

¹⁵ In December 2010 Turalba shows Diwata at the 12th Cairo Biennale.

The influence of the ancient culture and art of Egypt can be traced in the acrylic on canvas *Hold a Thousand Souls* of 2013, where the protective image of feminine souls clearly takes after the iconography of the goddess Nut.



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out of the duat (afterlife) renewing the birth of Nut (goddess of the skies), therefore divinity represents also the transformation that one undergoes in death and the subsequent rebirth. The extreme example of this transformation is the birth of scarabs from eggs laid inside a ball of excrements (symbol of death). In the personal concept of the artist what is gone exercises greater appeal on us more frequently. It is like the cycle of life (and production) of the artist were deeply driven by the cycle of death.

Josephine Turalba is particularly interested in the urban side *tout court* of places, **SMS Double Barrel** in 2013, created for the curatorial project of Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez for the First Conference on Performance Studies in the Philippines entitled "Pagtitipon/ Gathering", is a one-day performance, later turned in a video installation, that takes as the starting point a dream of the artist wherein the Henry Sy Building (at DLSU) is turned into a great warship together with other ships in the urban landscape of Manila, subject to floods and typhoons. On this "ship" Turalba places, therefore, a double barrel binocular created with bullets, hanging from which there is a manual with letters from the semaphore alphabet. The day of the performance Josephine Turalba climbs on top of this thirty-storey building and makes use of signs using the flag to shoot a video from the building across. This video, from the following day until the end of the exhibit, is uploaded in a cellular placed on the binoculars, repeatedly showing the performance and making it accessible to the audience in the succeeding days. In the semaphore signaling system, used in the shipping sector since the IXX century the international peace sign ☸ (that represent the letters "N" and "D" in a circle) indicated the two words "Nuclear Disarmament". In a frenetic society, highly technological, the semaphore alphabet places itself as an analog form on communication that makes the digital and virtual (reality) debatable, something we now can't do away with (even within the performance which makes use of a cellular phone, in fact) but that, in the end, estranges the audience from the time and space of real events, notwithstanding the speed of information: the audience, watching the video, does not witness the actual performance but a reproduction of it. The observation on how architecture reflects the memory of a people and the intention to upset the perception of the traditional function of public space and shake the silent monumentality of buildings, may be compared to the work of the Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko¹⁶, author of politically committed projections on the facades of buildings.

Josephine Turalba may be defined as a "socially committed *flâneuse*¹⁷", a performer that makes the world the backdrop of her autobiography, just like a philosophical operation. Her projects spring from her life involving people in an arbitrary manner, with freedom in the audience's reactions and requests. The artist contextually becomes author and actor of her work, with a sort of conceptual *voyeurism* that betrays a strong inner pain and constant criticism against incessant violence in the world.

¹⁶ Born in 1943 in Warsaw (Poland), where he works and lives.

¹⁷ Feminine version of the noun *flâneur* (see note 8).

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She moved to Rome in 2010 where she achieved a specialized degree at the University "La Sapienza" in History of Contemporary Art.