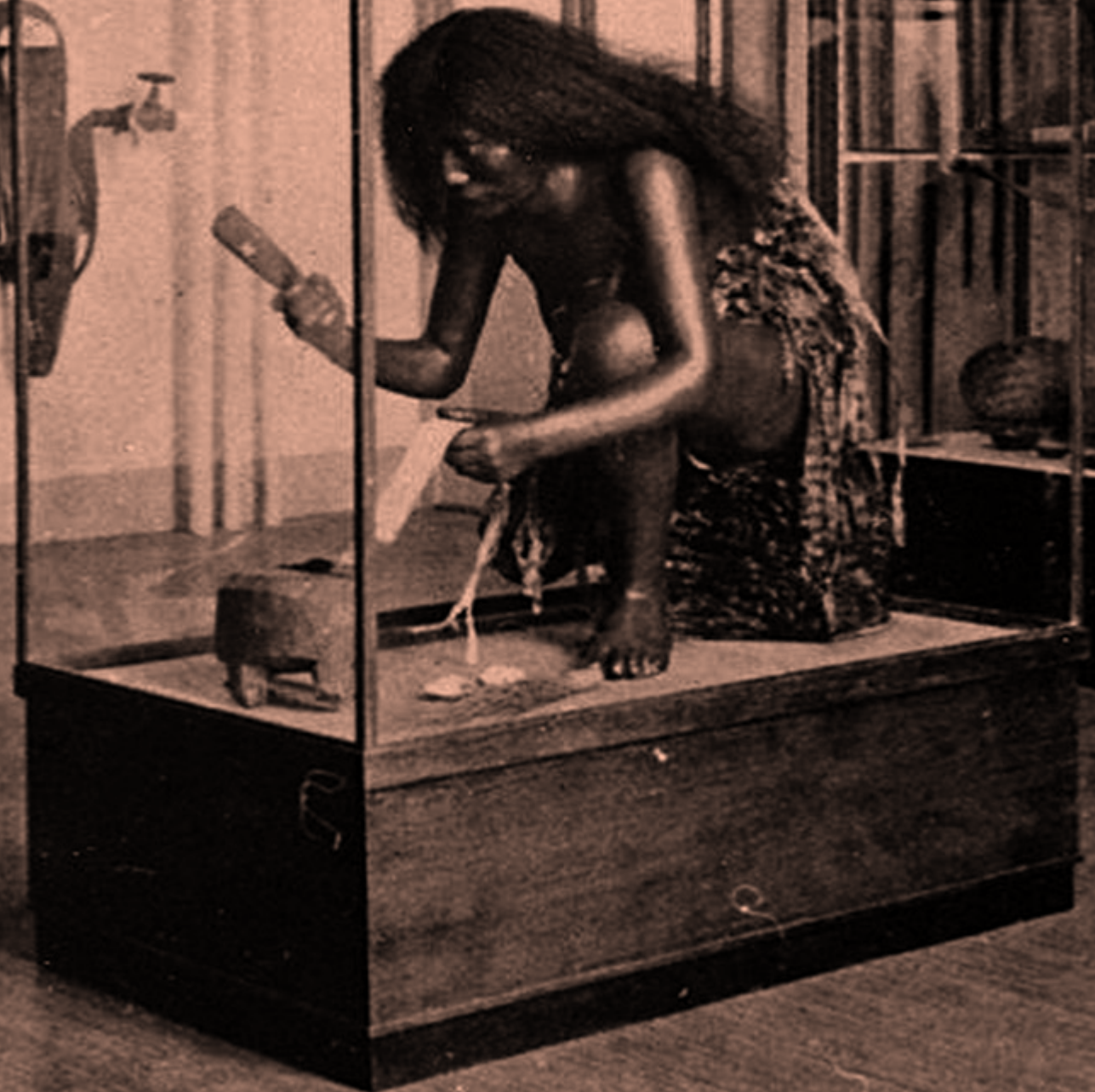


DECOLONISING MUSEUMS



A PUBLICATION OF L'INTERNATIONALE BOOKS

DECOLONISING MUSEUMS

COVER CREDIT

Historical exhibition display in the Museum für Völkerkunde
(today Weltkulturen Museum), Oceania section. Weltkulturen Image
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INTRODUCTION

Decolonising Museums is the second thematic publication of *L'Internationale Online*; it addresses colonial legacies and mindsets, which are still so rooted and present today in the museum institutions in Europe and beyond. The publication draws from the conference *Decolonising the Museum* which took place at MACBA in Barcelona, 27-29 November 2014¹, and offers new essays, responding to texts published on the online platform earlier this year. In different geopolitical regions, there have been various degrees of work to reconsider the colonial past ever since the 1960s, the painstaking process of decolonisation and the institutionalisation of multiculturalism. Scrutinising the complex European context, one can talk about belated processes taking place in France,

Belgium and Holland, the generational divides in the discussion around 'identity politics' and the obvious dichotomies between the South and the North. Especially in times when dealing with waves of refugees struggling for their lives

has become one of the most urgent civic and individual responsibilities in Europe. Calling upon cultural memory and half-gone history seems to be of utmost importance to oppose the often politically-guided amnesia and ignorance.

When proposing the 'decolonisation' of the museum the first thing to clarify is what the 'de' in this term actually means. As formulated in our own research brief, 'decolonising' means both resisting the reproduction of colonial taxonomies, while simultaneously vindicating radical multiplicity. These are two forces drawing in different directions: understanding the situation museums are in, critically and openly, and identifying those moments that already indicate a different type of practice that overcomes or resists the colonial conditioning. The term 'decolonisation' itself can appear somewhat forced to describe these two movements as it suggests the return to a pristine state 'before' colonialism, yet to name this double movement seems more adequate than the common 'postcolonial'. The current moment is not 'post', when it comes to museum practice and

1. Among the contributors to this thematic issue, Clémentine Deliss, Daniela Ortiz and Francisco Godoy Vega participated at the seminar *Decolonising the Museum* at MACBA.



the power imbalance that was once installed through colonisation, it is still very much part of how European societies are organised. Offering a remedy to this situation however also will never mean a return, but always the beginning of a new chapter. What the ‘de’ then signifies is that it is only by addressing the past and how it still lingers on today, that it is possible to move onwards.

The two opening essays by Nav Haq and Clémentine Deliss, each in their own way, engage with such a confrontation. [Nav Haq](#) thinks through the pitfalls of the traditional forms of institutional critique and identity politics to arrive at a new proposal to address power imbalance. Instead of putting all the emphasis on inclusion, one should first consider in what space one is included. The big danger of previous attempts to rectify the damage has been to include marginalised identities in representational spaces which are still prevalently white, male and heterosexual. Exploring the practice of Haegue Yang and other artists, he offers a new approach that takes these foundations on. [Deliss](#), who unfortunately was unable to continue her work in the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, takes on the museum directly and proposes a methodology she describes as ‘remediation’, producing a shift and a remedy. Drawing from Carl Einstein’s radical writing,

she proposes how a museum can resist the attempt to produce the spectacle of the Oriental and use the collection in self-reflexive ways as a contemporary resource to produce meaning. Throughout the issue, Deliss’ argument is unpacked through a series of case studies: works in the collections of the museums who are members of L’Internationale confederation are selected and presented by the staff of the collection departments.

[Mirjam Kooiman](#) discusses recent cases of institutions who are ignoring to deal with the colonial heritage in a critical manner in the Netherlands. [Nana Adusei-Poku](#) points to the ‘strategic temporal disjuncture’ in the attempts to counter colonialism, referring to the disconnection between the research done to raise awareness and understanding of the colonial condition on the one hand, and the general make-up of research and education on the other. Using Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s idea of the ‘undercommons’, she suggests that instead of correcting the existing system, it is better to consider starting completely somewhere else, building a parallel system that can interact with the mainstream in a different way. Ana Bigotte Vieira ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) brings a Portuguese perspective, offering an essay originally written for [the conference *When Where the 80s?*](#). She unpacks how discussions



around colonisation and emancipation take place in a country which was under Salazar's dictatorship until 1974, demonstrating that the common black and white division that marks anything done under dictatorial rule as evil and everything afterwards as good, needs to be reconsidered for a more comprehensive assessment of past and present events.

Daniela Ortiz critically reflects on the role of museums in the civic debate around the migration laws issued by the Spanish government. Analysing the manner in which her own work was presented, Ortiz points to the many indirect ways in which museums take position in this charged debate. Francisco Godoy Vega was associated with *L'Internationale Online* as contributor to the Opinions section. His articles offer a series of shorter and timely reflections on questions of coloniality and contemporary culture. Madina Tlostanova presents another geographic perspective, on the former Soviet countries, focusing on the manner in which heritage has been treated in that region and how the artist Taus Makhacheva “problematizes the museum as an imperial institution of aesthetic and epistemic control” in her work *The Way of an Object* (2013). Rasha Salti's essay describes the curatorial strategies behind her recent research in collaboration with Kristine Khouri, that resulted in the exhibition *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts*

from The International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) in Barcelona (20 February—1 June 2015). Colin Siyuan Chinnery presents an overview of the development of museums in China and an insight into the rapid expansion of the cultural institutions since the 2000s. Finally Vivian Zihlerl's contributions close this publication with a series of interviews that took place within the framework of the *Frontier Imaginaries* with Mitch Torres, Gary Foley, Elizabeth A. Povinelli and Rachel O'Reilly.



THE INVISIBLE
AND THE VISIBLE
IDENTITY POLITICS
AND THE ECONOMY
OF REPRODUCTION
IN ART

NAV HAQ

“The art world stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City.”

Arthur Danto 1964, p. 582

“While there is a deeply ethical appeal in the desire for a more inclusive representational landscape and certainly under-represented communities can be empowered by an enhanced visibility, the terms of this visibility can often enervate the putative power of these identities.”

Peggy Phelan 1996, p. 7

Some questions seem to always remain urgent. I would like to consider one of them: *Just where are we exactly when we consider the dynamics of power in the field of contemporary art?* Following the well-documented artistic strategies of ‘institutional critique’ of the 1960s and 1970s onwards, we had come to know more about art’s power relations through the waves of socially- and politically-engaged movements and tendencies in art that were categorised under the broad frame of ‘identity politics’. With hindsight, this is most often typical of the 1980s generation in the West—perhaps in the United States and the United Kingdom predominantly. Working with defined constituencies of Otherness based on perceived ‘minority’ or ‘marginalised’ status—mostly via notions of race, gender and sexuality—the thrust of these movements was to seek the light of cultural emancipation. It is fair to say that the art system, or what is often referred to as ‘the art world’, has over the recent decades worked through various necessary phases of attaining self-reflexivity: postmodernism has allowed it to take apart its own partialities



of taste and collapsed its understanding of aesthetics; it has become aware of how it has mediated the cultural narrative in close alignment with broader socio-political hegemonies; and it has eventually authorised 'other' perspectives to enter into the fold in the name of inclusivity. Broadly speaking, it has claimed the understanding that it possesses a locus of power at its core, and that it is taking steps to address it. But at the heart of it all, the question is—how much has really changed? Has artistic practice fulfilled the potential provided by the space that opened up especially for this emancipation through all the theorising? To what degree have the traditional terms of engagement between art's infrastructure and those wishing to be artistic practitioners been addressed, and where might we go from here?

It is perhaps worth undertaking the exercise of revisiting the trajectory of identity politics thus far, albeit with the effect of tightly condensing its discourse. Much of the key practice and debate around the subject of cultural marginalisation attributed to the 1980s occurred as part of a broad drive by groups marginalised from the art sphere demanding to be included, but also to be able to insist on their own identity. For artists, there was a deep desire to be made visible—identifiable—exactly for *who* they were. Subsequently, it could be said that they were

offered the conditions to position the defining factor of their marginalisation—i.e. their race, gender, sexuality—as being something intrinsic to their art. We might think for example of artists ranging from Keith Piper to Ana Mendieta in this regard. For Other perspectives and personas to be given the kind of opportunity they were previously deprived of was an understandable and legitimate desire in the name of inclusivity and pluralism. But what level of progress was this? What was lacking? Theorist Russell Ferguson, in his introduction to *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (1990), a key book on this subject, discusses the particular conditions of this desire for visibility¹. He observes that the “unquestionable, invisible, universal”, that is the bourgeois, heterosexual, white male, has ultimately been the legitimising force for both the discourse of art and those able to practise within it. Ferguson suggests that this power to legitimise extends towards those considered marginalised in society, with the mode of acceptance happening through a process of recasting them via predetermined criteria of identification. All the while, the

1. “Real changes are impossible without a questioning of the master(piece) discourse which forms its foundation. As Toni Morrison points out, resistance could begin with a questioning of the unspoken assumption of white, male, heterosexual identity which underlies the concept of the ‘universal’ ” (Ferguson, 1990, p. 10).





Haegue Yang, *5, Rue Saint-Benoît*, 2008. 8 sculptures made of household appliances. Aluminum Venetian blinds, steel frame, powder coating, perforated metal plates, casters, light bulbs, cable, cord, dance floor objects, metal eyelets, paint grid, metal chain, knitting yarn, paper. Dohmen Collection, Aachen. Installation view of *The New Décor*, Hayward Gallery, London, Great Britain, 2010. Photo: Steve White.

invisibility of the dominant group has meant someone's perceived difference (as manifested in their art) could only be meaningful in terms of a system of oppression. What in effect was formed was a subservient relation between the invisible and the visible. It is something we have known for a long time as the discourse of identity politics is well established.

The move to address under-representation in art became like an act of holding up a distorted mirror towards society in order to form an institutionalised sort of multiculturalism. Furthermore, through the limited modes of representation for this kind of 'identity art', there ensued an identity reductionism, a severe flattening out of the ways in which identities could be visualised and thus understood.

We have to go back literally half a century to the foundations of the so-called Institutional Theory of Art, first raised by American writer and philosopher Arthur Danto, to the moment when the way the art system sustains itself was first verbalised: "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world." (Danto 1964, p. 580). Danto, and others considering this theory such as George Dickie, fleshed out what he at that time might have meant by an 'atmosphere', determining that this ultimately correlated with the conditions

that created the aforementioned "unquestionable, invisible, universal" figure at the art system's centre. Discussing how an anonymous participant navigates the art field, Danto states in his essay "The Artworld": "We cannot help him until he has mastered the *is of artistic identification* and so *constitutes* it a work of art" (Danto 1964, p. 579). This introduces the notion of 'identification'—an understanding of the codes that constitute the 'atmosphere' surrounding an artwork that can deem it identifiable as art, and only then can someone fulfil the aspiration of being part of the art world. "The greater the variety of artistically relevant predicates, the more complex the individual members of the art world become; and the more one knows of the entire population of the art world, the richer one's experience with any of its members" (Danto 1964, p. 583-4). It seems an obvious point in hindsight to state that it is the art world that defines what art is, and many would argue that Danto's idea remains profoundly relevant today. Yet it is difficult to describe this 'atmosphere' concretely, as its effectiveness lies in its sheer intangibility. The implication of Danto's text is that there exists some sort of codification—behavioural codes of such great value that they even act as a legitimate form of cultural capital. Furthermore, some sort of art community 'meme' is nurtured in this state of intangibility. It drives the



memetic behaviour that spreads between people within a group—the art world—in order to perpetuate its streaming of value. But perhaps the identity politics generation lacked sufficient awareness of this meme to instigate the real change required?

The discourse of ‘identity politics’ in art for a long time has looked highly redundant, and for very good reasons too. With some exceptions, it was something that had rather stifled aesthetic limitations, with its clichéd images of the self or the body holding forth a marginalised status—a kind of figurative portraiture of one’s “otherness” if you like. ‘Identity politics’ art, arguably, may even have caused more problems

2. “Currently, however, there is a dismaying similarity in the beliefs generated about the political efficacy of political representation. The dangerous complicity between progressives dedicated to visibility politics and conservatives patrolling the borders of museums, movie houses and mainstream broadcasting is based on their mutual belief that representations can be treated as ‘real truths’ and guarded

than it set out to resolve. The act of making visible, though considered necessary for a certain period, could now be thought of as a second tier of marginalisation. It could be seen as a ghettoisation harboured within the fold of art world legitimisation. As Peggy Phelan so eloquently elucidated in her landmark book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* in the 1990s, visibility under these conditions can be considered an institutional trap². These kinds

of generic denominators for the self-representation of the marginalised create a kind of ethical dilemma for artists, with their promises of being able to enter the base stratum of the art system, but on the condition of having to perform the prescribed role of the Other. The ‘identity’ paradigm also became a kind of strategy for some individuals to find success in their careers—using the kind of ‘self-othering’ found in the work of many well-known but unmentionable artists. Even whole institutions have been built around supporting this kind of practice—one thinks of organisations such as Iniva in London. Thus there is a certain amount of baggage that comes with ‘identity politics’, and not all of it is helpful. At least there is one realisation that may be useful—the context of internationalism in art today mirrors that of 1970s and 80s institutional multiculturalism in the Anglo-Saxon world.

In the time since the emergence of the ‘identity politics’ discourse, the art world has entered rapid processes of internationalisation, and today numerous new metropolises of culture, including from right across the non-Western

or championed accordingly. Both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power. The progressives want to share this power with ‘others’; conservatives want to reserve this power for themselves. Insufficient understanding of the relationship between visibility, power, identity and liberation has led both groups to mistake the relation between the real and the representational” (Phelan 1996, p. 2).



world, have joined the hegemonic centres. Yet it feels evident that the old modes of legitimisation identified as prevalent in the Institutional Theory of Art, along with its institutionalised multiculturalism, have found their way into the realm of art's internationalism. The Western art world has legitimised new, previously marginalised entrants in a similar way to how it eventually legitimised those who were socially marginalised in its own societies the 1970s and 80s. Again, those previously marginalised, in this instance by geography, have been allowed in by the art world, on the condition that predetermined roles are fulfilled. Whether artists are aware enough of this mirroring, or even care, is unclear, but the broad apparatus is largely the same. Previously, the constituencies of identity were mostly vis-à-vis race, gender and sexuality, which could now be replaced with the regionalism—nationality, race and ethnicity rolled into one—of those practicing in the non-Western context. This is often, for example, through participation in the national or regional representation format for exhibitions—for example art from India, art from Mexico—which ultimately positions artists as regional representatives, and thus their art as being intrinsically linked to their national culture. This positioning would explain the success of artists such as Shirin Neshat or Subodh Gupta. Modes of visibility

and identification are at the fore. Once we accept that what we see as contemporary art (in the memetic sense) around the world is ultimately a kind of colonial export, we can take the simple step towards understanding that the visibility and success of any artist or even metropole in the context of the art world only happens through the consensus and mould of the Western art establishment. It ultimately follows the same institutional logic described by Danto as well as Ferguson. The gateway is opened, a meme is planted, and then an image of art is requested – all in the guise of inclusivity. Alongside national representation type exhibitions, other exhibition formats such as biennials, which could be seen as the contemporary versions of the colonial-era Universal or World Exhibition, are the spaces of concentration for this legitimisation.

This new geographic paradigm for art has also been provided with its own curious lexicon that implicitly demarcates Otherness. Stepping outside the art sphere for just a moment, we can observe how certain words reappear in particular public contexts time and again. In South London, for example, it is not entirely uncommon to come across a word such as 'vibrant' in newspapers, local authority literature or elsewhere, when describing a district such as Brixton. What it *really* means of course, is that a lot of Caribbean folk





Haegue Yang, *Yearning Melancholy Red*, 2008. Aluminum Venetian blinds, aluminum hanging structure, powder coating, steel wire, mirror, moving spotlights, infrared heater, fan, drum kit, trigger, MIDI converter, cable. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin. Installation view of *Asymmetric Equality*, REDCAT, Los Angeles, USA, 2008. Photos: Scott Groller.

live there—it might be a bit ‘edgy’ for some, but the locals are surely content, making plenty of noise, selling brightly coloured fabrics and exotic fruits. Similarly, art institutions have their own special lexicon for when they work with artists (and occasionally audiences) who may sit awkwardly within their traditional institutional frameworks of practice and reference. The word ‘local’, for example, is another somewhat discourteous term invoked when an institution wants to communicate to the world that they do, on occasion, work with locally-sourced, lesser-established artists. ‘Voices’ is another common one, with regard to ‘third-world’ artists in this instance, evoking frail, human, emotional stories from the battle-scarred, crisis-ridden outback. The word ‘celebration’ appears regularly too. Normally found in either the snappy opening, or last pensive paragraph of press releases and exhibition wall texts, it is a word often used in connection with foreign, predominantly non-Western artists exhibiting in solo shows or the ever-ubiquitous ‘national representation’ type exhibition. The type of celebration here is sprung on groups of artists hailing from the same region or country, who succumb to exhibiting together in this tenacious, and frankly, anachronistic format for exhibitions. The general tone is radically different from the norm, creating occasions when the pecking order between institutions and exhibiting artists becomes

excruciatingly transparent. The message translates, crudely, as: “*congratulations for making it this far!*”. To the public, artists are often portrayed as if they are ‘happy-clappy’ ethnics—expressive beings, always grateful, always ready and waiting for celebration to take place in the (one would think) momentarily self-conscious bourgeois museum. In this arena, visibility and faux-celebration go hand in hand, and evidently, this ‘celebration’ is unhelpful as it dissipates any attempt at criticality and intellectual relations. Yet following its rapid expansion, the art world has become a more complex place than it ever has been. This new ‘complexity’, we should hope, has its positive traits, and it is this notion—the aesthetics of complexity—that we will return to shortly.

The discourse about representation of the ‘othered’ self is distilled in the case study of artist Renzo Martens’s much-discussed video *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008). The work holds up a mirror, reflecting the art world’s blunt attitude towards marginalisation, its associated politics of visibility and economies of reproduction. It focuses on the lucrative business of poverty journalism that caters for a Western media that consumes images of people that have once been exploited through heavily unbalanced socio-economic conditions, and who can therefore be exploited again through these pictures. In the film,



Martens attempts to train people from an under-privileged community in Congo to benefit themselves by taking images of their own status as impoverished (yet now complicit) people. They portray themselves as what Giorgio Agamben would refer to as ‘bare life’—mere biological subjects with little in the way of choices or rights. The project fails of course—they simply do not have access to the same channels of distribution to cater for the demand. In their attempt at visibility through representations as marginalised selves, portrayed as a kind of universal basic human subject, the tiers of legitimisation for their work to be able to succeed remain inconspicuous.



Renzo Martens, *Episode 3*, 2008 (video still). Courtesy Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; KOW, Berlin; and the Box, Los Angeles.

The key platform of visibility for marginalised artists has been, as mentioned earlier, the exhibition. Irit Rogoff helps us move forwards here with her insightful and untypically anecdotal short text “How to Dress for an Exhibition”. This is her personal account of the opening of the exhibition *Black Male* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, in 1994—an exhibition renowned for considering representations of African-American men. She describes the experience of viewing the exhibition, and, afterwards finding the attendees to the opening profoundly more fascinating than the works of art on display. It was a rare occasion for a predominantly Black-American artistic crowd to convene within the bourgeois institution that is the Whitney. The guests had individually used the opportunity to present themselves for the occasion, dressing, conversing and participating in a way that brought to the fore a much more complex self-image. In her text, Rogoff initially asks: “In the shift that took place from art histories to discourses on representation within cultural criticism informed by post-structuralism and questions of difference during the 1980s, a certain move was made from looking at cultural artefacts as reflective to perceiving of them as constitutive. This was of course part of a much larger question to do with the establishment of meaning. How and where are meanings determined?”

By whom? For which readers or viewers? And through what structures of identification or disidentification?” (Rogoff 1998, p. 132). She then considers the notion of participation in relation to marginalisation and the possibilities not only for an awareness of the trap of institutionalised visibility, but also to open up the idea of addressing representation through more performative ideas of participation, including “... participation that is generated by unconscious strategies of self-staging, be it through dressing, of fantasising, or fictionalising” (Rogoff 1998, p. 139). The key point here is that ‘representation’ is differentiated from the ‘reproduction’ of the image. To echo Phelan, who in relation to the performance of identities suggested “[p]erformance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity [...], becomes itself through disappearance”, the desire in the here-and-now of the art system should be for modes of representation that do not succumb to being forced through the mechanical die of institutionalised visibility (Phelan 1996, p. 146).

It is evident that many artists today produce art in a way that is quite conscious of and complicit with how the art system accommodates the politics of identity, which though successful, also highlight some of the tensions. We might think of the work of the collective Slavs and Tatars, who display a marketing of Eurasian regionalism for a Western audience

through the use of ethno-centric motifs, socio-cultural affectation and ironic wordplay. Or the flirtations with post-colonialist self-othering in the work of Danh Võ that play heavily off the artist’s personal and family biographies as displaced migrants to Denmark from Vietnam. (It also informs us that some parts of Europe are only now having their first multiculturalist moment in the art context.) The global acclaim of artists such as these has been rapid, combining classic ‘self-othering’, a *savoir-faire* of the art world, and much charisma. It is a visibility in awareness of the art meme. Yet who can be blamed for pursuing a route to success?

Artists are reconsidering the politics of identity once more. Identity returns as an important subject precisely as a way to make sense of our lives under the very conditions of complexity. It argues for the reasonable—for plurality, for visions beyond the memetic criticality and legitimisation of the art world, and for the possibility of new aesthetic directions. Some are operating in the old paradigm of 1980s legitimation, but some are raising prospects of a wholesale shift in the consideration of identity and subjectivity in the artistic realm, working in a way that is more complex than the art system has been able, or willing, to accommodate. Simple observation can tell us that figurative representations of the self and its false universality



have been rejected, and they have been replaced by the potential offered through abstraction, performativity (as discussed by Phelan and Rogoff) and fiction, amongst many other approaches. And in doing so, they occupy valid positions to deal with identity without the essentialist necessity of identification.

Identity becomes something intricate and flowing in the expansive practices of an artist such as Haegue Yang. The compound nature of her works fuses numerous notions of identity together, forming layers and dimensions that co-exist. It appears on one level through the works acting as a form of portraiture, often of activists who laboured for inclusivity, referencing feminist histories via Petra Kelly or Marguerite Duras, through to figures such as that of the spiritualist thinker and teacher G. I. Gurdjieff. Mainly through the symbolic use of read-made objects, her works also synthesise other notions—of social class, mobility and co-habitation. She is renowned for her use of Venetian blinds in installations for example: how do we relate to them and others in space as we move around, with their function of obscuring our vision? This symbolises what the artist has referred to as “communities of absence”—communities hidden from ‘mainstream’ culture, yet are also very present, active and indefinable. The installations are situations for various contrasting

elements—large and small objects, industrial metal with natural fabric—which all have to co-exist. The elements sometimes take on anthropomorphic characteristics, and through their spatial relations, foreground ideas of cultural relativism. All of this functions on a formal level of abstraction in Yang’s work. The role of the viewer is also operative in works by Iman Issa, whose installations possess the key characteristic of a sort of democratic offer. Whether it is her *Material* (2009-12) series, or her installation *Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places* (2011), she provides sets of abstract propositions and fragments that avoid the pitfalls of identification, instilling a deliberate anonymity on the representation of specific places, people, events and emotions, sometimes simultaneously, with which you can associate and narrativise. These artists work with an implicit sense of self, as well as a critical distance from the politics of visibility. They are just two influential examples amongst numerous others that exemplify where things are also going.

It is difficult and probably even unnecessary to describe this as an actual movement to deal in progressive terms with identity politics per se, but still, it is a transition that is in its own way redefining the parameters of art right before us. Maybe it could be described as being generational, which might equally





Iman Issa, *Material*, 2010-2012, series of ten displays. Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo, Istanbul.

Iman Issa, *Material for a sculpture recalling the destruction of a prominent public monument in the name of national resistance*, 2010, from the series MATERIAL, 2009-2012. Mahogany sculpture with black tassel, white wooden pedestal, 64 points vinyl writing, 142 × 49 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo, Istanbul.



here be defined in terms of practice rather than biography. The relation of these artists to their works is not one of the figurative economy of reproduction, but something more urgent and experimental, mirroring more relational or intersectional understandings of identities formed through the interactions between biological, social and cultural spheres. The artists working with this mindset adopt a more relativistic attitude, foregrounding the self-determination of their practice, and defy traditional socially-coerced beliefs that they possess a stable, identifiable core. Rather than being stuck between the old dichotomy of the *invisibility* of the legitimising bourgeois art world and the strategy for attaining *visibility* for the traditionally marginalised subject, they have created the conditions that allow them the freedom to float between both, producing a new kind of cognitive space. There is, as always, the risk that it may only be moments before what could potentially cause broad change becomes evident and is recuperated by the neutralising-reflex of the art system, perhaps this is inevitable even, but then again it is hard to catch something without a fixed identity, especially when it is steps ahead of you.

To begin to equip ourselves with a sense of progress, we must acknowledge a level of inadequacy for self-representation within the traditional context of

art. And so, Phelan's proposal—to consider the place of identities as being beyond the sole denominator of visibility in artistic practice—remains relevant and largely unresolved. Yet it should and is, allowing us to work towards a new situation. One where the current paradigm of the art system is forced to annul the existing economy of reproduction for those marginalised by addressing its unwritten, memetic rules of engagement. Thereafter, our sense of what is valued in terms of art's relational property can be re-conceptualised, with a new sense of ownership of this value. It feels timely to raise these issues during a phase when many nations in Western Europe—such as Germany, Belgium, France, Denmark, etc.—are experiencing the early stages of their multicultural moment in the art context. Something that seems all the more complicated as it is also taking place after the advent of art's internationalism. Of course, things change through the new perspectives brought about by subsequent generations, in both society and in art. The 'atmosphere' will dissipate once those from backgrounds previously considered marginalised gain broader comprehension of the art world and its meme, understand it as a form of symbolic violence, and avoid being coaxed into the trap of visibility. But, most significantly, we must acknowledge that we cannot find this progress unless we gain the belief



that artists just might possess more intelligence than
the art system in the act of touching the real.

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COLLECTING LIFE'S UNKNOWNS

CLÉMENTINE DELISS

Materiality and the Unknown, Dating, Anonymity, the Occult

Collections have an anthropomorphic, fetishist feel to them. They are both about our failings and about our successes. They signify relations between things and ideas, between the inheritance of meaning and its erasure over time. In its singularity and ubiquity, the ethnographic museum can be seen as a household of foreign matter, of stuff that is diasporic, immigrant, domestic, bourgeois, effusive, feral, reclusive, rehabilitating, convivial, consumerist, curious, concerned, failed, and obsessive.

In the past, ethnographic museums not only collected the everyday, they sought out representations of life's unknowns. The unknown, uncharted, unexplainable, even the uncanny were part of the anthropologist's fascination with the Other and his bugchasing desire to put the status quo at risk.

In the late 1920s, Michel Leiris wrote: "I would

rather be possessed than talk about the possessed", and so in 1931, he left Paris behind, along with its conventions and correctives of everyday life, and embarked on a collecting expedition that would take him from Dakar to Djibouti, seeking a transducer into the unknown.

At certain moments, this unknown is believed to be contained in the material object. But it is an unknown that needs to be possessed too, crazed yet controlled, tamed and classified. This process tended to take place back to base, through administration, writing and photography. In Europe, ethnographic objects were given a date—as if they had been orphaned and needed to be parented anew—founded on when they were acquired, purchased, or even looted, but not when they were originally produced. The question was rarely asked at the moment of appropriation. Instead, it was the time of coupling, the relational moment with the colonial, which became a marker.

If these objects were once deemed auratic—in other words, they held you under their spell—once



back in Europe they quickly lose their original fascination, acquire patina, even anachronism, and appear past their sell-by date. Over time, the custodian's collection in its outrageous heterogeneity transforms into a pedestrian series of household articles, which purport nevertheless to be tools of enquiry. There are hierarchies of objects too, just as there are hierarchies of people, and of continents. These pyramids of classification, those nomenclatures that proffer capital onto things, those masterpieces that reoccur (Benin, Baule, New Britain...), and the photographs that are taken in studios all help to boost what is missing and produce the necessary commodification.

If, today, mass collecting for ethnographic museums has necessarily come to a standstill, which institutions today are still able to place a purchase on life's unknowns? What might a contemporary ethnographic collection look like? Would it be the entire contents of a department store full of the world's functional items and luxury goods with their mixed cultural heritage, skewed authenticity, and multiple producers? Or has the acquisition of life's unknowns shifted from the earlier speculative and occult interests of ethnographers and their museums to the rising market in globalising collections of contemporary art? What do we do with what exists and is in storage?

Stagnant Collections Versus Dynamic Schools or Museums

Writing in the 1920s when the blood pressure of collecting was at a high, Carl Einstein, the German theoretician of African art, contemporaneous with Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg, argued against the idea that objects from the past possessed an inherent kind of material and sentimental immortality. He claimed this view contradicted the historical process and represented what he called a “terrible legacy”, which “falsifies the past (...) and sprinkles fiction and dead perceptions into the present”. Einstein sought to nurture an intellectual lifeline between the museum and the research institute. In his view, the greatest strength of a collection lay in its *mobility*. In other words: in the intentional act of switching the position of exhibits back and forth from analysis and interpretation to public visibility.¹ Einstein claimed that the itinerancy of objects *within* collections

1. “Diese Sammlung müsste jeweils mit Hilfe der Forschungssammlung ausgewechselt und stetig erneuert werden, damit die Besucher ein ausreichendes Bild der Elemente der Kultur und Völkerbezirke gewinnen können. In dieser vergleichenden Sammlung vor allem müssten Vorlesungen und Führungen veranstaltet werden; wie die gesamte Schaustellung durch Lehrer verlebendigt werden muss. Hier ist der Punkt, wo die lebendige



Bindung zwischen Museum und Forschungsinstitut einzusetzen hat, soll das Museum nicht durch das Fachpopuläre nur Schau und nicht Lehre gewahren." Einstein 1926/2006, p. 303. For English translations of Carl Einstein's texts, see Einstein 2004.

2. See Léopold Sédar Senghor's 'Musée Dynamique' which was opened in Dakar forty years later, in 1966, by André Malraux.

What Einstein was suggesting was that the museum's engine room lies in the recognition of its research collection: "In dieser vergleichenden Sammlung vor allem müssten Vorlesungen und Führungen veranstaltet werden; wie die gesamte Schausstellung durch Lehrer verlebendigt werden muss. Hier ist der Punkt, wo die lebendige Bindung zwischen Museum und Forschungsinstitut einzusetzen hat, soll das Museum nicht durch das Fachpopuläre nur Schau und nicht Lehre gewahren." Today, nearly one hundred years after Einstein's quasi-manifesto for a dynamic museum², it does not take much to recognise to what degree these public

would make people look again, better understand what they saw, and take apart what they believed or assumed. Collections would reflect extremes of intellectual exploration and exhibitions would speak of human experience and knowledge. Otherwise, he claimed, museums would become nothing more than "preserve jars", and "anesthetize and rigidify into a myth of guaranteed continuity, into the drunken slumber of the mechanical".

institutions have become entrenched within the corporate culture of consumption on an increasingly global scale.

Recently the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris was described to me as being similar in remit to a television broadcaster such as Arte, or a publishing house like Taschen. The role of its exhibitions is to provide well-produced, colourful, attractive, and topical visions of the world with a touch of popular exoticism. After all why would one battle against industrial forms of populist trans-cultural entertainment? Indeed, the same museum in Paris runs one of the most interesting research branches in Europe, headed by French scholar Frédéric Keck who studied under Paul Rabinow. Keck is a specialist of contemporary animal-engendered epidemics who spent two years engaging with the 100-year-old Claude Lévi-Strauss before he died. Yet at the Quai Branly, the cohabitation of partner forms of curating knowledge—one for the purpose of public exhibiting, and the other ideational and charged with advanced developments, which remain largely backstage—is taken to an extreme. Critical reception is divided—some complain about Jean Nouvel's dark cavernous coloured concrete scenography, whilst applauding the museum for its excellent médiathèque, library, photographic archives, digitised collections,





Exhibition view: El Hadji Sy, *Painting, Performance, Politics*, 2015; El Hadji Sy, *Portrait du Président*, 2012. Acrylic and tar on butcher's paper, 190 x 200 cm. Collection of the artist. El Hadji Sy, *Le Puits*, 2014. Acrylic and tar on jute sacking, 245 x 280 cm. Collection of the artist; With stools, collected by Meinhard Schuster and Eike Haberland 1961, Papua New Guinea, wood. Collection Weltkulturen Museum. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel.



Exhibition view: *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014. Installation by Luke Willis Thompson: Skull mask (Lorr), collected by Carl Gerlach 1879, New Britain, human bones, plant fibres and paint. Collection Weltkulturen Museum. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel.



Exhibition view: *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014. Photographs of the collection (1960–2013) plus new works by Marie Angeletti, Otobong Nkanga, Benedikte Bjerre. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel.

international symposia, and close collaborations with global academia. Rather than symbiotic, these two strands appear lodged in a hiatus that contradicts the stored capital of this museum: its extensive ethnographic collections.

What kind of meaning does one want to produce today on the basis of such collections, collections that appear to have reached the dead-end of research? What role do they play in relation to universities? What modus operandi can be introduced today so that these heteroclitic, anachronistic objects from the past are recharged with contemporary meanings? If museums have to fight against routine, habit, and conservatism, what kind of working method can we develop to reactivate the reservoirs they hold once more?

To think of ways of curating, caring for and reconfiguring an ethnographic collection in 2014 is urgent. Instead of obfuscating access to these important objects due to an ideology of conservation, one should remediate them in a meaningful way. This is important because it helps to establish new ways of defining collections, breaking down the earlier hierarchies between high and low, between masterpieces and those artefacts relegated to everyday life. As anthropologist Paul Rabinow suggests, “The exercise is how to present historical elements in a

contemporary assemblage such that new visibilities and sayable things become actual inducing motion and affect.”³

3. Paul Rabinow, “Assembling Untimeliness: Permanently and Restively”, work in progress, sent to Clémentine Deliss in 2010.

Remediation

In the first, perhaps more contemporary sense of the term, ‘to remediate’ means to bring about a shift in medium, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection. To remediate also implies to remedy a deficient situation, for example, the ambivalent resonance of the colonial past (Rabinow 2008). The earlier assumption of epistemological authority does not extend comfortably within the post-colonial situation. One can no longer be content to use earlier examples of material culture for the purpose of depicting cultures, ethnic groups, thereby reasserting the *logos* of *ethnos* or an existing range of outdated anthropological themes. Of course, we respect and critically integrate earlier narratives and analyses written by anthropologists and area experts, just as we take on the existing testimonials that originate from the producers and users of these artefacts. But we can also



expand the context of this knowledge by taking the artefacts once again as the starting point and stimulus for contemporary innovation, aesthetic practice, linguist translation, future product design, and triggers for emergent museums. But how does one demystify them, activate a loss of aura? How does a collection “regain consciousness” or create presence anew?

As one knows, *bullë* matter, is first of all wood. And since this becoming-immaterial of matter seems to take no time and to operate its transmutation in the magic of an instant, in a single glance, through the omnipotence of a thought, we might also be tempted to describe it as the projection of an animism or a spiritism. The wood comes alive and is peopled with spirits: credulity, occultism, obscurantism, lack of maturity before Enlightenment, childish or primitive humanity. But what would Enlightenment be without the market? And who will ever make progress without exchange-value? (Derrida 1993/ 1994)

To remediate the ethnographic collection is to engage with that mix of discomfort, doubt, and melancholia, the *caput mortuum* phase of alchemical regeneration, transforming these objects into a contemporary environment and thereby building additional interpretations onto their existing set of references. This initial experimental phase yields new ideas for works that operate as *prototypes*, as

stimuli for subsequent elaboration. They are unfinished collections just like the ethnographica is unfinished in its semanticity. In this sense, the new prototypes interpellate the various models of concept and form embodied within the artefacts from the museum's collection.

The Research Collection

No research collection can be a viable commodity for long. The spectral chain is broken once its decoding procedure has been superseded and relegated to a past enquiry. Nevertheless, the objects in these collections—in particular those associated with ritual and therefore doubly fetishistic—retain something, and that something is what people search for in the museum. They search for transportation, for the steamship, the airplane, or the hologrammic virtual log-on into the mystical enigma. Their use-value may be interesting, but as Karl Marx and then Jacques Derrida pointed out, that is not how the numinous character of the material object is constituted. “The commodity is even very complicated; it is blurred, tangled, paralysed, aporetic, perhaps undecidable (*ein sehr vertrachtetes Ding*)” (Derrida 1993/1994).



There is a kind of failure that subtends the ability of this mass of ethnographic objects to be commoditised. These objects are failures because they can never *be us*, be an unquestioned part of our referentiality. As such their referentiality is not expended. They are contested and will continue to be contested. And the argument for their future restitution is undeniable. Distance is what makes them what we want from them. We want them to be a contrast medium to what we know.

The Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt which I have been directing since 2010 has a store of 70,000 such objects. In this case, the resistance to commodification becomes all the more apparent and persistent. Why would one object dominate? If one does dominate, it is because of a market in tribal art. The existing conservatism of the tribal art market with its implicit top twenty—in which a piece from Nok or Benin was at the top of the scale and a set of woven rattan fish traps from the Sepik at the bottom—no longer retains its ideological status. The associated apparatus of display, including genres of lighting and photographic imaging, are critically reviewed when thinking of post-ethnographic presentations.⁴ If one breaks that market lineage, the provenance that fetishises who owned what when, who stroked which sculpture, or introduced it into their frame of

reference, brought it into a relationship of affinity and transported through it—like a Ouija board séance on the table that Marx and Derrida refer to as the *figurante* in a play—then something begins to happen. The commoditised tribal art object suddenly shows up its naked, orphan-like status, its anachronism, out of timeliness, simply out of joint. These are fugitive works of art in fugitive collections. For an object is a migrant too with its partial knowledge, partial identities, and incompleteness (Sassen 2009).

One could argue that the claims for restitution, for returning the millions of objects to where they once came from is currently the most active form of commodification that is taking place. The relic diplomacy surrounding these artefacts insist that the material objects should be returned to the source communities even if these are so radically displaced that no one can be sure that a receiver will be there—other than the market.

4. As stated by Rabinow, during the first research seminar at the Weltkulturen Museum, in November 2010, dissent is inherent within experimental research: “I have always remained loyal to a vision of anthropology by remaining vigilantly disloyal to the existing state of affairs. I am anti-theory and pro-concept, and pro-experimentation”. (Paul Rabinow, *Towards an Anthropology of the Contemporary*, 2001).

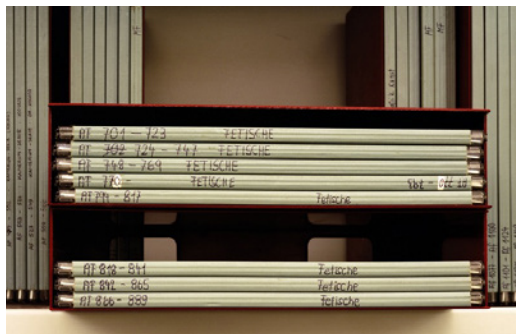




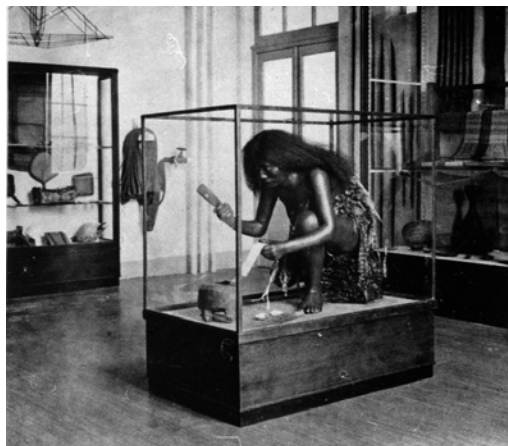
Exhibition view: *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014. Installation by Peggy Butth. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel.



Otobong Nkanga talking about her work during the Think Tank '*...persecuted, mourned, pitied, photographed, collected...*', 16-17 May 2013, in preparation for the exhibition *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*.



Rut Blees Luxemburg,
Afrika II (Fetishes), 2013.



Historical exhibition display in the Museum für Völkerkunde (today Weltkulturen Museum), Oceania section. Weltkulturen Image Archive. Photo: Hermann Niggemeyer, date unknown.

What To Do? The Seed of a Museum University

As Joseph Beuys said in 1975, “I want to turn museums into universities that have a department for objects... The museum could offer the first model for a ongoing (or permanent) conference on cultural issues” (Beuys and Haks 1993).⁵

I have spent four years exploring the presence of historical objects in ethnographic museums. It has led me to claim their potentiality for a contemporary form of artefact-led or collection-centred cross-cultural interdisciplinarity, a situation of enquiry that might even lead towards something which I dare to call a museum-university, a hybrid formulation of an art college, a university, and a museum, geared to accommodate new professional formations on the basis of an investigative reactivation of contentious and disputed historical collections.

If one breaks down the elements that require attention today and might constitute the foundation of a new type of working location, the following elements spring to mind:

- The—quite literally—millions of objects collected from around the world that sit in the stores of the ethnographic museums of Europe. Germany—I would estimate—has about 4 to 5 million. If this is multiplied by what is in storage in Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Austria, Italy, Spain, there is a serious quantity of phenomenally important “art works” of ingenuity and meaning. (We will not enter the polemic of ethnographic object versus the art work or craft here).
- A further area of attention is the flourishing of new sectors that combine disciplines and seem to have no institutional roof other than annexing universities or art school departments: cultural studies, curatorial studies, critical colonial studies, post-colonial studies, critical race and anti-colonial studies, and various museum studies in addition to the redefinitions of existing partner discourses in art history, art, anthropology, area studies (e.g. South-East Asian or African Studies). These new sectors are emerging on a global scale. It is no longer just occurring in Birmingham as was the case when Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige created Cultural Studies and brought attention to subcultures and diasporic histories in Britain. Today, you can study cultural and curatorial studies or museology, for example,

5. “Ich will ja die Museen zu Universitäten machen, die dann praktisch ein Department für Objekte haben... Das Museum könnte auch das erste Modell einer *permanenten* Konferenz für kulturelle Fragen werden.”



in numerous cities on the African continent, in South East Asia, India, Japan, Latin America, and probably China too.

- Finally, there is the issue of collecting. The visibility and contemporaneity of collections lies today with private initiatives and personalised museums. In contrast, cities in which state museums once flourished after their respective countries' independence (e.g. Jakarta, Delhi, Lagos, Dakar, to name just a few) are hindered when it comes to activating a renaissance of their cultural institutions, which are regarded today as ideologically outdated, unable to pull in visitors, and generally dilapidated. The civil service of museum professionals compounds the difficulties that exist in engaging younger generations of museologists and curators within these national or municipal venues.

At the Weltkulturen Museum, we have developed an experimental methodology, which I believe is not only possible within the post-ethnographic museum but can be applied to other museums with varied historical collections. It depends on how one views the possibility of knowledge production within a museum and defines hierarchies within collections. To test this way of working with collections by engaging with

a former colonial museum of anthropology aggravates questions of access, ownership, restitution, conservation, and oblivion that may also apply to other museums but to a lesser degree.

The potential of a *research collection* is that it is contingent on experiment and dialogue yet quickly loses its currency. As such it remains oddly outside of market forces yet characterises and punctuates the exploration of the moment. This process is connected to production and therefore to the emergence of a new collection, one that quite literally grows out of care and attention to historical antecedents.

The unfinished works produced in the Weltkulturen Museum's Labor evoke what one might define as the *prelusive* moment. Prelusive qualifies the object or experience that triggers a principal event, action, or performance. Often associated with composition and structure, the prelusive phase is the instance of anticipatory and transformative thinking that can lead to the early shaping of ideas and the subsequent creation of a new body of work.

The Weltkulturen Museum builds up an unfinished collection of emergent works of art or literature created on site, in its laboratory. These works reflect an intimate fieldwork situation, and an acute interaction by the guest artist or scholar with the specific context of the museum and its artefacts, photographs,



people, situations, and exhibitions. It is about decoding the tacit knowledge of objects by using small in-roads rather than mainlines within existing anthropological discourse. The Labor in the museum is “pre-operational”. It is a green room for production. It provides the researcher with a framework for living, sleeping, working, thinking, reading, producing—a kind of domestic inquiry that takes on night-work and adjusts to the domestic scale of a villa.

At the end of each residency, the artist or scholar gifts an example of this new emergent work to the Museum. By entrusting the museum with these new prototypes based directly on objects from the collections, guests pass on another form of relational knowledge to students, colleagues, and members of the public. This process can provide the framework for an innovatory form of education within the museum that communicates the extremes of intellectual exploration, a conceptual and reflexive exercise in things as yet unknown.

In this way, we can view the different artefacts from past collections as vehicles of cultural translation today, operating in the tension and traction between pedagogy and performativity: pedagogy with its “continuist, accumulative temporality” (Bhabha 1994, Chapter 8) and performativity that engages with the recursive language of creative

adjustment. This may help us to redefine the condition of mobility that Carl Einstein referred to in relation to the museum’s research collection.

This is the seed of a new museum-university, constantly working with external impulses and redrafting the concept of generalism and the democratic intellect towards a non-standardised education, independent and self-organising, a subjective, permeable, fragile institution.

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**“DECOLONISING
MUSEUMS” THROUGH
THE LENS OF
THE COLLECTIONS
AND ARCHIVES
OF THE MEMBERS
OF L'INTERNATIONALE**

Clémentine Deliss' article "Collecting Life's Unknowns" was a starting point for this EPUB by L'Internationale, reflecting upon the collections and archives held by the members of the confederation. Referring to Deliss' remark about the research potential of collections, MACBA addresses *The Green Detour*, a nine-volume comic by Francesc Ruiz in which he uses popular culture to create alternative narratives around emblematic moments in Egypt's cultural history. M HKA writes about the Vrielynck Collection of antique cameras, optical toys, film posters and other cinematographic paraphernalia: through a series of artists' interventions, the museum examined the potentialities of this collection for researchers and artists. Van Abbemuseum explores the parallels between anthropology and contemporary art in an installation by Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. Moderna galerija presents the work *Lenin—Coca-Cola* by Alexander Kosolapov and related artefacts to discuss art as an invention by Western culture and predict the shift from work of art back to artefact. The MNCARS

discusses a work by the Austrian artist Ines Doujak, *Evviva il coltello! (Es lebe das Messer!)*, which allows the museum to question the processes of construction of a collective memory, as well as explore the colonial and ethnographic technologies that have made these processes and their decoding possible.

—by Christiane Berndes



FROM THE
COLLECTION OF THE
VAN ABBEMUSEUM,
EINDHOVEN

CHRISTIANE BERNDES



Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2009-2010
plywood, packaging and newspapers from the Middle East, graphite on vellum,
audio, dimensions variable. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



Contemporary art and ethnography

Could the contemporary artist be the new anthropologist? This question came to mind while reading Clémentine Deliss' text "Collecting Life's Unknowns", and finding connections with works in the Van Abbemuseum collection. This context leads us to highlight *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2009–2010), an installation by American-Iraqi artist Michael Rakowitz that was acquired and installed at the Van Abbemuseum a few years ago.

The work is centred on the looting of artefacts from the National Museum of Iraq, Baghdad, in the aftermath of the US invasion in April 2003. It was only after severe criticism from the international community that the government came to help. Approximately 15,000 objects—the oldest dating back to around 4000 BC—have been destroyed, or stolen and sold on the black market. At the moment about 7,000 are still

missing. The installation consists of papier-mâché reconstructions of the missing artefacts made from the packaging of Middle Eastern foodstuff and local Arabic newspapers. Rakowitz lives in the United States but has roots in Iraq. Using the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute database and Interpol's website, he created the copies together with a team of assistants. These are displayed on a long table that borrows its form from Aj-ibur-shapu, the ancient Babylonian Processional Way through the famous Ishtar Gate. The title of the installation, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, is derived from this name.

Thus, the second element of Rakowitz's installation links the looting of 2003 to a story from the beginning of the twentieth century which is told in the framed drawings hanging on the walls. Carl Einstein, the German theoretician of African art mentioned by Deliss as the advocate of the Dynamic Museum, wrote about his ideal museum where "collections would reflect extremes of intellectual exploration and exhibitions would speak of human experience and knowledge". During excavations in 1902, the



German archaeologist Robert Koldewey discovered the Ishtar Gate, one of the eight gates to the inner city of Babylon constructed on the north side by order of King Nebuchadnezzar II around 575 BC. Koldewey transported this Gate to Berlin, where it is still on view as one of the highlights of the Pergamon Museum. The gate that was photographed and posted on the Internet the most by US servicemen stationed in Iraq is a 1950s reconstruction on a ¾ scale compared to the size of the original.

A third element in the work is the story of Donny George Youkhanna, who was Director of the museum during the time of the invasion and the looting in 2003. Dr. Youkhanna was also a member of the band called 99%, that covered songs by the UK heavy metal and hard rock band Deep Purple. One of their songs, “Smoke On The Water” from 1972, is played continuously in the installation. It is interesting to position the popularity of Western pop music against the near-total financial and trade embargo established by the United Nations Security Council on the Iraqi Republic, starting four days after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and until May 2003. Security measures were taken by the United States to defend government buildings against looting in the aftermath of the invasion, but they left cultural institutions like the National Museum to their fate.

Rakowitz’s work addresses the migration of goods in colonial and postcolonial times, creating and destroying identity through power, law and value systems. By recreating the missing objects from worthless packaging and newspapers and with the help of different modern information systems, Rakowitz transfers them into the discourse of contemporary art, where they testify about the complex exchange between different cultures within a globalised world, our world.

—by *Christiane Berndes*

Curator and Head of Collections Van Abbemuseum



THE DUTCH VOC MENTALITY: CULTURAL POLICY AS A BUSINESS MODEL

MIRJAM KOOIMAN



Interior of the Tropical Museum (Tropenmuseum) in Amsterdam.
Courtesy: Karel Kulhavy

In response to the opposition's criticism of government economic policy in 2006, the then Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Jan-Peter Balkenende, called for a return to the "VOC mentality". This was a reference to the old Dutch trading spirit and entrepreneurialism of the United East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or VOC, 1602–1798/9)—the world's very first multinational company. It unleashed a wave of criticism, since such romanticism about the Dutch Golden Age ignores the inherent historical associations with violence, slavery and colonialism. The Premier later stressed that "it had not been his intention to refer to that at all". However, it was precisely this selective approach to the country's history and his own unawareness of it, that had so offended his critics.

The VOC mentality as a characteristic of the selective historical perspective on the Dutch Golden Age has been a key feature of Dutch cultural policy for many years. The government seized on the economic crisis that broke out in 2008 as an opportunity to make far-reaching cutbacks in the cultural sector,

involving such great cuts to subsidies that critics have referred to it ever since as a 'cultural slash-and-burn policy'. Although virtually no part of the cultural sector was spared the effects of the cuts, certain institutions, including Rotterdam's Wereldmuseum and Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum and National Maritime Museum (Scheepvaartmuseum), were particularly badly hit by the policy. It is worth noting that these museums are the custodians of the country's collections of colonial history. The reasons given for the cuts were said to be based on 'impartial economic logic'. The 'success' of museums is determined by the number of visitors they attract. Since critical reflection on the colonial past is hardly a great money-spinner, these museums tend to fall by the wayside. As such, this would appear to be an example of the economic crisis being used to justify an ideological shift of strategy in the nation's cultural institutions. Only the stringent cutbacks, in part masked by urgent calls for cultural entrepreneurship and financial independence, appear to be linked to a renewed insistence on defining Dutch identity and betray a wilful national



1. Alberts, J. 2007, “Hoogmoed en gekibbel”, *Nrc.nl*, 6 July, viewed 15 September 2015.

loss of memory, or at the very least, a disquieting indifference towards some of the darker moments in the country’s history.

To mark the upcoming millennium, the government had decided in 1999 to donate 100 million Dutch guilders for a complete renovation of Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum: a political gesture that meant that the Dutch population would still have “a leading museum of international standing”¹. In 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) was reckoning on a budget of 272.5 million euro: by 2009, it emerged that this figure would be exceeded by almost 100 million. But it was all felt to be worth it—in 2013, the New Rijksmuseum was given a grand opening, officiated by Queen Beatrix. However, by this time, the economic crisis was in full swing and the government had announced serious cutbacks in 2010, hitting the cultural sector harder than any other sector, viewed proportionally. The government announced that the 20 million euro subsidy for the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) was to be halted by the end of 2012. Since Indonesian independence in 1950, this former colonial institute had been a privatised institute for knowledge focusing on medicine and economic development in the tropics and was also home to the Tropenmuseum, a theatre and a

library. Despite having a rich collection and history, the KIT was threatened with closure with no chance of a pardon. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was providing the subsidy, felt unable to justify development aid money being spent on a museum. The government declared that it would only be willing to save the Tropenmuseum if it agreed to merge with two other ethnographic museums—the National Museum for Ethnology (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde) and the Africa Museum. It was also expected immediately to comply with the revenue model imposed by government and increase its efficiency by merging the management teams. The importance of preserving a huge collection of cultural heritage from colonial history did not appear to be a factor in the debate. Moreover, the government made absolutely no reference to the museum’s theatre or even the acclaimed library collection: anything not taken over by third parties was to face destruction². This points to the lack of an integrated government policy, since the preservation of heritage became a concern of the museum itself rather than that of government.

As the museum sector responded with horror, the populist/ nationalist Party For Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) announced its willingness to agree to

2. Hof, Sv. 2013, “Is de ‘redding’ van de Tropenbibliotheek gerechtvaardigd?”, *Joop.nl*, 4 November, viewed 15 September 2015.





An installation shot of a slavery-exhibition in the Scheepvaartmuseum

The Black Page : The National Maritime Museum / Lighting design : Rapenburg Plaza

www.rapenburgplaza.nl



3. Modest, W. 2013, “Curating Between Self Hate and Self Love: Ethnographic Museums and Ethno-nationalist Politics”, lecture delivered at the conference *The Future of Ethnographic Museums*, 19-23 July, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, viewed 15 September 2015.

4. Bockma, H., 2011, “Halbe Zijlstra: Er zit pijn in de bezuinigingen, dat klopt”, *Volkskrant.nl*, 11 June, viewed 15 September 2015.

the closure of the Tropenmuseum. The PVV, which itself was not part of government, but was supporting a minority government made up of the conservative/ liberal People’s Party for Freedom (VVD) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) in a confidence-and-supply arrangement, had made something of a name for itself for its controversial populist statements from the sidelines. On this occasion, the party’s view was that the Tropenmuseum merely made its visitors feel guilty by spreading

“Western self-hatred”³. For his part, the VVD State Secretary for Culture, Halbe Zijlstra, who implemented the cutbacks in the cultural sector, simply confessed to a lack of understanding of the arts: “If you have to make so many cuts, that is more of an advantage than a disadvantage. You need to be able to distance yourself. We want to achieve a major reorganisation of the cultural sector, a culture shift within culture, and that calls for an ability to look at things from an impartial perspective⁴.” In this case, impartiality meant that every cultural institution needed to earn at least 17.5 percent of its own revenue in

order to be eligible for subsidy from 2013 onwards. The advice of the Cultural Council (*Raad van Cultuur*), the official government advisory body on art, culture and media, to postpone the introduction of the change to give institutions slightly more opportunity to find alternative ways of operating despite the severe cutbacks was dismissed out of hand by Zijlstra. It seemed the cultural slash-and-burn that the Cultural Council was warning about, was not actually a risk, but had in fact been the government’s very intention⁵.

From an ideological perspective, the selective approach adopted in terms of which cultural heritage is worthy of support and which isn’t, would appear to exemplify the ideas of the PVV. This radical political party is selective in its view of culture: it presents the ethnic Dutch population, whose “authentic roots” must be protected at all costs, as a minority threatened by immigrants⁶. In its 2012 manifesto, the PVV placed particular emphasis on preserving local traditions while art and multiculturalism were dismissed as “left-wing hobbies⁷”. But it was the first government

5. Raad van Cultuur, 2011, “Noodgedwongen keuzen. Advies bezuinigingen cultuur 2013-2016”, *Cultuur.nl*, 29 April, viewed 15 September 2015.

6. Sanders, S. 2015, “Crisis van links: wij zijn nu allemaal een minderheid”, *Nrc.nl*, 16 May, viewed 15 September 2015.

7. PVV 2012, “Hün Brussel, óns Nederland. Verkiezingsprogramma 2012-2017”, *Pvv.nl*, July, p. 43, viewed 15 September 2015.



8. Donner, PH. 2011, “Integratienota Integratie, binding, burgerschap”, *Rijksoverheid.nl*, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 16 June, p. 1, viewed 15 September 2015.

9. Zijlstra, H. 2011, “Meer dan kwaliteit: een nieuwe visie op cultuurbeleid”, *Rijksoverheid.nl*, Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, 10 June, p. 32, viewed 14 September 2015.

10. Revelations in an independent research report published in April of this year include the fact that the museum’s collection now plays a subordinate role only, no scientific research is conducted, educational activities have been

led by VVD Prime Minister Mark Rutte that was to declare that multiculturalism had failed, through its Minister of the Interior Piet Hein Donner and his 2011 policy document entitled integration, connection, citizenship (“Integratie, binding, burgerschap”). Donner argued that cultural diversity “had primarily led to division and at best to well-meaning mutual disregard⁸”. In view of this consensus between Rutte’s first government and the PVV that held it in power, Zijlstra’ minimalist explanation for cultural cutbacks that “the new basic infrastructure will no longer have room for development institutions in the field of cultural diversity” was all that was needed to pull the plug on institutions focusing on exactly that—such as the ethnographic museums⁹.

From a practical perspective however, it would appear that it was the VVD’s focus on economic profitability that informed its selective cultural policy. In 2000, Rotterdam’s ethnographic Wereldmuseum

was on the verge of bankruptcy as a result of major building renovations and rapidly falling visitor numbers. Even before the economic crisis began to become a factor, the then Mayor of Rotterdam, Ivo Opstelten (VVD), decided to turn the tide by appointing cultural entrepreneur Stanley Bremer. He was given free rein to develop an entrepreneurial policy with a view to making the museum successful again, but more importantly independent of subsidy. Alongside some serious commercial measures including the introduction of a Michelin star restaurant and the hiring out of the museum’s auditoria, it was not long before the entire team of curators was dismissed in the wake of the falling revenues and by 2011, as earnings continued to suffer, the radical museum director came up with the idea of selling off part of the collection. Although it clearly breached every museum’s ethical code, this controversial move was only prevented by the municipal council after heated discussions in the media¹⁰.

discontinued and serious damage caused to leading works by displaying them in the restaurant. There have even been claims that items have been sold in order to fund the museum’s new commercial activities.

Rengers, M. and Kammer C. 2015, “Vernietigend rapport over chaos bij verzelfstandigd Wereldmuseum”, *Nrc.nl*, 15 April, viewed 15 September 2015.
Rengers, M. and Kammer, C. 2015-2, “De ondernemer en het Wereldmuseum: reconstructie Wereldmuseum”, *Nrc.nl*, 16 April, viewed 15 September 2015.
Kammer, C. 2015, “Wereldmuseum in grote financiële problemen”, *Nrc.nl*, 14 April, viewed 15 September 2015.



Despite extreme attempts to commercialise it, the Wereldmuseum is virtually bankrupt and has seriously undermined its role as a museum in numerous ways. Yet, in spite of repeated signs of wrongdoing, the council (the owner of the collection) has washed its hands of the matter.

Unlike the Wereldmuseum, the National Maritime Museum appeared to have been successful in striking a balance between education and entertainment and thereby becoming less dependent on subsidies. This museum also made quite a radical commitment to cultural entrepreneurship. The museum building's recently-covered inner courtyard was hired out as a means to fund the museum and its presentation transformed from dusty displays to a multimedia experience. Although the Cultural Council expressed concern about the balance between its duties as a museum and its commercial ambitions, it also used the very same document to dismiss any notion of an academic role for the museum. Its research grants—which had until then actually enabled that balance to be achieved—were discontinued by the Ministry. This was followed by a reduction in the government's general museum contribution. Despite having previously received praise, the museum management responded to a serious budget deficit by attempting to dismiss eleven members of staff, including a

curator and the senior curator of the academic programme. Although this dismissal attempt was prevented at the last moment, the situation is evidence of a lack of political interest in the museum's programme that was attempting to portray both the glory of overseas trade and the inherent downside of the slave trade.

By giving an academic role to only a small selection of institutions, the government is undermining the role that museums must play in education. The VVD in particular would appear to see the cultural sector primarily as a leisure industry, whose very survival is measured by the number of visitors it attracts. This means that the principle of museums' financial independence and economic profit is taking precedence over historical value and importance. In other words, culture needs to be able to earn something for the Netherlands. Internationally, Halbe Zijlstra's new cultural policy was primarily based on using art and culture for foreign relations, literally insisting that it contributes to a *positive* image of the Netherlands by emphasising links between culture, trade and the economy¹¹. The Dutch Masters of the Golden Age are cited as examples of this. Equally, the reopening of the Rijksmuseum

11. Zijlstra, H. 2011, "Meer dan kwaliteit: een nieuwe visie op cultuurbeleid", *Rijksoverheid.nl*, Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, 10 June, p. 5-6. viewed 14 September 2015.





Opening of the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam
Courtesy: Tropenmuseum,
part of the National Museum
of World Cultures

12. Røling, D., Eigenraam A. and Venema N. 2015, "Frustrerend dat slavernijherdenkers telkens om subsidie moeten bedelen", *Nrc.nl*, 20 March, viewed 15 September 2015.

enabled the Dutch Golden Age to put a stop to the negative image of Amsterdam as a city of the red-light district and cannabis cafés. The government prefers to showcase national culture by means of such historic figures as

Rembrandt, Vincent van Gogh and even Anne Frank. These are the standard-bearers for museums that have unfailingly been attracting floods of tourists for many years. The aim of cultural tourism and the marketing of a Dutch identity is not only to target other countries, but also to generate a collective sense of an authentic cultural identity within the country itself. The subsidies awarded for national commemorations provide further evidence of an intent to create a selective view of the country's history: the memory of the victims of the Second World War is kept alive by some 4.5 million euro every year, while the organisers of the commemoration of slavery by the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee) must reapply for a grant every single year, with no certainty that its application will be honoured¹².

It simply seems that there is no room for the colonial past in Dutch public discourse. However, until very recently, the world of politics was clearly interested in

the country's past and the importance of its citizens' historical understanding. In 2006 politicians Jan Marijnissen (Socialist party, SP) and Maxime Verhagen (CDA) proposed the establishment of a National Historical Museum (NHM) in order to boost the country's knowledge of its history and strengthen national identity. In Britain, Lord Kenneth Baker launched a similar initiative in 2007 for the establishment of a museum of 'Britishness', that should not only focus on the narrative of British history, but above all be a paean to British standards and values¹³. Historians and museum professionals in both the Netherlands and Britain were critical of the idea of an historical canon approach, as well as the risk of the museum being used for propaganda purposes, since the project was the brainchild of politicians¹⁴. Whereas the British initiative ultimately came to nothing, in the Netherlands, a management board was appointed and a suitable location sought. However, this ambitious project fell victim to the harsh cutbacks introduced by State Secretary Halbe Zijlstra

13. Hope, C. 2007, "A museum of Britishness would show all that is great about Blighty", *Telegraph.co.uk*, 14 December, viewed 15 September 2015.
Tait, S. 2009, "PM's plan for 'Britishness' museum consigned to history", *Independent.co.uk*, 30 January, viewed 15 September 2015.

14. See, for example: Hunt, T. 2008, "A museum of back-slapping will belittle our island story", *TheGuardian.com*, 15 January, viewed 15 September 2015.



15. Zijlstra, H. 2011, “Meer dan kwaliteit: een nieuwe visie op cultuurbeleid”, *Rijksoverheid.nl*, Ministry of Education, Culture & Science, 10 June, p. 22, viewed 14 September 2015

16. Bloembergen, M., Schulte Nordholt H. and Eickhoff, M. 2013, “Opinie: Koloniale nostalgie in Rijksmuseum”, *Niod.knaw.nl* (NIOD Instituut voor oorlogs-, holocaust- en genocidestudies), 21 June, viewed 15 September 2015.

in 2011, who felt unable to justify a new museum in the wake of cutbacks at existing museums that were, after all, already developing initiatives to showcase Dutch history¹⁵. Although the NHM could potentially have created a more consistent home for the colonial past, both the British and Dutch initiatives were primarily inspired by the notion that multiculturalism had failed and by ongoing discussions about the integration of immigrants, globalisation and increasing public Islamophobia in

the wake of 9/11. Rather than suggesting an opportunity for society to engage in some self-reflection, the desire to define a national identity would therefore seem to be rooted in nostalgia.

The Rijksmuseum was opposed to the establishment of the NHM, as it felt that it itself could, after reopening, again fulfil the role of a national historical museum by means of a mixed collection of art and historical artefacts that would offer a chronological narrative of Dutch history. However, this turned out to be heavily based on the more glorious aspects of the country’s history¹⁶. The merger of the Tropenmuseum

with the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde and the Africa Museum demanded by the government might have been devised as a counterbalance to place a clearer focus on the Dutch colonial past and historical relations with the ‘Other’ alongside the Rijksmuseum. Whilst Belgium has just spent 75 million euro on a thorough renovation of its colonial Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, in order, according to its director Guido Gryseels, “to reconcile itself with the past¹⁷”, no similar ideas would appear to motivate the world of Dutch politics: the sole priority was to combine these ethnographic institutions in an attempt to cut spending. On top of suggesting a strong focus on economic profitability, this would appear to be a sign of a collective failure to acknowledge the political deeds of the Dutch past. Whereas Germany has this year officially acknowledged as genocide the massacre that took place in its former colony of Namibia between 1904 and 1908¹⁸, the Netherlands continues to describe the violence it applied during what is known as the Police Actions in the Netherlands East Indies (modern Indonesia)

17. Vervaeke, L. 2013, “Tropenzolder”, *Volkskrant.nl*, 1 November, viewed 15 September 2015.

18. Pondaag, J. and Bennema, T. 2015, “Nederland moet voorbeeld nemen aan Duitsland”, *Joop.nl*, 30 July, viewed 15 September 2015
Schlömer, F. 2015, “Duitsland noemt Herero-bloedbad voor het eerst ‘genocide’”, *Mo.be*, 11 August, viewed 15 September 2015.



19. The term “police actions” (*politioenele acties*) refers to two offensive operations by the Dutch forces during the Indonesian War of Independence. These took place on the islands of Java and Sumatra in the periods between 21 July and 5 August 1947 (first offensive) and between 19 December 1948 and 5 January 1949 (second offensive). The Police Actions were however more recently redubbed the “Dutch-Indonesian Wars”. In Indonesia, the two operations are known as *Agresi Militer Belanda* (“Dutch Military Aggressions”).

20. Hoek, AL. 2015, [“Geweld Indië was structureel \(1945-1950\)”](#), *Nrc.nl*, 14 August, viewed 15 September 2015.

merely as “excesses”¹⁹. The PhD thesis by Swiss-Dutch historian Rémy Limpach recently revealed extreme violence to be a structural feature²⁰. By the same token, the Netherlands has never issued an official apology for the slavery in its history. A recently-published advisory report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern about whether Dutch society’s poor understanding of its history with slavery and its colonial past could actually be encouraging the stigmatisation of certain minorities. Several of the UN committee’s recommendations explicitly target what it considers to be the Dutch government’s overly relaxed attitude with regard to its anti-discrimination policy²¹.

Nevertheless, the way that the Netherlands deals with its colonial past does not differ radically from that of other European former colonial powers. In Britain, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in

Bristol met its demise after being unable to attract sufficient visitors despite various successful exhibitions, publications and awards. The museum was devoted to the history of British imperialism and the effects of British colonial rule. Unlike many national museums in Britain, the museum was not publicly funded, but operated as a charity. In late 2007, the museum announced plans to relocate to London. However, it emerged in 2011 that various museum artefacts had been sold without authorisation and were therefore lost, including several that were on loan. In 2012, the museum announced that it was closing its doors and donated its collection to the city of Bristol, leading to the disappearance of the only museum explicitly devoted to British colonial history²². In France, it was actually the colonial collections themselves that became the subject of a *Grand Projet* initiated by the then President Jacques Chirac: he had a brand-new museum building specially built for the purpose, Musée du Quai Branly—proudly located just a stone’s throw away from the Eiffel Tower. Even if currently in this institute research has a prominent place,

21. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), UN report 2015, [“Concluding observations on the nineteenth to twenty-first periodic reports of the Netherlands”](#), *NRC*, 28 August, viewed 15 September 2015.

22. Morris, S. 2012, [“Row erupts over British empire museum’s ‘lost’ artefacts”](#), *The Guardian.com*, 10 December, viewed 15 September 2015.



23. Clifford, J. 2007, "Quai Branly in Process", *October*, vol. 120, Spring, pp. 3-23.

there are also critical points to be made, especially at its early years.

To establish the museum, the

French government unceremo-

niously removed the collections from the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in 2003, only to present them as so-called *arts primitifs*. Despite protests from museum staff and academics, the contexts of colonial history and anthropology were literally pushed into the margins of the museum, since nothing could be allowed to detract from the aesthetic experience of the object²³. In this case too, a commercial VOC mentality of 'take over and exploit' overrides any attempt at historical understanding.

RELEVANT LINK

photoCLEC: Photographs, Colonial Legacy and Museums
in Contemporary European Culture
<http://photoclec.dmu.ac.uk>



CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!

NANA ADUSEI-POKU

“It has always been much easier (because it has always seemed much safer) to give a name to the evil without than to locate the terror within. And yet, the terror within is far truer and far more powerful than any of our labels: the labels change, the terror is constant. And this terror has something to do with that irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself as being, which is, however and by definition, a provisional self—and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits.”

James Baldwin in *Avedon and Baldwin* 1964

That contemporary universities and art schools are criticised for the reproduction of a Western (art) canon is nothing new and that those higher (art) education institutions consist of a predominantly privileged white student body is not a novelty either. It is therefore not my aim to reproduce these debates and claims but they should be considered a

given throughout this short essay¹. For the past two decades, the same institutions have tried to change this condition, but have not really known how to do so, except by initiating diversity policies aimed at “inclusion” and “equal opportunities” that constantly problematise (prospective) students of colour whilst forgetting the multiplicity of other intersecting identity categories. In order to complicate the question of “how”, my primary aim is to point out the role of time as a political tool to reproduce a hegemonic education system and the connected argument is that there is no “catching up”, which calls the decolonisation of state institutions and their education system into question.

The argument derives from my observation that we are facing a form of strategic *temporal disjuncture*, which can be seen as the

1. By taking this argument as a fact, I consider this text already disobedient to academic rules of citation, particularly as a Black academic I had to “back up” every experience-based argument that I try to present, because these experiences would challenge the normative system, which was imposed on me. Thus the presented arguments and observations derive from being in the university system as a student as well as a professional for over 10 years.





Carrie Mae Weems, *Project Row Houses*,
2006-present, digital c-print, dimen-
sions variable, © Carrie Mae Weems.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York.

2. There are of course many other scholars who have looked at chronopolitics. With regards to colonialism and modernity: see references to Fabian 1983, Bhabha 2006. With regards to labour: Bloch 1961. With regards to sexuality and gender: Halberstam 2005, Dinshaw et al. 2007, Lorenz 2012.

aftermath of century-long white and hetero-sexist hegemony. The notion of *strategic temporal disjuncture* derives from the historian Michael Hanchard (1999, p. 252) who describes the way in which time has been used as a political tool in order to deprive Black people from knowledge, goods as well as subjecthood². During segregation,

apartheid and colonialism for instance, white schools would receive with the latest versions of school books which years later would be handed over to black schools and thus create unfair conditions for Black individuals. He also points out that time management was imposed on enslaved human beings by the people who owned them. Hence temporal deferrals, time management or even the determination of our biographies into a (hetero-) normative narrative are all connected to the ways in which politics—or in other words policing, disciplining and controlling—has been used in order to create the uneven power structures, access and exclusion that most institutions are confronted with, which is a common theme in the discussion around decolonisation.

I want to point out that today's *strategic temporal disjuncture* systematically hinders society's abilities

to change because of static outdated knowledge production and thus ideologically reproduces long-established power hierarchies. In other words this disjuncture produces historical and cultural amnesia and is a driving force in order to nourish an exclusive progress narrative. Working against this amnesia can not solely work through action plans and equal opportunities, because that does not change the dominant content, which sustains and reproduces itself. On the content level however, teaching Visual Culture, Critical Race, Gender, Queer and Post-colonial Theory constantly challenges lecturers to fill these knowledge-gaps in the classrooms that the dominant Western and Eurocentric canon has (re)produced for more than a century. We are always facing the long-term problems which the education system produces, by not privileging expansive and holistic learning but exclusive self-congratulatory learning environments. So the state of our museums can not be a surprise because they are fuelled by the very same system. Curating exhibitions in the European context with a Black radical approach is thus a very difficult act, because of the absence of these discourses in mainstream cultures. One option is to fall into the trap of anthropological framing or to be disobedient and not translate the discourse at all.



So where to begin?

This is a question that I am often facing, when I want to talk about the discourses that scholars and artists of colour currently discuss such as Black Ontologies, The Physics of Blackness, Afropessimism vs Afrooptimism or the post-black art debate. I have no grounds upon which to start, because the students have neither been exposed to the basis of these discourses nor can these discourses be understood as easy accessible theory because they contain the most advanced philosophical debates we have at our common disposal.

“But these are very specific subjects, they do not affect us”: this is one of the arguments for this exclusion, that I encounter. In particular when it comes to scholars and arts from the Black Diaspora, it is often argued that “*their* problems do not matter to us”, or “it is a completely different context and identity does not matter anyway”.

When we consider Europe and the United States, if not the entire world as the site of post-coloniality, how is such an argument even possible? When thousands of refugees land on the shores of Europe (White 2012) trying to escape the aftermath of the uneven economic power relations that colonialism

and exploitation have produced? How can an understanding of oneself begin through the exclusion of an understanding of the historical and contemporary circumstances that have let us come into being with all our situatedness in the first place? So what is at stake when thinkers and artists of colour are included in the general theory and art programs? What is at stake when traditions, perspectives and value systems change and individuals are allowed to start to reflect on the complexity of the entirety of our societies and their subjects? Somehow the answer lies in this last question, because the exclusion seems necessary in order to maintain and recreate white supremacist power structures, that disguise themselves behind an unmotivated desire for *diversity* and revisions to the curricula through institutional speech acts and policies (Ahmed 2012, p. 54)—which nobody even wants to read but that conveniently remain unchallenged.

Despite the fact that most of the fields such as Gender and Sexuality Studies, Black and African American Studies are institutionalised at universities, I am arguing that the departmentalisation of these fields helps to maintain the status quo³, which results in students and teachers arguing that “these matters do not concern us”.

So it is indeed possible to gain access to this knowledge but mostly in specialised Master Courses



3. I don't want to undermine the historical and contemporary importance of these institutes and departments, quite the opposite, my intention is rather to point out that the scholarship and knowledge from these fields should be more acknowledged and implemented.

and summer schools or in self-organised reading groups. Whilst many institutions desire diversity (Saner & Seefranz 2012) and confuse the term with race and see it as the reformative basis—the closing of the knowledge time-gap, which includes a self-reflective mode—this seems to be one of the greatest challenges.

Because it is not only the students who need to make time-warp jumps—they are the least problem when it comes to an eagerness to learn; what appears as a much greater problem is the body of teachers and directors, who do not have the expertise to teach the required content because they have equally not been exposed to it during their education. However a groundbreaking decolonising of our education system needs this expertise as well as a student body that starts to understand that they are part of the problem and thus the solution (Harney & Moten 2013, p. 29). Sylvia Wynter already argued for such a transformative mode when she wrote a letter to her colleagues in which she highlighted the intrinsic role and responsibility of educators in the reproduction of ideological, epistemological, symbolic and physical violence (Wynter 1994). If you re-read Black, Feminist

and Queer Activists over the past century, they all claim the same form of inclusion and acknowledgement, which seems to be a humanism, which is always in the making but never hits the production line.

The problem is of course more complex, because although content seems to be set in stone in most university curricula, and here in particular the conservative disciplines such as art history, philosophy or economics etc., the education system has equally changed and turned into a neoliberal labour machine. Art schools and universities have to constantly reinvent themselves. Today we look at the entrepreneurial university which, according to Angela McRobbie “entails relentless and hubristic forms of self-promotion”⁴.

In the European context—with EU research grants such as Horizon 2020 which is all about developing neoliberal futures, entrepreneurial and business-oriented research—it is questionable how and for whom this future is designed and whether this future is rather just a reproduction of the status quo. Thus it is no surprise that it is more important today in contemporary art schools to give the students lessons in entrepreneurship than in non-Western and diasporic art.

4. McRobbie, A. 2015, "Stuart Hall: Art and the Politics of Black Cultural Production", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, forthcoming 2015.





Carrie Mae Weems, *Louvre*, 2006, digital c-print, dimensions variable, © Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Research that tries to dismantle and change such institutional power-structures is systematically prolonged or circumvented through minimal funding and non supportive infrastructures, not to mention the emotional blisters and exhaustion, that individuals in this field experience. One jeopardises one's livelihood—if the critique one poses is not formed through negligence. But is it really David against Goliath? What happens through this continual fight for inclusion and representation is a desire to remove oneself, one's knowledge and intellectual production altogether from this space, which turns into a radical escapism and refuge into—what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the *Undercommons* of the university. They write: “To enter this space is to inhabit the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons” (Harney & Moten 2013, p.38). The temporal dimension of the *Undercommons* is one of synchronicity, because Harney and Moten compare the *Undercommons* to Maroon culture, which exists parallel to the dominant system, which is not about critique but in my interpretation about survival. It is a place of refusal to participate and a place which

is not in interaction or dialogue with the system, that forces us into the refuge. A place where one can ask what do I want because of myself? (Harney & Moten 2013, p. 120) It is a heterotopic place which allows to think possibilities in a system, which sustains itself unless it is completely destroyed and replaced by something still unthinkable different. If we start with that question, we come to very different results compared to policies, business-oriented research or inclusive action plans, because we also negotiate and ask ourselves on a day-to-day basis about our own practices within this closed economy of thought. The latter question to me is only the beginning point of a holistic transgressive temporal performative approach, which goes beyond the institutions that we are working in.

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FROM THE
COLLECTION
OF M HKA,
ANTWERPEN

JAN DE VREE

Contemporary art and remediating a collection of media-archaeological objects

In her text 'Collecting Life's Unknowns', Clémentine Deliss explains the term 'to remediate' in relation to recharging ethnographic collections with contemporary meanings, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying these heteroclitic, anachronistic objects. Alongside a collection of contemporary art, M HKA also has the Vrielynck Collection, a collection consisting of media equipment. What is a museum of contemporary art supposed to do with a collection of antique cameras, optical toys, film posters and a large amount of other cinematographic paraphernalia? M HKA regards this collection as an area of study for researchers and artists; a collection which can play a crucial role in giving us a better insight into our visual culture. Between 2011 and 2013, the Vrielynck Collection was the

source of research for a series of exhibitions curated by Edwin Carels with artists such as Julien Maire, Zoe Beloff, and David Blair.

In 2003 the former Centre for Visual Culture, now Cinema Zuid and part of M HKA acquired the Robert Vrielynck Collection with the aid of the Flemish Community. Robert Vrielynck was a solicitor from Bruges who also cultivated a collector's reflex for any object relating to the history and technology of moving pictures. He acquired various models of camera obscura, magic lanterns and 16mm cameras, as well as early video equipment. This rich and somewhat eclectic collection also includes a large number of film posters. A smaller section of the collection consists of so-called pre-cinema devices, a term which is increasingly being replaced by that of media archaeology.

By granting the M HKA this collection, the Flemish Community gave it a proper home for the first time. Moving it from an improvised storage space in a garage to the climate controlled rooms of a museum also changed its significance as a whole. Not only



did a private collection become public property, but a fanciful, idiosyncratic amalgam of cinematographic equipment now entered the realm of contemporary art. According to Carels, “The camera, which freed painting from its obligatory realism and at the same time immensely increased the impact of the artistic image because it enabled such rapid reproduction, now has become a museum object itself—or at least it shares the same waiting room, the museum reserves”.

It would be an admission of weakness to treat the media-archaeological objects in the Vrielynck Collection as a separate category, as an outsider within the whole discourse of the museum. The relationship between art and visual culture is as obvious as it is problematic, particularly now that not only filmmakers and video artists make prominent use of the camera as a medium, but all manner of other artists too. In 1935, in his classic essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin published a critical ode to both the photographic and film cameras—and especially their impact on our perception on historical, social and sensory levels.

The antique equipment and artefacts deserve better than to simply be put into storage as examples of instruments from various episodes in visual culture

that now definitively belong to the past. However, the museum prefers to regard the collection not simply as something to be stored but as a *reserve*, an area of study for both researchers and artists. Indeed, eliciting new interpretations is precisely the underlying strategy that regularly recurs in M HKA programmes: artists are invited to use the collection to produce an ‘intervention’. Consequently, and in association with the curator Edwin Carels, the museum set up a series of three exhibitions in which contemporary artists were invited to shed their own light on the Vrielynck Collection.

VRIELYNCK COLLECTION #1
Julien Maire, *Mixed Memory*
09.02-05.06.2011

The first in the series was an exhibition by Julien Maire, *Mixed Memory*, in which Maire incorporated elements of the Vrielynck Collection into three of his installations. Maire works at the crossroads between installation art, performance and media art. For many years he has focused on reviving early projection techniques with the aid of modern technology. The extinction of analogue images—in favour of digital images—endows the cinema apparatus such as it has found in the Vrielynck Collection a new status:

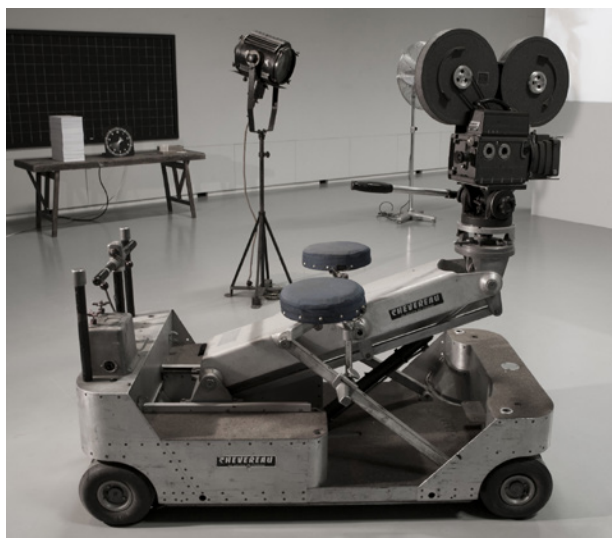




2011 EXHIBITION, Julien Maire, *Mixed Memory*, FOMU. Courtesy: collection M HKA, Antwerp.



2012 EXHIBITION, Zoë Beloff, *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*, FOMU. Courtesy: collection M HKA, Antwerp.



these objects of a history-in-progress have suddenly become archaeological. The complex mechanisms that configure analogue images have been replaced with digital equipment. In his work Julien Maire clearly enters into dialogue with history and media, paradoxically enough by designing a new technological apparatus. Through his manipulations he raises questions regarding the characteristics of the image, the viewer's position and visual strategies in the digital age. By combining past and current technologies, in the exhibition he did not show 'relics', but rather reactivated them. For his presentation at M HKA he brought together instruments in which he incorporated objects from the Vrielynck Collection. In one of his installations titled *Memory Stations*, he manipulates anonymous films and stills in a special way. He reconstructed a collective memory that is part human, part technological.

VRIELYNCK COLLECTION #2
Zoe Beloff, *The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*
16.02-03.06.2012

Zoe Beloff was the second artist the M HKA invited for an intervention in the Vrielynck Collection. In her work, Zoe Beloff looks for ways of depicting the unconscious processes of the mind. In doing so she tries to connect with the technology of the moving image. The title—*The Infernal Dream of Mutt and Jeff*—refers to a 1930s Super8 film that she found during her research in the archives of the Vrielynck Collection featuring Mutt and Jeff, two down on their luck characters from America's longest running comic strip. This comical cartoon film is exemplary of the way moving images influences the mind. Industrial and educational films from the 1940s, 50s and 60s provide another starting point for her installation. In addition to a video triptych and a film, which were re-contextualised in an installation that recalls a mid-twentieth century film studio set, Beloff incorporated objects and equipment from the Vrielynck Collection. In a separate area, these audio-visual media were being put into context. By means of a series of drawings, she examined how in the past utopian visions of social progress were linked to film equipment, industrial management and modernism.





2013 EXHIBITION, David Blair, LATT
Vrielynck Collection
courtesy: collection M HKA, Antwerp.



VRIELYNCK COLLECTION #3

David Blair, *The Telepathic Place:* *from the Making of 'The Telepathic Motion Picture* *of The Lost Tribes' 07.06.–08.09.2013*

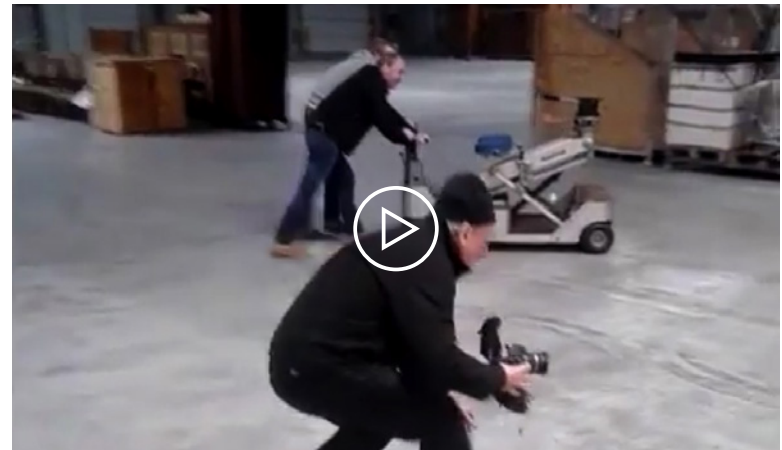
David Blair was the third artist that M HKA invited to interact with the Vrielynck Collection. The basis was provided by *The Telepathic Motion Picture of The Lost Tribes*, an expansive research project that is like in a flashback to the reconstruction of a lost film production in Manchuria, the doomed epic entitled *The Lost Tribes*. The media artist David Blair juggled with archive images, animation and live action to create a pseudo-scientific film in which he explored the boundaries between fact and fiction, truth and invention. His intention was to show that history is always a construction that is never definite but always changing and which requires new interpretations. In addition, the project was an allusion to the effect of nostalgia on our consumption of information.

For this exhibition Blair incorporated a large number of objects from the Vrielynck Collection displayed in five rooms and combined this with a series of paintings, assemblages and short video animations from his own archives; they all add to the evocation of the history of *The Lost Tribes*. A hypnotic soundtrack transported the viewer into the delirious

dream of an unhinged archivist, “an infinite universe, a filmic pantheon full of political ideologies that readily dissolve into a non-linear experience of time” (E. McMehen).

A Million Pictures: Magic Lantern Slide Heritage and the Common European History of Learning

Currently M HKA is participating as “associated partner” in the project *A Million Pictures: Magic Lantern Slide Heritage and the Common European History of Learning*. This project brings together researchers, curators, archivists and artists to develop new ways



David Blair, *Manchurian Camera*, viewed September 24, 2015.
<https://youtu.be/Qb3SUIvhrNE>

for people to connect with the history and heritage of the magic lantern and its slides. In collaboration with the University of Antwerp, M HKA will contribute to this project by making the Vrielynck Collection accessible for research, to produce interesting forms for re-using heritage to expand our knowledge and insight on magic lanterns and lantern slides. The museum will also accommodate or co-organise presentations that make the results of this research public. In this way the project will contribute to the development and remediation of the Vrielynck Collection.



“I GUESS YOU GUYS
AREN'T READY
FOR THAT YET
... BUT YOUR KIDS ARE
GONNA LOVE IT”

ANA BIGOTTE VIEIRA

‘Opening’, ‘Removal’ and ‘Restitution’: Why the 1980’s?

This essay was written for the roundtable discussion entitled Why the 1980s? proposed by L’Internationale within the framework of the cycle When Were the 1980s? curated by Luís Trindade, Ana Bigotte Vieira, and Giulia Bonali and organized by Instituto de História Contemporânea in Lisbon from 10 to 21 April 2015.

The general purpose of the debate, one of the last sessions of the cycle, was to reflect on the contemporary readings of the 1980s from the perspective of the projects each panellist has been undertaking, drawing parallels and differences among them.

Not being able to establish an overall perspective of the cycle, which was still running, I tried to bring to the forefront some of the reasons that led When Were the 1980s? to address this periodization

as a question, followed by some examples that suggest that it is difficult to place the Portuguese 1980s exactly between 1980 and 1989.

The text focuses on three operations—OPENING, REMOVAL and RESTITUTION—having Ana Hatherly’s work *As Ruas de Lisboa*, Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa’s *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*, and Ana Bigotte Vieira’s *No ALEPH—Notes about a research on Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation ACARTE Service (1984-1989)* as main sources.

It is important to note that this text is being written in 2015, at a time when the brutal presence of a succession of absences in Portuguese recent history is felt more than ever. In fact, the current austerity policies point to the removal of a series of I would call ‘openings’ directly related to the Revolution on 25 April 1974 that overthrew António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano’s forty-eight year dictatorship and ended thirteen years of colonial wars. The more obvious the removal process is (for instance, with the privatisation of large sectors of Portuguese



1. Two good documents on the Portuguese revolutionary process are the films Scenes From the Class Struggle in Portugal by Robert Kramer and Que Farei Eu Com Esta Espada? by João César Monteiro, both available on youtube. For a critique of Robert Kramer’s film, see “Never Has a Winter Been so Long” by Ricardo Noronha, written for a projection of the film at The Brecht Forum in New York in 2011. For a critique of the ways the revolutionary process has (not) been discussed, see also “Os excessos de Abril”, by Luís Trindade.

2. *The Back To The Future I* rock’n’roll scene is available online. I would like to acknowledge Rui Lopes, who drew my attention to this scene, and to thank Isabel Brison, Luís Trindade, André Silveira Miguel Cardoso and Maria João Afonso for their careful reading.

economy), the more evident it becomes that the roots of this process go back to the 1980s, at least, and to the backlash of the revolutionary process¹.

From today’s point of view, the ‘OPENING’ moment identified in all three works could be seen to correspond with the ‘Long 1960s’, its emancipatory impulse and set of practices, and the ‘REMOVAL’ moment could be read as a result of the decline of possibilities usually related to neoliberal policies of the 1980s. But in all three works, the periodization seems to exceed linear chronology. It is therefore our intention to bring this very periodization under scrutiny, in order to disclose potentialities for the present, in a critical, non-nostalgic approach.

Back To The Future

In *Back to the Future I*, after Marty McFly finishes a wild guitar performance, at the party where his parents dance for the first time, he notices everyone staring blankly at him and says: “I guess you guys aren’t ready for that yet... But your kids are gonna love it.” He had just prefigured rock ‘n’ roll music².

In Robert Zemeckis plot, McFly, the hero, travels back and forth in the chronology, going back to the past, so that the future can be unwrapped. In a less epic tone and with a dispersed multiplicity of agents rather than one single hero, such was (if you can allow me to be a little daring) one of our desires when opening up this reflection. What if we were to think back to thirty years ago?

But the plot thickened rather quickly.

Not only from a chronological perspective, the 1980s seemed inextricable from the period coming immediately before, the 1960s—or the ‘Long 1960s’—, but also, from a geographical perspective they would entangle different meanings. And what about the specific Portuguese case, where a long-lasting dictatorship and more than a decade of colonial wars were overthrown by the coup of 25 April 1974, giving rise to the eighteen month-long revolutionary



3. “Cavaquismo” refers to the rule of Prime Minister Cavaco Silva, who was in power from 1985 until 1995 (with two absolute parliamentary majorities, since 1987), being the longest in power since Salazar and describing himself not as a politician, but as an academic, precisely like his predecessor. From 2006 he became President of the country, until today.

process in 1974-75, soon interrupted by the counter-coup of 25 November 1975, with European Economic Community and NATO in the horizon?

Unlike Marty McFly for whom the perplexity of the audience staring at him could be answered with a simple “I guess you guys aren’t ready for that yet” (*that* being rock music), the challenge was precisely not to tell one single story through a narrative of back-

wardness and behind-ness—a story with central points emanating from unwavering developed centres—but to try, instead, to understand the past as a territory built from a multiplicity of negotiations and struggles, a time span traversed by tensions.

But let’s go back to *Back the Future*.

The second part of Marty McFly’s injunction—“I guess you guys aren’t ready for that yet... But your kids are gonna love it”—alludes to rock ‘n’ roll and suggests, by contagion, the rhythmic resonance between de-ordered people dancing, paving the way for a place where the collective desiring body plays a central role: TO LOVE.

Rock and pop, advertising, fashion, market,

well-being, colour television, youth, postmodernism, audio-visual, sexual freedom, multiculturalism, Europe; and at the same time depoliticization, cavaquismo³, depression in the rural world, uncontrolled growth of the outskirts, racism, corruption, social discrimination, pollution, anti-intellectualism, consumerism... On the one hand, the logic of abundance that can be found at work in the 1980s (and in the Portuguese 1980s, in particular) seems like an opening—disclosing potentials for the creation of emancipated desiring subjectivities. On the other hand, it definitively also appears like a closure—subsuming the possibilities of reality to a neoliberal order; an order interested as much in the atomisation of collective desire for consumption purposes, as in the removal of the traces of the recent revolutionary years marked by collective agency.

OPENING and REMOVAL can be considered as central operations to think about the time span addressed here. But again, which time span are we talking about? *When were the 1980s?*

I would like to illustrate this question by focusing on three works where an effort to deal with these two operations is at stake, in order to end up with a brief description of the reasons that lead us to propose this cycle—a public collective reflection on the 1980s understood as an interrogation.



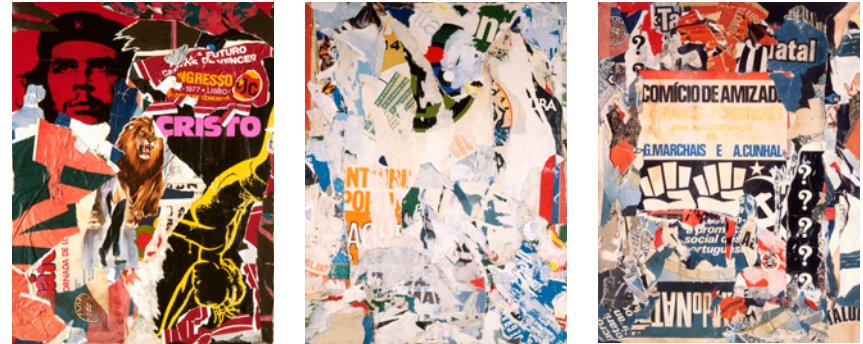
By doing so, I am invoking a third operation: DEVOLUÇÃO (RESTITUTION). This can be read in three ways: *DEVOLVER* in Portuguese can mean to give something we do not like back; *DEVOLVER* meaning to have back, by restitution; and *DEVOLVER*

as the substance of transmission, an ingredient of the experience of partaking.

The three works discussed here—from different periods, but all (re)visited today, in 2015—share with the cycle *When Were the 1980s?* the investigation of the limits of public space and collective agency, having the public sphere as an imagined community and inquiring into something that can be thought of as commons: common memories of common practices, memories and practices that can become part of a common imaginary and help illuminate a certain repertoire of actual practices.

4. Ana Hatherly, as we can see [here](#), was born in Porto in 1929 and died in Lisbon in August 2015. She started her literary career in the early 1960s, and has published a large number of books of poetry, translated not only into the main European languages but also into Japanese and Chinese, as well as essays and fiction. A graduate of Lisbon Classical University and a PhD from the University of California in Berkeley, she was Emeritus Professor of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa of which she was a founding member. She was also Chair of the Portuguese PEN Club. More information on Ana Hatherly’s work can be found [here](#).

I. Opening



Ana Hatherly, *As Ruas de Lisboa*, 1977. Collage on paper and Platemax, Col. CAM/ Fundação Gulbenkian Foundation. Foto: José Manuel Alves Costa.

As Ruas de Lisboa

In *As Ruas de Lisboa*, an artwork dating from 1977, visual artist, writer, poet and professor Ana Hatherly⁴ condenses some of the discursive and political effervescence that took place in Lisbon during the revolutionary process of 1974-1975. This effervescence—inseparable from the local and global contexts in which the Carnation Revolution took place, directly related to the African anti-colonial struggles and closely connected with other European processes of social rebellion—attests to the vivacity of the profound social mobilisation and international



5. Some of those who organised the cycle *When Were the 1980s?* had previously organised the conference “The Carnation Revolution between African Anti-Colonial Struggles and European Rebellion”, Birkbeck College, London, 2014. The two events are related and can be understood as part of the same project.

forms of activism triggered at the time.

By offering us a portrait of the Lisbon walls in 1974-1975, focusing on the everyday life of the revolutionary process, Hatherly’s work places this moment in “wider linkages to the radical moment of the long 1960s, the Cold War, African anti-Imperialism, and the memory of Revolution in the

twentieth-century at large”⁵. In this sense, *As Ruas de Lisboa* can be seen as bearing witness to a discursive and political opening, a disclosing of possibilities only made possible by a brutal interruption in the course of history, in a Benjaminian way.



Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Archive image provided by Câmara Municipal da Amadora: The 25th of April Monument in Rotunda das Águas Livres, Damaia, Amadora. Photo: Unkown. Date: Unkown.

The Águas Livres Square Monument

Researching how the Carnation Revolution had altered the public space, namely in statuary, artist Isabel Brison (who was born in 1980) realised that, astonishingly enough, very few monuments have been replaced or removed. Reverting instead to monuments commemorating the Portuguese Revolution,



6. Festa do Avante! is a cultural and political festival organised by the Portuguese Communist Party. It started in 1976 and it was one of the biggest festivals in Portugal, until the mid.1990s.

she found a reproduction of the *Águas Livres Square Monument* on the Damaia Roundabout in a book. The monument, dating from 1985, was acknowledged as “unknown collective authorship”.

A highly industrial metallurgical area in the 1970s and 1980s, Amadora is one of the biggest cities on the outskirts of Lisbon, and one of the most densely populated municipalities in the country, with 175,136 people in an area of 23.78 km². Damaia is a suburb of the city of Amadora, which at the time had only been a city for six years. In 1985, Amadora had been, for almost a decade by then, a communist municipality with a solid trade-unionist tradition in metallurgy, due, among others factories, to SOREFAME, a now extinct company specialised in building train carriages and heavy machinery. SOREFAME workers made the *Águas Livres Square Monument* in their spare time, for the communist party’s annual festival in September, Festa do Avante!⁶, and they then brought it to Damaia’s *Águas Livres* roundabout in December of the same year.

In the same period, as she also came to know, the same group of unknown workers also built another monument, an *Homage to the Fireman*, and a series

of playgrounds for children and street furniture, all made in metal, as the recently born neighbourhood lacked urban planning.



Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Image found online by the artists

Alongside the constructivist aesthetic of the monuments themselves, uncannily peculiar in the Portuguese statuary landscape, it is worth highlighting that these artworks were made collectively by absolutely unknown artists animated by ‘revolutionary spirit’, with the will to improve the newly born city of Amadora.



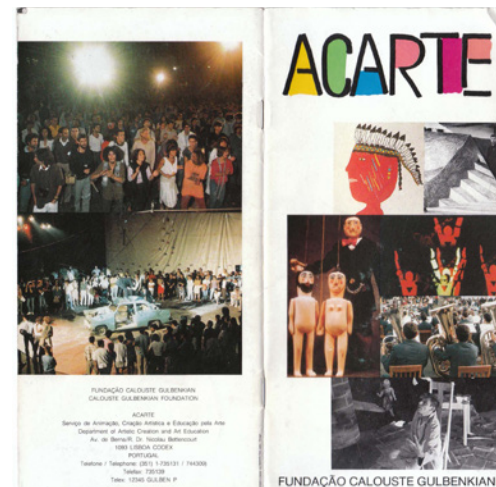
But I would like to call attention to the chronology: workers are spending their spare time collectively making artworks and infrastructures to improve their neighbourhood in 1985, one year before Portugal became a member of the European Economic Community? Wasn’t it in 1975, during the revolutionary process, when people were occupying lands and factories and organising themselves into neighbourhood committees? How come is that possible that this happened in the middle of the 1980s?

‘Curadoria da Falta’: The Gulbenkian Foundation’s ACARTE Department

Unlike several European countries where modern art museums were built in the 1950s and 1960s, shortly after the second World War, and understood as a symbol of democracy and freedom of speech, Salazar’s rule and Portugal’s economic conditions (drained by thirteen years of colonial wars on several fronts), meant that the construction of a modern art museum was only possible in the 1980s, due to the private initiative of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, shortly before the country joined EEC. The Gulbenkian’s Centro de Arte Moderna [CAM], opened in 1983, was the first modern art museum in Portugal, with a



Calouste Gulbenkian CAM, courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.



ACARTE 1989, leaflet describing the activity of the department between 1984 and 1989. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive

7. “Beyond the exhibitions gallery” is the expressive title of the text Madalena Perdigão wrote for the catalogue of *Exhibition-Dialogue on Contemporary Art* organised by the Council of Europe in 1985. This title perfectly captures ACARTE’s position inside CAM. It is important to notice that the ACARTE Department depended directly from the Gulbenkian Foundation’s Presidency, and thus had a huge degree of independence. A brochure dating 1989 gave an account of the Department’s main reasons of existence: “The Portuguese cultural scene was missing a service geared to contemporary culture and/or the modern treatment of timeless themes and a Centre for Education through Art dedicated to children. It was necessary to ensure that the Modern Art Centre (...), would not be merely a Museum in the restricted sense of the term, but also a cultural

collection that was partly brought together for the occasion.

Thought of as an art centre rather than solely a museum, CAM included a multi-purpose hall for theatre and dance performances, concerts, multimedia shows, conferences and meetings; an open-air amphitheatre for live performances, jazz concerts and bands; a temporary exhibition hall for exhibitions and a children’s art centre.

The activity undertaken *beyond the exhibitions gallery* where the modern art museum was lodged was the responsibility of ACARTE, the Gulbenkian Foundation’s Department of Artistic Creation and Art Education.⁷

CAM and ACARTE can therefore be said as being intensely desired by the artistic community who had been longing for a museum, rather than creating a rupture with such an institution as the modern art museum⁸. And

consequently, due to the fact that the museum was only built in the 1980s, several temporalities seem to be at stake in CAM and ACARTE:

Schematically (and risking some imprecisions⁹), CAM and ACARTE could be seen as a promise coming from the 1950/60s; placed in a cultural centre corresponding to a structuralist architectonic archetype from the 1970s (such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris); which opened in the 1980s (when Jean Baudrillard had already written his highly critical *Beaubourg* effect¹⁰); hosting the ACARTE Department, whose curatorial approach—mainly focused on performance, dance, theatre and a series of relational events where presence and performance were at stake—could be seen as prefiguring the curatorial discursive and performance turn of the 2000s.

ACARTE can also be thought of as the culminating point of two

centre”. in *ACARTE 5 anos brochure*, 1989.

8. The fact that there was no modern art museum in the country is crucial at this point. On the Portuguese experimental avant-garde scene between 1961 and 1979 see Verónica Metello (2007) in *Focos de Intensidade / Linhas de Abertura: A Ativação do Mecanismo Performance 1961-1979*, Masters Dissertation in History of Art presented at FCSH-UNL, Lisbon.

9. Nuno Grande (2009), *Arquitecturas da Cultura: Política, Debate, Espaço*, Doctorate Dissertation in Architecture presented at DARQ/FCTUC, Porto.

10. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard devotes a chapter to what he calls “The Beaubourg Effect”, an acute critique of the Centre Pompidou which had recently been built and was visited by crowds day after day.



decades of research on Education Through Art and Artistic Education. Its founder and main Director Madalena Perdigão not only founded the Gulbenkian Orchestra (1962), the Gulbenkian Chorus (1964) and the Gulbenkian Ballet (1965), but was also responsible for the reform of the national conservatory schools and for a failed reorganisation of the national artistic education after the Revolution. In fact, there is an intricate history linking the radical experiments in arts pedagogy prompted by the Gulbenkian Foundation's Centre for Pedagogic Research before 1974, Madalena Perdigão's failed efforts while working at the Ministry of Education shortly after the Revolution, and her return to the Gulbenkian Foundation as ACARTE Director in the 1980s. In this regard, ACARTE's activities in the 1980s are directly related to the 'Long 1960s' emancipatory experiments in pedagogy.



ACARTE 1984–June 1st International Childrens day, Escola de Circo Mariano Franco. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.



ACARTE 1984–*Almada Negreiros Deseja-se Mulher*, text Almada Negreiros, Director Fernanda Lapa (Sala Polivalente), Production ACARTE, Foto: @Paulo Cintra. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.



ACARTE 1985, *Exposição-Diálogo Sobre Arte Contemporânea*, 1985, Wolf Vostel, *O Jardim das Delícias*. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive. Foto: © Eduardo Gageiro. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.

But not exclusively. ACARTE’s activities can also be looked at from the point of view of curatorial practices, or, more accurately, as being at the crossroads between emergent curatorial and programming practices, conjoining both. Perdigão proposed what I would call ‘Curadoria da Falta’, for ACARTE’s often based its activity on the need to attend to what is missing (*faz falta*)—thus developing a particularly attentive way of moving through aesthetic and political-philosophical proposals usually attributed to different time spans. ‘Curadoria da Falta’ means something like ‘curating what is lacking’. Literally, *falta* stands for ‘lack’, but it can be understood as ‘missing’—as in my interpretation of the ‘School of Missing Studies’ project, by the collective BikVanderPol and friends, concerning interdisciplinary studies that still have to be located and undertaken. In fact, ‘Curadoria da falta’ takes lack as something constituent for the community, as openness to the other, in the sense Roberto Esposito describes it, and not as something derogatory, proof of scarcity and backwardness. By ‘Curadoria da Falta’, this Department’s activity opens up to the different perceptions its contemporaries had of their own time. As such, ACARTE is a superb case study with regards what concerns chronological folding, eccentric chronologies and decentred modernities.

This has led me to describe ACARTE as an *Aleph*, a comparison that came up in an interview with art critic João Pinharanda¹¹.

An *Aleph*, according to Jorge Luís Borges, is “the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending” (Borges 1945). There is both a heterotopic sense of the museum space (Foucault 1967), and an acute perception of ACARTE as belonging to the exhibitionary complex (Bennett 1995), a set of institutions where a particular kind of subjectivity would take shape through repeated practices and widespread discourses. In fact, in the Portuguese 1980s narrative, ACARTE could be placed alongside emergent phenomena such as the Lisbon nightclub scene at Bairro Alto (with places like the cosmopolitan disco Frágil), or urban consumption materialised, for instance, in the Amoreiras Shopping Mall, which opened one year after CAM. Contradictorily enough, ACARTE’s activity could also be understood in direct relation to the Carnation Revolution of April 1974—as a modern art museum was one of the late fulfilled ‘April promises’. Thus, if on the one hand the ACARTE Department proposed a series of disparate events such as *Contemporary European Dance*, *Spoken Newspaper of Literary Actuality* or *Quinzena*

11. Ana Bigotte Vieira, interview with João Pinharanda, Lisbon, September 2011.



Multimédia, to name but a few—gathering in an heterotopic fashion heterogeneous places and times in one single space—on the other hand its activities happened in articulation with a network of spaces for leisure, work and consumption—the ‘exhibitionary complex’ where one would see and be seen, and new subjectivities would arise.

Approaching CAM/ACARTE as an *Aleph*, allows for a particular non-linear reading of the set of tensions enacted by the opening of such spaces. It could be particularly useful in order to address the museum as a place that simultaneously works as an enunciator for society at large and something that is practiced (adapted, cheered, contested...) by its members.

Bearing these three examples in mind, let’s go on to the second operation “REMOVAL”, so that the argument can proceed. I will present three different ways of enacting this operation: to wrench, to dismantle and to extinguish.

II. Removal



Ana Hatherly, *As Ruas de Lisboa*, 1977. Collage on paper and Platemax, Col. CAM/ Fundação Gulbenkian Foundation. Foto: José Manuel Alves Costa.

To Wrench

Ana Hatherly’s *As Ruas de Lisboa* is often understood as a typical artwork from the 1970s and therefore usually used to celebrate the 25 April 1974 *zeitgeist* and its openings, but it actually dates from 1977, and it aims, instead, at giving an account of a brutal gesture of removal. It is therefore a *requiem* for the revolutionary process and not a celebration. The artist states¹²:

This series of collages, made in Lisbon throughout the year of 1977, was made out of authentic posters, arranged so as to reproduce the way they looked when they were *wrenched* from the city walls with this purpose. If the political poster, typical of the time, seems to be dominant, one can also find, at times, either overlapping, or separately, the circus poster, one of the most frequent in the country. This assemblage kind of work, other than its aesthetic objective, takes over and aims at assuming a facet which differentiates it from other *collages* and *décollages* that were made all around the world, for here we have an authentic historical recollection: *it is a matter of fixing, through a certain form of mural writing, an entire period of the life of the city and the life of the country that is already beginning to look remote: the 25th of April.*

Thus, rather than reflecting on the revolutionary process, this artwork is already commenting on what came next: the 1980s. *As Ruas de Lisboa* can, though, be understood as an aesthetic and affective testimony of a brutal gesture of removal. Ana Hatherly uses the word *arrancar* [to wrench]. And in her work

one can find fragments of words, images and pieces of a certain kind of aesthetics we would immediately relate to the 1974 revolutionary period. But at stake it is not so much the 1975 period itself, as its abrupt ending—and what is left for us to sense.

This kind of analysis can be extended to a series of other artworks from this period, which, typically understood as synthesising an utopian impulse, are actually commenting on its abrupt ending. What lead us to think of a series of misunderstandings and paradoxes of the Long 1960s and the ways in which the memory of this period has been transmitted.

12. In CASTELO BRANCO, Edwar de Alencar. PO-EX: a poética como acontecimento sob a noite que o fascismo salazarista impôs a Portugal. *Rev. Bras. Hist.* [online]. 2014, vol.34, n.67 [viewed 5 September 2015], pp. 131-155 (my italics). It is curious to notice that this series of paintings in 1978 were titled *Descolagens da cidade. Escrita mural de Ana Hatherly*. *Exposição Portuguese Art Since 1910*. Londres, Royal Academy of Arts, 1978. When and why has the series changed name still needs to be studied.



Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Archive image provided by Câmara Municipal da Amadora: The 25th of April Monument in Rotunda das Águas Livres, Damaia, Amadora. Photo: Unkown. Date: Unkown.



Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Archive image. *Rotunda das Águas Livres in 2008*. Photo: Isabel Brison. Courtesy the artist.

To Dismantle

Isabel Brison had found a picture of the mysterious monument in a book. It just so happens that her partner, the artist Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa, grew up in Amadora and remembered it perfectly. He used to pass by this monument on his way to high school.

In search for the constructivist sculpture, the couple drove to Damaia roundabout. But the monument was not there: where the gigantic metallic structure once stood, all they could see were nicely ordered red and white flower beds. What had happened? Nuno Rodrigues decided to join Brison's research and the *Águas Livres Square Monument at Damaia Roundabout* project was born.

Applying an historical and ethnographic method, Brison and Rodrigues de Sousa initiated a series of oral history interviews. By talking to the local people, they found out that the monument was dismantled in the late nineties (around 1997) by the party that was elected to the city council at that time, ending the communist municipal tradition in Amadora. That was also how they got to know the history of the *Monument to the Fireman* and the playgrounds, built by the same SOREFAME unknown workers.





Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Archive image. *Monument to the Fireman in 2014*. Photo: Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa. Courtesy the artist.



Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. The new monument to the fireman. Image found online

If the playgrounds, albeit in a renewed plastic version, happened to still be there—making us ponder the fact that at least the unknown workers succeeded in keeping the land for community purposes, the monument to the fireman had been removed from its central position on the main square and taken to a garden nearby (fig 2c). In its place now stands a discrete iron statue of a fireman (fig 2d). There was no clue, whatsoever as to where the *Rotunda das Águas Livres* monument could be. It had been dismantled.

To Extinguish

In 2008, while I was researching on theatre, dance and performance art history in Portugal from the perspective of international exchanges and global aesthetic influences and contaminations, the ACARTE Department that had been closed down in 2002, stood as a fundamental reference. And yet it was almost unstudied and barely visible, present only indirectly embodied in the performing art repertoire, namely in the Portuguese New Dance scene, or in people's memories.



ACARTE 1985 Jazz em Agosto 1985, Sun Ra Arkestra. Foto: © Eduardo Gageiro. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.



ACARTE, Jazz em Agosto 1985, Sun Ra Arkestra. Foto: © Eduardo Gageiro. Courtesy: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation archive.

The Department had not only hosted foundational artists from all over the world (with a focus on Europe, since the country was joining the EEC), but it had produced and presented hundreds of events in fields as different as dance, performance art, theatre, cartoon, literature, jazz, experimental and world music. It was one of the first institutions in the country to deal with multicultural issues. All this was occurring in the 1980s, at a time when Portuguese society faced major changes—such as the gradual ‘inclusion’ of half a million people coming from Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau (after 1975); or the European Community membership (in 1986). A close look at the almost untouched archives disclosed a scenario in which the ACARTE Department, especially in the first years when brand new and working through ‘curadoria da falta’, was the place for activities that could not be hosted anywhere else, among them a series of radical experiments in performance and performing arts, but also a series of initiatives concerning African countries for which a new kind of approach was needed. If often the discursive terms in which this approach was set were anything but radical, the ways in which the audience enthusiastically and polemically reacted to the Sun Ra Arkestra (USA), Sossabe and Os Tubarões (Cape Verde) points to the need to look at institutions (and to ACARTE in

particular) as something that is practiced... to see in them emancipatory potentials that often go beyond their institutional discursive frame, allowing us to think of its common uses and how they (in)form the construction of subjectivities.

Though extinct, ACARTE was an absent presence.

Soon this also happened to the Ballet Gulbenkian after forty years of existence, as it was extinct in 2005. And who knows, it might even end up happening to state funding for the culture as the Ministry of Culture was also extinguished in 2011, now replaced by a Secretary of State, directly dependent on the Prime Minister’s office.

As *what it is* aims at standing for *what it was* and for *what could therefore be*—archival and repertoire work seem the all more urgent.



III. Devolução / Restitution

Finally: DEVOLUÇÃO / RESTITUTION, the third operation, resulting from an effort to deal with the two operations mentioned before, while doing it collectively, in the public sphere. For now I will change the order of the presentation a little bit and start by presenting an excerpt of Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa’s work on *Águas Livres Square Monument* at Damaia Roundabout.

After an extensive investigation (materialised in a zine and a series of images) on the free work made by unknown SOREFAME workers, Brison and Rodrigues de Sousa risked the conclusion that most probably the monuments would not have been removed if they had been made by well-known artists

and considered ‘proper art’.

But alongside their ‘real’ investigation, they started to develop their own interpretation of the facts: due to the constructivist form of the monument, they related it to productivism, one of the dominant factions inside *Proletcult*, in which art was to join industrial production. Inspired by Alexander Bodganov’s 1908 novel *Red Star* and the 1927 Russian film *Aelita*, in which a utopian society is founded on Mars—the Red Planet, they depicted the *Águas Livres Square Monument* as a spaceship travelling to Mars.

By doing so Brison and Rodrigues de Sousa were not only commenting on the monument’s disappearance but also relating it to the withdrawal of an utopian impulse—the ‘end of history’ as preconised in the 1980s—which, far from being gone, is ironically pictured as active *elsewhere*, in this case, on Mars.



Animation series. Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa *O Monumento da Rotunda das Águas Livres*. Animation studies (work in progress). Isabel Brison and Nuno Rodrigues de Sousa. Courtesy the artist.





Screenshots of the ACARTE Timeline 1984-1989 project by Ana Bigotte Vieira.

The ACARTE Timeline 1984-1989 I worked on proposes a digital interface to ACARTE’s action in the 1980s. It functions as a radical archive that can be understood as a *commons tool*, essential in the transmission of the repertoire of time-based art, such as theatre, dance and performance art, among others. It can also be useful to address the 1980s Portuguese culture or the European performing arts of the period, specially the newly born New Dance scene.

But most of all, it can be used as a tool to inquire how the modern art museum was collectively used at a particular moment in time—enabling to illuminate the ways in which institutions become common institutions¹³. Such a tool, while used, might allow for various appropriations, disclosing the past and contributing to a more accurate understanding of the present as well as opening up possibilities for the future.

13. In this respect, it is important to notice how often Gulbenkian Foundation and ACARTE are seen as ‘ours’: ‘a nossa Gulbenkian’. In 1975, in the peak of the Revolutionary Process, Gulbenkian is ‘occupied’ by its workers. At the time newspaper Expresso publishes a dossier expressively entitled “Que Gulbenkian Temos? Que Gulbenkian Queremos?” [What Gulbenkian do we have? What Gulbenkian do we want?], where Gulbenkian Foundation is obviously seen as ‘ours’: commons. See “Que Gulbenkian temos? Que Gulbenkian queremos?” in Expresso, Lisboa, 8 de Março de 1975.



Finally, Hatherly’s *As Ruas de Lisboa* can be seen as one of the influences for Marco Balesteros and Isabel Lucena’s brilliant graphic proposition for *When Were the 1980s?*

Working with an array of recent images found by the curatorial team of the cycle, Balesteros and Lucena succeeded in creating a sensorial approach to the core question of the cycle, while simultaneously giving an account of the brutal gesture of removal mentioned earlier. Each poster would therefore work as a repository of recent visual culture, familiar and unfamiliar, deep and superficial at the same time, made out of pasted fragments over an unlimited surface.



Isabel Lucena and Marco Balesteros, graphic work for the cycle *When Were the 1980s?* (Lisbon April 10-21st, 2015)

By detailing these examples, I wanted to shed some light on the reasons that led us to address the 1980s as a question. Namely, the ways in which the present is marked by the brutal presence of gestures of removal; how the mapping out of those gestures reveals eccentric chronologies; and how we have acknowledged this by undertaking an operation of restitution/ devolução, in which we can include the very curating of the cycle *When Were the 1980s?*

Not only *When Were the 1980s?* could be seen as one of the very first efforts to critically scrutinize the Portuguese 1980s, but also the ways in which that was being done were quite open. Such

an approach involves both the opening of cultural phenomena to its relations with politics, society and economy, and the inclusion of historical phenomena transcending the 1980s, either with their origins in the post-revolutionary period, or beyond into the 1990s. With the backdrop of a non-linear chronology, *When Were the 1980s?* proposed, thus, a meeting structured in open call, along with a set of activities where a critical and sensory revisiting of a series of spaces, practices, images and products ‘of the time’ took place: music sessions with live comment, TV marathon, walks around pivotal 80s places, cinema and debate. In the ways this cycle went about there was an effort to both map out critical non-nostalgic researches being currently done, and to collectively investigate the foundations of our current moment. By watching 1980s TV together or listening to 1980s

14. In this sense, a proposal such as the TV Marathon organized during the cycle *When Were the 1980s?* has a parallel in events such as Collective Listening, Collective Liberation at Interference Archive in NYC, even though there is no direct relation between the two events.

music collectively there was an urge to enact the powerful social experience these kinds of media endorse and to collaboratively investigate their sound, images, historical context and emotional resonance, while at the same time having fun¹⁴.

But to conclude, let us return to *Back to the Future I*.

Right before the film ends, Doc states: “ROADS? Where we’re going we don’t need ROADS”, opening the plot to the next episode, where McFly travels to 2015.

Well, here we are, in 2015.

POST SCRIPTUM

I am editing this essay at the beginning of September 2015, five months after I first wrote it. Europe is said to be currently facing the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. In the media, images of people escaping from their home countries devastated by war and misery and arriving to Europe are recurrent. As these pictures spread and instigate different reactions—some of them highly racist and xenophobic—another picture came to my mind: a picture of Lisbon in 1975 by Alfredo Cunha, shortly after the arrival of 6000 people from the Portuguese ex-colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe and Cape Verde.





Alfredo Cunha, 1975.



Lisbon 1975, image taken from *Foi Há Quarenta Anos: O Dia a Dia de Lisboa no caldeirão do PREC*, jornal Observador.

The regime monument to the ‘Discoveries’—*Padrão dos Descobrimentos*¹⁵— on which more than two dozen heroic male ‘discoverers’ face the ocean in epic fashion is surrounded by wooden boxes full of the belongings of people who had recently ‘returned’, this image ironically captures the post-colonial moment Lisbon was facing in 1975. And yet, while I grew up there in the 1980s and 90s, the recent coming of all these people from Portuguese ex-colonies was almost invisible—similarly the colonial wars were almost never mentioned, in what can be seen as one of the biggest REMOVAL operations of the recent Portuguese past.

In fact, not only were these issues not being addressed, the Portuguese ‘Discoveries’, crucial to the dictatorship’s self-image, were invested with new rhetoric in the 1980s and 1990s as the country negotiated its position in the European Community. Dressed as ‘globalisation pioneer momentum’ and celebrated again and again in initiatives such as the creation of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries,

15. Initially built by architect Cotinelli Telmo in 1939 for the Portuguese World Fair of 1940 as a temporary construction, Padrão dos Descobrimentos was re-built in as a permanent Monument to the Discoveries for ‘Comemorações Henriquinas’, a series of commemorations of the Discoveries that took place in 1960 immediately before the beginning of the Colonial Wars.

in 1986, or the Expo 98, in 1998, there was never a moment to address the massive arrival of these people, nor to discuss the traumatic experience of the wars, all barely visible for my generation.



Kiluanji Kia Henda, 2007.

The artists Kiluanji Kia Henda and Isabel Brison have individually taken the iconic *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* as working material in a gesture that echoes what was previously named DEVOLUÇÃO/ RESTITUTION. Although very different, their artworks have in common a sense of irony and joy that are

crucial to deal with the centuries of violence implied by colonialism.

Kia Henda invites a group of young black men from the Lisbon outskirts to the monument, affectively bringing into presence the very effects of the ‘Discoveries’ and humorously compelling people to address them, rather than commemorating violent colonial pasts. Isabel Brison attempts to remove this statue, which remains until now a symbol of the country, regardless of its correspondence with the imperial colonial image forged by the dictatorship. In a succession of Photoshop coups, Brison enacts an operation that is said to have been part of the revolutionary process agenda in 1975. There is an urge to deal with the perception of the colonial legacy, starting by the removal of its ‘imperial’ presence by concretely thinking *what to do* with its symbols.



Isabel Brison, *Feitos Recentes na História das Cidades 2*,
Estudos com Escultura Pública #7 and #9, 2010.

In the first work, she removes the statue from its position by the water, transferring it to a hill where these figures, looking anything but glamorous, get literally *stuck*; in the second one, Brison goes further and dismantles the heroic composition depositing them in a storage.

With no pedestal and taken individually as pure materiality—stuff to store—these figures look semi-lost. All crowded and cluttered, lacking decent conditions, their image made me think of them not as heroes but as ordinary people (migrants who went overseas? refugees? prisoners?)—or better, as statues of people, representation.

Thinking about what is going on now and the images that have been circulating in the media, I long for actions similar to Brison’s and Henda’s: something powerful enough to dismantle the hydraulic rhetoric of ‘flux’ and ‘floods’, allowing us to address people arriving as people, whether they are refugees or migrants.

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THE CULTURE OF COLONIALITY

DANIELA ORTIZ

On Saturday 13 October 2012, the day after the celebration of the National Day of Spain and its insulting commemoration of the start of the colonial process, the Department of State Records published a document stating the conditions that the migrant populations would be required to meet if they wished to obtain equal rights as citizens through the only possible channel available: by obtaining Spanish nationality.

The first page of the document decrees that “the appropriate level of integration into Spanish society is not limited to an acceptable knowledge of the language, but also requires knowledge of the institutions and traditions, and the adoption of the Spanish way of life”. The document encourages the authority in charge of this process of bureaucratic abuse to specify whether or not migrant applicants are sufficiently integrated.

Similarly, in Catalonia a new law—ironically known as the ‘welcome law’—was introduced as part of the process of construction of sovereignty. This law basically consists of a series of requests on

financial and labour issues, which applicants must accomplish in order to obtain a residence permit or family reunification. In addition, the law states that they are required to prove their integration by participating in courses, an interview, and above all showing a basic knowledge of both Spanish and Catalan.

Imposing integration on the migrant populations is actually just a tool to strengthen the process of colonisation of individuals, like myself, who come from subjugated countries. Several politicians in Catalonia defended the prerequisite knowledge of Catalan—a condition that only applies to the migrant populations—based on the argument of maintaining social cohesion through the use of a common language, even though this common language is obviously not a prerequisite for people from Germany or Madrid.

As I mentioned in another article on this matter, if the Spanish state demands that people from countries like Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador become integrated into a society that celebrates its National Day on 12 October each year, and where there are fourteen monuments commemorating Christopher



Columbus, many of us end up believing that we are actually being asked to take the same position in regard to Spanish society as the indigenous person kneeling before the priest Bernardo Boyl represented on the pedestal of the monument to Columbus in Barcelona. The requirement to integrate begins with an aggressive questioning, in the negative sense, of the knowledge, traditions and cultures of the ones that come from the former colonies, and ends by determining, through the bureaucratic system, whether or not you are granted the right to not be deported and to remain in this territory.



Daniela Ortiz, *Réplica*, 12 October 2014, action carried out during the Spanish National Day celebrations.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bQz4pPGg9k>

In 2015, the Spanish government granted the Instituto Cervantes, which describes itself as “an institution for the promotion, teaching, and dissemination of Spanish and Hispanic culture”, the authority to draft the questions for the citizenship tests. The perspective on national identity, and the knowledge that a Spanish citizen would be expected to know do not differ much from the parameters used by the authorities in previous years. Questions such as “what is celebrated on 12 October?”, “what are Spain’s borders?” and “what were the Spanish viceroyalties in colonised territories?” show how the coloniality of knowledge is established in all its strength, given that the correct answers required to pass the test are those that defend the colonial and imperial nature of Spanish identity. This means that a person from a context in which the Day of Indigenous Resistance is celebrated on 12 October, for example, has to answer that the significance of this date is the fact that it is Spain’s National Day. Similarly, a person from Morocco has to state that the colonial territories of Ceuta and Melilla are Spanish, and so on. The migrant subject who attempts to obtain citizenship rights must accept and repeat as legitimate the narratives that place him or her in an inferior position.

You may be wondering what all of this abusive bureaucratic red tape established by the migratory

control system has to do with decolonising a museum. Apart from the fact that coloniality is precisely one of the main elements that the museum—as one of the key spaces for the construction of Eurocentrism—shares with the migratory control system as the backbone of coloniality in Europe, there is also the issue that what migrants are asked to learn and accept is culture, and at the same time museums supposedly establish the legitimisation frameworks that define what culture is or is not, and how that culture is understood and disseminated.

When I was asked to participate in the seminar “Decolonising the Museum” organised by the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), and again now that I have been invited to write about the subject, I do so based on the conviction that it is essential to note that in all the bureaucratic red tape described above, there is a striking absence of any responsibility given or taken by spaces and agents that are supposedly specialised in cultural construction and dissemination. While the Instituto Cervantes has already stepped into its role as inquisitor, institutions such as the Museo Reina Sofía, MACBA, MUSAC, and particularly an institution such as La Virreina, have been deafeningly silent in regard to how representatives of the migratory control system use notions such as culture to determine whether a


migrant person is expelled or permitted to stay.

The fact that cultural institutions do not express any resistance to culture being used to reinforce xenophobic and racial segregation practices by means of the discourse of integration makes it impossible to imagine how a process of decolonisation could take place simply through exhibitions, debates and talks that regularly appear in their programmes of activities. Unless there is a connection with the territories in which coloniality currently operates in all its violence in the European context, migrants may end up having to learn the name of the Spanish artists who exhibit in these museums in order to answer questions in the citizenship test.

I realise that the silence of cultural institutions may stem from their supposed political neutrality, that complex neutrality that leads, for example, to programme an exhibition financed by the embassy of the colonial state of Israel, publish an exhibition information sheet where the word Palestine, following Golda Meir’s style, is not mentioned but the words Jordan and Israel are, and throw out a Palestinian refugee artist who was carrying out an artistic action¹ at the opening in protest against the direct involvement of the Israeli Embassy in

1. Firas Shehadeh, *Palestinian sand dance*, 2014, single channel video/sound installation and digital print. Courtesy the artist <http://firasshehadeh.com/project/palestinian-sand-dance/>






CITA PREVIA
PARA LA OBTENCION DE LA NACIONALIDAD ESPAÑOLA
POR RESIDENCIA

D/D^a **DANIELA TALIA ORTIZ** [REDACTED]

N.I.E. [REDACTED]

DIA Y HORA **15 DE NOVIEMBRE DE 2016**
 DE LA CITA **10,30 HORAS**



Barcelona, 09 DE FEBRERO DE 2015

¡IMPORTANTE:

TODOS LOS SOLICITANTES EXCEPTO MENORES DE 14 AÑOS REALIZARAN UN EXAMEN DE INTEGRACION EL DIA DE LA CITA

Para presentar los documentos debe coger número de orden en Información para la **Sala 4 piso 1º**

El día de la cita el solicitante deberá estar empadronado en Barcelona ciudad, si no fuera así deberá acudir al Registro Civil correspondiente a su domicilio.

Es imprescindible la presentación de este impreso, los documentos requeridos y la solicitud cumplimentada.

Si el solicitante está casado/a deberá presentar la documentación con su cónyuge. En caso de no poder acompañar al cónyuge, deberá presentar un poder notarial de consentimiento.

En caso de no presentarse el día y la hora acordados, el proceso quedará cancelado y deberá solicitar cita nueva.

Appointment request form for Spanish citizenship application: “Please note: All applicants aged 14 and over will be required to sit an integration exam on the day of the appointment.”



Spanish Passport: Christopher Columbus' ships and the route of his first expedition to the Americas.





Intervention on a museum advertisement:
*Desires and Necessities. Down with colonial
 monuments*, 2015.

this cultural activity. The same political neutrality that leads them to staunchly defend the very European freedom of expression in response to the censorship of an artwork that includes the image of king Juan Carlos I but not to not ask questions such as those raised from non-institutional spaces in relation to the colonial humiliation of Domitila Barrios in that same work²³. That

political neutrality that allows a museum to call an itinerary through some of its collection “Meditarrani”⁴ and to describe Mediterranean lands as a “hospitable haven for immigrants”. That political neutrality that leads to situations where the exhibition of a series of clearly political artistic projects ends up being accompanied by interpretations issued by the museum that give the visitor precisely the opposite information to what the participating artist is trying to say. This recently occurred with the information sheet that explained the project *Estat Nació. Part I* [Nation State, Part I, 2014] in the exhibition *Desires and Necessities*⁵: “Daniela Ortiz + Xose Quiroga propose a journey through the streets of Barcelona to identify the monuments and buildings that celebrate

2. <http://pornoterorismo.com/2015/06/14/domitila-enculada-y-nadie-dice-nada/>

3. <http://on.fb.me/1NmYPn6>

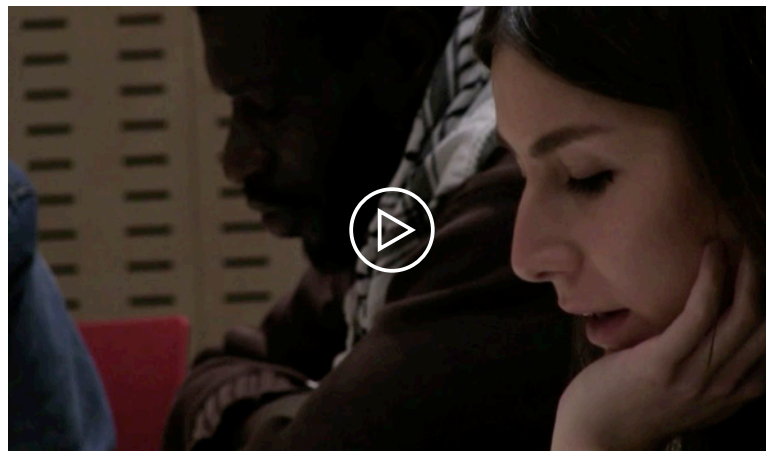
4. <http://www.macba.cat/es/56896-mediterrani>

5. http://www.macba.cat/uploads/20150617/Full_de_mn0_CAST_Desitjos_i_necessitats.pdf

our city’s colonial history and its associations with slavery, a city where the values of tolerance and openness to global culture contrast with the commemoration of those who grew rich on the trade in human beings or the colonial endeavour”.

Was the person who wrote the text referring to the “values of tolerance and openness to global culture” in the city of Barcelona, where migrants who work in public spaces are violently persecuted and arrested? Or to the values of tolerance and openness to global culture in the city of Barcelona, where migrants are required to pass integration and language tests in order to obtain a residence permit that allows them to avoid being totally left out of civic life or end up being deported? And that last point is where I really question the political intentions of the person who wrote the information sheet, because the project *Estat Nació. Part I* includes a video, which was not exhibited obviously, that challenges current policies in regard to the obligatory integration of migrants in Catalonia.

In a context of extreme colonial violence which the migrant and refugee populations are currently experiencing in Europe, it can be useful and necessary to think about decolonising the museum. But there is a danger that it may become a matter that is totally out of context and even insulting if it does not



Daniela Ortiz + Xose Quiroga, *Estat Nació. Part I*, 2014, video A group of migrants learn to pronounce Catalan correctly by repeating xenophobic discourses.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0c0kQT1qIw>

place at its centre a discussion concerning the situation that is currently imposed by Europe’s migratory control system on which people come from the former colonies. Decolonising a cultural institution does not just mean considering the matter and organising exhibitions and seminars. In the current context, decolonising a museum requires a constant effort to take a position in regard to the migratory control system; it requires accepting that it is impossible to continue programming activities and events while there is a total normalisation of the existence of Migrant Detention Centres, forced deportation flights on a

mass and individual scale, individuals with semi-rights and anti-rights, and situations of extreme violence in border zones which are the local contexts where these projects are presented. Decolonising a museum means sending letters to the Ministry of Interior, organising press conferences to condemn the use of culture in the discourse of integration, making the legal apparatus of the museum available to persecuted people; it means acknowledging the level of urgency imposed in the European context by the backbone of coloniality.

Translated by Nuria Rodríguez



THE BORDER OF THE 'FOURTH WORLD'

FRANCISCO GODOY VEGA

The year 1848 can be seen as the time of a paradigm shift brought about by the revolutionary and labour movements in Europe. Along with 1989, it is one of the two time markers that the L'Internationale project *The Uses of Art* reframes as moments of dense connections between art and politics. In the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of socialism was emerging, Marx published *The Communist Manifesto*, and the concept of 'Latin America' was taking shape as an impulse for a second independence of the continent. Meanwhile, on both sides of the Atlantic, New Imperialism was developing a scientific image of the inferiority of the otherness that lay outside of white society. The scientific positivism and biological racism promoted by intellectuals such as the Comte de Gobineau in his essay *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853) had disastrous effects.

Universal Exhibitions, the human zoos that put Native Americans, Asians and Africans on display, and the so-called 'Scramble for Africa', were the most explicit expressions of this system that did not just set up a North-South divide, but even back then

proposed a 'South' within the North: a 'fourth world' founded on 'pigmentocracy'. After the abolition of explicit slavery, blacks and native Americans were presented to nineteenth century European civil society in the guise of exotic entertainment. This was the case in Madrid and Barcelona, for example, with the exhibition of Ashanti, Inuit and Filipino people, never included in the key European readings of the issue¹. The human zoos displayed the racialised subjects as intellectually inferior and sexually animal, in line with Gobineau's ideas but also with those of Hegel in *The Philosophy of History*.

The postcolonial differentiation of the modern/colonial system set up a geographical divide between the metropolitan territories that sustained power/knowledge, and the colonial territories in which economic, environmental and human exploitation took place. Here we suggest that the visibilisation of the 'fourth world'—in a sense similar to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's notion of internal colonialism—makes it possible to distort that geopolitical

1. Blanchard, Pascal et al, *Human zoos. The invention of the savage*, Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, 2011.



2. Juan Latino, the first black professor in XVI century Europe, was a fissure to this racialised model through his integration to an academic system that did not allow this difference.

distinction². As the human exhibitions clearly illustrate, since at least the nineteenth century Europe has been going through a process in which the colonial has become an internal dimension of the metropolitan sphere, affecting the management of life and

death. By displacing the centre-periphery dividing line in accordance with this point of view, we activate a critical awareness of the long historical memory of this racial division of the world, which was created and concealed by and for Europe, and which continues to operate in the contemporary to varying degrees.

Through the media, twenty-first century European necrocapitalist society has been founded on the overexposure of this difference between itself and outside that it attempts to expel. The creation of the European Economic Community in the eighties perpetuated the European geopolitical myth based on the fence that marks the physical boundaries of the European bunker. Using multicultural policies to tone down the conflict in regard to that ‘fourth world’ that was already living in Europe, the community protected itself from the ‘new’ racialised other who tries to enter by means of death. The new European border created prison zones concealed in airports that don’t

correspond to Marc Augé’s ‘non-places’, while the sea and the boats that tried to cross it were delimited by border fences in north Africa. A necropolitical ideology is at work in these border zones: a politics of life for the European, a politics of death for the foreigner.

The right to the power of life and death over others is conditioned by two interconnected fictions: racism and xenophobia. I recently curated the exhibition *Critique of migrant reason* at La Casa Encendida in Madrid with Carolina Bustamante. In it, we showed the persistence of these systems of death embedded in Spain’s long colonial memory, avoiding locating the problem in the sphere of abstract reflection, and focusing instead on the policies, laws and cultural constructions that come into play in a specific cultural system. Through a range of different strategies, the works by the artists Miguel Benlloch, Rogelio López Cuenca and Magdalena Correa drew attention to the deaths that take place on the Andalusian coast and in the colonies that the Spanish state still has in Africa: the Canary Islands and the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. López Cuenca, for example, has been working on the persistence of these systems since the late seventies through the reappropriation of images and texts from the media.

Other artists included in the exhibition also reveal some of the devices of control and recruitment



that operate within this necropower. Lucía Egaña uses parody to do so in her social interaction performance *Miss Espanya*, in which she physically wears the clichés of Spanish culture and confronts the Migrant Detention Centre (CIE) in Barcelona with this imaginary. Meanwhile, Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga speak out against specific cases of migrant deaths during the deportation process, at the CIEs, and in racist raids in the streets of major Spanish cities. This pressing issue in a Europeanised Spain that saw its centralist dream emerge and die in a short period of time has also been broached by civil initiatives such as the State campaign to close the CIEs, Asociación Sin Papeles, Yo Sí. Universal Healthcare, and Territorio Doméstico, which have tried to oppose these strategies of racialised necropolitical terror³. We consider this opposition to be a continuation and intensification of forms that have historically operated in Europe based on its invention of itself as a centre that is superior to its former colonies.

The racists police raids that take place on the streets are a clear sign that the border does not only operate at the visual level of the fences and the coastlines that have been presented as spectacle by the media. The border also operates in day-to-day life. It does so by means of institutional dispositives of repression, but also through what Philomena Essed

has termed ‘everyday racism’. The deaths of Osamuyi Akpitaye from Nigeria, Mohamed Abagui from Morocco, Samba Martine from Congo and Alik Manukyan from Armenia in the last few years and, more recently, of Jeaneth Beltrán from Nicaragua, are real and undeniable proof of the existence of this race-based border that we inhabit every day, and of its perpetuation as a way of controlling those who, by blood right, do not belong on ‘this side’ of the abyssal line⁴.

As such, there is a pressing need for those who seek to defend the notion of Europe as a democratic and non-pigmentocratic zone to denounce and reinvent this internal border that constitutes the fourth world. In its brimming over the boundaries of these spaces, artistic and curatorial research practice is one of the tools that can be used to shift borders as murderous fictions: not just the physical, material site of the border, but also its historical dimension, which is what fuels the everyday cultural validation of the divide that enshrines the right to life for some and routinely legally eliminates it for others.

3. See also the web <http://carcelesracistas.org/>, a platform created by some organizations to denounce the racist jails in the Spanish state.

4. De Sousa Santos, Boaventura, *Para descolonizar Occidente. Más allá del pensamiento abismal*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO, 2010.

Posted on September 17, 2014.



1989—1992:
MYTH AND MAGIC

FRANCISCO GODOY VEGA



In 1978, the 1st Latin American Biennial of Sao Paulo was organised with a view to broadening the spectrum of national exhibitions that were taking place in the city at the same time as the International Biennale. The chosen title was ‘Myth and Magic’. The project revived the Latin American spirit that had been generated after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which had a significant impact on Latin American art systems. At the Biennale, Mário Pedrosa, a guest curator who had recently returned from exile, read the essay ‘Variacoes sem tema’ in which he suggested addressing the crisis of the Third World by building a great Latin American union based on its common elements: poverty and *mestizo*. Myth and magic, as well as poverty and terms like *mestizo*, hybrid and autochthonous, have been clichés for naming and neutralising Third-World thinking and actions that lie outside the Western canon and, as such, are not a source of primary knowledge.

Exoticising through magic

In 1989, the ‘magicians’ of *Magiciens de la terre*, the Paris exhibition organised by Jean Hubert Martin and cited ad nauseam, became the human spectacle of this primitivized otherness rather than the supposed opening up of the art world to the peripheries. It was one gesture among the many that were generated in the context of the recovery of the ‘age of discovery’, which was the theme of the Universal Exposition in Seville in 1992. The end of the misnamed Cold War turned attention back to thinking and acting in regard to the inhabitants of places that had been colonised during the ‘modern age’, whether or not they had gained their independence. In this arc of time from the eighties to the early nineties, ‘myth and magic’ was used by other exhibition projects, such as the already much-criticised *Art of the Fantastic*. Latin America, 1920–1987, presented at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1987 and ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern presented at MoMA, New York, in 1984. There were also other instances of exoticisation through magic that are not contemplated by the canon, such as *El surrealismo entre Viejo y Nuevo Mundo* at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in 1989.

Art of the Fantastic, in particular, drew responses from Latin American curators and critics linked to the United States scene, especially from Mari Carmen Ramírez who reacted by falling into a Westernising strategy, creating a new hegemonic paradigm consisting of going ‘beyond the fantastic’ to defend the modernity of peripheries. Given the surrealsing flow that connected supposedly sophisticated European art with the ‘intrinsic’ magic-realism of the New World, exhibitions such as *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collection* at the Museum of African Art in New York and the 2nd Havana Biennial, both in 1989, offered a critical reading of the production and interpretation of Third World art.

Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of the conquest of America, Stephen Greenblatt published *Marvellous Possessions: The wonder of the New World*, in which he probed the genealogy of the idea of the marvellous and the supernatural that persisted in the imagination of historical and contemporary peripheral territories as places of magic. Even the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey opened its doors in 1991 with a show entitled *Mito y magia en América: los ochentas*. I mention this exhibition in Mexico in order to avoid giving the impression of Latin America as an affable self-critical space, and to draw attention to the way in which certain stereotypes function



as ‘internal colonialism’ within the very territory that is the object of these projections. Similarly, we would like to testify to the critical capacity that emerged from Europe and the United States. Also in 1991, for example, a group of New York-based artists, including Caterina Borelli, Ana Busto, Steve Schiff and Cris Bratton, created a fanzine entitled *1492-1992 Re-View*, which critically confronted the commemoration of the event and invited other artists such as Nicanor Parra, Juan Downey, Rogelio López Cuenca and Antoni Muntadas to participate. The latter two were also included in one of the few critical projects that were carried out in relation to 1992 in the Spanish state, *Plus Ultra*, curated by Mar Villaespesa and organised by BNV as part of the Seville Expo.

Exoticising through the body

The desire to recover and display the ‘marvellous possessions’ was also influenced by a conceptual discourse that developed around the body, which designated ‘Indians’ and ‘women’ as objects of possession and desire, as had had been the case

during the conquest and colony. This became patent in *Magiciens de la terre* through the physical presence of the third world ‘magicians’ who were presented to Parisian society in a gesture reminiscent of human zoos of the nineteenth century.

A biopolitical critique of the apparatus of colonial domination must necessarily include a critique of the patriarchal system. In parallel to the implementation of these exhibition projects there was a symptomatic rise of early ‘cuir’ (queer) theories and practices, based on a cross between feminist critique and other resistant subjectivities. In the arts, the work of Cecilia Vicuña, Adrian Piper, Carlos Motta, Coco Fusco, Ines Doujak, Daniela Ortiz and Guisepppe Campuzano’s Museo Travesti del Perú, among others, drew attention to this inevitable intertwining of sex and race. And along similar lines, there is also the particularly noteworthy activist collective Mujeres Creando—that also but not exclusively worked within the art system—, which sprang up in Bolivia in 1992 and used direct action and graffiti, among other strategies, to work on the idea that ‘you can’t decolonise without depatriarchalizing’.



Exoticising through myth

The rekindled interest in the abovementioned exhibitions, particularly *Magiciens de la terre*, reminds us of the need to stay alert to the drives of the global art system. We should obviously avoid reductionism: the analytical exercises on the exhibitions carried out by *Afterall* cannot be equated to the ZKM exhibition *The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989*. The opening of the interactive museum *World of Discoveries* in Porto this year is significant in this debate, given that it reclaims Portugal's imperial past from a perspective that doesn't just aim to recover this reading of the past, but encourages the Portuguese people to relive this past in an experiential, relational way: through magic, the imperial myth is repeated.

Given this scenario, all that can be done is respond by proposing dislocated ways of recovering those 'marvellous possessions' and those mythicized colonial pasts. Orthodox colonial history and this recent past of events in the 1989-1992 arc of time require a critical analysis that does not magically fetishise their status as a supposed 'universal' paradigm change. Rather, it is necessary to identify their devices of imperialist commemoration, and the critical cracks that may have been generated in

this context, as we've set out to do for example in the research by the group *Peninsula. Colonial processes and art and curatorial practices*, presented in part early this year at Bulego z/b in Bilbao at the seminar '1992. Capital Status, Exhibitions and Critical Strategies'.

It is not sufficient, however, to fight the racist and xenophobic imaginaries projected in some of these exhibitions, and their recovery, through a critique of representation. Rather, the resistance must be based on a process of deactivation of the 'colonial unconscious' that Suely Rolnik talks about, which suggests filtering the experience of colonial processes through bodies and desires in order to activate the long memory that resides in them. In the current situation of the financial crisis of capitalism and its policies of repression of the racialised other, this memory reaffirms the need to recognise the structural faults of the modern patriarchal colonial system, and, from there, to imagine productive forms in which Third and Fourth world thoughts and practices come to life.

Translated by Nuria Rodríguez.

Posted on October 07, 2014.



COLUMBUS, HOW DO I GET RID OF MY HANGOVER?

FRANCISCO GODOY VEGA

In Spain, Columbus celebration—as an explicit activation of a colonial unconscious—, began to take public shape in 1888. The first public sculpture of the navigator, who according to Jesús Carrillo had been a figure of “structural neglect”¹ in Spain’s past, was unveiled as part of the Barcelona Universal Exposition that year. Columbus was not part of the Spanish colonial discourse, which saw him as a foreigner and not particularly loyal to the Catholic Monarchs. Restoring Columbus was an ‘importation’ aimed at integrating into the new European and North American hegemony. The Columbus statue by Gaietà Buïgas then literally pointed its finger at the African destination of the Imperial enterprise of the time, showing the consolidation of a system of North-South inequality. The staging of the colonial drunkenness continued in Madrid in 1892, not only with a second sculpture in honour of Columbus as well as a Historical-

European and Historical-American Exhibitions, inaugurated by the Monarchs of Spain and Portugal. This mainly involved a human

exhibition that formed part of the parade organised in conjunction with the shows, in which some actors dressed as Native American Indians gravely thanked the solemn Catholic Monarchs and Columbus. This episode gave rise to the popular Spanish expression *hacer el indio*, to ‘play the Indian’, meaning to ‘play the fool’. We shouldn’t forget that not far away from this avenue, live human exhibitions of Filipino, Ashanti and Inuit people were being staged at the Parque del Retiro at around the same time.

The alcohol poisoning of the Spanish colonial unconscious came with the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929 in Seville, younger sister of the International Exposition held in Barcelona’s Montjuïc that same year. No colony or former colony participated in this ‘international’ World Fair, even though the main thoroughfare that ran through the exhibition from Plaça d’Espanya was named Avenida de América to mark the occasion. The Ibero-American Exposition in Seville, on the other hand, included pavilions from Latin American countries, built in syncretic and indigenous styles that perpetuated the distinction

1. Jesús Carrillo, “La imposibilidad del héroe”, *Revista de Libros*, no. 131, 2007, p.7.



between them and Iberian visual culture, which was crowned with the Plaza de los Conquistadores. The Ibero-American Exhibition also included a Macau Pavilion—a remnant of Portuguese colonialism in Asia—, a Morocco Pavilion, a Moorish Quarter, and a Colonial Pavilion representing Spain’s possessions in Equatorial Guinea, this latter one with its own live human exhibition.

All of this was taking place against a political backdrop led by the dictator Primo de Rivera, who was promoting a new economic imperialism in the former colonies backed by a conservative, catholic ideology, which had led him to go as far as creating a Spanish

‘national day’; *the Día de la Raza or Day of the Race*; on October 12. Years later, an institutional system for the promotion of cultural relations with former colonies was set up during Franco’s dictatorship, with clearly political goals, in the form of five government entities: the Hispanic Council (1940), the Museum of America (1941), the Museum of Africa (1945), and the Institute of Hispanic Culture (1946), as well as the Hispanic-American Biennials (1951-1956).

Columbus, how can we cut off your heads?



Pabellon de guinea en la exposicion iberoamericana de sevilla de 1929, viewed 1 January 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pax5yMNAW-Q

In the late eighties, some cultural agents started to suffer and to reverse the pain of this long Columbus hangover. The artists’ group Agustín Parejo School, for example, carried out poetic activations of both the Latin American and the African colonial hangovers. In 1989, they modified the back page of issue 0 of the magazine *Arena Internacional*, with a map of the Sahara desert broken by a vinyl record containing the Paul Bowles piece *REH BENI BOUHYA*, recorded in Segangan, in the Sahara desert. Three years later, they invented a parodic Ecuadorian painter called Lenin Cumbe, and invited him to participate in the



Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Sevilla during the Universal Exposition of the supposed ‘Encounter of Two Worlds’: more inebriation disguised as modernising good will. These projects emanate from a new wave that looked to the art scenes in New York and Northern Europe for an art that was critical of their own time. This new generation of intellectuals and artists intervened the local scene with public actions, publications, and exhibitions that intended to rescue Spanish art from its provincialism and connect it to international debate. In this context, it is not surprising that a text by Homi K. Bhabha, “The postmodern and the postcolonial”, was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Plus Ultra* in 1992, and that Gerardo Mosquera had started to contribute to the magazine *Lápiz* in the mid-eighties, with

texts such as “The Third World and Western Culture” (1989), and “The Marco Polo Syndrome” (1992).

While that period could be read as a time of urgent transference in response to the sense of a lack of critical tools, over the past five years we have seen a different process of collective, affective, parodic and highly sceptical appropriation of knowledge stemming from experiences and histories shaped by another colonial past and present. Given the absence of academic debate around the postcolonial issue—except tangentially, in ‘area studies’—and its sporadic appearance in the museum world, the Columbus hangover appears to be a life experience that confront the systems of knowledge/power in which it operates. This could clearly be seen on day three of the seminar *Decolonising the Museum*, which was recently organised by MACBA in the framework of L’Internationale, when, as part of the Península platform, we joined other ‘local agents’ in a session called ‘Decolonial Practices, Activism, and Networks’. All the participants that day agreed that it is necessary to fight against the presence of the ‘colonial wound’ in every day life.

Created on 12 October 2012, Península is a group of about 40 members, who suggest research nodes at the intersection of colonial processes and exhibitions, the cultural industries, archives, migrations,

and radical sexualities, to mention just a few. With no predefined objectives and no budget of its own, Península works on the basis of the drives, affects, and pressing issues that turn the need for reflection/action into an engine for questioning the systems in which agents operate in today, and the history of art and culture in the long historical memory of Spanish and Portuguese colonisation, as was clearly shown at a recent seminar at Museo Reina Sofia entitled *Internal Colonialism and Citizenship in the South*. Also this year, the group Declinación Magnética was born out of the project *Decolonial Aesthetics*, organised by Matadero Madrid with the theoretical support of Goldsmiths University. Other like-minded research-action groups have also recently formed in Barcelona, including Diásporas Críticas and Ira Sudaka, joining the artistic practices of individual artists who are dealing with the same issues, as discussed in previous posts on this blog. Also in 2012, Maria Iñigo and Yayo Aznar organised the congress *History With No Past: Counterimages of the Spain/Latin America Coloniality at Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo* in Móstoles, Madrid, and Olga Fernández with Clare Carolin organised *Coloniality, Curating and Contemporary Art* at La Rábida in Huelva.

In exhibition terms, the effects of all of this action have been both alcohol poisoning and

hangover. In the first sense, the show *Painting from the Viceroyalties. Shared Identities in the Hispanic World* at Museo del Prado and the Royal Palace in Madrid was clearly a colonising liquor. On the other hand, in spite of their hits and misses, exhibitions such as *The Potosí Principle* at Museo Reina Sofía, *The Baroque D_Effect. Politics of the Hispanic Image* at the CCCB in Barcelona, and *Ultrópicos* at the Pontevedra Biennial were like a stomach pumping of the colonial alcoholism, organised against the backdrop of commemorations of the supposed 200 years of the independence of Latin American countries in 2010. More recently, exhibitions such as *Critique of Migrant Reason* at La Casa Encendida in Madrid and *Apocryphal Colony. Images of Coloniality in Spain* at MUSAC in León used different strategies to act upon this pressing need.

Meanwhile, people working through activist practices have also been taking action to denounce the violence of contemporary colonial life. Organisation-action groups such as CalÁfrica, which works with African migrants, and Territorio Doméstico, which focuses on migrant domestic workers, and associations such as Espacio del Inmigrante Raval, Asociación de Sin Papeles, Ferrocarril Clandestino and Migrantes Transgresorxs have struggled the increasingly acute processes of discrimination and



death affecting people from the former Third World. There are also various gypsy associations that fight the stereotypes and discrimination of internal colonialism, particularly the Association of Feminist Gypsy Women in Favour of Diversity which has, for example, spoken out against the racism of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language which includes among its definitions of ‘gypsy’ a person who ‘steals, or acts with dishonest intentions’.

These artistic, curatorial, or activist practices—or crosses between some or all of them—have been a recent process in which Columbus takes on a physical presence in the lives of those of us who have been marked by his historical power. Hence the pressing need for actions that confront colonial conflict, beyond the remoteness of the idea of ghosts that stalk memories from the past. We know that these ghosts remain alive in the present, in the colonial processes that cut across our bodies and exceed the levelling and distancing potential of any possible ‘boom’ of these debates in the international art system. Ultimately, it is about hangover bodies, furious at a global system located in the histories of Iberian imperialism, hoping to cut off all of the heads of Columbus and his henchmen.

Translated by Nuria Rodríguez.

Posted on January 1, 2015.



FROM THE COLLECTION
OF MUSEO NACIONAL
CENTRO DE ARTE
REINA SOFÍA, MADRID
(MNCARS)

LOLA HINOJOSA

Ines Doujak
Evviva il coltello! (Es Lebe das Messer!)
 [Long Live the Knife!]

With reference to Clémentine Deliss' use of the term 'remediation'¹, the selected work by Ines Doujak (Vienna, 1959) questions the museum and its visitors since it explores the colonial and ethnographic technologies used to shape major narratives, thus triggering an examination of their potential decodification.

From a feminist viewpoint, Doujak's work analyses the bio-political shift in historical-social narratives, often rooted in explorations of the colonisation and primitive accumulation processes that signal the start of modernity and culminate in modern capitalism. The work's title refers to the adulatory words people would shout upon hearing a castrato sing an aria, a highly esteemed form of music in the European colonial period – for nearly ten years, the eminent castrato Farinelli used song to alleviate the depression suffered by Philip V. The expression *Evviva il coltello!* [Long Live the Knife!] refers to the knife that

maimed the singer entrusted with captivating the courts from the old continent.

While the elements that comprise the work can be displayed as an installation, it is through performance that they are ultimately set in motion. In this instance, a countertenor, in attire that conceals his face behind a mask but exposes his stomach and genitals, chants excerpts from the book *Confesionario para los curas de Indios con la instrucción contra sus ritos y exhortación para ayudar a bien morir*, written during the Viceroyalty of Peru and made public through the Council of Lima in 1585. The book's subject matter was a major instrument in the mechanism of bio-political control exercised over the New World,

1. In the first, perhaps more contemporary sense of the term, 'to remediate' means to bring about a shift in medium, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection. To remediate also implies to remedy a deficient situation, for example, the ambivalent resonance of the colonial past (Rabinow 2008). The earlier assumption of epistemological authority does not extend comfortably within the post-colonial situation. One can no longer be content to use earlier examples of material culture for the purpose of depicting cultures, ethnic groups, thereby reasserting the logos of *ethnos* or an existing range





Ines Doujak, *Evviva il coltello! (Es lebe das Messer!)* [Long Live the Knife!], 2010, performance. Set of scenic elements, consisting of a book and a suit mask carved in metal core, with which you can activate a performance. Metal, textile, paper, snakeskin. Book: 73 × 57 cm / Suit 180 × 43 × 41 cm / Mask 79 × 62 cm. AD05878. Collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.



Ines Doujak, book cover, Reina Sofia Museum collection in 2010, produced by the artist in order to participate in the temporary exhibition *The Potosí Principle. How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land?*. Photographers: Joaquín Cortés /Román Lores. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Archivo fotográfico).

of outdated anthropological themes. Of course, we respect and critically integrate earlier narratives and analyses written by anthropologists and area experts, just as we take on the existing testimonials that originate from the producers and users of these artefacts.

But we can also expand the context of this knowledge by taking the artefacts once again as the starting point and stimulus for contemporary innovation, aesthetic practice, linguist translation, future product design, and triggers for emergent museums. But how does one demystify them, activate a loss of aura? How does a collection 'regain consciousness' or create presence anew?

regulating the body's pleasures and its relationships with nature. The countertenor pretends to read aloud from a book which is covered with snakeskin, a symbol in Amazonian and Andean cultures representing the belief that the world was created from the song of an anaconda. In contrast in Christian culture, the snake is associated with sin, death and destruction.

In Europe and the colonies, female or feminised bodies operated as instruments to produce wealth and behavioural control, while the extermination of indigenous cultures or the acculturation of their peoples was a bio-political process, not just ideological or religious. Doujak formulates an opera from which to confront the

“civilising” power of European classical music and the evangelising doctrine, using the sexed and disturbing image of a masked countertenor as a metaphor for muted historical accounts as she places the viewer in an uncomfortable space verging on abjection.



**A SALT BOX AND
A BRACELET CONVERSING
WITH A PAINTING:
DECOLONISING
A POST-SOVIET MUSEUM
IN THE CAUCASUS**

MADINA TLOSTANOVA

Museums are institutes of knowledge production, conservation and distribution. Their decolonisation involves their liberation from principles which are deeply-rooted in modernity/ coloniality. Perceptive and epistemic operations which control the appreciation of, and interaction with, artworks and other museum artefacts are problematised. Decolonisation also questions the museum as such, as embodying the “hubris of the zero point” (Castro-Gómez 1995), or the sensing and thinking subject, European by default, occupying a delocalised and disembodied vantage point which eliminates any other possible ways to produce, transmit and represent knowledge, allowing for a world view to be built on a rigid essentialist progressivist model.

Museums in a specific modern/colonial (post-*Wunderkammer*) understanding were roughly divided early on into two groups: history of fine arts and natural history museums. In the former, Western memory was constructed, preserved and transmitted to future generations. In the latter, the non-European world was represented at large. Later, ethnographic

museums placed the non-Western and non-modern subjects between the natural and the civilised worlds supplanting the Orientalist interpretation of the other with a supposedly more open progressive one. Countless contemporary public museums, with their heavy load of mythic national ontologies, continue to reproduce the prevailing modern episteme which appropriates or annihilates the other.

The first steps in museum decolonisation were made in the context of the emergent non-Western feminist and queer activism and postcolonial discourses which were immediately applied in art and curating practices globally to question the institutional framing of art and the linear historical narrative that museums continued to promote. Among the major epistemic and optical shifts that occurred were a deliberate reversal or blurring of the roles of subject and object, and the destabilising of the bound and coherent, mostly national and often imperial identities that museums helped to forge¹. Examples include both decolonial indigenous people’s projects such as the U’Mista Cultural Society in British Columbia



1. For more details see the Periscope “Decolonial AestheSis Dossier”, *Social Text*, 15 July 2013, viewed 15 August 2015, http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_topic/decolonial_aesthesis/.

2. U’Mista Cultural Society was established in 1974, and the cultural center with the permanent collection on display was opened in 1980.

(Canada)², where “the objects appear to be observing the spectators who become objectified by the masks whose eyes seem to be following their movements” (Lionnet 2012, p. 192) and the internal Western critique of museums, such as the famous exhibition *A Museum Looks at Itself, Past Imperfect* at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York (1992).

This has led to a collapse of the previously sanctified belief in a single Truth and the museum’s mission to convey and preach it. In Neil Curtis’s accurate view, the core of this shift was questioning the essentialist way of looking at the world when “the established beliefs and institutions of our modern heritage” were regarded “as not only real but true, and not only true but good” (Curtis 2012, p. 74). Museum institutional architecture has been reconstructed to formulate questions rather than feed the audience with answers, and forget about the excessive spectator disciplining techniques which prescribed what to do, where to go, which way to look and what impression to form. Yet even the most tolerant museums remain by their nature “cannibalistic

in appropriating other people’s material for their own study and interpretation” (McMaster 2012, p. 377). Thus decolonial issues have lately been appropriated by mainstream art institutions and theories so that they have lost an element of contestation and turned into a nicely packaged and easily digestible postcolonial good, treated through familiar Orientalism, exotification, demonisation, turning space into time, and other Eurocentric knowledge frames (McClintock 1992, pp. 84-5). There are numerous examples from the early *Magiciens de la terre* (Centre Pompidou Paris, 1989) to the more recent *Altermodern* (Tate Britain, London, 2009).

The decolonisation of the museum often happens through a merging of curatorial and artistic practices when artists-cum-curators critically engage with permanent collections and the spatial and temporal structures of existing museums, questioning the mechanisms of acquisition, selection, representation, interpretation, and appreciation. The most famous instances include Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 1992) and Pedro Lasch’s *Black Mirror / Espejo Negro* (Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina, 2008-10). In exhibition architectonics, this often takes the form of semi-hidden interventions, for example when artefacts of a non-modern culture



are presented alongside video art by contemporary authors connected with this particular culture, or when a whole exhibition becomes an assemblage in which objects from ethnographic collections are mixed with ironic fictitious artistic creations. This allows for the infiltration and dismantling of the museum system from within, the dialogical education of a transient decolonial “community of sense”, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière (2009).

In the post-Soviet space, the decolonisation of the museum has not yet received all the attention it deserves due to a lack of post- and decolonial discourses and for obvious political reasons. Most curators who accentuate the self-reflexive decentring museum tactics do so in postmodernist ways, ignoring or distorting the darker colonial side of the matter. Such borrowed postmodernist gestures often become delocalised, hand-me-down deconstructions, whereas the actual body- and geopolitics of knowledge and perception of the artists, curators, and institutions, are ignored or suppressed. For example the exhibition *Dictionary of the Caucasus. The Land and the People*, curated by Olga Sosnina (Tsaritsyno, Moscow, 2012), in spite of its claims to adopt conceptualist tools to deal with ethnographic categories in refreshing ways (Sosnina 2013), in the end reiterated a colonialist vantage point in viewing

the Caucasus as a set of Russian/ Soviet stereotypes. The “words” in this dictionary never came from the indigenous Caucasus peoples who remained silent objects of her study. The significance of the location of this exhibition—Tsaritsyno Palace, where the future of the Caucasus as a Russian colony and the Circassian genocide were decided—was also downplayed.

However there are sporadic attempts to make museums the focus of critical decolonial artistic agency and curatorial practices: Dagestani artist Taus Makhacheva problematises the museum as an imperial institution of aesthetic and epistemic control by letting muted objects speak. Her recent work, *The Way of an Object* (2013), grew out of the collection of the Dagestan Museum of Fine Arts—an institution that similarly to other Soviet museums in the national republics was originally designed as a combination of indigenous ethnographic collections, conventionally-appreciated Russian art sent from Moscow to aesthetically “educate” the local people, and a section of home-grown art created as a pale mimicking of the Russian canon. Makhacheva took her museum intervention out of the exhibition environment into the street. Several delocalised objects were removed from the museum’s aesthetic hierarchy and linear chronology. They were thus symbolically equalised



Nikita Shokhov. At the first performance of Taus Makhacheva's *Way of an Object* (Dagestan, October 2013).
Courtesy of the photographer.



Taus Makhacheva, *Way of an Object*, 2013.
Installation view photographer–Nikita Shokhov.
Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

in their value and importance, which allowed them to converse and argue. The artist switched to a mode of representation blending visual art with theatre.

One of the effective gestures for museum decolonising is shifting the focus from the material collection to a narrative which a curator builds around a set of objects, or in spite of them, or even in the mode of “object-less storytelling” traditionally including “reconstructed tableaux, models, moving light shows, life-size replicas, film sequences, audio-booths, commissions from artists, even cartoons” (Spalding 2002, p. 54). In *The Way of an Object*, Makhacheva merges the verbal and the visual in her adaptation of street marionette theatre. A significant performance site is linked to a traditional ethnic art form whose dramatic medium becomes the site for a conversation between three museum artefacts which have been made into marionettes. In her performance, an Avarian saltbox, a Kubachi wedding bracelet and Victor Vasnetsov’s 1897 painting, *The Bird Gamayun*, discuss the splendours and miseries of being museum objects and dispute the issues of authenticity and stylisation, the fragile boundaries between fine art and decorative and applied crafts, the looting and subsequent mortification of indigenous art in museums, as well as the impermeability and meaninglessness of artificially-imposed canonical works in

alien contexts, the possibilities and traps of relational aesthetics and interactive historical museum exhibitions, as well as the interaction between entertainment and critical learning and thinking in museums in contemporary society. Both the bracelet and the saltbox are artefacts of Dagestani culture taken out of their living contexts and deprived of their socio-cultural, utilitarian and cosmological functions when placed in a museum of fine arts. Vasnetsov’s painting depicting an ominous bird from Slavic folklore was also taken out of its original context—a particular stylising of Russian folklore in a pre-Art Nouveau version of exoticisation of national past—and became a dead representation of someone else’s impenetrable canon, brought to Dagestan in the 1920s to “educate” the local people according to Western / Russian aesthetic norms and therefore carrying a culturally imperialist agenda.

The first performance of this work in Dagestan took place on a rainy and windy October day in 2013. The drenched audience was trembling in front of a puppet theatre in the centre of Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan, and our physical inconvenience added to the intended affect. This spontaneous itinerant impromptu sketch can be set up quickly in any conditions and at any point. The quarrelling objects seemed particularly miserable and homeless as if



they had escaped the museum heterotopia (Foucault 1986) to gain freedom but later discovered the darker sides of non-belonging and falling out of time. However this transient experience has ultimately become one more face of a decolonised museum as a forever open and unfinished event.

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FROM THE
COLLECTION
OF MG+MSUM,
LJUBLJANA

WALTER BENJAMIN

Lenin—Coca-Cola
by Alexander Kosolapov
and Related Artifacts

painting, oil on canvas, 1980-2000
objects, publications, film-footage,
related to “Lenin” and “Coca-Cola”,
various dimensions and materials, 2011

With the establishment of the first art museum more than 200 years ago, all of the artefacts from the past included in museum collections became transformed into works of art. Even today those artefacts have at least two layers of meaning: one defined by their original purpose (sacred painting, for example), and another acquired in the art museum by being declared as art. Art museums, organising works chronologically and by national schools played a decisive role in establishing the History of Art structured by the same principles. Ever since, all the more recently produced artefacts included in the art museums have been originally conceived as works of art. In

other words, all those paintings, sculptures, objects, photographs, collages, ready-mades, installations, performances, etc. that emerged within the field of art museums and art history have claimed one layer of symbolic meaning—to be understood, interpreted and exhibited only as art.

Since it has become apparent in recent years that art is not some universal category but basically an invention of the Western (European) culture, a “child” of the Enlightenment decisively shaped by Romanticism, it might be worthwhile contemplating other possibilities to interpret and exhibit artefacts conceived and treated, until now, as art. One way of doing this would be a gradual detachment from the notion of art and an attempt to look at an artwork as a (hu)man-made specimen, as an artefact of a certain state of mind or cultural/ political milieu. This approach should not be one of a passionate believer and admirer of art, but one that is the diagnostic, almost cold approach of an ethnographer. In order to fully establish this “dispassionate” position, some of the existing art museums would have to gradually



Lenin-Coca-Cola by Alexander Kosolapov and Related Artifacts. Painting, oil on canvas, 1980-2000, objects, publications, film-foot-age, related to “Lenin” and “Coca-Cola”, various dimensions and materials, 2011



transform into anthropological museums about art. These would represent a new kind of museum that would enable the de-artisation of existing works of art into non-art artefacts, the way the desacralisation of religious paintings and objects changed their meaning when they were moved from churches into art museums. Until this (de-artisation) happens, it might still be possible to apply this approach to individual works of art within art museum exhibitions and displays, as in the case we discuss in this instance.

Here is a work of art in the form of a painting by Alexander Kosolapov entitled *Lenin—Coca-Cola*, dated 1980, in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana. Its iconography would be recognisable to most of the public since it is a combination of two well-known and contrasting icons of twentieth century mass-culture. One is a portrait of Lenin (Vladimir Ilich), leader of the first socialist revolution out of which emerged, in 1917, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), one of the countries that most shaped the history of the twentieth century until its demise in 1991. In spite of an early death in 1923, his image, often carried on red banners, has become one of the most recognisable symbols of the international communist movement. Another globally recognised symbol is the Coca-Cola logo, perhaps the most popular soft drink in the world

today. First introduced in 1886 in the United States, it is now sold in more than 200 countries and its white letters on a red background have become a central symbol of globalism and consumerism, as one of the ultimate achievements of liberal capitalism. Exhibited here primarily as an artefact, the painting is displayed with various randomly selected objects and film footage from mass culture, related either to “Lenin” or to “Coca-Cola”, which are also exhibited as artefacts. They should provide some information on the broader political and cultural context necessary for a better understanding of the iconography behind the painting, the respective symbolisms and the contradiction and irony of merging them into a single image. There is no way of predicting how far into the future Lenin and the meanings of his image will be remembered, nor Coca-Cola as a drink and its logo for that matter; but we could be almost certain that on their slow journey into oblivion the meaning of these two symbols will definitely be transformed in a way we could not anticipate today. When that happens, the original meaning of this painting will disappear, and if it physically survives and finds a new purpose, the painting will acquire an entirely new interpretation. By exhibiting the painting together with other related artefacts, we might, up to a point, prolong the preservation of its original meaning. But in the long run, there is a



good chance that even this attempt would have only limited and unpredictable effects.

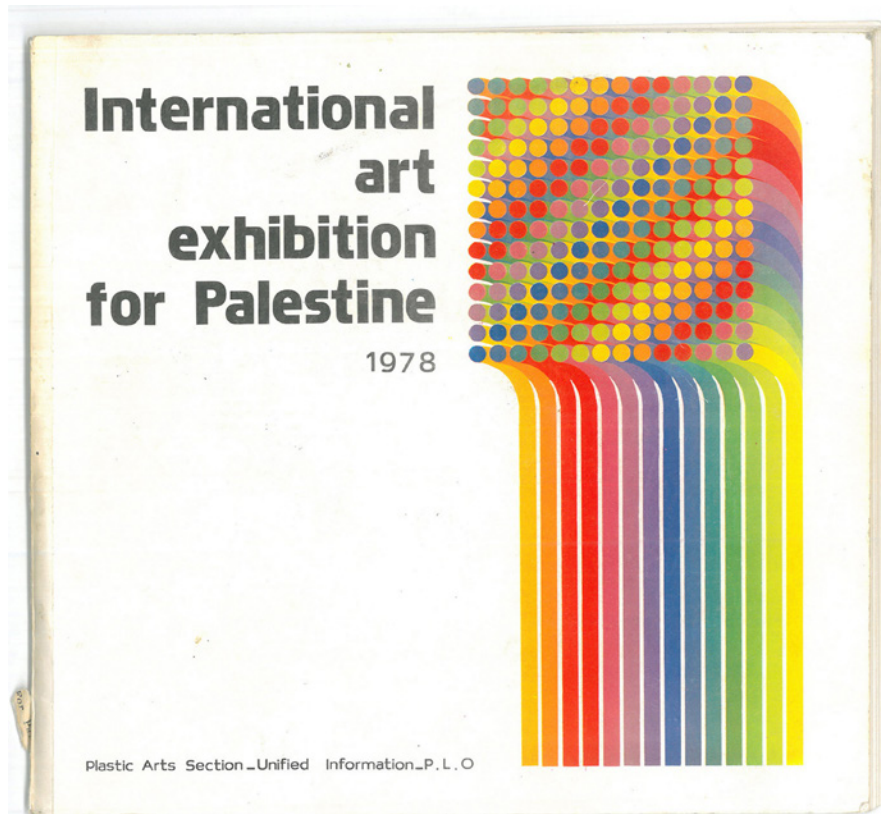
—*Walter Benjamin, Berlin, 2011*

Walter Benjamin is an art theoretician and philosopher who in his article “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) addressed issues of originality and reproduction. Many years after his tragic death in 1940, he reappeared in public for the first time in 1986 with the lecture “Mondrian ’63–’96” in Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana. Since then, he has published several articles and given interviews on museums and art history. His most recent appearance was a lecture “The Unmaking of Art” held in 2011 at the Times Museum in Guangzhou, China. In recent years, Benjamin has become closely associated with the Museum of American Art in Berlin.

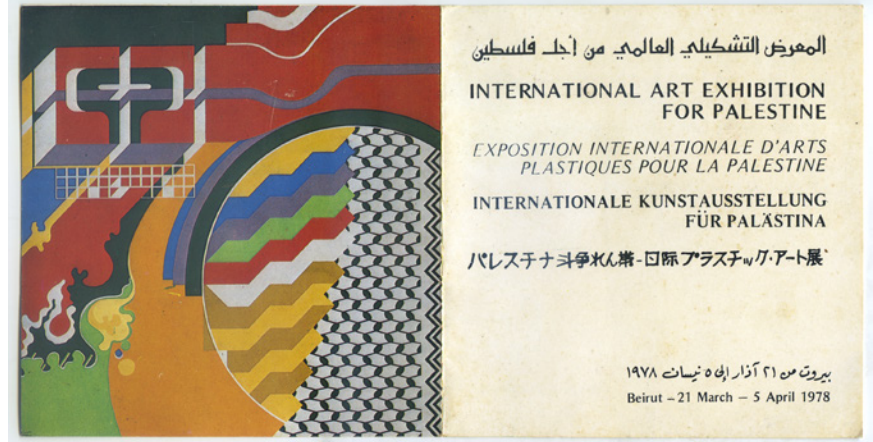


**AROUND
THE POSTCOLONY
AND THE MUSEUM:
CURATORIAL PRACTICE
AND DECOLONISING
EXHIBITION HISTORIES**

RASHA SALTİ



English cover of the catalogue for the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, Beirut, 1978.



Invitation for the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, Beirut, 1978. Cover artwork by Mohammed Chebaa (Morocco). Courtesy: Mona Saudi.

“So it can be said that it [the book, *On the Postcolony. Studies on the History of Society and Culture*] is concerned with memory only insofar as the latter is a question, first of all, of responsibility towards oneself and towards an inheritance. I’d say that memory is, above all else, a question of responsibility with respect to something of which one is often not the author. Moreover I believe that one only truly becomes a human being to the degree that one is capable of answering to what one is not the direct author of, and to the person with whom one has, seemingly, nothing in common. There is, truly, no memory except in the body of commands and demands that the past not only transmits to us but also requires us to contemplate. I suppose the past obliges us to reply in a responsible manner. So there is no memory except in the assignment of such a responsibility.”

Achille Mbembe, 2006¹

Earlier this year, Kristine Khouri and I curated an exhibition entitled *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts from The International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) in Barcelona (20 February—1 June 2015). It is a documentary and archival exhibition centred on and around the history of the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* that was inaugurated in the spring of 1978 at the Beirut Arab University in Lebanon. Organised by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), it comprised approximately 200 artworks donated from nearly thirty countries. It included work by very well-known artists such as: Joan Miró (Spain), Antoni Tàpies (Spain), Joan Rabascall (Spain), Julio Le Parc (Argentina), Renato Guttuso (Italy), Carlos Cruz-Diez (Venezuela), Roberto Matta (Chile), Aref al-Rayess (Lebanon), Dia al-Azzawi (Iraq), George al-Bahgoury (Egypt), Ziad Dalloul (Syria), Mohamed Melehi (Morocco), Ernest Pignon-Ernest (France), Gérard Fromanger (France), the Collectif Malassis (France).

1. “What is Postcolonial Thinking?”, Achille Mbembe interviewed by Olivier Mongin, Nathalie Lempereur, Jean-Louis Schlegel, *Esprit*, December 2006.



The *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* was intended as the seed collection of a museum in exile for Palestine. Until it could be repatriated to a free and just Palestine, it would take the form of an itinerant exhibition touring the world. After Beirut, it travelled to Norway, Japan and Iran from 1979 to 1982. The building where the artworks and the exhibition's archives and documentation were stored was shelled by the Israeli army during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982. Everything relating to this exhibition seemed to be lost. But little by little, scattered duplicates and copies were found in the personal archives of those who contributed to its realisation. For five years, Kristine Khouri and I tried to reconstitute the story of the making of this exhibition.

It all started by coincidence when we discovered a copy of the catalogue in the reference library of an art gallery in Beirut. Needless to say, we were highly intrigued. The *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* embodies a unique initiative in the Arab world, in scale and scope. It surpasses all the exhibitions that took place in the region during that period and even a couple of decades after. Astonishingly, it took place amidst Lebanon's Civil War, and opened only a week after a UN-brokered truce was implemented between Israel and Lebanon, and a UN peace-keeping force was deployed in South Lebanon

to prevent armed confrontations between the Israeli army and Palestinian factions and their Lebanese allies. Eventually, the exhibition's reconstructed history revealed an unwritten or scarcely documented, shared history of politically-engaged artists and initiatives, that links grassroots artist collectives in Paris, Rome and Tokyo, artist unions in Damascus, Baghdad, and Casablanca, seminal biennials in Venice, Baghdad and Rabat and museums in Santiago de Chile and Cape Town.

We were commissioned by Bartomeu Marí to present our research as a documentary and archival exhibition at the MACBA. Indeed, it intersected with two of the museum's programmatic leitmotifs under his mandate, namely staging exhibition histories as a means to interrogate the historiography of art and production of Eurocentric, or Western-centric canons and foregrounding 'decolonising the museum' is an overarching creed that informed the museum's various departments.

To revisit the conceits that guided our research and curatorial approach, I will draw on Achille Mbembe's notion of 'postcolony'. He does not propose this term to undermine the interpretive framework of postcolonial theory but because it suits his interrogations best:





Exhibition installation.
Courtesy: Claude Lazar.



Jamil Shammout (Palestine)
and Michel Najjar (Palestine)
paint the banner of the
exhibition. Courtesy: Claude
Lazar.



Exhibition installation.
Courtesy: Claude Lazar.



“In many respects my book adopts a different approach from that of most postcolonial thinking, if only over the privileged position accorded by the latter to questions of identity and difference, and over the central role that the theme of resistance plays in it. There is a difference, to my mind, between thinking about the ‘postcolony’ and ‘post-colonial’ thought. The question running through my book is this: ‘What is ‘today’, and what are we, today?’ What are the lines of fragility, the lines of precariousness, the fissures in contemporary African life? And, possibly, how could what is, be no more, how could it give birth to something else? And so, if you like, it’s a way of reflecting on the fractures, on what remains of the promise of life when the enemy is no longer the colonist in a strict sense, but the ‘brother’?”

When we launched our research, we had no intention of presenting its variegated findings in the format of an exhibition, and certainly not in a museum of contemporary art. We were acutely aware that we were conducting this inquiry as the globalised art market reached the Arab world and Arab artists and was prolific. Museums, institutional and private

collectors (local, regional and international) were not only interested in contemporary art, but increasingly in the art of generations that preceded it (vaguely referred to as ‘modern’ art). In the production of value, the market came before scholarship, or in other words, the market-driven production of value superseded and outpaced expert or scholarly production of knowledge. Consequently, the historical narrative that suited consumption, stitched together from the (whimsical) harvests of auction catalogues, art fair sensation and art dealer merchandising content, came to prevail. Not only is it unimaginable to emulate or reproduce the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* today with contemporary artists, but it is also unimaginable that it did actually take place some thirty years ago. As our research progressed, we came to realise that we were bringing a counter-history to the surface. And that became one of our prime motivations, we were impelled to foreground the questions that challenge wide perceptions of modern art in the Arab world.

We recognised in the story of the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* that ‘fissure’, or ‘line of precariousness’ described by Mbembe. To echo his words, it beckoned the question: “how could what is, be no more, how could it give birth to something else?” As the research and its transformation into



the *Past Disquiet* exhibition revisited a chapter in the history of artistic practice entrenched in the political engagement of the international anti-imperialist solidarity movement of the 1970s, it did not produce a linear and continuous narrative, but rather showcased speculative histories of a turbulent recent past, while overtly engaging with the issues of oral history, the trappings of memory and writing history in the absence of cogent archives. *Past Disquiet* did not include a single original artwork or display original archival documents. Instead, it reproduced facsimile of yellowed newspaper clippings, magazines and publications—most of which are no longer in circulation—pamphlets from revolutions that have lost their fervour, and photographs from boxes that had not been opened in decades. It exhibited stories culled from memories. The ‘raw material’ we collected was, to a large extent, a first-person oral history, replete with subjective affect, the trappings of remembering and forgetting, recorded by individuals across countries, cultures and languages (in Egypt, France, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine...). In the absence of access to an officially-sanctioned narrative and paper-trail, the information sourced from interviews could not be fact-checked. A number of individuals who played a key role in making the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* are deceased.

We struggled to craft the exhibition title because we wanted to acknowledge the research process as much as its outcome. It was minted by Paul Beatriz Preciado who oversaw our project at the museum and was an incredibly generous, sharp and engaged interlocutor. During the intense exchanges between us about the wordsmithing of the title, he proposed *Past Disquiet*, in Spanish. ‘Disquiet’ (and the Arabic *qaleq*) refers to an unsettled recent past—one that lacks closure. In Arabic, instead of the word ‘past’, we use *dhikr*, precisely because of its ambiguity that implies both remembering and resurrecting from death, or forgetting.

We translated it liberally rather than literally, and in retrospect, I find the Arabic title to be the closest representation of what the exhibition incarnates, because *dhikr* is active in contrast with ‘past’. We were very conscious of our responsibility. The introductory wall text read partly as follows:

“Research that involves recording personal recollections and using private archives implies a high degree of responsibility because people have entrusted us with fragments of their own lives, their subjective account of lived experiences of which they might not otherwise have produced a public





Poster for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978. Designed by Mohammed Melehi (Morocco). Courtesy: Samir Salameh.



Poster for the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, Beirut, 1978. Designed by Dia al-Azzawi (Iraq). Courtesy: Samir Salameh.

record. Our research has yielded an eclectic repository of stories and anecdotes, as well as digital copies of documents, images and film footage. Our methodology was closer to detective work, replete with entirely unexpected fortuitous coincidences, even encounters with ghosts, allegorical and otherwise. As we were transforming our findings into the exhibition, we used our own voices to retell some of the anecdotes, and so underline that we are proposing a subjective and speculative history, or histories, about events that have either not yet been written into the history of art per se or have been forgotten entirely.”

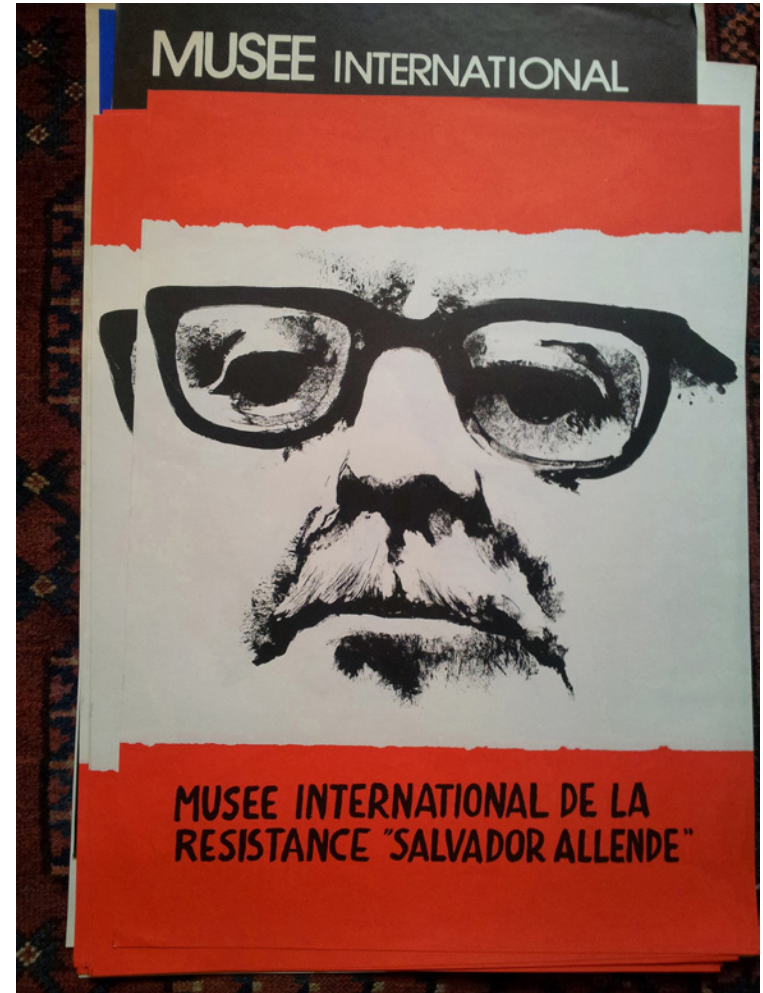
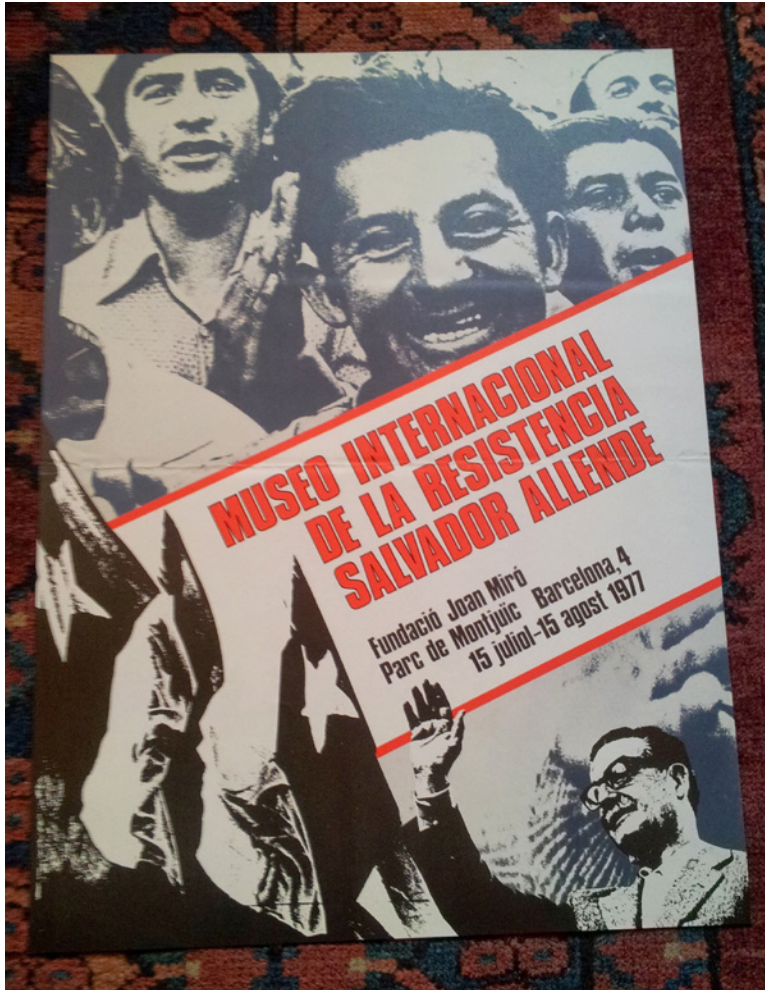
This sense of responsibility led us to use our own voices in order to piece together the many versions of intersecting histories, to transgress the binary of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, but also to move past the morbid grip of lingering vicissitudes, unresolved enmities that mire narratives of that period and undermine the ground of prevailing narratives today. In other words, we wanted to activate a memory as well as interrogations that might contribute significantly to the discourse and practices of subversion in the present, in Beirut, the Arab world, but

also Paris, Rome, Tokyo and Cape Town. The research surfaced a cartography of artist and exhibition practices across the world, within the realm of the international, anti-imperialist, radical leftist solidarity, connected through a network of politically-engaged artists and militants who mobilised their creative energies around the defence of various causes. From the outset, our inquiry was closer to detective work than to conventional scholarly research, and we travelled to several countries to interview artists and other personalities, but even at that scale, the geocultural paradigms that regiment our contemporary perception of art history were irrelevant. In France, we interviewed Brazilian, Argentinian, Palestinian and Syrian artists as well as French artists, who were involved in the museum in exile in solidarity with Salvador Allende, or the *Jeune Peinture*, or Art Against Apartheid, as well as in the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*.

The MACBA was the first epistemic space where *Past Disquiet* was made manifest, and we are eager to present the exhibition elsewhere around the world. Some cities, like Paris, Beirut, Tokyo and Ramallah would have a particular resonance because of their place in the ‘original story’. In many ways, *Past Disquiet* is a prism from which we can refract, or foreground, complicated questions about a recent,



Posters for itinerant exhibition of the *International Resistance Museum for Salvador Allende*. France, date unknown.
Courtesy: Jacques Leenhardt.



yet blotted out and thus complicated, past responsibly. In fact, in our private short-hand, we refer to the MACBA exhibition as “version 1.0”. At present, we are thinking through forthcoming iterations that will address questions that we did not have the space, or resources, to address in the first version. For instance, the question of the artistic languages or genres, schools or styles included in the exhibition is an important one. A visitor to the exhibition staged in Beirut in 1978 saw paintings, lithographs, etchings, drawings and sculptures in almost all styles, or genres: primitive or naïve, abstract art, figurative, optical art, neo-realism, social realism, critical figuration... At that time, the radical left in Italy and France regarded abstraction as bourgeois art, while the subversive, counter-cultural vanguard in Morocco defended abstraction because the post-colonial elite deemed naïve and landscape painting as the only ‘authentically’ Moroccan art. None of the artists from the Soviet Union or former East were anti-conformist, rather, they were for the most part ‘official artists’. In other words, the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* is an incarnation of the coexistence of the multiplicity or plurality of modern art in the 1970s. What do we make of this ‘Babel’ of art languages and styles? What was the marrow welding the solidarity networks across the so-called North and so-called

South? What did these instances of international solidarities translate to for the artists’ subjectivities? Certainly the brotherhood between French artists on the left (in its myriad manifestations) and artists seeking political asylum created a solidarity that gave ‘refugees’ asylum. Today that is unimaginable in the art circles of Paris or Rome.

I see the *International Art Exhibition for Palestine* as an eloquent crystallisation of a postcolonial occurrence. As Achille Mbembe explains:

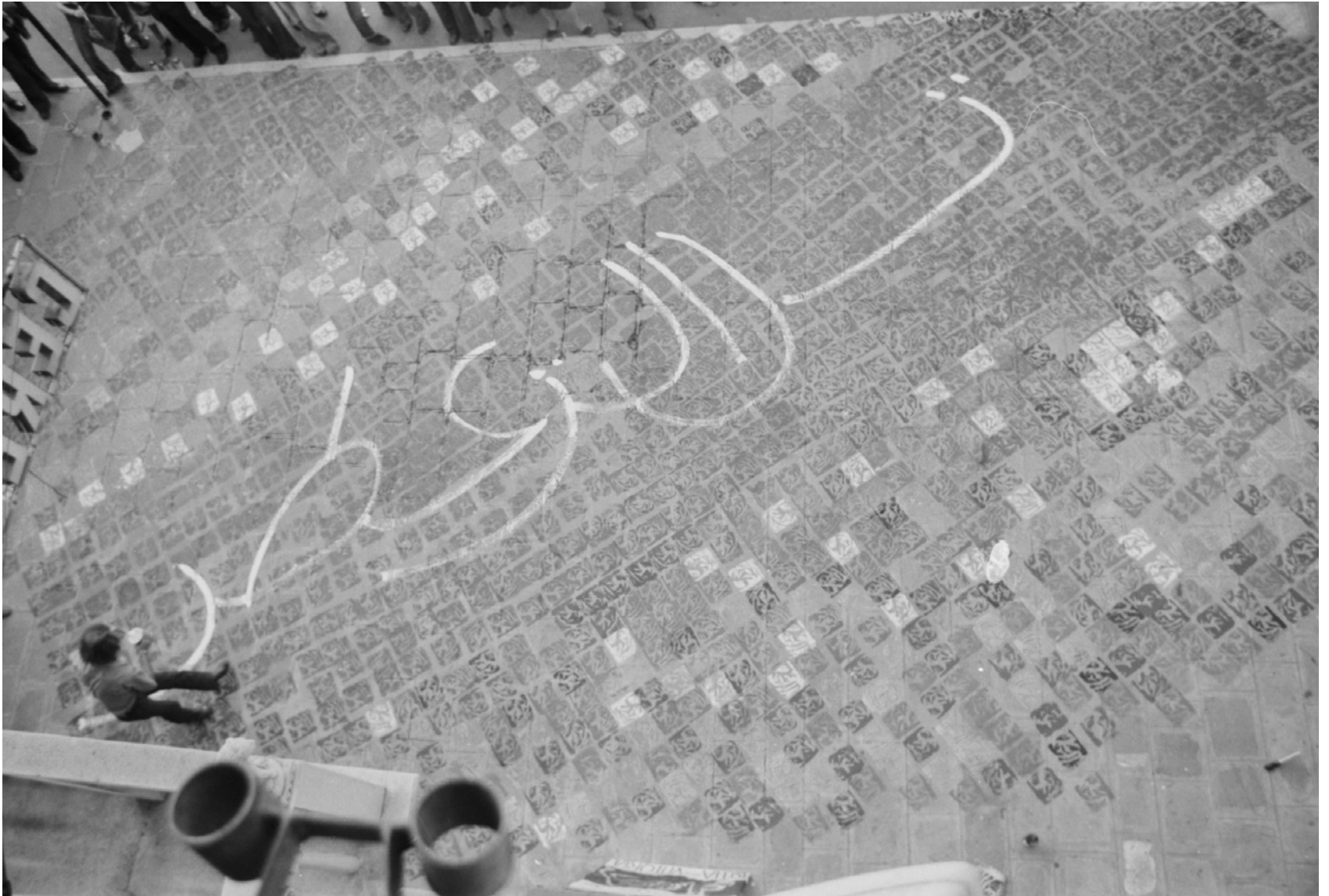
“In showing how the colonial and imperial experience has been codified in representations, divisions between disciplines, their methodologies and their objects, it invites us to undertake an alternative reading of our common modernity. It calls upon Europe to live what it declares to be its origins, its future and its promise, and to live all that responsibly. If, as Europe has always claimed, this promise has truly as its object the future of humanity as whole, then postcolonial thought calls upon Europe to open and continually relaunch that future in a singular fashion, responsible for itself, for the Other, and before the Other.”



The 1978 exhibition was the proud accomplishment of artists and Palestinian militants, in other words, visionaries and dreamers who imagined museums that could incarnate the causes they were fighting for. Museums without walls, or ‘in exile’, constituted via donations from artists, presented in the form of touring exhibitions, destined to travel the world until the historic change they were fighting for became real. *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, like the International Museum of Resistance for Salvador Allende and the Artists of the World Against Apartheid, began with artists who believe that art is at the heart of everyday life, in streets, cities, schools and homes, at the herald of political change, and with militants who believe that political change is impossible to imagine without artists. Until it was destroyed, *The International Art Exhibition for Palestine* embodied that common postcolonial modernity, or at least its possibility. The Art Against Apartheid collection lies in the storage rooms of the University of Western Cape. Only the International Museum of Resistance for Salvador Allende has actually become a museum in Santiago de Chile.



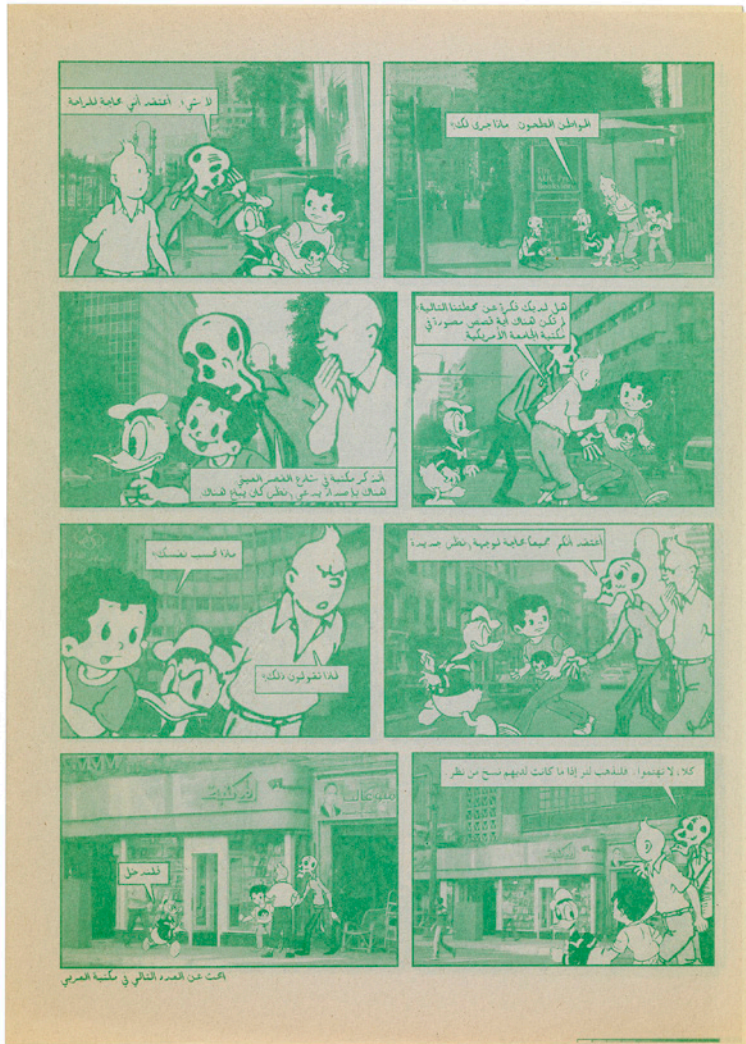
Sergio Tranquandi at his studio.
Courtesy: Kristine Khouri.



Photographic documentation of the public action that took place in Mestre during the Venice Biennial in solidarity with Palestinian refugees in Tel al-Zaatar, the refugee camp under siege in Beirut, 1976. Courtesy: Sergio Traquandi.



FROM
THE COLLECTION
OF MACBA,
BARCELONA



R. 5114, Francesc Ruiz, *The Green Detour*, 2010, Printed ink on paper, 9 four-pages publications, various dimensions, MACBA Collection. MACBA Foundation.

Clémentine Deliss' text "Collecting Life's Unknowns" talks about the potential of the "research collection" and "that it is contingent on experiment and dialogue yet quickly loses its currency. As such it remains oddly outside of market forces yet characterises and punctuates the exploration of the moment." Collections today are situated in this ambivalence. As a museum that collects, it is impossible to disassociate ourselves from the market, while our practice of incorporating artworks into our collection consists in research that contributes to the understanding of a diverse history and evolving present. This research places the collection in a continuous state of change, as the works are subject to the interpretations of curators, to relationships with other works with which they are shown, as well as to the diverse perspectives of each viewer.

The Green Detour (2010) by Francesc Ruiz (Barcelona, 1971), is a nine-volume comic that connects several hotspots of Cairo's city centre and invites readers to literally follow the steps of the characters in the story, with each new instalment

providing the coordinates for the following point of distribution. The protagonists—Donald Duck, Tintin, Samir, and ‘the Crushed Citizen’—explain emblematic moments in Egypt’s cultural history (with references to imperialism, orientalism, government propaganda, and censorship, respectively). As the story progresses the characters move through scenarios with strong political symbolism, question their own status as fictional characters, and wonder whether it is possible to break free from their authors and publishers. This work was produced during a residency at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo, where it was exhibited a few months before the mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square.

Using the genre of the comic, Ruiz elaborates works that can be considered site specific because they are always related to the historical and cultural contexts in which they are commissioned. Aware that popular culture is not found in libraries, his fieldwork takes place outside the conventional academic circuits. Contact with informants, visits to flea markets and specialised bookstores, are a few of the research methods that the artist used to understand the history of comics in the Arab world and generate a counter-narrative that resulted in *The Green Detour*.

In this work, Ruiz relates an untold history with a critical perspective employing the tools of popular

culture. In this way, the artist liberates the comic from its traditional popular context and converts it into a critical apparatus. Given its inherent contra-culture nature and capacity for unconventional distribution, the comic becomes a platform for alternative narratives and generator of new debates and emancipatory practices.

Museums today are no longer temples for relics but are flexible entities in a permanent state of transition. The work of Ruiz allows us to explore the intersections between diverse disciplines, recuperate a part of oral history, understand the context of the Arab Spring a few months before the uprisings, discover Cairo through the gaze of another, and other readings that may be generated with time and the constant dialogue with other works in collection. As such, *The Green Detour* allows for a break with old hierarchies and establishes new ways to define our collections. Deliss described this as “building additional interpretations onto their existing set of references.”

“Who can speak about anything in every moment? I am interested in the fact that certain events take place and that whoever speaks about *this* is not necessarily the person who *should speak about this*.”

Francesc Ruiz



ONLINE REFERENCES

Work currently on display in the exhibition in Desires and Necessities. New Incorporations to the MACBA Collection.

Interview with Francesc Ruiz (28') on Radio Web MACBA:

<http://rwm.macba.cat/en/specials/fons-francesc-ruiz/capsula>

<http://rwm.macba.cat/en/extra/deleted-francesc-ruiz/capsula>

Interview with Clémentine Deliss on Radio Web MACBA:

<http://www.macba.cat/en/rwm-sonia-clementine-deliss>

<http://www.macba.cat/es/>

[rwm-sonia-clementine-deliss-eliminades](http://www.macba.cat/es/rwm-sonia-clementine-deliss-eliminades)

Video of the Seminar (November 2014) "Decolonising the Museum": Clémentine Deliss: Collecting and Curating the Unknown. Ethnography of the Past and Contemporary Artistic Practice: <http://www.macba.cat/en/decolonising-the-museum-clementine-deliss>

RELATED UPCOMING EVENTS AT MACBA:

- Workshop with Francesc Ruiz: "Sexy comics for all ages" (2 December 2015).
- "Rosoum" Project (a collaboration with BCN Producció'15) (23-27 November 2015).



INSTITUTIONAL FEVER IN CHINA

COLIN SIYUAN CHINNERY

The Chinese contemporary art system was non-existent before 2000; there were only two or three commercial art galleries in the whole country and no institutions dedicated to contemporary art¹. It is difficult to comprehend how China went from practically nothing to being arguably one of the most lively art scenes in the world in just fifteen years. Taiwan and Hong Kong went through transformative colonial histories. Mainland China did not; its recent history had other predominant forces that fed into its contemporary art institution development.

After decades of Mao Zedong's failed and often destructive political movements, Deng Xiaoping initiated the Open Door Policy in 1978, tentatively allowing foreign business investment in China. This started a process that exposed the country to outside ideas. Decades worth of culture came gushing in all at once,

bombarding people who had been starved of cultural stimulus. At the same time, Deng promoted Hu Yaobang to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party,

1. Before 2000, only ShanghART in Shanghai, Courtyard Gallery and Red Gate Gallery in Beijing were dealing in contemporary art.

who in turn invited renowned writer Wang Meng to become Minister of Culture. This ushered in the most prolific period of cultural production in China since the 1930s. Film director Zhang Yimou, musician Tan Dun, literature Nobel laureate Mo Yan, and artist Huang Yong Ping are just some of the creative minds forged in that era. Moreover, the 85 New Wave art movement produced hundreds of impromptu exhibitions all over China, culminating in the *China/ Avant-Garde* show at the China Art Gallery in Beijing² in February 1989 with over 300 artists. However, the intensely idealistic mood of those times was part and parcel of idealistic political attitudes that led to the Tiananmen demonstrations, resulting in the tragic crackdown on 4 June 1989.

The government consequently set China on a very different ideological path into the 1990s, moving policy away from politics and almost exclusively towards the economy. This was a major watershed in recent Chinese history: indeed the fundamental paradigm shifted from political to economic reform for the first time in 100 years.

2. This museum is now called the National Art Museum of China





Wang Youshen, *Sample · China Avant-garde*, 1989, Photograph, 60×40cm, 1 of 24 pieces. 王友身1989-样片·中国现代艺术展-02

Before then, economic reform was part of a political ideology—Mao’s rhetoric was self-reliance, cutting China off from an imperialist and greedy world. In the early 1990s, economic reform became something for its own sake, cutting itself off from the communist ideology that was supposed to have formed it. The result was a special form of capitalism given an amusing euphemism—Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. With the prospect of economic prosperity, political ideology lost its allure very quickly for many people. In the 1980s, Chinese artists discovered

the West as a source of ideas, then in the 1990s as a centre of resources: collectors, curators, and museums. This loss of innocence coincided with a major transformation of the contemporary art world as centred on and about the West to being more diverse and international. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the last barrier to global capitalism had fallen. China’s new economic reforms were very much in tune with the times, and artists tried to take advantage of this the best they could.

Since there were practically no collectors or institutional support within their country, when Westerners came looking for the exotic, Chinese artists often obliged, tailoring their work to fit expectations. Some examples of contemporary art in the 1990s did not mirror China’s reality as much as it reflected some Westerners’ understanding of it, like a kind of contemporary chinoiserie. Simultaneously, a fascination with the emergence of China on the international stage resulted in a plethora of China-themed exhibitions, and one highlight of this trend was Harald Szeemann inviting twenty Chinese artists to participate in the 1999 Venice Biennale, when Cai Guo-Qiang was awarded the Golden Lion.

If China has any kind of post-colonial mindset, it was seeded in the 1990s, when all contemporary art resources lay in the West, and their collectors,

curators, and institutions were the only gatekeepers to exposure or success. However, by the early 2000s, things started to change in China. Encouraged by a handful of domestic curators and galleries, a generation of Chinese collectors began, very gradually, to emerge. In 2002, the first galleries opened in a factory complex called 798, and by 2005 this had expanded substantially, starting a gentrification process.



Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) facade unveiled in October 2012 as part of the fifth year anniversary celebrations. Courtesy:Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA).

By the time the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) opened in November 2007, the 798 Art District was almost entirely gentrified, with dozens of galleries, and a whole range of cafés, restaurants and boutiques, resulting in official government recognition, and even its designation as one of the top-ten tourist destinations alongside the Forbidden City and the Great Wall in 2008³. When Chinese entrepreneurs realised that art could be an investment vehicle just like real estate but with quicker and larger returns, they swiftly created a market. Chinese artists' world was transformed by the emergence of this domestic market. Despite the fact that much of it was an illusion, part of it was real. Chinese artists got a taste of self-reliance, and foreign curators were no longer at the top of the food chain. This bubble popped in sync with the global financial crisis in autumn 2008. Nevertheless, something unusual happened. Instead of collectors abandoning contemporary art, a whole new situation opened up. As the excessive prices had been slashed, and the bubble-building investors had been flushed out, more serious minded collectors became involved. Corporations were interested in a new form of brand building and sophisticated collectors were moving from more traditional art forms to the

3. Caffrey, K. 2013, *The Beijing Olympics: Promoting China: Soft and Hard Power in Global Politics*, Routledge, p. 16.

contemporary market. A generation of young people known as *fuerdai* (rich second generation) had also come of age. Some of these who had studied abroad and developed a passion for contemporary art came back to China armed with knowledge of the gallery

4. Mei Fong, “Why China Is Letting A Thousand Museums Take Root and Bloom”, *Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2006, viewed 17 September 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116433900468931817>.

5. For example, the Rockbund is currently showing a Chen Zhen retrospective, *Chen Zhen: Without going to New York and Paris, life could be internationalized*; the Power Station of Art has the major exhibition *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: The Dream City*; YUZ Museum just opened *Twin Tracks: Yang Fudong Solo Exhibition* and *Rain Room*; and the Long Museum West Bund started their programme with major solo shows by Xu Zhen and Ding Yi.

and museum system. Unlike the crass investors who dominated the pre-financial crisis market, these new collectors understood the value of building collections of quality, and the importance of institutions in bringing stability to the value of their collections. It is evident that institutional development started almost immediately after the initial shock of the financial crisis had subsided. In Shanghai alone, the following institutions opened since 2010: Rockbund Art Museum in 2010; Power Station of Art, Shanghai Himalayas Museum, and OCAT Shanghai in 2012; Shanghai 21st Century Minsheng Art Museum, Long Museum West Bund, and YUZ Museum Shanghai in 2014. Others are under construction.

Unlike the state-sponsored 1,000 museum project which is likely to result in hundreds of empty architectural shells⁴, most of these institutions seem to be genuinely dedicated to building audiences through mounting quality exhibitions⁵.

What is behind this institution building activity? Of all art forms, visual art is the most marketable while being censored the least. That means contemporary art enjoys the most creative freedom while providing the biggest financial reward for supporters. In contrast, cinema is censored heavily by the government, music has no copyright protection, and experimental theatre and dance have no way to pay back supporters. It is not a coincidence that visual art is the only contemporary art form that is booming. However, if marketing interests and commercial incentives fuel the development of institutions, what will this mean for the relationship between the artist, the institution, and the public? Such questions can only become clearer once the situation has settled down and there are no signs of that happening in the near future. Although centres such as Beijing and Shanghai may be close to institutional saturation point, development has only just started in second tier cities such as Xi’An, Nanjing, and Wuhan. The OCT Contemporary Art Museum Group (OCAT) has opened museum branches in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Beijing,





Rockbund Art Museum.
Courtesy: Rockbund Art
Museum.

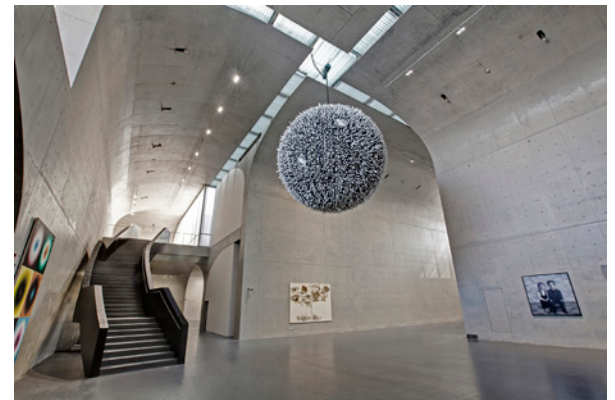
Long Museum West Bund. photo by Long
Museum.



Review-Long Museum West Bund,
photo by Long Museum.



West Bund Art Center,
courtesy of West Bund Art
& Design 馆外夜景



6. Disclosure: I am Director of the forthcoming Wuhan Art Terminus. and Xi’An; another is planned for Wuhan. Wuhan has just opened the privately owned He Art Museum, and is anticipating a branch of the Hong Kong based K11 ‘Art Mall’, as well as the Wuhan Art Terminus (WH.A.T.)⁶ As China’s focus on urban development moves away from coastal regions towards the hinterland, opportunities will follow policy incentives as they have done in the past. Regardless of the uneven motives and qualities of these new institutions, China appears to be a centre for institutional experimentation that may create new models for the conceptualisation and maintenance of contemporary art institutions in other parts of the world.

LINKS TO WEBSITES OF THE MUSEUMS MENTIONED ABOVE

- [Courtyard Gallery](#), Beijing
- [Long Museum West Bund](#), Shanghai
- [National Art Museum of China](#), Beijing
- [OCAT, OCT Contemporary Art Terminal](#), Shanghai
- [Power Station of Art](#), Shanghai
- [Red Gate Gallery](#), Beijing
- [Rockbund Art Museum](#), Shanghai
- [Shanghai Himalayas Museum](#), Shanghai
- [Shanghai 21st Century Mingsheng Art Museum](#), Shanghai
- [ShanghART](#), Shanghai
- [Ullens Center for Contemporary Art](#), Beijing
- [YUZ Museum Shanghai](#), Shanghai



OPINIONS – L'INTERNATIONALE BOOKS

FRONTIER IMAGINARIES

VIVIAN ZIHERL



Map made by Rumold Mercator in 1587.

Perhaps, to cite Négritudes pioneer Chinua Achebe, we are all “No Longer At Ease”. The precise formation of this discomfort varies along global trajectories of social, subjective and terrestrial relations. Radically subtending the politico-juridical construct of the ‘border’, these trajectories may better be understood as ‘frontiers’ that chart ongoing processes of primitive accumulation wherein the common is re-mattered into commodity. As a ‘life of lines’, in the words

of anthropologist Timothy Ingold, frontiers are climactic rather than cartographic—forming meteorological pressure-lines wherein the transformations of solid, liquid and gas occur as political and cosmological transubstantiations.

Frontier Imaginaries is a multi-platform exhibition and research project initiated by Vivian Zihlerl during the 2014/2015 IMA Brisbane Curatorial Fellowship. The project departs from Australian dialogues such as climate debates, the offshoreing and enclosure of asylum seekers, ongoing Indigenous struggles, and urban-rural divides within a knowledge economy—resurveying the role of aesthetic work within these increasingly urgent negotiations. Over the coming months, a series of interviews published on *L’Internationale Online* blog will develop a body of research towards this project and in response to the proposed thematic of Decolonising Practices. Topics will include: ‘Decolonising Golan’, ‘Decolonising Brunswick’, ‘Decolonising the Household’, and ‘Decolonising Poetics’ for example.

...



The ‘frontier’ as a horizon did not disappear with the passing of the cart and wagon. Indeed when liberal ideologues are called upon to defend the ever greater exceptions needed to enforce an increasingly tenuous ‘rule of law’ at both international and state levels, the Wild West is often hailed as the ultimate disciplining threat—a fantasized primitive condition of so-called ‘natural law’. We must submit, we are told, to the excesses of corporate-state monopolies, or else we’re in cowboy-land. But what in-fact is this illiberal terrain of unrule, and what if it is not ‘natural’ but produced?

Frontier Imaginaries seeks modes and protagonists by which to narrate the frontier as a socio-terrestrial form through imperial histories and within the global era. From the 1500s the frontier expanded across the Mercator projection as a line marking knowable-as-exploitable. In this way the imperial frontier was also the horizon towards which modernity pitched itself as an improving force of history, forming a geo-temporal cut before which lay the ‘primitive’, the ‘ahistoric’, the ‘backwards’ etc. As feminist researchers such as Silvia Federici have shown, incorporation into coercive industrial modernity acts not only upon lands but upon the intimate politics of populations, and particularly upon the bodies and worlds of women who must be disciplined to

re-produce the conditions of their own subjugation.

Through the 19th and 20th Centuries the imperial frontier gradually collapsed into global enclosure, overwritten by data grids as exploratory routes of conquest were exhausted and replaced with the channels of commerce and commutership. How, then, may the global frontier be charted as a reterritorialising imperative within industrial and post-Fordist schema? How may these forces be known, and how may resilience be figured, as capital continues with ever more intensity to exile its incomensurabilities onto outer locations, now marked doubly by the extraction of value and by what Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva call “the dispossession of the dispossessed”.

Posted on April 27, 2015.



INTERVIEW: FORCED CLOSURES

VIVIAN ZIHERL



Richard Bell, *Larry*, 2015, film still. Courtesy Milani Gallery.

What's in a closure?

What are the narrative and material forces that maintain the opening of certain possibilities and the closure of others? Many of the European institutions of L'Internationale confederation have faced the threat of closures—of exhibitions, research departments, discursive programmes etc. These destabilisations act through the winding back of essential support in terms of finance, at the level of professional independence and in the disciplining of social narratives.

The neoliberal politics of closure echoes the modern biopolitical regime of enclosure. Here, formerly productive parts of civil society become rezoned as waste to be shed from the social body. Regionally and globally what patterns do the pressure lines of closure form, and what picture do they offer of ongoing frontier processes?

Throughout 2015 the motif of closure has been writ large over the Australian political landscape in particular. The closure of its borders to asylum

seekers has escalated, most recently with the revelation of payments made to people smugglers to “stop the boats”. Numerous contemporary art institutions may also face closure following an unprecedented appropriation of over one third of the budget of the Australia Council for the Arts — redirected towards a discretionary fund under the oversight of the Attorney General, Senator George Brandis.

Most dramatically, tens of thousands of people have mobilized in the streets of capital cities and regional centres opposing the proposed forced closure of 150 remote aboriginal communities by the Western Australian government. The neoliberal dramaturgy of closure and opening is underscored by the recently announced plan of a \$5 billion fund towards infrastructure in far northern Australia to, in Treasurer Joe Hockey's words: “open our northern frontier for business”.

This entry to *L'Internationale Online* arrives marking the third global call to action against the forced closures in Western Australia taking place 26–28 June, 2015. The contribution takes the form of a short



questionnaire to an activist, a historian and a critic on possible readings across these occurrences, as well as an artist contribution by Richard Bell from his latest film which charts the exploits of a fictional entrepreneur gallerist “Larry”.



Richard Bell, *Larry*, 2015, film still. Courtesy Milani Gallery.

Mitch Torres

Mitch Torres is one of the main organisers of a campaign group based in the Kimberley (north-west Australia), known on social media as #SOSBlakAustralia. Torres is also a writer and director, know for films including *Jandamarra’s War* (2011) and

Whispering In Our Hearts (2001). Further information on the #SOSBlakAustralia campaign is available in an interview with Torres by *Solidarity Online*, 20 June 2016: online [here](#).

1—What do the proposed Forced Closures indicate about Australia’s liberal democratic state and is this significant at a global level?

In my humble belief it demonstrates a lack of human caring for the way people chose to have a choice about how they see themselves in a dominant ideology with it’s top-down policy of dismissing what is different and as part of this great push for full assimilation of the sovereign people of this country, now known to the world as Australia.

This goes against the UN statutes that should be about protecting the lives/way-of-life/culture of all indigenous people globally. Until the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is made domestic law here in Australia we will see our Human Rights as Indigenous peoples from one of the world’s oldest living/surviving Cultures be continuously dismantled.

This is very significant at a global level for all indigenous/sovereigns of the lands they still live on. There is a global push to further marginalize indigenous nations and peoples to the edge—forcing a

culture on them by a foreign occupation. We as indigenous people have never left our sovereign domiciles but we are being pushed off them by capitalist greed for natural resources and total domination.

2—The proposed Forced Closures are occurring at a time when the Australian Government is also expanding its programme of offshoring asylum seekers through increasingly controversial measures, to say the least. It happens that this also occurs at the time of an extraordinary withdrawal of support for independent and small practitioners in the arts by the Federal Government. Do you think that there can be meaningful alliances across these fields, and could or should this be meaningful to museum institutions in particular?

We have in Australia a heartless Government to put it in simple terms. As a ‘white’ culture that has its roots in being boat people, many of us cannot understand this push not to be open to helping people who are seeking asylum—many of us are also concerned about our neighbors in West Papua New Guinea—and the deafening silence from Australia and indeed the UN.

As a practitioner in the arts in film I have certainly felt the cuts to our industry and the restructuring of

having to fit into a paradigm of making safe stories for visual consumption by the wider community because our stories may offend in their truth. So in a sense we are being vetoed for wanting to tell stories of our struggles, history and the solutions to what we see as concerns.

Museums have a big role to play in giving back our stolen artifacts. This cannot be underestimated about the empowerment it can give to our people. To hold our history in our hands without being told why we cannot access it must stop now. It is our history that will empower our people to rebuild our story of our identity, which for the past close-to-227 years has been systematically dismantled with the intent to destroy.

3—The title of this blog thread is *Decolonising Practices*. Is that a term that is significant regarding the proposed Forced Closures, and what would it mean for cultural institutions to undertake decolonizing practices in particular?

For decolonising to happen the colonisers must first decolonise their own processes and ideologies.

We must also understand that there is no post-colonial period—we are still being colonised right now. The threat of closures to remote communities



is still a part of the colonising process. The Northern Territory is also moving people off country and in forcing them to follow what the dominant ideology wants them to be is colonising in the now. I see all these processes as part of the assimilation process of a foreign power on sovereigns, which is resulting in the linguicide, ecocide and genocide of my people.



Richard Bell, *Larry*, 2015, film still. Courtesy Milani Gallery.

Gary Foley

Gary Foley was born in Grafton (1950), northern NSW of Gumbainggir descent. Expelled from school aged 15, Foley came to Sydney as an

apprentice draughtsperson. Since then he has been at the centre of major political activities including the Springbok tour demonstrations (1971), Tent Embassy in Canberra (1972), Commonwealth Games protest (1982) and protests during the bicentennial celebrations (1988). Between 2001 and April 2005 he was also the Senior Curator for Southeastern Australia at Museum Victoria. Between 2005 and 2008 he was a lecturer/tutor in the Education Faculty of University of Melbourne, and in 2008 took up a position as Senior Lecturer in History and Politics at Moondani Balluk centre at Victoria University in western Melbourne.

1—What do the proposed forced closures in Western Australia indicate about Australia’s liberal democratic state & is this significant at a global level?

They’re entirely consistent with virtually all government policies since Federation in 1901. The broader problem crystallizes down to the deeply embedded white racism that pervades Australian society, and that has been a major issue since before 1901.

2—The proposed Forced Closures are occurring at a time when the Australian Government is also expanding its programme of offshoring asylum seekers through increasingly controversial measures, to say

the least. It happens that this also occurs at the time of an extraordinary withdrawal of support for independent and small practitioners in the arts by the Federal Government. Do you think that there can be meaningful alliances across these fields, and could or should this be meaningful to museum institutions in particular?

I personally don't see the forced closures as being one of the major issues in Australia at the moment. To me it's a regional thing that will, up to some point, sort itself out in a relatively short time. Whereas issues such as the incarceration rate of Aboriginal peoples and imposed historical poverty and ongoing appalling health statistics are more important as major national issues. Furthermore, the underlying fundamental injustice created by theft of Aboriginal lands and wealth and the refusal of all Australian governments since Federation to address these problems are the major issues of today, yesterday and tomorrow.

And the most significant thing is that all of the problems come back to an issue that is the subject of constant denial in Australia, which is the deeply embedded white racism that is evident daily in the farce that passes for political debate in Australia today.

On the question of whether "there can be meaningful alliances" develop, I believe such alliances

have and will continue to be developed but with museums and other cultural institutions being apathetic and disinterested bystanders. It is my opinion that there is little chance that this will change in the foreseeable future.

3—The title of this blog thread is *Decolonising Practices*. Is that a term that is significant regarding the proposed Forced Closures, and what would it mean for cultural institutions to undertake decolonizing practices in particular?

The only way one can decolonise institutions is not to merely pretend to listen to our voices in a condescending and meaningless way, but rather to empower our voices by enabling us to curate their own exhibitions. To allow Aboriginal peoples to decide and control the manner and content of Museum representation of ourselves. Simple as that.

The Melbourne Museum attempted to do something like that fifteen years ago, and with some success, momentarily. Then when the practices and demands of the Aboriginal curators became a threat to the British Museum it came to an end instantly.

I'm not sure that museums as cultural institutions are genuinely capable of decolonizing. The idea of "decolonizing practices" should be to relinquish



all control of the representation and exhibition of Aboriginal stuff, and place control of the specific Aboriginal mob whose stuff it is. And, where the issue of repatriation is raised by Aboriginal peoples, then not to hesitate or vacillate, but to step back. To put it more simply, “get out of the way”.

I would have thought that such a proposition is so alien to the underlying history and philosophy of Western museums that “decolonizing practices” remains a complete impossibility, even (or especially) in those institutions that consider themselves to be at the more “progressive” end of the spectrum.



Richard Bell, *Larry*, 2015, film still. Courtesy Milani Gallery.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Elizabeth A. Povinelli teaches in anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University. She was previously editor of *Public Culture* and her most recent books are *The Empire of Love* (2006) and *Economies of Abandonment* (2011). Her writing and filmography focuses on the conditions of otherwise in Late Liberalism. She is a founding member of the Karrabing Film Collective.

1—What do the proposed Forced Closures indicate about Australia’s liberal democratic state and is this significant at a global level?

The Western Australian government’s proposal to forcibly close numerous rural and remote Indigenous communities by defunding infrastructural support—their power and water—has to be understood in a broader late liberal policy environment. The forced closure proposal was announced as the Western Australian government more quietly changed the definitional criteria of a sacred sites, demanding every site conform more tightly to the practices and activities of religions of the book—that they be a holy site in the sense of a place where worshipers come and practice the

tenets of their faith. Wherever two or more are gathered constantly and regularly, now there is a sacred site, and thus banished from legislative protection is a core Indigenous ontological analytics—that it is the place that contains and concentrates the energies of the land and that constitutes the world whether or not humans are there one moment to the next.

These changes to sacred site registration and forced closures are occurring at the tail end of the mining boom, the moment the intensive labor input necessary for the construction of mining infrastructure gives way to the increasingly automated nature of modern mining. A vast evacuation of Indigenous lands is underway that is being made to give way to the machinery of national and multinational mining and the material fuels that drive our immaterial information economy. A new form of terra nullius is underway—the forced emptied landscape of power and meaning and people such that the material scars of pure profit never appear to be perceived or conceived. These are not deserted lands; these are desecrated lands being made into deserts. They are expressions of geontopower—the management of life and nonlife, what must be made into inert in order to continue to fuel capital. The deserted terrains of late liberalism’s governance of markets and of difference is eventually an actual desert filled with the power of sand and

wind and dryness to defeat those things of water that created it.

A few years ago, I thought of writing an essay for the Australian magazine, *The Monthly*, titled, “The Australian Taliban.” The context would have been the then recent destruction of the Bamayan Buddhas and the international outrage that accompanied their destruction and the lodgement by the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority of a desecration lawsuit against OM Manganese Ltd, a subsidiary of OM Holding, for deliberately damaging an Indigenous sacred site, Two Women Sitting Down, at its Bootu Creek Manganese mine. The case pivoted on whether OM Manganese intentionally wrecked features of the site when it undermined its foundations. Given that both the anthropological report and the legal judgment consider Two Women Sitting Down a geological formation represented by a human narrative, it perhaps goes without saying that the lawsuit was not prosecuted as manslaughter, attempted murder, or murder but as a “desecration” under criminal liability law. But Two Women Sitting Down is not inert even if it refuses to be alive under the conditions late liberalism demands. It will spread its fractured existence paying humans back in the form of toxic pollutants.

Nor are those men and women and children first fenced in these same deserts and now on boats



overcrowded and dangerously teetering at sea inert. The federal government can build a saltwater to the moon but the walls themselves will construct the forms of their own crumbling.

This, it seems to me, is the condition not merely of Australian late liberalism but late liberalism more generally, namely, the increasingly unavoidable conception and subsequent hysteria of the double binds of governing markets and difference. Thus, I don't think a grand unified and coherent rationality sits behind these policies. Instead, as my colleague, Tess Lea put it, these are the wild policy fields that late liberalism sprouts.

2—The proposed Forced Closures are occurring at a time when the Australian Government is also expanding its programme of offshoring asylum seekers through increasingly controversial measures, to say the least. It happens that this also occurs at the time of an extraordinary withdrawal of support for independent and small practitioners in the arts by the Federal Government. Do you think that there can be meaningful alliances across these fields, and could or should this be meaningful to museum institutions in particular?

In all three instances—forcible closures, deregistration, and off-shore processing—late liberalism needs

to create zones of abandonment where alternative social projects must ingest and digest small and large scale forms of toxicity to endure, understanding that to endure is not remain the same but to remain with the energy to express an otherwise. Of course, the arts would need to undergo the same effort to create abandonment. Nothing can remain as witness or writer of what is going on all around us but sequestered from most of us. Small and independent are what the government actually fears—not the big army, the big terrorist group, but the lone wolf and lone artist critically crying out in the desert that late liberalism has made.

Monday, ABC Radio broadcast a show about the art alliance between Antony and the Johnsons and Martu artist Curtis Taylor to bring attention to the plans of Cameco Australia to build the Kintyre open-cut uranium mine north-east in the Pilbara. The program used a fairly simple rhetorical framework to mobilize and canalize attention — how did a Manhattan based experimental musician such as Antony and the Johnson wind up in the Pilbara? But the trick worked — a radio program was authorized, produced and broadcast. And at least a bit of critical thought cut through mainstream media.

Of course, the mainstream media is only a part of the ecosystem system authored. Decades of



analogue and then digital infrastructure allowed small, local and independent critical Indigenous arts, film, television and radio a kind of authoritative leverage that it didn't have. We are here. We see what is happening. We can image and reimage these happenings and we can circulate them through our communities and into broader circuits of attention.

Arts defunding, site deregistration, and community closures are overlapping gale winds directed at the source of this leverage. Eliminate the material condition of the capacitation of other thoughts. Eliminate the embodied nature of perception, of eyes and ears and noses and skins that can experience and thus conceive the gutting of landscapes that create the factories of overseas capital that hemorrhage refugees.

3—The title of this blog thread is *Decolonising Practices*. Is that a term that is significant regarding the proposed Forced Closures, and what would it mean for cultural institutions to undertake decolonizing practices in particular?

I would love to have a contest, well, perhaps several contests, of the sort that corporations, nations and states have when they issue a public call for the branding of some event. Send us you idea of what we

should call “x.” We know that these calls are not primarily intended to create and then chose the best of all possible proper names, but mobilize and channel attention such that a public for the event is in place to consume the event no matter what its name or image end up being. Indeed, a widely acknowledged badly chosen brand can serve to channel attention just as well as a widely acknowledge good brand.

And thus the end of my contests isn't really concerned with the name per se as much as the pragmatic effect they would produce. My public call would be for the best name for what this period of liberal governance and the best name for its otherwise. I don't really have to issue such a call. We are in a swell of conceptual tests—decolonization, settler colonialism, geontology, biopower, pragmatology, relational ontologies... I myself would probably not use decolonizing practices simply because the “de” would likely conjure a return to some state prior to colonialism rather than to the radical experiments of endurance and maneuvering that are the real object of the conservative government's concern.

Posted on June 26, 2015.



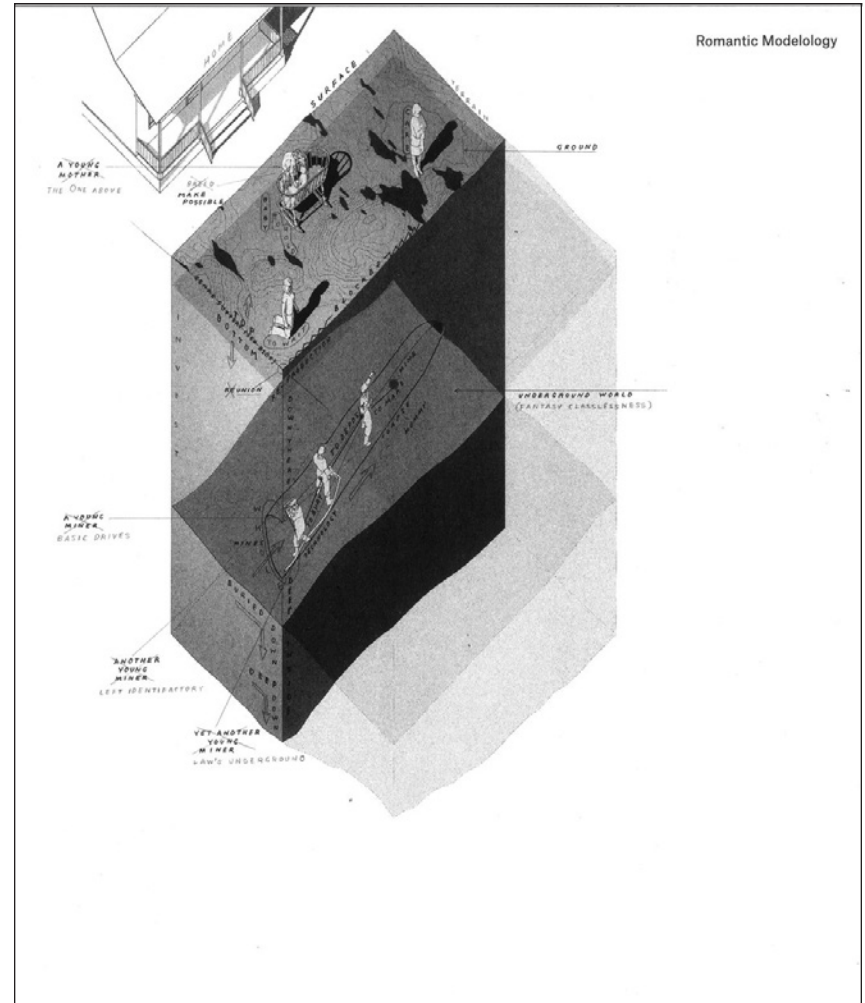
WHAT DO WE TALK
ABOUT WHEN
WE TALK ABOUT
DECOLONISATION?

VIVIAN ZIHERL

arising from the ‘South’ that claimed self-determination from colonial rule, using especially Europe’s own rights discourses of the post-war period against the legitimacy of Empire. In a post-89 period it takes on a different register again.

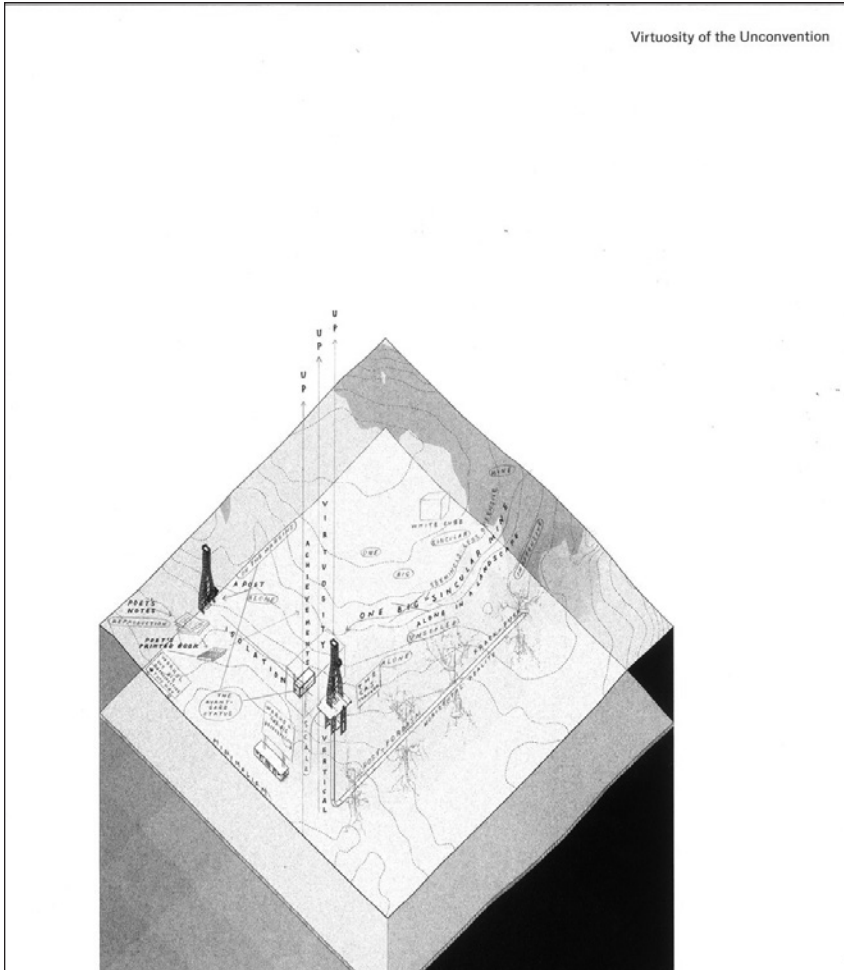
This all begs the question; what is at stake when a historically and specifically determined concept such as ‘decolonisation’ is mobilised in the present tense by a ‘transeuropean’ group of museum such as L’Internationale?

RACHEL O’REILLY—I read the L’Internationale’s own agenda in its ‘transeuropean’ framing as including—I assume—central consciousness of Western European as well as German and Russian colonial legacies, ‘decolonisations’ of Eastern bloc, alongside the ‘East’s’ own relation to and reading of Western colonisation, and all of that more than any North/South consciousness really (which tends to get read mostly, and persistently, in terms of “how to deal with the collection”). That is a very crass roping but it helps us to begin—clarifying at least both of our own Antipodean trajectories and conversations through culture and practice as ‘differently framed’ and placed from the L’Internationale starting point. I also wonder if ‘transeuropean decolonisation’ (not completely sure what this concept is) leaves out much of



Romantic Modelology from Rachel O'Reilly, *The Gas Imaginary*, iteration #2 (2014), with Rodrigo Hernandez and Pa.La.C.e. (Valle Medina and Benjamin Reynolds). Limited edition series of 9 × 3D drawings, risograph on paper, ink, pencil. Courtesy the artist.





Virtuosity of the Unconvention from Rachel O'Reilly, *The Gas Imaginary*, iteration #2 (2014), with Rodrigo Hernandez and Pa.La.C.e. (Valle Medina and Benjamin Reynolds). Limited edition series of 9 x 3d drawings, risograph on paper, ink, pencil. Courtesy the artist.

the specificity of non-European modernisms, modalities, art histories and knowledges of anything much from the 'South' except vis-à-vis a kind of indebtedness program. There is aesthetic idealism operative in the political geography before we even start to talk about Art, perhaps.

It is important to keep clear the workings of capital, states, and cultural institutions in the post-89 curation and administration of the aesthetic, in any case, before nominalisations (like 'decolonial') start to really point to actual modes of production of practices. Bearing in mind that cultural activism, innovative practices and theoretical work inevitably institutionalise as policy, in 'turns', or become behaviourally individuated as 'best practice' (this concept inherited from corporate culture) it is of course the material aspect of what such practices aim to achieve and work through, that is the point. Especially if we consider that Contemporary Art today tends to be a space where metapolitical questions are increasingly interdisciplinarily mediated and affectively and conceptually processed, but rarely so often¹ 'worked through'.

As a political project, decolonisation has never been separated

1. This is Lauren Berlant's understanding of the political location of aesthetically mediated public spheres. See *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control.” From the first paragraph of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

3. See for example S. Faulkner and A. Ramamurthy (eds), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain: British Art and Visual Culture since 1750*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

4. See [here](#) and [here](#).

5. I’m reminded here of relational critiques such as Dennis Ekpo’s classic *Third Text* essay “Any European around to help me talk about myself? The white man’s burden of black Africa’s critical practices”, in vol. 19, issue 2, 2005.

from questions of organisation and the materiality of justice. Tarrying with the administration of aesthetics in so-called global², or European or meta-regionally (usually economically) framed art spaces and discourse networks is different organisational terrain, but inseparably. We can note that ‘decolonial’ efforts and agendas in some form or other (including very much non-actualised ones)—whether through pressures of activism or soft Euro-metropole diplomacy and co-exposure³—are evident or buried in European archives and also biennale projects from the beginnings of the post-war era, and for some, much earlier than this. Regarding the legacies of colonial institutions themselves, all contemporary steering and performance remains contested⁴; of course the British institutional histories are going to be different from the Netherlands’ institutional workings through

Empire, and different again to labours associated with the French or German colonial situations, and so on (as should be expected). And this is not me speaking on behalf of ‘decolonisation’ movements⁵ at all, that should be a different interviewee, let’s emphasise, but addressing your questions in terms of the changing spacings—institutional and non—of irreconcilable gaps and limits in the cultural sector that are built precisely on historical and ongoing dispossession⁶. Around these gaps the supposed privilege of neutrality is not, actually, an option for ‘cultural’ work and workers negotiating the inter-generational overdetermination of inequality in life’s disposability, which sees some cultures managed and patronised by the state at the continuing expense of others.

I would say we are observing a kind of convergence in the way the liberal civilisational ideality of the

6. I think it is important to name names here at risk of seeming token, displacing, and overly individualising (non-native informant of native informants!): Tiga Bayles (Radio Redfern, 4AAA) explicated the politics of organization, ‘training’ and the country (of) music and story networks when I was inexpertly co-organising independent tertiary student media; Tracey Moffatt, Lisa Reihana and Genevieve Grieves, the cosmo- and micro-political performativity of installation and archival intervention. Cheryl L’Hondrelle (Metis-Cree)’s practice-based inquiries introduced me to indigenous computation to crystallise ‘the question concerning technology’. The longstanding impact of Vernon Ah Kee’s work on my appreciation of the role of the negative in art, and the mediation of historical affect through form is greater



than I can probably be fully conscious of. The work of people like Gary Foley and Richard Bell, alongside the committed trajectories of indigenous curators and independent organising collectives, and enduring indigenous-non-indigenous collaborations reintroduce discourses of political autonomy and sovereignty in full relationship to the artistic and aesthetic questions. Maryrose Casey's archival research into original performance and staging economies on the frontier, and Stephen Gilchrist (Yamatji)'s framing of the indigeneity of curation, recently consolidated for me the deep historical time and autonomy of mediation practices of Indigenous avantgardes. Postcolonialities of camera movement, proprietary colour and

'European post-war cultural project' (a place-holder for aesthetic idealist philosophy in programming also, perhaps especially for certain remaining colonial and globalising institutions in the South) has married with processes of Contemporary Art's own industrial globalisation and financialisation in ways that have made legible, and complex, a certain delayed crisis for liberal museologies. Some of my research on installation and neo-liberalisation, but also aesthetic autonomy in settler colonial space (with Danny Butt), addresses this. I think what is also interesting and contradictory about the present moment is a certain schizoid two-hand over-identification and de-naturalisation of remaining colonial art institutional power and authority by 'autonomous' and independent practitioners for the purpose of the defense of infrastructures.

In so far as Contemporary Art has been this space of absolute overlap of processes of 'democratisation'

on the display side, with post-Fordist mobility circulating 'difference' via near-full market liberalisation⁷, including more recently of cultural institutions themselves, it is interesting that it is only now that the 'colonising' forces of capital are felt on the material-symbolic inside of the euro-humanitarian border that certain continuities (of European modernism and colonialism) are being processed more publicly. 'Human rights' over 'class conflict' was the framing politicising wager of Okwui Enwezor's *Documenta 11*; skip forward to this year's Venice Biennale and Capital is remediated (this is not to deflate the integrity of the curation of the former or overstate the salience of the latter, but to point to the stealth of neoliberal transition in its period of trafficking in 'unrealised' democracy). The European Union is legally colonising the state of Greece through the same process of "accumulation by dispossession" captured in the⁸ David Harvey's piece of your curatorial

lens technologies I redacted via curating and archiving Kumar Shahani's films for GoMA (also via the writings of cinematographer, KK Mahajan). Jackie and Lindsay Johnson, and Juliri Ingra, elders of the Goreng Goreng in Gladstone, Queensland, teach the oral history of my home town alongside Baijali and Goereng peoples, and the region's archive of activism and art that I was not exposed to prior, including the work of Ron Hurly, recently given a fantastic retrospective curated by Bruce McLean at GoMA.

7. Arjun Appadurai's work has been of great value here, as has David Theo Goldberg's *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.



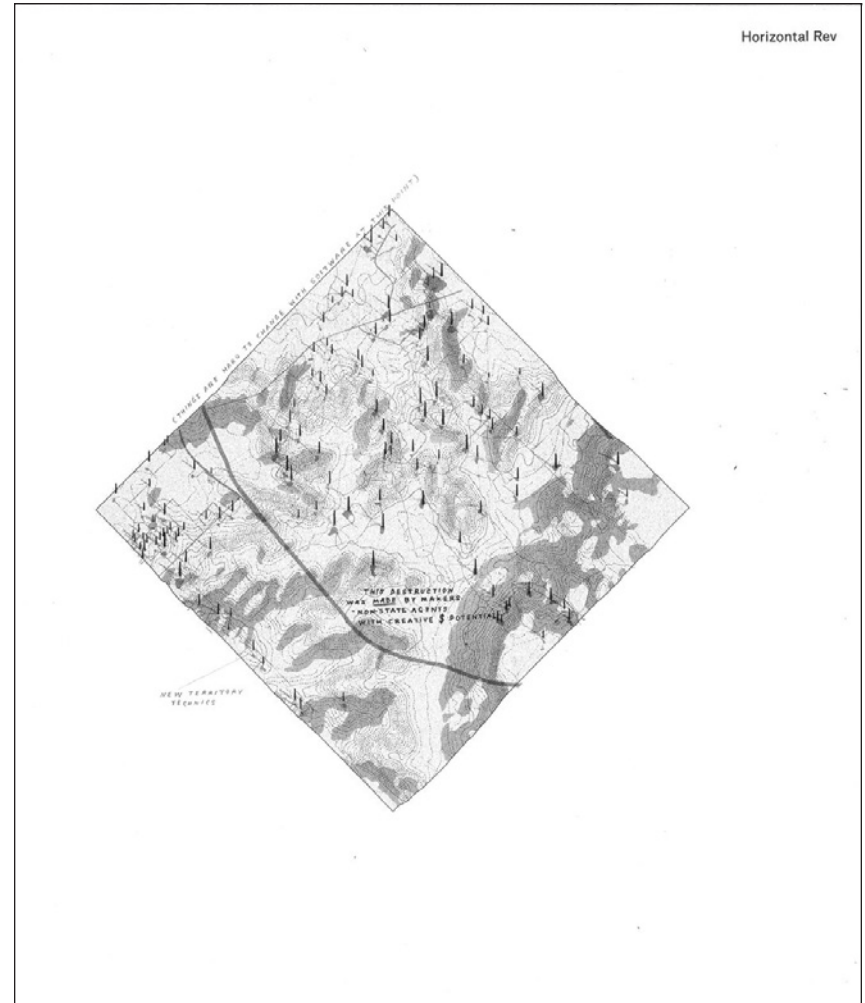
8. David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession”, in *Socialist Register 40*: 63-87, 2004.

armature. The art institution is as good a site as any to interrogate the entrenchment of contemporary (neo)colonial styled vectors and forces impacting culture in

these broadest senses—in so far as art’s own changed, global, financialised, conditions are acknowledged, and intractably ‘moving’ problems of political and economic power discrepancies are all there.

So the question about decolonisation ‘here’ is not whether ‘European’ institutions are or are not problematising a colonial (or Imperial) past and ‘withdrawing’ from such, which is somehow a fantastically cartesian conception of production and history (constantly somehow granting an entity some default ‘prior’ imperial neutrality until a better effort is prioritised soon?), but how, actually, do spaces and agents of art and culture socially perform, placehold or redistribute internationalism and perform and enact some version of ‘just’ exchange, with political and aesthetic specificity, discriminatory value, while negotiating wide-scale agendas of privation and neocolonial or endo-colonial (Paul Virillio) dominations. This is an organisational question, not a merely discursive or propositional or presentationalist one.

Posted July 29, 2015.



Horizontal Rev, from Rachel O'Reilly, *The Gas Imaginary, iteration #2* (2014), with Rodrigo Hernandez and Pa.La.C.e. (Valle Medina and Benjamin Reynolds). Limited edition series of 9 × 3D drawings, risograph on paper, ink, pencil. Courtesy the artist.



9. Miri Davidson, “The Union Jack and the Southern Cross”, in *The New Inquiry*, March 25, 2015.

VIVIAN ZIHERL—Within my early drafting of the curatorial proposition *Frontier Imaginaries*, I attempted to align the notion of ‘decolonisation’ with a possible agenda of ‘de-neoliberalisation’- in the effort of foregrounding a subjective and domestic register to the political, organisational and economic processes you mention. We recently discussed an article by Miri Davidson in *The New Inquiry*⁹ that addressed New Zealand Prime Minister John Key’s agenda to remove the Union Jack from the national flag. You commented that for you, this gesture showed up certain limitations in the proliferation of the term ‘decolonisation’. Could you expand upon that in this connection?

RACHEL O’REILLY—We talked about how different forms of such statements are observable in much settler colonial state management of the last two decades. Davidson’s great article gives a political coherence to the interests of the New Zealand Prime Minister in changing the national flag and removing the coloniser’s insignia. “It’s my belief,” said Key, “and I think one increasingly shared by many New Zealanders, that the design of the New Zealand flag symbolises a colonial and postcolonial era whose time has passed.” As Davidson traces it, the flag

design proposition follows quite directly from Key’s 2008 election campaign promise to achieve “full and final” settlements between the Crown and all iwi tribe, on all land theft matters that have breached the Treaty of Waitangi¹⁰.

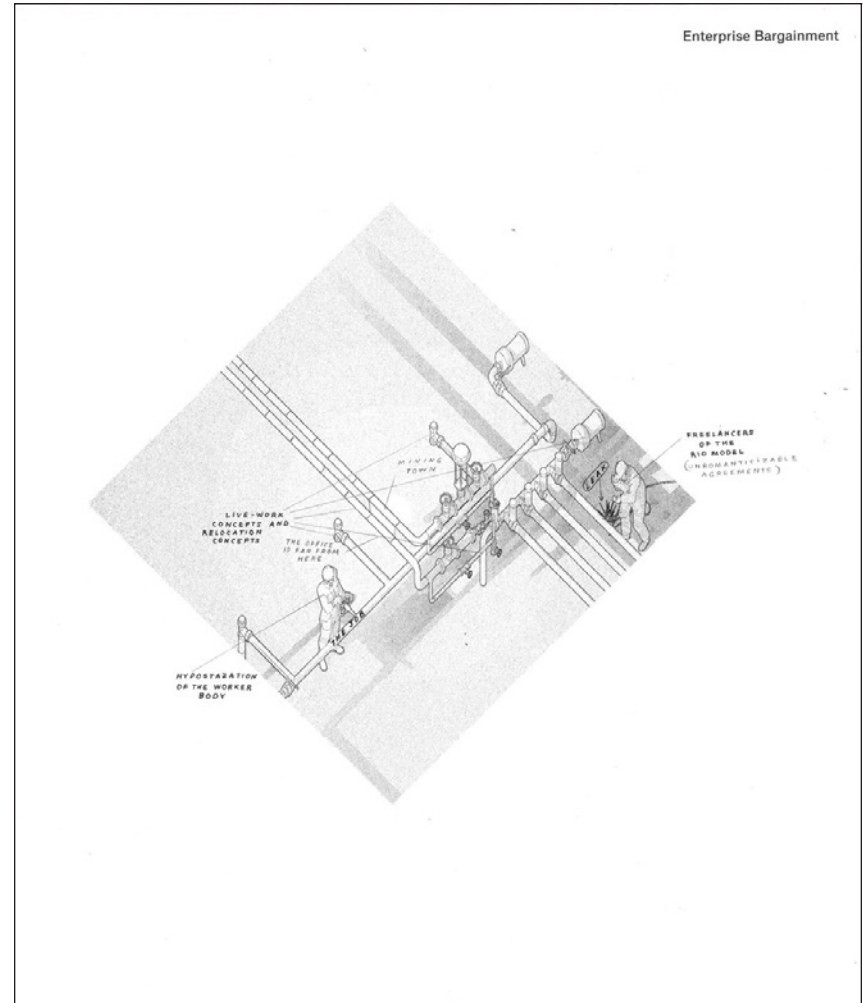
So I was again raising questions about the relationship of (neoliberal) policy to processes of subsumption. Changing the flag and ending restitution ‘finally’ legislates white wishfulness for the end of Bad History, as also a kind of ‘de’. Less extreme forms of such investments in moral-but-not-material ‘clean-up’ tend to (purposefully) confuse difficult, untended historical work with policy, such that political practices or tactics can be nominalised at the level of capital’s own modes of production. In Key we see how a propositional politics of speech inherited from a period of ‘more’ representational democracy but not of it, veers immediately towards subsumption in this sense, showing up also the rearrangement of desire in right populist politics. The individuated desire to *formally* ‘decolonise’ reveals in (ficto-) liberal citizenship a demolition of the stakes of/ for anything resembling the concept. Important to emphasize, Miri Davidson is articulating a non-indigenous occupied/occupier reflexivity around this.



VIVIAN ZIHERL—What do you mean by “rearrangement of desire in populist politics”? That the symbolic effects (of rearranging a national flag’s composition) are radically undercut by their material reality (ie. lack of change in racialised economic composition)?

RACHEL O’REILLY—In the other direction. At the level of the subject, right populist desire, exacerbated by neoliberal restructuring, tends to be about individuated satiation and losses, a preoccupation with how the state has blocked or failed one’s sense of freedom, in raised competition with others. It tends to spare no thought for the actual workings of infrastructure and provisioning, nor amid heightened competition, of how care for the other (which was inherent to ‘welfare’ statist concepts) might be distinguished from ‘owned’ private wishes for good feeling about the state’s (or society’s, this confusion) non/utility ‘for you’. Key, wanting to be the author of an emotional transubstantiation—something like a Southern Thatcher-esque ‘we are all post-post-colonial now’—and framing that as an immaterial aim or achievement for a ‘people’ experiencing less redistributive policy otherwise, is a particularly characteristic operation of affect in right populist politics.

This relationship between affect and neo-liberalisation is also at play in the embrace of the



Enterprise Bargainment, from Rachel O'Reilly, *The Gas Imaginary*, iteration #2 (2014), with Rodrigo Hernandez and Pa.La.C.e. (Valle Medina and Benjamin Reynolds). Limited edition series of 9 × 3D drawings, risograph on paper, ink, pencil. Courtesy the artist.



11. See [here](#). More mainstream media coverage [here](#) and [here](#).

neoconservative Australian government’s *Recognise* campaign, to write Indigenous peoples into the Constitution¹¹. How can a liberal be against this word or ‘recognition’ etcetera, it sounds very basic good manners. Apart from pointing out the obvious fact that this kind of neo/liberal ‘emotional’ investment in (limits of) indigeneity is possible only because of being built directly on the partial material successes (and non-crediting) of autonomous indigenous political work, survivance, thriving, the larger point I was making about the concepting of ‘only-administrative decolonisation’ (as de-historicisation) here is that discourses are situated and ever re-authored—also along cognitive capitalist lines—and so constantly being transformed by practices and regimes. *Recognise* appears in the wake of the NT intervention, co-occurs with masses of evictions from traditional lands *and* private property (into jails), and with material derigrations of sacred sites opening to mining etc, so in a dialectical continuity with a history of non-recognition (terra nullius) in this sense.

VIVIAN ZIHERL—Your own poetry, drawings and research within *Gas Imaginaries* explores the aesthetic and political imagination of fracking or

‘unconventional extraction’, including in Queensland where the industry is being rolled out upon a mass scale. Where does that project, and its unfamiliar or ‘unconventional’ topographies fit into the conversation we are having here? It seems that an important question subtending this exchange is how to grasp ‘decolonisation’ as a discourse that can be most meaningfully responsive to particular neo/imperial processes that are ongoing over particular territories and bodies. I find this tendency present in your focus upon a possible poetics that run counter to the capitalist-realist poiesis of contracting, for example. Can you say something about this?

RACHEL O’REILLY—I talk about *The Gas Imaginary* as a research project in poetics, tracking the forms and norms of ‘unconventional’ extraction, but more specifically of fracking, and its continuity with and differencing from modernist mining, as it rolls out internally to the indebted settler colonial states of the West (from its Halliburton centre). The first series of drawings, produced with [P.a.L.a.C.e. architects](#) Valle Medina and Ben Reynolds, and artist [Rodrigo Hernandez](#), exhibit *Mine and Mine* work concepts between the Modern and Postmodern (fracking). As a narrative series it kind of dramatises the ‘situation’ of unconventional gas extraction to be both



13. “Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others. Rather, they carry earlier things with them, things which are intricately involved...” See [here](#).

14. See [here](#). And for the global stats [here](#).

15. See [here](#).

16. Here I’m channeling Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, University of Alabama Press, 312 pp. 2006.

17. Particularly successful in Australia has been the independent [Lock the Gate movement](#) against coal seam gas licensing and installation.

everyday fisherman, religious conservatives and liberal environmentalists understanding—because being overexposed to—accumulation processes and the injustices of neocolonial land transfers ‘as if’ for the first time. Affected groups’ emergent collective relating to the negatively commoned state of things often (though not majoritively or consistently) moves—when it does—beyond defense of the property form in styles of speech that are uncannily similar to that of the lyric poet. That’s not my work, but that is the kind of relationship between language and installation that I’m talking about. In the settler colony, and also in the Blochian sense¹³, we do not (ever) share the same time on the mine, which is (also) why divestment is perceived by some as a floppy ‘one-hit’ liberal cognition when prioritised on its own;

but people are also being ‘turned’ away from older naturalised classed and raced attachments to energy

industries, we must understand, because the scale and impact of the new forms are so clearly unprecedented¹⁴, while the level of regulation has become manifestly pre-modern.

In parallel to the semi-autobiographical aspect of the work, the artistic research of *The Gas Imaginary* actually came together most clearly for me when I was travelling to and from Gladstone, post-Global Financial Crisis, at the height of the (unaffected) construction boom for the new gas port, while the harbour was being ruinously dredged¹⁵. It was my abreactions to the extreme ossifications of language and vocabulary at the greenwashed public meetings that I was attending about the harbour’s situation—as we shuffled around variously sacrificable nature-items on maps within boom and growth norms, in a fascinating anti-scientific and *deeply* aesthetic outsourcing of concessions about ‘liveability’ to ‘the people’—which initially (dis)organised my own responsiveness at the level of language (I started writing the poems right then). The project since takes up different media formats (poetry, installation, drawing, also theory) and different analytical distances from the initial site, depending on which aspect of the research I’m grappling with. Of course, speaking back to engineered expertise and corporate science inherently manifests as quite dark and impotent, also a coping comedy, for a supposed ‘woman’



poet, failing to be speaking authoritatively into mega-industrially scaled space. The drawings and the poems are blue operations mainly in that sense (affect specific and internal to Boom)¹⁶, while still conjuncting tragedy's ekphrases with the inventive formalisms of political movements¹⁷. If that was all I was doing with the material I'd be basically administrating aesthetics just like any other vectorial extraction of (dis/)content into global art (or poetry) space; but translating so-called artistic research into meaningful engagements with so-called workers for and against the mine, through different educational, political and other non-art spaces, alongside the contemporary and regional art institutional displays, is really the challenge.

Posted on August 27, 2015.



BIOGRAPHIES

Nana Adusei-Poku

Nana Adusei-Poku (PhD) is Research Professor in Cultural Diversity at Rotterdam University and Guest Lecturer in Media Arts and Master Fine Arts at the University of the Arts, Zürich. She was a scholarship doctoral student at Humboldt University, Berlin, working on the curatorial concept *post-black* in relation to contemporary Black artists called “Rooted in but not limited by—Re-iterations of Post Black Art”, following degrees in African studies and gender studies at Humboldt University, and in media and communications at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of Ghana, Legon; the London School of Economics; and Columbia University, New York. She published “A Time without before and after” in *Not now! Now!* edited by Renate Lorenz, Sternberg Press, 2014.

As Witte de With’s Center for Contemporary Arts Curatorial Fellow 2015, she has co-curated next to her Professorship the exhibition *No Humans Involved* by the interdisciplinary artist Collective HOWDOYOU SAY YAMINAFRICAN? and the symposium *Between Nothingness and Infinity*.

Ana Bigotte Vieira

Ana Bigotte Vieira is completing her PhD thesis in Contemporary Culture for which she has received a grant from FCT. Her research centers on the 'cultural transformation' that occurred in Portugal after it joined the European Union in the 1980s, focusing on the performative role played by the opening of the Modern Art Museum. Vieira was a Visiting Scholar at Tisch/NYU Performance Studies from 2009 to 2012. She graduated in Modern and Contemporary History at ISCTE, and undertook post-graduate studies in Contemporary Culture at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa and in Theatre Studies at Universidade de Lisboa. She works as a theatre and dance dramaturge. Founding member of baldio—performance studies, research collective, and member of Jeux Sans Frontières platform she has been curating small-scale discursive and performative events around Arts and Politics together with Sandra Lang. Vieira has translated, among others, Agamben, Lazzarato, Pirandello, Ravenhill, Ruccello and Scimone.



Francisco Godoy Vega

Francisco Godoy Vega is a Chilean researcher, writer and curator based in Madrid. He is associate professor at the Department of Art History and Theory of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and research fellow at the Exhibition department of the Museo Reina Sofía. He has collaborated in publications as *Discourses and Practices in the Visual Arts of the '70s and '80s in Chile II* (Santiago: LOM editores, 2012, [here](#)), *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013, [here](#)) and *Paris/México. Capitals of Exile* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014, [here](#)). He has also published the poetry book *The Revolution of the Rats* (Madrid: Esto No es Berlín, 2013, [here](#)). He recently has curated the exhibitions *Critique of Migrant Reason* (Madrid: La Casa Encendida, 2014, with Carolina Bustamante) and *Chile Vive. Activated Memory* (Santiago: CCE, 2013). He is a founder member of the [independent research platform](#) *Península. Colonial Processes, Art and Curatorial Practices*.

Nav Haq

Nav Haq is curator at [M HKA](#), Antwerpen. Haq has organised numerous solo exhibitions with artists

such as Hassan Khan, Cosima von Bonin, Imogen Stidworthy, Kerry James Marshall and Shilpa Gupta. Group exhibitions have included *Superpower: Africa in Science Fiction* (2012, [here](#)); *Museum Show*; a major historical survey of (semi-fictional) museums created by artists (2011); and *Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie: Class Hegemony in Contemporary Art*, co-curated with Tirdad Zolghadr (2006-09, [here](#)). In 2014 he co-curated the group exhibition *Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics* at [MuHKA](#), and is preparing exhibitions of works by Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin and Otobong Nkanga for autumn 2015. In 2012 he was co-recipient of the Independent Vision Award for Curatorial Achievement, awarded by Independent Curators International, New York. Haq is on the editorial board of *L'Internationale Online*.

Mirjam Kooiman

Mirjam Kooiman (Netherlands, 1990) is an art historian and recently started working as a curator at [Foam Photography Museum Amsterdam](#). She holds a B.A. in Art History from the University of Amsterdam, with a special interest in postcolonial approaches in the arts and museum studies. She pursued her interest in photography in Paris during a semester at the Université Paris VIII. Before that, she



carried out research on the historical photography collection of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. She recently graduated from the M.A. program in Museum Curating from the University of Amsterdam and the VU University Amsterdam, during which she worked as a curator in training at the photography collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Here she assisted in the exhibitions *On the Move: Storytelling in Contemporary Photography and Graphic Design* and *How Far How Near—The World in the Stedelijk*. Kooiman lives and works in Amsterdam.

Daniela Ortiz

Daniela Ortiz was born in Cusco, Peru, in 1985. Her work generates spaces of tension in which concepts of nationality, race, social class, and genre are explored in order to critically understand structures of inclusion and exclusion in society. Her recent projects and research revolve around the issue of migration control, its links to colonialism, and its management by European states and societies. At the same time, she has produced projects about the Peruvian upper class and its exploitative relationship with domestic workers. Daniela gives talks and participates in discussions on Europe's migration control system and its ties to coloniality in different contexts.

Rasha Salti

Rasha Salti is a writer, researcher, curator and an international programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival. She lives in Beirut.

Together with Kristine Khouri, Rasha Salti co-founded of the History of Arab Modernities in the Visual Arts Study Group, a research platform focused around the social history of art in the Arab world. They co-authored the paper, "Beirut's *Musée Imaginaire*: The Promise of Modernity in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", on the history of a 1957 exhibition of reproductions. Their current work is focused on the history of the *International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine* that was opened in Beirut in 1978. This research was transformed into an exhibition, *Past Disquiet: Narratives and Ghosts of the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978* (here), which opened at MACBA in 2015.

Colin Siyuan Chinnery

Colin Siyuan Chinnery is an artist and curator based in Beijing. He is currently Director of the Wuhan Art Terminus (WH.A.T.), a contemporary art institution under development in Wuhan, China; founder of the Beijing Sound Museum, a long-term project



recreating the history of Beijing from the Republican era to the present day using only sound; and contributing editor for *Frieze* magazine. He was Director in 2009 and 2010 of SH Contemporary Art Fair in Shanghai, and before that, Chinnery was a founding director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing, playing a central role in setting up China's first major contemporary art institution. Between 2003 and 2006, as Arts Manager for the British Council in Beijing, he initiated major projects in experimental theatre, live art, sound art, and visual arts, bringing a wider public into contact with experimental practice.

Madina Tlostanova

Madina Tlostanova (Moscow, 1970) is a decolonial theorist and writer. She is a professor of philosophy at RANEPa (Moscow, since 2012). From 2004 to 2012 she held a professorship in the history of philosophy at Peoples' Friendship University and was a senior researcher of the 20th century American literature at Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow (1997–2003). Trained in Moscow State University as an American Studies major, she drifted to transcultural aesthetics to finally shift to post/decolonial interpretations of the post-Soviet subjectivities, fiction and

contemporary art. She was a DAAD visiting professor in the University of Bremen (Germany, 2006, 2011), an international researcher at Duke University (USA, 2007), a visiting scholar at TEMA GENUS, Linköping University (2013, Sweden).

Tlostanova has authored eight scholarly books and 250 articles published in Europe and the Americas, including *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* ([Palgrave Macmillan, 2010](#)) and *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflection from Eurasia and the Americas* (co-authored with Walter D. Mignolo, Ohio State University Press, 2012, [here](#)). Currently she is finishing a book on decolonial aesthetics, contemporary art and the post-Socialist imaginary.

Vivian Zihlerl

Vivian Zihlerl is an Associate Curator at *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part Of Your Revolution* (Amsterdam) and Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane) where she initiated the multi-platform research project *Frontier Imaginaries*. Other recent projects include the *Landings* (ongoing, [here](#)) curated with Natasha Ginwala and initiated in partnership with the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, and well as the performance series *Stage It! Parts 1* ([here](#)) and *2* ([here](#)) commissioned for



the re-opening of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and curated with Hendrik Folkerts. Vivian has presented programmes with the ICA London, teaches at the Sandberg Institute, Department of Critical Studies, and is editor of *The Lip Anthology* (Macmillan Art Publishing and Kunstverein Publishing). Her writing has been published in the *Curating Research* anthology (eds. Paul O'Neil and Mick Wilson) and has appeared in periodicals including the *e-Flux Journal*, *Art Agenda*, *Frieze*, *LEAP Magazine*, *Metropolis M*, *Discipline*, and the *Journal of Art* (Art Association of Australia and New Zealand), among others.



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