

# #6

## Thoughts on Curatorial Practices in the Decolonial Turn

IVAN MUÑIZ-REED

**MASP Afterall**

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### **Art and descolonization**

Afterall and Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) are working together to explore new artistic and curatorial practices that explicitly question and critique colonial legacies in art, curation and critical art writing. The project Art and descolonization is building a critical forum for cultural theorists, curators and artists to raise questions and formulate proposals for the reinterpretation of exhibitions and museum collections in non-canonical ways by promoting workshops, seminars and publishing essays. It is intended that the events promoted by this collaboration will stimulate further discussion and research on decolonization, de-colonial and post-colonial studies.



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# STRA SEÑORA DE LA REBELDÍA





# Thoughts on Curatorial Practices in the Decolonial Turn

IVAN MUÑIZ-REED

1. QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento en América Latina". *Anuario Mariateguiano*. v. 9, n. 9, 1997; QUIJANO, Aníbal. "Colonialidad y modernidad-racionalidad". *Perú Indígena*. v. 13, n. 29, 1992.

2. *Ibid.*

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Coloniality is ever-present. Even decades after the period of formal colonisation has ended, it has persisted through structural forms of privilege and bias. Beyond their more obvious economic and social manifestations (such as the racial stratification of labour and the proliferation of inequality and racism), these oppressive hierarchies also pervade the realm of culture; but so much of the modern world we know and experience has been constructed out of Western imperial categories that the coloniality of knowledge is perhaps harder to discern and much more insidious to overcome.

Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018) has described coloniality as a 'matrix of power that produces racial and gender hierarchies on the global and local level, functioning alongside capital to maintain a modern regime of exploitation and domination'.<sup>1</sup> He argues that if knowledge is colonised, then one of the tasks ahead is to decolonise knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

What are the implications for contemporary curators and museums that are responsible for interpreting contested histories and whose prime matter is knowledge? How are curators and art institutions positioned within the colonial matrix, and is it possible for them to restructure knowledge and power—to return agency to those who have lost it?

In order to imagine a decolonial curatorial practice, it is important to define the context and parameters from which decoloniality emerges. While decolonisation refers to the



3. Its important to note that although Quijano coins the term 'coloniality', there are many decolonial writers that had already articulated the same idea. As sociologist Ramon Grosfoguel notes, Quijano formulates a concept based on the ideas of other Indigenous and intellectuals of colour without a proper acknowledgement: 'The idea of the articulation of race as the organizing principle of the world capitalist system or of the colonial relationships of epistemic, social, economic, patriarchal, political or cultural power that remain today after colonialism, is a subject that has been extensively analysed, discussed, raised, deepened and recognized by authors such as Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Dubois, Fausto Reinaga, Angela Davis, Sylvia Wynter, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, Cedric Robinson, Ali Shariati, Malek Bennabi, Ho Chi Minh, Enrique Dussel and many other thinkers from the global South'. For the full article see "Ramon Grosfoguel: Hay que tomarse en serio el pensamiento crítico de los colonizados en toda su complejidad," *METAPOLÍTICA*, n. 83, October-December 2013.

4. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, interview for Ku Leuven in 2014, [https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/centr\\_bevrijding\\_newsletter/view/145/](https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/centr_bevrijding_newsletter/view/145/). Access on: 12.3.2019.

completed socio-historical process of independence from colonial powers, decoloniality is an ongoing ethico-political and epistemic project, which seeks to de-link from colonial structures that have persisted throughout modernity and which underpin Eurocentrism and systems of discrimination.

The concept of decoloniality can be traced back centuries, but a brief genealogy elicits the work of Quijano and a number of scholars, thinkers and activists from across Latin America, and more broadly from the Global South, who generate critical theory from an alternative perspective: the perspective of the colonised and the oppressed.<sup>3</sup> Most of this literature either emerges from—or is framed within—the Third World and is considered the most valuable contribution from Latin American scholars to the fields of critical theory, philosophy and ethnic studies. As such, it has gained international attention, attracting many contributions from around the world, and constituting what has been identified as a 'decolonial movement' or 'decolonial turn' in the domain of knowledge.

The aim of decolonial theory is to re-inscribe histories and perspectives, which have been devalued through 'radical exercises of un-thinking, de-disciplining, and re-educating',<sup>4</sup> that reformulate fundamental questions in the realms of philosophy, theory and critical thought. In the field of art theory, the main contribution is the term decolonial aethesis/ aesthetics, which has recently gained currency primarily through the work of Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo (and his collaborators). Mignolo argues that aethesis, an ancient Greek concept, which broadly describes the senses—'an unelaborated elementary awareness of stimulation, a sensation of touch'—was absorbed in the eighteenth century into the concept of aesthetics defined by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).<sup>5</sup> Mignolo suggests that Kant's theorisation of aesthetics was the cognitive operation that marked the colonisation of aethesis, a process that led to the devaluing of any sensory experience conceptualised outside of European aesthetic categories. Kant's aesthetics emphasise sensing the beautiful and the sublime. According to Mignolo, Kant's work established European standards, which were then projected universally. Mignolo's counter-concept, decolonial aethesis, therefore becomes a 'confrontation with modern aesthetics, and its aftermath (postmodern and altermodern aesthetics) to decolonise the regulation of sensing all the sensations to which our bodies respond, from culture as well as from nature'.<sup>6</sup>

5. MIGNOLO, Walter. "Aesthesis Decolonial". *Calle 14: Revista de Investigación en el Campo del Arte*. v. 4, n. 4, 2011, pp. 10-25.

6. MIGNOLO, Walter e VÁZQUEZ, Rolando. "Decolonial Aesthesis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings". *Social Text*. 15 jul. 2013.

7. MALDONADO-TORRES, Nelson, 2014, *op. cit.*

8. LOCKWARD, Alanna. "Marooning the White Cube as Epistemic Disobedience: BE.BOP. BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS 2012-2016". *On Afrophobia: Towards Decolonial Curatorial Approaches*, University of Gothenburg (Sweden), 18.1.2016.

Although Mignolo doesn't apply his theory specifically to curatorial practice, his criticism of Kantian aesthetics could be easily extended to the authoritative role curators and art institutions exercise as gatekeepers of the beautiful and sublime. Curators, who have become central figures in cultural production within the art canon, have the power to decide which (and how) histories are told. Perhaps Mignolo's biggest criticism of Western art institutions (and the work of curators/critics such as Nicolas Bourriaud) is that, in their articulation of a postmodern or altermodern aesthetic, they often omit the violence perpetrated throughout modernity in the name of 'progress', 'freedom' and 'peace', and thereby propagate the silencing of suppressed histories.

A decolonial critique of postmodern and postcolonial discourses is that although they both focus on understanding the aftermath of colonialism, this is all effected within the framework of European philosophy with little regard for the exploration of problems arising outside of Europe. Although postcolonial theory is considered very valuable for analysing and critiquing imperial structures, decolonialists argue that ultimately, by operating within the academy and through European-generated categories, they construct a 'Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism'.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Mignolo regards Bourriaud's attempt to proclaim an altermodern aesthetic (during his 2009 exhibition at London's Tate Gallery), as comparable to Weber's or Habermas' formulation of modernity, whose philosophical frame is still 'drinking in the fountains of European Renaissance and their Enlightenment "secular" imperative'.<sup>8</sup>

Decolonial thought, on the other hand, is not constructed from or in opposition to European grand narratives, but rather from the philosophical, artistic and theoretical contributions that originate from the Global South. Many important decolonial concepts are articulated within Transmodernism—a philosophical and cultural movement founded by Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel—in addition to the work of intellectuals such as Martinique-born, Afro-Caribbean writer Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and Martinican Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), who are its historical backbone. With this in mind and using Mignolo as a framing device, a decolonial curatorial practice would advocate for an epistemic disobedience, replacing or complementing Eurocentric discourses and categories with alternative perspectives.

It is hard to avoid mentioning Jean-Hubert Martin's seminal 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* [Magiciens of the

9. "Pluriversality" is a concept used by Mignolo that can also be traced back to Enrique Dussel's writing on transmodernity.

10. FRANK, Chandra. "Policy Briefing: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice", *Discover Society*. 3, jun. 2015, <https://discoversociety.org/2015/06/03/policy-briefing-towards-a-decolonial-curatorial-practice/>. Access on: 12.3.2019.

Earth] in this context. Beyond assigning pride of place to art scenes developed beyond the West, it bore the decolonial stamp, not only through its inclusion of a wide range of silenced histories and Indigenous cosmologies, but in the way it challenged the notion of globalised artistic parameters, which have cast the shadows of primitivism and ethnography onto cultural production from non-Western culture. It illustrated the decolonial principle that there is no single universal aesthetic, but rather a pluriversality of aesthesis.<sup>9</sup>

Although many curators around the world have since assumed comparable politics of inclusion, there are colonial structures that persist at an institutional level. Systematically including oppressed histories into the museum has proven to be insufficient, and in fact, when not carefully enacted, has led to an institutional tokenism, which has only served to reinforce imperial power hierarchies. These institutional conditions, together with the unhelpful use of separatist categories, such as 'folk' or 'outsider' art, are a product of the colonisation of aesthesis and inexorably affect and restrain curatorial practices.

An example within Australia is the obstinate dominance of white, male artists in state galleries and their collections, and the segregation of non-Western artistic production into different exhibition spaces. As curator Chandra Frank notes, it is a responsibility of institutions and curators to create 'policies that guide towards the dismantling of normative paradigms that privilege certain ways of knowing, seeing and curating over others'.<sup>10</sup> This principle should extend well beyond the more overt binaries of coloniser/colonised, Western/non-Western and into all other spheres with implicit inequality. On the issue of gender, for example, feminist discourses exist within a decolonial framework, since many of the normative principles of male dominance have been propagated by the same matrix of power. Viewed under this logic, the day the Art Gallery of New South Wales reaches an even gender representation in a collection hang will mark a significant decolonial triumph—a step forward for the institution, its curators, artists and audiences.

Exposing these institutional biases, however, is not an easy task for curators, since they are working from inside the marble pillars. It has often been artists—who are better positioned to criticise the institution—working with collections that have perpetrated some of the most interesting examples of epistemic disobedience. As discussed by Mignolo, Fred



Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993) is a quintessential example of decolonial artistic praxis. For the exhibition, Wilson incorporated objects from Maryland Historical Society's collection and rearranged them in ways that exposed the biases of museums to under-represent the uncomfortable histories of the oppressed. His intervention offered a new viewpoint of colonisation, which forced viewers to confront a muffled perspective of their colonial past.

Another example mentioned by Mignolo is *Black Mirror*, an ongoing series by Mexican artist Pedro Lasch. For the 2008 iteration of the series—commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art to accompany its blockbuster exhibition *El Greco to Velázquez*—Lasch selected sixteen pre-Hispanic figures from the museum's permanent collection, which he then positioned on plinths with their backs turned to the audience. In front of each of the pieces, large sheets of reflective black glass acted as mirrors, as though the indigenous figures were silently contemplating their own existence. On closer inspection, behind the reflective surfaces a different set of images—European colonial era paintings—could also be seen. Thus in a single plane, indigeneity, coloniality and the self collide, implicating the audience through their moving reflections.

The work of both Lasch and Wilson involves the selection of items from pre-existing collections (comparable to the approach of an institutional curator) to further a decolonial agenda. In an Australian context, artist Brook Andrew has created a series of projects that have similarly relied on the collections. Andrew is himself an avid collector and in many of his recent projects he has combined his own archive with objects sourced from collaborating institutions—such as the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Powerhouse Museum, and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. In each of his collaborations he breathes new meaning into these items, either through suggesting alternative readings of the past or challenging the supposed neutrality of the archive. Andrew's work is a testament that re-framing or re-contextualising objects can be a powerful curatorial decolonial tool. In a similar vein, Tony Albert's series *Rearranging Our History* (2002-2011), derives its power from re-contextualising a different kind of archive: kitsch souvenirs and items from popular culture's representation of Indigenous culture in Australia, which the artist has gathered over years. Although in isolation these objects could appear naïve or harmless to some, their toxicity comes to the fore when brought together.

Returning to Mignolo and the Latin American decolonial movement, there have been a few curatorial attempts at representing decolonial aesthetics, but in my view they have fallen short. An exhibition of decolonial aesthetics at the Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá was followed by a second exhibition and workshop—presented in 2011 at Duke University in Durham, USA—which expanded on the earlier exhibition by incorporating participants from East Asia into the dialogue. Although these exhibitions have been successful in defining a theoretical and historical framework, they failed to identify the way in which artistic practices might fit into such a framework beyond a very obvious connection to coloniality.

From a curatorial perspective there is no apparent epistemic shift in the curatorial process. The exhibitions do not seem to do justice to the ambitions of the critical theory, or at least they fail to illustrate its breadth and complexity. The majority of the artists included are men, for example, and the entire premise seems to be reduced to works that directly reference colonialism. The format skews toward the didactic and illustrative, and seems oblivious to the difficulties of ‘absorbing’ non-Western art and Global South discourses into the museum context. Maybe it has to do with the fact that Mignolo begins by admitting that he is not a specialist in art history or criticism, and hence his analysis of the strategies used by the artists and curatorial approach is narrow.

In my view, the most interesting example of a decolonial curatorial strategy, and far more radical and illustrative of the decolonial ethos, is Cuauhtémoc Medina’s Biennial program *Dominó Caníbal* [Cannibal Dominoes], in 2010 at PAC Murcia, in Spain. For this year-long series of overlapping solo exhibitions, Medina broke with curatorial convention by using a counter-model as the central framing device: each artist was asked to start from his or her predecessor’s work; adding, removing or modifying something from the previous exhibition, thereby ‘cannibalising’ the previous efforts. Historically, Medina positions his biennial within a transmodern context, which acknowledges the geo-political complexity of memory making in the postcolonial:

My starting point is the operation of the game of domino, which is a very widespread transcultural point of production. Based on games of Chinese dice, it was then taken to Italy, from where it spread to the New World with the Spanish and

11. Artists included were Francis Alÿs, Bruce High Quality Foundation, Tania Bruguera, Jimmie Durham, Kendell Geers, Cristina Lucas and Rivane Neuenschwander.

12. MEDINA, Cuauhtémoc. *Dominó Caníbal curatorial statement*, Sala Verónicas, Proyecto de Arte Contemporáneo Múrcia, España, 2010.

13. THORNE, Sam. "Dominó Caníbal". Frieze. com. 1 abr. 2010, <http://frieze.com/article/dominio-canibal>. Access on: 12.3.2019.

Portuguese colonisations, becoming very popular in Latin America. From a historical viewpoint, it reflects the migratory route of the game from Cathay to the Caribbean, passing through the European routes of early capitalism; it is a map of the historical process that led to the modern world. Furthermore, the domino effect refers to the chain of historical and argumental moments that define the links between colonisation, post-colonialism and capitalist globalisation.

*Dominó Caníbal* is an epistemic rebellion that disregards the traditional biennial model and shifts the power from the institution and the curator towards the artists. In addition, the equal gender balance and diverse geographical origin in the selection of artists is in accord with the decolonial agenda.<sup>11</sup> As Medina notes: 'It is not based on any autonomy or individual identity, but rather on a continuous negotiation of languages, materials and aesthetics'.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, there is the allusion to the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade's 1928 'Manifesto Antropófago' [Anthropophagic Manifesto], wherein he describes Brazil's conflation of foreign influences as a sort of cultural cannibalism, which gives rise to something new and unique. By using *antropofagia* as the core principle and frame of reference, Medina favours an alternative, non-European viewpoint and at the same time nods to a cultural condition experienced by the colonised world in its 'itinerant search for origins'.<sup>13</sup>

Although all of these instances are crucial steps towards healing the colonial wound, decoloniality is not limited to academics and curators. Decoloniality is a cultural call for arms, an invitation to rearticulate our collective past experience, questioning its weight and biases, in the hope that with every step forward, we might make increasing sense of our condition and contribute to the possibility of a world without coloniality: the world otherwise.



IVAN MUÑIZ REED is an independent curator, writer and researcher with a keen interest in Latin American and Australian practices, and artistic discourses from the Global South. He is Associate Curator (former director and founding member) at the Sydney-based agency The Curators' Department, and was previously Assistant Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Australia. Recent projects include *Yoshua Okon: Octopus* at Artspace, Sydney and *Repertoires of Contention: Tony Garifalakis & Joaquin Segura* at Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne. He is currently based in San Francisco, California, completing a PhD on decolonial aesthetics.

ICONOCLASISTAS (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2006) is an artist's duo composed by Julia Risler and Pablo Ares. Their work is based on the creation of collaborative research dispositives, collective itinerant mapping, critic cartographies and open-source graphic resources.

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