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We Promise to Decolonize the Museum: A Critical View of Contemporary Museum Policies

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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.



TIAGO GUALBERTO
Pay Per Doll, 2012
Cortesia do artista

We Promise to Decolonize the Museum: A Critical View of Contemporary Museum Policies

BRENDA CARO COCOTLE

1. I take the licence of using the terms 'museum' and 'archive' in the singular here to refer to their institutional condition.

2. With the advent of the so-called 'New Museology' around the ICOM Roundtable of Santiago de Chile 'El desarrollo y el papel de los museos en el mundo contemporáneo' ('The Development and Role of Museums in the Contemporary World'), 31 May 1972.

3. This term has been used to talk about the museum as a space of conflict and public sphere with its own particularities.

4. This in itself merits a dedicated study that lies beyond the scope of this essay.

We must decolonize the museum or else. We must decolonize the museum because we must justify its existence and permanence. We must decolonize the museum because it is a stiff, rigid, outmoded and antiquated institution. We must decolonize the museum because it makes us uncomfortable. We must decolonize the museum from the standpoint of history, from the standpoint of culture and from the standpoint of its publics. We must decolonize the museum from the standpoint of art, we must decolonize the museum because, hell, someone has to do it, whether this is in order to cleanse its institutional conscience, in order to follow a trend, or out of sheer conviction.

Few today would dispute that the museum is the product of both a colonial narrative and its apparatus. Hence, there have been growing calls for institutions to establish non-colonial practices, understood primarily at the level of exhibition and collection policies. These calls have also extended themselves to the archive, conceived as an institutional exercise in selective forgetting.¹ It is worth noting, however, that the politics of representation in museums have been a subject of discussion at least since the 1970s,² becoming a recurrent theme for the so-called "critical museology".³ Such calls have gained unprecedented energy as they have been taken up by the contemporary art world both as a task and as a trend.⁴ At the very least we can say that the art museum—in particular the museum of contemporary art—has finally woken up to its colonial legacy.

Hence, decolonizing the museum has become an urgent task. The number of institutions that implement curatorial projects, public programmes, educational services, seminars

5. In this respect, the work of Flora S. Kaplan, Simon Knell, Luis Gerardo Morales Moreno and Pierre Nora is crucial.

6. See BENNETT, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.

and engagement activities that propose ways of achieving this or, rather, that *propose themselves as the way of achieving decolonization* has increased exponentially.

Nonetheless, the problem persists. As we have already noted, the museum as a modern institution has its epistemic foundation and *raison d'être* embedded in the colonial logic. This is the case in its role as producer and preserver of heritage and memory for the nation-state,⁵ and as part of a wider complex that allows for the reinforcement of colonial power structures by virtue of its ability to operate a visibility apparatus, that of exhibiting or being exhibited.⁶

The above might sound like a moot point, but it is not. The contemporary museum—with its programmes focused on specific publics, so-called socially engaged works and curatorial practices that go from the politically correct to the incorporation of themes previously considered inadequate for museum display—might give the impression that such a contradiction does not exist, or even worse, that it has been superseded. This is why it is important to explore in more detail some of the premises that these attempts to decolonize the museum have mobilised, identifying the blind spots and conflict zones that slip in between the good intentions. This is important in order to rescue its critical possibilities. Otherwise, we might end up reinforcing the very categories and power relations we had tried to unpack.

We can identify in these recent attempts to decolonize the museum two tendencies, which are not mutually exclusive: one of them focuses on the politics of identity and representation, while the other privileges the introduction of *the South* as a category that is offered as an epistemological solution. It is the latter that has left the deepest mark in the discourse around contemporary art.

MULTICULTURALISM AND CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION: BETWEEN RECOGNITION, THE GHETTO AND 'FOLKLORIZATION'

One of the first critical fronts to the museum as a colonial apparatus was launched around discussions of multiculturalism and cultural hybridization, in the wake of a crisis of the nation-state. The emergence of new forms of territoriality (not necessarily grounded in concrete physical space or bound by the traditional model of the border) and the eruption of new migration and mobility flows brought categories like 'identity',

7. For a sense of the debate in the English-speaking world, see ANDERSON, Gail (Ed.). *Reinventing the Museum: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Paradigm Shift*. Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2004; KNELL, Simon et al. (Ed.). *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World*. London: Routledge, 2010; PREZIOSI, Donald and FARAGO, Clare (Ed.). *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2004; and SANDELL, Richard (Ed.). *Museums, Society, Inequality*. London: Routledge, 2002. Latin American contributions have come, for example, from CASTILLO, Américo (Ed.). *El museo en escena: Política y cultura en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Fundación TyPA, Teoría y Práctica de las Artes, Paidós, 2010; MORENO, Luis Gerardo Morales (Ed.). *Tendencias de la Museología en América Latina*. México: ENCRYM, Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 2015; as well as journal issues *Cuicuilco*, *Nueva época*, vol.3, n. 7, México: Escuela Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 1996, and *Cuicuilco*, v. 15, n. 44, México: Escuela Nacional de Antropología y Historia, 2008.

8. The exhibition took place in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. See STEEDS, Lucy (Ed.). *Making Art Global (Part 2) 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989*. London: Afterall Books, 2013.

'representation' and 'appropriation' under close scrutiny.

We can identify three lines of debate: first, the narrative of national museums and their relationship with historical discourse, memory and collective identity; second, the representation of minorities and subaltern groups; and third, the constitution, ownership and management of collections.⁷ Exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre*,⁸ publications like the influential *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*⁹ and legal initiatives like the ones pursued by Australian indigenous groups to demand the return of artefacts from the collections of district and university museums were based on the conviction that the museum had to move towards the recognition of cultural diversity. In other words, that the problem of the colonial museum was condensed in its politics of representations and it was on that front that it had to be sublimated. In Latin America, and especially in Mexico, one of the most consistent proposals that tried to go beyond the mere recognition of a 'multilingual and diverse nation' was the programme of community museums promoted by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) and led by Cuauhtémoc Camarena and Teresa Morales since 1985. The welcome reception and palpable results of this programme fed a wave of optimism regarding the extent to which the museum had managed to turn a corner from its colonial past. However, although the discourse of multiculturalism and the subsequent introduction of the category of 'inter-culturalism' as a critical counterpoint placed the museum at the centre of academic reflection, its first contradictions and conceptual limits did not take long to surface.

This recognition of cultural diversity was primarily thematic rather than structural. The value assigned to a whole set of activities and expressions that had until then been considered 'low-brow', 'popular' or aligned with minority groups did not result in opening up spaces of representation at the level of decision-making in museums and exhibition centres. Likewise, no real mechanisms for revision at the level of collection and exhibition policies were devised; even when a culturalist approach was privileged, the attitude remained largely top-down and reliant on the vision of 'experts'.

Indigenous subjects, women, afro-descendants and chicanos 'gained a voice' given by the other and rarely obtained by themselves; they were turned into themes and, in the worst cases, into museum fetishes.¹⁰ Some inclusivity policies gave rise to an extreme racialization and 'folklorization' of com-

9. This was published in 1991 by the Smithsonian Institute, something that is in itself significant. Lavine, Steven D. (Ed.). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1991.

10. The diorama was replaced by the 'living tableau', in the context of an attempt to emphasise openness and cultural contact it was not unusual to find in exhibitions of popular art and culture, craftswomen performing their work, situated at the same museographical level as an object. That is to say, they were part of the exhibition in such a way that between the visitor and 'the other' there was no more contact than the curious gaze of the first upon the second. This has been the case, for example, in some of the exhibitions organised by the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares (National Museum of Popular Cultures) in Mexico City.

munities, negating their internal differences, power struggles, negotiations and conflicts. While attempting to break with stereotypes, new labels were produced in a simplification and acritical appropriation of cultural production.

On the other hand, the work with communities revealed that in certain contexts, identity narratives were linked to the idea of 'full citizenship' in as much as this implied the recognition of subjects as members of the State or another iteration of the 'national identity' discourse. That is to say, the affirmation of identity was grounded in the idea of being recognised and made part of an official historical narrative, not necessarily in the desire to be inscribed in a discourse 'out of history'.¹¹

Recognition did not go beyond the level of the exhibition, in most cases even at that level the discourse centred on otherness rather than on a first-person voice. Multiculturalism was presented as a discourse that 'levelled differences', promoting an inclusivity that was depoliticized, a celebration of diversity that was free of conflict and historical tension. As Paul B. Preciado has noted, representation in terms of political identity does not necessarily constitute or construct decolonial strategies.¹²

SOUTH, SOUTH, SOUTH: WHEN CONTEMPORARY ART MET DECOLONIAL THEORY

The 'postcolonial turn' reached the international art circuit mainstream in the 11th edition of Documenta (1998-2000) under the directorship of Okwui Enwezor. The documentation of the event describes it as 'the first truly global, postcolonial documenta exhibition'.¹³ In Enwezor's words through its five platforms his curatorship attempted 'to describe the present location of culture and its interfaces with other complex, global knowledge systems'.¹⁴ This edition of Documenta was distinctive in the wide range of nationalities of the artists selected, a great deal of whom lived and worked in Africa, Asia and Latin America, although their careers had developed within mainstream art institutions.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is striking that the event was reviewed in some contexts as an encounter of artists from the *first world* and a Western (European) public with the gaze of *artists from the third world*,¹⁵ while the curatorial team asserted that they had tried to move away from an exoticizing of the other, and were privileging archival or documentary work.

The idea of a 'global artist' was thus put in place, global

11. This was partly the case in the community museums in Mexico, in many of which the communities replicated at a museographical level the nationalist discourse promoted by the National Museum of Anthropology along with freely distributed school books. This has been explored, among others, by MORENO, Luis Gerardo Morales. 'Los espejos transfigurados de Oaxaca'. *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación*. v. 3, 1995 pp. 13-43; CIRIMELE, Lili González. 'Funcionamiento del poder y del saber en el discurso/texto museográfico comunitario'. *Cuicuilco*. v. 15, issue 44, 2008, pp. 135-62 and RUFER, Mario. 'La exhibición del otro: Tradición, memoria y colonialidad en museos de México'. *Antítesis*. v. 7, issue 14, 2014, pp. 94-120.

12. 'Decolonizing the Museum', Museo del Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona, 2014, <https://www.macba.cat/en/decolonising-museum> (last accessed 27 February 2019).

13. 'Documenta 11', <https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11#>. Accessed on: 27.2.2019).

14. *Ibid.*

in as much as her discourse was rooted in the particularities of local contexts but uprooted and relocated in a handful of centres of artistic production (Berlin, London, New York). Enwezor's work allowed the discussions of postcolonial and decolonial theory that were taking place in other fields to reach the contemporary art world, in turn the art world found in this discourse a way out of the impasse that theories of post-modernism had reached.

At the same time, in Latin America a renewed reflection was taking place on the narrations, representations and identifications that colonial discourse continued to generate. Authors such as Aníbal Quijano and Rita Segato tried to reveal the epistemic mechanisms of the power relations that inform these discourses as well as their relation to specific category-formations, in particular that of 'race'.¹⁶ However, the rise of the so-called decolonial turn in contemporary art can be more directly traced to the work of Walter D. Mignolo and his proposal of a 'decolonial aesthetics'. These ideas were tested and displayed in an exhibition curated by Mignolo and Pedro Pablo Gómez, 'Estéticas decoloniales', organised in 2010 in Bogotá, across three different sites: the Sala de Exposiciones ASAB at the Faculty of Fine Art in the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, the project space El Parqueadero and two rooms of the Museo de Arte Moderno. The exhibition was based on Mignolo's proposal to undo the *colonial logic* established by the 'privileging of the eye'.¹⁷ That is to say, the ways of seeing and aesthetic categories inherited from Western art history and art institutions, its mechanisms of control and ways of constructing differences.

Mignolo's idea found an echo in other groups—especially those that gathered around the Conceptualismos del Sur Network (Southern Conceptualisms), such as Ana Longoni, Graciela Carnevale, André Mesquita, Cuauhtémoc Medina or Joaquín Barrientos—focused on the history of Latin American conceptualisms through an approach that questioned the existing power structures of aesthetics and art history.

The South appears then as a term that allows for the structuring of 'a framework for the representation not just of a cultural context of regions that are geographically in the South, but also regions that share a common colonial legacy [...] patterns of colonization, migration and cultural mixing'.¹⁸ In this way, *the South* was an attempt to establish a category of *dissensus* regarding the narrative of art institutions, in particular the museum and the archive,

15. See KRIEGER, Peter. 'Revolución y colonialismo en las artes visuales: el paradigma de la Documenta'. *Revista de la Universidad de México*. 2002, pp. 88-92; EVERS, M. 'Art Show Aims to Go Global'. *Digital Journal*. 30 July 2001; RIDING, Alan. 'The Art of the New; the Art of the Deal'. *The New York Times*. 2 June 2002, p. 29; COSTA, José Manuel. 'La Documenta 11 de Kassel antepone la protesta a la estética'. *ABC*. 7 June 2002, https://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-06-06-2002/abc/Cultura/la-documenta-11-de-kassel-antepone-la-protesta-a-la-estetica_104950.html; ORING, Sheryl. 'Blurring Boundaries in the World of Art'. *DW*. 6 August 2002, <https://www.dw.com/en/blurring-boundaries-in-the-world-of-art/a-604970>. Accessed on: 27.2.2019)

16. See QUIJANO, Aníbal. 'Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina'. In: LANDER, Edgardo (Ed.). *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latino-americanas*. Buenos Aires, CLACSO, 2002, <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/lander/quijano.rtf>. Accessed on: 27.2.2019; "'Bien Vivir": Entre "desarrollo" y la Des/Colonialidad del Poder'. *Ecuador Debate*. n. 84, December 2011, pp. 77-88; SEGATO, Rita. *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos: Y una antropología por demanda*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2015.

understood as necessary tools for the articulation of a historiography linked to the nation-state now resignified and amplified from a neoliberal perspective.

It is hard to deny the attractiveness of both Mignolo's proposals and the criticisms from the South, not just because they resonated with the idea of a global and peripheric art scene sanctioned by the international art circuit, but because it recuperates for art a political component that appeared to have been blurred within a socio-economic context marked by the flows of transnational capital and its territories, not to mention the fact that it was conceived as a profoundly original position. Art was to recuperate what neither history nor politics had managed to, it had found a way to decolonize the museum and with it, the institution of art. But, to what extent has this been the case? Have the basic epistemic categories been unsettled or are we merely calling them something else when we no longer talk of 'centre'/'periphery' but of 'North'/'South'. Perhaps one of the most contradictory aspects of this drive to decolonize is the apparent ease with which this 'South' fits into the current models of institutional management of the museum-as-enterprise, its ability to be co-opted within a museum model that remains linked to the international circuit of the contemporary art market.

Resembling the issues that surrounded the adoption of multiculturalism as a way of undoing the politics of representation at the museum, the mere articulation of artistic discourses identified as part of that 'South' (in as much as they can be considered 'local', 'non-Eurocentric' or 'peripheric')—has not implied a questioning of the structure and the rationality of the museum itself and, in particular, of the ways in which the museum of contemporary art articulates relations of power and value. In this way, the validation or legitimation of artistic discourse seems to become a kind of 'personification of difference', often predicated on the place of residence or on belonging to social or cultural minorities. It is worth asking how that foregrounding of *dissensus* or that movement towards 'the South' play towards a particular production of art-value, the very value towards which it putatively wants to cast its critique.

While few would question the usefulness of opening up to other discourses and practices as a way of widening the platform of visibility offered by the museum, the museum continues to operate on the same mechanisms of artistic legitimation: critical consensus, market position and integration of artists in local, regional and international circuits as well as the sanc-

17. GÓMEZ, Pedro Pablo and MIGNOLO, Walther. 'Estéticas decoloniales'. Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, 2012, p. 20.

18. PAPASTERGIADIS, Nikos. '¿Qué es el Sur?'. In: MEDINA, Cuauhtémoc (Ed.). *Sur, sur, sur: Séptimo Simposio Internacional de Teoría sobre Arte Contemporáneo*, México: SITAC, 2010, pp. 45-48.

tioning of authority. In some ways, this gesture of invoking a museum from the South, a 'decolonized' museum, can be understood as an attempt to retain agency and status as the prime site for the legitimation of artistic and art historical discourses. In this way, while exhibition policies and public programmes tend to announce a collaboration with, or inclusion of *peripheral subjects*—often under formulas that depart neither conceptually nor formally from relational art, or from objectifying representations—museum policies and management continue unchallenged to operate along the lines of the cultural industries. Hence the 'museum of the South' seems desperately to seek revalidation as a 'museum of the first world', in terms already suggested by that phrase: entrepreneurial, efficient, successful and popular. We are witnessing a museum that has decolonized its curatorial and museographical discourse, but whose institutional structure remains eager to be recolonized.

WHAT COMES AFTER THE PROMISE?

Put in such bleak terms, it might look like the only viable alternative is to destroy the institution, to completely dissolve its rationality. To burn the museum down to the ground. But perhaps, before we declare the museum decolonized, we should linger in its present contradictions, we should situate ourselves at its limits, we should understand it as being in crisis with itself. This does not mean renouncing the critical possibilities of the museum, but to affirm them only in as much as it acknowledges and recognises its own conflict zones. The museum might not currently be able to decolonize itself, but it could certainly start by constructing different institutional ethics.

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