

Decolonial Aesthetics



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Since the beginning of the 1990s, global contemporary art worlds have seen the emergence of many artistic, art criticism related and curatorial projects associated with notions such as the decolonial turn, decolonization of the museum and decolonial aesthetics. The dynamic consisting in acknowledging how the colonial experiences have shaped the values in art and society, and of mapping art as a point of mobilisation to engage in critical ways with this enduring heritage might constitute a common thread running between these variegated projects. The simultaneous statement and undoing of colonialism's effects seem eager to inscribe these aesthetic propositions within the frame of decolonizing processes. Indeed, they espouse the words spoken by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano on knowledge, of which aesthetics is

constitutive: "if knowledge is colonized, then one of the tasks ahead is to de-colonize knowledge" [Quijano 1997].

The critical nature of the ways in which recent aesthetic experiments connect to the values of art inherited from the Modern European heritage form another argument for reading decolonial aesthetics as a movement that owes to the processes of decolonization. The reworking of European legacy within which revolves the decolonial turn of art unfolds in frames of protestation, resistance and emancipation, that may remind the operations driven in the 1980s by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o of decolonizing the mind, as a "contestation around European colonial heritage and legacies" [Andersen 2018].

The impulse to decolonize can be seen as a response to today's structural forms of privilege and oppressive hierarchies. In spite of the end of political colonization, effects of coloniality defined by Quijano as a "matrix of power that produces racial and gender hierarchies on the global and local level" [Quijano 1997] pervade, especially the "racial stratification of labour and the proliferation of inequality and racism" [Muñiz Reed 2017: 99]. The realm of culture has also been constructed out of Western imperial categories like the museum, which has historically given impetus to artists and curators to attempts to decolonize aesthetics.

Decolonizing the museum

In *Mining the Museum* (1992), the Afro-American artist Fred Wilson, who had been invited by the Maryland historical society to make a site-specific work in the Baltimore's Contemporary museum, attempted to raise the implications for curators and museums for telling history.

If decolonial practising is about re-inscribing histories and perspectives that have been devalued [Maldonado-Torres 2014], then exercise of undoing the coloniality of power could unleash in the re-arranging of objects of existing collections. Assembling historical objects of the collections, *Modes of transportation* worked on the association of Ku Klux Klan hood and a baby carriage and had provocative effects on the viewer, who, at first, could think he was seeing a baby. By reshuffling the objects in a display that brought to visibility some of the artefacts of collections including accounts of colonization, slavery and abolition that were, usually, not shown, the artist reinforced the Baltimore museum's status as a place where history is not only subjectively told, but told 'from a specific viewpoint, namely that of its white male founding board' [Ginsberg 2014].

The Black Mirror / Espejo Negro series started in 2007 by Mexican artist Pedro Lasch relied on the same basis of a re-arranging of museums' objects. Its decolonial stake comes from the fact that the context of the museum is used to pose the question of coloniality of knowledge.

Coatlícué and Las Meninas was based on the gathering of these two iconic works of pre- and colonial periods, usually separated in collections in Madrid and Mexico - bringing out the fact that imperial history has been that of a 'modernity/coloniality union' [Lasch 2013].

Lasch's decision to separate the works confronted in the Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology and Prado's contexts by a black glass entailed strange perceptive effects of light reflections that involved the audience bodily, and of superimposition, colliding indigeneity, coloniality and the Self. Lasch, thus designed interesting ways of handling the colonial heritage. These were less about getting rid of it, than making it an opportunity to imagine a physical dialogue where Modern and Indigenous have the same status, where the physical experience of cotemporality translates the extent to which copresence of cultures was and is constitutive of the Mexican and Spanish identities.

Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez's decolonial aesthetics: questioning aesthetics and making decolonial aesthesis, as ways to delink from aesthetic Modern colonial heritage

For theorists like Walter Mignolo, much of the necessity to re-conceptualise aesthetics relies on the failure of the museum fueled with the values inherited from Modern aesthetic heritage – addressed by Wilson – to provide the people of the transmodern world with categories suitable to their current experiences. Around Duke University's

Transnational Decolonial Institute, a group of researchers, artists and theorists (gathering Pedro Lasch, Alanna Lockward, Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez) addressed decolonial aesthetics on this basis. Their aim was to point the limits of the Modern model, throughout a philosophical investigation of aesthetic concepts. Their main assumption was based on the fact that aesthetics constitutes and is constitutive – like knowledge, politics and economy – of systemic expressions of the colonial matrix of power that began in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade as a capitalist commercial circuit and the colonization of the New World.

The issue, thus, was to challenge Modern epistemology and to change the hegemonic ideas of art. They did so by the use of terminological de-naturalization. Mignolo considered this as a way of exploring coloniality of knowledge. The Kantian aesthetics comes as the concept around which Mignolo and Vázquez engaged their epistemic critique of aesthetic knowledge. From a mainstream/modern point of view, Kantian aesthetics could be seen as a coupling of art as skill and theory of beauty. But a decolonial gaze on it – which is Mignolo and Vázquez' one – would describe it as a normative standard that attempts to superimpose its own sense of beauty over the world [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013]. Aesthetics then is twice an operation of reduction. Firstly, for as came with Immanuel Kant the enunciation of a theory of beauty that reduced the plurality of the organic senses encapsulated in the Greek word *aesthesis* or

aesthesis to a single visual sense. Secondly, since non-Western ways of sensing were denied by aesthetics' universalist claims. Once this regulating of the beautiful became projected 'to the entire population of the planet' [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013], reduction gave way to a control of Europe over the world. By way of consequence, aesthetics entered into a colonization of the different types of aesthesis in the world. This argument of aesthetics as an operation of control over the senses owes much to Frantz Fanon's concept of sociogenesis (quoted by the two thinkers) which exemplifies how colonized subjectivity was made by the colonial gaze. In other words, from a decolonial point of view, Modern aesthetics was nothing else than a form of sensory colonisation, that dovetails with other economic and political forms of control.

The de-naturalization of the terms stands for the first step of an epistemic critique that contests the Western hegemonic ideas. Besides, the decolonial option aims to strive to incorporate "the perspectives/cosmologies/epistemic visions of the Global South critical thinkers" [Grosfoguel 2007]. Discussion on the new functions for art, by Mignolo and Vázquez, who called for the word *aesthesis* to replace aesthetics, dovetail with the Global South epistemologies' project to reflect on the subalternized bodies and spaces. In the beginning of the 2010s, the Greek and pre-colonial word *aesthesis* was elected in relation to the use Afro-Colombian researcher Adolfo Alban Achinte had made of it, ten years before. He addressed then the practices of everyday creation,

which had been denied validity under the Modern aesthetic hegemony [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013]. *Aesthesis* then talks of concrete re-existence of ways of sensing through the everyday practices [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013] and enters in one the three kinds of [re-emergence](#) upon which could be enacted 'decolonial futures' [Knudsen 2018].

For Mignolo, the powerful agency of *aesthesis* plays as a source for coining an aesthetic model founded on the liberation of senses. In contrast to Adolfo Alban Achinte, *aesthesis* is less about the recognition of the senses than about articulating, through the liberation of senses, a delinking from aesthetics as based on regulation of the senses. This new model does not only oppose to the Kantian one, but wishes to decolonize it [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013]. The political sounding of words chosen to rebuilt aesthetics's meaning might be explained by decoloniality's dialogue with the Global South genealogies, Mignolo and Vázquez lean on, that of Fanon, inscribing thereby decoloniality in dialogue with struggles for emancipation, and that of the Abya Yala knowledge, absorbing thereby a part of indigenous way of understanding human actions with the topic of healing [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013]. From these traditions, the theorists define *aesthesis* as both a practice of resistance and of healing. Though reflecting *aesthesis*' significance in the process of decolonization of aesthetics, Mignolo and Vázquez felt necessary to distinguish between *aesthesis* and another current: *decolonial aesthesis*. Replaying old Modern European divide between folkore and art,

the first was seen as a basic human global skill while the second as the interventions within the world of the contemporary arts aimed at challenging 'the hegemonic normativity of aesthetics in its own field' [Mignolo and Vázquez 2013].

Decolonial aesthetics and intercultural identities. Some perspectives on decolonial practices in Europe

Critical voices that speak from the center of colonial power are also especially crucial for the ECHOES project, which addresses bodies of artworks located in Bristol, Cape Town and Marseille.

Artists based in Marseille, Martine Derain and Dalila Mahdjoub have explored indigenous culture and historical vacuums as part of decolonial strategizing. *From a threshold another* (2007) revolves around a physical residence where old former colonial Algerian workers in Marseille live today. The burial, deep into the soil, of two doors coming from the first residence built during French Empire to host colonial workers in the metropole (in the aftermath of World War II) completes the installation. The feeling of injustice, born out the research led by Dalila Mahdjoub in colonial archives services, pointing to poor housing of Algerian workers, was the source a creation that addresses delinking from colonial heritage *via* epistemic disobedience.

Indeed, throughout the image of the dwell and the use of a Kabylean proverb, the work questions the notion of belonging, partly reminiscent in the title of the installation. The dwell, as conceived in the proverb as the site of unpredictability, rather than enclosure, challenges the notion of belonging since domesticity is often equated with national space [Meskimmon 2010].

Moreover, the issue of the disruptive effects of positionality on the Western Self is important to understand how decolonial aesthetics challenges power structures. But it ought not to be restricted to the position of the subjects/artists in the world. The way Mignolo discusses the decolonial aesthetics seems sometimes to reduce the other parameters entering in the formation of identity, especially class and gender, what could bring, when applied to artworks, to read the contestation of colonial/Modern values in unidimensional ways. Concerning the post-colonial subject addressed by decolonial thinkers, it should be interesting to consider effects of transculturation that decolonization had also on subjects in Europe [Hulme quoted in Rycroft 2015], identity and the inter-aesthetical/inter-epistemic ways of sensing and thinking. The fact that transculturation eschews binary ways of being obliges us to re-read the sometimes binarity from which decoloniality addresses aesthetic phenomena. It brings us to ask what kind of definitions of identity should be mobilized to get frames that recognize how decolonial aesthetics also comes to negotiate power-relations in terms of

class and gender. Indeed, class and feminist discourses do encapsulate decolonial artworks and many decolonial artworks locate at the crossroads of entangled struggles. Ivan Muñiz explains the multidimensional expressions of the links between identity and decolonial art by the fact that "many of the normative principles of male dominance have been propagated by the same matrix of power" [Muñiz-Reed 2017:101]. This comment seems especially right, due to the fact that Martine Derain and Dalila Mahdjoub's work can certainly be understood as a decolonization of colonial aesthetic knowledge, but also as a challenge to cultural hegemony; that the resistance it produces certainly responds to colonial history, but also to the oblivion of the history of the colonial workers and to the restrained artistic space for women artists. Therefore, a suited methodological approach would be to inform the inquiry in intersectional terms, by drawing on other academic fields like feminism and cultural studies. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality would also help to understand the extent to which power-relations might be articulated within decolonial aesthetics. Interestingly, the discussion she developed to address the crossings of the feminist and the black liberation movements were underpinned by a conception of identity as multifaceted, lying at the intersection of class, gender and race. This could precisely pave the way to a rethinking of decolonial aesthetics in more mobile and flexible ways.

To cite: Schütz, Marine (2018), 'Decolonial aesthetics' [online] ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. Available at: <http://keywordsechoes.com/> [Accessed XX.XX.XXXX].



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