

## **De-Colonizing Art Institutions**

Maria Thereza Alves  
Song-Ming Ang  
Priscila Arantes  
Stefan Baltensperger + David Siepert  
Fabiana de Barros  
Mabe Bethônico  
Flavio Cury  
Jimmie Durham  
Gabriel Flückiger and Vera Leisibach  
Hikaru Fujii  
Szuper Gallery  
Patrick Hamilton  
Ana Hupe  
Taloi Havini and Gabriella Hirst  
Balz Isler  
Daniel Jablonski  
San Keller  
Astrid S. Klein  
Michael Leung / Kai Fong Pai Dong  
Marinka Limat

## **Nkule Mabaso**

*Decolonisation and the Scopic Regime*

Filippo Minelli  
Lisl Ponger  
Raghavendra Rao K.V.  
Roe Rosen  
Sally Schonfeldt  
Katrin Stroebel and Simo Laouli  
Túlio Tavares  
Navid Tschopp  
Lucie Tuma  
Maíra Vaz Valente  
Katie West  
Claire Wintle  
Casa da Xiclet  
Zou Zhao

## Decolonisation<sup>1</sup> and the Scopic Regime

Achille Mbembe in *African Modes of Self Writing*<sup>2</sup> points out the sets of dogmas that seem to pass for African discourse in both its political and cultural dimensions, as lacking of historical criticism... and this lack reduces the discourse to three rituals:

the first ritual contradicts and refutes Western definitions of Africa and Africans by pointing out the falsehoods and bad faith they presuppose.

The second denounces what the West has done (and continues to do) to Africa in the name of these definitions. The third provides so-called proofs which, by disqualifying the West's fictional representations of Africa and refuting its claim to have a monopoly on the expression of the human in general, are supposed to open up a space in which Africans can finally narrate their own fables (self-definition) in a voice that cannot be imitated because it is authentically their own.

These rituals of discourse according to Mbembe reduce an extraordinary history to three tragic acts: slavery, colonization, and apartheid--to which globalization as a form of neo-colonisation<sup>3</sup> is being added.

Without falling into these traps in the quest towards engaging with the call towards decolonisation in South Africa's education institutions, how does one pose questions or develop responses that reflect on how have we taken ownership of the ideological space that creative production occupies in the popular imagination in the face of the complexities of and representing a new post colonial if not a decolonised reality. Especially in the context of an arts space that is within the embattled terrain of the university, and still produce genuine platforms for reflection and imagination, contingent of the political and moral positions of any reflection.

Through Decolonisation and the Scopic Regime the objective for me has been one of developing space that is relevant in this environment and brought together various people and their ideas that poses questions on aspects of the question at hand: the development of critical, self-reflexive, locally specific responses to knowledge production and dissemination in all its forms.

Decolonization as a political, epistemological and economic liberatory project has remained an unfinished business. Already in 2006 Mario Pissarra of ASAI noted several reasons for decolonization not featuring prominently in the South African discourse on transformation, and the absence of a mainstream debate on decolonization, for him this was because South Africa prioritized the path of Reconciliation.

Arguably there have been many debates and processes in post 1994 South Africa that could be viewed as classic elements of decolonization: the promotion of indige-

nous languages, changing of place names, regulation of customary law and land reform among them, overall these have been positioned within a discourse on transformation that is primarily centred on redressing apartheid, rather than addressing the colonial legacy<sup>4</sup>. However, blacks, women, and other historically marginalised groups have been expected to assimilate into the discomfiting institutional cultures of universities<sup>5</sup>.

The majority of people holding leadership positions in institutions are people who were in those institutions during apartheid and demonstrate a lack of willingness to embrace change in teaching and learning<sup>6</sup>, and by extension exhibiting and curating.

At this time it is painfully clear that the greater presence of blacks has not automatically translated into genuine respected for difference, appreciation of diversity, and meaningful social and educational inclusion, whether social, linguistic, cultural, or academic. Instead of dismantling and displacing previous institutional arrangements, norms and practices, assimilation politics have instead closed of the possibility for genuine inclusion and meaningful participation.

These are all very important points when considering how institutions have positioned art and art practices and still more the role of institutional conventions that have become edified or canonized modes of programming, curating and displaying art works etc.

It is all part of why this comprehensive project necessary at this time, perhaps it is a simplistic response to the hard questions that demanding less superficial reform...I am very self aware of my position, and do not want to produce projects that fall into existing and problematic tropes and want to rather work towards growing the offers of some kind of historical or present criticism.

#### Notes

1 if "Decolonisation is not a metaphor", Tuck and Wng 2012 contend, and it is not passive but an activity requiring praxis as Paulo Freire defined praxis as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it... Ngugi wa Thiongo contends decolonisation must occur in the mind and so does the Tunisian activist Albert Memmi, the first step to decolonisation is to question the legitimacy of colonisation, only once we can recognise the truth of the injustice one can think about ways to resist and challenge colonial institutions and ideologies, but without falling into clichés.

2 Mbembe, A. 2001. African Modes of Self-Writing. Identity, Culture and Politics, Volume 2, Number 1, January 2001

3 Coloniality of power works as a crucial structuring process within global imperial designs, sustaining the superiority of the Global North and ensuring the perpetual sub-alternity of the Global South using colonial matrices of power (Mignolo 2007, 155-167). This is the same methods through which neo-colonialism maintains itself through globalisation... (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 240-270) refer to: Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. 2013. Coloniality of Power in Development Studies and the Impact of Global Imperial Designs on Africa. Archie Mafeje Research Institute (AMRI) and Department

4 Pissarra, M. 2009. Decolonising art in Africa: some preliminary thoughts on the relevance of the discourse on decolonization for contemporary African art, with particular reference to post-apartheid South Africa.

5 Badat, S. 2016. Deciphering the Meanings, and Explaining the South African Higher Education Student Protests of 2015-16.

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