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Article:

Grant, C and Price, D (2020) Decolonizing Art History. *Art History*, 43 (1). pp. 8-66. ISSN: 0141-6790

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12490>

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Griselda Pollock

What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonise art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?

South Africa has been the site of convergence for two major political catastrophes of the modern: multiple and contesting European racist colonisation since the seventeenth century and the installation of a semi-totalitarian 'concentrationary' society after 1948. The idea of a 'concentrationary' society is developed from Hannah Arendt's three-volume study *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt drew on accounts written by political prisoners who had returned from the concentration camps of Germany after 1945, in particular the 'concentrationary universe' proposed by the French Trotskyist and political deportee, David Rousset, writing in 1946.¹ Arendt understood the 'concentrationary' as a system and instrument of both German and Stalinist totalitarianism. The first volume of her trilogy studied the horrors initiated by both regimes, it focused in particular on the pre-history of their experiments in destroying political life and human dignity that occurred under imperialism. Arendt revealed that colonial imperialism was a necessary foundation for, but not unique cause of, the racist totalitarian empires of the twentieth century. Significantly South Africa, still pre-apartheid until 1948, was one of Arendt's key case studies. Thus, the fact that the call for decolonisation has emerged from today's South African students, twenty years after the jubilation at the end of the apartheid system, should not surprise us. Historical specificity in this instance relates to the political or rather *anti-political* convergence of a viciously racist concentrationary society with the historically racist foundations of European colonialism and imperialism. The cultural forms, including thought, fiction, art, science, anthropology, that were at once the product and the alibi of the imperial and colonial project became identical with thought, fiction, art, science, anthropology *tout court* and have been disseminated as culture itself.

The critique of the legacy of empire – the colonized mind – has long been advanced by postcolonial thinkers as part of the struggle for decolonization. It is not new as anyone who has read this literature from the eighteenth century on will know. Indeed, it is clear that the emergence of the new social movements of the 1960s (women's liberation, gay and lesbian

liberation, civil rights and students) were deeply influenced by a much longer history of anti-colonial political and cultural activism. To go beyond classic Western class struggle, these new social movements drew on the writings of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, James Baldwin and many other writers. Yet decolonization efforts themselves were inflected with other forms of unquestioned dominant ideologies and imaginaries that were sexist with regard to all women and as Stuart Hall observed, were in denial about black homosexuality.²

I would resist a historical genealogy implied in this question in terms that list 'previous' challenges that place decolonization as the most recent. In the call for decolonization, what is the colonial? Is it imagined exclusively in Marxist terms that are indifferent to overlapping and entwined agonistic patriarchal relations and the complex ideologies and practices of sexual use and abuse in situations of multiple dominations? Surely Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and the critique of its initial formulation offered by many feminist art historians revealed the deep hold of the colonial, within which, however, sexuality and sexual difference as critical axes were not acknowledged.

In art history, a colonial or hegemonic mindset preserves 'the discipline' intact, even if challenged *from outside* by various theoretical projects that clearly enrich it theoretically while never being allowed 'in' enough to deconstruct the original premise of 'the discipline'. These so-called challenges (feminist, queer, postcolonial) represent sustained projects of art historical writing and thinking, even as they extend the frontiers of what that is by insisting on an already socio-economic-political-colonial-patriarchal structuring of the discourse and 'knowledge' that have constituted art history. As I once rather boldly declared: 'art history' cannot survive feminism because what art history as a discipline has enacted and performatively iterated is a continuing production of a classed, raced, gendered and heteronormative representation of art contested structurally by feminism.³

The impact of the 2015 call from South African students has released new energy and urgency with world-wide circulation as a result of the social platforms for dissemination and visible public agitation. It is to be welcomed. It is not, however, new. It emerges now as a desperate indictment of the failure of major hegemonic aspects of the discipline to change in the face of the impact of forty years of postcolonial, queer, feminist, materialist art histories. Why is that the case? The latter represent a deeply political struggle played out on the

ground of the symbolic and imaginary spheres of the socio-economic ensemble. Accommodation of and limited permissiveness towards postcolonial, queer, feminist, materialist practices takes the form of labelling them as 'other' to 'the discipline', quarantined as perspectives and approaches, often identified with specific individuals. The historical specificity of the present, namely a response to the 2015 uprising and struggle led by South African students, may well fail to 'know' the specificity and complexity of race/class/gender/sexuality struggles within South Africa. To look at their desperation in the face of failed democratisation shields those of us in the North/West from recognizing how consistently 'we' have failed to listen and learn and change, for we have been called upon to do so for centuries and we have had plenty of opportunities. What I can say personally is that I see very little real evidence of the diverse forms of art historical writing and teaching embracing the theoretico-political frameworks that are necessary for 'decolonizing the mind', to use the title of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's key publication from 1981.⁴

What is your understanding of decolonising art history now? What does a decolonised art history look like? How should it be written/practised?

There are two levels to my answer. The first involves decolonizing the curriculum, changing what is taught. This means that no class or seminar or lecture can be delivered without the following two questions: What is my class, lecture, seminar doing in relation to challenging the normative hierarchies? Is it maintaining the colonial imaginary or is it actively displacing and deconstructing it? At first, the methodology for responding to the inevitable, 'Yes, I am probably maintaining and reproducing the default position of non-decolonization' is hard work. It cannot be 'I do not know anything else'. As a scholar, you are trained to find out what you do not know. So that is not hard. The difficulty lies in finding the will to do so. This lack is the sign of an endemic political failure to recognize the ease with which each of us reproduces the power relations and axes of difference in which we are ourselves privileged and hence comfortable and confirmed.

The second question is: How does the picture of the world I am producing *look and feel* to those present (or not yet present because already alienated) if they are not white, middle class, Northern/Western straight men and indeed white straight women? How is what I am teaching *unlabelled*, so that it is normatively masculinist, Euro-American, heterosexualizing?

What universal words have I used that are not at all universal? What and whom have I othered in just doing what I do and speaking as I do without thinking, i.e. without addressing difference and differences that displace my occupation of universality and the normative? Finally speaking from the lectern or the head of the seminar table in a language that de-universalises at all times is a powerful methodology even as it aggravates and sounds aggressive to those who have never been named in relation to abuses of power. If I speak of white straight men, each of the adjectives sounds pointed and nasty. Yet if I have to mention that an artist is a woman, the added adjectival woman in 'woman artist' slips by. The effect is that I have unconsciously excluded her because of her gender - and the listeners can ignore her because my evident feminist politics disqualify a woman as 'an artist' and therefore part of the serious field of important art. If I, as a white woman, then name an artist who is a woman as a *black artist-woman* (my way round the adjectival disqualifier problem and so I suggest we also write artist-men) the cue comes from the existence of Black discourse, Black politics, self-naming as a political collectivity or identity and not as a phylogenetic attribute. That must be clear. So, one strategy will be to identify the community of origin, the geopolitical situation and training or the political identification of the artist in question because decolonization involves not merely gestural and thus partial inclusiveness. It calls for real knowledge of the political, discursive and intellectual histories, terminologies and politics of different of creative individuals and larger collective struggles. Research again. It is all available to know.

The more as a teacher or lecturer I introduce into the world through language the complexity of the socio-subjective positions from which artists make art and cultures analyse it, the more the individual students in the room and audience are relieved of the imposed silence or required self-naming with regard to 'minority' status. Queering, postcolonialising and developing a feminist analysis for the classroom is not the obligation of the individual student but the person who is responsible for the culture of that moment and that room. This requires work on the part of those who have not felt the need to read feminist, queer, postcolonial and decolonizing texts, theories, studies – because all that 'other stuff' can be left to the postcolonial feminist queers. Then how are these positions themselves to be challenged with regard to the elephant in most rooms: class. The material sociality of class ravages women and men of all societies, sexualities, majority and minority histories. Some of the major decolonising thinkers were Marxists, but without either

feminist or Marxist-feminist inflections. Their patriarchal assumptions were untampered as were their homophobias. Their indifference was also part of the decolonizing re-assumption of colonially destroyed national and cultural traditions by curing the indignities imposed on othered men through reinscription of masculinist nationalist and cultural ideology. So, what we need to undertake is not an uncritical denigration of European traditions but a careful dialectical negotiation of complex positionalities. Let me give one example. Many years ago, the New Left historian Robin Blackburn delivered a lecture on his latest work on enslavement and the struggle for its abolition. He referenced the story of one enslaved African woman who had written a petition on behalf of abolition of enslavement. She declared that she was willing to work and to work hard. What she wanted was for her labour to be recognized as work she willingly undertook. As an enslaved person, her labour had no value. She protested against the fate of being thrown away or allowed to die like a useless dog when too old or infirm to work. Blackburn showed how this woman's argument for the right to her own labour formed a foundation for what was taken in nineteenth-century industrial struggles, as workers' rights. His point was that historians had heretofore compartmentalized the colonial and enslavement as separate from the classic territory of Marxist theories of industrial class relations. By doing so, they had failed to see the relations between the resistance of Africans enslaved in chattel slavery and the terms later used by the European working class and women's movements to articulate and claim new rights. How this project should be written or practised is not for me to define. It is for me to share with you questions I ask myself, the examination I make of my writing and talks, the research I constantly need to do and the terms and language that is needed to change, every day.

How might the decolonisation of art history impact upon your own area of research/practice? What would be produced from it? Might anything have to be jettisoned?

As an art historian born into apartheid South Africa as a privileged white child, who immigrated to Canada and lived in a Francophone, Catholic majoritarian province in the grips of emerging separatism (being neither), my world was already marked by questions of difference that shaped my discontent with the indifference of what I was later offered as a historian and art historian as knowledge. My own academic thinking about difference was shaped in the encounter with student radicalism informed by Western Marxism of the

1960s and then with the Women's Movement and with socialist feminism and Afro-American and British Black feminism. I was then plunged into structuralist/poststructuralist and psychoanalytical cultural theory often written by writers from class and geo-political and ethnic minorities, many directly exposed to historical racism. I revolted, therefore, against what I was offered as and in art history. From the start, I used all of these encounters and resources to build a practice that needed perpetually to be challenged for assumptions I did not realize I was making, and in order to respond to demands that were made of me. One question came up quite early. Did I have the right to write about artist-women who were Asian or African or African-Caribbean? This question was posed: can white woman write about black women? If I did write, what could I know of another's experience of racism when I was benefitting from my white privilege in a racist world? If I wrote only about white women, was I not implying that artist-women from Black communities were not worthy of entry into art history. Given that my whiteness, class and education gave me a platform and my publications would be read, would my politically sensitive silence have occluding effects? The obligation as an art historian was to write about the art that exists. I have a training in looking and thinking about art. I can practice my craft and use my knowledge. I also have to be silent at times, and listen or overhear conversations of which I cannot be a part. Others have to be centre-stage making the histories. In writing, however, and feeling that I cannot remain silent if silence effaces, I have to respect each person as an artist and avoid the ways in which labelling focusses on identity and not the specificity of the artist's project and practice, Yet I am sure to blunder. Or fail to notice things of importance.

Lubaina Himid, an artist about whom I have written over many years, told me that when art historians or critics fail to see something important for her in her work, or say something that really does not fit, this can, however, become an incitement for change. Undesirable as it for something to go unrecognized, it can indirectly be useful to the artist and lead to a different strategy. This does not make me feel any better when I realize how class, race and sexuality disfigure my insights. It does mean, however, that critical recognition and art historical respect for artistic work can dialectically, even in the negative, feed into the practice of an artist who, like all artists, desires to be seen, to be recognized for her work, to have critical engagement with her practice and her project. All I can say is that, through study, interviews, reflection, research and commitment, I have blundered on in an ethico-

political commitment to the work of artists I consider to have profound importance, especially when their creativity smashes up against the solid wall of indifference.

Regarding the question about 'jettisoning' I would like to make one final comment. When we first introduced an MA in Cultural Studies at Leeds, Kofi Nyaako, a Ghanaian journalist, took the course. As a Marxist intellectual from the tradition of Nkrumah, Kofi Nyaako criticized our core course which introduced Marxism but only as European project. What about teaching Marx through African writers or Caribbean thinkers such as C.L.R. James or through an Indian postcolonial thinker such as Gayatri Spivak, he asked us? Students could then go back to Marx having started their encounter with this texts already through the decolonizing uses of his thought in struggles beyond the European continent. Yet when Paul Gilroy was invited to speak to the students on this MA course, what became apparent were differing interpretations of decolonisation through the uses of Marx in relation to pan-African politics versus what Gilroy was developing as 'The Black Atlantic'. What this exchange then made visible was that the issue is not one of replacement or even a one-move re-orientation but a process that really grasps the complexity of decolonization, which must include and respect the internal complexity of the oppositional field. There might be a danger of creating decolonization-based canons without ensuring that the voices of postcolonial feminist and queer artists and theorists are included. Each domination has to be interrogated intersectionally, from several positions. We can imagine removing the great white men and still having a canon of diverse thinkers who are all 'men' or men-thinking women. We can add 'women' without deep and internally self-questioning feminist theory and end up with nothing very radical and possibly very white. We can queer art history and still silence the specific issues around lesbian theory and experience; or even queering art history we may find we are no longer 'allowed' to consider the category of women at all.

Where should decolonisation in relation to art history happen? What strategies might different spaces for decolonisation demand?

This call for the decolonisation of art history is way too late. The demand has been made. Any self-critical and thinking scholar has to respond, now. It must happen in every instance and location as a daily work. Just as ending patriarchal, racist and heteronormative assumptions that bruise, wound and exclude every day must happen every day. I have been

working on this for fifty years and have been challenged over those five decades for my own indifference, blindness and stupidity. The key thing is to respond with real work when our own racism, sexism, class privilege and colonial mind set is called out. Decolonising must also include continuous engagement with the fabric of human life composed of the threads of race, gender, sexuality, sexual difference, geopolitical inequality and the brutality that is globalising capitalism.

Griselda Pollock is Professor of Social and Critical Histories of Art at the University of Leeds.

Notes

¹ See Griselda Pollock & Max Silverman (eds) *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics and Political Resistance in Night and Fog* by Alain Resnais (London and New York: Berghan, 2011); *Concentrationary Memory: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance* (London: I B Tauris, 2013); *Concentrationary Imaginaries: Tracing Totalitarian Violence in Popular Culture* (London: I B Tauris, 2015); *Concentrationary Art: Jean Cayrol, The Lazarean And The Everyday In Post-War Film, Literature, Music And The Visual Arts* (London: Berghan, 2019)

² Stuart Hall in in Isaac Julian's film *Fanon: Black Skin White Masks* 1996.

³ Griselda Pollock 'Can Art History survive Feminism' Keynote address, Women's Caucus for the Arts, College Art Association annual conference, New York 1990

⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* London: James Currey Ltd; Nairobi; Heinemann Educational Books, 1981.