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REFERENCES

Seloua Luste Boulbina. *Les Miroirs vagabonds ou la décolonisation des savoirs (arts, littérature, philosophie)*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018, (Figures)
Décolonisons les arts !, Paris: L'Arche, 2018. Ed. by Leïla Cukierman, Gerty Dambury, Françoise Vergès
Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. Ed. by Elizabeth Harney, Ruth B. Phillips

- 1 In November/December 2018, the #199 issue of *Frieze* analysed the situation of the decolonisation of culture, asking: "Where do we go from here?". The magazine highlighted the significance of the "decolonial turn" in the art world over the last few years, a fact which should be taken into account in the assessment of the critical weight of publications driven by the idea of decolonisation. Although they come from very different registers and contexts, *Décolonisons les arts !*, *Les Miroirs vagabonds ou la décolonisation des savoirs (arts, littérature, philosophie)* and *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism* all share the will to disrupt established narratives and to question the persistency of social, epistemic and representational inequalities inherited from colonialism. At the root of all three books is the observation of the invisibility and/or exclusion of non-white subjectivities and bodies from dominant narratives and artistic institutions. Although the two first books are not primarily devoted to art history as a discipline, all three publications do have in common the fact of encouraging a desacralisation of art for more inclusivity, through the abolition of the categories of high and low culture.

- 2 An opusculé with a militant title, *Décolonisons les arts !* [Let's decolonise the arts!], is a collection of contributions by eighteen members of the *Décoloniser les arts* collective. The arts in question are mostly theatre arts, represented by the majority of the contributors. Visual arts are in the minority with contributions by Kader Attia, Myriam Dao, Olivier Marbœuf and Pascale Obolo. Although the approach is collective, the book is not a manifesto with a precise programme (and it is far from being a "hegemonic strategy"¹). Its short texts all respond to three points: describing how their author's practice is decolonial; do they describe themselves as racialised, and whether they believe that the "decolonisation of the arts [...] would allow to denationalise and de-Westernise the French version of universalism."² The texts express different subjectivities which all have in common a direct experience of systemic racism, analysed through intersectionality. According to Kader Attia, "art alone gives access to a struggle that the political and economic fields cannot."³ The strategies used by the members of the collective to negotiate this struggle take on various forms within their practices: repairing colonial wounds from the past; rethinking the place of mestizo as concept in society; blending languages; decolonising the actor's practice (acting style and phrasing); fostering education; reappropriating narratives and production means; developing a specific aesthetics; avoidance, flight, and the celebration of hospitality. Olivier Marbœuf emphasises the fact that by reifying and quickly capitalising the "Other", contemporary art in its Western form "empties the transformational strength of the minority decolonial gesture, by making its critical understanding no longer an operation capable of affecting the political and social order, but a mere category in the economy of knowledge."⁴ Rasheed Araeen had previously expressed the same criticism in 2000 regarding postcolonial theories, decrying their appropriation by institutions in order to legitimise neoliberal programmes.⁵ The questions that arises, therefore, is to know how to evade the same traps and how to avoid the attempts at decolonising institutional practices being seen as "business"⁶ and becoming a form of decolonial washing, acting as alibis for institutions (or individuals) in a world where identity politics have become so present.
- 3 The last contribution in *Décolonisons les arts !* is written by Françoise Vergès, one of the three editors, who concludes her essay with a list of six concrete propositions to be developed: teaching colonial history in art schools, an affirmative action programme, the revision of labels in museums, exhibitions with a decolonial methodology, a new museography surrounding the questions of slavery and colonisation, and debate spaces. It would be interesting to know more about the content of the revisions of museum labels and what a decolonial strategy would be in a curatorial context. The appeal made by the *Décoloniser les arts* collective echoes the practices of the activist group #DecolonizeThisPlace, which regularly stages media-friendly actions targeting colonial resurgences and the systemic racism of artistic institutions in the United States. One of its most recent, ongoing, actions is its demand that the Whitney Museum of American Art should dismiss one of its board of directors who manufactures arms for law enforcement; it called out the Brooklyn Museum after a white woman was appointed curator of the African art collection, demanding that a Decolonisation Commission be established.⁷ The point is not so much to make the United States a foil – a practice Françoise Vergès cautions against – as it is to create connections between struggles which are similar but taking place in different contexts, in order to learn from their successes and mistakes, and determine what tools can be used.

- 4 The philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina, for her part, published an essay with a promising title, *Les Miroirs vagabonds ou la décolonisation des savoirs (arts, littérature, philosophie)* [Vagabond Mirrors or the Decolonisation of Knowledge (arts, literature and philosophy)]. In a flowing and poetic style, the author extols disorientation as a decisive aspect for the decolonisation of knowledge, and praises the “thick underbrush”⁸ – uncharted spaces that escape colonial rule. Throughout the ten chapters of the book, she fuses literary, philosophical and artistic references in order to approach such subjects as music, literature, representations of migration and gender, opening the art world to African artists and creolisation, a process which Seloua Luste Boulbina believes is inseparable from the processes of decolonisation.⁹ She defines art history as a “periodised temporal cartography of artists and art works in Western Europe”¹⁰, and encourages the reader to forget chronology in order to avoid teleologies referring to the fact that modernity has become a “historical norm”.¹¹
- 5 From a methodological viewpoint, the fact she expresses no position regarding the decolonisation of knowledge is somewhat disconcerting. The absence of Latinamericanist and Chicana/o scholars and thinkers is particularly puzzling, as they have produced key writings and research on the subject for the past twenty years. The occurrence of non-deconstructed terms such as “Third World” and “African art”, although they have been widely debated at least since the beginning of the 1990s raises real questions in an essay that aims at decolonising knowledge. Moreover, the book lacks illustrations and the visual works the text evokes are scarcely described – if they are described at all. This induces the feeling that the works are being used to illustrate the author’s point without being thoroughly analysed. Many of them seem to have been chosen because of their creators’ identity rather than for their aesthetic qualities.
- 6 Seloua Luste Boulbina’s invitation to rethink the concept of time and the division of art history into periods is at the heart of *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism*, a collective publication edited by Elizabeth Harney and Ruth Phillips. It is the result of the meetings of a transnational group of researchers committed to devising new theories and methods for approaching world art history, and to reconsidering the theorisation of modernism and modernity. As emphasised by Harney and Phillips: “It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that once a classificatory term has been effectively deconstructed, its discursive power has been neutralized; and for many, these critiques have settled the issue of modernist primitivism.”¹² The persistent marginalization of modern art created by native artists subjected to colonial power in established narratives and museum displays proves this.
- 7 In *Mapping Modernisms*, the issue is not to replace one normative history by another, but to displace the art historical narrative attached to models of modernity, and to what Leon Wainwright calls the “over here and back there” scenario. Considering a globalised art history requires comparatist, transnational and plurivocal studies organised according to models of heterochronicity. In this case, it is by examining marginalised native subjectivities within national scenes, such as Maoris, Inuits, Australian Aboriginals and North-American natives, that the “over here and back there” scenario can be evaded, because the “back there” disappears from the equation, stressing the concept of “over here”. The use of a locational case study methodology circumvents generalities: indeed, the succession of case studies evacuates any idea of isolated cases and allows the reader to forge a vertiginous mental map. Precisely because they argue that cartography is one of the critical tools of decolonisation, the

editors might have enriched their publication by integrating a map or a diagram to visualise the scope of exchanges, circulations and connections revealed by the studies. This would have been a precious methodological tool for art history.

- 8 Reading this book confirms that modernity was not a unilaterally distributed phenomenon, but that it was the result of meetings and exchanges, exemplified in particular by the famous case of Ulli Beier who connected Africa and Papua-New-Guinea, or the less well-known example of the artistic collaboration between a Russian, Nicolaï Michoutouchkine and Aloï Pilioko, a Wallisian. The authors disrupt categories and show how the demarcation between “art” and “crafts” has been at once an obstacle and a driving force to gain access into the category of modern art. They explain that the experience of modernity was possible with just as much expressive force in the genre of “arts” than of “crafts”, and that these distinctions are now unjustified. They demonstrate how modernism could be experienced as a coercion or, on the contrary as a space for emancipation. Why were some artists recognized as modern, or at any rate contemporary, rather than belonging to a disappeared primitive past?
- 9 However, one major pitfall *Mapping Modernisms* does not escape is the lack of studies on women artists. Out of the fourteen essays, only Bill Anthes’s article on basketry in the South-Western United States discusses objects created by women, and does so by anonymously presenting them. Art produced by women is still the blind spot of art history, even when it claims to be decolonised. However, decolonised art history will succeed only when all forms of oppression and discrimination are taken into account, specifically through an intersectional approach.

NOTES

1. According to a column published by 80 intellectuals – including Pierre Nora, Elisabeth Badinter and Alain Finkielkraut in *Le Point* in November 2018, “decolonialism” [*sic*] is “a hegemonic strategy” attacking republican universalism by reactivating the concept of “race”. The *Décoloniser les arts* collective was one of the associations which was directly targeted by the article. See: https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/le-decolonialisme-une-strategie-hegemonique-l-appel-de-80-intellectuels-28-11-2018-2275104_20.php. For a reaction, see the article by historian Ludvine Bantigny, « Non, la pensée décoloniale ne menace pas la République », *L’Obs*, published online on 18 December 2018 : <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20181217.OBS7278/non-la-pensee-decoloniale-ne-menace-pas-la-republique.html>

2. Cukierman, Leïla. Dambury, Gerty. Vergès, Françoise. “Une démarche collective”, *Décolonisons les arts* !, Paris: L’Arche, 2018, p. 9

3. Attia, Kader. “La réparation c’est la conscience de la blessure”, *ibid.*, p. 13

4. Marbœuf, Olivier. “Décoloniser c’est être là, décoloniser c’est fuir”, *ibid.*, p. 74

5. Araeen, Rasheed. “New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics”, *Third Text*, no.50, Spring 2000, p. 3-20

6. Doumbia, Eva. “Affaires de lions ou même de gazelles”, *op. cit.*, p. 35

7. See: <http://www.decolonizethisplace.org>

8. "I have always loved the margins of uncertainty, imperfectly indexed fringes, 'thick underbrush', the expression comes from a colonial geography map from 1845 which I treasure." Luste Boulbina, Seloua. *Les Miroirs vagabonds ou la décolonisation des savoirs (arts, littérature, philosophie)*, Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018, (Figures), p. 19
9. "Although creolisation is not in itself decolonisation, it is difficult to imagine, on the other hand, decolonisation without creolisation." *Ibid.*, p. 61
10. Luste Boulbina, Seloua. *Op.cit.*, p. 23
11. *Ibid.*, p. 24
12. Harney, Elizabeth. Phillips, Ruth B. "Introduction", *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 14