

Art & Decolonisation: Small Steps Towards a Global Art History

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Introduction

On 14 January 2011 I convened two sessions of a panel on “art as an act of decolonisation” for an international colloquium convened by the South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH).(1) The panel comprised ten papers selected from 25 abstracts submitted in response to my call.(2)

This report provides an overview of the papers on decolonisation, without engaging in detailed summaries or critique of individual papers.(3) It does not address the conference as a whole, although some reference is made to presentations on other panels, where these have a bearing on the decolonisation theme. It concludes with a brief reflection on the potential impact of trans-national themes on the development of a global art history.

Overview

Most papers focused on art produced after political independence, when art was entangled within the context of newly emerging nation states. This included South Africa, where ‘national liberation’ led not to ‘independence’ but to a new democratic order typically referred to as post-apartheid. Cassandra Barnett’s discussion of the artist Lisa Reihana introduced a different angle to the concept of decolonisation, since contemporary Maori art and identity falls short of most people’s notions of self-determination or liberation, perhaps explaining why the notion of indigeneity featured so strongly in her presentation (as it did in the presentation by the other Maori scholar present, Jonathan Mane Wheeki).

Shannen Hill’s paper also differed from most, since it was the only one to address work from a period of anti-colonial (more precisely anti-apartheid) resistance, although it too was framed by the post-colonial (post-apartheid) context, where hegemonic narratives erase counter narratives (in this case the legacy of black consciousness). Tegan Bristow’s presentation of internet art also stood apart. While it was situated within the post-colonial/apartheid context Bristow’s was the only paper to go beyond the framework of the nation-state, highlighting the possibilities of new global communities that are made possible through the internet.

With most papers focused on art practice, little was said of the institutional infrastructure for art. A notable exception was Kwame Labi’s comparative study of art education in Kenya and Ghana. Labi addressed the consequences of colonial-era education for contemporary art. More specifically, he highlighted how colonial views on the intellectual capacity of Africans had limited the development of art history and theory.

Several papers dealt with the recovery or affirmation of indigenous or pre-colonial identities. This included works that addressed or referenced historical figures and events, as well as others that incorporated oral traditions. It also included examples where artists referenced pre-colonial or popular artistic traditions, and melded these with dominant 'western' forms.

While several of the papers dealt with the recovery of the past, these invariably reflected an engagement with the present. This was visible in the appropriation of western forms, as well as the critical engagement with stereotypes. Generally, two tendencies were apparent. The first concerned the use of western forms that were subsequently invested with new or 'local' content. The second highlighted the development of new forms, such as the fusion of easel painting and traditional crafts in the work of Farid Belkahia in Morocco, and the use of new technologies, including digital installations and the internet.

New technology aside, the most dramatic departure from the emphasis on the past was provided by Bernadette van Haute. Following Dennis Ekpo, van Haute called for 'post-Africanism' arguing for the necessity to unburden the weight of the past. In contrast to Ekpo/van Haute's critique that post-colonial African countries advocated 'too much Africanism', Drew Thompson's discussion on post-colonial Moçambique highlighted a counter example where nationality was privileged over race and ethnicity.

Several papers introduced questions of censorship and historical revisionism on the part of the state, within the context of emerging nation-states where counter-narratives were seen to undermine the national 'consensus' being established by the ruling party. This was most apparent in Pascal Ratvonony's account of Ousmane Sembene's cinematic response to Senghor's historical revisionism, and Senghor's subsequent banning of Sembene's *Ceddo*, but was also a feature of Hill's reclamation of the influence of black consciousness on the posters of the 1980s. Thompson, like Ratvonony, also referenced the state's control of language, where naming was sometimes subjected to state sanction, even decree.

The post-colonial state as gatekeeper was also raised in Holiday Powers' accounts of the official contexts for the display of art in Morocco, and how artists tried to expand the audience for art through exhibiting in public spaces. This theme, of engaging with a popular audience, was also apparent in other papers. These included the narration of popular history in public museums, as in Claudia Hucke's account of post-independence mural painting in Jamaica, reference to the use of popular art forms such as glass painting in Senegal, and the mining of oral histories and local genres, as evident in Yvonne Winters and Mxolisi Mchunu's account of a painting by Trevor Makhoba, and potentially participatory interactions provided for by new technology, as discussed by Bristow and Barnett.

Overlap with other panels and presentations

What was striking was the overlap between the issues discussed on the decolonisation panel with other panels. This was particularly so with the "indigenous modernisms" panel (4), where several of the case studies showed artists mediating the particular and the universal, the indigenous and the western. A similar example

appeared on the Latin American panel (5), in the presentation by Roberto Conduru on the Brazilian artist Rubem Valentim. Also from this panel, Helena Chávez Mac Gregor referred to the pervasive influence of Catholicism on Latin America, which served as a reminder that none of the papers on the decolonisation panel addressed the cultural dimensions of colonisation, and how these are mediated in the contexts of 'liberation' or 'self-determination'. The presentation by Peju Layawola, on the "Changing museums, changing art histories" panel (6), where she discussed her artistic response to the looting of the Benin bronzes and the refusal of the British to return the spoils of their plunder, would also not have been out of place on the decolonisation panel.

Conclusion

The overlap with other panels highlighted that, with the majority of the world experiencing some form of colonisation, occupation, and exploitation, artists the world-over have had to rise to the challenge of making art that is relevant for their contexts. Frequently this has taken the form of developing a new form of art, one that in part draws upon their unique heritage and on the other reflects their engagement with the culture of the colonising force.

In considering how to develop a global art history it becomes apparent that the exploration of trans-national themes presents opportunities to introduce often disparate and neglected artists and movements into new discursive frameworks. While this often entails a fair amount of de-coding, translating and learning to read new visual dialects and languages, the introduction of relevant, comparative examples will inevitably lead to the emergence of new discourses. This will provide a viable alternative to the 'peripheral artist as a shadow of a western colossus' orthodoxy that has been responsible for the misrepresentation and exclusion of far too many artists for far too long.

Notes

(1) Held under the aegis of the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA), the colloquium theme was "Other Views: Art History in (South) Africa and the Global South". It was held at the University of Witwatersrand, 12-15 January 2011. Thanks to the Getty Foundation for awarding me a grant to attend the conference.

(2) The full title was "Art as an act of decolonisation: perspectives from and on the global south". The call for papers read: "The struggle for decolonisation is one of the critical themes of the 20th century. Across the globe visual arts practitioners (artists, educators, historians, curators, publishers, administrators, etc) have contributed to and been impacted on by struggles for self-determination. The struggle for decolonisation does not end with national liberation in the political sense but persists in the economic and cultural spheres. Whether visual arts practitioners have been active, passive or even resistant subjects in these struggles, the art, exhibitions, and publications produced in these contexts will inevitably reference issues that can be read as part of the broader struggle for cultural identity.

Decolonisation is both an ongoing historical process and a discourse. The discourse typically invokes contested notions such as cultural imperialism, authenticity,

indigeneity, traditionalism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, modernity, assimilation, synthesis, hybridity, and globalisation.

While decolonisation does manifest literally in artists' choice of themes, images and symbols, it also manifests in quests to generate new visual languages. This includes questions of style, form and materials. Critical assessments of the purposes of art and its public are also important to consider, as is the transformation of existing art institutions, or the establishment of new ones. The relationship to the new nation-state of practitioners who see their work, as Wilfredo Lam put it, as "an act of decolonisation" is also a critical question, particularly when the new state assumes a neo-colonial character. The relationships that are privileged and cultivated with the artists and art events of other nation states are also important, since this calls into question the extent to which the struggle for dignity that led to national liberation is accompanied by a struggle to transform the eurocentrism of the international art world.

This panel discussion aims to explore how decolonisation impacts on the visual arts and how visual arts practitioners contribute as subjects to the ongoing process of decolonisation. Case studies, singular and comparative, from across the world are particularly welcomed. The emphasis will be on periods before and after political independence, as well as those dealing with the incomplete project of decolonisation in more recent times. While most case studies will come from the South, latitude will be extended to case studies from the North where equivalent struggles for self-determination occur. Critical approaches to the value and limits of applying decolonisation as a discursive frame are also welcome."

(3) Topics and speakers for the first panel were:

- *Modernization and traditionalization: art and decolonization in Morocco* – Holiday Powers (Cornell University, New York).
- *The disconnect between contemporary art practice and theory in Ghana and Kenya* – Kwame Amoah Labi (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana).
- *Ousmane Sembene censored by Leopold Sedar Senghor (Ceddo, 1976): a political and aesthetical debate in postcolonial Senegal* – Pascale Nirina Ratovonony (École Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm/Université de Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne).
- *'Regardless, the struggle continues': black consciousness is a culture of resistance* – Shannen Hill (University of Maryland-College Park, USA).
- *The art of Trevor Makhoba: a cultural and historical review of KwaZulu-Natal's urban African artists' response to decolonisation* – Yvonne Winters (Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Mxolisi Mchunu (Voortrekker/Msunduzi Museum, Pietermaritzburg, RSA).

Topics and speakers for the second panel were:

- *Murals and national identity: issues in postcolonial Jamaican art* – Claudia Hucke (Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, Kingston, Jamaica).

- *Renegotiating race and nationality: commercial and press-photography in post-independent Mozambique, 1975-1986* – Drew A. Thompson (Arquivo Histórico de Moçambique/Centro de Documentação e Formação de Fotografia, Maputo, Moçambique).
- *Post-Africanism and contemporary art in South African townships* – Bernadette Van Haute (University of South Africa, Pretoria).
- *Rephrasing protocol: internet art in the global south* – Tegan Bristow (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg).
- *'What You See You Don't See': Lisa Reihana's Digital Marae* – Cassandra Barnett (Unitec, New Zealand).

(4) Convened by Ruth Phillips, the full title of the panel was “Modernist Primitivism and indigenous modernisms: Transnational discourse and local art histories”.

(5) Convened by Maria Iñigo Clavo and Jaime Vindel, the panel was titled “About the epistemological and political consequences of the ‘Latin American’ label”. Conduru’s paper was titled “African dimensions of Latin American art”.

(6) Convened by Jillian Carman. Layiwola’s paper was titled “Contesting imperial narratives and display of African art: A counter history from Nigeria”.