

# Decolonial Aesthetics and the Museum

## An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken

By Rosa Wevers

Rosa Wevers (RW): Rolando, you are the organizer of the Decolonial Summer School in Middelburg, you have published on decolonial theory and practice, and you are invited by many art institutions to speak on the question of how to decolonize the museum.<sup>1</sup> You are affiliated with the Institute of Cultural Inquiry (ICON) at Utrecht University and you are part of the advisory board of the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED). Speaking from this position, what do you consider to be the urgent issues that Dutch art institutions should deal with today?

Rolando Vázquez Melken (RVM): A central proposition of decolonial thought is that there is no modernity without coloniality—that is to say, that there is no history of Western civilization without enslavement. Decolonial thought has been concerned with bringing to the fore how the aesthetics and epistemology of modernity are implicated in coloniality. In particular, decolonial aesthetics questions the role that museums have played in the constitution of the modern/colonial order. We differentiate decolonial aesthetics from modern aesthetics; modern aesthetics is, for us, the order of regulation of the senses and the arts under modernity, whereas with decolonial aesthetics we speak of the plurality of sensorial experiences and expressions that are in excess of the modern order of aesthetics.<sup>2</sup>

The museum cannot be seen as a neutral institution; it is an expression of the modern/colonial power. It holds epistemic and aesthetic power. It contributes to the articulation of modernity as the dominant order of representation by determining the canon, and by configuring a history of

aesthetics as primarily the history of the West. Concurrently, in its coloniality the museum functions as a tool of exclusion. The modernity/coloniality framework enables us to examine the museum's function to establish the aesthetic and epistemic canons of modernity while paying attention to its coloniality—that is, the role it plays in the erasure of other worlds, of other forms of sensing and meaning.

One of the important things that is happening in the museum, and that we are engaging with in MOED, is the question of the spectator. How the museum is producing a spectator: not as a given, but as a position that the museum is actively producing. This enables us to see how the modern/colonial order has been reproducing normative forms of subjectivity, how it entails processes of subjectification. The museum does this by establishing a horizon of perception for the modern subject that we from the decolonial movement see as an enclosure of perception. What the museum presents as universality, we see as an enclosure into a Eurocentric and gendered sphere of intelligibility.

Modernity's function of the museum takes form as subjectification (i.e., the production of the spectator), while its function as coloniality appears as processes of subjugation. The museum is not made for publics that are located at the other side of the colonial difference. Museums, and here the ethnographic museum is a clear example, are representing the others at the other side of the colonial difference, classifying them, speaking *about* them, but not serving them and considering them as spectators: they are the ones that are seen, not the ones that are privileged to see.

What happens in the museum is the constitution of a normative subject. A public that belongs to the cultural archive of whiteness attends the museum in order to acquire the power and entitlement of the normative subject, yet for others the museum gives no possibility of any such identification and entitlement. Normative publics do not go to the museum simply to entertain themselves, but to be produced as the subject that can see. Concurrently, they define themselves in contradistinction to those that are being seen—to become the “self” in opposition to the “other.” We cannot separate the history of the museum from modern/colonial history and how the museum as an institution is an expression of that history.

Just as the university, the museum is part of the modern/colonial control of epistemology and aesthetics. This control is not just about holding the canon of the arts, but also about controlling the possibilities for experiencing the world. Decolonial aesthesis is thus not just about focusing on art institutions, artists, and curators, but is also about understanding how the subject is overdetermined by the field of modern aesthetics that frames his experience. Aesthetics begins to govern the senses and the horizon of experience.

People subjectified within this aesthetics are separated from other worlds. Other worlds are objectified, consumed, and often rendered as spectacles. For us, aesthetics, while being central for the arts and museums, remains a question that goes beyond the arts. It illuminates how modernity and coloniality contribute to the experience of the real and come to shape our senses. It determines how we have been taught to see, how we have been taught to talk, how we have been taught to listen and perceive the world. We have done this so often, inadvertently becoming spectators, performing the model of dominant perception. Dominant perception is not just blind; it is, worryingly, an indolent perception. The indolence towards the rest of world performs erasure through representation.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, decolonial aesthesis also calls to break open the formation of the subject as an indolent subject.<sup>4</sup>

RW: Museums often want to provide their public a feeling of affirmation. This raises questions on what kind of publics they are serving and expecting, as well as what is it that they consider to be the function of the museum. How do you see this role of affirmation in relation to the museum?

RVM: In the logic of the formation of the subject, the “subjectification,” what you call the logic of affirmation has to do with a politics of identity, with a belonging to a city or a nation, with having cultural capital, but especially with belonging to *this* side of the colonial difference. We see this clearly in ethnographic museums; there is a belonging to whiteness that is produced by experiencing the museum, by exercising the white gaze. But this process is not exclusive of the ethnographic museum; in modern and contemporary art museums this takes the form of entering the canon of history and to be in the “now” of history. What takes place is the formation of the subject as denizen of modernity.

The museum can be decolonized by transforming this role of affirmation and identity, by becoming a place that exercises consciously a politics of positionality. How we are implicated in the world in which we live, and how we are not in a safe position, in our own identity, in our abstraction. But our ways of dressing, seeing, consuming, are implicated in the suffering of others. A decolonial positionality articulates the ethical question of how our forms of enjoyment, of becoming somebody, are implicated in the suffering of others. The possibility of entering a meaningful life, that is, a life that doesn't start from the premise of abstract spectators, but from the premise of knowing who you are in a situated position. Situated, that is, not just across social class and gender, but particularly in relation to the colonial difference and your relation to the planet. Who is working for us? Who are we consuming as peoples, as earth? It will mobilize a discomfort of breaking the artifice and fallacy of the modern/colonial order, and also breaking from its enclosure. Can we imagine experiencing a freedom which is not abstract and given by the state, or by the liberty of becoming “myself,” but a freedom together with others: a becoming with others, a plural self?

RW: In your text on “The Museum, Decoloniality and the End of the Contemporary” you have argued that museums function as a mechanism for the production and reproduction of the white gaze.<sup>5</sup> How exactly does this work?

RVM: We can uncover the mechanisms at work in the museum by asking very simple questions, for example: Who is being seen? Who has the power to see? Who represents? Who is represented? These types of questions reveal immediately who the sovereign subject of perception is. We can trace the birth of the notion of the author (which has been mostly a white Christian male author) back to the Renaissance and the emergence of the portrait as a genre. The construction of the individuated normative self came to be defined by the given name of the author and of the portrayed self. This process of individuation is part of the white gaze.

There is a parallel development of ways of representing the world. The authors started to draw the world in perspective. The Renaissance’s perspective both presupposes and expresses the zero point of epistemology of the white gaze.<sup>6</sup> The world comes to be represented from that singular perspective, the singular perspective of the self. The normative gaze comes together with the individualized portrait and the normative pose.<sup>7</sup> Think, for example, about how the portraits of the directors of the Dutch East India Company were made; therein we can see the formation of the representation of the normative subject.

Importantly, what you are perceiving when you look at the normative portrait is also the portrait’s own gaze. These portraits affirm their sovereignty over visibility as much as they establish their power over representation. We are taught to look at the world and to ourselves through their eyes; perception and representation become coextensive. The portrait and perspective are a sort of visual pedagogy that became constitutive of the modern subject and modernity’s worldview, and that reproduced the erasure of coloniality.

This dynamic is present in the history of visual arts, and stretches from colonial landscape painting, to primitivism and abstraction. In all these streams of art, the power of the singular white gaze is present. This is how the white gaze becomes formed through the formation of its own horizon of intelligibility: it creates its own universe, while it is creating itself as a canon. It is in our view an enclosure, the seeing from that singular perspective. This is a monocultural history in the history of perception. That is why, in our form of decolonial thinking, we put such a strong emphasis on the question of listening.<sup>8</sup> We want to move away from a way of being that appropriates and dominates the world, that experiences perception as appropriation and that affirms the surface of representation as the standard of reality. This



Fig. 1. Jacques Waben, *Portrait of Jan Pieterszoon Coen*, ca. 1623-1641. Collection Westfries Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

gaze carries a whole metaphysics of presence, in which time is reduced to space, and the surface of representation becomes the standard of reality.

Today we live in a society of screens. The screen has become the dominant surface of representation. It has come to delimit our experience of reality. The screen is the realization of the history of the modern subject-centered gaze that arose in the Renaissance. The screen is a technology that materializes the singular gaze of perspective. A decolonial and feminist perspective calls for the overcoming of the aesthetics dominated by the gaze and a move toward the aesthesis of listening. If the gaze is about the appropriation of the world as perception, then we respond from the decolonial position with the question of listening.<sup>9</sup> For first-nation philosophies from Abya Yala (the Americas), listening is not a question of the “I,” but rather a question of the “we.” Instead of an appropriative perception, can we think of an aesthesis that is about reception (exceeding the aesthetic) and becoming broader than the singular perspective?

RW: How does gender function in this mechanism?

RVM: Maria Lugones has shown how gender is a condition of socialization and humanity in the Western world.<sup>10</sup> She considers the coloniality of gender and shows how people across the colonial divide were excluded from gender as a way of being excluded from humanity. In other words, gender as a condition of socialization was denied to the enslaved, who were treated as less than human.

*[The] dichotomous hierarchical distinctions... between men and women... became the mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men or women. Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild.<sup>11</sup>*

It is interesting to think of gender formations as aesthetic formations that mobilize the coloniality of gender as a tool for ordering the world, with its own internal violence. This is reflected in the aesthetic order of the museum, in which “the author” is predominantly white and male, whereas racialized women are mostly absent or become simply reified objects of colonial representation together with exotic fruits and landscapes.

This well-known poster by the Guerrilla Girls states that “less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.” It is a clear statement that reveals how the white gaze is gendered—it is predominantly masculine and constitutes the normative subject as masculine. It is important to think of this standard of white masculinity as an impoverishment of experience. In the modern/colonial order, to become masculine means that, to be someone, one has to engage and indulge in the violent consumption of the other. We can think of this critique of



Fig. 2. Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?*, 2012. © Guerrilla Girls. Courtesy of <http://www.guerrillagirls.com>

normative masculinity following the movement of thought that Toni Morrison does in relation to whiteness;<sup>12</sup> normative masculinity carries some of this “having to become a monstrosity to become functional”—having to consume the other in order to become the self. In Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence*, we see how, in the colonial order, the masculinity of the plantation owner meant enjoying unrestrained access to racialized women’s bodies.<sup>13</sup> Here we encounter a crucial issue; that is, to see how these aesthetic formations, which are dominated by the white male gaze, are loaded with the violence of coloniality. How “beauty” as a form of enjoyment in modern life is often implicated in the suffering of others. The colonial landscape, the exoticized nudes of racialized women, and the aesthetic appropriation of primitivism are all articulations of the reification and consumption of coloniality as aesthetics.

The decolonial task of healing, mourning, and overcoming the modern/colonial gaze is a task that has to overcome gender binaries as well as the coloniality of gender. We need to overcome these two different exclusions. We do not want to overcome the coloniality of gender by reinforcing gender. Decoloniality involves a refusing of being out of gender as nonhuman, as well as refusing to be framed by the structural violence and power differentials that constitute the gender binary and heteronormativity.

The problem of gender dimorphism is not only that it constitutes the other as inferior but also that it constructs the male as a monstrosity, as superior, as someone that can only enjoy life through the suffering of others. In an article that I wrote with Daniel Chávez, we were speaking of trans\* as a possibility of transgressing this gender normativity and coloniality of gender, towards a non-gendered relational self.<sup>14</sup>

RW: In your work you often address the need for a humbling of modernity. What does such a process entail, and what is the role of the museum in this?

RVM: When we talk about humbling, we refer to the necessity to overcome the “arrogant ignorance” of modernity, which has established itself as the domain of historical reality. There are still many critical scholars in the West that would not accept that there is an outside of modernity. They can speak of an incomplete Modernity, of a never-achieved modernity, of multiple modernities, but it is all in reference to modernity as the field of intelligibility. When we call for a humbling of modernity, we say that modernity has its right to exist, as a specific genealogy of the West, but we need to recognize that there are other worlds of meaning that are not reducible to modernity’s history. Humbling modernity names a movement to recognize modernity’s limits, to reduce its claims to universality and the real. The humbling of modernity calls for a modernity that is capable of locating itself vis-à-vis the colonial difference and the modern/colonial order. That is why, in decolonial thought, we

use the term modernity, not as a world-historical period, but specifically to speak of the Western project of civilization.

Here we take a different strategy than most postcolonial scholars. Theirs is often a position of claiming recognition within modernity as a world-historical period. They challenge the Eurocentric history of modernity and ask to be included, claiming “we are also modern and we have also been part of the history of modernity.” In this way, they challenge the Eurocentric narrative of modernity, but do not challenge modernity as the framework of recognition. Theirs is a struggle for acquiring a space in visibility. They show that their histories have also been part of modernity and how modernity would not have been possible without them.

We, as decolonial thinkers, respect and understand the importance of the postcolonial articulation but we want to say something different: “We do not want to be modern.” We want to have the right not to be modern, of recognizing other trajectories of thought, relating to the world, relating to others in a pluriversal manner and not in a monocultural way. We recognize the possibility of modernity but as a historically located project, a project that belongs to the genealogy of the West and not as a universal term to define the historical world as whole.

For museums, just as for universities, to participate in the task of humbling modernity requires that they engage their positionality. Museums might be the holders of the canon, but it is shown as if it is a given and as if this canon is universal or global. What happens when we position the canon. Who decided it? Who are the actors? Who decided that this is an aesthetics? What type of enjoyment is it? Is it reproducing or is it challenging the colonial difference, across gender lines? Starting from such questions, we can use the tools in the museum to reveal that history and to enter the process of humbling modernity. We do not think that museums and universities are in a strong position to engage in de-linking; they can, however, enter into the clarity of what they are in relation to colonial difference, recognize their positionality, and not remain ignorant of it.

RW: How do these strategies differ for different types of museums, such as the ethnographic museum or the contemporary art museum?

RVM: For decoloniality it is important to always be contextual: there is no one recipe for all, decoloniality does not function as an ideology. What ethnographic museums have to do is different from what modern and contemporary art museums have to do, or city museums. However, they all carry this legacy of reproducing the canon of modernity, its gaze, its aesthetics and worldview, without acknowledging its implications with coloniality. They will have to find their own ways to deal with these questions in relation to their



Fig. 3 La Vaughn Belle and Jeanette Ehlers, *I am Queen Mary*, Copenhagen 2018. Photo: Rolando Vázquez.

local histories, the works that they have, the works that they commission, the publics that they reach, and so on.

RW: What specific task lies there for contemporary art museums? How do you analyze this notion of “contemporaneity”?

RVM: While the contemporary is all over the place in the arts, it is very rarely questioned. It is simply used as a given. Sometimes it takes shape as a synonym of the “now.” Through the thinking of decolonial aesthetics we bring it into question. We say: What is contemporaneity? What is its function in relation to the modern/colonial order? What is its modernity, and what is its coloniality? Through these questions we can start to see how contemporaneity has functioned as a normative field. It is a field that reproduces the colonial difference; it keeps at play the politics of time in which the rest of world is in the past, in the “pastness” of modernity, in what has already happened. Those who control the field of aesthetics have the control over defining contemporaneity, who is contemporary and who is not. The work of Fabian Barba around decolonizing contemporary dance has shown how contemporaneity works hand in hand with the colonial difference.<sup>15</sup> He exposes how, when artists today are dancing in Ecuador, it does not count as contemporary; people dancing in Brussels are the contemporary. Contemporaneity as a politics of time is a very powerful field of exclusion. This is one of its functions.

The coloniality of contemporaneity is what we call a form of temporal discrimination, in which the other is seen as “in the past.” Just as in the discourse of progress and development, in which the other is defined as “backward” or “underdeveloped.” Contemporaneity is also an expression of the praise of novelty, of now and futurity. Just as we go to the supermarket to get the latest merchandise or to the mall for the latest fashion, contemporaneity is attached to a search for radical novelty, for the most radical, for what has never been done before, etc. Decolonial aesthetics as critique is calling for the end of the contemporary.<sup>16</sup> We are not looking for a post-contemporaneity, but rather we are striving to stop the modern politics of time from becoming the normative principle of aesthetics. The end of the contemporary is a condition to enable the articulation of other trajectories.

The end of the contemporary is not in itself creating new artworks, but enabling the reading of other aesthetics to be part of the experience of the arts. When we speak of the end of the contemporary, we see the possibility for de-linking from this temporal framework that has become normative and for enabling other forms of aesthetics and other articulations between them. For example, when the work of decolonial artists such as Patricia Kaersenhout, La Vaughn Belle, and Jeanette Ehlers is framed by contemporaneity, it is valued but its decolonial content is made invisible or irrelevant. The decolonial aspect of the work is not perceived through the framework of the contemporary. We think that

the end of the contemporary enables the appreciation of elements in these works that have been there, but that have become underappreciated just by becoming framed by contemporaneity.

One can read the global contemporary that emerged in exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 as an attempt to overcome the Eurocentrism of the canon; but it became equivalent to extending the temporality of modernity as a global norm. Global meant that “we include you as long as you are included within my temporal norm.” That is why we are calling for the end of contemporary as we search for decolonial possibilities for reading other aesthetic trajectories and their qualities that have remained invisible and underappreciated.

RW: In our conversation we have focused mostly on the museum as an institute. Recently, individual curators have gained more visibility in museums and exhibitions, and art institutions are increasingly inviting guest curators for the composition of exhibitions, as persons who make connections and bring different elements together to create new or different ways of seeing. How do you look at this development?

RVM: Curators are taking a more prominent role, especially in confronting the task of decolonizing the museum. What curators can do is to occupy the museum and make it work otherwise. They can explore to what extent the museum is implicated in reproducing or challenging the colonial difference. Curators can raise very simple but fundamental questions that reveal the role of aesthetics in the constitution of the colonial difference: Who is looking and who is being seen? Who is being represented and who is representing?

They can work through the archive of the museum to make it speak a different narrative, one that is precisely not the narrative that has been configuring and is configured by the museum’s archive. Decolonial curatorial practices can create critical engagements with the instrumental function of the museum of perpetuating the modern/colonial world as a world that is dominated by the axis of anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism.<sup>17</sup>

They can engage the instrumentality of the museum and make it function otherwise. For example, curators can intervene in the way Fred Moten explains how black musicians perform resistance, not by scaping but by augmentation.<sup>18</sup> They can turn the machine into an instrument. Instead of being overdetermined by the enframing of the museum and its history, its political and financial orientations, its epistemic enclosure, they can use that structure as an instrument to make it speak otherwise. This semester some of my students wrote about hip-hop and how the DJ turns the machinic function of the turntable itself into a musical instrument. This is the key in how to turn the



Fig. 4. Patricia Kaersenhout, *No Names Please!*, 2017. Digital print on cotton, beads, lace, wooden dowel, 8 parts, each 48 x 38 cm. Photo: Tor Jonsson. Courtesy of Wilfried Lentz Rotterdam.

machinery of the modern/colonial order into an instrument of resistance, of decoloniality.

Who is speaking through the museum? Is the curator functional to the narrative of the museum, or is the museum an instrument for the curator? We also need to question the curator as a single individual. Or could we think of collectives, assembles, communities as curators? A decolonial intervention requires to turn the museum into an instrument, so that the museum can be inhabited, re-signified, made to speak what goes beyond its enframing and what it has been designed to silence.

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1. An earlier version of this interview appeared in the catalogue of the exhibition *What is Left Unseen* at Centraal Museum Utrecht: Rolando Vázquez Melken and Rosa Wevers, “Decoloniality and the Museum,” in *What is Left Unseen* (Utrecht: Centraal Museum, 2019).
  2. Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,” *Social Text/Periscope* (July 15, 2013),

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3. Rolando Vázquez, "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2011): 27–44.
  4. Rolando Vázquez, "Salir del Sujeto," in *Decolonialidad y psicoanálisis*, eds. María Amelia Castañola and Mauricio González González (Mexico City: Ediciones Navarra, 2017), 49–70.
  5. Rolando Vázquez, "The Museum, Decoloniality and the End of the Contemporary," in *The Future of the New, Artistic Innovation in Times of Social Acceleration*, ed. Thijs Lijster (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 181–195.
  6. Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero: ciencia, raza e ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750–1816)* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005).
  7. Nicole Haitzinger, "Mirroring the Conquistador's Pose: Being Centaur and Becoming Jaguar," in *Endangered Human Movements Vol. 3 – The School of the Jaguar*, eds. Amanda Piña, Angela Vadori, and Christina Gillinger-Correa Vivar (Vienna: BMfB, Federal Ministry of Movement Affairs, 2019), 191.
  8. Rolando Vázquez, "Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening," in *Capital, Poverty, Development*, ed. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (Aachen: Mainz, 2012), 241–252.
  9. Carlos Lenkersdorf, *Aprender a escuchar* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdes, 2008).
  10. María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–759.
  11. *Ibid.*, 743
  12. Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison Takes White Supremacy To Task," *YouTube* (March 24, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S7zGg6Suw>.
  13. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence, Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 130.
  14. Daniel Chavéz and Rolando Vázquez, "Precedence, Trans\* and the Decolonial," *Angelaki, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2017): 39–45.
  15. Fabian Barba, "The Local Prejudice of Contemporary Dance," *Documenta* 34, no. 2 (2016): 46–63.
  16. Rolando Vázquez, "Staging the End of the Contemporary," *Archiv Maerz Musik*, accessed April 8, 2019, [https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-gesamtprogramm/programmdetail\\_195861.html](https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-gesamtprogramm/programmdetail_195861.html).
  17. Rolando Vázquez, "Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 15, no. 1 (2017): 77–91.
  18. Fred Moten, *Black and Blur, consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2017).