

## FROM GLOBALIZING TOWARDS DECOLONIZING: ART HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF TIME

INTERVIEW WITH ROLANDO VÁZQUEZ

Rolando Vázquez is a sociologist at University College Roosevelt and an affiliated researcher at the Department of Gender Studies and the Research Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON) of the University of Utrecht. He is the driving force of the Decolonial Summer School, co-organized each year with Walter Dignolo in Middelburg. Under the coordination of professor Gloria Wekker, Rolando Vázquez co-authored the report of the Diversity Commission of the University of Amsterdam in 2016. Over the past years, he has held many talks within Dutch art institutions, propagating the need to humble modernity. According to Vázquez, the politics of time are particularly important when thinking about how to unpack 'art history' as a field that has obviously been heavily subjected to modernity, eurocentrism, and coloniality.

Kunstlicht (Aline Hernández and Rosa te Velde): Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. In 'Modernity Coloniality and Visibility: The Politics of Time' (2009), you write that modern temporality is "[...] a strategy of domination. It imposes the universal claim that the present is the only site of the real, while dismissing the past as archaic." How are the 'politics of time' at play in art and art history? How does this relate to the notion of contemporaneity?

Rolando Vazquez: The question is how the contemporary became normative — how it operates as a norm. The realization for us, on how 'the contemporary' operates, was developed in dialogue with dancer and decolonial thinker Fabian Barba. The contemporary acts as a gatekeeper that decides who gets to be recognized, who gets access to the arts, to art institutions, to the space of appearance and validity. It seems to me that the discursive transition from *modern* art to *contemporary* art — to 'contemporaneity' — happened somewhere in the late 1950s, obviously having important roots in the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. The late 1950s is when I see the value of the 'art of the now' being solidified into the overarching category of contemporaneity. Recently, I was looking at the catalogue of an exhibition titled *1960 douze ans d'art contemporain en france 1972*, in which the art was presented as 'actuality', as not yet having memory nor history; 'the art that is happening *now*' — that is what is constructed as 'the contemporary'.

Indeed, the eurocentric character of contemporary art has been questioned, famously with *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989 in Pompidou), and also at the biennials in Havana and São Paulo. These exhibitions questioned how the contemporary could stop being eurocentric in its content and become globalized to include artists from different geographies. However, whereas

they did question the eurocentrism of the artists represented, they did not question the eurocentric notion of contemporaneity itself. In other words, how the contemporary operates as a norm in practice, how its mechanisms for inclusion and recognition play out. Those who have the power to *name and validate* the contemporary — curators, directors or museums — hold the power of representation. This comes down to the very basic question of decoloniality: who is speaking and who has the right to speak? Who holds the epistemic field of the contemporary and the field of visibility and legibility?

Contemporaneity is not defined as a set of aesthetic criteria, but turns the modern politics of time itself into the primary field and condition for recognition. The modern notion of time posits 'the latest' as the highest point of history and makes novelty into a criterion for recognition. In other words, contemporaneity turns the modern politics of time into a norm. This logic is never really thematized or revealed in order to establish who enters the canon of contemporaneity and who is left out. But there is a significant border there. In some artists' desire to become contemporary we see how the framework exercises its power. While some non-western artists are subsumed under the realm of the global contemporary, this inclusion can also function to reinforce the colonial difference by making irrelevant *how* they belong to other geo-genealogies, to non-modern forms of aesthesis, and how they enact other worlds of meaning that cannot be encompassed by 'the contemporary'. By the 'colonial difference', we understand the schism that articulates modernity with coloniality, the colonial difference appears as the slash (/) when we write modernity/coloniality. It indicates the border of inclusion and exclusion, of visibility and invisibility, of contemporaneity and pastness, etc.

KL: Does this mean that in order to overcome the normativity of the contemporary, we need to 'stage the end of the contemporary'?

RV: The idea is not to create a new set of parameters for creating new art, but to allow for different *readings* of the art that is already there, readings that are not possible under the 'regime' of the contemporary. When I speak about 'the end', I mean that we have to exit the modern politics of time, because it leads to the impoverishment of experience, to the enclosure of life in the 'empty present' to use the term by Walter Benjamin. The critique of the contemporary is therefore also an ethical commitment that enables us to acknowledge other forms of perception, of 'aesthesis', of relating to the world, and of 'worlding the world', as valuable experiences. It's about enacting other temporalities that do not fit under the contemporary, as they do not seek novelty nor do they seek to inscribe themselves within this empty present.

KL: What is decolonial *aesthesis* and what is its relation to time, justice, and ethics?

RV: For decolonial aesthetics, the plane of the present needs to be brought in relation with what precedes it. Through remembrance and especially not forgetting, we attain the recognition of how what has happened is actively configuring the present. For many years, decolonial artists have made works dealing with the colonial difference, the colonial wound and the need for mourning, healing, and hope.

By engaging with temporalities that precede and ground our present, decolonial aesthetics brings the colonial difference to the fore, and with it the unavoidable question of justice. In contrast, when the dominant criterion is novelty then the question of justice is vacated. When the overarching criterion is to see the present as a messy assemblage of different networks and processes involving agents and actants, then the question of justice loses its centrality and disappears. In my mind, this is very much the case with new materialism. For us decolonial aesthetics in particular has to do with allowing for the possibility to remember *us*, to recover a communal form of being, that exceeds individuality, through remembering who we are as communal, as earth and as ancestral. A decolonial positionality is not just about locating yourself in the present, but rather about positioning yourself in relation to others, to earth and *deep* temporalities. To reach-out behind the screen of individual-identities we ask: where do you come from and what exactly configures your privileges and/or your oppressions?

By studying the contemporary we might be able to see how the normalization of certain bodies, voices, and perceptions are forms of enclosure that constrain us to perceive others, other worlds of meaning, and the times that precede us. The contemporary is thus complicit in the emptying of experience. Through decolonial aesthetics, we can recover the radical forms of relation, we can recover the radical freedom of compassion, of being able to feel with others. Relationality shows us that there are limits that we cannot overcome on our own, it shows us that we are embedded in a history that configures our present instead of a present that is self-contained and always desiring a future that is not yet.

KL: Could you explain how 'the past' is different from what you understand as 'deep temporality'?

RV: In the west when you speak of the past, you're seen as either speaking from a fundamentalist or a traditionalist position. Everything that is not future-oriented is by definition seen as conservative. Modernity approaches the past as fixed and turns it into monuments, archives, collections, national histories etcetera. It is what I call the monumentalization of the past. The past is reified into a national fetish or an archaeological curiosity. This transmogrification of the past is itself part of the violence of modernity. When *we* speak of the past we are speaking of what has been lived by peoples and earth that preceded us. When we speak of deep temporalities we are speaking of an active relation to time, to the time that has

happened. Whereas monuments, collections or archives are just replicas of the textuality of modernity, of the affirmation of the present as the totality of the real, our notion of what has happened, and more precisely, of precedence, has to do with an understanding of time in which what has been lived has to be understood as the radical alterity of the present.

From a decolonial perspective, justice has to do with a recognition of what has happened, what needs to be healed, what cannot be forgotten, because we are all implicated in histories of injustice. The past is not seen as a monument or as a fixed narrative, like it is in modernity; it is seen as the ground of what has been lived. We are speaking about a past in which people were enslaved, a past in which genocides took place. This is the archive we have to think through, not the archive of monuments, which often colonizes, and overrules the past that has been lived. Today there are many struggles against monuments, in the US, in South Africa and also here, in the Netherlands. Monuments of colonial emperors erase and block the past of a living memory that is required for healing and that is claiming recognition. These monuments, and these views on history, close the access to peoples' histories. They perform the power of coloniality, which is the power of erasing other worlds of meaning.

The question of what has happened is a question of the majority of humanity — for all those that have lived under coloniality — while the question of utopia is a question of privilege for those who can partake in the design of utopias. That is where the decolonial also distinguishes itself from other traditions of critique; we are not seeking to access modernity, or to be recognized as modern or contemporary, we are not seeking to access the future. Our struggle is to bring about that knowledge that has been suppressed by the contemporary, by modernity, and move towards a pluriversal world, or to use the Zapatista dictum a 'world where many worlds can fit' — and not just to produce one utopia for everybody.

KL: Another question that we have relates to art education and art criticism. What are the 'judgements' or the ways in which contemporary art is taught and evaluated?

RV: The key to understanding this lies in how time relates to reality. Because when you see what type of temporality we use or exercise as a way of living, then you can begin distinguishing that there are other ways of being on earth, of being with others and being with ourselves. Whether or not artistic expressions are seen as *passé*, or as having been already done, they present important questions to the logic of novelty that is necessary for the reproduction of the modern/colonial system of domination, including neoliberal capitalism.

If we begin to see how the criterion of novelty is created under the notion of contemporaneity, we can understand how it is implemented to always seek the new. This mechanism covers up other types of criteria we could be using to relate to art. Entering the field of the contemporary

means to be evaluated on the grounds of novelty, on whether or not it is a new assemblage, but not taking into consideration the engagement with deep temporalities. This is something that happens very often to decolonial artists. They have to confront institutional judgements that enforce criteria of novelty and complexity but that remain oblivious to the colonial difference. They are receptive to the formation of new constellations, celebrate assemblages, complexity, and messiness in the plane of the present. They are engaged in the reproduction of the contemporary as the overarching field of validation, in the reproduction of their own privilege to hold the space of recognition.

KL: What role could institutions play in this regard?

RV: The function of contemporary art museums in relation to their publics needs to be questioned. Which sort of public does an institution of contemporary art attract and reproduce? Why do people go to these museums? And what do they become through the experience of the museum? Sociology teaches us that people become 'somebody,' they are subjectivized within schools and clinics, like Michel Foucault explained. How are people being subjectivized by the contemporary? Do people really go through the limits of their experience? Do they humble themselves and become more open to other worlds of meaning? Or do people go to a museum to acquire cultural capital and reaffirm themselves as the 'I,' the consumer/spectator that is in the present, in the now of history? In other words, decolonizing the contemporary calls for decolonizing the function of the museum and the way it produces certain publics.

KL: In 'The End of the Contemporary' (2017), you state that "you can globalize the contemporary and remain contemporary, but you can not decolonize the contemporary and remain contemporary". If the contemporary hasn't been questioned and global art history emerges as a movement framed within the contemporary — what is the place that 'global art history' holds within these narratives? What could be the implications of this way of thinking, and the notion of staging the end of the contemporary when it comes to thinking of the ways in which we write and do 'art history'?

RV: In the face of a critique of contemporaneity, as a structure of power that runs in parallel to other structures of power like patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and eurocentrism, art history has to address the question of how it has been implicated in the reproduction of the contemporary and hence complicit in the reproduction of the colonial difference. The contemporary needs to be historicized, because it needs to be denaturalized. Who produced it and under which modern/colonial conditions? What were the interests at play in producing these criteria? These, of course, are social processes that correspond to the dominance of the west in the arts and aesthetics, the praise of the commodity in capitalism, the affirmation of

abstraction as freedom, the cult of the individual and the author, and the articulation of 'empty time' as contemporaneity. It is a very serious task for art history to show the historical constitution of the contemporary, to show how the borders of the visible have been produced, and how it has been instrumentalized and globalized.

To what extent has globalization within the art world really enabled the western public to *listen* to other world realities? Or is it a globalization that just incorporated marginal or exotic elements to it — like in the tradition of 'world exhibitions' — to again reinforce its normative position as the locus of enunciation, as the here of geography and the now of history? We need a history of the practices, knowledges, and mechanisms that have implemented the logic of the contemporary across the colonial difference. This type of question illuminates the discipline in a different way.

Another crucial element involves talking about the positionality of the contemporary and asking how it is implicated in the constitution of the colonial difference. Not only should we look at the history of the contemporary as establishing its field of legitimacy and legibility, but also at the question of its coloniality. Denaturalization, or deconstruction, understood as technique from western critical thought, are not capable of revealing coloniality. The power of western aesthetics has blinded us from seeing that there are other ways of being on earth with others. The question of the coloniality of the contemporary cannot only be solved through the western tradition of critical thinking, we need black, Chicana, and decolonial critical thought that reveal the colonial difference and the erasure of other realities. We need to locate and position the contemporary in the modern/colonial history.

KL: What does this mean for academics or art historians themselves? We have noticed that there are quite a few academics, now working to 'globalize' art history. Yet, even there, the coloniality of the production of knowledge according to a specific logic is reproduced because people are writing without necessarily explaining their position.

RV: Do you mean that globalizing art history is more or less replicating the movement of globalizing the contemporary?

KL: To some extent yes. This is something we have only come to realize while making this issue. While there is a lot of sensitive and productive critique within this field, and also in this issue, it seems that academia itself needs to reflect on its systems of knowledge production, to which, for one thing, acknowledgement of positionality and inherent biases or privileges, is not common practice. This is what seems to define the gap between 'globalizing' and 'decolonizing'.

RV: Decolonial critique is about an ethics of doing and a politics of coalition. You cannot just use decolonial terminology and not have ways of living

that are consistent with it. This is a risk today, many people are using the term 'decolonial' without understanding its movement as a way of engagement, as a politics and as an ethics, they just use it as an instrument of thinking. Not all critique is a decolonial critique. In that regard, you're right that globalizing art history is running the risk of simply extending the empire of western epistemology. The empires used to organize parades as a way of celebrating the expansion of their colonial territories. They sought to continuously add territories and spheres of life under their control. To what extent are we also doing this epistemologically? Using our epistemology to expand its reach and bring other territories under our conditions of legibility?

What is also at stake is the epistemic violence that has been happening since the beginning of modernity, understood as the western project of civilization. Eurocentrism is a type of arrogant ignorance, by this I mean an ignorance that doesn't know other realities while at the same time claiming to possess world-historical reality. It doesn't know about other forms of relating to time and to the earth, to others and to the plural-self, about communality. It is arrogant in the sense that it assumes to have *the* knowledge of the world and the privilege to speak, but it is ignorant because it doesn't see the limit of its own knowledge. We need forms of humbling modernity. One of the methods to do so is positionality: the question of *who* is speaking; *where* are you speaking from; and *why* are you speaking about this? Professor Gloria Wekker once asked a white female artist that was portraying black bodies in her work what sort of pleasure she derived from displaying and speaking about others. I think we need to be confronted with those questions that make it impossible to keep on ignoring our positionality across the colonial difference.

Engaging in the task of humbling modernity is very necessary. It leads to the recognition of the limits of our knowledge, to the consciousness that we cannot incorporate and presume to encompass the worlds of meaning of others, that we cannot enclose the radical plurality of the earth and others within our field of legibility. We can certainly participate in dialogues across worlds of meaning but first, we need to relinquish the position of arrogance and be confronted with the limits of what we know and the certainty of what we do not know. A process of humbling and positioning is the condition of possibility for the hegemonic position to enter a truly intercultural dialogue. Otherwise, we are again enacting the arrogant ignorant mode of being towards others, we are judging the reality of others, and riding the colonial difference to reproduce our privilege, at least our epistemic privilege.

For us as decolonial thinkers, it is very important to acknowledge that we are not 'organic intellectuals' at the centre of historical transformation. Rather we see ourselves in the margins of an ongoing decolonial struggle for dignity, for healing and re-existence of other worlds. We have the task to listen to the ongoing struggles and we are engaged with our own local tasks of humbling the institutions of the west that continue silencing and

forgetting the realities across the colonial divide. This is the relevance of the struggle to decolonize 'contemporaneity', 'the university', 'the museum'...

We are engaged with opening-up the epistemic territory of modernity. But we do not claim to be the centre nor do we claim a position of purity for ourselves; we are all implicated in oppression through the way we dress, the way we eat, our forms of embodiment and so on. The recognition that we are implicated and that we are not working from an abstract or superior position of purity is a hard process but it is also liberating in that we renounce the fiction of the organic intellectual, we renounce the wordlessness of the abstract self. We have to get rid of the pretension of abstract innocence of the performing self and begin to recognize who we are as positioned historical subjects. None of us is safe, in masculinity, in whiteness, in consumption, in the colonial difference... Humbling as a practice of decolonial positioning and as the condition of listening to worlds of meaning that are beyond our enclosures is the start of sensing, doing, and thinking decolonially.