

De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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Introduction

It's fair to say that the loudest discourse embedded within Documenta14 concerns the power dynamic between North and South, with the primary emphasis on the relationship between a northern European cultural power implanted in a fetishized European south. Documenta 14's approach was *to look at itself, looking at the south*.

Rather than making blanket statements commenting upon Kassel in Athens (Documenta 14 as a theatre of European power play), we wanted to discuss Documenta's approach to *global* southness from the POV (point of view) of two Australian artists temporarily living in Europe, as a focal point to more generalized observations on how European Institutions represent art and peoples from the global south, specifically Oceania. This written dialogue is a follow on to an actual conversation between the two of us that took place in Athens, during the opening week of Documenta 14. Our concerns revolved around a particular wing of the EMST, about how specific works/objects presented themselves and also the manner in which they were contextualized.

Taloi Havini: *Let's talk about that problematic corner of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST). I won't mention all of the works, but we're concerned about that corner representing Indigenous societies. On the walls there were the 1895 B&W photographs of German anthropologist Franz Boas posing for a creation of a diorama meant to represent a Hamat'sa ceremony of the Kwakwaka'wakw society in Canada. I do get that this is a section of the Documenta exhibition where we see how European history had this fascination on the "other". It got problematic when I saw the film 'Why are you angry' made by Nashashibi and Skaer, two British female artists who filmed Tahitian women based on representations made by Paul Gauguin's paintings. I immediately felt oppressed.*

Gabriella Hirst:

In context of these works I think that immediate responses are really significant, especially because the curatorial framework surrounding the film eluded any progressive or complicated approach towards the historical material that was being referenced. Nearby Nashashibi's film, and the aforementioned Franz Boas photographs, archival images lifted from the Australian Museum (taken in the early 20thC by Thomas Dick) were pinned haphazardly to the wall. There was little accompanying text that might have clarified the critical position taken, and as a result everything was left to float in this state of ambiguity.

Taloi: *Yeah. Without a critique or critical context it's really just reiterating the exoticism that underpins Euro-centric views that western art history framed non-European societies. Even if it's intended otherwise, speaking as an Indigenous contemporary female artist from Oceania, it was disempowering to see new work that is returning to late 19thC European Romantic views on brown women in the Pacific.*

Gabriella:

I get what you mean; the effect remains the same. I'm wondering about the intentions here, which were surely nuanced, but perhaps nuanced beyond recognition, when the resulting effect is a perpetuation of straight-up exoticization of the South by a

powerful European Cultural Institution. My follow-up impression was that perhaps Documenta 14's approach was simply *to look at itself, looking at the south*- a type of self-observation could have the potential to be productively critical, if it were not so inherently narcissistic, keeping the power of looking firmly in the hands of the European institution. It's an approach that I think underscored a lot of what was happening at Documenta in Athens (down to the tagline 'Learning from Athens'), and that was starkly visible in that particular corner of the EMST. It's colonizing, but from a different angle, or colonizing with a self-awareness... and I think that is something we should be careful of.

Taloi: *The exploration on 'the gaze' itself could be interesting. Taken originally from the white male gaze and now perhaps through a female artists or curatorial gaze. The fact is that in reflecting on that western gaze, focussing on itself, is still as you say, narcissistic and holding on to that power and control of representation when it comes to Indigenous societies.*

This is also a responsibility of the overall curatorial framework and how there is danger in continuing a legacy of colonisation.

Gabriella: Totally, which is something that Documenta 14 has attempted to tackle, but there is something uncomfortable in the language used. For example, in the introductory essay of the Documenta Reader there is this passage:

"...it seemed most pertinent to work and act from Athens, where we might begin to learn to see the world again in an unprejudiced way, unlearning and abandoning the predominant cultural conditioning that, silently or explicitly, presupposes the supremacy of the West, it's institutions and culture, over the 'barbarian' and supposedly untrustworthy, unable, unenlightened, ever to be subjugated 'rest'. By bringing Indigenous practises and techniques of knowledge from all over the world, via Athens, to Kassel and elsewhere, we aim to question this very supremacist, white and male, nationalist, colonialist way of being and thinking that continues to construct and dominate the world order."

I'm left wondering who comprises this 'we', the 'we' talking about the else who is to be reconceptualised.

Taloi: *The "we" assumes we are homogenous. The act of simply arriving at a place assumes that we will "learn from" this place.*

Gabriella: Following on from this, when we spoke last time you mentioned your experiences so far in Europe in regards to language and othering.

Taloi: *The year of 2017 is my first time in Europe and after a four-month residency in Paris I have found that the general perceptions on where I come from (Bougainville/ Papua New Guinea) is through that 'primitive' and 'savage' eurocentric lens. For instance, I asked someone (who was writing in reference to a work of mine) to remove the word 'primitive' when describing an aspect of my work. Instead I asked them to use the word 'ancient'. Language is important isn't it?*

G: Absolutely, especially when it perpetuates fetishizing.

Taloi: *I was looking forward to seeing the contemporary art discourses come out in Athens. There was so much hype around it that began in Australia months ago. For*

me it was going to be a reprieve from the kind of exhibition that claims Picasso as a hero of 'Primitif' art which I did see at the musée du quai Branly in Paris. I thought these would be two completely different views. Yet clearly, in speaking with you, a contemporary Australian artist who being non-Indigenous but like me being from the real 'south' with roots in Australia, were able to recognise together the patronising representations experienced in that section of EMST.

G: There is a line in the introductory essay of the Reader about how Documenta has this history of laying down the paradigm of contemporary art discourse for years to come, and I do think that that is the way I had thought of it. It seems that there are still deep rooted reverberations in Australia of the old view of Europe as being the epicentre of art and culture. So it has been surprising to see these back-reaching displays in Athens in comparison with how an institution such as GOMA in Brisbane addresses a non Eurocentric view of cross-cultural presentation in the Asia Pacific Triennial. It's an institutional dynamic, but also one that occurs at a conversational level between practising artists. I was talking the other day with a UK-based Australian curator who on a recent trip to Sydney had noted something when visiting artists studios; a particular self-awareness of a certain identity politics of home and post-colonialism that is a central feature of contemporary Australian art discourse. Which I think is really valuable. Needless to say, I am endlessly ashamed and revolted by Australian policy and ideas of nationhood that oppress and exclude, so it is an unfamiliar experience to find myself discussing the value of these conversations and dialogues that are happening in the arts scene, that go beyond the othering perspective that we have seen are still being recycled in some European institutions.

Taloi: *I think she's right. Our age group of Australian's (but more the kind of Australian's you and I would hang out with) are far more self-aware of the impacts of colonisation. There are more non-Indigenous people supporting days like 'Invasion Day', the same day where White Australians celebrate Captain Cook's landing. That's why I saw this conversation with you as an important one to share and possibly to build on as contemporary artists who have a long and dedicated practise - we both want to show and be shown in places that are not oppressive to race or our imaginations.*