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ÄSTHETIKEN X.0

Christian Grüny / Brandon Farnsworth (Eds.)

New Music and Institutional Critique

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J.B. METZLER

Ästhetiken X.0 – Zeitgenössische Konturen ästhetischen Denkens

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Die Reihe Ästhetiken X.0 folgt einem Verständnis von Kunstphilosophie und philosophischer Ästhetik, das auf Sachhaltigkeit und historische Konkretheit setzt. Danach sind philosophische Reflexion, wissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzung und kulturelle Situietheit aufeinander verwiesen und sollten den Entwicklungen der ästhetischen Praxis in den verschiedenen künstlerischen Feldern, aber auch jenseits dieser Rechnung tragen. Ohne auf eine bestimmte theoretische Position festgelegt zu sein, bringt die Reihe Beiträge aus unterschiedlichen Disziplinen und Feldern zur Artikulation, die für die Gegenwart symptomatisch und wegweisend erscheinen. Dabei ist die Frage ausschlaggebend, was ästhetische Praxis heute bedeutet, in welchen (De)Form(ation)en sie stattfindet und welche gesellschaftlich-symbolische Position sie bezieht. Dazu gehört die Reflexion der Ästhetik als westlich-bürgerliche Emanzipationswissenschaft und normsetzend-universalisierende Disziplin.

The series Ästhetiken X.0 follows a philosophy of art and philosophical aesthetics stressing the necessity of specific analysis and historical concreteness. In our view, philosophical reflection, scholarly practice, and cultural situatedness are interdependent and should account for the contemporary development of aesthetic practices in and beyond the various artistic fields. Without propounding a fixed theoretical position, the series assembles seminal contributions from different disciplines and fields that can claim contemporary relevance. Its central questions include what aesthetic practice means today relative to the cultural context, in what kinds of (de)form(ation)s it takes place, and how it positions itself symbolically within society. This includes reflection on aesthetics as a bourgeois Western discipline of emancipation and normative universalisation.

Christian Grüny · Brandon Farnsworth
Editors

New Music and Institutional Critique



J.B. METZLER

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Vorwort der Herausgeber/innen

Unverkennbar ist, dass sich die gesellschaftlichen und personalen Sensibilitäten fortgesetzt ändern. In einer selbstreflexiven und responsiven Gesellschaft, die auf den Wandel politischer Konstellationen zu reagieren vermag, wirkt dies auf politische Haltungen, theoretische Annahmen, künstlerische Praktiken und auch ästhetische Urteile zurück. Selbstbefragungen und Modifikationen der ästhetischen Theoriebildung sind daher allzeit unverzichtbar.

So hat sich das Feld des ästhetischen Denkens zunehmend entgrenzt und im Hinblick auf seine Voraussetzungen hinterfragt: Heute reflektiert es ebenso auf zeitgenössische künstlerische Praktiken und globalisierte Ausstellungs- und Aufführungsdispositive wie auf die politische Verteilung des Sinnlichen und deren historische und kulturelle Bedingtheit. Es befragt das medial erweiterte Zusammenspiel der menschlichen Vermögen, die Interdependenzen von Theoriebildung und künstlerischen Verfahren, die Rolle und Funktion der Künste in Abhängigkeit von sozio-ökonomischen Bedingungen. Es reagiert auf erweiterte erkenntnistheoretische Fragestellungen wie aktuell auf jene des Posthumanen, Medienökologischen oder (Post-)Kolonialen, auf die Infragestellung anthropo- und eurozentrischer Perspektiven, auf nicht-westliche Schönheitsverständnisse und die Aufforderung, die Grenzen tradierter philosophischer Konzepte von Ästhetik zu problematisieren.

Ästhetik hat sich zu einem transversalen Feld erweitert, das aus unterschiedlichen Disziplinen und Perspektiven Anleihen bezieht, um die sich verändernden ästhetischen und künstlerischen Konstellationen der Gegenwart in möglichst umfassender Weise zu reflektieren.

Die im Metzler-Verlag erscheinende Reihe *Ästhetiken X.0* trägt diesen Veränderungen Rechnung und wendet sich der zeitgenössischen Situation, in der die klassischen Bestimmungen nicht einfach fortgeschrieben werden können, mit erhöhter Sensibilität und theoretischer Neugier zu. Ihr Anliegen ist es,

nahsichtig und skrupulös die ästhetischen Veränderungen im personalen, künstlerischen und gesellschaftlichen Bereich zu sondieren und auch auf Arten des Nichtwahrnehmens oder der theoretischen Geringschätzung zu reagieren. Damit will sie eine möglichst lebendige Forschung über Grenzen hinweg anregen.

Judith Sigmund
Michaela Ott
Christian Grüny

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Rosanna Lovell is a musician, educator, performer, radio maker and sound artist based in Berlin. Her practice focuses on feminist and postcolonial perspectives in classical and new music which she explores through performance, intervention, sound and research, as well as critical and self-reflexive approaches in the arts and arts education. She studied classical music performance and languages at the University of Adelaide (Australia) and in 2018 completed a Master of Arts at the Institute for Art in Context, UdK/Berlin University of the Arts, where she is also part of the feminist collective FEM*_MUSIC*.

Peter Meanwell is a curator and radio maker exploring the collision of new sound practices with social and political ideas. Living in Bergen, Norway, he is artistic director of Borealis - a festival for experimental music, where he has curated an annual programme of new composed music, performance and sound since 2014. He is also Creative Director of UK based audio production company Reduced Listening, who make podcasts for clients as diverse as Serpentine Galleries and Spotify, and produce BBC Radio's flagship experimental music shows Late Junction and freeness. Peter teaches at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music.

Ari Benjamin Meyers received his training as a composer and conductor at The Juilliard School, Yale University, and Peabody Institute. Trading the concert format for that of the exhibition, his internationally presented works—such as *Kunsthalle for Music* (2018), *Symphony 80*, and *Solo for Ayumi* (both 2017)—explore structures and processes that redefine the performative, social, and ephemeral nature of music as well as the relationship between performer and audience. His diverse practice includes a commission for the Semperoper Dresden, a ballet for the Paris Opera, and the experimental music-theater work *Forecast* (2021) for the Volksbühne Berlin. A number of recent works including the *The Long Parade* (2021), *Rehearsing Philadelphia*, and *Werkorchester* (both 2022) focus on the public and civic spheres and involve large scale communal performances.

Berno Odo Polzer is a curator and researcher in the fields of experimental music and sound-related art based in Brussels. His interdisciplinary practice combines artistic, theory-related, dramaturgical and curatorial approaches, with a focus on time as a political category and the politics of listening. He studied Classical Archaeology, Musicology, Philosophy and German literature in Vienna. He was co-curator and artistic director of *Wien Modern* festival (2000–2009) and artistic

director of Berliner Festspiele's *MaerzMusik* festival, which he reconceived as a research platform on the politics of time under the subtitle *Festival for Time Issues*.

Benjamin Piekut studies music and performance after 1960 and is currently researching the history of sound art. Author of *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-garde and Its Limits* (2011) and *Henry Cow: The World Is a Problem* (2019), editor of *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies* (2014), and co-editor of the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (2016), he is a professor of music at Cornell University.

Trond Reinholdtsen challenges traditional forms while remaining the respectful and struggling composer looking for his musical "spirit" (first portrayed as a phantom-like ghost backstage and then shown falling over into the mud). Reinholdtsen's music has evolved in extremely performative directions and is characterised by the blending of pure music with various non-musical expressions.

Tine Rude is former Managing Director of Borealis – a festival for experimental music, and currently Head of Art and Cultural Development (*Seksjonssjef*) at the City of Bergen. She is committed to creating an organisation that is welcoming and inclusive to everyone, and is dedicated to confronting established truths about gender and representation, and how to make the arts more important for more people. She has extensive experience as a producer in the performing arts and music, and in initiating methods to strengthen the role of the producer and develop strong organisations.

Hannes Seidl is a composer. His focus lies on music theatre as well as mixed media such as his radio shows *You Are Here* (2020) and *Good Morning Deutschland* (2016), scenic concerts like *Die Flexibilität der Fische* (2022) or *Salims Salon* (2017). Between 2008 and 2020 he was collaborating intensely with video artist Daniel Kötter on the music theatre trilogies *Economies of action* (2013–2016) and *Stadt Land Fluss* (2018–2020). He lives in Frankfurt/Main.

Manos Tsangaris, composer, drummer and installation artist, has been professor of composition at the Hochschule für Musik Carl Maria von Weber Dresden since 2009. For him, composing means triggering readings that open up spaces.

Patrick Valiquet earned degrees in music and digital media at McGill University, Concordia University, and the Institute of Sonology before defending his doctoral research at the University of Oxford in 2014, and then holding a series of postdoctoral fellowships at the University of Edinburgh from 2014 to 2021. His ethnographic and historical research on francophone experimental music policy, pedagogy, and theory had been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture, the Institute of Musical Research, and the British Academy. From 2015 to 2021 he was Associate Editor at the journal *Contemporary Music Review*, where in 2020 he also guest edited the retrospective issue "Contemporaneities". His most recent writing appears in *History of Education*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Music & Letters*, *Organised Sound*, and *The Senses and Society*.

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Multi-disciplinary artist **Samson Young** works in sound, performance, video, and installation. He graduated with a PhD in Music Composition from Princeton University in 2013. He was Hong Kong Sinfonietta’s Artist Associate from 2008 to 2009. In 2017, he represented Hong Kong at the 57th Venice Biennale. Other solo projects include the De Appel, Amsterdam; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh; SMART Museum, Chicago; Centre for Contemporary Chinese Art in Manchester; M+ Pavilion, Hong Kong; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; Ryosoku-in at Kenninji Temple, Kyoto; Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne; and Jameel Art Centre, Dubai, among others. Selected group exhibitions include Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Gropius Bau, Berlin; Performa 19, New York; Biennale of Sydney; Shanghai Biennale; Sonic Acts Biennale, Amsterdam; National Museum of Art, Osaka; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Ars Electronica, Linz; and documenta 14: documenta radio, among others. In 2020, he was awarded the inaugural Uli Sigg Prize.



“Framing Europe” —meLê yamomo Interviewed by Theresa Beyer

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meLê yamomo and Theresa Beyer

Theresa Beyer: Your research reflects on music in the context of global economies, colonialism, and patriarchy, and pursues a performative practice exploring these same issues. What does institutional critique mean for you?

meLê yamomo: In a healthy democracy, criticism is necessary. However, the consideration of how equal the relationship between the institution asking for critique and the people it is asked from is even more pertinent. I would then reformulate your question from ‘what is institutional critique?’ into ‘for whom is institutional critique?’ What matters most is for whom and by whom is the critique formulated.

As a researcher, artist, and activist, I’ve sat on both the institution and community sides. From the institutional perspective, I wonder how a (invitation for) critique is a defensive response by hegemonic institutions. I’m curious to what extent it is a social experiment in how far institutions can push their power envelope with the least wrist slaps from civil society. What might come across as a critique of an institution is often simply a statement of basic needs for equal political and economic rights from a disenfranchised community.

TB: In recent years, several important contemporary music festivals have addressed post-colonialism and diversity, with the awareness of these issues in curation definitely growing. What is your impression? How serious are these institutions about this?

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MY: I don't think European contemporary music, with its relationship to European classical aesthetics, is where paradigmatic shifts could happen. My decolonial research and practice reveal the limitations of the hermeneutic logic of contemporary European aesthetics. In considering the contemporary practice of *Neue Musik* for example, I see Europe polemicising itself within its hermetically sealed aesthetical and musical logic. Even when it purports artistic revolution, it lacks the epistemic humility to converse with non-European artists and aesthetics without relegating them as either foreign 'migrants' or exotic bodies and knowledge to be extracted. In this Eurocentric imagining, terms such as 'migrant' formulate colonially constituted roles, and expectations of how (non-white) bodies and the knowledge they carry exclude them from the institutional practice of artistic legitimisation and canonisation. In such an imagination, movements of bodies, ideas, and aesthetics are unequal: Europe is the centre where non-white bodies immigrate, whereas European aesthetics are imposed on the rest of the world by European ex-pats or philanthropic cultural institutions. Or when it does permit previously 'othered' bodies within its institutions, they are the ones who have successfully embodied the canons and aesthetics—as the trophy children of colonialism.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls this the 'metonymy of presence': An English colonial subject can only be Anglicised but will never be fully English. Through this lens, the empire will never recognise the colonised as a complete being. Rather the empire only sees the insufficiency of the 'Other' in its aspirational mimicry of the European 'Self'. Suppose we apply Bhabha's critique to European 'contemporary music' (a practice originating from and situated in German classical music tradition). In this case, contemporary music composed by non-Europeans and outside the central European aesthetics will only be a metonymy—an incomplete Germanified copy of the standardised German aesthetics.

Despite knowing that Europe's interaction with non-European aesthetics brought about the 'contemporary' in European art, these aesthetic developments operate within the colonial and neo-liberal capitalist logic. Contemporary European aesthetics is colonial because it extracts and usurps non-European aesthetic systems to produce its appropriated 'contemporaneity' which, in turn, it sells as a universal cultural necessity to the rest of the world (that simultaneously spawns more self-referential value and surplus profit).

TB: Still, contemporary music programming is more diverse than 10 years ago. Isn't this evidence that things are slowly changing, at least?

MY: I look at this from a Marxist perspective. Through such a lens, we can unravel the relationship and flows of power, economics, and aesthetics. Today neo-liberal capitalism has developed in a specific way: 'Wokeness', feminism, and queerness are usurped by capitalism. The latest mutation of capitalism generates market value and surplus profit from feminist, queer, or Black Lives Matter movements. Decolonialism is the latest edition to this. An entire 'decolonial industry' is now operating to generate social and cultural capital that circles back to cultural institutions to maintain and amplify their hegemonic status.

Classical concert halls opening up their stage for Black musicians or queer musicians are not necessarily interested in Black or queer artists. These curatorial acts often usurp the Black or queer body to perform a self-congratulatory act that reinstates their cultural relevance—while simultaneously policing. Usually, the marginalised bodies permitted in such houses or festivals are by those who have 'culturally integrated' into the canons and repertoires of these institutions.

What used to be excluded—other musics and sound cultures—may also now be welcomed in today's music programming. But they are merely added to or included in an existing canon that remains unquestioned. Hence, contemporary music perpetuates an imperialist stance in its refusal to consider other systems as equal.

TB: With your practice, you aim to reveal the power structures behind music, asking who is allowed to define what music is. You define a broader understanding of sound. What are the challenges of such an approach when you enter institutions?

MY: I am perpetually confronted with many colonial mechanisms, such as the constant need to legitimise myself within Eurocentric institutions. White male composers freely speak for themselves and their art. Before I could even get to the point of creation, I had already used half of my energy and time to legitimise my presence, my work, and my being. I have to justify my brown queer body and my embodied archive of aesthetics and practices—made illegible and invisible through the white and heteronormative lens of Western history and institutions.

The institutionalisation of music, theatre, and art is Eurocentric and, thus, imperial projects. As a project, its intellectual labour invested in the standardisation of aesthetics that privileged the male bourgeois able, cis, straight white European. Throughout my childhood and early adulthood, despite studying and embodying an academic appreciation of European music, I always felt alienated by its repertoire. It would take several more decades, after a Masters, a PhD, and a postdoctoral project, that I would understand that my discomfort was less about my intellectual or artistic flaws in relation to the canon. Rather, this was an experience of epistemic violence. Not only am I demanded to think and feel inadequate to the 'universalised' subjectivity of this canonised repertoire, but as an artist I am punished for having my artistic failure equated to my inability to embody a hegemonic identity—the very identity which oppresses my queer and racialised being.

These conditions led me to a paradigm shift in my thinking and practice. I decided to bring my artistic and intellectual work outside the disciplines of music and theatre. I now purposefully situate my thinking and practice in performance and sound. Within these epistemological spaces, I strive to find new praxes of performativity, listening, social dramaturgies, and social compositions parallel to or outside the European logic of theatre and music.

My decolonial method working within the sound discourse is a liberatory act to remove myself from the hegemonic framework of music. I think about the

multiplicities of sound practices without the need for polemics or defensiveness from music's imperialism. So, to circle back to the topic of our conversation, I see 'contemporary music' as just one province among the multitude of sound cultures.

TB: Is this one of the reasons why you decided to go to a university instead of a conservatory when you came to Europe?

MY: Before coming to Europe, I already studied theatre and music in art school and completed a BA in Art Studies. I came to Europe to study for a university MA through a scholarship from the EU. After that degree, I wanted to further study music composition or opera directing in an art school. However, as a self-funded student from the Philippines without income, I could not afford it. But also, 15 years ago, the aesthetics of most European art schools and the type of students they attract and recruit were far from my artistic and biographical profile.

I was, however, offered a funded PhD position in Munich, which I accepted. My focus shifted towards academic research. This opened up a different way of looking at music, theatre, and the arts. But it also put me on another career rail track. Back then, I thought I had left behind my artistic practice. It took me several years before I circled back. And it would take a while to realise that the two paths I followed would merge and open up new roads. Retrospectively, I am grateful that I did not go to an art school. If I had done that, my studies would have imposed on me the canons that had to be replicated, and trained me to commit to its institutional hierarchies that I would have been expected to climb up and symbolically preserve.

TB: You mean the hierarchy of how to build an artistic career?

MY: In continental Europe, artistic careers are shaped by training institutions that prepare you for the production needs of concert halls, theatres, museums—the cultural institutions, or from a neo-liberal capitalist perspective: industries.

The contemporary development in art schools and art institutions is entangled with the economic shifts of the twenty-first century—where efficiency, low investment/high profit philosophy becomes the rule perpetuating a self-serving industry. Students are trained for skills that replicate the canon and that are useful to the standardised repertoire—which means critical thinking (towards the institutions) would not be encouraged.

Institutionalised degree-granting schools train students in the profession of acquiring privileges (degrees, awards, and institutional affiliations). To stay in this career, one must learn to collect as much privilege within the institution as possible. This obfuscates how these institutions and their practices are intertwined with centuries-old epistemologically violent constructions and modes of operation.

TB: What role do these constructions play in the political and economic situation of the present?

MY: When neo-liberalism prioritises efficiency, it means relying on the status quo. When institutions' artistic and curatorial programming is dependent on 'market-safe' productions, it perpetuates the trap of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and classism. This, in turn, informs the training provided in art schools that are also pressed to design efficient syllabi that is complementary to the needs of the market. If we consider that an art career is about collecting privileges, this means that diversity in student recruitment and artistic programming is less about the diversification of aesthetics and new perspectives, but rather a diversification of the market. Art education and art institutions maintain the imperial regime by reinforcing the dominant canons and aesthetics by recruiting 'diverse' students and performers as the industry's new labourers and prospective market of the dominant repertoire.

TB: How does this relate to your own discursive position? Would you agree that constantly experiencing borders and exclusions lead to critique becoming an embodied practice?

MY: I am a post-migrant Filipino-Dutch person. I was born, raised, and educated until my Bachelor's degree in the Philippines. I moved to Europe 14 years ago for graduate studies and have since lived and worked in the Netherlands and Germany. Having a hyphenated position, I constantly ask myself: Where are my privileges? And where are my marginalisations? We all have the coloniser and the colonised within us. How do both roles play out within me? In her famous essay from 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked: 'Can the subaltern speak?' The short of her answer is no. To hear the subaltern means that they already speak the language of the empire and have ceased to be subaltern. I critically reflect on my flawed positionality in how I speak about my decolonial work in the language of the empire.

TB: Would you go so far as to say that the patriarchal, colonial system has made you an ally?

MY: I will respond to this question with an analogy from the tech industry. Silicon Valley tech companies employ the very hackers that reveal the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of these multinational corporations' systems. Paradoxically, the expertise of the hackers is utilised to make the very systems that they are breaking better. In my work, I have to be aware of this potential to be instrumentalised. When a festival or an institution invites me and my art or research, am I just then hired as a 'hacker'? When I criticise the hegemonic system, am I then complicit in making the same system stronger? This makes me extremely careful in choosing whom to collaborate with.

TB: In Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin, you host your own festival and concert series called Decolonial Frequencies, where you decide with whom you collaborate. The theatre is a safe space where nobody has to legitimise themselves, a space dedicated to the perspectives of queer people, artists of colour, and

post-migrant experiences. How do you address the issue of framing when you are the curator?

MY: The agenda to engage sound cultures more democratically and in a decolonial way is the driving impetus for the Decolonial Frequencies Festival. The festival was intended to serve as a laboratory to practise and experiment with different decolonial strategies and methodologies through soundings and listening.

I strive to give my collaborating artists as much autonomy as possible. I want them to honestly criticise me as a curator. They should be able to tell me when they think I am trying to frame them. The goal is not to extract their knowledge for my gain. We reflected together on how their practice might be subjected to translation for white legibility or to be objectified as ethnographic subjects to be catalogued.

TB: What would happen if you did the same series in another venue?

MY: The issue of legitimisation, white gaze, and performative expectations consciously or subconsciously come into operation. Even at Ballhaus Naunynstraße, the relational dynamics shift as soon as a white male body comes in during rehearsals. But I'm curious to find other spaces and contexts where such practice and experiment could transpire.

TB: Do you think these spaces can have an impact on bigger institutions and initiate change? Where would you place Ballhaus Naunynstraße in the institutional matrix?

MY: Ballhaus Naunynstraße opens up a space and working condition that avoids the default *modus operandi* of white institutions. In the work that I do there, conventional expectations and categories of success are postponed: Feminist, queer and decolonial positions require space and context to fail—over and over again. Ballhaus Naunynstraße is one of the places where we strive to create such a safe space.

TB: I would like to come back to one point: You said that it is not your objective to make the artists participating in Decolonial Frequencies Festival legible for the white European audience. Why do you feel this is a risk?

MY: First, I'd like to distinguish between the white gaze and the European audience. The white gaze is not necessarily a white body perceiving. The white gaze can be internalised even by racialised minorities. Hollywood and classical music institutions embedded this white gaze in all of us through colonial education. Secondly, not all European audiences are white. One of the persistent problems of the European project is it imagines itself as homogeneously white. This negates the presence of brown and black Europeans, who are constantly made invisible by white supremacy.

Now to answer your question: Critical theory has allowed us to identify, name, and analyse the hegemonic systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and heteronormativity. However, being able to identify them doesn't mean we are not within these systems. And it also doesn't mean that we are free from acting within these hegemonic system's scripts or social dramaturgies. Through our education, cultural upbringing, and socialisation, racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism are embedded within us. We are complicit to it even as queer people of colour. We are programmed to perform for the white gaze and ear. We are historically conditioned to address such expectations. Conservatories and art schools train bodies to serve the cultural industry structured for white spectatorship. The careers of many women, queer, or racialised artists are based and dependent on this. As an artist, I have to be self-critical in how these systems are manifested in my practice. As a curator, I need to be mindful that the artists I work with and their careers are intertwined with the dominant art and music institutions that enable precarity towards women, queer folks, and people of colour.

Entangled with cultural institutions are the academic institutions that might also frame and usurp the decolonial practices of the artists within the anthropological gaze of academia. The artists I collaborate with and their practices could easily be extracted by the self-serving decolonial industry of European academic institutions. Maybe we have to turn this around by framing Europe and asking how these institutions can lead us to change.

TB: Let's turn to your own research. You have worked with archival institutions such as the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv. Can you say something about your experience there?

MY: It took me 4 years to get access to the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, despite having a prestigious research grant from the Dutch government. Institutional archives are very strict gatekeepers who decide who can enter and who is allowed to formulate a discourse around the archival objects. Thus, archives as institutions are complicit to the canon-making and gatekeeping of musical imperialism. I have to point out however that this is already shifting. Whether this is because of the conversation that emerged from the research project and the festival, or because of the change of leadership—or both, it is good to see small changes happening in institutional policies.

TB: Many of your research projects deal with archives, their exclusions and their entanglement in colonial politics. Can you tell us more about them?

MY: In my project *Sonic Entanglements* (funded by the Dutch Research Council 2017–2022), I built relationships with colonial sound archives in Europe with communities in Southeast Asia. Last year (2022), we made significant steps in arranging the repatriation of colonial sound recordings from the twentieth century back to the source community. My new EU-funded project, *DeCoSEAS* (Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives), is a consortium between partners

in the Netherlands, France, UK, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Laos that aims to reexamine the flows of knowledge productions and conversations on sonic heritage. In this project, three key points inform our decolonial intervention into sound and music archives: *Access* to the cultural materials is the first tiny step to decolonising the archives and the history of sound and music. The paradigmatic shift towards true decolonisation begins with the transfer of *Agency* in the access and use of these materials to the stakeholders of heritage and, therefore, towards the reshaping of *Discussion* on the topic from the community's perspective. DeCoSEAS facilitates the discussion between different stakeholders in the Global South, supports Southeast Asian stakeholders' agenda towards the claim and reframing of colonial archives, and opens the discussion between former colonial capitals in a transregional collaborative effort to decolonise.

TB: This change of perspectives and the active exposure and deconstruction of colonial power relations seems to be crucial to your performances as well as your research. Your PhD was about theatre and music in Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. What learnings from that research shape your work with archives today?

MY: During my doctoral research, I learned (in a painful way) how the archives work. I was looking for musicians in nineteenth-century colonial Southeast Asia, and I was consulting the colonial archives in Singapore, Hanoi, Manila, Jakarta, and Bangkok. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, international communication, intercontinental travel, and the global economic system were transforming. Touring opera, theatre, and music companies were crossing oceans with unprecedented ease. As early as 1867, travelling Italian companies advertised entire opera seasons staged in local theatres in colonial Manila and Jakarta (back then called Batavia). In the archives, I could find the names of the European musicians but not necessarily the locals. While exploring the different sections of the archives in Singapore, I eventually found local musicians and theatre performers recorded reports within the police and fire departments.

TB: Why there?

MY: Before the electrification of cities, the music halls were highly flammable because they used candles for lighting. Musicians, ensembles, and performing troupes were required to submit the names of performers and programmes to the police and fire departments to secure performance permits. During the performance, police officers and firefighters were deployed to concert halls and theatres in case of social disorder or fire. I realised that then, as now, to understand where the colonised are, one must learn how to think like the colonisers. This double consciousness helps me understand the system today.

TB: Your example shows how the West sets a frame about what goes into an archive, resulting in the subaltern remaining invisible.

MY: This colonial social order reflected in the archives left legacies in the organisation of our contemporary world. The twentieth century was preoccupied with stricter drawings of territorial borders, migration bureaucracies, and passport and visa systems—all in the name of the modern nation-state project. Consequentially, artistic, cultural, and humanistic disciplines were built in support of the nation-state. Histories are written from the national perspective: German history, Dutch history, Filipino history, and Indonesian history.

Archives, universities, concert halls, and opera houses are legitimising institutions of the nation-state. Historians, scholars, and programmers build a historiography and cultural ideology around what were included in the archives and canonised by institutions. When music and art histories were standardised in the twentieth century, the legacies of empire and modern states circumscribed the narrative. In my research on the nineteenth century, I found archival traces of 'Manila musicians' travelling all over the Asia Pacific before their Filipino identity was established. (The Philippine Republic would only be recognised internationally in 1946.) This means they were not recorded as 'Filipinos', so they disappeared in the archival system.

Non-European migrant artists have disappeared from history. Filipino historians cannot write about them because they are not in the national archives of the Philippines. Concomitantly, Singaporean, Indonesian, Chinese, or Japanese historians, who might come across their records in other national archives, will not write about them because they don't contribute to the national narrative.

TB: Is there such a thing as decolonial aesthetics?

MY: We must remind ourselves that colonialism is a project that has spanned at least four centuries. It was built with financial, political, and cultural capital sponsored by monarchs, churches, nations, and empires. These value systems are deeply embedded in cultural and social institutions that form intergenerational habitus. Our aesthetics—our habits of perceiving, thinking, and feeling—is the product of centuries of institutional investments. Our current (institutional) aesthetics is a product of centuries of failures and selectivity in the service of the status quo.

Decolonial positions never had institutional support. They never had the support of powerful institutions the way classical music always did. I invite us to think about practices that do not put the 'colonial' at the centre—whether as an imposed influence, agenda to collude with, or structure to be polemical to. How can we listen and hold the space for indigenous practices that are not legible to the cultural industry? Here, I am aware of the romanticising tendency of pre-colonial fantasies that urban decolonial thinkers, like me, tend to fabulate. To be mindful of practices outside of and purposefully concealed from the imperial matrix, think about how street or queer culture has hidden itself from oppressive regimes. And to consider emergent practices that are yet trying to articulate themselves outside the dominant canon, repertoire, and institutions.

TB: In that sense it seems impossible to clearly distinguish between politics and aesthetics.

MY: For me, there is no distinction between doing aesthetic work and doing political work. Aesthetics is the affective consolidation of politics, social relations, cultural symbols, and economics. This unity, whose parts are not easily identifiable by language or reason, forms our perception of what is beautiful. Those who make such distinctions hold systemic privileges to legitimise art that supports their ideology, and to delegitimise practices that are offensive or purposeless to the power structure.

Here lies the critical question: how can we open up new aesthetics? And by aesthetics, I don't mean this as the normative means of consuming affective experiences that cultural institutions have standardised. I refer to aesthetics as an individual but also a collective understanding and ordering of the world through feelings. How can we account for the struggle of the fabric maker from Vietnam who contributes to the costumes onstage? Or the pained experiences of the children cobalt-miners that make possible the use of battery-powered stage equipment in a concert? The legacy of colonial aesthetics is typically embodied by the proscenium stage, which hides the labour from the frame that displays the pleasurable elements. Thus, institutions are complicit in these concealing and erasures.

Institutional aesthetics begins with knowledge about how to write a grant application. And it goes all the way to the material realisation of a fictitious world onstage—through human labour, copyright, rentals, and ticket sales. In this sense, institutional aesthetics conventionally support the bourgeoisie, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white values. Thus, in this framework, my intellectual and artistic labour of imagining a world outside such normative systems is never just aesthetic but patently political.

TB: *meLê yamomo*, I ask you my last question with the risk of hiring you as a hacker: Where should institutions start in order to really open up politically and aesthetically? Or, using the analogy from the beginning of our interview: How do we break the frame?

MY: I am not paid for this interview, Theresa. The knowledge situated in my intellectual work, artistic practice, and political struggle wasn't hired. I do not offer bite-size, easily digestible answers or solutions to century-old systemic problems. But opening up the conversation, like this one that we are having, is an important step towards better understanding.

Oppressive frames will always be replaced by another oppressive system, says a friend of mine. In replacing the framework, it is not the question of what. Decolonialisation, feminism, or queerness is not a question of what or who. Decolonisation is a method. It asks the question of how and why. The way that hegemonic systems and neo-liberal capitalism is entangled with academic, artistic, and cultural institutions, liberatory practices will not come from these institutions.

Utopias are imagined outside of institutions, and sometimes they are co-opted within the institutions.

From the decolonial perspective, the ordering of systems, institutions, relations, and emotional experiences confronts us with questions of reimagining futures. How do we re-assemble sounds, spaces, people, and feelings into a horizon of a world that brings together beauty, joy, disgust, and pain from the violent past, towards our aspired utopias? How can we consolidate aesthetics outside and beyond the European institutional formulation—towards a new hermeneutic logic that is truly egalitarian and democratic?

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