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Countering universalism

Decolonisation and the order of art

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Summary

Countering Universalism: Decolonisation and the Order of Art

This study explores the relation between colonialism and art, and analyses decolonial practices of contemporary Indian and Israeli artists. Adopting a discursive and historicist framework, I contour the emergence of a new approach to what came to be known as “art” in the eighteenth century. Designated in this study as the *order of art*, this new mode of distributing artefacts was responsible for several developments which are usually understood as separate phenomena: the establishment of the modern museum, the emergence of the discipline of aesthetics, the consolidation of art as an autonomous field, and the appearance of artistic styles such as Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, and Impressionism. This study argues that these developments were linked to colonial expansion and the coloniser’s endeavour to universalise the domains of knowledge and culture. It distinguishes between two colonial devices which were designed to facilitate the operation of the colonial matrix of knowledge: while the *differential apparatus* functions through the construction of differences and binary oppositions, the *uniformal apparatus* creates a smooth space of universal sameness.

The analysis of the order of art and its relation to colonialism serves as a background to explore decolonial art practices. One of the central arguments of this study is that the order of art began to decline in the last century; this watershed enabled artists from non-Western societies to question the order’s premises. Each of the chapters of this study delves into the convolution of art and coloniality, and examines artistic strategies that attempt to delink the two.

The first chapter reviews the Indian artist Atul Dodiya’s exhibition *7000 Museums: A Project for the Republic of India* (2015, Mumbai). Dodiya transforms the space of the Dr Bhanu Daji Lad Museum into a cabinet of curiosities, thus questioning the artistic order’s approach to art. Previously known as the Victoria & Albert Museum, the BDL Museum, along with other nineteenth-century colonial establishments, epitomises the colonial organisational mode of knowledge. Apart from contributing to the expansion of the “imperial archive,” it was established with the intention of enhancing colonialism’s civilising

mission. By evoking the cabinet of curiosities' eclectic form of organising artefacts, Dodiya challenges the scientific appearance of the museum. The taxonomic scheme of the cabinets of curiosities and its emphasis on wonder and otherness, I show in my analysis, challenge the aesthetic logic of the modern museum and its universalising operation.

While Dodiya examines the relationship between colonialism and aesthetic pigeonholing in the context of imperial colonialism and from the perspective of a postcolonial artist, Larry Abramson, the Israeli artist at the centre of the second chapter, explores colonial artistic practices in the context of Zionism and from the perspective of the settler. In accordance with Patrick Wolfe's argument regarding settler colonialism's logic of elimination, Abramson describes the Zionist effort to hide the presence of the Palestinians as the art of camouflage. His analysis of the politics of abstraction, however, is narrowly invested in the Israeli case and ignores the colonial motives and political ramifications of the order of art. His attention to the disappearance of the Palestinian village from Joseph Zaritsky's canvases, I argue, not only reflects Abramson's political awakening, but also a transformation in the approach to art. With the disintegration of the artistic order and the collapse of the essentialist category of the work of art, the latter can no longer be isolated from the world.

In a similar manner to Dodiya, Israeli artist Michal Rovner's exhibition *Histories*, discussed in Chapter III, challenges the operation of the museum, and proposes an alternative museal practice. While Dodiya criticises aesthetics, Rovner attempts to overcome the historical distance between the viewer and the exhibits that the museum imposes. By erasing the information normally provided about museum exhibits, Rovner enables viewers to see the exhibits as part of their present. Nonetheless, the erasure of data entails its own complications as it undermines the contexts from which the artefacts emerge. This strategy enables Rovner to appropriate images and objects from the Palestinian arena, without the risk that the native's presence will challenge the justification for the Zionist settler project. Thus, while the imitation of the Palestinian strengthens the settler's links with the territory, Rovner mitigates the threat of the Palestinian presence by abstracting the "provenance" of her artworks and universalising her visual sources.

The first three chapters of this study thus outline some of the central features of the order of art and its relation to colonialism. Furthermore, they explore how different artists

attempt to decolonise the museum and the domain of art: Dodiya challenges the universalism of the artistic order, Abramson unfolds the political ramification of its abstraction, and Rovner undermines the distance that it creates between the viewer and the artefacts. These strategies subvert the apparatus of the order of art, but they do not squarely address the cultural differences that the colonial uniformal apparatus suppresses. The last two chapters engage more directly with the articulation of cultural particularity and show how the Indian artists Subodh Gupta and Zarina Hashmi foreground particularism without employing essentialism and without triggering differential devices.

While the settler's claim to particularity passes through the appropriation of the native culture, in the ex-colony of India the interaction between the artwork and the world allows artists such as Gupta to express their unique world. Nonetheless, since Gupta's artworks interact with other cultural settings, they are susceptible to what this study designates as *transworlding*, i.e., to being perceived and interpreted according to the codes of dominant cultures. By insisting on the untranslatability of his objects, however, Gupta is able to counter this new form of appropriation. This chapter also deals with the modern notion of identity and offers an alternative framework to articulate cultural specificity which does not essentialise ways of being in the world through representative registers. In this manner, it challenges both the colonial uniformal apparatus that projects universal sameness, and the differential apparatus that constructs binary oppositions between the coloniser and the colonised.

The fifth and final chapter explores the link between colonialism and cartography through the prints of Zarina. While underscoring both the differential and uniformal apparatuses of colonial mapping, this chapter analyses these prints as attempts to decolonise cartography. Zarina's approach to the expression of particularism through art is markedly different from that of Gupta. While Gupta intentionally produces opaque and impervious objects that cannot be translated into alien syntax, Zarina charts maps that do not represent her culture, but enable the viewer to navigate through her world. Furthermore, as distinct from the widespread critical tendencies within contemporary map art, Zarina underscores the productive side of cartography and its crucial contribution to those who are physically and culturally dispossessed. While some postcolonial theories

maintain a critical approach to map making that resonates with their suspicious attitude towards signifying practices, Zarina uses her maps to trace the blueprint of her world.

The artistic strategies described in this study challenge some of the features of the artistic order and underline its entanglement with colonialism, but they do not escape its framework nor offer all-encompassing decolonial solutions. To make "art" nowadays is to advance a social practice whose logic and parameters are the expression of a colonial worldview. Thus, while this study is oriented towards decolonisation, it also acknowledges its complexity. Since coloniality shapes our horizon and the way in which the world is perceived, decolonialisation cannot be understood as a mere adoption of or openness to non-Western social practices and traditions of knowledge. It also necessitates a discourse analysis of modernity that probes our theoretical premises. While these premises enable us to carry out this critical endeavour, decolonisation must be understood as moving back and forth between them and the conclusions emerging from the discourse analysis of coloniality and modernity.

Samenvatting

Tegen het universalisme: Dekolonisatie en de orde van kunst

Deze studie onderzoekt de relatie tussen kolonialisme en kunst, en analyseert de dekoloniale artistieke praktijken van hedendaagse Indiase en Israëliëse kunstenaars. Ik schets vanuit een discursief en historicistisch perspectief de achttiende-eeuwse opkomst van een nieuwe benadering van wat “kunst” werd genoemd. Deze nieuwe wijze van het verspreiden van artefacten, hier benoemd als de *orde van kunst (order of art)*, was verantwoordelijk voor een aantal ontwikkelingen die meestal als afzonderlijke fenomenen worden gezien: de oprichting van het moderne museum, de opkomst van esthetiek als discipline, de consolidatie van kunst als een autonoom veld, en de ontwikkeling van artistieke stijlen zoals het neoclassicisme, de romantiek, het realisme, en het impressionisme. Dit onderzoek betoogt dat deze ontwikkelingen verbonden waren met koloniale expansie en met het streven van de kolonisator om de domeinen van kennis en cultuur te universaliseren. Het onderzoek maakt onderscheid tussen twee koloniale apparaten die de werking van de koloniale kennis-matrix faciliteren: waar het *differentiële apparaat (differential apparatus)* verschillen en binaire opposities construeert, creëert het *uniforme apparaat (uniformal apparatus)* een vlakke, universele gelijkvormigheid.

De analyse van de orde van kunst en haar relatie met het kolonialisme dient als achtergrond om dekoloniale kunstpraktijken te verkennen. Een van de centrale argumenten van dit onderzoek is dat de orde van kunst in de afgelopen eeuw in verval begon te raken; dit keerpunt maakte het mogelijk voor kunstenaars uit niet-westerse samenlevingen om de uitgangspunten van de orde in twijfel te trekken. Elk hoofdstuk van deze studie gaat in op de verwikkeling van kunst en kolonialiteit, en onderzoekt artistieke strategieën die proberen deze twee dingen te ontkoppelen.

Het eerste hoofdstuk behandelt de tentoonstelling *7000 Museums: A Project for the Republic of India* (2015, Mumbai) van de Indiase kunstenaar Atul Dodiya. Dodiya transformeert de ruimte van het Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum in een rariteitenkabinet en stelt zo de benadering van kunst door de artistieke order ter discussie. Het BDL museum, voorheen bekend als het Victoria & Albert Museum, belichaamt samen met andere

negentiende-eeuwse koloniale instellingen de koloniale organisatorische modus van kennis. Naast de bijdrage die het museum leverde aan de uitbreiding van het 'imperiale archief' werd het opgericht met het doel om de beschavingsmissie van het kolonialisme te bevorderen. Door de eclecticische organisatie van het rariteitenkabinet op te roepen, doorbreekt Dodiya de wetenschappelijke uitstraling van het museum. Mijn analyse laat zien hoe het taxonomische schema van het rariteitenkabinet, en de nadruk die het legt op verwondering en andersheid, de esthetische logica en universaliserende werking van het moderne museum in vraag stellen.

Waar Dodiya de relatie tussen kolonialisme en esthetisch hokjesdenken onderzoekt in de context van imperiaal kolonialisme en vanuit het perspectief van een postkoloniale kunstenaar, verkent Larry Abramson, de Israëliische kunstenaar die centraal staat in het tweede hoofdstuk, koloniale artistieke praktijken in de context van het zionisme en vanuit het perspectief van de vestigingskolonist. In overeenstemming met het argument van Patrick Wolfe met betrekking tot de eliminatielogica van het vestigingskolonialisme beschrijft Abramson de zionistische poging om de aanwezigheid van de Palestijnen te verbergen als de kunst van camouflage. Zijn analyse van de politiek van abstractie is echter nauw gefocust op de Israëliische casus en negeert de koloniale motieven en politieke implicaties van de orde van kunst. Zijn aandacht voor de verdwijning van het Palestijnse dorp van de doeken van Joseph Zaritsky, betoog ik, weerspiegelt niet alleen Abramsons politieke bewustwording maar ook een transformatie in hoe kunst wordt benaderd. Door de desintegratie van de artistieke orde en de ineenstorting van het kunstwerk als essentialistische categorie kan het kunstwerk niet meer van de wereld worden geïsoleerd.

De tentoonstelling *Histories* van de Israëliische kunstenaar Michal Rovner, onderwerp van hoofdstuk drie, ondervraagt de werking van het museum op een vergelijkbare manier als Dodiya, en stelt een alternatieve museale praktijk voor. Waar Dodiya de esthetiek bekritiseert, probeert Rovner om de chronologische afstand te overbruggen die het museum creëert tussen de kijker en de exposities. Door de informatie uit te wissen die normaal gesproken over museumexposities wordt verstrekt, stelt Rovner bezoekers in staat om de exposities als onderdeel van hun heden te zien. Niettemin brengt het wissen van gegevens ook complicaties met zich mee, omdat het de contexten waaruit de artefacten voortkomen ondermijnt. Deze strategie maakt het mogelijk voor Rovner om zich beelden en

objecten uit de Palestijnse arena toe te eigenen, zonder het risico dat de aanwezigheid van de oorspronkelijke bewoners de rechtvaardiging van het zionistische vestigingskoloniale project in twijfel trekt. Terwijl de nabootsing van het Palestijnse de band van de kolonist met het grondgebied versterkt, vermindert Rovner dus de dreiging van de Palestijnse aanwezigheid door de herkomst van haar kunstwerken te abstraheren en haar visuele bronnen te universaliseren.

De eerste drie hoofdstukken van dit onderzoek schetsen op deze manier enkele centrale kenmerken van de orde van kunst en haar relatie met het kolonialisme. Ze onderzoeken bovendien hoe verschillende kunstenaars het museum en het domein van kunst proberen te dekoloniseren: Dodiya betwist het universalisme van de artistieke orde, Abramson ontvouwt de politieke implicaties van de abstractie van de orde, en Rovner ondermijnt de afstand die de orde creëert tussen de kijker en de artefacten. Deze strategieën ontwrichten het apparaat van de orde van kunst, maar ze richten zich niet rechtstreeks op de culturele verschillen die het koloniale uniforme apparaat onderdrukt. De laatste twee hoofdstukken gaan directer in op de articulatie van culturele particulariteit en laten zien hoe de Indiase kunstenaars Subodh Gupta en Zarina Hashmi particularisme op de voorgrond plaatsen zonder essentialisme aan te wenden of het differentiële apparaat te activeren.

Waar de vestigingskolonist specificiteit claimt door de toe-eigening van de oorspronkelijke cultuur, stelt in de voormalige kolonie India de interactie tussen het kunstwerk en de wereld kunstenaars zoals Gupta in staat hun unieke wereld uit te drukken. Niettemin zijn de kunstwerken van Gupta, doordat ze interactie hebben met andere culturele contexten, gevoelig voor wat deze studie aanduidt als *transworlding*, wat wil zeggen dat ze worden waargenomen en geïnterpreteerd volgens de codes van dominante culturen. Door aan te dringen op de onvertaalbaarheid van zijn objecten kan Gupta deze nieuwe vorm van toe-eigening echter tegengaan. Dit hoofdstuk behandelt ook het moderne begrip van identiteit en biedt een alternatief kader om culturele specificiteit te articuleren zonder manieren van in de wereld zijn te essentialiseren door middel van representatieve registers. Op deze manier stelt het zowel het koloniale uniforme apparaat dat uniforme gelijkvormigheid projecteert ter discussie als het differentiële apparaat dat binaire tegenstellingen creëert tussen kolonisator en gekoloniseerde.

Het vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk verkent de link tussen kolonialisme en cartografie aan de hand van de prenten van Zarina. Hoewel dit hoofdstuk zowel de differentiële als uniforme apparaten van koloniale kaarten onderstreept, worden deze prenten geanalyseerd als pogingen om cartografie te dekoloniseren. De manier waarop Zarina de expressie van particularisme in kunst benadert, verschilt duidelijk van die van Gupta. Waar Gupta opzettelijk ondoorzichtige en ondoordringbare objecten produceert die niet vertaald kunnen worden naar een andere syntax, maakt Zarina kaarten die haar cultuur niet vertegenwoordigen maar de kijker in staat stellen om door haar wereld te navigeren. Bovendien benadrukt Zarina, in tegenstelling tot de wijdverbreide kritische tendensen binnen hedendaagse kaartenkunst, de productieve kant van cartografie, en de cruciale bijdrage die cartografie levert aan diegenen die fysiek en cultureel ontheemd zijn. Hoewel sommige postkoloniale theorieën vasthouden aan een kritische benadering van cartografie die resoneert met hun wantrouwende houding ten opzichte van betekenisgeving, gebruikt Zarina haar kaarten om een blauwdruk van haar wereld te schetsen.

De artistieke strategieën beschreven in dit onderzoek betwisten een aantal kenmerken van de orde van kunst en onderstrepen haar verstrengeling met het kolonialisme, maar ze ontsnappen niet aan het raamwerk van deze orde en bieden ook geen alomvattende dekoloniale oplossingen. Vandaag de dag betekent het maken van “kunst” het bevorderen van een sociale praktijk waarvan de logica en parameters een koloniaal wereldbeeld uitdrukken. Hoewel dit onderzoek dus gericht is op dekolonisatie erkent het ook de complexiteit hiervan. Omdat kolonialiteit vormgeeft aan onze horizon en aan de manier waarop de wereld wordt waargenomen, kan dekolonisatie niet worden opgevat als louter de adoptie van, of openheid tegenover, niet-westerse sociale praktijken en kennistradities. Het vereist ook een discoursanalyse van moderniteit die onze theoretische uitgangspunten ondervraagt. Hoewel deze uitgangspunten ons in staat stellen om zulke kritiek uit te voeren, moet dekolonisatie worden begrepen als iets dat heen en weer beweegt tussen die uitgangspunten en de conclusies die voortvloeien uit de discoursanalyse van kolonialiteit en moderniteit.

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