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Decolonization: Horizontal Practices

Approaching the theme of decolonization from an artistic practice, horizontally, means to put into play both the arts and the issue of colonialism, as intertwined. That is the hinge of the horizontal. And it also means to think through certain academic conventions as we put ourselves in the position of the work of art. This horizontal practice creates but does not produce. That is, there will not necessarily be a product, only an effect. Something that would not be the result of a process that can be adequately measured or contained in advance. It is possible that you cannot work without a frame, or that without a frame what you do would not be recognized as work. This, then, could be a frame.

A map does not represent a territory, but rather creates, directs or facilitates a series of practices. These practices when reduced to abstractions are what we then understand as territories, institutions or subjects. However, the apparent solidity of these abstractions might then lead to the mistaken assumption that they have a prior or exterior existence. At all times these maps are contested, and at any specific point of practice there exists the possibility of resistance or counter-practices.

A horizontal understanding from within the work of art includes the artifice of map-making, of tracing the outlines of what does not (yet) exist (Afrofuturism is a good example of this). To make a map of something that does not exist is simply to make a map, not to suggest some heroic modernist project. To map is the most quotidian, every day, normal activity. Art is merely a way to make it more visible.

Colonialism is part of the condition of the present. One could argue that "art" is in itself colonialism, a category used to organize the world from the point of view of Europe. Art history is a map making the world legible, and thus susceptible to control by reducing a vast quantity of mutually incompatible practices by binding them to a single measure. Leaving behind the operative inefficacy of moral condemnation, this is not to say that art is bad or wrong, merely that it is dangerous. It is a practice and as such there are always ways to resist. But this resistance would not be taking place in some exterior space, uncontaminated by colonialism, some supposed authentic original alternative. There is no such space, no simple binary outside of colonialism.



Rather the other way around, we would be looking for some more complicated inside of colonialism. The idea of a simple inside/outside dualism might mostly just be a misunderstanding about maps. There are no borders, only border guards, only practices. The border exists because someone is there to guard it, not the other way around. Which is not exactly to say that the idea that borders exist is “wrong” (it might be, but that’s not what matters to us here), only that it is not very useful, leading towards some idealist notion of essences that cannot be measured or even located.

Here we can also find that art outlines this approach by emphasizing the activity itself over any specific outcome meant to justify it from some exterior vantage point. Of course, art can be useful, and it can be justified in many ways, but it can also only be justified in itself. Any knowledge produced, any results are only secondary effects of (the pleasure of) art. And maybe only if we don’t care about its use, can it be useful? The creation of art, rather than representing some “thing” supposed to “really” already exist can have the effect of making possible new forms of practices and open up rifts inside of the colonial edifice, which is to say the territories, institutions and subjects that constitute what we (think we) are.

This could be a frame for the initial lectures and subsequent discussions at the start of October School 2019 in Mexico. It would be a way to allow for the horizontal meeting of students and teachers, from different countries and cultures, where, rather than finding an answer, the questions posed might open up new ways of alignment without the need for any specific centralized intentionality or meaning. It could respect the differences that cannot be measured or overcome if you don’t seek to understand but rather to create. Not to “correctly” read the past but actively construct a more creative future.