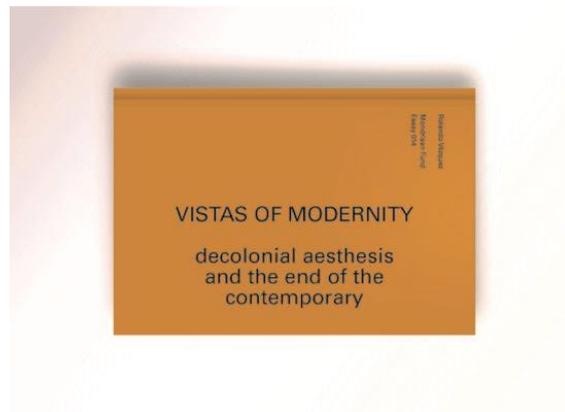


Re-worlding one world in relation, to breath and move, to simply love and live again.

A review of Rolando Vazquez (2020) Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary. Mondriaan Fund. Essay 014

By Joachim Ben Yakoub, 06/10/2021



The first time I heard of ‘decolonial aesthetics’ must have been around the spring of 2015, as I subscribed to the Decolonial Summer School in Middelburg. Engaged in different autonomous artistic projects in Brussels in different neighborhoods and simultaneously doing research on the aesthetics of revolt in Tunisia, I was drawn by the proposed reflection on the intersection of art and politics and by the desire to gain more in depth understanding of the decolonial turn that was starting to gain momentum in Belgium. There existed some writings on ‘decolonial aesthetics’, mainly in Spanish, some more in English, but it was a burgeoning poetics, already holding the promise to grow into a communal space where you could think about artistic practices, making sense and sensing the world differently. No need to tell you how excited I was, when I found out Rolando Vazquez, was about to publish ‘Vistas of Modernity’, a book long awaited by many, that helps to clarify fundamentally what we mean when we talk about contemporary arts, decoloniality, the decolonial in the arts or about decolonizing the arts and the end of the contemporary.

With the support of Walter D. Mignolo, Vazquez has been organizing the Decolonial Summer School annually since 2010 at the University College Roosevelt. I had the chance to participate in the 2015 edition on the theme of ‘Stolen Memories: Museums, Slavery, and (de)coloniality’, an intense two week course where we had the honor to be with and exchange with fine scholars and artists such as Jeannette Ehlers, Fabián Barba and Jean Casimir, but also with Maria Lugones and Alanna Lockward two refined decolonial practitioners that now precede us as ancestors, among many benevolent others. May their souls be guarded. This immersive period helped us make sense of the decolonial turn that was well under way in Belgium, as it confronted us with the lived reality of the colonial difference, with the simple wisdom that in modernity the enjoyment of the few, is inevitably entangled with the suffering of the many. That possession and dispossession always walk hand in hand. That western civilization is inseparable from the violence of coloniality that constitutes it. That the veil of modernity always hides, even erases its hideous reverse, the logic of coloniality. It helped us understand colonization not only erases and still erases the lives, livelihoods, stories and cultures to steal the land or extract the resources and minerals from these stolen lands, but that in its modern

legitimation it also erases these erasures. In our seemingly inexhaustible exchanges during the summer school it became clear that the colonial difference is therefore not something theoretical, developing outside ourselves, but rather something we inhabit, experience every day, something ancestral, something that precedes us, something lived, incarnated and embodied.

In 'Vistas of Modernity' Vazquez further develops this colonial difference, and presents to us a deep excavation of the double erasure and the variegated ways it produces the modern subject as consumer and spectator, as an always deviant copy of the Vitruvian man or Le Corbusier's Modulor. Torn by the vortex of the colonial difference, this normative man cannot but reproduce his inherited colonial wounds. In the light of the irreparability of what has been erased, eviscerated and dis-membered, Vazquez underlies in his spiral mode of writing the importance of precedence and provenance of re-membling and reparations, mourning and healing. As he underlines, decolonial thought is grounded in the inherited experience of mass enslavement, genocide, colonization, and more importantly in the guiding precedence of refusal, the lingering option of delinking that facilitates various ways to overcome and undo the logic of coloniality and in the end allows for new forms of re-existence beyond gender, beyond race and class. Hence the central ethical question of the book, how to undo the colonial difference, how to detach the enjoyment of the few, from the suffering of the many?

Zooming into the image of the Eiffel tower in Paris on the Philips postcard - that could easily be replaced by a postcard of the Atomium in Brussels - Vazquez points to the impossibility to inhabit the modern universal god's eye perspective, the pure and abstracted zero-point epistemology, the view from above, the panorama, as he insists on a more grounded and relational perspective. Fundamentally humbling the unmarked male, sovereign colonial gaze from nowhere/everywhere, Vazquez holds space for reception, for every-one-body who wishes to relate with and listen to all earth-beings, to overcome the worldlessness, earthlessness and timelessness that consumes and empties our present, always from a very specific and always communal and ancestral point of view. Not as an individual 'I' driven by the will to power that owns his knowledge as an author, but as a collective 'We' that is moved by the will to life and love and can foster political life beyond the enclosed separated realities of the self-centered social media consumers, beyond the 'I' eaten, digested and formed by the never-ending contemporary spectacle, lost in a simulacrum that reduces reality into mere representation, all the while turning that representation into an enclosed and innocent plane of experience. A 'We' that owes to ways of understanding that preceded them, always situated in a geopolitics and geopoetics of knowing and sensing, allowing for a pluriversity of worlds to re-emerge.

Here in Belgium we got acquainted again with the decolonial approach since about 2005, through the echoes of the politicizing work of Les Indigènes de la République reverberating in anti-racist milieus in Brussels and beyond, a now infamous movement founded in France by Sadri Khiari and Houria Bouteldja.¹ Acquainted again, as this approach lingers since the very first explorers in the Congo overstepped their bounds and is as old as the initial refusal of the very colonial project itself. In 2011 Olivia Rutazibwa further heightened our curiosity, with her personal account in a TEDx talk that went viral and started the long process of "decolonizing our minds".² Well before Rhodes Must Fall, the collective Decolonize Belgium had formed to contest our colonial present through its monumentalization since 2014.³ More than a theory, the decolonial in Belgium gained traction as a grassroots movement, bringing about a radical,

¹ Sadri Khiari & Houria Bouteldja (2012). *Nous sommes les indigènes de la république*. Editions Amsterdam

² Olivia U. Rutazibwa – Dekoloniseer de Geesten - [TEDxFlanders](#) 27/11/2011

³ See the facebook page [Decolonize Belgium](#)

autonomous, discursive space from which a new stream of politicized collectivity emerged, in the wake of what Nadia Fadil post 9/11 called the A.E.L generation.⁴ From ‘failed’ multiculturalism, diversity, super-diversity and the turn in securitization through the misnomer of radicalization, processes of inclusion/exclusion are for the first time being discussed on the conditions and in the terms of primary concerned, reopening and challenging the archives of anticolonial struggle, decolonization and international solidarity.

On the other hand, no one can refute decolonization became the talk of the day, no one can neglect what Maddee Clark and Neika Lehman justly dubbed as “Unbearable Hotness of Decolonization”.⁵ The growing demand for decolonization has been taken up enthusiastically by various mainstream white institutions spreading confusion by taking up words and discourses, often disembodied, separated from possible praxes of liberation. Universities organize workshops, seminars and conferences, arts institutions produce festivals on decolonization, theaters claim it as an artistic mission in conjunction with intersectionality, and art centers take on, as their own, all sorts of radical poetics as soon as they enter the cultural lexicon. The militant rallying cry seems to have been hijacked to serve as a new strategic institutional concept, but stripped from its poetics, that risks reproducing the same obsolete practices, structures and economies and thus reinforcing the existing power relations in the world of the arts. The solidity of the critique and the productivity of the movement, paradoxically reduced decolonization to a mere metaphor as reminded by Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang.⁶

It is not so remarkable that the institutional sphere where the talk on decolonization gains the most traction is not the neoliberal academic sphere, nor the media, formal civil society or the trade unions, but the artistic sphere. The artistic sphere is one of the very few still relatively autonomous spheres left, where one still has the relative liberty to re-imagine a radically different world, a different world where many different worlds fit, to paraphrase the Zapatista adagio often used by Vazquez. What is often omitted however is that in order to reimagine a pluriversal world in the arts, one also needs to make space for a radically different art-world, a different art-world where many different art-worlds fit. It is in this line that Olivier Marboeuf diagnosed “this sudden decolonizing fever that seizes the trembling bodies of the most renowned institutions in the art world” and is developing a plea to “re-arm the decolonial gesture”. And this is exactly what Vazquez is doing with *Vistas of Modernity*, it sharpens the decolonial “so that it pierces again the lips of those who pronounce it”.⁷ The postface of the book moreover explicitly reaches a gentle hand to these academic and cultural institutions - in particular to the university and the museum - and helps them answer the question of what it really means to decolonize.

Pointing to historical continuities and similarities in the order of representation proper to the colonial postcards discussed in the book and the aesthetic and epistemic order of academic and cultural institutions, Vazquez asks some questions that should resonate broadly in the decision centers of these still monocultural, still very exclusive institutions: “Who is speaking in the museum or in the canon of aesthetics? Who is representing and who is being represented? Are the intersectional axes of discrimination along gender, racial, economic and cultural lines not

⁴ Nadia Fadil. Wij behoren tot de AEL-generatie. [De Morgen](#) 26/05/2008

⁵ Maddee Clark and Neika Lehman (2018). The unbearable hotness of decolonization. [UN Magazine](#).

⁶ Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." [Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society](#) 1.1 (2012).

⁷ Olivier Marboeuf. "Variations décoloniales: conversation entre Olivier Marboeuf et Joachim Ben Yakoub." [Toujours debout](#) 09/05/2019 : 1-16.

sustained and replicated in the divisions between (...) who curates the exhibitions, who are the authors (...) in contrast with who attends to the cleaning, catering and security services of these institutions?” To these institutions who want to contribute to an inclusive and plural society, Vazquez reaches out with a generous decolonial path, through which they can enforce what he calls an intersectional transformation, i.e. a transformation that not only requires to diversify the personnel of the institutions, or to broaden and reach out to the public, but most importantly needs to profoundly alter the epistemic and aesthetic depths of their curatorial practices, their canons and collections.

To do this, mobilizing aesthesis from the underside of the colonial difference is strategically key, as our artistic projects - in Brussels or Belgium at least – are often dismissed as outdated, excluded from the plane of the contemporary that appropriated and emptied the now as aesthetic standard, as merely social, or at best socio-cultural or social-artistic, always incomplete, lagging behind, out of place, at times racialized, even animalized, but for sure always lacking the required quality to flourish and excel in the monocultural, anthropocentric and eurocentric canon of the arts. In this light, it feels indeed important to refuse and delink from the desire of recognition, transparency and representation and to continuously rehearse how Vazquez poetically demarcates aesthetiCs, from aestheSis, all the while demanding what Édouard Glissant called “the right to opacity” in the communal building of one world in relation.⁸

Even though the practices that it describes are as old as the history of colonialization itself, the critique of decolonial aesthesis as developed throughout ‘Vistas of Modernity’ is rather recent. It was introduced in Anglophone literature with the publication of the Decolonial Aesthetics Manifesto by what was then called the Transnational Decolonial Institute.⁹ After pointing to the coloniality of knowledge and power by authors like Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo, and the coloniality of being by authors like Sylvia Wynter or Nelson Maldonado-Torres, artist and activist Adolfo Alban Achinte pointed to the coloniality of aesthetics in 2003.¹⁰ It was later written in Spanish by Zulma Palermo and in English by Mignolo, Alana Lockward and Vazquez among many others as decolonial AestheSis, referring to the sensuous aspect of decoloniality. It also found an entrance in the French debate, where it was further elaborated by Françoise Vergès and the collective *Décoloniser les Arts*.¹¹

The references to aesthetiCs and aestheSis in *Vistas of Modernity* have little to do with the rational judgement of beauty, rather they engage with the critique of modernity as a world image, as a particular world-view after the conquest of the world as picture and the flattening of the world as artifice, as worldview and choreography. In Vazquez his understanding, aesthetiCs is worlding the world as representation by turning visual representation into the reality of experience, deflating it to mere spectacle, all the while subjugating its reverse to various forms of social death. The postcards that demarcate the different chapters of the book, then turn into mirrors, and the archeology of the modern colonial gaze transforms into an excavation of the distanceless and timeless sovereign but enclosed, at times monstrous and delusional self, of what Enrique Dussel called the “ego conquiro”.¹² After unpacking the aesthetic order of modernity, and its regime of representation by unearthing different nineteenth century tourist postcards - from different monuments, exhibitions, human zoos, safari’s and

⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 204.

⁹ T.D.I. + Transnational Decolonial Institute (2011). [Decolonial Aesthetics](#) (I).

¹⁰ Zulma Palermo (ed), (2009) *Arte y estética en la encrucijada decolonial*. Ediciones del Signo.

¹¹ Françoise Vergès, Gerty Dambury, & Leila Cukierman (ed) "Décolonisons les arts! L'Arche, 2018.

¹² Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) On the coloniality of being. [Cultural Studies](#), 21:2-3, 240-270

other explorative endeavors that make up modern structures of feeling - 'Vistas of Modernity' holds space for different art practices. The variegated praxis of Jeanette Ehlers, Rana Hamadeh, Fabian Barba, Patricia Kaersenhout, Saodat Ismailova and Amanda Piña discussed in the book have some traits in common, as they all seem to be engaged in different form of decolonial aestheSis, as they undo the processes of erasure proper to coloniality, facilitating the re-emergence of silenced stories, and ways of coming into place and inhabiting a pluriversality of worlds. Each in their own way, they position themselves as an option against the presupposed universality of the codified but unmarked normative contemporary sovereign, male colonial gaze and subvert it. Subverting the all-seeing gaze from nowhere/everywhere, centralizing the sensuous reception, the artistic practices discussed in the book make room for different modes of listening. If aesthetiCs points at the modern control over representation and over the field of experience, hiding the subjugation and erasure it stands and strives on, then aestheSis points to the always preceding possibility to keep on reimagining different ways to undo the colonial difference, to re-world the world and inhabit the earth in relation, communally, to breath and move, to simply love and live again. .

Having woven together these words with his own poetics, Vazquez gives us a solid base for a possible remedy to this sudden decolonizing fever, by helping us find the right words to "re-arm the decolonial gesture so that it makes the lips of those who pronounce it tremble again".¹³ But, there is still a question that has long haunted my mind, related to laying out coloniality as the outside of modernity. Asking this question seems to be key for the lingering, but maybe - thanks to *Vistas of Modernity* - almost finalized, internal debate between postcolonial and decolonial approaches to aesthetics. In the book Vazquez anticipates in a very convincing way possible critiques on decolonial thinking as a logic that would reinforce Manichean dichotomies between modernity and coloniality, colonizer and colonized, romanticizing forms of authentic otherness and pastness. Whereas in the ever-fluctuating postcolonial critiques these categories pretend to be more ambiguous and fluid, decolonial perspectives speak from and are built around a lived and embodied awareness and history of coloniality. Stating there is no epistemic and aesthetic outside to modernity, like postcolonial critiques often do, would for Vazquez hide the locus of enunciation, overall neglecting the intersectional, communal and relational positionality of decoloniality. But is that really so? Indeed, positioned and situated poetics have the power to ground the everlasting debate between universalist and relativists alike. Moreover, when speaking from a decolonial perspective, we engage in a movement that goes beyond and overcomes the dichotomies as key ordering principles of modernity. This movement then would open up to other ways of sensing, experiencing and being in the world, that have different roots, routes and trajectories, in touch with, without belonging to modernity, always in relation, opening up to a pluriversality. That is certain, without a doubt. But when postcolonial critiques state there exists no vantage point outside the actuality of relationships and thus outside of modernity, are they not exactly tackling the Zero-Point Hubris, the pure and abstracted, transparent and non-marked god-eye perspective from nowhere/everywhere? As Trinh T. Minh-Ha reminds us,¹⁴ are presupposed outsides or elsewhere not always also always somewhere within? If so, what is really the difference between postcolonial and decolonial understandings of aesthetics?

¹³ Olivier Marboeuf. "Variations décoloniales: conversation entre Olivier Marboeuf et Joachim Ben Yakoub." [Toujours debout](#) 09/05/2019 : 1-16.

¹⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Elsewhere, within here: Immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. Routledge, 2010.