

OCTOBER

Issue No. 174, Fall 2020

A Questionnaire on Decolonization

The term *decolonize* has gained a new life in recent art activism, as a radical challenge to the Eurocentrism of museums (in light of Native, Indigenous, and other epistemological perspectives) as well as in the museum's structural relation to violence (either in its ties to oligarchic trustees or to corporations engaged in the business of war or environmental depredation). In calling forth the mid-twentieth-century period of decolonization as its historical point of reference, the word's emphatic return is rhetorically powerful, and it corresponds to a parallel interest among scholars in a plural field of postcolonial or global modernisms. The exhortation to decolonize, however, is not uncontroversial—some believe it still carries a Eurocentric bias. Indeed, it has been proposed that, for the West, de-imperialization is perhaps even more urgent than decolonization.

What does the term *decolonize* mean to you in your work in activism, criticism, art, and/or scholarship? Why has it come to play such an urgent role in the neoliberal West? How can we link it historically with the political history of decolonization, and how does it work to translate postcolonial theory into a critique of the neocolonial contemporary art world?

—Huey Copeland, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Pamela M. Lee

ARNOLD J. KEMP

The situation of art now, reflecting the current sense of postcolonial crisis, demands thinking about the neocolonial in connection with notions of cultural difference, where every notion of difference refers back to colonial fascination with a primitive other carrying a fixed ethnic identity. The product of a larger conceptual entanglement, coexisting with concerns of anti-racism and respect for traditional land rights, decolonization is more than just a rethinking of our relationship to images and objects. In my work in art and scholarship, the term *decolonize* has a bearing on image- and object-making and the histories and places in culture in which critical artwork circulates. Much like Kerry James Marshall, I don't want to be vague about the dialogues and conversations with history that my work seeks to have. In 1993, David Hammons said to me that he didn't care whether people understood his work, that he would even prefer if people thought that his work was from outer space. Perhaps this was because outer space would be a pre-colonized place where Hammons could set the terms for the consideration of his achievement. I said to Hammons that he sounded like Sun Ra, the legendary jazz musician who claimed to be from Saturn. Hammons replied succinctly, "Exactly!" Whether it is outer space or outer consciousness, the locus of artistic activity must not be colonized if critical artists mean to go someplace where others have not.

In 1998, during a studio visit with members of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, one of the members said to me in frustration, "All of the black artists we have visited make work about slavery. My question is, why don't you?" My answer was that, since she already knew this about black people, I didn't need to make work that illustrated this fact, that didn't trouble essentialist assumptions about my race, and that didn't refuse to perform what she would recognize as art and as black. Throughout my work these refusals have been nonnegotiable. I find that in the art world the colonized consciousness is one that has to negotiate. For this reason my work has existed outside of the art market and has made its way by being successfully exhibited and critically received in an apartment (*HOW TO MAKE MIRRORS*, 2nd Floor Projects, San Francisco, April 29–June 6, 2012), in a closet (*FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE*, MEΣ(s), A Project Space, Portland, OR, May–June, 2012), in an empty car garage (*NOT YET SEEN*, Cherry & Lucic, Portland, OR, October 15–November 16, 2016), and in an almost derelict building (*WHEN THE SICK RULE THE WORLD [CUANDO LOS ENFERMOS GOBIERNAN EL MUNDO]*, Biquini Wax, E.P.S., Mexico City, August 5–September 5, 2017). My desire to not negotiate the terms of my colonization, to show my work in spaces started by artists for artists, has paradoxically not prevented my work from being collected by institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Portland Art Museum. It is, in fact, important that my work is shown in museums which participate in the colo-

nizing activity of building public collections, while I continue to operate in a mindset of a decolonized participant in artistic community-building.

In 2013 I met the Vancouver-based artist Raymond Boisjoly as the result of being on the jury for a biannual prize awarded to emerging artists by the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery. During the jury's visit with Boisjoly, I found his ambitions to undo some of the structures that process his work through the filter of Indigenous art echoing my own concerns with my work being read through a lens shaped by centuries of white supremacy and xenophobia. At the end of the visit, I was not sure if I would ever hear from Boisjoly again, and then in 2014 he took up a six-week residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the thematic program "In Kind" Negotiations. As the lead faculty of the residency, Boisjoly designed the program and invited me and Joar Nango, an architect based in Norway, to share leadership duties. Together we welcomed ten international artists of different Indigenous identities to work through Boisjoly's notion that "there is no particular way things are supposed to have been," an open-ended framework to discuss postcolonialism. Much of the discourse revolved around undeclared or partially declared intentions—a method of not saying directly. Boisjoly's message was aspirational in framing a parallel reality where things might have gone differently. His inviting me, a black artist of Caribbean heritage and Nango of the Indigenous peoples from Sápmi, the traditional territories of Sámi, seemed at once poetic and pointedly political. The gesture of invitation was suggestive of shared alliances and strategies for survival. As Banff is located on the lands of Treaty 7 territory, where the creation of Canada's first national park imposed boundaries and displaced the territory's original stewards, the people of the Stoney Nakoda, Blackfoot, and Tsuut'ina nations, it seemed most culturally appropriate that I would only attend at the invitation of peoples related to the land. My participation ensured that the residency would make space for the participants to locate themselves within a post-identity spectrum of engagement that lay somewhere between the Indigenous and the global.

At Banff I noted that colonization allowed for a false separation between people with shared interests. So I gave lectures, led seminars, and organized social activities that exposed the residents to ways of being in the world and in the studio that made room for thinking critically about issues of identity, indigeneity, and colonization embedded in the educational, artistic, and cultural structures around us. While acknowledging the role of artists in reflecting on social and political changes necessary for the expansion of art today, I was sensitive to the group's desires to dismantle traditional divisions established between design, architecture, and visual art. I gave the group permission to intertwine each discipline with methods and processes led by improvisation. I brought other role models, such as Adrian Piper, Kathy Acker, Alice Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Robert Farris Thompson, to the group. We took advantage of

chance, experimentation with localized raw materials, and punk and free-jazz aesthetics, and we tuned our relationship to place. Our actions and interventions at Banff ultimately added up to new knowledge and connectedness to the environment in which we stood. On that land decolonization was an urgent relational praxis of self-affirming, space-opening, and permission-giving embodiments rooted in culture and tradition that countered ongoing legacies of colonial violence and impositions of oppressive structures.

ARNOLD J. KEMP is an artist, a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow, and formerly Dean of Graduate Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.