

# Archival and bodily art in decolonial practices

The concept of decoloniality, which has featured prominently on the biennial circuit this year, is not new in contemporary art discourse and curatorial practice. The question of whether decolonial practices in a contemporary art context have become more fashionable or relevant in the Global North was addressed by Indian writer and activist Meena Kandasamy in a panel entitled 'New Social Movements, Black Lives Matter and its Global Reverberations' at the 2022 March Meeting held by the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF): "Sometimes in a sinister manner, decolonisation functions as a smoke bomb, there's drama and distraction, it's entertaining and is even the current trend as far as circus routines go."<sup>1</sup> This can be seen in the thinking behind this year's documenta, as well as the Berlin Biennale, while the Sharjah Biennial often opts for a regional approach that although critical, is in line with the Emirate's general avoidance of a radical politik in relation to its own geography. Curator and researcher Ivan Muñiz-Reed posits that a decolonial critique on postcolonial theory is that it is situated within a European framework. It's akin to formulating a "Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism."<sup>2</sup> "Decolonial thought, on the other hand" he writes, "is not constructed from or in opposition to European grand narratives, but rather from the philosophical, artistic and theoretical contributions that originate from the Global South."<sup>3</sup>

While a distinct awareness of the confines of Eurocentric perspectives in the non-Western world, both geopolitical and epistemic, was evident in the 2022 March Meeting, 'The Afterlives of the Postcolonial', much of the debate by scholars, artists and art practitioners focused on language and terminology, the constant redefinition of such felt like a glossary that needed regular updating. Theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Spivak's reimagined postcolonialism and anti-colonialism, Walter D. Mignolo's extrapolation of decoloniality by the late sociologist Anibal Quijano in relation to Western modernity, and Premesh Lalu's definition of "petty apartheid" of the everyday and internal colonialism in South Africa were cases in point. South African academic and historian Premesh Lalu, in the panel 'Persistent Structural Inequalities: Settler Colonialism, Segregation and Apartheid' talked about a need for tightening the concept of decoloniality on the one hand and broadening it on the other so that a "capaciousness could account for the present." Gayatri Spivak stated in her keynote 'Imperatives to Reimagine the Postcolonial' that the real fight is now against a globalised neoliberalism, rather than colonialism, which has become "a cultural excuse" that diverts attention from precolonial structures of oppression that are still operative in today's postcolonial world, such as India's theocracy. Most of the March Meeting panelists would agree that the project of decolonisation is not over and has become the pretext for regressive politics, which especially

has seen an inheritance of neo-colonial systems post-independence in Asia and Africa. “Where it remains an academic project, decolonisation panders to white guilt, to the white savior complex of seeking absolution or the ‘forgive me father for I have sinned’ performance,” proclaimed Menna Kandasamy, in the panel discussion ‘New Social Movements, Black Lives Matter and its Global Reverberations’. For all the debate on terminology, there surprisingly wasn’t a serious attempt to distinguish between postcolonial and decolonial discourse, the latter having a lineage from the 1955 Bandung Conference and the transnational Afro-Asian solidarities of the Non-Aligned Movement. This moment has been described by academics Anthony Gardner and Charles Green as “the birth of the Third World not as a racialised category of poverty or under-development, as it would become in the First World’s hierarchical imagination, but as a critical geopolitical entity, one based less on explicit ties of solidarity than on shared experiences of decolonisation and an insistence on independence from the Russian-American binary of the Cold War.”<sup>4</sup>

As an institution, the Sharjah Art Foundation has become a locus in decentering the cultural geographies of power, pushing the emergence of South-South art discourse in the broader region, and pointing to the situated aspect of knowledge production in that it always emerges from a particular context. Postcolonial theory was driven by the triumvirate of theorists Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak who contextualised the Middle Eastern and South Asian diasporas, and according to Gurminder Bhambra, “refers back to those locations and their imperial interlocutors (Europe and the West)”<sup>5</sup> in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while decoloniality arose from South American scholarship and covers a much longer time frame, starting from the fifteenth century colonial invasions of the Americas. Accordingly, it makes sense that Sharjah, which focuses on the Global South or the SWANA (South West Asia and North Africa) region, locates itself within the postcolonial.

However, homogenising non-Euro-American worlds into strict binaries of ‘West and the rest’ dilutes the critical positioning of post-Western thought. Kandasamy’s particular examples of right-wing appropriations of decoloniality via Hindu nationalism, the targeting of Muslims and a fascist caste system, highlight the problems in bifurcating non-Western decolonisation from Western colonial structures. Pointing fingers at the oppressor from without often leads to a lack of recognition of the oppressor within, where seemingly progressive rhetoric can be co-opted for state-sanctioned violence. In other words, can we speak of a collective decolonial subject? As David Teh, co-curator of the 2022 Istanbul Biennial, which was firmly entrenched in South and Southeast Asian art practices, has remarked, “What is the geography of decolonial politics? That’s more than the majority of the world and this is not just in terms of the former colonised countries, it’s also speaking to the imperial centres where decolonisation is arguably most necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

The implication of “afterlives” in the March Meeting is that rather than claiming to undo hegemonic historiographies, the ways in which they persist in the present is more significant. Feminist theorist Tina Campt noted in the panel, ‘New Concepts and Theoretical Imperatives: Intersectionality, Feminism and Gendered Identities,’ it is important to consider the grammars implied in “afterlife.” Said differently, it is necessary to distinguish between the ‘aftermath’ and present continuities. This pays tribute to Okwui Enzavor’s vision for the 2023 Sharjah Biennial 15, ‘Thinking Historically in the Present’, curated by SAF Director, Hoor Al Qasimi of which the March Meeting can be seen as a theoretical prelude, deriving from the late Nigerian curator’s idea of the “postcolonial constellation.”<sup>7</sup>

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Al Qasimi has often referred to how her curatorial concepts have been greatly influenced by Enzewor's documenta 11 in 2002, which challenged the centrality of an exclusionary art canon by incorporating non-Western art histories in a global context. It is interesting that we have reached a moment in 2022, where the authorial gesture of curating documenta 15 by the Indonesian collective ruangrupa was in a sense withdrawn. By inviting additional groups to curate themselves into documenta, they enabled a broader segment of cultural actors and geographies. Sadly, their provocation of the quinquennial's hierarchy witnessed an extreme backlash under the guise of anti-Semitism that began with the vandalism of the exhibition space of Question of Funding, a Palestinian collective. Although restrictions on artistic expression are also prevalent outside the West, the issue here was one of orientation and terms of address. That is to say, what art publics were being gauged? How are North-South differences being instrumentalised? Are these delineations/divisions still effective in the contemporary art world? For example, the removal of Indonesian collective Taring Padi's mural *People's Justice* (2002) by documenta because of imagery critics claimed to be anti-Semitic had a completely different impact from the withdrawal of artworks by Iraqi artists at the Berlin Biennale protesting against Jean-Jacques Lebel's explicit imagery of torture at Abu Ghraib Prison, in terms of the demonisation of an othered body. The first instance demonstrates the limitations in a German environment that bears the historical burden of the Holocaust tragedy; the second fetishises the violence against—and disregard for—Iraqi bodies in the West, a more recent history of assault that is perpetuated through Lebel's images.

The question remains what can be expected from biennials in the SWANA region that respond to non-Western epistemologies in relation to those biennials developed in the Western world that gesture towards them, to consider the value of knowledge systems that emerge from specific contexts while acknowledging how the geopolitics of representation (or underrepresentation) can undermine that. When thinking of Sharjah's position on the biennial circuit for the past three decades as an institutional model outside the West and its take on contemporary art discourse, it is important to note the shift in the SAF's own trajectory with the 2018 establishment of the Africa Institute, which has expanded conversations to incorporate African perspectives. But it also does so at the safe distance that comes with academic research.

In the past, lecture-performances by artists at the March Meeting mediated overly theoretical talks and standalone art practice, but this year the latter were few. A parallel seems to be occurring currently in the art world if one considers that the recent Berlin and Istanbul Biennials were seen as pedagogical, text-heavy spaces for art. This kind of intervention also harks back to Kandasamy's "white guilt", or the need to correct past wrongs from the position of privilege.

"As a person who has been rightly or wrongly described as one of the founders of postcolonialism, I would say that the real imperative today as we move toward acknowledging planetary disaster and saving a future for our children and their children, is to conduct the postcolonial with general social justice," Spivak observed in her keynote. These sociopolitical urgencies of the present, when seen through the lens of twentieth-century humanitarianism and 'transitional' justice, lend a sense of resolution that is misguided, according to political theorist Robert Meister.<sup>8</sup> By deferring responsibility from the time before justice, during the Holocaust, slavery or apartheid for example, there is a preconception that 'evil' ends after justice. But it is merely a means of alleviating collective guilt he argues, while still enabling the systemic conditions that gave rise to these humanitarian crises. Meister's critique of human rights discourse can be linked to postcolonial discourse and those who have benefited indirectly from systems of oppression.

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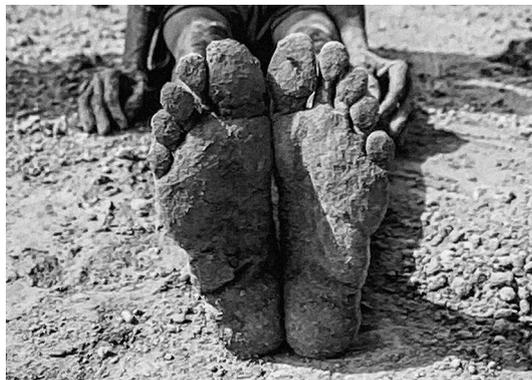
One could even suggest that the human rights discourse of the Global South has translated into a strained attempt at eliciting a kind of collective care in contemporary art. Therefore, in Berlin, Istanbul and Kassel, we saw archive-driven work that risked reifying the problems they sought to address as an overload of information, instead of the kind of art that confronts you in a bodily manner in public space. As Homi Bhabha puts it, “We must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live.”<sup>9</sup>

For the March Meeting panel, ‘Migrations to the North, Forced Repatriation and the New Middle Passage’, critical theorist Zahid Chaudhary stated, “Art that reinvents documentary practices, drawing on histories of forced migration, radicalised violence and archives of repatriation and migrant stories... becomes a mode of recovery, reinvention and recording.” A compelling example of this was presented by feminist researcher Anjali Arondekar in the panel, ‘New Concepts and Theoretical Imperatives: Intersectionality, Feminism and Gendered Identities’, in which she examined the under-theorisation of archival forms in the Global South as sites of surplus or abundance, rather than centres of “marginality and loss, paucity and disenfranchisement.” These “narrative economies of loss,” she noted, are “an excruciating double bind that indentures us to the very historical holdings we seek to release. In face of the casual brutality of dispersed global suffering, there is nothing spectacular to report about loss anymore. Histories of caste and sexuality have always been pandemic histories, accessed solely through material and phantasmatic imaginary of contagion, precarity and destruction.” Through the case study of a specific collectivity in India, the (Hindu reform movement) Arya Samaj, Arondekar demonstrated how archival practices were less concerned with record-keeping and absence rather than with amplifying a relationship to the past, which moved beyond stories of caste to the minutiae of everyday life.

Shaina Anand from the artist collective CAMP, in ‘New Forms of Extraction and Surveillance,’ similarly addressed the idea of the overflow of the archive as a way of resisting obsolescence through the publicly accessible digital media project Pad.ma. Together Anand and Arondekar developed a language of accumulation that is deployed to create new archival practices. “The story of this archive can be the story of any archive if you think of archives as non-evidentiary,” Arondekar noted. “We have to be more robust about South-South conversations, we presume shared vocabularies of oppression which we do not have. The origin stories of slavery are radically different between the Middle East and the Atlantic, for example.” It is significant to note that only one scholar, Ahmad Sikainga from the Africa Institute focused on the prevalence of slavery in the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf. He revealed that the practice began before the rise of Islam, but then became part of Islamic law, reflecting changes in the global economy that the pearling industry brought about during the nineteenth century.

Tina Camp’s analysis, in her panel presentation of the work of American artist Carrie Mae Weems, showed how the artist visually archives an afterlife of slavery through the movement—or lack thereof—of African-Americans being shot by US police. Holding a delicate balance between academic discourse and artistic practice that was felt lacking in this year’s March Meeting, Camp suggested that Weem’s photographic or moving image depictions of “fatally arrested movement” by anonymous black bodies are a means to move beyond the archive, which “is so fraught in its capacity to allow witnessing.” A sharp counterpoint to the invisibility of the black body was made by scholar Naminata Diabate, who saw the naked female body in public as a site of excess and creative resistance in her presentation for ‘New Concepts and Theoretical Imperatives: Intersectionality, Feminism and Gendered Identities’. Using the prevalence of female protesters who have mobilised

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in different parts of Africa since the 1920s through “civil nakedness as the most universal yet most context-specific mode of dissent,” Diabate shifted the framework of interpretation. Instead of looking at this kind of protest as a pre-colonial form of contestation relying on spiritual logic and ritual, she saw it as an anti-colonial strategy, as “naked agency,” a neat trope that was nevertheless effective. Diabate stated, naked agency is—peace activist Leymah Gbowee helping end the Liberian civil war by threatening to strip naked (seen as a powerful curse in West Africa) at peace talks in Accra in 2003; of hundreds of female protestors taking over ChevronTexaco’s export terminals in Nigeria in July 2022, holding 700 Americans, British, Canadians and Nigerians hostage, the same threat to strip naked enabling them to negotiate their demands for employment and basic infrastructure. Diabate’s argument resonated with Indian artist Mayuri Chari’s *I Was Not Created For Pleasure* (2022) at this year’s Berlin Biennale. A derisive wall installation of rows of cow dung shaped in the form of vaginas, it evoked a feminist vocabulary of dissent through its linkage of the Indian patriarchal system’s traditional perception of menstruating women as impure, with the use of cow dung as fuel and religious purification rituals.

These instances of a body politic and performative archive illuminated embodied forms of knowledge that seemed lacking in depictions of indigeneity. Colombian artist Caroline Cayedo for instance, in the panel ‘The Environment, Climate and Global Warming, and the Anthropocene’ talked about the effects of extractivism on the human body in her analysis of a political ecology of dams, with the perspective that infrastructures do not exist just outside the body. “These projects extract knowledge from our bodies, from the everyday, choreographic gestures inherited over time that are accumulated by our grandmothers intrinsic to these geo-choreographies,” she stated. “Our memory muscle disappears and the transmission stops with the extractivist infrastructure. There is no longer the possibility to embody knowledge anymore because the river isn’t there anymore.”

When looking at environmental degradation, art can be an expansive field of engagement in regard to climate change, conservation and control, often employed as excuses by Western museums to retain looted artifacts. In the March Meeting panel, ‘Restitution and Repatriation of Looted Artworks and artefacts’, Nigerian artist and historian Chika Okeke-Agulu saw this hoarding of global cultural heritage by museums as “the primary valence of colonisation in the technologies of knowledge production and dissemination.” Sri Lankan Deneth Piumakshi Veda Arachchige turned this institutional hierarchy on its head in *Self-Portrait as Restitution—from a feminist point of view* (2020) at the Berlin Biennale. The hyperreal, half-naked 3D scanned reproduction of her body carries a skull, referencing the collection of ancestral remains by Swiss naturalists during an 1884 scientific expedition to Ceylon that are now held in European museums, such as the Natural History Museum in Basel, the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory and the Museum of Mankind in Paris. The plaintive offering of a replica of a male skull from the Indigenous Adivasi group in Sri Lanka to which she belongs, is a tribute but also a reclamation; utilising her own body a means of taking ownership of nineteenth century anthropometric photographs taken of her ancestors. Arachchige studied these archives to achieve a similar expression of fear and alienation, which is remarkable to apprehend in person. Her body, which is tattooed with texts about the colour of her nipples, irises and complexion chillingly conforms with historical categorisations. As Kader Attia explained to me his curatorial intent for the Berlin Biennale, “The real issue is how we can reinvent the debate on restitution by producing other forms of rituals from the locus of where they were repatriated, and to reappropriate them.” This act resonates with French filmmaker Jihan el-Tahri’s video, *Complexifying Restitution* (2022) also at the Berlin Biennale, which, stemming

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from a 1934 decree that prohibited Africans in the French colonies from filming themselves (until the 1960s), invites researchers and filmmakers to find other possibilities of self-representation.

An important concern was raised by Chika Okeke-Agulu in the March Meeting restitution panel about the possibilities of the postcolonial museum undertaking reparation as professional practice, removed from the damage of the “one-line history” propagated by Western museums that “told all the stories” of retained African and Asian objects in order “to teach the world.” The question raised by panelists was what kind of stories would global museums connecting Africa, Asia and Latin America tell? If the dominant order was reversed, how would they display Renaissance objects, for example? Such alliances in the non-Western world were engaged in the panel, ‘New Social Movements, Black Lives Matter and its Global Reverberations’, where Meena Kandasamy talked about solidarities between the Liberation Panther’s Party, a Dalit mass movement in Tamil Nadu, South India, that sees convergences between white supremacy and the nationalist, neoliberal Hindutva, of which she says is “nothing but East India Company 2.” This argument was countered by historian Suraj Yengde who cautioned against a kind of “peekaboo activism” or commodified “identities of convenience” in stating, “The new liberal order has reduced the relevance of your movement by having a certain hashtag that rhymes with someone else’s experience, which doesn’t give access to other communities who don’t know what hashtags mean or have access to technological innovations.” Both however, agreed on the necessity of a decolonial critique that speaks to a hereditary system of caste discrimination and local oppression. “How do you name an oppressor who shares your passport and skin colour, practices the horrors of colonialism but speaks the language of diversity and decolonialism? It doesn’t augur well for a society to lay all the blame for its disintegration on the doorstep of colonialism,” Kandasamy said. “To blame the British without acknowledging the horrors of caste and class patriarchy, which existed hundreds of years before their arrival is convenient whitewashing, as in using the white oppressor/coloniser to cover up what is deeply rotten and wounded in our society.”

In ‘New Concepts and Theoretical Imperatives: Coloniality, Decoloniality and their Aftermath,’ semiotician Walter Mignolo added to the position on cultural specificity by questioning the “North Atlantic universal.” He claimed that, “The way we think decoloniality cannot be the same in the Maghreb as in sub-Saharan Africa or the Americas; the grammar of decoloniality is no longer universal, it is pluriversal,” echoing the decolonial scholar Rolando Vázquez, who has argued that a colonial modern discourse constructs an invisible, modern colonial, white West in relation to a hypervisible inferiority of others, reducing them “to a single and universal concept of humanity ... there is no claim to universality without erasure.”<sup>10</sup> This contends with Yengde’s question about whether the underrepresented can be seen as a global caste and what would it take for a Dalit subject to become a global subject.

The political and aesthetic imaginaries of Dalit histories were particularly poignant in art events during 2022. At the Berlin Biennale, evocations of landless brick workers, groups displaced by British colonisers, stood out in Birender Yadav’s installation *Walking on the Roof of Hell* (2016), which included sculptures of wooden *khadau* sandals used to protect the bonded labourers from the extreme heat of brick kilns, while Prabhakar Kamble’s sculpture series *Utarand* (2022), casts of the feet of agricultural workers, were symbolic of the violence of caste structures. In documenta, Amol Patil’s *Black Masks on Roller Skates* (2022) comprised surreal sculptures and paintings of appendages: an unnaturally extended hand, an eye-like aperture through an old radio, the cracked sole of a foot, a set of teeth. His performance, *Sweep Walkers* (2022) was a tribute to Anil Tuebhakar

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(a Dalit who played the radio while he swept the streets on roller skates) with songs written by his grandfather, anchored in a seventeenth-century protest tradition (*powada*) that criticises the caste system. Such elegiac works, located between thought and practice, were transformative. They felt both mournful and hopeful. They expressed a long singular encounter with the protracted present that prompts a questioning of not only of Enwezor's 'Thinking Historically in the Present,' but also how the present can be re-envisioned through artistic material and medium.

This leads me to the role of dreams in reconstituting and refashioning the present. Can dreams be an anti-colonial force? As Enwezor writes, "decolonisation is more than just the forlorn daydream of the postcolonial artist or intellectual."<sup>11</sup> *A Dream on Lucids* (2016–22), an immersive multi-channel video and sound work by Randomroutines (Tamás Kaszás and Krisztián Kristóf) at documenta told a dystopic tale of collective dreamers and subcultures roaming in the desert who can consciously manipulate the conditions of their reality in a world that bears no traces of historical trauma. Like with Enwezor's postcolonial constellation, it is a world that is subject to constant redefinition. In it, some individuals hijack their own dreams, but essentially there's a powerlessness and violence as the community falls apart. The narrator states in *A Dream on Lucids*, "This memory came back to me several times, always with that disconcerting feeling that in the end, everyone winds up choosing their own kind, everything that's similar becomes one. It's like a magnet bringing together all the little drops of mercury that have wandered off here and there, picking them out from the masses they ended up in, forming a single, indivisible puddle, which then becomes impermeable to any foreign matter."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotes that follow are by the named speakers, in the titled panel or talk, at the 2022 March Meeting, Sharjah

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Muñiz-Reed, 'Thoughts on Curatorial Practices in the Decolonial Turn', *Decolonizing Art Institutions*, December 2017, p. 99

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, 'Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global', *Third Text*, 27:4 2013, p. 446

<sup>5</sup> Gurminder Bhabra, 'Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, p.115

<sup>6</sup> Interview with David Teh, Singapore 27 September 2022

<sup>7</sup> "Contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also—and in a more critical sense—from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems or production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalisation after imperialism. It is this geopolitical configuration, its post-imperial transformations, that situates what I call here "the postcolonial constellation." See Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2003, pp. 57–82

<sup>8</sup> Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights*, New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2012

<sup>9</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994

<sup>10</sup> Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*, 2020, Prinsenbeek: Japsam Books, p. 8

<sup>11</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition'; <http://www.oddweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Enwezor-The-Postcolonial-Constellation.pdf>