The 2017 Venice Biennale and the Colonial Other

Paula Clemente Vega

The tyranny of exoticism or ethnocentrism is to insist that those who speak from a place of difference should also represent it in recognisable signs, as if this gave transparent access to the ‘other’s’ meaning...

Jean Fisher

In the contemporary art sector, concepts such as ‘transcultural’, ‘inter-cultural’ and ‘cross-cultural’ are increasingly becoming popular and used in relation to exhibitions, education and marketing strategies in order to displace the formerly used terms of ‘cultural diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’. This is also as a way to reflect the influence of global trends in artistic practice and culture and the complex and heterogeneous identities of today’s visitor populations and backgrounds. However, while this continues to inform cultural organisations and their predisposition to foster and investigate new forms of cultural production, a Eurocentric understanding of culture, and cultural diversity, with a preserved anthropological definition of culture still connected with notions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’, is, in many cases, maintained. Together with the de-ideologisation of artistic practice and the increasing market view of culture, ‘conceived unquestioningly as wholly positive, not itself ridden by structural contradictions and conflicts, but which could create unproblematic modes of engagement with leisure, training, job creation and industry’, this has played a central role in how art is currently perceived and translated to the public. In the following, I will explore these ideas through a close examination of the narratives of the exhibition and some of the works in the 57th Venice Biennale’s ‘Viva Arte Viva’ in 2017.

The 2015 and 2017 Venice Biennales could not have been more different. In 2015, curator Okwui Enwezor welcomed visitors with a performance in which actors were invited to read Karl Marx’s Das Kapital, and the Biennale included works that exposed the continued effects of colonialism, migration, refugee crises, war and climate change. But the curator for 2017, Christine Macel, the chief curator of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, distanced herself from


politics with an exhibition designed to put artists and art practice at the centre of the stage – a choice she defended as crucial in a world dominated by ‘conflicts and shocks’, where the exaltation of difference generally plays an important part in the evolution of these confrontations.

Accordingly, this was resolved by an exhibition where conflict was eradicated and replaced instead by a neo-humanist approach to the arts that began with the question: what does it mean to be an artist today? As a response, Macel chose 120 artists, most of whom were participating in the Biennale for the first time, and she distributed them among nine pavilions divided between the Giardini and the Arsenale. She described these as trans-pavilions, inviting a persevering consideration of the traditional organisation of national pavilions and thus responding to the debate about the problematic configuration of identity in relation to the nation-state binomial. The Biennale’s national pavilions also generated a wide variety of responses in relation to this respect (see below). Following this vision, the curator conceived each trans-pavilion as a chapter of a book, with two introductory chapters in the Giardini with the Pavilion of Joys and Fears and the Pavilion of Artists and Books, followed by another seven pavilions in the Arsenale: Pavilion of the Earth, Pavilion of the Common, Pavilion of Traditions, Pavilion of Shamans, the Dionysian Pavilion, the Pavilion of Colours and the Pavilion of Time and Infinity. The composition of the ‘book’ was entirely left to the artists, who, occupying a translational space, defined – in the words of Macel – by the mixing of artists of all generations and origins, provided the corpus of all the different chapters of the ‘book’. These last remarks do not, however, reflect the reality of the exhibition, where more than half of the artists were white and only five were black, something that was not, in fact, surprising considering the rhetoric promoted by the curator of separating art and politics, and which usually ends up being translated into the underrepresentation of blacks and other racialised people in art exhibitions.

Thus, this common space defined beyond the traditional defined boundaries functioned as a metaphor of contemporary culture, now defined by the fluxus of globalisation, hybridisation and the transnationalisation of culture and identity. The predominant narratives surrounding the discourse of globalisation in relation to contemporary art generally stresses the international dimension of art as a potential sphere for inclusion of different artistic practices that would add to or extend the historical discourse of modernism. Accordingly, this new theoretical framework also poses some crucial questions, the responses to which are decisive in giving shape to the

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different set of arguments. How is the rearrangement and reconfiguration of the different elements that shape globalisation mediated and articulated? A question to which some cultural theorists, such as Stuart Hall, have also added: is this a global or a western phenomenon? And although Hall refers to the broader field of postmodern culture, the responses provided by the field of ‘cultural studies’, and more broadly ‘postcolonial theory’, provide the basis through which to interrogate the field of contemporary art, and more specifically, the narratives of the 2017 Venice Biennale in relation to these concerns.

Returning to the questions, this is what led Hall to assert that, ‘postmodernism is not a new cultural epoch, but only modernism in the streets’. The arguments that sustained this assertion made reference to European modernism and to the broader sense of modernity. A worldview that emerged during the Renaissance and the Reformation – a time when new worlds were being ‘discovered’ – and which was then conceptualised during the Enlightenment, modernity not only continues to colour our perceptions but it is also the ground from which art is produced. It is the social, cultural and ideological apparatus that shapes the outlook of western societies, its ontological foundation of meaning. In the field of contemporary art, and more specifically in the context of the Biennale, this has had tremendous consequences – for instance, in the reification of the Other in the name of globalization or collective identity.

This was also also reflected in Christine Macel's ‘Viva Arte Viva’ exhibition, where diversity was heavily supported by an ethnographic gaze. One of the works in which the Other resonated with special force was Juan Downey’s The Circle of Fires from 1979, installed as a circle of video monitors at the entrance of the Arsenale. The videos showed the everyday of the Yanomami, an indigenous tribe from the Amazon. In order to produce the work, the artist and his family moved to live with the tribe in the Venezuelan Amazon for eight months, and the videos were recorded by the Yanomami themselves during that period. Downey’s idea was to look critically at ethnographic observation and an anthropological-style imaginary by inverting the conventional roles of observer and observed. And although Downey’s intention was one of generating mutual understanding between people from different cultures, today, almost forty years later, such a primitivist approach feels completely unnecessary.

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5 See https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/33093
The flirtations with primitivism also found an echo in Ernesto Neto’s *Um Sagrado Lugar (A Sacred Place)* (2017), which introduced the Pavilion of Shamans, the pavilion dedicated by Macel to the relationship between art and spirituality. Neto’s piece consisted of a large tent that replicated a *Cupixawa*, the social place for debate and ceremonies of the Huni Kuin Indians from the Amazonian state of Acre in Brazil. At the start of the Biennale, the space was occupied by the Huni Kuin themselves, who were on display, dressed in traditional clothes, as part of Neto’s art. The work was specifically made for the Biennale, and was intended to generate a dialogue between western culture and ancient wisdom through the setting up of an environment where visitors could immerse themselves in a ‘place of sensations, a place of exchange and continuity between people’, although a different and complementary reading arose from this work, one in which the ‘global south’ continues to supply exoticism and postmodern spirituality for the western art consumer.

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Ultimately, it was not surprising to see Neto, when he was with the six Huni Kuin members at the talk held on the day of the opening, as impersonating a guru. Neto pointed out that the work was for sale and that 20 per cent of the sales would go to the Huni Kuin, leaving aside any possible collaborative approach and reproducing instead the mark of the typical approach of nineteenth-century missionaries, a mark that should, however, have already been discarded. In line with this view, therefore, it was not accidental that the text written on the walls of the pavilion to supplement the work were in a childlike style, adding to the primitivist aspect of the work the stereotype of the ‘noble savage’ threatened by the outside world, and reproducing the idea of the binary model of powerful/powerless, adult/child, and the paternalist outcome that normally follows.
The ways in which racialised people, or people from ‘other’ cultures, have been positioned in relation to the dominant regimes of representation and its effects have been widely discussed – for at least forty years, since Edward Said framed the debates about cultural diversity and the construction of the Other in his seminal book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Said described Orientalism as a ‘system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering the Orient into Western consciousness, (…) the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all non-European people and cultures’. *Orientalism* supposed a breakaway with the Marxist readings of ideology, and demonstrated the formative rather than reflective role of representations in the construction of reality, inaugurating the field of postcolonial studies. We could easily replace the word ‘orientalism’ with ‘primitivism’ in identifying these ideas in the work of Ernesto Neto, as well as in the work of other artists exhibiting at the 2017 Biennale, as both share a similar perception about the colonial ‘other’ with its racial stereotypes and equivalent cultural stereotypes. Postcolonial critique has always stressed the importance of

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looking with a certain scepticism at all narratives that make use of essentialist, ethnographic and fixed notions about race and culture, and have found neocolonial and racist ideas within them.

The works on display in Venice were not isolated in time and space, and, like everything, must be put in context. In other words, we need to assert the particularities of the relations between the narratives of the work and its location, and the wider social context. In the case of Neto’s *Um Sagrado Lugar*, as in other similar works, what is at stake is the ‘Indigenous cultural, political, intellectual, and artistic sovereignties, against colonial ideologies and structures that have sought to erase and contain Indigenous peoples’.

It is within this picture that Olafur Eliasson’s *Green Light* project in the Pavilion of Artists and Books in the Giardini arouses a certain scepticism. The work was a participatory project where members of the public were invited to participate in community workshops, together with refugees and migrants, to produce lamps. The green lamps were then put on sale for €250, and the money raised was intended to go to different NGOs working directly with immigrants and

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8 Mark Watson, ‘“Centring the Indigenous”: Postcommodity’s Trans-Indigenous Relational Art’, *Third Text*, vol 29, no 3, 2015, p 153
refugees. Those taking part in the project as volunteers would have access to free language classes, counselling or education. The artist himself praised the work for being a metaphor for cooperation and understanding between immigrants, refugees and Europeans, and proposed it as a model for responding to the refugee crisis. While refugees and immigrants working together with members of the public functioned well as a way to challenge current perceptions and stereotypes about them, when this was seen in relation to the broader picture and narratives of the Biennale, as some critics have argued, placing immigrants and refugees as part of the exhibition display seems wrong and problematic – especially if the work was meant to address issues of forced migration, and there was no registered trace or any comments made regarding the migratory detention centres, individual and mass deportations, or the extremely violent situation in the border zones where many of the NGOs that benefited from the money raised from the project are probably working. Neither was there anything about the implication of inherited racist patterns in the drafting of the legal system regarding immigration. It was just another self-congratulatory work that people pass by, take photographs, observe the multicultural image of the set or take part in the workshops, and then fly back home with their European passports and visas. As Cristina Ruiz said in *The Art Newspaper*, this was not ‘art in service of migrants but migrants in service of an artistic and curatorial vision’.  


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An important step forward in challenging these dynamics and narratives would require taking into consideration what some theorists have called the coloniality of power, a concept that explores the correlation between the set of practices and legacies of colonialism with forms of knowledge and social orders. There were several examples that acknowledged this in the Biennale, in the Zimbabwe Pavilion for instance, with its exhibition ‘Deconstructing Boundaries: Exploring Ideas of Belonging’. The exhibition featured four artists, among them Dana Whabira with *Black Sunlight*, a work that examined language not as a medium of communication but as a tool of manipulation and control. The work was composed of neon light and sound, and the title was inspired by Dambudzo Marechera’s experimental novel *Black Sunlight* (1980), a work on the correlation between identity formation and essentialisation in the process of nation-building in Zimbabwe. The sound piece included extracts from an interview with the author. Whabira’s intention was to explore the formation of local language and identity through the colonial encounters between Great Britain and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), encounters that were not intended to facilitate exchange or communication between the two cultures, but were used as a tool for exploitation and control. In this way, by looking back at the epistemological chain that was used to mock, mute and commodify colonial subjects, and putting the ‘variety and congruency of the colonial experiences transformed into critical and epistemological reflexion’, the artist establishes the conditions through which she can claim her own agency, an agency that cannot be encapsulated within the Eurocentric binary model.

Apart from some national pavilions, there was one external pavilion that offered an alternative view to the predominant narratives proposed by Christine Macel, as well as to the privileged position of the Biennale’s national pavilions and the absence of black artists in Macel’s exhibition. This was the Diaspora Pavilion, presented as the result of a collaborative project run

11 According to Walter D. Mignolo in *Historias locales/diseños globales: Colonialidad, conocimientos subalternos y pensamiento fronterizo* (Akal, Madrid, 2003), the ‘coloniality of power’ is the logic of domination of the structures of power, control and hegemony that made the narrative of ‘modernity’ possible, and which expands from the conquest of the Americas until the present. Mignolo’s notion of modernity/coloniality reveals the other side of modernity, what is left behind: the rhetoric of progress, the legacy of colonialism and the epistemologies that it produced. The first conceptualisation was introduced by Aníbal Quijano in ‘Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad’ (published in *Perú Indígena*, vol. 13, no. 29, Instituto Indigenista, Lima, 1992) and focused on notions of knowledge production and racial, social and political hierarchies. The concept was then expanded by Mignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Sylvia Wynter and Nelson Maldonado-Torres in various directions, through the exploration of the coloniality of power’s intersection with aesthetics, gender and ontology.

12 See Dana Whabira’s website: [https://njeleleart.wixsite.com/whabira/black-sunlight](https://njeleleart.wixsite.com/whabira/black-sunlight)

13 Walter D. Mignolo, *Historias locales/diseños globales: Colonialidad, conocimientos subalternos y pensamiento fronterizo*, op cit, p 24
by the ICF International Curators Forum and London’s University of the Arts (UAL). The pavilion showcased nineteen artists who in diverse ways complicated, expanded and destabilised ‘diaspora’ as a term, whilst reflecting about the relevance that diaspora continues to have in the lives of many. One of these artists was Yinka Shonibare with a work that explored current discourses about immigration and historical epistemologies. Shonibare’s *British Library* included a library with books covered with African textiles with the names of the immigrants that have impacted on the nation’s history mixed with those who have opposed their inclusion. The library was then supplemented by a series of tablets that showcased recent conversations with politicians and other members of civil society about immigration. In this way, the work connected colonial legacies with recent conversations about immigration, asking us to explore the rich complexity of diaspora culture and re-evaluate our attitudes towards immigration.

Among the other artists also exhibiting in the Diaspora pavilion was Khadija Saye, the young artist who tragically lost her life in the Grenfell Tower fire in London in the summer of 2017,
reminding us about the city’s internal borders, constrained now by processes of gentrification and speculation.

Nowadays it is difficult to ignore the impact of globalisation in the field of contemporary art, so much so that it seems odd to detach the world of contemporary art from the notion of the global. In this way, thinking about contemporary art practice in terms of nationality or place of birth has become outdated. Concepts such as translational, cross-cultural, hybridisation and cosmopolitanism have become pivotal terms used to grasp global trends and their effects on everyday life. Events such as the Venice Biennale have been carrying out this reflection for years now. In 2017, there were multiple responses, from Christine Macel’s curated exhibition to other national and external pavilions. In looking at the narratives of the Biennale, I have given some reconsideration to what is emerging in the course of the unfolding new dialectics of international contemporary art, not just in order to evaluate how this has been manifested in the Biennale but more specifically to see how other cultures were incorporated into this new discourse in the context of the exhibition.
The ways in which the Venice Biennale’s ‘Viva Arte Viva’ exhibition resolved these dynamics were many, and the most characteristic among them was the conceiving of the exhibition as a consensual common space of dialogue. The consequences of this view of coexistence and conviviality were varied, but probably the main one was the missing of the crucial role of conflict, multiplicity, and the multiple viewpoints in democratic social relations. Thus, by ignoring possible conflictive elements, the exhibition vanished in the empty void of the abstract, which was then resolved by a series of commonplaces, clichés and fantasies inherited from popular culture, as manifested in its primitivist approach. This poses some questions about the visibility of non-western art or cultures in exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, and the ethno boom and trend for exoticism in postmodern culture. Ultimately, it is still the old Eurocentric representational regime that dictates the modes of visibility of non-western culture, which attributes people from other cultures the role of playing its exotic ‘other’. Little seems to have changed in the outlooks of the last decades; the west continues to import ‘the other’ for its pleasure, while remaining complicit with a global economy that is destroying the other’s world.

In light of these reflections, we might wonder how Christine Macel’s exhibition would look like if she had incorporated these challenges. To reshape, transform and reclaim the current narratives of the Biennale in order to offer a more pluralistic and therefore a more inclusive view requires an institutional mindset prepared not just to confront the traditional configuration of the Biennale in national pavilions, but also willing to confront hegemonic models of thought and culture, in addition to be willing to develop new strategies that look beyond the narratives of multiculturalism. This demands some serious reflection on the entanglement of culture with the order of knowledge, being and power that essentialises diversity and naturalises structural inequalities and phobias. These concepts and ideas were materialised in the Diaspora and Zimbabwe Pavilions. Accordingly, they represented a much more interesting understanding of cosmopolitanism, one in which discrepant modernities provided the general framework from which the global is reflected in the local.

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