

Is documenta a decolonising force?

Abstract

As one of the most important contemporary art mega-projects in the world, the Documenta of Kassel is particularly suitable for examining the changes that have taken place in art and in the way it is presented in the artistic field. Back in 1955, political motivations played a part in the Documenta's founding, but it was only in 1992, during its ninth edition, that Jan Hoet first criticised the hegemony of European and North American art (at the time, only 7% of the featured artists were from Africa, Asia and Oceania). And it was not until 1997 that, under the artistic directorship of Catherine David, this criticism was treated theoretically in the form of lectures. The first Documenta that can be regarded as postcolonial was held in 2002, with Enwezor taking charge as artistic director. In my paper, I will examine the shifts that have occurred in the way global art is represented in Kassel from Documenta 11, when the postcolonial discourse finally came to the fore, until the present day (Documenta 14). The questions I touch upon are whether there has been a strengthening of postcolonial representation; whether there is evidence of cultural decolonisation as cultural colonisation is dismantled that is, as postcolonial theories are put into practice; whether or not a decolonisation of art has taken place during the Documenta exhibitions; and whether there has been a change in the postcolonialist content of art. With respect to the knowledge generated by the exhibitions and the theories espoused by the documents – most of which were written to accompany the exhibitions –, I will investigate what has been implemented and how from three different perspectives: firstly, by taking into account the proportion of artists (by country of origin); secondly, via content analysis; and thirdly, from the perspective of the artistic canon.

Keywords: documenta, postcolonialism, decolonization, dictatorship, visual sociology, identity-construction, women's identity, canon, cultural critique, flight

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Erzsébet Tatai

Art historian, Senior Research Fellow, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary

Correspondence: Erzsébet Tatai, Art historian, Senior Research Fellow, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary, Email Tatai.Erzsebet@btk.mta.hu

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Introduction

“The big exhibition has no form.” Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, curators of Documenta 12, begin their preface with these words in the Documenta Catalogue. While insisting on Documenta's inherent formlessness, they arranged the exhibition of distinctive character to deal with provocative issues. Such contradictions are typical in the history of mega-exhibitions and that makes them all the more appealing. Being one of the most significant – if not *the* most significant – mega contemporary art projects of the world, the Kassel Documenta is pre-eminently suitable for studying the changes, the shifts in fine arts, or rather, in its representation and in the field of art – as formulated by Bourdieu. Political motivations (distancing from fascist and communist culture) date as far back as Documenta's foundation in 1955, but it was only in 1992 that Jan Hoet, artistic director of the 9th Issue of Documenta, critiqued the hegemony of European and North American Art (only 7 percent of the invited artists came from Africa, Asia and Oceania in that year). In 1997, when Catherine David was artistic director, this issue was further elaborated theoretically (Okwui Enwezor, Edward W. Said, Matthew Ngui were, among other people, invited to present their papers). Finally, the first exhibition considered to be postcolonial was accomplished by Okwui Enwezor in 2002. In my paper I focus on the shifts of the representation of global art in Kassel from emergence of postcolonial discourse (from Documenta 11) up to the present (Documenta 14). This paper will also explore if the tendency of postcolonial representation became stronger; if one can really see cultural decolonialization as the practice of postcolonial theories; if the decolonialization of art occurred in the course of Documentas and whether the content of postcoloniality changed in the arts? I follow

the Documenta exhibitions from the aspect of the proportions of the number of artists coming from different countries, carry out content analysis and finally I study the Documentas in question from the point of view of the canon.

In the following, I will analyse the changes in art in the last 15 years through the works of Documentas, from the point of view of postcolonialism and decoloniality – that is, whether there is any chance to dismantle colonial, western (and sexist) hegemony through culture or border thinking (WD. Mignolo). For the sake of clarity, it may be worth mentioning that both postcolonial discourse and decolonial thinking are critical theories of hegemonial western coloniality and colonialism. Since my intention is neither to merge nor to play off these two concepts against each other, I will only mention a few differences: postcoloniality emerged earlier (in the 1980's with G. Ch. Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Achille Mbembe) and is linked to post-structuralism and at the beginning was also (geographically) connected to Asia and Africa. Decolonial thinking arose later, in Latin America. It has a more profound approach to colonialism (e.g. WD. Mignolo, A. Quijano), while also being anti-capitalist; de-westernization is also one of its key motives. In the context of the intense decolonization in political and military practice after World War II, writing in French on decolonization, Frantz Fanon (of African origin) was a forerunner of both postcoloniality and decoloniality, inasmuch as he saw and treated the cultural, economical, political, institutional and military aspects of colonialism interwoven. We might of course ask, if Documenta as a cultural institution of Germany, the 4th strongest economy of the world, can be a “decolonialist” within the framework of global neoliberalism, when our social space consisting of disparate social networks is divided by borders “that discriminate between those who

circulate capital' and 'those whom capital circulates'?" After all great international exhibitions (and as such Documenta too) "follow the economic (read: corporate) and political interests that constitute and produce the 'exhibitory complex' (per Tony Bennett), an apparatus correlative to the art world that strategically presents itself as self-evident, transparent reality—supposedly the only reality available to us."¹ Although Documenta cannot solve the question of capital, it can help us reflect on the problems, propose artistic questions, analyze, highlight features of existing colonialism, react and can show ways, inspire reflexions – particularly where artistic directors reflect on their own situation, the circumstances in which they work. For example, Adam Szymczyk, artistic director of the Documenta 14, constructed his project (artworks and texts) purposefully dealing with broader social contexts (including historical) and local conditions. In their first curatorial statement Adam Szymczyk and Quinn Latimer analysed the current situation as follows. "It [The Documenta Magazine] was produced during several months of a palpable worsening of the ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis in Greece."² They go on to say, "humanitarian crises escalated when 4 million Syrian Afghan, Iraqi and African refugees arrived in Europe, it was the greatest migration since the second world war and the first stop was Greece."³ According to their intention, "Documenta 14 will attempt to deliver a real-time response to the changing situation of Europe, which, as a birthplace of both democracy and colonialism [...] is also a plea for imagining and elaborating on the possibilities of a different, more inclusive world, one that appears unattainable in the light of current political and economic developments and the unmasked violence they bring about."³

Colonization, due to the similar patterns of using power, relates to other suppressing structures (racism, nationalism, sexism). Thus, representation of the many different types of inequality affects decolonization and at the same time decolonization brings up other inequalities and discrimination, though does not eliminate them.

Documenta 11, directed by Okwui Enwezor in 2002, is considered to be the first postcolonial Documenta. This is proclaimed on the official homepage of the Documenta,⁴ and this intention is supported by the chief curator's statement and other studies,⁵ as well as the fact that the cluster of exhibitions in Kassel was only one of the Documenta events organized worldwide: 1. Democracy unrealized – a conference in Vienna and lectures in Berlin; 2. Experiments with truth: Transnational Justice and the process of Truth and Reconciliation – conference, film and video programs in New Delhi; 3. Creolité and Creolization – workshops in Saint Lucia; 4. Under Siege. Four African cities (Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos) – conference and workshops in Lagos.⁶ In his study with the telling title *The Black Box*, Enwezor explains that after thorough analysis of contemporary art and visual culture we have to realize that the visual arts can only be understood in the context of such other moving factors

that go beyond the disciplinary borders of today's art production. Art objects as such do not exist outside the system of art, they have no autonomy outside the context of exhibitions. On the other hand, there are methods manifested in social, political and cultural networks which in turn mark out the outline and horizon of global discourse and give a different context to the projects than did Documenta 11. So the forums of Enwezor's Documenta⁷ were dedicated to the ethical and intellectual processes of rethinking of historical events and phenomena, which help the elaboration of the controversial heritage of the past.⁸ Enwezor himself, in one of the chapters of his study entitled "What is an Avant-Garde today? The postcolonial aftermath of globalization and the terrible nearness of distant places", argues for a committed avant-garde art and decolonizing as a liberating strategy.⁹

In critiques on Documenta, voices appeared in protection of Western culture, Niklas Maak quotes several of these, for example the author of the *Washington Post* "the deep loathing of the global left for our country"¹⁰ and Yugo Hasegawa, who, visiting the exhibition, felt that although it helped widen the horizons, it was like visiting Cultural Studies lessons of an American or British university.¹¹ According to another critical opinion, the exhibition "outlines a radical trans-disciplinary, trans-cultural and trans-generational method for escaping the mediocrity of most what the art world has to offer these days".¹² Examples of Barbara Steiner proved to herself that "...every aesthetic space is certainly imbued with political, economic and social factors, but that is also offers a 'space for play and resistance'".¹³

European artists sensed the beginning of demolition of the neocolonial world. The question of "many" or "few" calls attention to numbers: indeed, compared to the exhibition ten years before, when North American and (Western) European artists made up 90 percent of the exhibitors, in 2002 they made up 79 percent of the exhibitors (yet the only three artists from Eastern Europe were Pavel Bräila, Arthur Żmijewski and Sanja Iveković). The number of African artists increased from 0.5(!) percent to 8 percent, Asians from 6.6 to 7.5 percent, South Americans from 3 to 5 percent. This change may be considered as significant or insignificant (with the proportion of "the rest" growing from 10 percent to 21 percent); however, the shift is apparent and also the fact that the dominance of the "first world" remained. The tendency of decolonization expressible in numbers continued in 2007. The proportion of Euro-Atlantic participants further decreased (59 percent), Asians increased significantly (24 percent) and to some extent the presence of Africa and South America (9 percent and 8 percent, respectively). However, the 2017 figures again show a high percentage of North-American and European participation, though this backslide was mainly due to the fact that for the first time there were more artists from Eastern Europe (17 percent) and "Learning from Athen" being the motto there were many Greek artists present (20 percent) – and this also points to decolonization

⁷Ibid. 42.

⁸Ibid. 43.

⁹Ibid. 44-45.

¹⁰Blake Gopnik, quoted by Niklas Maak: Documenta beats its own record. Renaissance of utopia replaced Nihilism at the 11th quintennial art show in Kassel. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2002. September 20.

¹¹Yuko Hasegawa: Struggling for Utopia. *Flash Art*, XXXIV. 2002. (July–September) 225. 105.

¹²Jens Hoffmann: Reentering Art Reentering Politics. *Flash Art*, XXXIV. 2002. 225. 106. and Massimiliano Gioni: Finding The Center. *Flash Art*, XXXIV. 2002. 225. 106.

¹³Barbara Steiner: Some Thoughts on Documenta 11. *Flash Art*, XXXIV. 2002. 225. 109.

¹Editors' Letter by Quinn Latimer, Adam Szymczyk. *South as a State of Mind*, 2015. 6. s [Documenta 14 #1], 4.

²Ibid. 3-4.

³Ibid. 4.

⁴<https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11#>

⁵Okwui Enwezor: *The Black Box*. In: *Documenta 11. Platform 5. Exhibition. Catalogue. Kassel, June 8 – September 15, 2002*. Eds. Heike Ander–Nadja Rottner. Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Kantz Publishers, 2002. 42–55. Pl. Sarat Maharaj: Xeno-epistemis: Makeshift kit for sounding visual art as knowledge production and retinal regimes. *Uo.* 71–84. (= Cat. 11.)

⁶Enwezor 2002, 49–53.

even if the number of African artists decreased from 9 to 8 percent and the number of South American artist from 8 to 7 percent, but this is not really significant compared with the decrease of Asian presence. While in 2007 they made up 24 percent of all exhibitors, this figure was a mere 13 percent in 2017. It seems that the decrease of Asian presence was the price of the increase in Eastern and Southern Europeans. However, it was really remarkable that unlike previous editions there was not one single Japanese artist in the show and even more conspicuous was the subsequent, gradual decrease of North American artists – from 31 percent in 1992 to 9 percent in 2017.

The presentation of the explicit post-colonialist intention and decolonist art practices that had been initiated in 2002 was not an explicit aim of the Documenta in 2007. However, it continued the trend both in respect of numbers and the themes exposed.¹⁴ Curators this time broke away from the tradition of exhibiting exclusively contemporary works. They presented creations from global art history from the 15th century on and this trend was followed in the Documenta 13 and 14 as well. Historicism in the Documenta 12 was a decidedly decolonizing practice inasmuch as it “discovered” (for the West) earlier Modernisms of the World (Nasreen Mohamedi, Běla Kolářová) and Neomodernist artworks (Iole de Freitas) and all this on the pretext of the question “Is modernity our antiquity?” – which really sounds like an ivory-tower sort of a question. Artworks selected in keeping with the other guideline of the exhibition, “bare life”, as formulated by Agamben, also referred implicitly to decolonization (Sonia Abián Rose, Amar Kanwar, Churchill Madikida).

In 2012 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev – judging from the works exhibited – continued the decolonizing endeavour. She also hosted exhibitions outside Kassel and organized seminars in Kabul, Bamiyan, Alexandria, Cairo and Banff. The question itself whether this (neo)colonist expansion of the Documenta was really cultural colonization or true decolonization, is laden with issues, which also came up during previous Documentas and during the realization of Szymczyk’s 2017 concept “Learning from Athens”. Documenta 14 was decidedly dedicated to decolonizing. Its Magazine advocated this by saying, “work[s] against the politics of forgetting—forgetfulness of the history of colonialism and mass enslavement and displacement that brought us here, to our collective contemporary world; and forgetfulness of the dissident histories and peoples that have often been left out of the Western canon.”¹⁵ “In the current process of decolonization, memories of itineraries of the enslaved, migrants and refugees are reactivated against new politics of forgetfulness. Memory here is not the realm of subjective fleeting thought but a source of images, texts and songs that constitute a counter hegemonic library for present battles.”¹⁶ What can be learnt from Athens and which one? From the ancient Greeks or modern Greeks? Or the ideal which – among other people – German scientists and artists from Hegel to Heidegger looked upon with colonizing and at the same time admiring eyes? Though the curators declared, “...we will insist on ‘learning from Athens’ not as from the cradle of Western civilization but as a place where the contradictions of the contemporary world, embodied by loaded directional’s like East and West, North and South, meet and clash”,¹⁶ the emblem of this Documenta, apart from the owl of Athena, was the Parthenon – albeit only as a “copy” erected in Kassel. Having Documenta staged in two cities – though it intended as part of

¹⁴What is more they abolished sexism. Almost the half of the artists were women.

¹⁵Latimer Szymczyk 2015. 5.

¹⁶Latimer, Szymczyk 2015. 5.

a decolonizing practice, the two places were supposedly equal, real as well as metaphoric – was nevertheless just as much about fixing borders (or at least making them more obvious) as it was about decolonizing. The improvements of infrastructures helped Athens a bit and many Greek artists, who could not show their work before, now could take part in a Documenta, but this extension really favoured only the wealthier parts of the world – who could afford to visit both venues? Moreover, as Nuit Banai pointed out when travelling from Athens to Kassel, “...multiple security checkpoints and teams of *polizei* were in place, gesturing to current anxieties about ‘protecting’ the contempt European demos from migrants and the spectre of terrorism[...] the nation-state superseded Documenta’s attempt to enable a ‘presentist democracy’ [...] trumped the more inclusive notion of the people...”¹⁷

Athens artists expressed their discontent in an open letter^{2,3} and the graffiti in the city – Earning on Athens. Dear Documenta: I refuse to exoticize myself to increase your cultural capital – visualized the tension between one of the strongest economies of the world and one of the weakest in Europe. On the other hand, taking artworks from the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Athens to Kassel is doubtful, because as Birnbaum points out with neocolonist contempt, it made possible for us to see “mildly interesting Greek Conceptualism” and “If there’s a point, beyond the symbolic gesture of filling the space of Germany’s oldest public museum with Greek property, it is one the organizers have made *by accident*...”¹⁸ (italics mine), but because these artworks, without having their context properly outlined, were really lost in the rooms of Fridericianum. However, according to Nuit Banai, “The show [...] updates the mega-exhibition’s historical status as a frontier and bellwether of Western humanism for contemporary conditions of neoliberal global capitalism”.¹⁹ The extension of borders of Documenta in the direction of Greece demanded the dissolution of many other borders, like between East and West and North and South. “This is Documenta’s humanist strain which it simultaneously asserts, challenges and mourns by assimilating the border into its form, as a site of both maximum agency and utter impotence.”²⁰

In Documenta exhibitions decolonialist artistic practices are manifested in the artworks. Many different approaches are possible: works focusing on decolonization, or coming from a decolonist way of thinking; or the context created by the curator leads to decolonist readings. When in her performance²¹ a breathless Regina José Galindo is running in front of a tank for 18 minutes (and endlessly in the video loop), she not only refers to the perils of war but also the frenzy fed by permanent threat, which is known by those who living on borders, who belong neither to this country, area, or culture, nor the other. If they are lucky, they are related to both.²² Emily Jacir’s work⁴ presents

¹⁷Banai 2017. 303.

¹⁸Daniel Birnbaum: Thinking twice. On Documenta 14. *Art Forum*, 56.1. 2017. September. 291–295: 291.

¹⁹Banai 2017. 303.

²⁰*Ibid.* 305.

²¹Regina José Galindo. 1974, Guatemala city: *The Shadow*. 2017. Video following performance with Leopard tank, 18’. Cat.14. V.12.; Booklet 14. 87.

²²Walter D. Mignolo called it *border thinking*. “First of all, border thinking implies dwelling in the border, not crossing borders. That is, border thinking is not an impersonal algorithm, but a conceptualization of the experience of living in the border.... I theorize border thinking from my experience of dwelling in the borders: as the son of immigrants in Argentina, as métèque in France, and as hispano/latino in the United States. Sebastian Weier: Interview with Walter D. Mignolo. In: *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics*. Eds. Marc Woons–Sebastian Weier. Bristol, E-International Relations Publishing, 2017. 11–25: 11.

this very situation from the point of view of intersectionality, in her army tent embroidered with text (also shown in Documenta 14) which had all the names of Palestinian villages occupied or destroyed by the State of Israel in 1948 and also his film *Continuity* by Omer Fast²³ projected at the Documenta 13.

Visual sociography

In the context of the Documentas – in the center of Germany – the documentary or socio-photographic works created by artists hailing from (former) third-world countries about their own environment have a decolonizing effect. Many of them revealed the life of people in their countries – the way they see it, without any extenuation, like Ravi Agarwal's 18 large size color photographs from the life of people in India,²⁴ Olumuyiwa Olamide Osifuye's 15 color photos of Lagos,²⁵ David Goldblatt's series called *Jo'urg Intersections* in Documenta 11 and *The Transported of KwaNdebele in Documenta 12*.²⁶ The representation of poverty with sociographic intention is also apparent in drawings. Documenta 14 presented drawings of the 1943–44 famine in Bangladesh by Chittaprosad. The curators showed these together with the photographs of the Bengal famine in 1943 and the Orissa famine (1944) by Sunil Janah.²⁷ "Chittaprosad's graphic art expresses the struggle against colonial oppression and a revolutionary consciousness that remains of pressing importance today," they wrote.²⁸ The video installation *Our Land* by Igloodik Isuma Productions is on the border of fiction and documentary works. The artists aimed to give an outlet once more to four thousand years of unwritten Inuit tradition, which was silenced by 50 years of sermons, schooling and cable television.²⁹ Although the poor, exploited agricultural and oil workers of Niger, one of the main oil exporting countries, have their own government to thank for their conditions, if we consider that international (western) companies benefit most from their oil, then showing the poverty of those who produce the oil is a decolonizing practice even outside the context of Documenta. This was shown in the photo series *Oil rich Niger delta* by George Osodi.⁵ The Raqs Media Collective 28°28'N /77°15'E: 2001/2002 urging the demolishing of all limitations, in their multimedia installation called *An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life – Delhi* accomplished the live broadcast of reality. While they are working on the alternative strategies of production and sharing information, they argue for the free use of software and Internet (they follow the rules of "copy left"), they represent social, economic and political misuses. In their interactive work, visitors may create their own critical version, which is neither a clone, nor a copy, but neither is it an original.³⁰

²³Omer Fast (1972, Jerusalem, lives in Berlin): *Continuity*. 2012. 40. Cat. 13. 256.

²⁴Ravi Agarwal (1958, New Delhi) Photographs, 1993–1999. Cat. 11. App. 36.

²⁵Olumuyiwa Olamide Osifuye (1960, Lagos). Cat. 11. App. 45.

²⁶David Goldblatt (1930, Randfontein): *Jo'urg Intersections*. 1999–2002, 49 c-print, each 42×29,5 cm. Cat. 11. App. 42; 1983, 19 each 30×40 cm. Cat. 12. 120–121, 366.

²⁷Sunil Janah (1918, Assam – 2012) Booklet 14. 92.

²⁸<http://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21960/chittaprosad>

²⁹Igloodik Isuma Productions. Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak, Pauloisie Qualitalik, Norman Cohn, 1990, Igloodik. *Our Land*, 1994–1995, 13 channels, each 28'60". Cat. 11. App. 43.; Mark Nash: Igloodik Isuma Productions. In: *Documenta 11 Short Guide*. Ed. Christina Rattemeyer. Stuttgart, Hatje Kantz Publishers, 2002. 118–119.

³⁰Raqs Media Collective (Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, 1991, New Delhi): 28°28'N /77°15'E: 2001/2002. *An Installation on the Coordinates of Everyday Life – Delhi*. 2002. Cat. 11. App. 46.; Nadja

Constructing identity – deconstructing colonizing

A different kind of decolonizing art strategy is one that draws the spectator to a formerly colonized culture by not only documenting facts – albeit it doesn't miss objective elements – but also by setting forth certain elements of that culture, telling stories and sometimes critically interpreting asymmetrical intercultural relations.

When J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere,³¹ a systematic collector like Berndt and Hilla Becher, takes his photo portraits,³² he inventories and denominates a series of hair styles from Nigeria, he strengthens Nigerian identity through building on the (self)consciousness of beauty and peculiarity. Forty years later Zanele Muholi³³ uses also traditional photographic tools in her *Faces and Phases* series. Various black people from South Africa with a LBQT identity look bravely in her camera. They are not "Negros", since, as Walter de Mignolo notes about Franz Fanon, "He realizes that he is a Negro when he realizes that he is seen as a Negro."³⁴

Annie Pootoogook's genre paintings³⁵ about family life made in colour pencil challenge stereotypes of Inuit art. Her compositions and her style resembling children's drawings are witty, critical and humorous at the same time, whether the topic is alcoholism, a family dinner, watching TV or suicide. Yet her titles tell a lot ironically and without much ado about contemporary Inuit life: *Watching erotic film*, *Pitseolak drawing with two girls on a bed*, *Bear by the window*, *Watching George Bush on tv*, *Dr. phil. Pavel Brăila's film Shoes for Europe (2001–2002)*³⁶ represents that endless, exhausting work of train carriages being moved from the "Asian" track to the "European" ones at the border between Romania and Moldova (part of the Soviet Union before 1991). This metaphor of cultural borders is, among other things, a depiction of materially very much existing, hardly permeable borders. Brăila with Moldavian origin points at his own country (the fact that it does not belong to the civilized world, Europe) with a self-colonizing gesture. However, the irony-free representation of the absurdity of – otherwise insignificant – difference neutralizes this gesture.

Rottner: Raqs Media Collective. In: *Documenta 11 Short Guide*. Ed. Christina Rattemeyer. Stuttgart, Hatje Kantz Publishers, 2002. 192–193. (= Cat. 11. Short.)

³¹1930–2014, Ovbionu-Emai, Lagos.

³²Exhibited in 2002: 12 photographs, 1974, gelatin silver prints, aluminium, each 100×100 cm. Cat. 12. 96–97, 376.

³³Muholi, Zanele (1972, Umlazi): *Faces and Phases*. 2011–2012, 60 photographs, gelatin silver prints, each 67,5×50,5 cm. DOCUMENTA (13). *Das Begleitbuch. The Guidebook. Catalog 3/3*. Artistic director: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Ed. Catrin Sauerländer. Stuttgart, Hatje Kantz Publishers, 2012. 164. (= Cat. 13.)

³⁴Weier. "The border here is between Fanon's self-consciousness and the moment he realized that although he *knew of course that his skin was black*, he did not know he was a Negro. He realizes that he is a Negro when he realizes that he is seen as a Negro." (italics original.) 2017. 14 p.

³⁵Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016, Cape Dorset Nunavut): *Watching erotic films*. 2003–2004, pencil, paper, 50,8×66 cm; *Pitseolak drawing with two girls on a bed*. 2006, pencil, paper, 50,8×66 cm; *Bear by the window*. 2003–2004, colour pencil, ink, paper, 50,8×66 cm; *Watching george bush on tv*. 2003–2004, pencil, ink, paper, 25,4×33 cm; *Dr. phil.* 2006, pencil, paper, 39,4×50,8 cm. Cat. 12. 164–165., 377.

³⁶Pavel Brăila (1971, Chişinău, lives in Maastricht): *Shoes for Europe*. 2001–2002. 26°. Cat. 11. 216–217; Cat. 11. App. 38. Nadja Rottner: Pavel Brăila. In: Cat. 11. Short. 46–47.

The 1313 Tata type truck was manufactured in India after German licence until 1985. In 2007, the Singaporean–Australian Simryn Gill⁶ exhibited parts of this truck’s motor, made of different types of fruit, clay, seashells and other natural materials as they were parts of the real motor. Gill reversed the colonialist direction of cultural migration and questioned its aims by placing the artistic reproduction of the useless, outdated machine to its original place of conception – that is, ironically the motor is returned to its starting point in a transformed shape.

Ai Weiwei, in the frames of his project *Fairytale*,³⁷ invited 1001 Chinese people to Kassel, who could otherwise not afford to make the journey. He distributed 1001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs from in the venues of the Documenta exhibition, which symbolized the people, the invitation, the hospitality and provisional homeliness.

Britta Markatt Labba, with the ambition of the embroideresses of the Bayeux Tapestry, wittily embroiders her epos *Historija*.³⁸ The depiction of the vicissitudes of life near the North Pole – the flight, birth, battles, hunting and reindeer herds, journeys in forests and snowfields – resembles medieval pictorial composition, stylization and proportions.

In contrast with Markatt-Labba’s myth-creating strategy, George Adéagbo³⁹ merely formulates the critique of the Western colonizing gaze (if there is such)⁴⁰ in his multi-coloured monumental pop installations composed of gimmicks: “Explorer and Explorers Confronting the History of Exploration.” “The World Theatre” Made in the style of funky folk art, his “African art” consists of collected woodcarvings, books, magazines and Bakelite records, which, ironically, making his topic not only spectacular but also legible – prompting social-historical discourse. In his installations – Museum of Contemporary African Art: The Library; The Shop – Meschac Gaba,⁴¹ educated on Dutch Art, presents neat arrangements of African artworks (in the shop) and publications on African Art (in the library). Thus, he formulates the critique of dispossessing colonizing culture and at the same time joins in the discourse of museum critique.

The canon

Talking about art, the most important question of the cultural emancipation – which is decolonization – is the issue of canon. The expansion of the canon is necessary but not enough for emancipation.⁷ “we need a polylogue: ‘the interplay of many voices a kind of creative ‘barbarism’ that would disrupt the mono-logical, colonizing, centric drives of ‘civilization’ Such a vision lives, as Adrienne Rich taught us, in a re-vision: an eccentric re-reading, re-discovering what the canon’s priestly mantle would conceal: the entanglements of all

³⁷Ai Weiwei (1957, Beijing): *Fairytale*. 2007. 1001 Chinese visitors, 1001 Qing Dynasty wooden chairs. Cat. 12. 208–209, 356.

³⁸Britta MarCatt-Labba (1951, Idivuoma): *Historija*. 2003–07. Embroidery, print, application, wool, linen, 39×23,5 m. documenta 14: *Daybook*. Athens, 8 April – Kassel, 17 September 2017. Ed. Quinn Latimer–Adam Szymczyk. Munich–London–New York, Prestel, 2017. VI. 23. (= Cat 14.); Kassel Map Booklet. *Documenta 14: June 10–September 17*. 2017. Ed. Quinn Latimer–Adam Szymczyk. Kassel, documenta und Museum Fridericianum GmbH, 2017, 96. (= Booklet 14.)

³⁹Georges Adéagbo (1942, Cotonou) Cat. 11. App. 36.

⁴⁰Frantz Fanon: *A föld rabjai*. [The Wretched on the Earth (1961)] Budapest, Gondolat, 1985. 197.

⁴¹Meschac Gaba (1961, Cotonou, lives in Amsterdam). Cat. 11. 282–284; Cat. 11. App. 41.

literature with the power dynamics of culture.”³⁸ After the end of cultural colonization different canons will not be the obstacles, but the tools of understanding; the voices coming out from the cracks of hegemonic discourses will sound,⁴² and we will be able to see things from a different perspective, with the eyes of others. If only for short periods of time, at the Documentas in question works are emancipated and evaluated in a coequal way, works that are far away not only from the proportions and perspective that Renaissance has bequeathed to us, but also from the exclusive, familiar, omniscient practice of the western Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde. Some works simply ignore the canons of white male, but most of them combining more (or at least two) cultural or stylistic canonical traditions are polylogous. The local and global, “universal” or “western” elements meld seamlessly in individual artworks – especially if they bear the traces of multiple cultural (and art-historical) exchanges.

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré consistently formulated his thoughts in visual form (which he had previously expressed in writing) on thousands of small, colourful, simple, symbolic pencil drawings framed by rolls (e.g. Alphabet Bété, Museum of the African Faces and Knowledge of the World – 1963–1994)⁴³ – creating a sort of treasury of encyclopaedic knowledge. He was interested first in language, signs and symbols, later in the African life (style). He believed that self-understanding requires a script that differs from that of the colonizers and to that end, he elaborated the script for his mother tongue.⁴⁴ Churchill Madikida’s installation⁴⁵ entitled Status at Documenta 12, with its red, exuberant interior, flashing lights, rosaries and crosses, was chilling. Western visitors educated on Minimalism can easily forgive the directness of the videos (Virus, Nemesis, 2005), where sequences of a red and bloody foetus and computer generated red image-divisions resemble multiplying, proliferating cells – which are pervaded by the same explicit pain as the horrifying installation. This intensity invokes and calls attention to disease, death and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. On her huge canvases, Dorin Reid Nakamarra⁴⁶ painted immense Australian aboriginal ornamental motifs melded with the virtues of western abstract painting and systematic art. Namin Bold⁴⁷ meticulously painted her monumental pictures: episodes of Mongolian life. Depicted from different viewpoints, the scenes constitute systematic compositions and owe as much to Persian miniatures, Japanese woodcuts, Chinese ink paintings as to the graphic traditions of European realistic illustrations.

Explicit intent of decolonization

The topic of Jeff Wall’s light box After Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, the Preface exhibited in 2002 is just as explicitly decolonialist⁴⁸ as Allan Sekula’s public-art billboard in 2007. The billboard near Wilhelmshöhe railway station features a dark-skinned male construction worker. The famous verse of Ode to Joy, “All people

⁴²*Ibid.* 204.

⁴³Cat. 11. 208–211.; Cat. 11. App. 36–37.

⁴⁴Christian Rattemeyer: Frédéric Bruly Bouabré [1923–2014, Zéprégühé]. In: Cat. 11. Short 42–43.

⁴⁵Churchill Madikida (1973, Butterworth, lives in Johannesburg): *Status*. 2005. Installation, coffins, candles, flowers etc. Cat. 12. 176–177, 373.

⁴⁶1955, Warburton–2009, Adelaide, Cat. 13. 146–147.

⁴⁷Nomin Bold (1982, Ulaanbaatar): *Green Palace*. 2017, acryl, canvas, 150×200 cm; *One Day of Mongolia*. 2017, acryl, canvas, 150×200 cm. Cat. 14. V.21; Booklet 80.

⁴⁸Jeff Wall (1946, Vancouver): *After Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, the Preface*. 2001, cybachrome, lightbox, 190×265×25 cm.

become brothers” that became the Anthem of Europe appeared in the design of anonymous letters as if the letters were cut out from different newspapers.⁴⁹ However, replacing the “brothers” with “sisters” in the caption “Alle Menschen werden Schwestern” adds a feminist critical angle to Sekula’s critique of colonialism. Susan Hiller’s video, *Lost and Found* (2016, 30’)⁵⁰ is no less decolonialist. It is, however, more analytic and less direct as the previous works. It is an adaptation of scholarly systematic research. Hiller and her associates visited peoples around the world, whose language was endangered⁵¹ and made short interviews in the speakers’ mother tongue. The moving image only shows the visualized sound waves (with subtitles in English and German). The people spoke about their own language and, in particular, their relationship to it.

Cultural critique

In 2007, the American Kerry James Marshall exhibited his paintings *The lost boys*⁵² at the Wilhelmshöhe Schlossmuseum under Karel van Mander’s painting *Hydaspes and Persina before a painting of Andromeda* (1640). Karel van Mander depicted a story by Heliodorus about the Ethiopian royal couple, who gave birth to a white daughter. The miraculously born girl had good chances for a happy life, because she had been conceived in the night when Andromeda nebula could be observed. Kerry James Marshall’s intervention consisted of new, expressively painted portraits of black boys, whose life chances in a racist environment were in strike contrast with those of the fortunate girl. In the context of the classical European museum, they afforded a challenge to European racism, which goes as far back as Heliodorus and highlighted the colonialist character of the western museum, the absurdity of the entire story, as well as and Mander’s imagery where even the stellar constellation is depicted as a sexy nude (a picture in picture). Romuald Hazoumè was engaged in cultural exchange when he fabricated his “Negro masks”⁵³ (altered ready-mades) by transforming plastic cans used for watering or transporting oil (banal commodities of western oil production), which ironically reversed European expropriation. At the same time, he reconquered his own culture through representation of Dogon masks appropriated by European avant-garde. *Spiral Lands* (2007) by Andrea Geyer⁵⁴ consist of 17 photo-texts representing American landscapes. Each plate features one or two black-and white photographs with almost identical pairs, depicting the same sight with a tiny angular deviation. The texts are quotations from the occupants and American Indians, confronting the truths from different angles. The texts and landscapes are loosely connected by dreamlike allusions, producing a peculiar filter of history, memory, language and culture.

⁴⁹Allan Sekula (1951, Eire–2013): billboard, 2007, 500×750 cm. Cat. 12. 300–301, 381.

⁵⁰Susan Hiller (1940, Tallahassee): Booklet 14. 91; *South as a State of Mind*, 5. 2016. 9. sz. [documenta 14 #4]

⁵¹More precisely: recently extinct, dormant, critically, severely, and definitely a endangered vulnerable, revived.

⁵²Kerry James Marshall (1955, Birmingham): *The lost boys: A.K.A. Baby brother*. 1993, acryl, collage, canvas, 66×66 cm; *The lost boys: A.K.A. 8 Ball*. 1993, acryl, collage, canvas, 7 6,5×76,5 cm; *The lost boys: A.K.A. Black Al*. 1993, acryl, collage, canvas, 67,3×67,3 cm; *The lost boys: A.K.A. Black Johnny*. 1993, acryl, collage, canvas, 63,5×63,5×5,1 cm. Cat. 12. 134, 373–374.

⁵³Romuald Hazoumè (1962, Porto Novo): *Dogon*. 1996, mixed t., 20×60×20 cm; *Agassa*. 1997, mixed t., 44×50×26 cm; *Citoyenne*. 1997, mixed t., 40×40×30 cm; *Moon*. 2003, mixed t., 34×20×16 cm. Cat. 12. 142–143, 368.

⁵⁴Andrea Geyer (1971, Freiburg): *Spiral Lands*. 2007. 1 fejezet. 17 photos, texts, Footnotes. 70×230 cm. Cat. 12. 248–249., 377.

In the shadow of dictatorships

Showcasing at the Documenta the works of artists who live or lived under dictatorship – Vann Nāt,⁵⁵ Marta Minujin and Carlos Garaicoa – is essential partly because of the relationship and occasional interconnectedness of inner oppression and (external) colonization and partly because their mere presence presents epistemic disobedience⁵⁶ against dictatorships (even if it is possible only when dictatorship is softening). Crucially, too, the visibility of these art objects work to the exoticization of the art living in a dictatorships. By installing plans, drawings and models alongside the photos of unfinished buildings in Cuba, Carlos Garaicoa⁵⁷ completed and at least theoretically improved them, creating metaphors of the unfinished (misguided) project of (Cuban) socialism and that of its reconstruction. Marta Minujin’s work built on Friedrichsplatz, the Parthenon of Books⁵⁸ is the remake of her work in Buenos Aires from 1983. The steal-framed building had the same proportions as the Parthenón in Athens and it consisted of almost 100.000 copies of books that have been banned (students of Kassel University selected 170 titles). Although it got some disparaging critics⁵⁹ too, it is nevertheless a visual and haptic catalogue of banned books. It is truly spectacular and emblematic at the same time, openly alluding to Athens, the ancient city – that the Documenta 14 has chosen for its guideline. It stands on the spot of the auto-da-fé organized by Nazis in 1933 and in front of Fridericianum, where the library was burnt down in 1942, making it site-specific.

Female identity

From the point of view of decolonization female identity is relevant in so much as the women in question are subjugated on the grounds of race, sex and colonialism. Intersectionality thus gains peculiar significance, since decolonizing is vastly insufficient for millions of women: it is no more acceptable to them to be exploited and raped by their own people than by white men. Besides, among many tribes in America, gender roles were more balanced than those of the colonizers.⁹ Consequently, “for women colonizing was a double process: it meant racial and sexual subjection at the same time.”⁶⁰ American Indian men often adopted a western gender regime, “thus become accomplices in subjugating”⁶¹ women. Moreover “they joined the whites in destroying woman power.”⁶² Furthermore, we have to consider that since gender roles are different in different societies, feminism, established by white upper-middle-class women, cannot be the same everywhere, in the same way as women living in diverse circumstances are different.

Tooba, the video of the Iranian-American Shirin Neshat, literally

⁵⁵Vann Nāt (1946–2011, Cambodia): *Interrogation in Kandal Pagoda*, 2006, oil, canvas, 70×100 cm. Cat. 13. 130.

⁵⁶Walter D. Mignolo: *Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto*. *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1(2) 2011. 01. 44–66.

⁵⁷1967, Havana. Cat. 11. App. 41.

⁵⁸Marta Minujin (1941, Buenos Aires): *The Parthenon of books*. 1983, remake: 2017, Steel, books, and plastic sheeting, 19,5×29,5×65,5 m. Cat. 14. VI.17; Booklet. 98.

⁵⁹Daniel Birnbaum: *Thinking twice*. On Documenta 14. *Art Forum*, 56. 1. 2017. September. 295. Benjamin H. Buchloh: *Rock paper Scissor*. On some means and ends of Sculpture in? Venice, Münster and Documenta. *Art Forum*, 56.1. 2017. September. 288.

⁶⁰*Ibid*. 114.

⁶¹*Ibid*.

⁶²*Ibid*. 117.

depicts the ancient myth⁶³ of a woman who becomes a (fig) tree. However, this video represents more the grievous woman isolated, bound and imprisoned in a patriarchal society. Measures of distance by the Lebanese Mona Hatoum was exhibited in 2002. It is about the artist's intimate relationship with her mother. In the video the mother can be seen taking shower behind the curtain of calligraphic letters, while the artist, who now lives in London, is reading the letters about sex and eroticism in English.⁶⁴ Thus, this melancholic film destroys the stereotypical image of the passive Arabic woman. Sheela Gowda's work entitled *And Tell Him of My Pain* (1998)⁶⁵ is also engaged in identity construction (exhibited in 2007). This minimalist installation consists of 277 meters of plastic tubes filled with red threads "flowing" along and streaming forth here and there. At the end of the tube, needles with red threads line up and remind us of the origin of this work, giving the sense of the masochistic bridling of powers circulating like blood. Sexually violated Indian and Bangladeshi women recall their stories – notorious, group rapes and incidents committed by soldiers (75 000 women were raped only in 1947) in Amar Kanwar's video installation *The Lightning Testimonies*⁶⁶ (2007). The nine screens encompass the viewer gruesomely as the perfect beauty of sequences with intensive colours splendid, idyllic landscapes contrasts the women's speech. Chilean Cecilia Vicuña who is famous for her large scale sensuous installations (dyed textiles and land artworks) in 2017 exhibited at the Documenta Halle her red, woollen, Quipu, over 10 meters high, an example of Inca civilization. In the modern context it also identifies as female work. Her earlier paintings, exhibited at the Neue Galerie, challenge the Western canon as well as hallmark her commitment: between the portraits of politicians (Marx, Lenin, Allende) and – *horribile dictu* – the *Angel of Menstruation* were the portraits of Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet, María Sabina Mexican shaman and Violeta Parra⁶⁷ Chilean artist – which was how she defined her identity as Latin American woman artist.

Flight

It is a consequence of colonialism and the postcolonial state following its dissolution that vast numbers of people try to escape war and impoverished (formerly colonized) countries by moving to richer and peaceful (usually formerly colonist) countries. On 26 December 1996, the F174 Maltese ship sunk between Sicily and Malta with more than 300 Indian, Pakistani and Singhalese people on board. The Multiplicity⁶⁸ art group made the project *A Journey through a Solid Sea* in order to expose and show the circumstances, the causes and aftermath of the catastrophe. They investigated, in co-operation with engineers, geographers, sociologists, artists photographers; they made

⁶³Shirin Neshat (1957, Kazvin, lives in New York): *Tooba*. 2012. Tabea Metzel: Shirin Neshat. In: Cat 11. Short. 170–171.

⁶⁴Mona Hatoum (1952, Bejrút, lives in London): *Measures of distance*. 1988, 15'. Tabea Metzel: Mona Hatoum. In: Cat 11. Short. 106–107.

⁶⁵Sheela Gowda (1957, Bhadravati): *And...* 2007, cords; needles, thread, pigment and glue, 2 cords of 11.250x1 cm; 1 cord of 5250x1 cm. Cat. 12. 252–253, 377.

⁶⁶Amar Kanwar (1964, New Delhi): *The Lightning Testimonies*. 2007, nine chanel, videoinstallation, 32'31". Cat. 12. 266–267, 369.

⁶⁷Cecilia Vicuña (1948, Santiago de Chile): *Karl Marx*. 1972, oil, canvas, 92,1x71,7 cm; *Lenin*. 1972, oil, canvas, 56,5x51,4 cm; *Death of Allende*. 1973, oil, canvas, 57,1x40 cm; *Angel de la Menstruación*. 1973, oil, canvas, 57,8x48,3 cm; *Gabriela Mistral*. 1986, oil, canvas, 61x49 cm; *María Sabina*. 1986, oil, canvas, 59,7x49,5; *Violeta Parra*. 1973, oil, canvas, 57,8x48,3 cm. Cat. 14. VI.29; Booklet. 107.

⁶⁸Multiplicity (Stefano Boeri, Maddalena Bregani, Francisca Insulza, Francesco Jodice, Nadja Rottner et al. 2000, Milan): *Multiplicity*. Cat 11. Short. 166–167.

interviews with survivors, members of the local authorities and naval officers. They presented their results on videos, texts, drawings and photographic documents. The cause of the catastrophe was that the ship was carrying many more people than capacity would allow and since they were being illegally transported, the crew refused to ask for help.

The installation of Romuald Hazoumè,⁶⁹ *Dream*, is a huge picture with an idyllic African seaside. In front of the photograph there stands a boat made of oil cans made by African immigrants and with which rescue is doubtful.

In the video of Danica Dakić, *El Dorado*, young immigrants speak about what Paradise means, about flight, their plans, purposes and trust in Kassel's German Museum of Wallpaper. The *El Dorado* wallpaper (1848) as background of illusion of unspoiled nature became witness of experiences, ideas and desires.⁷⁰ In her film *Journal No 1*. An Artist's impression, Hito Steyerl⁷¹ shows through the eyes of a survivor, who was a child at the time of the Bosnian war, how memory is constructed by vulnerability, fear, laws and prejudices.

Conclusion

The questions I touch upon are whether there has been a strengthening of postcolonial representation; whether there is evidence of cultural decolonisation as cultural colonisation is dismantled – that is, as postcolonial theories are put into practice; whether or not a decolonisation of art has taken place during the Documenta exhibitions; and whether there has been a change in the post colonialist content of art. Since culture, art, economy and politics are so interwoven, it is hard to find the proper perspective from which the question can be elaborated: is Documenta decolonialist? Due to its position – economic, political and institutional embeddedness – as an institution it is not able to be decolonialist. However, due to its significance and potency, the Documenta has the opportunity to propose, elaborate and distribute theories and artistic practices, which are equally topical and subversive – in this case, a decolonialist ideology. Not by taking Documenta to several cities of the world, but by its special forms of exhibitions, publications and last but not at least, through its prestige. Since the first manifestation of post-colonialism in the Documenta, decolonialist thinking became evident. However slow the changes, the decolonialist spirit is there in the works of art – it cannot be put back in the bottle.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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