



GLOBALIZATION AND
CONTEMPORARY
Edited by **JONATHAN HARRIS** **ART**

WILEY-BLACKWELL

Art and Postcolonial Society

RASHEED ARAEEN

Before I deal with the key issue of this chapter, which is to look at “young, contemporary art” and see how it “intervenes in the social and economic infrastructures of art production and of society,” I would like to say something about the idea of artistic intervention. The fundamental prerequisite for an artistic intervention is the position of artists, how they are seen or considered in relation to the society in which they are located, whether or not their historical role or what constitutes agency is recognized within the society’s mainstream transformational processes.

This positionality is not a physical space but what is perceived by the society as a central role of the artist in its historical developments. If some artists are considered to belong to different cultural traditions and are thus excluded from the mainstream or their position within the mainstream is not institutionally recognized, even when their work references mainstream developments, their artistic intervention cannot be effective. I’m not thinking of a hypothetical situation but referring to the reality of nonwhite peoples in the West. What nonwhite artists in the West face is not necessarily that of their neglect or a denial of their multicultural role, but their specific positioning outside the historical genealogy of modernism which prevents them intervening in society at its structural level.

The ideological structures of western society were formed and built during its colonial period on the basis of the specific and exclusive position of the European, by which the white artist alone defined and determined the nature of modernism. This structure still prevails and excludes any central role by the nonwhite in it. It is therefore fundamentally important that nonwhite artists challenge this white privilege as part of their artistic endeavors. In other words, their intervention would necessarily involve a struggle to locate themselves within the space which has been denied to them due to their imposed “otherness.”

However, the relationship between the artist and society is extremely complex; it’s problematic and paradoxical. Artistic intervention cannot take place unless it enters

the institutional space and demands recognition from the very institution it may confront and disrupt. If it's realized that a particular work could subvert and disrupt the established order, the society may suppress it before it can enter the space or discourse by which it may attain legitimation and historical significance. Consequently, this work would remain ineffective until it's allowed to enter the institutional space.

My concern here is with what was established during the colonial times, in terms of the West's view of the world and its legacies today, whether this view has been abandoned or is still part of our present world. What I really want to examine is the role of artists, particularly of African and Asian backgrounds, in recognition of what should be considered as postcolonial reality. What have African and Asian artists produced during the time they have been here in Europe? And what does their contribution mean to the society in which they have produced their work? It's important to take into account the history of this work or intervention because it's only then that we can evaluate what is happening today among the young generation.

However, it's also important to define what I mean by postcoloniality. The common perception and understanding of postcoloniality is that it's something to do only with those peoples who were once Europe's colonial subjects but who have now achieved their independence. It's based on a mistaken view that it's only the colonized who are now facing or must face the specific conditions of postcoloniality; and that there was no need for the colonizer to change or go through its own liberation from colonial relationship. Europe can therefore continue behaving as a colonial master even when it doesn't have colonies. All it has to do now is to become a benevolent master and extend its charitable hand to help those who were once its colonial subjects.

What I'm instead suggesting is that postcoloniality is the condition of both: those who were once the colonizer and the colonized, and only when we recognize this can we establish a new relationship based on human equality between the people of Europe and its new citizens, who were once Europe's colonial subjects, and their European-born descendants. It is therefore historically important for Europe – for that matter for the whole West – to consider itself as a postcolonial entity. It would therefore be right to assume that its views, attitudes and values must today be radically different; they must be different from the time when the world was the West's colonial empire.

I therefore assume the West to be a postcolonial society. I assume we share an assumption and belief that we are all postcolonial subjects, irrespective of racial differences and cultural backgrounds, and it's only on this basis that we can have a dialogue and discuss the issues together which concern all of us. It's very important to avoid neocolonial fantasies which may be concerned with the welfare of others but are in effect part of a desire to dominate and control the world. This unfortunately is the situation of multiculturalism or cultural diversity spectacles in the West legitimated by postmodernism and globalization.

It's with this understanding that I wish to raise some fundamental questions. Although these questions are of a philosophical nature, they are fundamental to art and the way art has been contextualized historically as an expression of

modernity. It's difficult for me to raise these questions because philosophy is not my discipline. I do not claim to possess sufficient knowledge of it, either, in order to engage with them through their hermeneutics. But that does not mean I cannot or should not reflect upon or express my understanding of the ideas which concern me; I do not accept that my views in this respect have no validity because I'm entering a discipline which is considered to be the privilege of institutional power. It's my view that knowledge should not be monopolized, controlled, and contained by academia but should be open to public discussion and debate. It is only then that society as a whole can benefit from it.

These questions are particularly concerned with the "infrastructure of art production." What is happening in art today as part of globalization is the result of a continuity of the West's worldview developed philosophically during its emergence as a world power. However, before I go on to deal with these questions, I would like to express an initial personal concern. My worry was the focus on young contemporary artists, with whom I had very little to do. It is not that I'm not interested in contemporary art or what's happening around nowadays. I do understand why the younger generation is producing a particular kind of art today, and I've some kind of sympathy with them. I admire their ambition to express themselves in the way they think is right for them, different from earlier generations. Every generation expresses itself in its own way, and I do not see it as a problem. But when contemporariness, or the production of new ideas in art, is attributed only to the young, then there is something wrong.

For the last ten years or so, there has been a growing tendency in the art world to promote very young artists who are often picked up while they're still in art school or have just finished their education. As a result they are not given much time to think and develop their own ideas without the pressures of the art market, whose main concern is the commercial success of the artist which is often achieved through media hype. Moreover, the implication of the whole thing is that you have to be young in order to create new ideas or be creative in a contemporary context. I have no problem in associating myself with youthful energy and ambitions, but when youthfulness in itself is seen to be the only signifying thing for new art then I think we have lost the true sense of art and what its critical function is. As a result, the art scene has now become part of the youth culture which thrives on sensationalism and quick success. There is nothing wrong in being a successful artist, but in order to develop a critical discourse one needs a mature and responsible attitude and at the same time some distance from the demands of the art market.

However, I do not believe that the dynamic of contemporary art is solely due to the art market. There are complex historical reasons for what is being produced today, particularly by young artists. It would not be enough to dismiss the whole thing only as a juvenile activity hyped by the media. One needs to look at it historically: what has led to this present situation, and why artists are trapped in their ambitions for success.

Most of my writings have been about the first and second generation of artists from Africa and Asia who came to live in Europe after the war, and their struggle

to establishment themselves as part of the mainstream. It was a very difficult struggle against the prevailing views, attitudes, and assumptions of a society which saw them as "others" and expected them to produce art according to its old perceptions of them. The problem is how to talk about their struggle today, particularly when the situation is very different from the one that earlier generations faced. There would be no point in talking about this struggle without making a historical connection with what is happening now, particularly the situation of nonwhite artists today. I'm not aware of the situation in Denmark, or other European countries, but, during the twenty years between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s in Britain, no nonwhite artist was able to establish himself or herself as part of the art scene. The institutionally sanctioned history of art of this period shows that there were no artists around except white artists – which of course is not true. The absence or invisibility of the artists of this period is directly due to the establishment's deliberate ignorance and suppression of their work because it represented a challenge to the Eurocentric notion that only the white/European artist could occupy a central position within the historical developments of modern art.

The situation now is very different. The young generation of artists of non-European origins, whom I would call here "other" artists, are today very much around as part of the contemporary art scene, not only within the West's national boundaries – such as in Britain – but globally (as part of globalization). The question now is: how come the art scene has suddenly changed? How come the West has suddenly become concerned with equality for all? How come the institutions in the West have suddenly felt the need to promote "other" artists?

These questions are of historical nature and can only be looked at historically. What we see today is an end-result of what began with the definition of modernity and modernism of art, following Hegel's notion of art as a function of history. It's therefore important to look beyond the present success of young artists, and to see how they are located historically. If these artists are involved in an intervention, as part of the transformational processes of our modern or postmodern world, what is the nature of this intervention? Does the context of postmodernism allow the "other" to reclaim itself as a subject? Is their intervention possible without and outside the history of modernism?

Enrique Dussel, an Argentinian thinker who teaches in the Philosophy Department of the Metropolitan Autonomous University in Mexico City, argues that modernity which emerged in Europe as a result of its relation to the rest of the world, following the "discovery" and conquest of the New World, became Eurocentric at the time when it began to rationalize its colonial expansion "on the basis that Europe had exceptional internal characteristics that allowed it to supersede other cultures." "For Hegel," continues Dussel,

the Spirit of Europe (the German Spirit) is the absolute Truth that determines or realizes itself through itself without owing anything to anyone. This thesis which I call the Eurocentric Paradigm (in opposition to the world paradigm), has imposed itself not only in Europe and the United States, but in the entire intellectual realm of

the world periphery. The chronology of this position has its geopolitics: modern subjectivity develops spatially, according to the Eurocentric paradigm, from the Italy of the Renaissance to the Germany of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, to the France of the French Revolution; throughout, Europe is central.⁷

It is not the centrality of Europe in the development of the modern world which is being questioned here, but its assumption that it alone has the exclusive – if not divine – right to change the world. It's on this basis that the idea of modernity and its agency is defined exclusively within European subjectivity. This centrality is achieved through a construction of specific subjectivity which is perceived to be the bearer of civilized values and modernity, in contradistinction to what is seen to be the primitivism of other cultures and civilizations. Having claimed this subjectivity exclusively for its own self, the West begins to impose itself upon the colonized world. Colonialism was justified not just through the actual conquest of the land but also through its philosophical discourse, which underpinned and legitimated its claim of colonizing the world in order to take progress to its people. It's not my purpose to go into the whole history of western cultural discourse to show how it persistently and systematically built a system which rationalized differences between western and non-western subjects with an implication of the West's racial and cultural superiority. However, I will make a few points here which relate to the construction of the Western Self on the basis of European modernity which provides it with an exclusive historical role in the production of new ideas, whether they are scientific or artistic, which in turn helps it maintain its control and domination of the world.

In modernity the construction of the Self is dependent upon the construction of the "other" which must be the opposite of the Self, in terms of the modernity of the former and the primitivism of the latter; the former being the active subject of history while the latter is a passive object of transformation. While I have oversimplified this relationship, it is not my aim to ignore the ambivalence and dialectics of human interaction which cannot be eliminated from this relationship. However, what is interesting is the way the separation of the Self and the "other" is applied to the philosophy of modern art and its historical agency. By defining modernity only as an expression of European subjectivity, the European artist is granted the sole subject position in the realization of the historical developments of modern art and its grand narrative.

In order to understand this, let us turn to Hegel again who is the central figure in the formulation of philosophy of art history. For Hegel, the modernity of art can manifest only through the continuity of new ideas through the framework of history in which sequential events take place through an opposition to the established idea, which he calls thesis. The thesis must give rise to antithesis to produce a movement of ideas, resulting in a chain of synthesis within the dynamic of history and which maintains a continuity of history. The dialectics of this Hegelian idea demand an agency which must be free to challenge the established idea.

The human agency of this dynamic is therefore, according to Hegel and western philosophy in general, a specific subject. This subject must be totally free,

unlike the slave or the colonized. In other words, a modern artist must be free in order to act upon history and change it. The most obvious interpretation of Hegelian dialectics, and its limits, are found in the grand narrative of the modern history of art. The absence of non-European peoples as active agents from this narrative is based on the idea that colonized peoples cannot be agents of history, as they are not free subjects. They cannot therefore enter history, act upon it, and change it. In other words, they cannot and must not play any critical role in the construction of the world and must only allow themselves to be led by those who are inside and are part of the dynamic of history.

What if the colonized liberates itself? The answer to this lies in whether Hegel was only interested in propping up and legitimating colonialism and its world domination or whether he was interested in the ultimate achievement of what he called "universal spirit" through the liberation and emancipation of humanity as a whole. A philosophical idea as complex as Hegelian dialectics cannot be reduced to one dimension or interpretation, particularly when it leads to its own unresolvable contradiction or closure. Hegel's construction of specific agency, which was exclusively located within western culture or the raciality of the European subject, was determined by the imperial context in which he himself was located and which provided him with the dynamic of his thought. And it should be no surprise when he dismissed and blocked the evolutionary dynamics of other cultures and civilizations by locating them in a temporal hierarchy and freezing them in the past. But when we examine the master-slave relationship by applying Hegelian dialectics, we begin to become aware of the potential of the slave not only to liberate itself but also the master, leading to the fulfillment of the very Hegelian desire for universal human liberation and ultimate freedom of expression.

The struggle of the colonized for liberation is also for the liberation of the colonizer. When the colonized achieves its liberation, through its struggle against the colonizer's attempt to maintain its colonial grip on its subjects indefinitely, it actually offers to the colonizer a gift of liberation. It's a gift which when accepted restores the humanity of both, and brings them together in a humanized equal relationship.

It is with this universal spirit – to use Hegelian term – that the first generation of artists from Africa and Asia, after being liberated from the colonial bondage, arrived in Europe. Their ambition was not only to reclaim their subject position historically but also to inject new dynamism into modernism. Postcoloniality demanded that modernism be redefined beyond its western/colonial boundaries, so that it could achieve a new historical validity in universal terms as part of the postcolonial modernization of the newly independent countries, particularly of Africa and Asia.

What did the presence of African and Asian artists in postwar Europe do? Did they achieve anything? Did their presence in Europe or their achievement change the perception of Europe about them, and about itself? I'm not really concerned here with individual achievements or failures, as their achievements have not yet been properly evaluated or their failures understood historically. What is important

for me is the fact that they understood their historical responsibility, by locating themselves firmly within the paradigm of modernism and its historical space. What they thus achieved was extremely profound and historically important; they tried to change our notion of history and its genealogy.

We can understand this achievement if we remind ourselves that the modern art of the twentieth century was seen and propagated as a universal expression of humanity, and it was something to whose development everyone from every part of the world could contribute. It was with this ambition that the modern and avant-garde artists from the third world entered mainstream modernism, not only to claim their own place in it but also to liberate modernism from its colonial past. But this ambition flew in the face of what is still fundamental to western perception of the world, and which continues to be entrenched in the western art institutions. It was Europe's misfortune that it failed to see the importance of this intervention. And today we are left without the real history of Europe's postwar achievement, an achievement which would have made us look at things differently.

However, with this historical achievement of the "other," the whole logic of western humanism had come home to roost. The logic of Hegelian dialectics, which was trapped for a long time within its colonial assumptions, is turned on its head by the action of the "other," not in order to denounce the failure of humanism to fulfill its humanist ambitions and promises to the world, but to push the dialectics of this logic to its own logical conclusions. I am talking here about those artists who were among the pioneers of postwar international art movements, such as abstract expressionism, kinetic art, minimalism, conceptualism, Arte Povera, postminimalism, etc., leaving aside those attempts which tried to shift the center of modern movement from the West to the third world. I'm not indulging here in some fantasy because we have documented proof of these achievements. One of the purposes of *Third Text*, the art journal which I founded in 1987, is to expose and discuss these achievements. However, the aim of this paper is not to go into the detail of these achievements but to try to understand their implications, not only in their own right, but also to consider them as metaphors for the liberation of humanity: of both colonizer and colonized from the colonial past.

It's understandable why it is difficult for Europe to accept that the "other" could and would challenge its humanist presumptions. They are still trapped in the idea of Europe's – and for that matter the West's – supremacy, with subtle but pernicious racist undertones. The West cannot, on the other hand, deny the fact that the world is no longer its colony. It has liberated itself, on the very basis on which Europeans tried to civilize the world.

However, the philosophical discourse which legitimated the West's colonial expansion and domination could not be continually justified in the context of the postcolonial situation without facing what Habermas calls the "crisis of legitimation." It needed a new philosophical discourse which would help it look critically at the past but, at the same time, not jeopardize its old position. It needed something which would provide new ways of looking at and controlling the world,

and without a threat from the "other" to its privileged subjectivity, its Eurocentric modernity and history. It was important to remove or divert the conflict between those who considered themselves liberated subjects and the West that continued to define them as the "other." It needed a resolution in order to avoid its spilling over into the open and becoming an ideological warfare. The problem really was how to do this without the West giving up its ground, its own global ambitions. The solution was: why not close that chapter of history that was causing the problem and declare the end of modernity and its history. Thus emerges what is called postmodernism. It removed the historical challenge of the "other" to the West's centrality in the history of modern art in one stroke, and at the same time produced a new context in which to produce art that did not require art historic context or references for its legitimation. The world was now free from Eurocentric modernity and its history. The chapter in which the "other" had challenged Eurocentric modernism and redefined it as a continuing historical process beyond the West's colonial definition had thus been closed with the West's exclusive seal on it.

Despite all this, the "other" was not going to go away without demanding its place in the culture in which it was located and to which it had made a considerable contribution. Something had to be done in order to avoid the ramification of this demand. Postmodernism did the trick again: yes, we recognize that you are no longer the colonial "other," inhabiting a space far away from our Metropolis. You are within it as a part of us, and we want you to play a creative role in it. We know you have problems here, being away from your own culture, but we will help you overcome these problems. We will provide you with a special space, an in-between space, a context within which you can express your specific experiences. You don't have to be like us. We think you are different. We want you to express your difference. You can even use your difference to critique our shortcomings. After all, we are human beings and are not perfect. As for our institutions, they are not only ours, they belong to all of us. And there is no reason why the institution will not give you full support. In fact, they will celebrate you because you are playing a major role in our multicultural society. The question of conflict is no longer there because we are all together and all equals. As for the old institutional structures and their discourses, you should not worry about them. They won't affect you. They won't affect your special position. If there's some conflicts because of misunderstanding, let the politicians or postcolonial academics sort them out. In fact, we will produce postcolonial theorists who will pay special attention to your position in our society and provide theoretical justifications for whatever you do. As for the history of art and the discourse of modernism, they belong to a different period. We should let bygones be bygones. Why look at the past? We should look to the future, the brilliant future of our multicultural world.

Thus emerges the young, postcolonial artist of African or Asian origin who is part of western society and who is not separated from his or her white/European contemporaries. Both of them display and circulate within the same space (of globalization) and same art market, recognized, and legitimated by the same

institutions. But underlying this apparent equality there exist two different schemes of things: the white/European artist has no obligation to the multicultural society and he does not require any identity sign for the work to be recognized; the "other" artists must carry the burden of the culture from which they have originated, and they must indicate this in their artworks before they can be recognized and legitimated. Their works must carry identity cards with African or Asian signs on them.

You may think I'm talking about South Africa under apartheid. No, I'm not. I'm talking about the liberal democratic society of the West in which all its citizen, irrespective of their place of origin or racial difference, are supposed to have equal right and status. Is it not extraordinary that within this society there exists a system of apartheid upheld and protected by its most liberal institutions, in some cases with the help of some postcolonial theorists? These theorists are still arguing on the basis of the colonizer-colonized relationship and its ambivalence. In fact, behind their idea of ambivalence lies a desire to serve the old masters, as colonial go-betweens. Their postcolonial theories, instead of recognizing the modernity of the postcolonial subject and its creative ability to intervene in what are the legacies of colonialism, have in fact limited and controlled the choices and actions of the postwar artist by defining his/her artistic role and potential exclusively within the migratory and diasporic experiences. In this situation, how could the young "other" artist, excluded from the paradigm of modernism and removed from its history, intervene in what are historically determined structures, both of art production and legitimation? While young postmodern white/European artists carry with them the knowledge of modernism and its history, which provides them the dynamic for their present work, nonwhite artists have been denied the history of the modern achievement of their earlier generations in the West.

The issue we face is therefore of a structural nature, and until this is dealt with in its historical context it is very difficult to say how one can intervene in the system today. The issue here is of human equality, of human rights. In a liberal democratic society, it should be one's basic right to express oneself in whatever way one chooses, with or without one's cultural baggage. Nobody should dictate, prescribe, or create conditions that limit one's creative actions. The historical responsibility of the postcolonial artist, both white and black, European and non-European, is to understand that the world is no longer the West's colony. The philosophical discourses which justified and legitimated the centrality of the European in modernism has collapsed and has no validity today. These discourses are still being used, with their new name of postmodernism, by art institutions, art historians, and critics because of the global power of the West; they continue to look at the world and define it in the same old colonial way. The postcolonial artist must therefore challenge this colonial legacy; and only through this challenge can we intervene and transform this society into a truly postcolonial multiracial society.

To end up, I just want to say something about the present situation. Here is an example of a young artist's achievement. Recently a British artist of African origin, who is a darling of the establishment, announced in a seminar that all he wanted was to be successful like white artists. The same artist once confessed to me that he

didn't care much what his work was and how it was displayed, so long as it was shown. After all, he had to pay his mortgage and support his family. This artist is famous for his irony, but I am not sure he has been ironic in this instance. If there is an irony, it's lost on the artist himself, masking his bitterness, cynicism, and failure.

Note

This is the slightly revised text of a talk Rasheed Araeen gave in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1999. I have preserved its spoken quality because the author refers to the context in ways that directly relate to the concerns of the argument he is making.

- 1 Enrique Dussel "Beyond Eurocentrism: The world-system and the limits of modernity," trans. Eduardo Mendieta, in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (eds), *The Culture of Globalization*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.