

*What is your understanding of decolonizing art history now? What does a decolonized art history look like? How should it be written/practised?*

The theory, as opposed to the praxis, of 'decolonizing art history now' is the attempt at a more robust methodology of art history which will be more accommodating and tolerant of other world civilizations. Many of the plastic and creative endeavours of colonial peoples are both technically robust and aesthetically beautiful. Take, for instance, the lost wax method of metal casting (*cire perdue*) that has long been practised in Ife and Benin; or perhaps the wood carving processes of certain West African communities. These conceptual and practical approaches to making constitute comprehensive scientific contributions to world knowledge. We should, therefore, be looking at new curricula which seek interpretation as a result of the origin and history of the same works. Works of art also have nations, cultures and languages by and through which they speak to us and address our sensibilities and emotions. Colonized objects out of place as a result of looting, such as those from the British expedition to Benin, Nigeria in 1897, need to be rethought indigenously, rather than as products of Western museums.

*How might the decolonization of art history impact upon your own area of research/practice? What would be produced from it? Might anything have to be jettisoned?*

The decolonization of art history will give rise to the multidisciplinary, multicultural rebirth of the study of art and culture. It will result in a broader way of looking at learning, scholarship and the world at large. If anything is to be jettisoned from it, it will be the bias and the 'parochialism' associated with territoriality and narrow specializations. The world is becoming increasingly multi- and trans-disciplinary in outlook. A more liberal outlook might gradually and steadily emerge.

*Where should decolonization in relation to art history happen? What strategies might different spaces for decolonization demand?*

The geography of decolonization is not space-bound. As with the dictates of cultural studies, the willingness of institutions to modify methodologies is key. It is necessary for art institutions to begin to call for discussions on what best practices should be in the near future on decolonization. It is noteworthy that Western institutions have always had the resources, the wherewithal, the good will and the courage to lead the initiative even as second and third world countries make commensurate efforts to catch up or elaborate patterns by which convenient alternatives are practicable. There is greater economic and human capacity in the Western world to begin exploration on the future of decolonization.

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## **susan pui san lok**

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

Modern colonialism continues to engender and enforce capitalism – engenders and enforces supremacism (white, male, human) – engenders and enforces slavery,

genocide, ecocide, domestic and environmental violence – exploitation of cheap and invisible labour, human and natural resources – engenders and enforces chronic inflammation, slow and sudden deaths, transgenerational trauma. Our bodies are inflamed, the world is enflamed – literally burning.

The moment demands unity and alliances beyond discrete and solitary causes – notwithstanding seemingly irresolvable tensions, conflicts and animosities between them. As disparate calls for action grow out of local conjunctures of power and abuse, as ‘minor’ injustices ratchet up, those dismissed as powerless, useless, inept, less than human (too young, too old, not white nor male nor straight enough) refuse manipulation and turpitude. Anger ricochets – how to amplify long drowned out voices, including the voices of the drowned, to dampen and change the course of the fires?

The moment demands that we move against the apparent global tide – through praxes in tension and in concert – that we dismantle the monumental narratives that mask historical violence, violence that continues to reverberate through discriminatory structures and systems, still dividing and conquering along racial, gendered, heteronormative, class and ableist lines, obfuscating commonalities and strengths (lest we remember the Emperor’s new clothes, the houses of cards/the oceans of waste that will eventually asphyxiate us). We are fantasists if we imagine that alliances will be easy. We are fantasists if we fail to admit that we are all on the same terrifying brink.

Our social, economic, political and cultural differences, privileges and positionalities will always be multiple, intersecting and shifting, in unequal relations of domination, located within mutually imbricated local and global ecologies. There is no denying that many suffer daily violence, pain, fear, threat and humiliation, that some of us cannot know. Decolonization entails the deeply discomfiting, deeply disturbing work of confronting our own complicities and silences. Decolonization entails the dismantling of enduring systemic and structural laws and institutions and pedagogies and practices, to resist their dehumanizing, annihilating affects. As others have said: dehumanization = death.

Fifty or so years of challenges to the discipline, from within and without, appear in some ways to be converging – forming bipartisan and non-binaristic alliances that have the potential to reach across and undermine actual and perceived silos. Ideologically entrenched in the intricate global legacies of five hundred years of colonialism and imperialism that continue to oppress, damage and destroy, perhaps such alliances can only ever be temporary and tactical, riven as they are with internal conflict. Assemble, disassemble, reassemble. Attune, re-attune to decolonial ways of seeing-thinking-doing-listening. Trans- and anti-disciplinary activism, through artistic, creative, critical, poetic, curatorial and museological intervention and disruption, may take slow, quiet and solitary forms, effecting small, modest changes. Yet these are crucial to the collective work of dismantling the ruling structures, de-territorializing the political and intellectual terrain, and reinventing our relations to each other.

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De-centred, de-territorialized, de-disciplined; heterogeneous, contested, contradictory, confused, confusing; multiple, multitudinous, multilingual, translingual,

untranslatable; diasporic, migratory, translocal, transhemispheric, oceanic, archipelagic; uncertain, indefinite, unstable, transforming, transformative.

We might begin by asking: what everyday de-territorial acknowledgements do we need to make, here and now, in the places we occupy? We need to recognize that the afterlives of imperialism and colonialism continue to deny and negate Indigenous peoples and their relation to unceded lands; that we continue to deny and negate the histories and experiences of former enslaved and indentured communities; that we continue to deny and negate the histories and experiences of immigrant, racialized and displaced communities. We need to recognize the specific histories and pervasive legacies of domination and exploitation in Britain and that ‘after empire’, our public collections and archives are always already colonial and imperial.

And: how can we displace and undo the terms and orders of value and visibility, in order to attune to and re-attune our ways of seeing otherness to ways of seeing-thinking-doing-listening otherwise?

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No more hoarding (no more stealing, appropriating and amassing of valuable/useless stuff), but also no more jettisoning – another violent act of dispossession, disownership, denial.

Twenty-five years since my BA in Fine Art at Bretton Hall, Leeds University; twenty-two since my MA in Feminism and the Visual Arts with Griselda Pollock; fifteen since my PhD with Aavaa (the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, founded by Eddie Chambers and relocated to the University of East London under the co-direction of Sonia Boyce and David A. Bailey); two children on and, against various odds, it looks like I am still pursuing an ambivalent career – or ‘careen’ – between artworld and academia.

My practice research/research practice, across archives, moving image, installation, sound, performance and text remains resistant to ‘identity politics’ and aspirational towards what I have hesitantly called a critical diasporic aesthetics, where ‘identification’ might be understood as the ongoing negotiation of place, language, memory, and voice, from an uncertain, unstable and shifting positioning, undone yet determined by cultural aphasia and amnesia. My first solo exhibition was called *Un- (Retrospectre, part 6)* (Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, 1996-97) – the title and work a compact undoing, fragmenting, rehearsal, refusal and resurfacing of misleading originary narratives. My most recent solo show was called *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND* (FirstSite, Colchester, 2018) – a retrospective witnessing of past persecutions through transhistorical and transcultural assemblies or assemblages of voice and stitch; and an ever uncomfortable ‘return’ to my so-called ‘Essex roots’, to uproot and transpose an ancient oak tree as symbol and sanctuary of witches.

Moving in the last year into a new academic role as Director of the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute, currently in development, I have been navigating the complex ecology of decolonization within the university: the attenuated links between research, practice, and pedagogical communities; the historical research projects and curriculum change

initiatives over several decades, and more recent student campaigns (#UALSoWhite, #liberatemycurriculum); the enduring privilege of some, and ongoing marginalization of others; the minimizing and silencing effects of white entitlement and fragility on loud and swaggering display; the question of resilience, well-being, collective- and self-care; the uneven distribution of unacknowledged labour related to 'diversity work' (diversification  $\neq$  decolonization); the invisibility of staff and students who may choose not to identify by ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation or disability ... I am only beginning to situate and understand this ecology in relation to wider various global cultural and socio-political perspectives, as well as in relation to my own practice research/research practice.

I have always resisted the burden of representation – I am more interested in its politics and poetics – and the particular conjunctions, affinities, alignments and relations, that, for example, prompted the twenty-four-year-old me to introduce myself as a 'YBBAACRYRWBWA', or 'Young-Black-British-Anglo-Asian-Chinese-Yellow-Red-White-and-Blue-Woman-Artist'. Asked to identify myself, I might respond with: why? Or simply refuse. Tactics change, but perhaps not so much. As far as I am concerned, the same goes for the emerging Institute – to refuse the burden of representation. A Decolonising Arts Institute is arguably a contradiction in terms. It is both an admission and confrontation and embrace of the need for institutions to decolonize from within. Its 'success' cannot be envisioned without its eventual 'failure' or dissolution, in the reimagining and reinvention of the university. Its purpose is not to represent institutional politics or ecologies (the university has other mechanisms and processes for that). For me, a Decolonising Arts Institute must be anything but territorial. Rather, the Institute is for instituting, generating, challenging old and new knowledges, and their wilful or unwilling gatekeepers and audiences – opening up and disrupting and reconnecting spaces and habits of thinking and doing, to attend and attune to decolonial praxes – including experimental practice research, research practice and practice pedagogies – and perhaps the occasional Decolonial Fight Club. (First rule: We talk about the fight club. Second rule: We talk about the fight club. Third rule: Someone yells 'stop', we find another way. Fourth rule: Everybody fights. Fifth rule: Break the rules).

The Institute is for enacting, performing and testing the de/territorialization and dis/embodiment and dis/possession of what we know and what we forget, of what we do and how we do it. The Institute needs to be peripatetic, connective, interstitial, intersectional, porous and generous, but also contradictory, challenging, difficult, uncomfortable – more than the sum of its strategic and tactical, solitary and collective acts and gestures of resistance, refusal and reinvention.

How to negotiate and hold a space or spaces, as both host and guest, without succumbing to proprietorial habits, without trying to own or disown, or dominate others? How to give; to give some things up; to never give up; to forgive yet not to forget?

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In the studio, in the seminar room, in the lecture theatre, in the canteen, in the museum, in the gallery, in the street, in the journals, in the books, in the

broadsheets, in the tabloids, in the broadcast media, online and off. All these spaces demand that we challenge our everyday interactions, our habitual, disciplinary norms, call out unconscious biases, resist the urge to draw lines, do everything to decentre and resituate ourselves as unconditional allies. Ask questions and listen differently and deeply:

Who is in the room? Who is outside the room? Who (wo)mans the door? Who is gatekeeping? Who holds the keys? Who is speaking? Who is silent? Who is listening? Who is heard? Who is looking? Who is being looked at? Who is seen? Who is not seen? Whose gaze is privileged? Whose gaze, whose desires are denied? Who has the right to not be seen? Who can refuse visibility? Whose language dominates? Whose rules determine value? Who and what is denigrated? Are you mansplaining? Are you whitesplaining? Are you blacksplaining? Who is uncomfortable? Who is apologizing? Who is doing the work?

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## **Emanuele Lugli**

*What is the historical specificity of current calls to decolonize art history? How are they different from previous challenges to the discipline (such as postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, Marxism)?*

Rather than speaking of the historical specificity of current calls in the singular, as if they all shared the same agenda, I would insist on the shapes that studies of racial oppression have taken across the world. After all, they differ profoundly in terms of awareness, scale, even urgency. Compare, for instance, African American studies in the United States, which has generated wonderfully active departments and done tremendous work to show to the public the fundamental role that slavery has played in that country's economy, to the little research about the persecutions of ethno-religious communities (Jews, Romani people, the Valdesi) in the modern Italian states and that struggles to gain even some scholarly attention.

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It is difficult to say what it may look like because studies of decolonization are calls to work and thus embrace openness. They interrogate: they question the language we employ, the categories by which we judge, and the focus of our research projects. Even if such an ambitious process of resensitization has been going on for a few decades now, we have started seeing its benefits only recently. One of them is that some art historians no longer teach a list of artistic achievements but instead focus on processes of socialization that are at the core of material production. Unfortunately, I see the current landscape as rather jagged, with many institutions only making some cosmetic adjustments, if any. I also see much analysis as taking the form of abstract commentary whereas I would like to see more teachers, writers, curators, and public historians spend energies articulating the ongoing hardship of racial exclusions.