

A Mão do Povo Brasileiro

Any discourse which however rudimentary acknowledges the possibility of the concept of decolonization in Brazil is welcome since the mere mention of the word has been and continues vehemently to be vigorously rejected by the non-indigenous as an impossibility or as inapplicable to Brazil.

MASP (Museu de Arte de São Paulo), which has been called since its inception, a "bastion of Western art" had as its inaugural exhibit "A Mão do Povo Brasileiro". The press release states "The Hand of the Brazilian People was the inaugural temporary exhibition at MASP on Avenida Paulista in 1969, presenting a vast panorama of the rich material culture of Brazil—around a thousand objects, including figureheads, votive figures, textiles, garments, furniture, tools, utensils, machinery, musical instruments, ornaments, toys, religious objects, paintings, and sculptures...To give value to a production frequently marginalized by the museum and art history, MASP, known for its collection of European masterpieces, engaged in a radical gesture of decolonization. To decolonize the museum meant to rethink it from a bottom-up perspective, presenting art as work. In this sense, a painting by Brazilian modernist Candido Portinari and a hoe were both considered work—a notion that transcended the distinctions between art, artifact, and craft... [this exhibit] is taken as an object of study and an exemplary precedent of a decolonizing museum practice." It is commendable that the curating team has re-created this exhibit in 2016 as an attempt to re-contextualize it within the forever nascent discourse of decolonization in Brazil.

But is it a "radical gesture of decolonization"?

Decolonization results in the indigenous population having control over their land and lives. Therefore it follows that a basic tenet of decolonization is that the colonized be the active agent of her own discourse and process of decolonization. In other words, the indigenous must come first in all discourse on decolonization in Brazil and therefore must be present for any discourse on decolonization.

The curatorial team of the original exhibit consisted of four organizers: two Italians, one descendant of a Bandeirante (a killer of indigenous peoples) and a former student of medicine - from privileged and non-indigenous backgrounds. Their solidarity with those who were not part of the Western tradition of art is admirable, however, it remains that the exhibit was organized with no active voice from the non-Western historical and cultural perspectives.

In the recreation of the exhibit in 2016, we find a curatorial re-enactment of the same dilemma: the organizers are non-indigenous and one imagines they come from Western privileged backgrounds.

The original museographic choice of raw pine boards to serve for displaying the works is problematic as it reveals a common conceit that the non-privileged classes are somewhat "rough". (It is typical mistake made by visitors to 'popular' events to 'dress down' whereas those who are from the non-privileged classes would be 'dressing up' for these same events. This is then perceived by the privileged visitors as attempts by the participants to imitate like the dominant class instead of trying to dress as celebratory as possible - since during all the other days of the week one is dressed in working clothes - let us say, the opposite of those who 'dress down' for the weekend etc.) Therefore the carved wooden and hand painted clocks and cupboards embedded at times between these boards look glaringly out of place...as they should. Wherever possible in regions where wood is used to build homes, much effort is taken to cover the raw board with whatever is at hand and affordable such as paint, cloth or paper (mostly newspaper or magazines pages) to make it look more aesthetically pleasing. Even the junctions where the wood board meets another are covered with a thinner strips to keep out drafts of wind and for elegance. This was not the case in this exhibit. It was 'rough' because the non-privileged are seen as 'rough'....

The quilts at the back of the exhibit provided an important clue to the basic problem with the exhibit; the aesthetics of the exhibit which are meant to be one of the first initiatives of decolonizing practice in a museum in Brazil. The quilts, all of muted colors and all on a white background, are in keeping with the modernist Western aesthetics of the times and its continuation today. They are a clear indication of what is amiss in the exhibit from 1969 and its recreation: Who decides? At every moment with each display, we must ask what was not chosen? Why was it not chosen? From the quilts we see that muted colors was an important basis for the inclusion of an object from this category in this exhibit. (Strangely, there is one example of a more colorful quilt, which however, is not included with the 'tasteful' modernist selection.)

The possibility of the exhibit initiating a decolonial discourse is further eroded by a display case of indigenous necklaces (with no attempt to identify the ethnic groups responsible for their production, some of which to even my non-trained eyes could be easily identifiable i.e. necklaces made by the Kayapó and Rikbaktsa) owned by a non-indigenous gallerist. The necklaces, all elegant, and tastefully chosen; are either white, beige or black. (Yes, there are other vitrines with a wider range of color - but even they must bring us to question again, what was not chosen and why?)

The curatorial team of the current re-created exhibit asks "The central question posed by the exhibition (and a possibly subversive one to the eyes of the generals of taste) is: in which way can the histories of art and culture in Brazil be reconstructed, recollected, and reconfigured beyond the mores, tastes, and protocols of the dominant classes?". There was a seminar in connection with the exhibit but going through the biographies of the eight speakers (http://masp.art.br/masp2010/mediacaoeprogramaspublicos_a-mao-do-povo-brasileiro.php) it seems only one invited speaker is indigenous.....from La Paz, Bolivia. Beneath the elegant floating upper section of MASP, is a pleasant public urban space to escape from rain or sun. Some Guarani who live in reservations in São Paulo, also use it as a space to meet up with each other. For example, Jera Guarani, the young leader of the Guarani Kalipety reservation in the south of the city, sometimes rests there between meetings. There are several interviews and recordings of her talks, here is one where she speaks with a minister: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pftUMqF0Mzs>. For the decolonization process to begin in museums in Brazil, the indigenous must be the first voice to speak. Without the indigenous voice such exhibits tragically must remain the result of the dominant discourse, no matter how well intentioned.

With decades of discussion on decolonization in so many regions of the world, with so many publications by brilliant non-Western thinkers why does the lack of indigenous agency in this exhibit continue to not seem problematic at all in Brazil? Why is the singular Western vision of the 1969 exhibit re-enacted in the 2016 re-creation with no critical participation of indigenous thinkers in Brazil still sadly acceptable? Even their lack of participation still invisible and not acknowledged?

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