

Decolonising the Canon

Drawing from her own background in anthropology, Virginia Whiles advocates an interdisciplinary approach to deconstructing the racist canon underlying western art-historical curricula.

The ideological background to colonialism demands rigorous cross-cultural investigation, especially with the current delusion of imperialism inflaming the Tory party.

Not only fervent nationalism but racist ideology, too, transpired in the writings of several 19th-century European art historians such as Eugéne Viollet-le-Duc, whose passion for the Gothic northern so-called primitive Renaissance was linked to its good 'arian' blood (a polemical issue even now with the predicted restoration of Notre Dame, whose earlier restoration he oversaw in 1844). The term 'orientalism', as a form of 'imperialist knowledge' as Edward Said described it, was used by the critical defender of the French realist movement Jules-Antoine Castagnary to decry the popular tendency in French salon art between 1840 and 1860.

Twenty years ago while looking at so-called orientalist art with South Asian students, the critical questions raised about power structures, gender issues and representation of the other were perceived as relevant to their own context. In a recent discussion about decolonising art history with students at University of the Arts London (UAL) looking at the Tate Britain collection, one student said she had to look the word

decolonising up and several admitted difficulty in grasping its sense. Of around 20 students, two thirds were from BAME backgrounds – the common proportion in UK art schools. Their reactions to the historical facts around cultural colonialism reflected the same degree of dismay shown by the South Asian students. Anger at their ignorance of their own cultural backgrounds coupled with anger at the marketing strategies of British education policies (hugely subsidised by high-fee-paying Asian students, soon to be enhanced by raising the fees for EU students) foments their challenging of the curriculum, both here and in Asia.

Richard Hylton's conclusion, in his feature 'Decolonising the Curriculum' (*AM426*), that we need to decolonise academia was only too manifest in my review of 'Art and Empire' at Tate Britain in 2016 (*AM393*), in which I wrote: 'the overall visual effect suggests that our means of knowledge are still colonised. As the Australian artist Brook Andrew stated in the Tate debate, steeped in post-imperial melancholia, "We still need to decolonise ourselves ... the final gallery, mis-named *Out of Empire*, makes a feeble footnote. Significant artists such as Aubrey Williams, Donald Locke, Hew Locke, Uzo Egonu, Balraj Khanna, Sonia Boyce and Judy Watson are hung without curatorial care or passion. Despite the worthy intentions to show the "inter-cultural connections of a postcolonial artworld in a multicultural Britain", they fail to make their case by lack of imagination and collaboration with the artists.'

Deconstruction of the racist canon that ruled the western art world develops through interdisciplinary deviations. This route led me to study anthropology. Its focus on context and agency motivates the self-reflexivity critical for the study and practice of art as a social fact. Ethnography can be a tool towards understanding how other art stories disturb the ethnocentric narrative of western art history. Throughout the past 20 years of combining art history with anthropological methodology, I have run a seminar entitled 'Anthropology as a Tool for Artists' in France, the UK, Pakistan and India. Why and how this option seems popular is the subject of my current research. The main reason lies in its partial response to the demand from students to decolonise the curriculum; it serves as a forum for the multicultural student body to discuss migration and the diasporic shifts in cultural identity.

Further to this, the zines being produced by students at UAL interrogate issues surrounding western hegemony. Central Saint Martins has a zine library to support alternative forms of publishing representing anti-capitalist marginalised voices of all varieties, from LGBTQI+ to fat activism and squatting, all included in the library catalogue. The main UAL zine, *Decolonising the Arts Curriculum* (which is available online), is collated and curated by Hansika Jethnani (Students' Union), Lucy Panesar and Rahul Patel (Teaching and Learning Exchange). Their activism was sparked off by a student-led campaign in 2016 called UAL SO WHITE. To the question: 'Do you feel like your curriculum represents people of diverse backgrounds and identities?', 13% of the student body replied yes and 87% said no.

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Raisa Kabir, *Build me a loom off your back and your stomach*, 2018, performance, Manchester School of Art



Vipin Dhanurdharan's community kitchen project, Kochi-Muziris Biennial, 2019

staff of colour and the discrimination faced by those who enter the institution'. Staff and student submissions to the zines reveal diverse perspectives from art and design departments; the list of suggested further reading, for example, includes impressive websites on Asian cultural studies that offer notions of 'Inter-Asia' and transnationalism as a form of academic activism referring to Kuan-Hsing Chen's belief that 'decolonisation, deimperialisation and de-cold war have to proceed in concert'.

A major source for the workshops/reading groups centred on racism and colonialism at Chelsea College is the African-Caribbean, Asian and African Art in Britain Archive in the bibliography 'Recordings' initiated in 1996 by Elisabeth Ward. Patel runs the group together with the archive curator and academic support librarian Gustavo Grandal Montero. Readings and discussions focus on publications and exhibitions in black British art in the 1980s, while the issue of experimental pedagogy is addressed by Shades of Noir, an organisation whose founder, Aisha Richards, agitates for more staff of colour in the university. Collective Creativity is a small group that was inspired by histories of radical political black art in Britain, coming together in 2016 under the subtitle QTIPOC (Queer, Trans, Intersex People of Colour). The group's main spokeswoman is Raisa Kabir, an artist working in textiles with a background in Bangladesh. She has

written a manifesto denouncing the erasure of many black women and queer people from a black art world made up mainly of men. Her insistence on the need to research queer feminist postcolonial histories resonated in a feisty talk she gave at the Courtauld Institute last year, which led to a lively debate.

There is an interdisciplinary route to decolonising academia. As a Fine Art student at Hornsey in the 1960s, Jonathan Miller (neurologist and theatre director) turned a group of us on to interdisciplinary learning through the *communitas* spirit encouraged by anthropologist Vic Turner. We studied the nervous system for a year and I wrote a dissertation on 'Strategy and Tactics in Abstract Expressionism'. This experience has been crucial to my teaching, using the pedantic term 'contextualisation' for many conversations held around a big table. Postgraduate art history at Chelsea College encouraged a critique of academic art history by female feminist practitioners who believed that theory should be linked to studio practice. To study Tibetan art, however, I had to seek outside help from John Irwin at the V&A and David Snellgrove at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). My first job at Winchester Art School was orientated to non-western art history using the slides from my travels in South Asia. Although welcomed by the textile department it was viewed with much scepticism by the Fine Art department, which saw no need for it.

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Raisa Kabir, *The Body is a Site of Production*, 2017, The Tetley, Leeds

Options courses are positive sites for interdisciplinary learning. In the 1970s, for example, Chelsea seminars offered rich pickings: David Medalla on *La Belle Epoque*, Anne Rees Mogg on colour theory, Peter Marshall on psychoanalysis and Greg Desjardins on Homer and Plato; mine was on contemporary theatre and its oriental antecedents using Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstücke* as tools for improvisation. 1970s art-history seminars at Goldsmiths, however, offered traditional western fare – rare were the alternative interventions. Out of Ian Jeffrey's 20 lectures on European art stood one exception, 'The Social Functions of Art', which focused on European Church art, but also covered 'African masks and sculptures'. John Steele held seminars on prehistoric art, myth and science, citing Egyptian pyramids and Mexican shamans, including Carlos Castaneda and his own search for Atlantis. Truly exceptional was Wen-Chin Hsu's course on Chinese art. Most references to diverse cultures only appeared in the lecture series on 'Early Textiles' by Jackie Herald. A notably iconic moment occurred with the ambitious proposal of 'alternative views' by Malcolm Miles in 1982 in West Surrey: 'This course will look at a few ideas from both western and eastern thought.'

From 1980 to 2000 at the École des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, I ran courses in Asiatic art history and in global contemporary art. The school's gallery offered opportunities to invite artists from South Asia and elsewhere to participate in several exhibitions and conferences. In the early 1990s I went to India to fix the first exchanges with art schools in Baroda, Madras, Hyderabad and Bangalore, meeting students and artists for exhibitions at Rouen. These experiences confirmed my growing realisation that art history and cultural studies need anthropological framing. Eventually I completed a doctorate in Anthropology at SOAS. Invited to Pakistan to set up an MA theory course at the National College of Art in Lahore, I encountered the unique miniature painting department that triggered my shift towards ethnographic research into the practice by studying it alongside the students. I found the interdisciplinary approach to be effective in widening my view beyond the traditional European canon.

But there remains a question about how the post-colonial might itself be colonised. At a 1996 conference in Bombay on The Post-Modern Art Object, the artist Nalini Malani shouted out a vehement rejection of the term postcolonialist: 'With the arrival of the multinationals in India, we rediscover ourselves in a neo-colonialist situation.'

The motives for establishing British art education in the subcontinent under colonial rule were economic and political. For instance, progressive policies were applied to help the survival of indigenous handicrafts. This discourse, however through the gradual imposition of an academic programme wholly based on western art history and aesthetics, revealed the colonial hand. The ruse to split Fine Art, seen as belonging to the West, from Applied Arts, seen as coming from the craft and design lesson to be taught by India, set up a dual framework. Suiting the colonial combination of missionary zeal and commercialisation, it discriminated between craft as minor and Fine Art as major, thus gaining ideological control over class, race and gender.

In 2001 while teaching in Lahore, I curated a show entitled 'Returning the Gaze'. The Pakistani artists were also teachers who had spent time studying in UK art schools, experiencing the shifts of the 'new art history' since the 1970s. They were invited to reverse the former colonial surveillance and to reflect on their studies in UK art institutions in a postcolonial era. Although feminist inspiration had developed an interdisciplinary approach towards examining the socio-political contexts of gender, it was slow in losing its ethnocentric focus on western art. The issue for the artists was to reflect on how this process had affected their own teaching, particularly because the shadow of the imperialist academic structure still hung over most art schools in South Asia.

How to avoid re-inscribing western 'cultural authority' was clearly a problem for me, conscious of my WMCAF (white-middle-class-aged-female) role within a 'Return of the Raj' scenario, but it was also a problem for the artists. For the contemporary artist trained interculturally, the postmodern fascination with appropriation intrigues through questions of linking ideas, forms and techniques from both local and global culture. Awareness of such issues revealed a conscious appropriation of diverse cultural imagery, acknowledging their indigenous formation and the effects of migration.

In my experience of working with them, Asian students in European art schools often confront a dilemma. While being encouraged by certain tutors to avoid 'cultural transparency', to lose their 'ethnic' imagery and 'go with the global flow', recognition from the art market often motivates curatorial pressure to 'signal their ethnicity through a variety of formal and symbolic devices', in the words of MC Sturtevant.

Questions for debate arose: since public culture in South Asia has been moulded by orientalist concepts of difference and division, how much is anti-colonialist ideology derivative of colonial knowledge? Had their experience of British art education encouraged or discouraged their sense of class division? Their texts reflected a mixed appreciation of their time abroad. Displacement and relocation enforces a far more intense reflection on cultural identity. In my experience of working with them, Asian students in European art schools often confront a dilemma. While being encouraged by certain tutors to avoid 'cultural transparency', to lose their 'ethnic' imagery and 'go with the global flow', recognition from the art market often motivates curatorial pressure to 'signal their ethnicity through a variety of formal and symbolic devices', as MC Sturtevant wrote in *The Meaning of North American Art* in 1986.

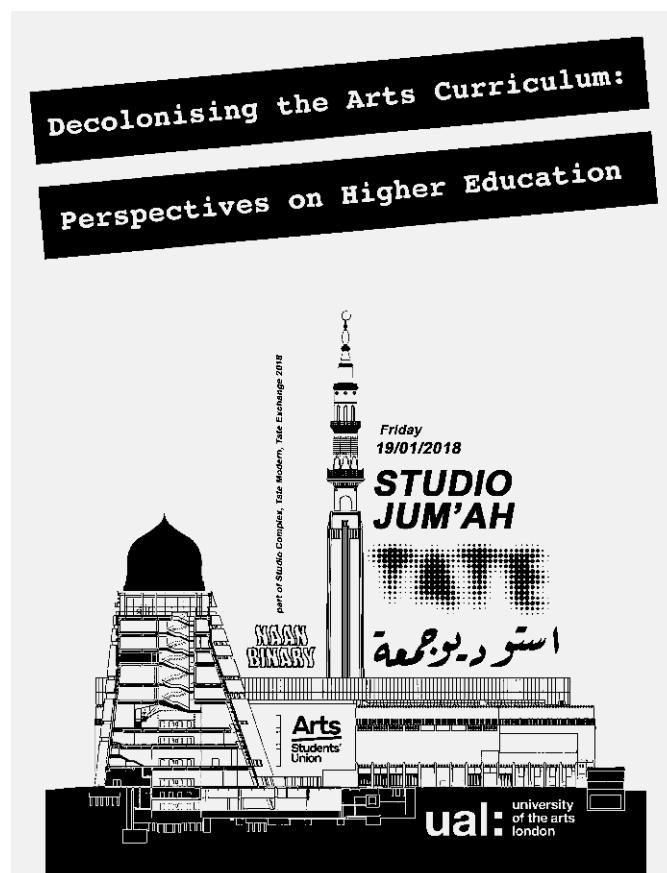
These questions are still hot to debate; they were clearly too hot to handle at the time since they were never even posed to the public after a bomb threat at the exhibition opening on 20 September 2001 (just days after 9/11). This caused much stress to the British Council, which immediately shut up house in Lahore for many years.

Alongside the strong postcolonial critique by Indian art historians, South Asian artists are reviewing indigenous history through their practice. 'Performative' rather than 'pedagogical', their politicisation arises from engagement with everyday conflict, but also from their desire to learn. The gap between making art and discursive practice is as fragile in India as anywhere. One potential solution as an alternative to western-based theory, suggested by the remarkable pedagogy at Hyderabad University's SN School of Arts is to listen to the students' stories. Often coming from farming communities, unlike the mainly middle-class milieu of students in UK art schools, the contrast in attitudes is striking. While being engaged with digital technologies, there is a continuing respect for traditional skills which opens up an interface between the two, experimenting through practice rather than theory. Naturally, all students Google the global forums of art between local workshops, yet the vernacular still offers a wide source of research. Through indigenisation, as encouraged by Arjun Appadurai, the hegemony of western art history meets resistance.

In a recent conversation with Anita Dube, the artist who curated this year's Indian biennale in Kochi, we spoke about the project by Vipin Dhanurdharan in which the artist visits people's houses, sits and eats with them, draws and paints them, videos them eating, examining cross-class, caste, gender and economic structures through connecting people to each other. I asked Dube if she had adopted an anthropological gaze. 'Yes, in the sense of context with awareness of history,' she said. 'This exhibition is historical, it is not just about the contemporary, the new and the young ... we are all in this mess together, tribal, folk, different languages, different regions, different genders, mediums, ages, different photographers like Sunil Janah whose work is about India on the cusp of Independence and post-Independence. It's a mixture because that is the way we live ... a beautiful way that is better to understand as that rather than as a bad toxic mix that needs cleaning up or turning it into pure identity politics.' Would she relate Walter Benjamin's concern with a 'state of urgency' to present-day India? Dube replied: 'Absolutely. Of course we have to say that,

but not only that, we have to listen, as my curatorial note says. Enough of talking down, enough of telling people what to do, we must listen. We have to develop ways in which we listen and talk at the same time, that we are humble enough as cultural practitioners to recognise that there is such a divide between the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor that we have forgotten, we are in our little bubble and so excited by ourselves that we have no connection, and I think the inherent violence can only be brought down by conversation, by opening up spaces and listening and sharing and not always talking down.' I wondered whether this meant a return to roots and negotiation with global works through the notion of *communitas*, not just a fuck art let's dance approach? Dube replied: 'Yes, but not as a prescriptive thing. As I have said before, pedagogy without pleasure will not work, they need to be brought together, so I advocate PP - "Pleasure and Pedagogy!"'

Virginia Whiles is an art historian, critic and author.



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