



IETM REPORT

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POSTCOLONIAL MINEFIELDS

Report from the IETM Munich Plenary Meeting, 1 – 4 November 2018

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Flanders
State of the Art



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

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Postcolonial minefields

Toni Attard, Founder and Director of [Culture Venture](#), Malta, and moderator of the session, offered a working definition of “colonialism” as a starting point of the discussion:

“To colonise a space is to take it away from those who previously occupied it, but it also includes changing the meaning of that space—into one of property—so that there can be no going back, no way to even imagine that which was lost because those ways of thinking about place and the alternative languages to describe it have been eradicated.” – John Zarobell, [The Postcolonial Contemporary](#).

The session gathered Ramiro Noriega, current Rector of the [Universidad de las Artes](#) of Ecuador, former Minister of culture and heritage of Ecuador, and Helena Nassif, Managing Director of [Al Mawred Al Thaqafy- Culture Resource](#), Lebanon, to speak about their perception of the colonial and postcolonial, and to invite all the participants in the discussion to share their ideas on the topic. Postcolonial relationships were observed through the everyday working experiences of art professionals: artists, producers, cultural managers. Can collaboration and international cooperation overcome privilege and divide?



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Moderator:

Toni Attard, Founder and Director of Culture Venture, Malta

Speakers:

Ramiro Noriega, Rector of Universidad de las Artes, Ecuador

Helena Nassif, Managing Director of Al Mawred - Cultural Resource, Lebanon

How far is Latin America

Coming to Europe from the South has never been easy. It requires visas and health insurance; it takes hours of flights, airport transit, and then again, hours of flights to reach any point of Europe. This definitely hinders collaboration between the artistic organisations and cultural institutes of Latin America and Europe. But also within Latin America itself: a kind of “colonial remoteness” is evident through the fact that when one wants to travel from one country to another, within

the same continent, it is sometimes faster and cheaper to go through the US instead of choosing the direct flight, as Ramiro Noriega explained.

Ecuador has been declared an independent country since 1830, yet it has not entered the postcolonial phase, as much as any other Latin American country, Ramiro argued. “We are still colonial. Our thinking, our concepts are.” The wage gap in this region is the highest in the world, and it is

based on the ethnic inequality, on [racism](#) instilled back in the colonial times.

Speaking about the arts, “art” is a Western, Eurocentric concept, to begin with. “Art” has different meanings, and some cultures simply don’t operate with this concept. As Stephen Davies claims in [Philosophical Perspectives on Art](#), the artefacts of non-Western cultures become art only by being appropriated by Western art institutions. When we admire the ceramic figurines,

masks, stelas, pyramids of the indigenous people while on a tourist trip, we are actually doing a colonial gesture, Ramiro explained.

He also remembered how fascinated were the Ecuadorian intellectuals with the works of the postmodern philosophers, whose works they got to know in translated editions from the US, while – as now Ramiro thinks – they should be looking at what was going on in their own country in that time.

He was referring to the 1990 Indigenous Uprising provoked by policies concerning their land. Starting from occupying a church in Quito, the uprising soon brought thousands of indigenous people who blocked local highways and took over urban plazas and thus, paralysed the whole country. That was the first time when the voice of the indigenous was heard in Ecuador. It was also a beginning of a long struggle for equality, which is still going on in Ecuador. “Postcolonialism is a noble idea, it gives us hope that we will achieve true plurinationality for our countries. We still have a long way to go, and our inspiration should come from the indigenous people who fight against colonialism”, Ramiro said.

The Middle East and the West

Speaking about the Middle East, Helena Nassif did not oppose particularism to universalism, but observed the connectedness between them. In fact, Egyptian pharaonic art was made visible by colonialism – when “Egyptomania” took over the Western imagination. The biggest collections of Egyptian art are still outside Egypt, in the big museums of Western Europe and the USA – which is a typical colonial situation. The Middle East colonisation differed to that in Latin America, for example. The abundance of natural resources and the vast markets for the Western production were the colonisers’ primary interest. As for the Western philosophy and arts, the Orient has always been the fascinating Other.

Nowadays, contemporary artists from the Arab region feel connected with Europe. When artists engage in what is often called



Graffiti painted on a wall in the area surrounding Mohamed Mahmoud street near Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt during the 2011 Egyptian revolution. © Hossam el-Hamalawy

there “European art” or “modern art”, it is not regarded as European property but as a universal one. Helena assumed: “In the Orient, Europe was not regarded as the Other.” Some of the new art movements that spread out in the Middle East after bursting out in the Arab Spring are not considered as ‘Western’ art forms: graffiti, rap, experimental theatre.

Europe welcomed the Arab Uprisings, which started in 2011, as a bottom-up process with the potential to open the way for a democratic development in the region. Arab art received acclaim and was showcased in numerous exhibitions across Europe, with the Venice Biennale holding Europe’s largest show of contemporary Arab art, The Future of a Promise, in 2011. Yet now, when Europe’s political thinkers speak about the power of citizen movements, it seems they don’t mention the Arab Uprisings as an inspiration anymore, Helena noticed. As if they have been intentionally forgotten.

A decade has passed since the Arab Spring and the burst of the contemporary art scene in the Middle East. Authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, however, still hold power to oppress freedom of expression and threaten artistic freedom and artists’ safety.

The regime of your country can colonise you!

In most of the Middle East countries, the government funds for the arts do not support the independent arts and the cultural sector. Furthermore: receiving foreign funding is incriminated as a threat to national security.

So, Arab independent artists have little means to receive funding for their art, or to earn a living from their art, plus they risk going to jail and even losing their life. The whole field of independent arts can be in danger in many countries.

Similar processes of expropriation of space, the space of free speech, brought Jair Bolsonaro to the president’s post in Brazil, Ramiro noted. Which is worse, Bolsonaro came to power through democratic elections. He led his successful campaign through the social media and several supportive TV channels and newspapers, declaring all voices critical towards him “fake news”. “Trump of the Tropics”, as some call him, promised that when he assumes office, he will start a war against media which spread fake news, i.e. against any critical media.

Toni Attard noticed that populism and far-right are on rise in Europe as well, and certain steps to restrict the freedom of expression are in place: in [Hungary](#), [Poland](#)... The coming European elections in 2019 can be the last opportunity to save democracy and freedom of expression. If authoritarian nationalist leaders gain power [across Europe](#), this would inevitably bring hard times for democratic forces worldwide. Judging from recent developments, funding from Europe to independent arts in other regions would be reduced, at least.

Is globalisation a new form of colonisation?

Independent art scene in the Middle East is currently supported by major donors from Europe and the USA: [Institut français](#), [Goethe Institut](#), [British Council](#), [Open Society Foundations](#), [Rosa Luxemburg Foundation](#), [The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture](#), [Center for Arab American Philanthropy](#), [Ford Foundation](#), [Foundation for Arts Initiatives](#), etc. Most of those organisations fund the Latin American art scene as well.

Could that philanthropic funding turn into another form of colonisation: by setting agendas from outside, or by promoting certain art forms over others? Could it be that applying to the same funding programmes and addressing the same requirements all over the world lead to uniformity, to a globalised form of art, which is similar from Europe, through the Middle East, to Latin America? Or, could counting on foreign funding for the arts make the local governments careless about the independent art scene: why should they fund it if the money will come from Europe anyway?

Helena disagreed: "If we look at the funding an arts organisation can get, that is peanuts money. But even a tiny funding can allow the artists to create works that are critical and which would have no chance to be created otherwise."

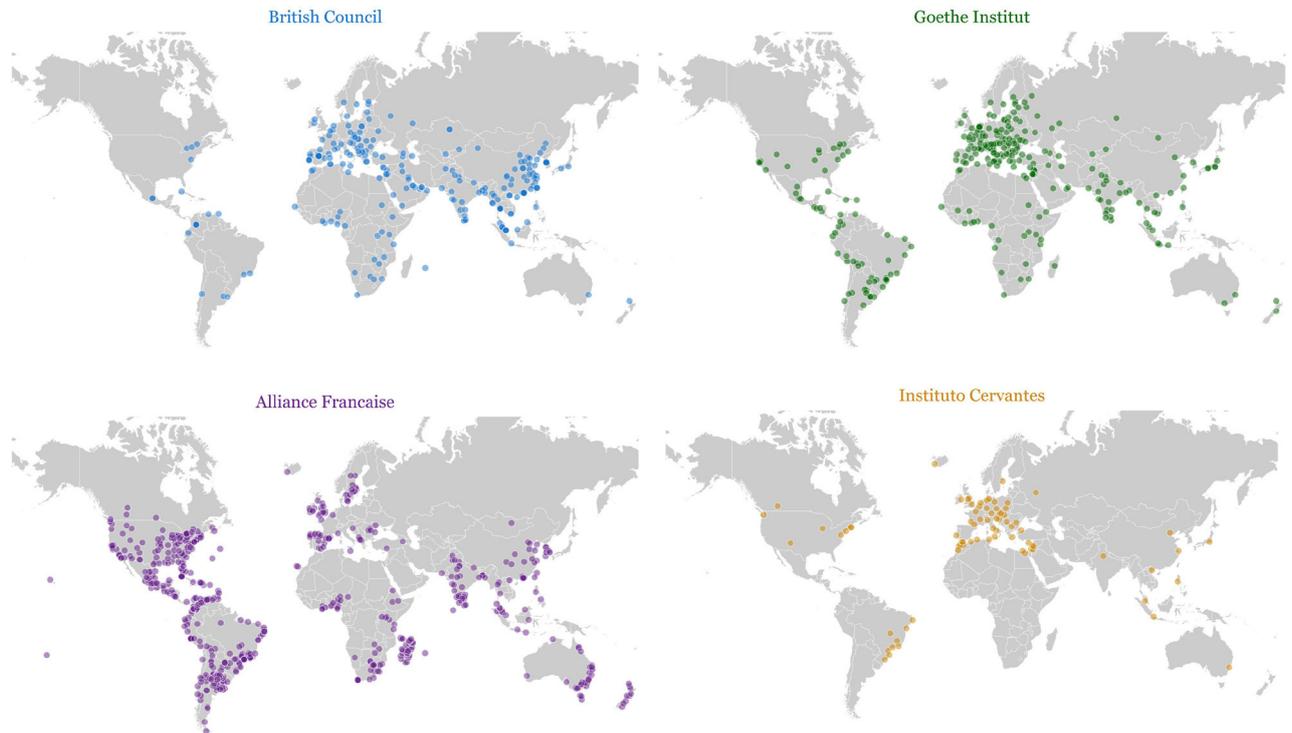
A representative of the Goethe Institute explained that their guiding principles of plurality and freedom of expression would not allow imposing an agenda: "We seek for a base that would be in common with our values as an organisation. And sometimes we defend values which some of our donors do not support. That is why we need to be

careful and transparent about the origin of our funding."

Working in the academic field, Ramiro distinguished the impact Erasmus Mundus and [Erasmus+](#) programmes have on opening up higher education all over the world. Yet, if we look into the details, this programme, along with many others, was designed to suit primary the European citizens: "It is always more difficult when you come from the South."

Ramiro also perceived globalisation, or economisation, in the language and in the policies we use to address the arts. What do we understand by 'doing arts'? What stands behind terms like 'cultural economy', 'creative economy' or 'artistic economy'? What is this ['Orange economy'](#) that UNESCO proclaimed to be the solution for Latin America and the Caribbean? Is 'creative imagination' a synonym for 'artistic imagination'? - Not that much. Not at all.

Many artists prefer to stay neutral towards the present day struggles and make 'art for art's sake', often because critical, socially and politically engaged art is being regarded as instrumental. But if we are to fight for a postcolonial future, artists cannot stay neutral.



© Milos Popovic

Counteracting the Colonial: in solidarity

We should probably start from facing the truth that we are colonial creatures: our models of thinking, our concepts are shaped in colonial times. But arts give the opportunity to deconstruct our codes and to find the new concepts and meanings of the Postcolonial.

Alas, rethinking the models will not do the whole work. We need to act. If there were no power in arts to transform societies, governments would not so adamantly try to crush them. "We need to put our bodies on the line. This sacrifice can be less expensive in Germany and more expensive in an Arab or Latin American country, but we need to take this extra step. Solidarity will make this sacrifice less bitter," Helena stated. Ramiro agreed: "We must go for more democracy. We must be radical in our criticism and in our struggle for democracy. Only then we will achieve decolonisation". Solidarity, ethics, sensitivity, kindness to others should be the key stance.

The participants in the session filled in with examples of international cooperation projects and advocacy campaigns, which helped critical art meet the audience and lowered the "price" artists were to pay for their disobedience. Here are just two examples, to outline the broad spectrum of solidary actions.

Based in Beirut, Lebanon, Zoukak Theatre Company started in 2006 as a non-hierarchical structure, led by the vision of theatre as a space for common reflection and for collective position against the system. This year's festival, [Zoukak Sidewalks 2018 – The Festival](#), has been supported by the most prominent foundations of Europe. With that international support, the festival could afford to explore how much of radical critique can come up on stage without putting artists' bodies on the line.

Up in the North, in Canada, a city councillor decided to name a street after the battle of Trafalgar. An immigrant of Italian descent found that insensitive towards the indigenous people whose land the Canadian inhabit nowadays. He started a

campaign and at the end, the street was given a name in the indigenous language.

International cooperation supports artists in difficult political, social or economic situation to continue their work. There are multiple good examples from the Middle East, from Turkey, Ukraine, across Europe and Latin America. When international cooperation is built on common struggles, it gives fruitful suggestions on how to go in the right direction against uneven processes. "But we need to see the connectedness across the divides and the value of solidarity and freedom," Helena believes. If we bet on security alone, we will end up building huge fences and locking ourselves behind. Do we want such future for us, for our children?"

Who will imagine the future?

Would that be the people with access to the media, with connections with the military forces – like Bolsonaro? Are we going to let that happen, Ramiro wondered.

We need to take in account that there is no more time for naivety: the far-right is gaining strength because people are scared and angry. On the other hand, corporations are stronger than ever. Google, Facebook, the Chinese companies are systematically shaping our present and future according to their corporate interests.

Art is powerful, and that power is inspirational and conscious-opening. Who else but artists would be better in opening space to imagine a new future: democratic, sustainable, solidary?

It is high time for us, for people to understand that our societies cannot be monocultural anymore.

Long-term sustainability of our planet should rank in our highest priorities.

In the global world, we need to care of one another. People in the Middle East should worry about the rainforests of Amazonia. Latin Americans and Caribbean people

should care for the fate of the refugees in the Mediterranean Sea.

We should imagine the new role of the artist as well.

We need to state an agenda beyond the individual artist and make sure it is heard by wider audiences in order to counteract the massive media coverage of populist leaders. We should lead our struggles with kindness and compassion towards everybody. Maybe we should not try sourcing a political alternative to populism and authoritarian regimes. We should provide artistic time and space to dismantle the old structures altogether. We would need a new vocabulary for that new, decolonised mind.

Above all, we need to dismantle what is in our heads and turn to the hearts. We should maintain solidarity and work together. We are all in the same boat.