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RECLAIMING THE SELF. REDEFINING AND AFFIRMING MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART

abstract

Throughout history, artists have used their work to investigate and express their identity (whether individual, community, political, sexual or social). Artists belonging to historically marginalized communities have used their artistic practices as a weapon in response to stereotyping and oppression. The present paper intends to present different contemporary artistic experiences focused on the theme of marginalized identities and their investigation within a decolonial approach. An attempt will be made to investigate how contemporary artists are positioning themselves in processes of identity inquiry, claiming, and reappropriation. A comparison will be made between different artists that have decided to use their art as a tool for reclaiming their own identity, cleansing it of any remnants of stereotype previously produced by dominant cultures. The 60th Venice Biennale will serve as a main case study to examine how contemporary artists are dealing with the notion of identity.

keywords

contemporary art, identity, decolonization, Venice Biennale

1. Introduction Throughout the eras, artists have investigated through their artistic practices the issues of identity, whether it is conceived as individual, community, political, or social. Through their work, artists have had the chance to cathartically analyze the self and express it through different creative forms. Sometimes the creative product represents the result of the investigation, while at other times it serves as an integral part of the investigative process itself. In response to the systemic oppression, homogenization, and censorship historically perpetrated by the dominant culture, artists and women artists from marginalized communities claim and celebrate their own identities while spreading awareness on established stereotypes and contributing to their demolition. Therefore, decolonial art practices have become for artists engaged in social and cultural decolonization a tool for identity redefinition and self-determination. Through their art, contemporary artists who belong to socially and politically marginalized communities have finally had the chance to express and affirm their own identity, without having it mediated by the Western gaze¹. The present paper intends to present different contemporary artistic experiences focused on the theme of marginalized identities and their investigation within a decolonial approach. An attempt will be made to investigate how contemporary artists are positioning themselves in processes of identity inquiry, claiming, and reappropriation.

In the first paragraph of the paper the role of contemporary artists in these processes will be analyzed. A comparison will be made between different artists that have decided to use their art as a tool for reclaiming their own identity, cleansing it of any remnants of stereotype previously produced by dominant cultures. Through the short analysis of the art of Robert Colescott, an unusual way of fighting stereotypes through painting will be presented. Secondly, the practice of portraiture will be investigated through the art of Lynett Yiadom Boyake.

The second section of the paper will address the 60th Venice Biennale as the main case study. As decolonization and inclusion were core themes of the *Foreigners Everywhere*

¹ In this process of abandoning the Eurocentric approach for the qualitative evaluation of art and establishing new perspectives other than the Western one, activism plays a key role. Art practices related to individual artist-activists or creative collectives have facilitated processes of cultural decolonization and re-signification of heritage. On the role of activism in the decolonization processes see, for instance, Castellano (2022).

exhibition, this section will present and analyze the artists who have explored their identities and presented their artworks within such an historically elitist setting.

2.1 *A premises: Sonya Boyce and the risk of generalizing*

Before delving into the study of how contemporary artistic practices have addressed the analysis of marginalized identity, a preliminary remark is necessary. In the wake of postcolonial studies and the popularity of the inclusive discourse, one could fall into error by making simplifications and generalizations. Just because an artist belongs to a marginalized community, it doesn't mean that they are always willing to represent their people and their condition through his art. This issue is well articulated by the British Afro-Caribbean artist Sonia Boyce, who has represented Britain at the 59th Venice Biennale. When asked about her identity, Boyce stated:

I am a black woman artist. That's not necessarily who I am, but what I am. And so I always feel nervous when people expect that what one is represents what one does... and represents anyone else who could come under that rubric (Diawara, 1992, p. 192).

Boyce herself has underlined that the presence of a few Black artists in the country does not imply that they wish to act as spokespeople for their entire community (Diawara, 1992, p. 193)². Speaking about herself, Boyce has claimed that she's trying distance herself from the notion of identity, as it's a limiting concept that can trap you:

If I speak, I speak "as a" black woman artist or "as a" black woman or "as a" black person. I always have to name who I am: I'm constantly being put in that position, required to talk in that place ... never allowed to speak because I speak. I want to find out what other things I can talk about. I no longer want to describe who I am (Diawara, 1992, p. 195).

Boyce's perspective allows us to understand that, when discussing identity, it is essential to consider the complexity and the individuality of each artist- Her reflection highlights the risks of oversimplification that stem from assumptions and generalization.

2.2 *Robert Colescott and the use of stereotypes*

Since the second half of the XIX century, artists have increasingly challenged and dismantled the legacy of colonialism on cultural, social and personal identity. For years, marginalized communities, such as black or indigenous people, have been represented through stereotypical images, mediated by a dominant culture. The products of these stereotyping were artificial and false identities, images produced from the outside, shaped by prejudice and presumption. Even though these images were belittling and did not correspond to reality, they became established in pop culture and have not been eradicated yet.

The black community is among those witnessing the worst stereotyping from the dominant (white) culture. Stereotypical representations were used since the colonial period and towards the Jim Crow-era to depict black people, emphasizing physical features and making them displeasing and laughable. Figures such as Aunt Jemima, Jim Crow or Sambo are perfect examples of this made-up black identity, built by white people to slander the black community³. Their aim was propagandistic and contributed to furthering the

2. Redefying identity through contemporary art

2 "There have been quite a few black artists producing work. Now, because of the pressures within the fine arts world, and the additional challenge of being a black male or female artist working in the system, it's very very difficult to survive and to develop as an artist. And when attention has been paid to black British art, there hasn't really been a discussion of things *around* the work. But I am not the only person; I am just one of the people who are quite well known" (Diawara, 1992, p. 193).

3 For an in-depth study on the stereotyped image of black women, see Sewell (2013).

separation between communities⁴. Thanks to postcolonial studies and the raising awareness on cultural affirmation and fair representation, contemporary artists from marginalized communities have finally had the chance to claim their own space. Through their artworks, they have started a proper process of decolonization of the arts and historical narratives, by reinterpreting historical events, reclaiming ownership on cultural heritage and promoting inclusivity and diversity⁵.

Robert Colescott attempted to use the “artificial identities” of the sadly well-known black stereotypical characters to claim a new space for blacks in contemporary art history. Colescott was the first African American painter to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale, in 1997, and the first black artist to have his work published on the cover of *Artforum* in 1984 (Gallant, 2022). His artworks consist of rearrangements of famous western paintings, yet they are filled with only black stereotypical figures⁶. His painting is based on a humorous complaint that turns out irreverent and unsettling for the public (especially the white one). The investigation on black identity intrigues and captures the viewer, thanks also to the cartoonlike figures and the bright colors used by the artist. However, he creates in the audience a mix of feelings: comic features that first seem entertaining suddenly leave room for a sense of guilt and discomfort. The artist himself used to say: “If you decide to laugh, don’t forget the ‘humor is the bait,’ and once you’ve bitten, you may have to do some serious chewing. The tears may come later” (Copeland, 2009). In one of his masterpieces, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975), Colescott exhibits this artificial black identity created by whites. The Emanuel Leutze’s work *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is reproduced on Colescott’s canvas, but here the main protagonists are replaced with Sambo, Aunt Jemima, Jim Crow and other stereotyped black figures. Through this artwork, Colescott rewrites United States history as written by blacks, and he reclaims a space for black people in the contemporary art world. Starting from his identity as a black male, he reshapes the Eurocentric narratives of art history, while also advocating for fair representation of marginalized cultures. In his artworks, Colescott often investigates and plays with both black and white identities. *Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White* is another example of the “swap game” played by the artist: in the painting he switches the racial identities of the two well-known actors to create amusement and bewilderment in the audience. The questions that Colescott asks the audience are clear: can identity influence the way a person is perceived and loved by the public? Would a black Shirley Temple have been loved as much as the white one?

2.3 Portraying blackness

Portraits and self-portraits have been major tools for the investigation and representation of personal identities. Throughout history artists have used these forms of art to investigate themselves and capture their true selves, or to represent all the possible facets of other human beings. However, contemporary artists have found different ways of employing portraits and self-portraits to provide a decolonized perspective on identities to the public. Kehinde Wiley, for example, is known worldwide for his baroque portraits that sumptuously celebrate blackness and the urban culture often associated with it. But is blackness an identitarian feature for every contemporary portraitist?

4 On the propagandistic aim of stereotyping black communities, see Melson–Silimon, Spivey, & Skinner–Dorkenoo (2023).

5 The so called “Fanonian art Practices”, for example, built on the decolonial perspective of the psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon and consist in artistic research that start from the remnants of blackness and that seek to escape the constraints of the western culture through inclusive and decolonial creative practices. See Nkosinkulu, 2024.

6 On the life and work of Robert Colescott throughout his career, see Platow, Stokes Sims, & Weseley (2019).

Those painted by the British Ghanaian artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, for example, are unusual, imaginary portraits. In her artworks Yiadom-Boakye represents daily life scenes or portraits of people who do not exist and that she can only see in her mind. The figures that fill her works are black people and their outlines are blurred like those of a distant memory. This lack of clarity, the use of generic clothes and unidentifiable backgrounds allow her to portrait figures that are timeless and spaceless. The color of her artworks, generally mute, and the vague titles (such as *To Improvise a Mountain* or *Solitaire*) contribute to this imaginative aura. The representation of black people and the definition of black identity is a matter of normality for the artist: since she was raised by black people as a black person, she can only paint black people (Higgie, 2012). Yiadom-Boakye stated “Blackness has never been other to me. Therefore, I’ve never felt the need to explain its presence in the work anymore than I’ve felt the need to explain my presence in the world, however often I’m asked”⁷. The difference between Yiadom Boakye and Colescott is evident: while the American painter claims a space for black people in art history by using sarcasm and a captivating figurative language, Yiadom Boakye’s research is much more intimate, subtle, and personal. Like Boyce, Yiadom Boakye complains about expectations placed on Black artists to explain or justify their work in relation to their race. The decolonial approach to Black identity is rooted in the artist’s decision not to use whiteness as a paradigm: she describes blackness and her identity as they are, without defying them by negation (as non-white). The blurred contours and the fictional characters of her paintings allow her to explore not only blackness, but its “infinite possibilities” (Richler, 2023).

Adriano Pedrosa, the curator of the 60th Venice Biennale decided to make the concept of identity one of the core themes of the renowned exhibition. With the title *Stranieri ovunque. Foreigners everywhere*, inspired by a famous series of work by the collective Claire Fontaine⁸, the exhibition aimed to mirror the complex social and political context of the present. Artists were asked to reflect on the global challenges of our society, in which people can no longer be classified through borders, languages, genders or sexuality. According to Pedrosa, the condition of the foreigners, the strangers, starts within the person, who “will always feel foreigner”, no matter where or with whom: that of the foreigners is an inherent, inevitable condition that, at the same time, unites all humanity (Pedrosa, 2024b, p. 54). The effort to decolonize the Venice Biennale and to explore the concept of identity in a broader and more inclusive way was evident. By doing so, the curator aimed to allow the artists and their communities (that mostly join the Biennale for the first time) to speak and advocate for themselves. Thanks to this approach, the exhibition is enriched with a multitude of approaches and perspectives that finally make it possible to anyone in the audience to feel represented, while fostering the dialogue between people and cultures.

The exhibition hosted artists who, for a variety of reasons, were connected to the condition and experience of foreignness. Queers, indigenous, naive, immigrant artists have pondered the challenge proposed by Pedrosa by exploring the themes of migration, displacement and identity. In the following section of the paper, different ways of

3. The 2024 Venice Biennale: between decolonizing and reclaiming identities

⁷ The quote is attributed to the artist by the Tate Britain, and it has been used for the presentation of the artworks. Retrieved from: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/lynette-yiadom-boakye-16784/introduction-lynette-yiadom-boakye>. For other personal reflection by the artist on blackness and its meaning in her artworks, see Yiadom-Boakye, 2014.

⁸ The artworks consist in neon lights in different colors displaying the phrase “Foreigners everywhere”. The series was initiated by the collective in 2004 and addresses the issues of identity and migration within the contemporary socio-political context. On Claire Fontaine and its theoretical techniques and procedures see Chiari, 2024.

addressing the issues of identity, belonging and foreignness within the 60th Biennale will be analyzed⁹.

3.1 Decolonized national identities

Pablo Delano's project, which spread across an entire hall of the central pavilion at the Giardini, broke down, through a decolonial approach, the concept of community, individual, political and social identity. The artist's reflection started from the complexities of his home country, Puerto Rico, which since the arrival of Cristoforo Colombo has been living under colonial oppression. After the Spanish-American war, in 1898, the island became an unincorporated state and has still been striving to gain its independence. In his project, that has been already presented on other occasions, Delano decides to build a sort of museum within the museum and unfolds a multilayered and harsh systemic critic. The work derives its title, *The Museum of the Old Colony*¹⁰, from a popular American soft drink popular in Puerto Rico from the 50s and still on the market. The title alludes with bitter irony to the island's past and present political conditions. In his installation/project Delano exhibits historical photographs of Puerto Rico, mostly taken by U.S. photographers and depicting a variety of subjects, events and scenes. The photos that are shown are divided in different sections, depending on the themes, and are combined with videos and everyday objects from the island. Through all these elements, Delano traces a history of the cultural and political colonization witnessed by Puerto Rico. He reflects on the concept of museums and the extractivist approach of those who have stereotyped, colonized and exploited the Caribbean communities. Viewers question themselves on their potential role in this perpetual act of colonization. The project challenges the concept of identity: after a history and a present of colonization, can there truly be an authentic Puerto Rican identity? Furthermore, Delano questions the main mechanisms and rules of the Biennale, an exhibition that has been historically based on national pavilions: since Puerto Rico doesn't hold the state of a nation, it could never be represented by an artist in a national pavilion. Despite this "formal" contradictions, Puerto Ricans have a sense of community and nationality that unites them, a common Puerto Rican identity that is based on the same language, the same cultural references, symbols and practices. The identity that Delano is trying to exhibit and bring to a bigger public is an identity that is not politically recognized yet, but still exists and vibes in the present days¹¹.

3.2 Mute and muted identities

The decolonized approach towards the investigation of identity can also be seen in another specific artistic production dedicated to the analysis and reflection on gender and sexuality. Usually, the aim of these practices is to decolonize the gaze, to affirm other ways of living, of being, of experiencing sexuality and gender identity that differ from those normally accepted. For the 60th Venice Biennale Gabrielle Goliath presented an immersive installation

9 The descriptions of the artworks in the following paragraphs are based not only on the study of the cited sources but also on the firsthand experience of the author during their visit to the exhibition in April and May 2024.

10 On Pablo Delano's *Museum of Old Colony* see Berger (2020) and Katzman (2022).

11 Palo Delano was not the only one proposing a reflection on decolonized political and national identities at the 60th Venice Biennale. Among the artists presented at the exhibition, for example, The Unknown Chilean artist (Arpilleristas) proposed, through their tapestries, a decolonized perspective on Chile (Pedrosa, 2024b, p. 81). In the Danish pavilion, Inuute Storch traced the colonial history of Greenland from a colonized perspective (Pedrosa, 2024b, p. 389), while in the spaces of the USA Pavilion Jeffrey Gibson proudly celebrated indigenous identity against oppression (Pedrosa, 2024b, p. 449).

dedicated to giving space to marginalized identities. For her project, *Personal Accounts*¹², which started in 2014 and has been brought all over the world, the Sud African artist decided to interview black people, people of color, queers, transgenders and indigenous. The interviewed express all the limits of the political and social systems that oppress them: patriarchal logics, binarism, colonial attitudes, racism. In a choral catarchical act, people of different cities and countries of the world have shared their stories with the artist, telling her about their traumatic experiences. They told their stories to the artist, united under the same condition as survivors of an oppressive, discriminatory, and bigoted system. However, the artist has decided, with the prior consent of all the participants, to cut and delete all the spoken words: only sighs, whispers, murmurs, waverings, swallowings, and pauses echo in the room where the videos of the interviews are screened. As a result of these choices, viewers find themselves totally immersed in a profound chanting of hesitation and surrounded by the presence of the participants and their discomfort. By forgoing dialogues, the artist creates a universally understandable language through which the participants express their feelings without any fear of being misunderstood and not trusted. That of Goliath is a sensitive and delicate way to investigate marginalized identities and to reclaim a space for their conditions in the public dialogue. The lack of words acts as a metaphor of the lack of comprehension that these people have experienced in their lives. The viewers question themselves on their past attitudes towards marginalized communities and challenge the concepts of identity (whether individual, social, or sexual) that they have normalized throughout their lives.

3.3 Reclaiming identity through the group: The Aravani Art Project

A common and widespread mistake is to conceive identities as solely individual. Many of the projects presented at the 60th Venice Biennale have shown that many artists can relate the sense of belonging and the concept of identity to their community: the individual defines himself through the group and, at the same time, is empowered by the collectivity. The importance given to plural projects and artistic collectives was crucial for the exhibition, as can easily be seen from two elements: the title of the exhibition itself, retrieved from the artwork of a collective, Claire Fontaine, and the mural on the façade of the central pavilion, realized by the Brazilian *Movimento Dos Artistas Huni Kuin*.

Sometimes working as a group empowers marginalized individuals, leading them to speak up for themselves, as in the case of the Aravani Art Project. The Indian collective is made of cis and transgender women and was created with the specific purpose of spreading positivity and hope among their community (Pedrosa, 2024b, p.79). The bright and colorful murals contribute to the process of affirmation and acceptance of the trans community within India. By showing in their mural trans people in a gigantic scale, Aravani Art Projects wants to metaphorically overcome the traditional concept of identity and put an end to stereotyping and stigmas. The collective acts as a safe space in which everyone can express its true self and unveil their true self¹³.

Despite the attempt of numerous communities and individuals to create a more inclusive society, episodes of racism, oppression and ostracism are still sadly present in our society.

4. Conclusion

12 On the project's website, *Personal Accounts* is described as a "transnational, decolonial, black feminist project of repair". See <https://www.personal-accounts.art/personal-accounts>.

13 The Aravani Art Project's mission, vision and methodology can be further explored on the collective's website, see <https://aravaniartproject.com/>.

For this reason, it is important that the artistic research presented in this paper gains more and more visibility and importance in public discourse. That of Pedrosa is one of the potential attempts to achieve this goal: the 60th Venice Biennale exemplifies a progressive shift towards a broader notion of identity. Thanks to this prestigious platform, artists were not only able to present their work for the first time at one of the world's most important industry events but, more importantly, to share new narratives and perspectives that move away from traditional Eurocentrism. As we look to the future, these artistic experiences and their new-found popularity offer a beacon of hope. In any case, as Boyce well expressed, each artistic practice will have to be valued in its specifics and contextualized. By embracing and celebrating the diverse range of human experiences and fostering a broader concept of identity, society will move towards greater inclusivity. In this collective effort, art will play a fundamental role, serving as a catalyst for change and an amplifier of voices.

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