

Contemporary Art and the Museum - A
Global Perspective: Peter Weibel, Andrea
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In what follows, I am republishing my introduction to the 1996 Graz exhibition *Inklusion: Exklusion*. The text was previously available in German only. It seems that my arguments have lost none of their validity and thus can be introduced again in the context of the present volume, which contains, for the most part, newly written texts.

The traumatic experiences of two world wars, totalitarian systems such as fascism, the Nazi era, communism, and the Holocaust, have put their stamp on modernism in Europe. In the nineteenth century Europe produced modernism, and in

Beyond the White Cube

(2007)

the nineteenth century it produced totalitarian systems. For this reason it would be naïve to continue the modernism project without casting a critical eye. Adorno and Horkheimer argued in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during their exile in America while Hitler and Stalin tyrannized Europe, that the logic of enlightened rationality, developed according to a plan for dominating nature, may also become the logic for holding sway over man. However, modernism turned a relatively blind eye to the problems of nationality, particularity, and universality. Owing to the critical glance taken by postmodernism, central mechanisms of power were discovered within the universalism of an international world culture that is the same for all peoples and mankind as a whole, its standard being binding for all. With such mechanisms a monopoly was asserted on establishing universal norms and

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a standardization of the world from the perspective of an ethnic, gender- and class-specific, and national centrism. Modernism was simply not free of the fuzzy logic of nationalism, religion, and capital. It had only been neglected and not paid attention to.¹ What was known as modernization was at the same time a covert strategy of colonization. Since an essential component of modernism is its claim to rationality and transparency, it managed to alert itself to this hidden strategy through rational self-criticism.

In the course of its self-dissolution, Europe has discovered that its imperialist expansion was carried out in the form of a universal civilizing function in the name of modernization. The free, universal society of a European nature turned into the colonization of other nations, and meant the de-forming of other cultures through Europeanization, all done in the name of freedom, progress, and technology. But the colonization of particular ethnic groups within multi-ethnic societies by agents of central power is fading, as we have been continually shown by events in eastern Europe.² The mutual decoupling of cognitive and political aspects from aesthetics was the second stage of my criticism of modernism. The exhibition *Kontext Kunst*, which took place as part of the Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz, Austria, in 1993,³ introduced, on the other hand, an art movement of the 1990s that provided an uncompromising rejection of the "white cube"⁴ of modern art, the aim being to connect art once again to social practice. The "white cube," as Brian O'Doherty critically referred to the myth of the neutrality of gallery or museum space in 1976, constitutes a synonym for a North American and European art that conceals all social, gender, religious, ethnical differences in the name of aesthetic autonomy and a universal language of forms, thus suppressing the social, national,

ethnic, religious, and gender conditions of the origin of art. Gallery space had to be white and pure, which meant that any experience outside of an aesthetical one had to be stripped or excluded, and thus virtually any object, banal or not, could become a work of art. The artistic text—in terms of its aesthetic validity—was therefore dependent upon the neutral white gallery space, according to the thesis propagated in O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube*. In the twentieth century, the aesthetic neutral space of the white cell became a symbol for the decoupling of what is cognitive and social from what is aesthetic, and also for exclusion.

By depriving the works of art of their historic context, the result was not only a poverty of experience in contrast to the alleged formal wealth, but above all, art was denied the right to participate in the construction of reality. Artists of the 1960s, '70s, and '90s have therefore made the formal, social, and ideological conditions for the production, distribution, presentation, and reception of art, the actual topics of their art. The conditions under which a work comes about became the point of departure for the work or even the work itself. *The context becomes the text*. From such a contextual viewpoint, art as a purely aesthetic discourse becomes an issue for art itself, and succumbs to "institutional criticism."⁵ If "white cubes" and their aesthetics are synonymous with modern art, then one could maintain that the issue of modern art—seen from the critical view of modernism—is modern art itself. Modernist criticism thus also means the criticism of modern art, in as much as it is limited to the "white cube." In general, the achievement of modernist criticism in contextualizing things lies in the fact that it reinserts the neglected economic, ecological, and social contexts that are outside the "white cube," in other words makes possible a "return to the real" in art.⁶

The criticism undertaken in *Kontext Kunst* concerning the aesthetics of modernism was an inner-European criticism of "inside the white cube," a criticism of the "white cube," presented by an inside observer, an inhabitant of the "white cube" itself. North American and European artists criticized the discourse of artistic modernism as neglecting or excluding its constituting determinants. In a nutshell this already meant, however, an expansion of the European viewpoint precisely because it dealt with contexts external to the "white cube." The expansion of the text of the "white cube" to contexts external to it—through a practice of

art in the form of a discourse analysis—led to a criticism of modernism not only within the European and North American "white cube," but also outside of it. The criticism of modernism from a non-European standpoint is thus, the logical consequence of the inner-European criticism of the "white cube." In the case of Jean-François Lyotard, this criticism may be called postmodern, if we understand by this a "rewriting," a "working through" of modernism.⁷ The charge against modernism was that it made a universal doctrine out of particular characteristics inherent to European life. The European singularity was elevated to become a generally-binding canon for all peoples of the globe, a crude essentialism. The term subject basically meant a white male bourgeois European subject. Reason, centered on the subject as a founding principle of modernism, was thus deconstructed already at the point when the subject was replaced with a non-European instead of a European, or a female instead of a male. Postmodern criticism of modernism insisted upon the difference and the particularity of the respective standpoints.

The criticism of Western white art from a non-Western, non-white, post-colonial perspective is that no cultural theory never conducts an analysis of phenomena separate from its location in the white West.⁸ This means that the "white cube" is now criticized by an external observer who does not reside, or only temporarily resides within it, someone who is, so to speak, "outside the white cube." The third stage of the criticism of modernism is thus, the connection of postmodern and post-colonial standpoints. In the wake of the postmodernist intrinsic deconstruction of the "white cube," which likewise took a critical view of institutions, necessary is an extrinsic system-critical deconstruction of "white art," seen as a field of hegemonic and colonial practices; from the perspective of "post-colonial critique" (G. Ch. Spivak).⁹

Post-colonialism should not be understood as "subsequent to the Colonial era," the end of the colonial process, just as the "post" in postmodernism is not to be understood as "after modernism." This being the case, it is nonetheless necessary to say that the rise of postmodernism in the West came at the same time that a discourse on post-colonialism was taking place. Postmodern deconstruction of the great logocentric master narratives of European culture is comparable with the post-colonial project of the dissolution of the centrist/peripheral binary system of imperialist discourse. The post-structuralist agenda such as the critique

of the Cartesian concept of the subject, the instability and randomness of signification, the localization of the subject in the language, and discourse, or respectively, the study of the discourse as a masculine discourse or a discourse of power—are encountered again in a different way in post-colonial discourse. Deconstruction and decolonization thus share common ground. Also, the hybrid identity of the post-colonial author corresponds with the syncretism and eclecticism of postmodernism. In this respect the “post” in “postmodernism” and in “post-colonialism” condition each other. Postmodernism helped to instigate post-colonial discourse.¹⁰ And yet, post-colonialism is more than merely “postmodernism with politics.” The reason for this is, for example, that in two important aspects postmodernism takes a stand against the intentions of post-colonialism. First, postmodernism is a philosophy of difference, allowing space for the Other, but in doing so, it denies the Other status as an equal. Second, as an international style postmodernism carries on with the universal hegemony of modernism. Post-colonialism is thus the discourse, which directs a critical eye to the effects of colonial and post-colonial forms of rule, or societies, respectively.

In colonialism one's own values are expanded to foreign territories, one's own particularity is held to be universally valid, and forced upon Others. Colonization means territorial, economic, political, and cultural subjugation, appropriation, exploitation of other countries and peoples in order to succeed with one's own hegemony and to achieve acceptance of one's own domination of the world. In the “white cube,” accordingly, not only aesthetic deviations were concealed, but also concepts of art values and the world view of foreign peoples, cultures, races, religions, and voices. Put simply, we could say that “world art” was defined as “Western art” and “Western art” was defined as “white art”. The notion of a “world art” is the child of Western civilization, born of the ideological intention to suppress and exclude any artistic expression that does not adapt to the Western canon. Therefore, our “art museums” are full of the products of Western art, while we have built so-called “houses of foreign cultures” to present the art of other civilizations. Such a division expresses the symptoms of the cultural Euro-centric mechanism of exclusion. The distinction between “art museum” and “museum of ethnology” expressly marks the borderline between inclusion and exclusion.

Like all first-world social systems (i. e., Western, male, white society), art is also embedded within the dialectics of differentiation. Only when a style distinguishes itself does it become a style. Only in difference does identity come about. Following its own logic, this system of difference produces and exercises exclusion, according to Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. The question inevitably arises as to whether the social system of art in a Western sense is not itself the preferred field for the dialectics of inclusion/exclusion, and for this reason, might be defined as a colonial discourse. Within the European-North American frame of reference, the art system decides first what products and practices are to be included as art, or as relevant art respectively, and second, which non-European products and practices are to be included into the European-North American art system. Western culture draws borderlines between itself and other peoples, cultures, races, and religions. At the same time, it excludes the “Other,” that is, women, people of other skin colors, children, the elderly, homosexuals, etc. within its own culture. Social space becomes purified so that undisputed dominance is possible. The voices and the knowledge of the Others are relegated to the margins, or excluded altogether. This is the reason for Luhmann's thesis that the culture of the Western world is based, in principle, on exclusion.

The “white cube,” or the “white cell” respectively, are synonyms for exclusion. The pure gallery space is not only pure aesthetically, but has also been purified ethnically, religiously, class- and gender-specifically, so that it is largely the works of art made by Christian, white, European or North American men that we see in the museums. The art of other religions and other peoples, of another gender, is neglected in the museums of modern art. Is (modern) art thus only a European invention, as Jimmie Durham asks? Paradoxically, art became a synonym for exclusion. Throughout the world there is growing awareness of the historical necessity to deconstruct not only the “white cube,” but also “white art” as a field of practices for domination, rejection, and exclusion, and to undertake a “cultural remix,”¹¹ or “remapping” of the cultural cartography from the viewpoint of colonial criticism. The map of culture must be decolonized in the sense of a truly global culture.

Using the example of the reactions of the Western art system to the consequences of a reversed colonialism, that is to say, the return of

"colonized objects" from the colonies as "subjects" to the homeland, we may ask to what extent the Western art system, extending *grosso modo* between Paris and New York, is capable or incapable of including other concepts of art. In reality, it excludes these even while constructing an idealized Other. Is it not that the various forms of alterity are still illusions, because they are antitypes of our own identities? Is it not true that constructions of the Other are still nothing more than colonial and neo-colonial strategies in multicultural societies? In the philosophy of multiculturalism, on the one hand, isn't the permission to be different from others paramount to an admission of difference, but at the same time, doesn't it also mean the rejection of equality? The permission to be different also provides an excuse for having to put up with exclusion precisely because of alterity. Unfortunately, the logic of multiculturalism does not surmount the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion. The right to alterity and difference does not grant the actual basic right of equality.¹² The transformation of the issue of race into a cultural issue via the discourse on multiculturalism has only nominally accelerated actual social integration. Multicultural discourse bears the inherent danger of concealing the banishment of equality by permitting difference.

A symptomatic interpretation will find traces of a paradigmatic shift in the conception of a universal art, towards emphasizing the advantage of particular and peripheral forms of art. This shift allows the following questions:

For those artists who grew up in former colonies, or are descendants of colonial peoples now living in the so-called "homeland," or in the centers of global power such as New York, how is their art socially conditioned, culturally construed, and formally articulated? To what extent do these artists assimilate the aesthetic strategies of the colonizing countries and to what extent does their mentality, their style, or their material maintain their colonized country of origin without risking being denounced as ethnic art? Such questions concern individual autonomy versus collective identity. How strongly is whiteness represented in the Black imagination or blackness in the White imagination?¹³ To what extent do our art institutions really allow for a translation of social differences extending beyond the polarities of the self and the Other, East and West, First and Third World?

The physical and cultural displacement, or dislocation, the forced

physical departure from one's own culture, or the colonization of one's own world by a foreign culture are among the deepest impressions experienced by humans in our century. The birth of new areas and forms of power, and the breakdown of old ones, have produced particular global currents and periods of migration between continents and cultures. How can artists from the former colonies, after having been culturally and physically dislocated, overcome the hegemonic strategies of inclusion and exclusion? To what extent can they succeed in calling the dominating cultural canon or consensus into question if they remain excluded? What must they do, after being accepted by the dominant cultural canon, in order to question this canon from their post-colonial perspective? For this is a possible goal of art, to free modernism as well as postmodernism from their hidden colonial discourse, "to relocate the culture of Western modernity from the postcolonial perspective" (Homi K. Bhabha).¹⁴

Translated from the German by Elizabeth Volk.

Notes

- 1 Peter Weibel, Christa Steinle, eds., *Identität: Differenz. Eine Topographie der Moderne* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1992), p. 13.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 3 Peter Weibel, ed., *Kontext Kunst* (Cologne: DuMont, 1994).
- 4 Brian O'Doherty, "Inside the White Cube," in *Artforum*, New York 1976, published in book form in 1986, and appearing in German with Merve Verlag Publishers, Berlin. O'Doherty, who was born in Ireland in 1934 and has been living in the USA since 1957, has been using the artist pseudonym Patrick Ireland since 1972 out of protest against British policy in Northern Ireland.
- 5 In his essay "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism," in *Hans Haacke, Unfinished Business* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986). Frederic Jameson used the term "institutional critique" or "institutional analysis" for the art that made the extrinsic determinants of art to the intrinsic content of an artistic text.
- 6 Precisely how fitting this analysis of 1994 proved to be (see the inside cover text of my book *Kontext Kunst*), may be seen, for example, by the return of the idiomatic phrase "return of the real" in the title of Hal Foster's work, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge/London 1996).
- 7 Jean-François Lyotard, "Die Moderne redigieren," in ed. Gerhard Lischka, *um 9*, series (Bern: Benteli, 1988). By "working through," Freud understood a work that takes into consideration what is constitutively hidden from us with regard to the event and its meaning.
- 8 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 10 Among the representatives of the discourse on post-colonialism there are: Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Said, G. Ch. Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, K. A. Appiah, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, L. Grossberg, Cornel West, K. Mercer, Coco Fusco, Anthony Giddens, Charles Taylor, and H. L. Gates Jr.

- 11 Erica Carter, James Donald, Judith Squires, eds., *Cultural Remix. Theories of Politics and the Popular* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995) takes into consideration what is constitutively hidden from us with regard to the event and its sense.
- 12 Joel S. Kahn analyzes precisely this problem of the liberal, post-colonial multiculturalism in *Culture, Multiculture, Postculture* (London: Sage Publications, 1995). Also see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction" and Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in ed. Amy Gutmann, *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). The construction of race, class, gender, and peoples by the mass media are examined from a multicultural and feminist perspective in ed. Angharad N. Valdivia, *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).
- 13 See Bell Hooks, *Black Looks. Race, Gender and Culture* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," in eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, *Cultural Studies* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992); *Art on My Mind. Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995).
- 14 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).