

# Learning to decolonize

## Decolonisation in theory and practice



Nicolaas van der Waay, Draft for the door of the Royal Golden Coach depicting the homage of the colonies, 1898.

There is perhaps no theme that has stirred the mood in the art world in recent years more so than its relation to and addressing of colonial heritage. Discussions have now even extended beyond what we could call physical objects bearing traces of history, visual art and architecture for example, into the realm of immaterial heritage. Recent debates include the appropriacy of the bust of John Maurice (Dutch: Johan Maurits), 17th century governor of the Dutch possessions in Brazil, formerly on display in the foyer of the eponymously named art museum in the Hague, and the Rijksmuseum's recent decision to evaluate the titles of artworks, changing those which it deemed racist.

Bit by bit the colonial roots of modern Western society are being dug up. Not just objects considered to be key to a national heritage, but also cultural behaviours, ways of thinking, and patterns of consumption, can today through careful studying be linked to socio-economic inequality traceable and attributable back to a colonialist past. A painful fact that many members of contemporary Western society still prefers not to face.

Despite resistance, numerous initiatives have been taken in recent years to rid the art world of the dregs of colonialism at all levels. The starting point is invariably to question the status quo – the supposedly self-evident Western norms and aesthetics, which were up until recently decreed to be objective and neutral. Elements of this movement are clearly visible in perhaps two of the most important knowledge institutes in society: the university and the museum. Increasingly, people are trying not only to represent, but also to actively listen to voices that had been systematically ignored in the history books.

2019's spring issue of Article will be devoted to scrutinising the decolonization of theory and practice in various corners of the art world, ranging from museums and art (history) courses, to the practice of critics, curators, and artists. At other levels, organizations and individuals gradually seem to offer more space to other, non-hegemonic ways of thinking, and strive for polyphony of views. Within the museum world, this change is taking place on both an artistic as well as an organizational level. Prominent examples are the exhibition planned for 2020 on slavery in the Rijksmuseum and the Dutch representation at the Venice Biennale by Remy Jungerman and Iris Kensmil, both Surinamese artists engaged in the decolonization of ideas. At the local level, most museums and cultural institutions have now incorporated the objective to diversify both artistic program and organization. Not only acts, but also words are examined – for the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam has announced that it is soon to change its name, and the Tropenmuseum (an ethnographic museum in Amsterdam) recently published a language guide.

What is to be done with works of art that could be termed as 'contaminated heritage', which not only represent the colonial past, but go as far as to glorify it, by, for example, portraying slaves as trophies? How is one to deal with buildings in which such regretful activities took place, or museums that have collections dating back to colonial times? How did our peers from centuries past view these issues, if at all?

**For its upcoming spring issue, the editorial staff of Article is looking for contributions that reflect critically on the themes outlined above. In addition, the editors also welcome essays which study other interesting cases, which can be published in the non-thematic space. Proposals for articles should be around 300 words and can be sent to [article@stichting-art.nl](mailto:article@stichting-art.nl) until November 4th. Published essays are usually between 1500 and 3000 words. It is also possible to submit proposals for articles with a different form, such as an image essay. The deadline for articles is December 14th.**

*Article is a scientific journal about topical themes in the visual arts, architecture and design. Article is published by students and alumni Art History at Utrecht University for a broad public of art buffs. The magazine is affiliated with Stichting Art and offers students and young alumni a platform for their research results in addition to essays from renowned colleagues. Article appears twice per academic year.*