

PROVOCATIONS

“Resetting” Extraction and Ableist, Colonial Pandemic Manifestations¹

Khairani Barokeka

To understand extraction capital as what undergirds so much of the “global” in arts industries, and to understand this extraction as the ground on which ableism and colonialism (which continue apace and are interwoven) are built on, is to understand that “resetting the global” in light of COVID-19 is somewhat of a false moniker. And that the so-called “bugs” to overcome during this pandemic (genuinely no pun intended) form the basis of the system itself.

The untrue notions that “the old world” pre-COVID-19 – and here, note the colonial parallel with Europe as “the old world” – has somehow been put on hold to its absolute core due to this pandemic is as false as the denial that disabled and chronically ill people have been subject to a genocide at this time, a continuance of violence that never ceased. What is happening now is a denial of our very existence, excluding chronically ill and disabled perspectives in, of all things, an actual global pandemic of illness – excluding we millions of disabled and chronically ill artists and educators, who have been working under pandemic conditions for decades, yet whose work is still rarely highlighted, consulted, or cited amidst a rise in non-disabled artists’ work on “newfound isolation”. All of this is in fact an apex of ableism. Of ableism as part of colonial logics that involve land, wealth, power, and a eugenics, based on expendability to colonial capitalism – all of which form the basis of the fine arts industry.

The term “resetting” calls to mind bringing something back to full speed, full power. What is vital to understand is that the deaths of hundreds of thousands around the world *is* very much a manifestation of the systems some think have been slowed down completely – things could only have been this bad if whole populations were stolen from, over centuries, if the mass industrialisation attendant with colonialism were to shape systems of food and agriculture around the world, facilitating food insecurity that does not get spotlighted often on the international news in the UK. If systems were set up to privilege capital accumulation over the preservation and welfare of human life, and if all of these things colluded with the Western art world, as all of us in capitalism collude with it, and are complicit in it to different degrees.

¹ This is the full text of a presentation made in session I, ‘Resetting the Global’ on 9 July 2020 of the two-day webinar titled ‘Art Criticism and the Pandemic’ jointly organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Chris McCormack, Associate Editor of *Art Monthly*. A review of the full event appears in Reviews section of this journal pp. 116-120.

This is fundamentally an issue of differing chronologies and chronotypes, and models for not only time and space, but for describing the body-minds that the art world thinks it lays claims to.

To “reset” the art world seems very much in line with the prioritisation of ruthlessly oligarchic capitalist economics over saving lives that continue to be very much at risk. Just speaking from the perspective of someone who is “high risk” for COVID-19, and who takes no solace in the “opening up” process I see in the UK and elsewhere. As I wonder, as many of us wonder (disabled and chronically ill people being, I like to underscore, the largest minority in the world) when we particularly as migrants will be able to see our loved ones in other countries again.

Many people’s ideas of “resetting the global” to my mind, means continuing the system that has actually been kept in place, has been persistently held down, during this pandemic. As Tuck and Yang say, “decolonization is not a metaphor”²; after all colonial capitalism is very much not a metaphor – during this pandemic, land, property, and wealth, so much wealth, has still not been repatriated or restituted, nor have colonial laws keeping them in place been abolished. It is this same system that has allowed governments the world over to escape culpability for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. It is the system that has ensured certain people have kept their profit prioritisation on the to-do lists of governments.

In Jasbir Puar’s book *The Right to Maim* (Duke University press, 2017), at the same time as nation-states such as the UK and the US fund accessibility measures for their citizens, their funding bodies have the right to maim others through other policies, creating disabled bodies in places where the processes of colonialism have deliberately defunded healthcare, including in places within these countries with a high percentage of people of colour. (Taken through a certain lens, my own disability is a result of defunding of healthcare in underserved populations in both the US and Indonesia, where my condition was mismanaged and exacerbated.) As I recently wrote in *Art Monthly*,³ increasing “access” seems to be tied indelibly in people’s minds with increasing D/deaf and/or disabled people’s access to existing physical and social structures of the art world. Whereas, taking into account what Puar writes, the Western art world has never been confined to European and/or English-speaking countries. And we know this to be true. By virtue of donors, funding chains of command, and colonial financial flows past and present, the “Western art world” has also always been the Indonesian mining industry, the Bolivian political system, weapons brokers affecting both Palestine and Ferguson (both, of course, places where tear gas from Safariland, owned by former Whitney Museum Board Member Warren Kanders, operates). And so on. The art world is interconnectedness, and has always meant mass dispossession, endangerment, and killing commensurate with the astronomical prices of “fine art”.

² Tuck, E. and Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 1.1, pp. 1-40.

³ Available at: <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/how-to-make-art-in-a-pandemic-by-khairani-barokka-june-2020>.

There are contexts in which it is understandable to say that something is no surprise, and nonetheless shocking. That includes times like now, when we are witnessing a shocking lack of solidarity, a shocking erasure of disabled and/or chronically ill perspectives on every aspect of society, including “the art world”, in light of a literal genocide of disabled and/or chronically ill people. As disabled women in the UK, to quote a recent BBC News article, we are “roughly 11 times more likely to die from COVID-19”, with new data suggesting around two-thirds of people who have died of coronavirus in the UK have been disabled. And this danger is heightened for those of us deemed “BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic)”, also disproportionately likely to die. And heightened yet again for those of us who are, on top of this, migrants with no recourse to public funds.

This is due to the fact that resources for healthcare and wellbeing have been starved from communities as a whole, that key workers who are “BAME” and/or disabled are more likely to be recipients of prejudice, and due to these power dynamics, are less likely to report mistreatment and endangerment, including widespread refusal to grant PPE (Personal Protective Equipment). These dynamics are borne out when workers like Belly Mujinga⁴ were not given PPE by their employer and left them more vulnerable to misogynoir and to hate crimes, one of which cost them their life. These dynamics are borne out when those who have been made chronically ill by COVID-19 are not supported for this illness, and how stolen-from communities are less likely to receive psychological support amidst all of this.

The ableism, racism, and colonialism that undergirds extraction capital is what has caused the impact of COVID-19 to be so enormous. It is an understanding of the art world as only “global” without honouring local communities – and more than that, as “global” precisely because it dishonours local contexts and communities.

Ableism needs to be understood as the processes that deem only some kinds of bodies “good bodies”, meaning worthy of saving, of protecting, of honouring, of uplifting. This is why racism is ableism. This is why capitalism is ableism. Why both are part of so many colonialisms, that continue into the present.

The least we can do is not pretend like we do not live amidst a massacre. That all we have to do is to continue to think of art as always an inherent good, no matter who dies in association with it. That all any of us have to do is keep calm and carry on.



⁴‘Belly Mujinga’s death: Searching for the truth’ by Rianna Croxford (13.11.2020), BBC Panorama, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-54435703>.