



ASCA - Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis

Decolonizing western Aesthetics through Sophie Utikal's "with my thick hair": in pursuit of a decolonial Aesthetics?

Final Paper Intercultural Dialogues 2

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This paper selects an artwork entitled *with my thick hair* by Vienna-based artist Sophie Utikal as its object of cultural analysis. Utikal's work is comprised of a written text alongside 6 GIF's consisting of moments where the artist interacts with the notion of aesthetics.

This paper does not limit an understanding of aesthetics to pertain to only western ideas of taste and beauty but "the conceptual and formal systems governing the material expression of the activity within societies that we refer to as artmaking" (Perez, 2007: 7). A demarcation is drawn here between aesthetics and Aesthetics, a vocabulary expounded on by Mignolo and Vazquez (2013). Western aesthetics is understood here to have been created by the epistemology of the zero point, a system which considers material expression resulting from conceptual and formal systems external to its logic to be behind time and inferior (Castro-Gomez, 2005: 17). While this epistemological hegemony vanquishes those knowledges unable to be perceived inside the totality of modernity/coloniality, it locates on a second rung delegitimized orders of beauty inside the modern system; it (de)legitimizes from totality and casts into exteriority geopolitical subjectivities and bodies of knowledge which question the universality/centrality of modernity/coloniality. Western aesthetics and epistemology are inseparable from the discursive regimes that construct human variation and which

coerce bodies into the borderlands between humans and things, humanity and objectivity. Thus, meditation and creation in the border is necessary for releasing the pressure from the valve of modernity/coloniality, a task which Utikal takes on as she tries to lift the burden of residing in a racial borderland:

Going through the pages.
You need hundreds of pages so thin to become so heavy.
One on top of another, they build up until they are a burden

Utikal's aim is to invoke a decolonial imaginary where she attempts to carve out a space for her to emerge momentarily from the westernised system of aesthetics which racialises her body as she tries to disrupt the linearity of modernity/coloniality transgressing into the potential for her body to occupy a position in *pensamiento otro* (Anzaldúa, 1987: 15). In other words, modern aesthetics are carved out in the colonial matrix of power in the 16th century and become Eurocentric in the 18th century asserting universality on and regulating beauty and taste by the "Enlightenment's" strict interpellation of Greek poetics, whereas, decolonial aesthetics allows for a plurality of ways of sensing, knowing and relating to the world which strives to re-evaluate and bring to light what has been rejected and excluded from the western body-politics of knowledge (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). Here it is advanced that Utikal's acts should be comprehended as unfolding in la frontera entre nation, language, gender, race and identity.



A breakdown of the six clips would describe them as operating within a canonical narrative structure with the artist herself as protagonist. The first clip sees Utikal flick her fingers through a book entitled "The Aesthetics of Western Art", playfully toying with it, her fingernails painted pink and her fingers embossed with a gold bracelet and silver rings, a reminder of theft from the Americas through the formation of the coloniality of power, which now serve to decorate Utikal's hands. The second clip entails her tearing out pages from the book. This symbolizes the calling into question of modern Aesthetics, the disruption of the order of the western body-politics of knowledge as Utikal crosses over a border; the book was once unified and now it is scattered lacking the cohesive fixity it once had. You can imagine the continually contagious and addictive pleasure derived from tearing out each page one by one, as the

figure of the *damné* lays waste to the apparatus that, through construction of hierarchical yet epoch-shifting categories of human variation, has exerted conceptual hegemony over her body in the modern/racial matrix. Subsequently, she begins to roll the pages up into scrolls in the third clip, tailoring, remoulding and reimagining what the modern/colonial system removed through epistemicide, linguisticide and feminicide (Grosfoguel, 2015). The fourth and fifth videos depict Utikal rolling these into her hair not unlike functionally designated hair curlers; her hair is almost serpent-like as it wraps up these ink-smearred dead pieces of tree.

The six visual components of Utikal's work are presented in the form of GIF's, short soundless video clips which constantly restart without end. The overall visual effect is one of hypnotic repetition where the sensor/believer¹ has no choice other than to watch these images fold in and out of time and space. Utikal's choice of form is motivated by a desire to pose a disruption to the linear order of the chain; as the sensor/believer continues to experience the GIF's the less able she is to decipher the end and the beginning. In the final GIF a perceptive sensor/believer will notice a momentary break in the continuous flow of the form in what appears to be a tropical scene and some concrete, which could be assumed to be photos taken from another time and space; again this highlights how the piece interrupts and breaks the smoothness of linear modernity/coloniality. Here, in her attempt at hacking the temporality of modernity/coloniality Utikal reminds us that decoloniality is bound to a re-imagining of time.

Perhaps the most striking omission in the piece is the artist's face; the sensor/believer is denied access to a reading of Utikal's factions, something that would assist in assessing the mood of the piece. Consequently, Utikal's possible intention of producing a playful or even angry tone in this piece fails to achieve an inferential space for complete enunciation and, instead, the piece unfolds seriously and even callously as no countenance is present to instruct the sensor/believer's comprehension of the register. The focus is completely on the hair and as a result, the sensor/believer is implored to turn to the written text for an elaboration on attitude, where Utikal makes explicit her close connections and affiliations to the decolonial project and intention of intervening in the colonial matrix of power. Another strong decolonial presence in the piece is the fundamental role of the book:

You need hundreds of pages so thin to become so heavy.

So many pages about Western art and aesthetics, and so little about its dominance.
So much about its canon and so little about its superiority complex:
The fables it made up, the supremacies it set in motion, the stories it vanished.
From Europe to all across the globe.

The whole piece revolves around Utikal's liberation from the stranglehold of the western aesthetic system. In this sense we can understand Utikal's behaviour as the embodiment of the decolonial impulse and spirit to fight back against racial oppression, not dissimilar to the young comic book Chicana super-hero Cihualyaomiquiz (Perez, 2007: 238). Utikal creates the space for herself to become a powerful and critical force against that which western aesthetics "set in motion".

¹ Sensor/believer is chosen instead of viewer as a decolonising act.

All of this raises two important points in relation to the context of its exhibit and whether this space required the facilitation of the accompanying written text. The artwork was displayed on a screen in the university library of Vienna and thus is positioned inside the westernized university and knowledge producing centre of modernity/coloniality. Consequently, it is open to the interpellation of the modern/colonial system's reterritorialization of which the piece has tried to deterritorialize (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 10). This might explain why the accompanying text so explicitly makes use of decolonial vocabulary, that, when juxtaposed to the visual part of the piece its simplicity and canonicity serves to bring attention to its primary aims almost stealing from the western sensor/believer an opportunity to misread the piece. This all points to the question of whether Utikal has provided the possibility of an exit route from the western/colonial system. Admittedly, she does not equip the sensor/believer with an alternative set of aesthetics; however as we learn from Mignolo (2011: 65) there are no ready-made versions of decolonial aestheSis, thus her choice of method perhaps aptly fits the confines of the westernised university as perhaps that location would not provide the space for that to emerge. Coloniality necessitates sifting through and examining colonialism which means that the promise of decolonial aestheSis must work through western aestheTics; Utikal's piece lucidly demonstrates this working through by the presentation of a simple yet liberatory syzuhet.



Born in the U.S. to a Colombian mother and a German father, Utikal moved to Germany soon after her birth, where she has lived the entirety of her life apart from the last three years residing as a working artist in Vienna. Utikal's Germanic status is constantly brought into question as her skin marks her as *Auslander*. Although Utikal's sense of "Germanness" is relatively strong, she is denied everyday "corporal belonging" to the German nation because modernity's vision applies the principles of division which are invoked by colonised minds when Utikal interacts in public (Grabham, 2009: 66). She dwells in a borderland bifurcated by the western Cartesian subject which ensures power can constantly assert itself through the categories of the modern/racial matrix

for which vast numbers of race-making institutions were commissioned during the 19th century, and of which, hair was an instrumental racial classifier. Whereas “purity of blood” in the “long sixteenth century” is based on the possession of a soul, hair categorisation, measuring and assortment into typologies of human variation come into widespread use by anthropologists in the 19th century as biological accounts of race emerge as the dominant vocabulary of racist expression (Grosfoguel, 2015: 28). Coloniality/modernity thus transcends epochalist notions of race; as we continue towards the end of the nineteenth century anthropology devises notions of kinship, ritual and myth which rely heavily on western aesthetics as centre and point zero (Quereshi, 2011: 264). Likewise, modern aesthetics assists greatly in the fashioning of the racial matrix and intellectually sponsors the induction of racial categories in Latin America, oriented around a policy of whitening the population, with white as the most desirable and end goal of race breeding. The further away from white the mixes are, the more animalistic and non-human the terms become such as *Mestizo*, *Castizo*, *Mulatto*, *Morisco*, *Albino*, ‘Return-backwards’, *Wolf*, *Coyote*, *Chino*, *Cambujo*, ‘Hold-Yourself-in-Midair’, *Albarazafo*, *Barcino* and *Calpamulato* (Goldberg, 2009: 208-9). Grabham (2009: 67) maintains that racial hierarchies are tangibly related to hierarchical notions of property as they are governed by a subject-object relationship which was eked out in the period of Chattel slavery when humans were treated as property. The accompanying text in the piece illuminates just what has been carried out:

The many worlds it has silenced.
The tastes it has made invalid
The bodies it has made invisible.
The hair it has straightened.
The skins it has bleached.

Utikal stresses that the whole piece liberates her from western Aesthetics culminating in the moment she removes any trace of the pages from her hair and lacerates them onto the ground as she strokes her fingers through her now uninterrupted and voluminous hair. She is revealed here on her knees as the sensor/believer is coerced into “looking down” on her which leaves the impression that this has been an act that has left the subject bereft of energy, who sits in a state of contemplation; however Utikal is neither being “looked up” nor “down” at- the Cartesian Dualistic was torn apart when the pages were eviscerated. Utikal unlocks for a split moment a decolonial imaginary where time and space slow down, where her hair has been altered by the morsels of modern aesthetics and her usage of the pages she has altered modern aesthetics by acting upon the pages themselves:

Tearing them out, engulfing them with my body,
with this thin paper I make my hair even thicker

Under western aesthetics we might believe that the texture and look of her hair has not been altered but the process of changing the volume of her hair has changed the very foundations and order of aesthetics and produced, if only in terms of the piece’s own semantic logic, decolonial aesthetics. Thus, after the act, her hair is even thicker than it was before and while the sensor/believer is constrained by the western visual aesthetic, we are asked to look through the decolonial imagination and conceive of another way of sensing Utikal’s hair.

I liberate myself from the oppression of modern aesthetics:
 Going towards the plurality of ways, of the sensible.
 Weaving alternatives to the control of knowledge.
 Delinking from the heavy empire of Western artistic values.

In conclusion, this process has created a space where Utikal emerges as reflective, creative, critical and heroic, satisfying one of Maldonado Torres' (2016) 10 theses on (de-)coloniality. "Weaving alternatives to the control of knowledge" into her hair Utikal reminds us that the task of decoloniality is unfinished and helps us envisage the possibility of a decolonial AestheSis. While Utikal has by her own admission not offered the next step for an alternative to modern aestheTics, she has opened up a space for "critical border thinking" where "epistemic meditation" can occur over redrawing the coordinates of modernity/coloniality with a view to epistemic delinking and the creation of decolonial AestheSis (Mignolo, 2011: 65-6). The question on this writer's lips is not how she will pursue this but rather where?

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Videos:

- 1) <https://media.giphy.com/media/3o6Ztm7E2kAizXlcvC/source.gif>
- 2) <http://imgur.com/a/lwetY>
- 3) <http://imgur.com/a/NI1tu>
- 4) <https://media.giphy.com/media/l2JholdUVwFI1QcM0/source.gif>
- 5) <https://media.giphy.com/media/3oriOgsMnMj9zDYbN6/source.gif>
- 6) <http://i.imgur.com/1lmtUIq.gifv>

Object:

Text:

Going through the pages.
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The bodies it has made invisible.
The hair it has straightened.
The skins it has bleached.

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Tearing them out, engulfing them with my body, with this thin paper I make my hair even thicker.

I liberate myself from the oppression of modern aesthetics:
Going towards the plurality of ways, of the sensible. Weaving alternatives to the control of knowledge.
Delinking from the heavy empire of Western artistic values.

An unfinished process of a never-ending dialogue, tonight seeped through into the system of this westernized university.