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REVIEW

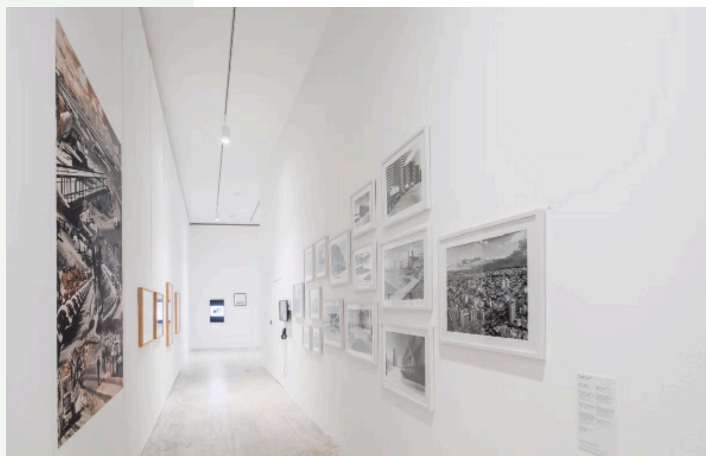
Defining Decolonial: Julieta González on *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the decolonizing turn in Latin America, 1960 - 1985*

by Katherine Hamilton

Lecture by Julieta González on her exhibition *"Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985"*
Thursday, February 25, 2021

In this lecture, González presents the exhibition and discusses the broader context of culture and visual art in Latin America as it went through the gradual unraveling of various modernist projects, the rise of military regimes, and the developmentalist economic policies throughout the region. This historical paradigm shift led to the emergence of a cultural movement rooted in decolonial thought as a counter-narrative to the project of desarrollismo (developmentalism) in Latin America.

"Decolonial turn" seems to have been the phrase leaving every culture worker's lips over the past five years, especially following a year of demands for institutions to take actions against racial and ethnic discriminations directed at their staff and in their collections. While these calls for accountability were necessary, the meaning of "decolonial" continues to be contested in the social-justice sphere because there is no singular, unified call to action that heals or dismantles all colonized spaces, as colonization itself is not a homogenous action. The ambiguous phrase "decolonial turn" appeared simultaneously with the phrase "global turn" in the late 1980s, referring in part to the rising importance of biennials in the art world. These terms were then combined into the "global indigenous turn," an oxymoronic phrase referring to the increased interest around the world in the sovereignty of colonized peoples.[1] And so, when considering a historical period in hindsight, how do we, as cultural workers, historians, and artists, map a term like "decolonial" onto the past? Can we retroactively christen a time when visual artists reacted against their governments' false promises of riches brought from modernist development as "decolonial"? How can past "decolonial" actions be discussed when such a term's etymology has evolved with global capitalism's many "turns"?



Installation image from *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985.*

Julietta González, curator and artistic director of the Museo Jumex in Mexico City, joined the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art via Zoom webinar on February 25th. González discussed her own interpretation of "decolonial" through her 2017 exhibition *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and*

[1] This phenomenon is demonstrated through the publication of books such as *Sovereign Words: Indigenous Art, Curation, and Criticism* (2019, ed. Katya García-Antón, Daniel Browning) that addresses a global "Indigenous Turn," and *Becoming Our Future: Global Indigenous Curatorial Practice* (2020, ed. Julie Nagam, Carly Lane, Megan Tamati-Quennell), a collection of essays on curatorial practices within settler-colonial states.

the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985. González's exhibition was funded by the Getty Foundation's 2014 initiative "Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA," a series of grants that supported Southern California institutions to highlight Latin American artists' role in the Los Angeles art scene. The exhibition was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego in partnership with the Museo de Arte de Lima and the Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo. The exhibition included works from dozens of artists working from 1960-85, including Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, and Cecilia Vicuña. Though prompted by a political uprising in Venezuela sparked by the 1998 election of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, the exhibition emphasized the emergence of decolonial aesthetics through anthropology and cybernetics in Latin America from 1960-1985. González's discussion of the exhibition re-examined and disputed the U.S. art world's claim that these works were merely aligned with the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s—definitions she found reductive and restrictive.

The exhibition's title *Memories of Underdevelopment* comes from experimental filmmaker Tomás Guttiérrez Alea's 1968 film on post-revolutionary Cuba of the same name. This film explores a bourgeois writer's memories of turmoil, social change, and revolution in what he calls an "underdeveloped country." González emphasized the title's real-life relationship to European modernism's failed promises supposedly manifesting in the construction of Brazil's federal capital inaugurated in 1960: Brasília. Known for its white, crisp, modern designs, Brasília was how Juscelino Kubitschek, the newly elected president at that time, promised modernity to the Brazilian public. The architect, a student of famed modernist architect Le Corbusier, presented his designs for the city in two axes, echoing metaphysics philosopher René Descartes's understanding of the world through a grid plane—a design principle on which much of modernist design was founded. But, as González explained, framing the world through such a grid system was problematic. The system mapped out mountains, hills, farms, streets, and neighborhoods as objects to be surveyed, negating the legitimacy of embodied knowledge and situated experience. Artists such as Anna Bella Geiger (Brazil, 1933) and Juan Downey (Chile, 1940) began using maps as parts of their practice to subvert this logic of modernism through which extractive capitalism justified exploiting Latin American countries. In Chile, the Anaconda Mining Company was largely credited for bringing military dictator Augusto Pinochet to power, confusing corporations' values with the needs and wants of the people. To reflect how the Anaconda Mining Company dominated Chile's laws and land, Downey encased an anaconda snake on top of a map of Chile in the work *Anaconda Map of Chile* (1973). The snake slithered freely on top of a red, beige, and blue map of the country, encased by pink walls, demonstrating the relative ease with which extractive companies crossed, regulated, and manipulated colonial borders. Other artists criticized the modernist grid by literally intervening in the grid's geometry. González highlighted Venezuelan painter Eugenio Espinoza who "tropicalized" the modernist grid by distorting or contouring it, rebelling against a history of perfect geometric paintings in Venezuela and Brazil. Yet, how can the exhibition form contextualize "decolonial" artwork from the mid-20th century when the term has taken on a different meaning in the context of art and activism in 2021?

Slide from González's lecture showing the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, designed by Brazilian architect Affonso Reidy

Between 1960 and 1985, Latin American artists responded to and critiqued the utopian promise of modernization from leaders all over Latin America. Leaders promised that rapid urban development would lead to more prosperous lives for all classes following the second World War. González also conceptualized this "decolonial turn" as a form of epistemic disobedience, embracing influence from social constructivism and departing from commonly held cultural idioms such as geometric abstraction promoted by Latin American and U.S. governments. To contextualize how these acts against the map or the grid may be perceived as "decolonial aesthetics," González presented a quote from Brazilian politician, art critic, and museum director Mário Pedrosa, whose speech *Discurso aos Tupiniquins ou Nambás* directly addressed the Tupiniquins and the Nambás peoples, two Indigenous groups in Brazil, about forms of development that circumnavigate America's narrative of the Third World:

> "The cultural history of the Third World will no longer be a repetition *en raccourci* of the recent history of the United States, West Germany, France, etc. It must cast from its herd the 'developmentalist' mentality that is the bar that supports the colonialist spirit (emphasis original)." [2]

For Pedrosa, as for González, this "decolonial" turn was not only a refusal of colonial epistemologies but an embrace of the possibility of Indigenous sovereignty from colonial powers. I believe this sentiment is clearly articulated in the anti-colonial works of Beatriz González and Cecelia Vicuña, who challenged the church's role in their respective countries Columbia and Chile, showing how this institution was complicit in the extractive capitalism impoverishing the country. Beatriz González's work, *La iglesia está en peligro* (The Church is in Danger, 1976), shows a religious figure in a yellow robe with legibly white skin against a patterned burgundy backdrop, framed in a yellow border resembling a stamp. The image of this man, wearing a long necklace with a large cross and a feathered headdress, came from a newspaper image of Papa Pablo VI as he addresses an audience of visitors from Gaylord, Michigan. The newspaper's caption notes that the Pope's headdress was used by Indigenous Americans. The image of these Catholic authorities wearing such ceremonial regalia adds insult to injury for Indigenous peoples: the colonizers had mercilessly punished Indigenous peoples for wearing the same headdresses they now donned mockingly. Vicuña's painting, *Sueño* (1971), depicts a dream Vicuña had where the Indigenous peoples of the Americas took up arms to kill the Pope. The work symbolizes liberation from violent colonial education systems that stripped Indigenous peoples from their lands, families, and cultures.

Ultramodernisms and their progress, usually shaped by the American template, are fundamentally tied to our favelas and shantytowns. The paradox is that these don't change, as neither do misery, hunger, poverty, huts, and ruins. But that is where the future passes by. Here is the option of the Third World: an open future or eternal misery... The creative task of humanity begins to move to other latitudes and advances to the widest and most disperse areas of the Third World.

The Third World must build its own path to development—one that is decidedly different from the one taken by the world of the rich from the northern hemisphere. The cultural history of the Third World will no longer be a repetition en raccourci of the recent history of the United States, West Germany, France, etc. It must cast from its heart the "developmentalist" mentality that is the bar that supports the colonialist spirit.

—Mario Pedrosa, *Discurso aos Tupiniquins ou Nambás*, 1975

Slide from González's lecture showing a quote from Mario Pedrosa.

However, these artistic interventions expressing dismay and disapproval for the Catholic institution and colonial apparatus were not the main focus of this turn towards "decolonial aesthetics." While the artworks discussed here subverted dominant notions of the Third World, this question of how to frame a moment in hindsight remains unanswered. What is the "decolonial" aspect of

[2] Mário Pedrosa, *Discurso aos Tupiniquins ou Nambás*, 1975. Translated by Julieta González, *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960-1985*, Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art. San Francisco; Feb. 25th, 2021

the aesthetics and political issues González presented, both in the exhibition and with four years hindsight? When a term is either loosely defined or not defined at all, what and whose histories and contributions to political upheaval have we lost? How will this term "decolonization" be used to characterize artists' past work, when the phrase itself points to a future of deconstructing and dismantling colonial ideals, idioms, and structures? To encompass all the evils of colonization through one word invalidates the disparate methods colonial governments used to break Indigenous peoples away from their families and cultures. "Colonization" is both obvious and insidious, making it nearly impossible to define in every circumstance. To continue discussing "decolonial" in a consequential way that gives credence to colonized peoples' multitude of embodied experiences, historians, culture workers, and educators must expand their vocabulary surrounding "decolonial" art. González concluded that because the elites were never actually interested in real development and the possibility of equality, Latin American countries remain "underdeveloped." But maybe there *are* glimmers of "development" towards a more hospitable, caring, empathetic world outside of capitalist ideals—development in the sense of true equality.

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