Let's decolonise the arts!
A long, difficult, and passionate struggle

Personally, I started to hate the word ‘integrate’. All my childhood, I had been integrated into France and its Western values, without choosing to be, at the wish of my parents. I needed to discover Aime Cesaire and Blackness in order to recognise my origins and to distance myself from my colonial heritage.

– Maryse Condé¹

The dominant media don’t want women, particularly white women, to react against racism. They want us to accept racism as an immutable fact of our existence, like the sunset or hay fever.

– Audre Lorde²

The worst thing about this kind of prejudice is that at the same time as you feel wounded and angry and all the rest, it nourishes self-doubt inside you. You start to think: maybe I’m not good enough.

– Nina Simone.

² Audre Lorde, De l’usage de la colère. La réponse des femmes au racisme. Available at http://infokiosques.net/imprimersans2.php?id_article=387.
Some years ago, just out of curiosity, I visited the Marine Museum in Paris. Its purpose was to “make the sea and the adventure of the sea interesting to all French people” by telling “stories of the sea and seafarers, both ancient and contemporary”. I saw the impressive and splendid figures from ships’ prows (generally allegorical female figures), magnificent models of ships from all over the world, and evocations of the great French maritime companies and ocean liners from the early 20th century. Nowhere was mention made of the role of ships in the treatment of blacks in the history of colonialism, capitalism, or imperialism. One left the museum in total ignorance of the links between progress in shipping and navigation and the slave trade, between maritime history and colonial conquests, between maritime history and colonial wars.

Nonetheless, without boats there would have been no slaves and thus no tobacco, no sugar, no coffee, no cotton. One finds the same phenomenon in other museums, where nothing is totally false, but the story is riddled with blind spots, resulting in mutilated history and cartography. This is how things get erased. Erasure works not by being noisy, but through a pedagogical discourse that tells a story which is not inexact per se, but which rests on certain things being covered up and thus forever forgotten. One does not see any more because has taught oneself not to. To decolonise means to learn to see again – transversally and intersectionally. To de-naturalise the world where we evolve, created by human beings and by economic and political regimes. It means to learn to place all the pieces into the puzzle and to study relationships, circulation, and intermingling. Thus new cartographies emerge, questioning the European narrative and making evident regionalisations and globalisations that do not exclusively obey the logic of North and South. It means understanding the world around us while neglecting neither the large nor the small, exploring the faults, the conflicts, the betrayals, and all the forms of complicity, solidarity, solitude, and resistance. To decolonise means to inevitably begin with colonial exploitation and slavery, both constructed like something as natural as the day and the night. The church, the state, culture, and law justify them. The slaves were the first to tear the curtain of lies, of this naturalisation which served to cover the rejection of their humanity, the most brutal exploitation, the greediness of the European powers and the fiction of universal human rights. The slaves accepted any risk when they wanted to make known their humanity. Their strategies for surviving, living, and creating preserved, reinterpreted, invented, and transmitted art and culture which expresses resistance to being wiped out. Anti-slavery and anti-colonial revolts and insurrections proposed to decolonise images and narratives, putting forth new histories and new forms of expression. Maroon communities – places of liberty in the midst of a world which denied that the principal of liberty was universal – created languages, art, and culture. They remain a powerful element in the imagination of the formerly-enslaved peoples of the Caribbean, Brasil, and the Indian Ocean. Post-slavery colonisation did just as much ravaging, sacking, pillaging, dispossessioning, and stealing. European museums amassed, in the course of these centuries of iron and blood, millions of objects wrenched away from their owners. In the second half of the 20th century, between 1945 and the 1970s, the stage of decolonisation which led to the dismantlement of the great European colonial empires and to the reconquest of sovereignty pursued this work of cultural decolonisation. It was necessary to undo the white masks; in fact, to “consider oneself from a vantage point outside of oneself.”

An entire generation of artists, film-makers, musicians, and researchers renewed the process of decolonising languages, art, and images, because until then “the illustrious mirror of the imagination was located in Europe, and the entirety of the universe – its history, geography, and culture – was inevitably organised from this centre.” All fields – art, literature, poetry, photography, dance, cinema, music, theatre, museums, design, crafts – were re-explored, and a vast library of works, images, sounds, and archives was built up all around the world. This history and this vast...
archive of the decolonisation of the arts are accessible, and knowledge of this corpus is indispensable. Not everything begins with Europe or revolves around Europe.

The processes of wiping history out have not ceased, however. They find new forms or use old ones like censorship, lack of funding, denial of visas, theft, and appropriation. For many years now, without changing their structure, organisations have gradually taken it upon themselves to organise conferences, debates, and expositions about the notions of diversity, hybridisation, creolisation, and decolonisation. Should we not be happy about this? Some progress has certainly been made. Africa has become a fascinating new space for “discovery” in the art market, which means that some artists have seen their works acquire value and have been able to obtain substantial financial support. But to admit that these things have happened does not mean, as far as we are concerned, that there has been a decolonisation. On one hand, there is often a bowdlerisation of the works, emptying some of all radical content; on the other hand, the structural organisation of those institutions and the economy of production and distribution of works have not been transformed.

Decolonisation of the arts starts with understanding the phenomena and processes being used to wipe people out. As we have mentioned, these can often advance in disguise. Decolonisation demands a huge effort, because one must first unlearn in order to learn. One must develop a form of curiosity which always asks how, who, why, and for whom. Education teaches us not to be curious but to disconnect ourselves from our world and the world in general. This reminds me of an anecdote told by Rabindranath Tagore, where he tells the following story: at a school, one of his young friends climbs a tree during recess and goes out on a branch to read. The schoolmaster scolds him and makes him come down from the tree, but this same schoolmaster encourages him to learn botany. Tagore remarks that the schoolmaster “believed in impersonal knowledge of the tree, but not personal experience”.

Who does not remember how, as a child, one was asked to stop asking so many questions because they tire out the adults? This is even more pronounced for non-white children. Everything that constitutes their world is excluded from being represented, not a single street name carries the name of a hero or heroine that looks like them, and the world as presented to them conveys a deformed image of
their origins, religions, memories, and history. And it is not only their curiosity which is presented as a defect; no, they must be integrated “without having chosen, into Western values”. It is thus only at a great cost that lost traditions can be recovered. “To make oneself autonomous and construct for oneself a niche of resistance, then, as best one can, to connect it with other niches of resistance….and to free oneself from the yoke of the great national, official narrative so as to re-appropriate and write one’s own narrative, to exhibit one’s own vision of things,” says Kader Attia. One must unlearn in order to learn anew, to re-educate all of one’s senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell – which have been damaged, but one must also re-learn silence.

In the hegemonic narrative, the term “rupture” (in art, cinema, theatre, dance) is only applied to ruptures caused by whites who are writing a linear narrative. But the narrative of decolonisation cannot be linear because “decolonisation is a historical process”, a multiple and complex process which cannot follow only one path. It is multi-territorial, it seeks to answer a multitude of memories which sometimes conflict with other, it has to admit different genders and sexualities, and many spaces intermingle. At the heart of decolonisation lies attention to colonial history and to its contemporary parallels in all their forms. The centuries of colonisation – during slavery and afterwards – have left traces, fragments, prohibitions, images, and vocabulary contaminated by racism. In France, moral condemnation of racism after World War II created the fiction that racism would no longer be anything but a wrong-headed opinion, an attitude revealing an ethical fault. Even now, the acceptance of the fact that there is no such thing as human races has not stopped the progress of a cultural racism – a racism without races. Racism without races and racists who are not racist (who are nothing new, by the way) have taken the upper hand, thanks to a political situation where French citizenship has become a token of identity (implying a certain “civilisation”, certain “values”, and a fundamentalist approach to the idea of a “secular state”). Not a day passes without a declaration, a piece of publicity, a performance aimed at the “blacks”, the “Asians”, the “North Africans”, and “Muslims”. Comedians invent an “accent” for them, mock their cuisine and clothing, and the cinema portrays them in a racist way. This feedback effect of colonialism/racism, as described by Aime Cesaire in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, has affected the artistic and cultural world because “just as nobody colonises innocently, nobody colonises without paying the price; a nation that colonises, a civilisation that justifies colonisation – and thus violence – is already a sick civilisation, a civilisation morally corrupted which, irresistibly, from one consequence to another, from one denial to another, calls forth its Hitler, I mean its own punishment”. Although it was written in 1950, Cesaire’s analysis remains unknown in the artistic world. The racial structure of mentalities and representations develops over a very long time: take, for example, the antisemitic tropes that have been common in Europe since the Middle Ages, or those stigmatising blacks, which spread starting in the 19th century, or the journals of European travellers separating the world into civilised and non-civilised, into human zoos, or colonial literature, or images spread by photography and cinema in order to sustain racist, colonial ideology, to misogynist and homophobic images, all of which nourished and continue to nourish our mental image bank and our actions. And in spite of the treatises, studies, and theses written about this long development, the French cultural castes still strongly oppose their own decolonisation. The evidence for this opposition is everywhere. From refusals to consider projects because “it won’t interest the public” to remarks about skin colour, a name, a real or supposed origin, a real or supposed religion. From the assignment of mostly negative roles to blacks, Asians, and North Africans to the assumption that white actors can play any role. From the certainty that white artists can draw on colonial images in complete freedom to cultural appropriation. From the absence of non-white persons in management posts in artistic and cultural institutions to the
absence of colonial history. Or the absence of critical, postcolonial theories of the visual arts in French art schools. Or the cartels in museums who either hide the past with euphemisms or try to wipe it clean, omitting African, Asian, or North African works in French cities. The list is long, examples occur daily, and the discrimination is proven.

Racialized persons are, meanwhile, asked every day to explain that racism and discrimination exist. They are required to prove at all times their allegiance to an abstract discourse about rights – abstract because it takes no account of differences of class or gender, inherited from a patriarchal, misogynist, and colonial history – while their right to equality is regularly denied. Their freedom to create is denied. At DLA (Décolonisons les arts, in English “Let’s decolonise the arts”), we defend this right. But we are also in favour of liberation, that collective action which concerns not just individual creativity but the liberation of creative energy in society at large. While inequality between men and women in the artistic world is now recognised, and official declarations are made in order to reduce it, there is still indifference or condescension towards the accumulation of inequality when the victims are racialized persons. This phenomenon is described by the notion of intersectionality, which insists on the fact that people can simultaneously suffer multiple forms of domination or discrimination. At an institutional level, greater value is put on male/female equality precisely because it permits one to ignore demands for equality based on an intersectional analysis, and white bourgeois feminism – a feminism which refuses to analyse the links between the formation of the “white woman” (innocent, beautiful, maternal, gentle, needing protection) and the invention of the “black woman” (Jezebel, lacking femininity or a maternal instinct, indifferent to pain) – thus becomes a formidable ally in the fight against equality for all. This white bourgeois feminism becomes a valuable card in the neoliberal offensive at a time when other cards – the superiority of “Western civilisation”, the superiority of European democracy, or the superiority of art from Europe – have lost their power. The rights of women, seen as an extension of individual rights in a world structured by capitalism, threaten the patriarchy, which rejects any non-gendered form of capitalism but can accept this white bourgeois feminism. The development of state feminism, femonationalism and femoimperialism shows that the
category “women”, taken as a whole, is a construction which refuses to account for social differences and processes of racialisation.

Indifference and condescension depend on a kind of intentional ignorance – intentional because it holds up regardless of the evidence which accumulates against it, intentional because the alternative would mean educating oneself and engaging in a process of decolonisation oneself, something which would mean renouncing privileges which rest not on any genius or innate talent, nor on any competence, aptitude, or disposition associated by nature with being European, but rather on the results of a history of theft, pillaging, and exploitation, and on a process of racialisation (antisemitism, negrophobia, islamophobia, romophobia), as well as on misogyny and all forms of transphobia.

In France, society has learned to neglect the personal experiences of racialized women, to demean them, to reject them by putting them into categories such as ‘victimisation’ or ‘communitarianism’, often without taking the time to see or read the works inspired by those experiences. These experiences are – a priori – illegitimate, denied validity, or assigned validity in pre-determined narratives such as victim, terrorist, drug-dealer. Let us not kid ourselves: if these works ever find a place in our artistic world, it is thanks to individual favours or because of mass protests.

One undeniable fact is that for years now, racialized artists have been taking control of their personal experiences, digging in archives, rediscovering forgotten narratives and figures, exhuming memories, returning to objects the story of their wanderings and transformations. For these artists, this is not about responding face to face to Europe and its obsession with the west, but rather about liberating themselves from Europe's grip and exploring other image banks, timeframes, spaces, and spiritualities. It is not about writing history, strictly speaking, but about inspiring, revising, or reinterpreting narratives, images, sounds; it is about investigation the victim but also the executioner. A list of these achievements would never be complete, but to cite just a few examples, let us consider works which deal with colonial exploitation and slavery; reawaken memories buried in colonial wars (Madagascar, Cameroun, Vietnam, Algeria) or the massacres and repression since 1962 (the revolt of May 1967 in Guadaloupe, the dead of Ouvea, the children deported from Reunion); rediscover important figures in struggles for independence and anticolonial movements; break
the silence surrounding the victims of October 17, 1961 (when the prefect of Paris, Maurice Papon, encouraged the police to kill Algerians protesting against the curfew), naming them and bringing attention to the youngest victim (Fatima Bedar); explore the manifestations of misogyny and hatred of black women, racism, sexism, islamophobia, negrophobia, homophobia, and transphobia; plumb the depths of contemporary catastrophes – terrorism, the war on migrants, pollution, the consequences of nuclear tests; examine dominant ideas about beauty, the factory of genders, and sexuality. Nothing should be taboo. Faced with this movement, an offensive has coalesced around a point of convergence between the extreme right and a left and a feminism that find (as Sara Farris has shown in her analysis) their roots in racist stereotypes and economic interests, offering to the Western European imagination would-be universal representations and conceptualisations that are, in reality, very particular. Under the cover of defending “values”, the attraction of which has been exhausted in a world which is shaking off centuries of Western supremacy, these forces attack anything and everything which, in their eyes, threatens their hegemony. While those forces seek to impose their order, which is only a different disorder against the background of the world’s variety, we wish to understand how the contemporary world comes to be, a world which is chaotic, disturbed, troubled, and full of danger but also of hope. Faced with conservative and reactionary forces, with racist nationalisms, we do not believe that an appeal to some abstract universalism or to easily-trampled-on principles is enough. To combat racism is not to combat prejudices but to fight for social justice and against the destructiveness of capitalism.

We take into account the deep psychological wounds left by racism, which affect nations and individuals. A remark by the great African-American singer Paul Robeson illustrates the depth of these wounds: “Even when he demonstrates that he is your equal (and this demonstration has to include a performance which is better than what would normally be expected), the black man must never put in doubt, in any way, white superiority. You can climb the social ladder, but stay modest. Always show that you are grateful. And above all, don’t do anything that could scare them, because the hand of oppression, which sometimes relaxes a bit, will not fail to crush you.” From racialized artists, from Billie Holliday, who when asked by a friend on an avenue in New York “How is Lady Day”, responded “Well, you know, I’m still black”, from those who declared in 2018 that “Black is not my profession”, and from actors, students, directors, and racialized artists who tell us their personal stories when we receive them at DLA, the realisation is always the same: in order to be listened to, you have to calm down and not show any anger, or otherwise accept being dirtied as described by Toni Morrison in Beloved: “every white had the right to take your whole person whether you said yes or no. Not just to make you work, kill you, or mutilate you, but to make you dirty. Make you so dirty that from then on it would be impossible for anyone to love you. Make you so dirty that you would forget who you were and could never remember.”

Decolonisation is liberating oneself from this dirtiness, emancipating oneself from mental slavery. *Emancipate yourself from mental slavery*, sang Bob Marley, because nobody but you can liberate your spirit. “We will weave the burial shroud of the old world”, sang the Lyonnais silk workers in 1844, a shroud that evokes the weaving done by the hands of those used to the task, the miserable hands of anonymous women and men without whom the beauties of the world would not exist, invisible architects of wonders.

---

No difference in this sweet France
between my past, my present, and my suffering
to be at the bottom of the precipice or on the surface
but in any case on the scene and hated excessively
my scars are full of stress
full of racist stories that oppress me
of bruises, cysts, pains, and thick chains
for the indigenous people at the origin of their riches
they attack us so we attack them
they beat the black men, raped the black women
so my sores are big and my skull puts on
anguish and demotivation in my blockhaus
it’s the blockage in our lives, too
they signal our pedigree on our CV
how do you expect me to calm my anger
when the colon is as cruel as the SS?21

Casey22

At DLA, we do not separate the decolonisation of the arts from the scandal of unpunished crimes by the police, from the criminalisation of solidarity, from laws that weaken social protections, or from injustice, inequality, racism, and environmental destruction in France and across the seas. Since racism is indistinguishable in our eyes from sexism, misogyny, or ethno-nationalism (in fact they act in symbiosis), as militant anti-racists we are particularly concerned now. We observe the ravages of neoliberalism and individualism, which lead to attacks on movements involving decolonisers, women, trans people, queers, or indigenous people. We are aware that it is necessary to distinguish between worry and malignant attacks, between a request for explanation and an accusation.

For those who want to understand: can we admit to you our fatigue at your constant demand that we become educators when information (on the French translation of blackface, for example) is already readily available? Why do you accept that anyone can decide that they are an expert on slavery, colonialism, or the current forms of colonialism, without even looking for information about their long and complex history? Why do you participate in the fairy tale that pretends that colonialism ended in 1962? Why do you never ask yourselves how your privileges were given to you? Do not just be content to read a black writer or to go and see an artist of colour. Your culpability does not bring any benefit, save the fragility of your tears, they do not bring any benefit either, neither for you nor us. Accept that you are troubled and disturbed, and take the time to reflect. We are the first to admit that nothing is ever final as far as knowledge is concerned, and that we too can have prejudices, that decolonisation is not thing to be acquired, but rather a process.

To our allies and friends, we say that we know how difficult it is to construct a collective path, but nevertheless it is important to construct it. Listening, attention, and solidarity are fundamental, just as is working on our disagreements so that common ground can be found anew each time. Let’s decolonise the arts will be a painful and tedious movement, joyful and happy, because it affects me as an individual and also the collective. You do not have to be afraid of our anger, because just as Audre Lorde wrote, “to exteriorise anger, to transform it into action in the service of our vision and our future, is an act of clarification that liberates us and gives us strength, because it is via this painful process of putting theory into practice that we...
find out who are our allies, with whom we may have serious differences, and who are our real enemies."

To the others, who defend at all cost their little square of terrain, all the while pretending to defend the universal: your universalism hides your particularism, the transformation of your singular culture into universal culture, and your refusal to analyse the current forms of racism. Your antiracism is moral, which means that it does not seek to detect how racism has insinuated itself into the practices and institutions of the state. When shown concrete examples of racism, you counter with grand abstract principles. When you pretend to act as a foil to the United States, this serves to reinforce the image of France as fairer, more egalitarian. But we know that in both cases, if any modest progress was made it was because you were pushed by our struggle, not by your principles. You accuse the United States of being puritan, of menacing French gallantry, of being much more racist (e.g. segregation, lynching). But here, in France, we have created the laws for blacks (Code noir) and the code for indigenous people (Code de l’indigénat); here was decreed the dispossession of colonised peoples; here we decided in favour of bloody wars in Madagascar, Indochina, Cameroon, and Algeria; here, we welcomed dictators to whom we sold arms; here, the highest authorities of the state have welcomed an identity movement which violently pronounced itself opposed to marriage for everybody. Here, a harmless manual about gender equality was recalled; here, conferences have been prohibited under pressure from the far right; here, militants have been banned from speaking at universities; here, militant antiracists have been denounced and named in reports broadcast by government ministries. Those of you who refuse a true humanism which cannot but take the form of a concrete, political antiracism, know that our determination is real. It is not your job to tell us which past is important, and your injunctions are but minor obstacles to our producing more complex and jarring narratives. Our adversaries should get used to our cumbersome presence, joyful and bothersome.

And to ourselves, to those of us involved in decolonising the arts, know that our path will be long, difficult, and exciting. We will have to decolonise our own spirits, overcome divisions inside ourselves, interrogate our own prejudices, and to make a constant effort to go beyond the fragmentation caused the patriarchy, sexism, racism, and capitalism. But let us feel free to choose the forms that we want to develop. Let us refuse to be assigned to certain topics, problems, or forms. Let us deliver ourselves from the politics of respectability, from the desire to be accepted at the cost of compromises that would destroy us. In a world made of obstacles, uncertainty, and arbitrariness, let us develop a methodological and epistemological critique of colonialism and let us decolonise the arts in order to overcome the dehumanisation which has always been at the heart of the modernity which now has hegemony.

We do not prohibit ourselves from tackling any topic, and we will have our opinion on the restitution of stolen African objects in French museums just like we will have an opinion on the intellectual cannibalism that absorbs our ideas and content while preserving the dominance of certain institutions and their programming. We engage ourselves to combat racism, because as we see it the decolonisation of the arts contributes to the decolonisation of French society. We believe that our voices, our narrations, our stories, our forms of expression and representation deserve to be recognised as well as to be criticised. We will not be fooled by token attempts at recuperation. We reserve the right to disturb and overturn, as well as the right to make mistakes.
In conclusion, temporary as this may be, here are some concrete proposals for debate:

- Bring to wider attention all initiatives, actions, experiences, and practices developed in art schools and cultural centres by artists, students, and teachers that contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge and methods; teach colonial history in art schools – obviously this teaching is necessary in all schools, but our goal here is to pose the following question: is it possible to an artist, whatever topics and forms I want to adopt or explore, if I am ignorant of what has contributed to constructing the world I live in – slavery, colonialism, racism, sexism?

- A programme of affirmative action to transform selection committees, commissions, and boards of directors of cultural, artistic, film, and media institutions in order to go beyond male/female parity or the appointment of a few tokens of diversity, and to institute a bit more transparency. In order to reinforce this programme, to publish each year a report studying the forms of intersection of discrimination in the world or art and culture.

- An examination of the cartels in our museums.

- The development of exhibitions based on a de-colonial methodology, shifting one’s viewpoint and not positioning itself face to face with the West.

- The elaboration of a museography focused on slavery/colonisation which will question the linear narratives and the centrality of the object, and will seek to visualise and make understood the catastrophe, deportation, the construction of racist gender and sexual stereotypes, the economy of exploitation, multiple modes of resistance, the critique of modernity and its representations, their multiple timeframes and spaces.

- Sustainable venues in France and abroad where one can organise debates, meetings, expositions, and reflection on the process of decolonising the arts.

Françoise Vergès is a political scientist, historian and feminist. She has taught at Sussex University and Goldsmiths College in England.

Translation from French: Adriano Hundhausen