

INTRODUCTION

This work, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future*, sets out to identify socially engaged artists as active practitioners of decolonization. Conceiving of both socially engaged art and decolonial thought as potentially subversive, praxis-based tools for social transformation, the book argues that there is much to be gained from putting both traditions into dialogue. I believe that both share objectives and can complement and refine each other. Following Cedric Robinson's incisive observation that capitalism is always racial capitalism, and that social inequalities are shaped by (and shape in turn) racial categorizations, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* maintains that art activists and socially engaged artists are equipped with a decades-long experience of challenging the reasoning that lies behind neoliberal capitalism.

In this book, I argue that there exist multiple, alternative genealogies of socially engaged art. This means at least two things: first, that our histories of art and activism and our critical appreciation of those cultural phenomena are incomplete if they fail to explore the transnational articulations (both historical and contemporary) deployed by affirmative, resistant artistic initiatives, many of which have emerged and are emerging from the Global South. Second, and more important, since those histories clarify our present situation, the act of silencing part of them will forcefully imply an erasure and therefore limit and circumscribe the potential that radical, activist artistic practices can still have in the present. Through this book, I excavate the political paradigms at play in socially engaged art in order to see how theories of colonial power relations can explain former, present, and future forms of artistic engagement in which,

obviously, different sets of uneven forces and bonds operate. Stressing the relevance of coloniality for the comprehension of socially engaged art does not mean that a decolonial lens (a theory) should be applied to the art projects (a set of creative practices) analyzed in this book. The point is, rather, to look anew at coloniality as a central factor shaping many of the obstacles that socially engaged and activist art have faced in the past and continue to face. However, it is important to determine the extent to which ideas and theories on colonialism and its cultural influence make us more attentive to and more critical of the use and value of art, socially committed or otherwise. Through this double movement, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* will showcase some of the tensions that emerge from this confluence between socially engaged art and coloniality.

It follows from here that recognizing the global currency of socially engaged art does not mean incorporating a few case studies into the well-known list of usual suspects. It is not enough to acknowledge the existence of multiple genealogies of social practice existing under the radar of mainstream academic or artistic backgrounds; nor is it sufficient to point out the relevance of some of these projects as peripheral influences or distant relatives of other commonly discussed practices. On the contrary, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* affirms that it is our whole understanding of the concepts and practices of agency and social transformation that should be expanded and interrogated. Related to this, the universal value of concepts and political constructs, such as civil society and public space, should be interrogated, not just from a theoretical perspective but also when scrutinizing each project. The specificities of context and location are not just additional elements associated with particular creative practices; rather, they urge us to redefine the conceptual apparatus designed to measure the aesthetic and social relevance of artistic creativity.

Critical appreciations of socially engaged art practice have tended to be anchored from within a universalizing conceptual framework, without paying much attention to the spatial dynamics that configure both creative practices and art criticism. Always written in English, the term “socially engaged art” was popularized in the United States and Western Europe around the start of the twenty-first century to refer to a mode of artistic creativity that employed long-term collaboration as a means of achieving certain forms of sociopolitical transformation. The expression “socially engaged” thus competed with many others, including “participatory art,” “collaborative art,” “useful art,” “new-genre public art,” and “social practice,” among others. Although a specific set of artistic projects and a list of artists’ names is associated with each of those concepts, and each

has a specific genealogy behind it, they overlap in many ways and their use in scholarly criticism in the art world more widely has increased or decreased over the last two decades. This diglossia notwithstanding, the critical debate over engaged and activist art practices has set aside the debates over which term is most adequate and moved from a debate on terminology to discussions of the many ways in which the strategies and resources of radical creativity can be co-opted and mobilized for conservative and exploitative interests.

Expressed simply, the story of the commodification of socially engaged art is tied to what these specific terms make visible. Some artists operating on the peripheries of the “mainstream art world” realized that the production of material artworks was objectifying, and artists’ commitment to separate themselves from other productive forces was ultimately unproductive. In response, they started to collaborate. This artistic collaboration was intended not so much to change what is understood by art but rather to question and explore how the role of art in producing change was both desirable and politically urgent. Then came the backlash. Different forms of creative production were turned into formal arrangements of accommodation to the present, consolidating motionless movement, leading to paralysis. The capacity of artistic collaboration for space making—its ability to redistribute and repurpose agencies, affects, and effects—was placed at the service of institutional desires and predictable, programmed cultural transformation. Emancipatory processes of space making and translatable radical synergies were replaced by the ubiquity of a creative class operating qua the last (the only remaining, the definitive) revolutionary class, of mainstream art institutions choreographing activism, of mutinous experience and local resilience turned into universally applicable know-how. In the last episodes of the story of change that lies at the core of social practice, “change” disappears, becoming commodified ubiquitous inertia.

Although I accept that the global commercial success of socially engaged art (and the concomitant existence of a “social turn” in artistic practice) is linked to the erosion of progressive politics everywhere, I am reluctant to accept the idea of the demise of art’s potential for social transformation. In particular, I am skeptical of the idea that the success of this kind of practice implies the consolidation of a modernist form of artistic creativity, one that arose from the context of the Euro-American avant-garde and was later expanded globally.

In opposition to the understanding of socially engaged art as a global trend, this book conceives of socially engaged art projects as a set of located, frequently transgressive actions seeking to challenge visible

and not-so-visible forms of coloniality. If the idea of socially engaged art needs to be unpacked before applying it, something similar happens with the critical vocabulary employed to describe, name, and interpret it. Decolonial thought has been essential in dismantling the universalizing nature of the theoretical constellations of Western humanities and social sciences. In this respect, its endeavors have continued, expanding anticolonialism's interest in not only overcoming the culture of the colonizer but also doing so in a way that could equate cultural agency with social change. Decolonial thought and praxis pursue ways of engaging heterogeneous communities existing within national territories in active, radical ways, stressing the urgency of implementing participatory and anti-elitist understandings of cultural practices. In that sense, they attempt to overcome the individualism and the class narrowness of colonial culture, encouraging the emergence of both new cultural forms and new ways of partaking in and expanding them. Conceiving the legacy of decolonial processes as necessarily multiple, complex, and not limited to a specific time frame, this book explores how a decolonial ethos can inform a broader, more effective contemporary socially engaged art aesthetics. In situating "South" socially engaged art projects within a wider framework of progressive, radical action *and* thought, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* aims not so much to contextualize and historicize past and present currents of art activism, but rather proposes to highlight the heterogeneous, productive ways in which these creative currents help us to make sense of our own experience and future expectations. Removed from the urgency of presentism and teleology (explaining current trajectories of social change as being more clever, more effective, and better informed than in the past), the interpretation of socially engaged art presented in this book reframes those questions while also questioning the critical vocabulary used to broach them.

Viewed through a lens focused on coloniality, socially engaged art reveals that critical ideas and appreciations are unintelligible without the experiences and critical traditions emerging in places traditionally left outside of Western and global accounts of contemporary artistic practice. Anticolonial struggles, for example, were essential in materially shaping ideas of collective agency and social transformation throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, anticolonialism was crucial in determining what radical culture looked like in its historical moment, decisively contributing to the configuration of a vocabulary of radical coexistence. When weighing the impact of activist art in the present, it is all the more pressing to evaluate how alive this legacy can be. In this way, the historical indebtedness of Western and Eurocentric philosophy and critical thought

to the anticolonial experience (which affects art criticism in similar ways) is aligned with the present blindness of many “global” views that still envision the South as a place of derivative ideas and practices, a place frozen in time, where originality, innovation, and historical relevance have been extirpated and translated elsewhere.

My own engagement with socially engaged art intentionally adopts the experimental, the experience-based impetus channeled by the kind of art projects analyzed here. The second main hypothesis sustained throughout this book is that praxis informs our understanding of cultural processes just as much as theory. When it comes to socially engaged art, the unpredictable process of negotiating a common ground among the multiple actors involved in artistic collaboration becomes a powerful source of critical thought. I am interested, then, in excavating the multiple ways in which radical creativity from postcolonial, non-Western contexts can inform theory. Understanding, in line with Theodore Schatzki (2001: 13), that theory is always practiced and that practice always contains a degree of (collective) thinking, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* envisages the transformative potential of subversive, radical, collaborative artistic creativity for retooling our conceptual repertoire for epistemic and embodied decolonization.

If theory and practice reciprocally inform each other, then it follows that critical conceptualizations of socially engaged art projects should carefully consider the specificities of place and location in which both take place. A short anecdote provides a timely example about the dangers of adopting socially engaged art and activism as a sort of ready-to-use tool susceptible to being applied without context-sensitive awareness. In 2017, during a short period of fieldwork in Hong Kong, former artist Tsang Tak “Kith” Ping shared with me the conclusions he had reached after his experiences of activism and resistance against neoliberalism over the course of several decades: for him, the only effective mode of change was through radical, direct action.¹ Many had tried in the past, he argued, to change Chinese politics. However, only the action of going to Beijing and “poisoning the emperor” (which I took to be a metaphor for the need to locate and know your enemy in order to directly confront it) proved effective. Outside of this radical action, Hong Kong activism, according to Kith, remained a sort of “colonial version of *The Hunger Games*” that the financial elite of the Chinese empire watched with amusement. For him, then, acting was a matter of spatial awareness. The local dimension from which many of the protests and artistic projects were framed was simply not enough for confronting Hong Kong’s complex relation with China and the global economy. Kith realized that “local” was not a stable formula

ensuring good results; on the contrary, for him “local” stood for the thoroughgoing knowledge that only sustained engagement and experience can provide. Speaking from his situatedness, Kith identified hardcore and soft-core paths to activism. He tried both and, when he thought that it was enough, he partially withdrew from the art world, remaining an educator and a source of motivation for many Hong Kongese artists.²

Kith’s itinerary should not discourage us. Indeed, I take it to be perfect advice about the importance of conceptualizing and contextualizing space and strategy when producing and analyzing socially engaged art initiatives. Many of the debates on socially engaged art have taken place without enough spatial sensitivity. As a result, the entire scope of practices usually falling under the umbrella term “socially engaged art” have been praised or condemned without taking into consideration the contingent ways in which specific experiments in radical creative imagination nurture specific lexicons of activist intervention. By grounding South radical artistic practices within broader theoretical and cultural ecosystems, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* intends to reverse such shortcomings.

Undisciplining Socially Engaged Art

Operating from a contingent, situated position, the first objective of this book is to excavate canonical and alternative histories of socially engaged art to make them productively unfamiliar. One of this book’s main hypotheses can be expressed in a simple way: socially engaged art is much more than an artistic style deriving from the experiments with the artistic collaboration of the Western avant-garde, including historic avant-garde movements in the 1910s and 1920s (futurism, constructivism) and experimental creativity in the 1960s (situationism, Fluxus) (see Bishop 2012). Despite the international success of processes of artistic collaboration and the at least partial consolidation of this kind of creative practice through the interest of mainstream art institutions and the development of master’s programs (especially in the United States and Western Europe), the effect and social signification of activist and socially engaged forms of artistic creativity cannot be reduced to any established or canonized phenomenon. Certainly, the canonization of socially engaged art has a decisive influence on the way artists think about and materialize their practices. At the same time, however, I believe that socially engaged art remains a powerful tool for expanding the social relevance of artistic creativity and for addressing pressing socioeconomic concerns. It is from that position that this book argues

for redefining socially engaged art as conditioned by its recent success but also still operating as an increasingly disciplined cultural practice that nevertheless remains productively undisciplined.

Throughout the following pages, socially engaged art emerges as both a way of making art (which follows a methodology, reads in a particular way, expresses itself with a particular language, and complies with specific objectives) and a way of understanding art's role within society and emancipative praxis' role within artistic creativity. Socially engaged art has moved from being unrepresented and marginalized within art discussions to being considered and favored by museums (at least in its softer versions). At the same time, however, in the present moment it has also become something far more complex than an artistic trend: a mode of "doing" culture, a powerful tool for despecializing, undisciplining, and unmastering cultural interactions. The consequence of this double conceptualization can also be easily understood: for instance, just as it is impossible to conceive a Western critical tradition without the contributions of Black and non-Western radical thought, it is equally impossible to sketch any history of critical, engaged artistic practice without considering the centrality of insurgent cultural forms produced by individuals and collectivities subjected to multiple forms of colonial domination. Usually confined within local configurations and associated with particular causes, many of the radical movements emerging out of anticolonialism and decolonization were and are concerned with improving humanity and not just the lives of the colonized. This has been made clear recently by movements such as Black Lives Matter and its aspiration to fight to have all human lives valued and respected. When approaching the aesthetic side of what Cedric Robinson (2005) called the "Black Radical Tradition," a different kind of humanity and universalism appears, one based on strategic and contingent alliances. Praxis and engagement are prone to appear with more clarity in contexts subjected to the most brutal forms of racial capitalism, that is, in contexts subjected to the impact of different forms of colonial dominance: first, because cultural models were imposed and therefore cultural renovation could only happen with a social dimension, after expanding the role of culture within society, and second, because in this context cultural struggles take an urgent, political form. When viewed from a peripheral, unfamiliar perspective, socially engaged art can emerge as a resilient force nurturing alternative traditions of partisan aesthetics.

In that sense, without forgetting the consequences deriving from the emergence of activist and socially engaged art as a major art current (even, we would dare to say, as a discipline), *Art Activism for an Anticolonial*

Future resists the idea of defeat. Things would appear differently, I believe, if we conceived of our times as a crossroads where neoconservative forms are being implemented worldwide but also where progressive interventions manifest themselves as a lucid and tenacious force as in few other epochs. Our time of crisis is also, I would suggest, a time of particular social innovation and collective productive coordination. In fact, crisis and progressive response are not just historical stages, advancing or receding forces. Nor can they be universalized. Despite the contradictions surrounding socially engaged art practice and the critical thought emerging around them, the practitioners appearing in the pages of this book can teach us many lessons concerning the importance of experience and experimentation, the need to find open-ended solutions to shifting problems, the fertile mixing of pragmatism and utopian imagination, and the potential of contingent yet open sites of radical struggle. In the context of this book, socially engaged art is conceived of as a set of practices pursuing practical, real objectives related to social transformation and emancipative action. At the same time, in those practices it is possible to recognize an exercise in grounding and materializing ideas on those very topics, in turning theory into practice and exploring the potential of practice to think our present, and to engage it in radical, subversive ways.

Practicing Decolonialization

This issue is that of the genre of the human, the issue whose target of abolition is the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernized (or conversely) global middle classes

—Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality
of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”

Central to Sylvia Wynter’s epigraph above about the struggle between Western rationality and its universalizing pretensions (that is to say, Man) and alternative “genres of the human” is the idea that Western supremacy was sustained by the drawing of binaries between human and rational, political and apolitical, corporeal ontologies. In her view, the expansion of a colonizing ethnoclass conception of the human came paired with a normative and restrictive understanding of human action. The answer to this limiting situation lies in embracing the invention and imagination of alternative agencies and conceptions of the human, in voicing

productively impure approximations to the self and the other, capable of becoming as “isomorphic with the being of being human itself, in its multiple self-inscripting, auto-instituting modalities” (Wynter 2003: 330).

Socially engaged art has often been described as potentially colonizing. Thinking through Wynter, however, I believe that many socially engaged art practices can be read as exercises in radical imagination attempting to invent different categories of the human and of human acting and interrelating. Still talking from the prehistory of the discipline (that is, from its fertile, undisciplined babbling), the curator and art critic Miwon Kwon (2004: 6) launched a warning against the multiple ways in which “new genre public art can exacerbate uneven power relations, remarginalize (even colonize) already disenfranchised groups, depoliticize and remythify the artistic process, and finally further the separation of art and life (despite claims to the contrary).” The many issues at play in this formulation will be discussed throughout this book. What interests me now is how a supposedly emancipatory creative practice can be associated (more or less straightforwardly) with colonialism and colonization. According to Kwon’s view, (socially engaged) art not only modulates affects and energies but does so in a teleological way, in which the *ends* of each project are defined by artists and materialized through (collective) means. Following that formula, the collective agency of communities can be appropriated and colonized by well-intentioned artists. Since art “lies” (claims to do something positive but ends up doing the opposite), its criticism must fall under the detective-like task of fault finding. Kwon’s words, to be sure, hold some degree of truth: as anyone familiar with the story of socially engaged art will know, socially engaged art can be and has been *used in such a way* that it reinforces capitalist power relations, foregrounds urban exclusion, makes disenfranchised groups more invisible, conceals the causes of social marginalization, and delays public intervention. To assume that this is all that socially engaged art *does*, that this is the whole story, however, is a totally different matter.

What does it mean to conceive socially engaged art’s transformative potential as *potentially* (and not necessarily) colonizing? What comes of accepting the existence of alternative options emerging before and within the process of institutionalization of those artistic practices? If the danger of institutionalization overwhelms the materialization and the critical thought about this kind of practice, why is it that colonialism is often left out the main discussions about art activism and socially engaged art? If art is becoming a colonizing tool, to what extent can we ignore the complexities of ongoing forms of coloniality? Would we not advance in our understanding of (social) practice if we conceived of the fraught art

initiatives depicted by Kwon as extractive enterprises sucking people's bodies and agencies out and transforming the result into artistic income (and therefore as not just, or only, "socially engaged art")?

Following Sylvia Wynter, I will argue that our appreciation of what socially engaged art can do would appear quite different if we looked at the many ways in which this kind of creative practice has been used as a testing ground for alternative social and cultural relations. There is much to be gained from addressing radical artistic practices from a decolonial optic. With decolonial thinking, this book shares the situatedness of knowledge, the conceptualization of coloniality as an underside of modernity. In this sense, it compels us to understand decolonization as an ongoing, unfinished project, with the emphasis on the racial matrix permeating the capitalist expansion. The book also poses the need to speak about the imposition of racial/racist epistemic categorizations through the *longue durée* of the modern/capitalist system throughout modernity and contemporaneity, thus underscoring the supposed neutrality and placelessness of Western thought (see Dussel 1973; Castro-Gómez 2005; Quijano 2007; Wallerstein 2004) and the need to pay close attention to non-Western "geopolitics of knowledge" (Grosfóguet 2011) while relativizing the European modernist and postmodernist canon. By taking "theory from the South" seriously as a fertile source of intellectual renovation that keeps expanding and transforming subversive critical and creative interventions, a decolonial view of socially engaged art would reveal its non-Western origins and, more importantly, the active potential of its contemporary configurations when emerging in close contact with activist initiatives from the Global South.

At the same time, the focus on experience and long-term collaboration of socially engaged art practices allows us to better understand the provincialization of theory and critical thought: to present decolonization as a collective, practice-led activity. By paying attention to the multiple ways in which art practitioners tackle the presence of coloniality in their everyday reality, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* argues that the efficiency and the critical relevance of decolonization have to emerge from the specificities of practice. Crucial to the arguments of this book is to understand decolonization as something more than an abstract episteme decoupled from practice and applicable to any given situation. Decolonial thought is not a magic wand that reveals the true side of reality when waved. The alternative, eccentric locus of enunciation claimed by decolonial thinkers as a replacement for the modern-colonial geopolitics is the result of previously untested, unforeseen actions developed by many individuals and communities around the globe. By highlighting the performative

and active nature of decolonization, by identifying it as a produced and productive mo(ve)ment rather than as an alternative theoretical framework, I attempt to measure the impact of specific decolonial artistic gestures in opening up spaces for discussion and negotiation.

Although artistic practice originally did not constitute the main focus of decolonial analysis, it is increasingly becoming a central area in the debates around this epistemic perspective. Decolonial artists and thinkers, including Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Pedro Lasch, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Alanna Lockward, Mladina Tlostanova, and Macarena Gómez-Barris, to name just a few, are highlighting the importance of creativity in the materialization of decolonial futures. Whereas culture and cultural production was already an important concern in the systemic focus of the initial conversations of the decolonial group, the relevance of the visual was only later recognized. In the Decolonial Aesthetics manifesto that was signed by a group of scholars including Walter D. Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres and practitioners such as Tanja Ostojić, Marina Grzinic, Pedro Lasch, and Raúl Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, art and visual production is identified as a nodal point through which coloniality is both reproduced and challenged. According to the group, “The creativity of visual and aural artists, thinkers, curators and artifices of the written word have affirmed the existence of multiple and transnational identities, reaffirming themselves in their confrontation with global imperial tendencies to homogenize and to erase differences” (Transnational Decolonial Institute 2011). Central to the group’s intentions is criticizing the ways in which artistic views of globalization and multiculturalism lay the ground for a continuation of coloniality’s desire for universalism. While some of the prerogatives of the manifesto are not made sufficiently explicit (take, for example, this fragment: “Decolonial transmodern aesthetics is intercultural, inter-epistemic, inter-political, inter-aesthetical and inter-spiritual but always from perspectives of the global south and the former-Eastern Europe”), the document was effective in identifying art as a fundamental battleground where colonizing and decolonial worldviews are opposed.³

Adding to that identification, I believe that socially engaged art exemplifies the relevance of the visual for decolonial knowledge-power, while also revealing the main fracture lines where coloniality and the decolonial, Man and alternative modes of being human (to paraphrase Wynter once again), meet and clash. Three main features made socially engaged art a particularly suitable observatory of the colonizing and decolonial potential of visual creativity: its mistrust of representational concerns and its emphasis on direct engagement and active, long-term

social collaboration; its allergy to predefined aesthetic models and its interest in unpredicted, unforeseen social interrelation; and its direct (and certainly not conflict-free) engagement with capitalism's interest in commodifying everything, social experiences and do-good informal interactions included (see N. Thompson 2015, 2017).

It may well be that our contemporary art world works as a symptom of our social incapacity to envisage ways of reenergizing and regenerating alternative activist horizons. But although the expansion of NGO capitalism can be directly associated with the vanishing of utopian, emancipative ideals, I believe that the contemporary relevance of decolonization cannot be measured from the narrow rationality through which the praxis of anticolonial struggle is often perceived. I have some reservations concerning the criticism of anticolonial thought and postcolonial theory defended by many decolonial authors. As Anne Ring Petersen affirmed, "Care should be taken therefore not to validate neo-essentialist notions of a particular postcolonial or decolonial aesthetics, and promote the illusion of the singularity and detachment of postcolonial or decolonial art" (2017: 124). First, and concerning postcolonial criticism, it is crucial to relativize the history of its academic canonization and its appropriation by US and European university departments. Decolonial thought not only ignores the heterogeneity of postcolonialism but also overlooks the (more or less effective) self-criticism taking place within the body of postcolonial thought itself (see Spivak 1999; Melas 2007; Sethi 2011; Cheah 2016). Countering the image of postcolonial studies as a disciplined body of thought primarily concerned with cultural or representational manifestations (with discourse analysis), *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* reveals the strong component of active and subversive imagination at play in the postcolonial critical project. In this I follow the materialist and agency turns of postcolonial studies, which I identify as fertile theoretical configurations to address the continuities in the present of the colonial episteme. Postcolonial studies, Rumina Sethi argues, are "at variance with social change and uninformed by activism" (2011: 18). By exploring "South" artistic practices invested in social transformation, this book's focus shares Sethi's claim that "unless abstract theory translates itself into action and real events, and is productively employed in materialist history, postcolonial studies cannot claim to be political" (59). Accepting this challenge, in this book I see in many "South" examples of socially engaged art the here and now of radical struggles against neoliberalism and ongoing forms of colonialism that were once at the core of the transformative project postcolonial criticism sought to represent. Being aware of the differences between the

postcolonial and the decolonial critical projects, in this book I am more interested in exploring the fertile crisscrossing of both theoretical and practical configurations manifested in the bold, out-of-the-box body of work of a group of heterogeneous thinkers such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Rumina Sethi, Jean and John Comaroff, Asef Bayat, Talal Asad, Achille Mbembe, and Aníbal Quijano, among others.

Furthermore, I would question the idea that the process of decolonization that brought freedom to many African and Asian territories between the 1940s and 1960s can be reducible to a “mythology” by which a straightforward colonial power matrix was replaced by indirect forms of coloniality (although that also happened). The successes and failures of decolonization cannot be subsumed under the contingent histories of postcolonial nationalism. Rather, it is crucial to understand their impact on a broader, global-yet-located humanist scale, as reverberating and contagious processes whose expiry date is not determined by the particular demise of national emancipative expectations. Besides making a claim for understanding postcolonialism as a heterogeneous, still useful body of work, in this book I am interested in redefining anticolonialism as a particularly productive project whose future potential still informs our present.

Anticolonial struggles advanced many of the aesthetic experiments taking place worldwide after the 1960s. They gave material shape to thinking on community, emancipation, and agency in ways that remain innovative when looked at from our contemporary perspective. Any history of radical creativity would be incomplete without the decisive influence of Fanonian thought, Third Cinema, US Black radicalism (and the international networks of solidarity that shaped it and that it helped to shape), the Bandung conference, and a long list of etceteras. Recent approximations to anticolonialism are rethinking it in the long run as a political and cultural project that largely surpassed the creation of postcolonial nation-states. From multiple perspectives, the work of Partha Chatterjee, Natalie Melas, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Nikhil Singh, David Scott, Pal Ahluwalia, Vijay Prashad, Hamid Dabashi, Maia Ramnath, and Gary Wilder informs an alternative understanding of anticolonial thought and praxis that highlights its relevance in the configuration of subversive transnational alliances and modes of creative resistance. As viewed by those authors, anticolonialism is no longer charged with being politically naive by framing cultural and social emancipation within the framework of postcolonial nationalism. Rather, they read anticolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, and Sylvia Wynter from a

broader and more complex perspective aligned to their global, humanist implications. This turn has particular consequences for the configuration of alternative genealogies of socially engaged creativity. The anticolonial enterprise was concerned with exploring the emancipative potential of collective mobilization. Their leaders were aware of the need not only to overcome the culture of the colonizer but also to do so in a way that could equate cultural agency with social change. They pursued ways of engaging the heterogeneous communities existing within national territories in active, radical ways, stressing the urgency of implementing participatory and anti-elitist understandings of cultural practices. In that sense, they attempted to overcome the individualism and class narrowness of colonial culture, encouraging the emergence both of new cultural forms and new ways of participating in and expanding them. Through this lens, anticolonialism appears not so much as a distant, foreclosed past but rather as a fertile proving ground where the “social” of socially engaged art was continuously reinvented and materialized. Adopting that perspective, *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future* hypothesizes what a decolonized activism and radical agency might look like.

Homegrown Theory

Another main objective of this book is to decenter and deneutralize the conceptual grounds and the vocabulary surrounding socially engaged art. If it is easy to agree that socially engaged art has become a global phenomenon, it seems to me that the consequences of this process have not yet been fully addressed. Despite the success of social practice worldwide (or perhaps because of it), the critical vocabulary that has been developed in the last fifteen years does not fully succeed in describing the diversity of artistic initiatives and situations that emerge in the present day. This is not a problem of numbers. Approaching the expanded, global field of social practice today could not, must not, mean incorporating a few case studies from the South into the existing list of well-known initiatives. Rather, a whole new set of questions and points of confrontation appear if we defamiliarize and look at that field anew, not as a global phenomenon or as a state of things linked to movements such as Occupy Wall Street but as a series of interlinked yet homegrown processes of experimentation.

If we accept that practice informs thinking, the next step should be to understand how our vocabulary on social transformation reads when shaped by heterogeneous practical initiatives. Concepts such as community, agency, culture, people, common, etcetera, are often framed as universal values, as if their mere mention will recall a clear image in

everyone's mind. Despite the fact that many socially engaged artistic practices from all over the world are being discussed in international forums, those are often analyzed through a Western prism, with little or no reference to "homegrown theory." As I demonstrate in chapter 2, this also applies to one of the epicenters of socially engaged art, the United States. Socially engaged art began to be theorized at a particular time when issues of social exclusion and racialized stories of persisting violence were being brought to the fore of US debates. At the same time, however, the debates on social practice tended to forget that the same issues those artistic practices were targeting were being theorized *from within*. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, for example, already made the claim about the active role of mestizo collective identity in the 1980s. Why is it, then, that the debates over community art involving Latino communities in the United States preferred to borrow from Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of inoperative community (to mention just one example) and not from Anzaldúa? There is nothing intrinsically bad about Nancy; rather, the question has to do with the supposed universal validity of Western (radical) thought and the confinement of "theory from the South" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) to a restricted, circumstantial operativity.

We arrive therefore at a paradoxical and unproductive situation: the aesthetic appreciation of collaborative artistic practices such as those examined in this book is often measured by its capacity to have an impact on civil society, to enact individual and collective agencies or to challenge normative and exclusionary uses of the public sphere. At the same time, however, those practices are aesthetically categorized through a standardized vocabulary that understands civil society, agency, and public sphere as neutral and universal realities. As a result, the emancipatory potential of artistic practice is neutralized by the modernist assumption that there is only one way of measuring its impact. A movement to provincialize those concepts would not only assert that it is only through the contingencies of practice that those ideas come to mind and become thinkable; the provincialization and decolonization of theory will reveal that what sometimes appears to be a dead end might look otherwise when viewed from a different perspective.

Therefore, the use of "grounded" and situated theory is pursued here not just as a way of provincializing the debates on art activism and social transformation. Examining socially engaged art practices directly embedded in anticolonial and decolonial resistance, I attempt to explore how the connection between ideas of social practice and decolonization can be mutually influential. Socially engaged art is grounded in a political vocabulary that was practiced intensely (both in

the sense of being materialized and in a more musical sense of tuning, exercising) during decolonization. Anticolonialism initiated a radical experimentation with sociopolitical categories, many of which are central to the public role socially engaged art claims to play. Thinkers from the Global South have been and still are highly successful in experimenting with radical forms of cultural creativity. They have taken to their limit central issues, among them the limitations of representation and poststructural negativity, which nowadays inform our shared cultural and artistic vocabulary. Conversely, socially engaged art has proved particularly efficient at challenging the continuities of colonialism. What we have witnessed within the last two decades is the intensification of coloniality within sociality, at every stage of human reality, both in countries that were former colonies and in former metropolitan societies. Internal colonialism, environmental racism, or slow violence are part of the coloniality of being in our present. Although socially engaged art is not alone in confronting this legacy, its aesthetics and ethics are closely tied to those of decolonization, in many respects. Socially engaged art has been shown to be particularly appropriate for tackling ongoing, not-so-visible forms of epistemic and systemic violence, many of which are the direct consequences of coloniality. Furthermore, socially engaged art's focus on action and social interrelations has successfully revised the role of individual authorship in the configuration of art histories, expanding art's public presence and taking its social relevance to new limits. Through its interest in artistic collaboration and the privileging of process over results, the kind of artistic practices analyzed in this book challenge mainstream ideas of artistic mastery, offering instead a myriad of bottom-up possibilities that are the direct result of experimentation and situated know-how (see Singh 2018).

Chapter Outline

An Indonesian collective that reconstructs an old site of anticolonial resistance as its operating ground; a Chilean group siding with scientists to mobilize human and natural agencies within a supposedly “useless” territory; a Lebanese collective attempting to redefine the rules of the game of public art in postwar Beirut; a transnational Latin American group categorizing colonial and neocolonial exploitation as an enduring error—and reacting against it: these are some of the stories discussed in *Art Activism for an Anticolonial Future*. All these projects belong to the common imaginary of “social practice.” Yet they are also something

else. Through a direct engagement with the continuities of coloniality in their home societies, these initiatives rearticulate and repurpose former collaborative experiences. Linked to pressing social and economic matters in the present day, these initiatives also react against the legacies of colonialism. In this sense, they cannot be explained in general terms, nor can we interpret them as part of a recent international art trend. Rather, they constitute the latest version of locally grounded, globally connected processes of resistance.

This book is divided into four parts. Part 1 contains two chapters and outlines the main ideas of the book by discussing the configuration of a lexicon for socially engaged art (particularly in the United States), presenting the shortcomings of universalist approaches to social transformation and the restricted view of artistic postcolonialism when it is viewed only from the perspective of art biennials. Chapter 1 deals with the first two questions, hypothesizing how an alternative, race-attentive genealogy of US socially engaged art might look. Underscoring that the concerns about art's interest in the collective and more generally its turn into the field of social relations took place in parallel with the 1980s "wars" on multiculturalism, this first chapter reads US art criticism differently. If socially engaged art emerged in the United States as a consequence of Reaganomics and the dismantling of the country's public cultural infrastructure, then it will be essential to look at how racialized subjects were made visible or invisible through multiple means, including art. Here I draw on the work of Gregory Sholette, Lucy Lippard, Suzanne Lacy, and Grant Kester, all pivotal references in the configuration of *avant la lettre* theoretical conceptualizations on art activism and artistic collaboration. If the work of these authors is often associated with the main critical lineaments nowadays common in socially engaged art criticism, I suggest that a close reading of their early texts reveals a much more nuanced panorama, one in which the artistic interventions of racialized subjects arise as fundamental for the definition of a critical vocabulary for social practice. When viewed from the point of view of racialization, the US genealogy of socially engaged art looks unfamiliarly productive. Following Sholette's question "How might our narrative about social practice art collectivism be imagined differently?" (2017: 230), chapter 1 decenters and provincializes art criticism, turning past artistic experiences to a conflicting but fertile soil where alternative emancipative horizons can emerge. The main focus of chapter 2 is art biennials and their role in configuring a "postcolonial artistic constellation." Theories on global and world art rely on the impact of the biennial format, a transnational forum endlessly replicated and adapted in every corner

of the globe. Biennials have been essential in decentering the Western-centered contemporary art canon and in challenging the influence of the European art museum. At the same time, however, they are the underside of art's articulation with global capital. Instead of criticizing biennials, in this chapter I turn to two less-explored questions: Are art biennials and exhibition making the only vehicles of artistic postcolonialism? And then, more broadly, might it be the case that both art biennials and postcolonial criticism are suffering the same illnesses, experiencing a similar backlash? Comparing art biennials and postcolonial studies as two areas subjected to a parallel process of politicization, I argue for collective, agency-informed genealogies of postcolonial visual creativity that could point to alternative (art) worlds.

Part 2 moves back in time to engage with the transformative project of decolonization. The two chapters comprising this part engage with the thought and praxis of Amílcar Cabral (the anticolonial leader of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau) and C. L. R. James (the Trinidadian intellectual who approached the masses to identify in them an active voice and a productive collaborative aesthetics), reading them as precursors of a collective, socially led aesthetics. If the definition *and production* of a radical, emancipated culture was for anticolonial intellectuals tantamount to the creation of a new society and a new humanism, it is surprising that the influence of decolonization is often removed from the genealogies of art activism and social practice. In chapters 3 and 4, I contend that this absence can be attributed to two main factors: a narrow understanding of decolonization as a fraught enterprise whose collapse is self-evident when looking at the failure of postcolonial nation-states, and a critical incapacity to identify in anticolonial thought any sign of coequality, any potential to make sense of contemporary situations. Challenging both assumptions and claiming Cabral's and James's thought *and action* as relevant in our present, this part identifies in anticolonialism an indispensable ally for decolonizing socially engaged art's genealogies and futures.

Chapter 3 reads Cabral's ideas on culture and the land as a precedent of a situated and difference-attentive theory of cultural agency arising from praxis. Having studied agronomy in the Portuguese Instituto Superior de Agronomia, Cabral was well aware of the ways in which "cultural particularities" affected the use of land and conditioned individual and collective responses to colonialism. When shifting from colonial intellectual educated in the metropolis to anticolonial leader, Cabral applied his vast knowledge acquired on the ground in Guinea to developing a cultural theory that shares many of the main concerns of present-day socially led creativity. Cabral criticized essentialism, and

mistrusted bourgeois aesthetics for its capacity to master the language of the colonizer, in such way delaying and uncovering the urgency of a deep aesthetic transformation, and finally asked for popular participation and collaborative creativity as the only way to overcome the cultural legacies of colonialism. By identifying in Cabral's thought *and praxis* a cultural theory both bigger and smaller than the nation-state, I underscore the extent to which his criticism can emerge as an appealing source of renovation of radical criticism. Chapter 4, however, begins with an impossible conversation in the 1940s to reconstruct how much the positive consideration of popular culture and the active role of the masses owe to postcolonial voices such as C. L. R. James's. Following his journey across the Americas, Africa, and Europe, in this chapter I claim that James's is the most relevant voice in the postwar period, concerned with expanding the field of cultural production and aesthetically engaging the appetites and expectations of the masses. Highlighting how, by the time James wrote his best-known essays on popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s, the layers of aesthetic modernism were being established in the United States, I argue here that his work presents a valuable mixture of realism and utopian imagination, as well as an interest in curating peripheral subjects and identities *into* critical analysis.

The last two parts of this book shift from theoretical speculation and historical excavations to discussions of specific case studies. The three chapters included in part 3 revolve around the transformative potential of former cases of artistic activism and collaboration. Conceiving these as active forces that "haunt" and illuminate ways of acting in the present, especially in contexts where systemic violence does not appear as evident, this part examines contemporary socially engaged art practices from the point of view of the continuities between colonial and postcolonial times and agencies. The socially engaged art projects included in this part had to confront the difficulties of living in the "post": they emerge in the aftermath of civil conflict, unfinished processes of democratization, and unconcluded postcolonial nationalism. Operating in such terrain might prove challenging, to say the least. For if the "enemy" could appear clearly defined during decolonization, when it comes to the overlapping of coloniality and neoliberalism in officially declared "post" moments, knowing what to do and who the "enemy" is present a serious challenge.

Chapter 5 approaches two Ugandan community-based art projects, Lilian Mary Nabulime's HIV/AIDS social sculpture and the Disability Art Project Uganda (DAPU), to discuss issues of alternative institutionalism, humanitarian colonialism, and informal artistic networks. Both artistic projects are analyzed against the backdrop of the anticolonial legacy of

Makerere University in Kampala, its pivotal role in the configuration of Ugandan art history, and its current negotiations within the neoliberal and privatized panorama of higher education in Uganda. Avoiding a simplistic identification of Nabulime's social sculpture and DAPU action-based dialogical aesthetics as a continuation of "the Makerere moment," this chapter locates in Ugandan socially engaged art many of the most pressing concerns that determine the debates on artistic autonomy, deskilling, and collective agency in East Africa.

Chapter 6 presents the work of an anarchist collective, an informal artist-managed institution, and a cultural studies center in post-Reformasi Indonesia. In 1998, Indonesia put an end to more than three decades of dictatorship, inaugurating a new, democratic period. Indonesian artists did not believe the hype, but rather rose to the challenge of responding to the quandaries emerging as a result of the continuity of coloniality and state violence. Examining the work of Taring Padi, ruangrupa, and Kunci, in this chapter I argue that the experiments with artistic collaboration at play in those three collective endeavors can teach us the importance of tailored, trial-and-error responses to the pervasive, continuously shifting project that is coloniality. Finally, closing this part, chapter 7 moves to postwar Beirut and the Temporary Art Platform (TAP), an artistic collective that in 2014 produced a guide for artists wishing to produce public art works. While a great deal of discussion on the possibilities and limitations of public art does exist, in this case it was necessary to spell out the nonwritten norms deriving from sectarian politics and bureaucratic stagnation so that Lebanese artists could be aware of the terrain in which they were operating. Borrowing from Talal Asad's superb work on the secular and Asef Bayat's impressive defense of popular politics as a radical source of renovation in the Arab world, in this chapter I question the idea of public and socially engaged art as universal tools that can be applied just anywhere. For TAP, as for many other Lebanese artists, the postwar period (itself a continuation of internecine violence, regional instability, and international meddling) made them aware of the need to define the language of public engagement from scratch. By approaching one response to this situation, I identify in socially engaged art a tool for expanding and defamiliarizing public, shared spaces.

The last part of this book moves from the importance of legacy to the pivotal influence of affects and emotions in art activism. Reading, with Sara Ahmed, affect and emotion as culturally produced, the three chapters comprising this last part analyze how the feelings of love, hate, fear, or anger at play in movements such as Black Lives Matter can be