

The Brussels Lesson

(As we have no place)

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In order to introduce this "Lesson from Brussels", I would first like to share a lecture I gave on zoom on November 21, 2020 as part of the 'Intersections of Care, Open School', developed by Loraine Furter and Florence Cheval. This 'Open School' is part of 'Risquons-Tout', a series of events presented from September 12, 2020 to March 28, 2021 at Wiels, a center for contemporary art in Brussels, Belgium. 'Risquons-Tout' proposed an exhibition, performances and composed "an ambitious program that explores the potential of transgression, risk and unpredictability."

After various adventures and conversations among the participants about the location of the chapter dedicated to 'Decolonial Practices' of 'The Open School' - as well as its conditions of access - the health crisis settled the controversy by forcing the community of speakers to move to the remote space of a zoom session. This did not, however, resolve the questions raised during the implementation of this event.

In what follows, I will try to offer a form of continuation by sharing my intervention - which you can find among other videos on the Wiels website. I added an afterword that allows me to redefine a place of enunciation and to develop the stakes and future perspectives of a speech that is uncomfortable in many ways.

21 November 2020:

The first thing I would like to say to introduce my intervention in the space designed by Loraine Furter and Florence Cheval is: it began with a problem. A very simple problem that anyone can understand. This problem is that we were invited to Wiels, a large Belgian art institution in Brussels, to talk about an ensemble of things gathered under the title "Intersection of Care". These things covered feminist practices of care, decolonial gestures, minority voices, emancipatory issues, etc. All things invented slowly, with much fragility, in the margins of Wiels-like institutions. Everything that could be said then was said because we could speak without our words being exposed, becoming a risk, without our words being exploited, becoming a capital for others than ourselves

and those with whom we had decided to make these little things for precise and situated uses. For a “We” that was precisely somewhere and not everywhere, that was in certain bodies and certain lives, in a place where We could catch our breath before any form of alliance, in a space of preparation, in a site to rehearse common futures.

From the start there is a problem here, I would say. On the one hand an ecological problem and on the other a practical one, even perhaps a strategic problem, a problem of perspective and agenda. In short, a scene problem.

As far as ecology is concerned, I have never thought that we should clean up toxic spaces to make them more lovable and livable. Because the toxicity they carry is not superficial, it is their raw material. It is not a surface problem that would require cleaning staff or even benevolent management. This toxicity is not only present in the imaginary of certain places, it is present in the bodies of the art-workers and in the matter, the bones, and the infrastructures of these places in the same way that a statue of Leopold II in Brussels is made of a certain matter that has a precise history and we must melt it down to access the potentiality of that matter, to engage it in another, possible future.¹ The transformation of art places is not a small matter, but rather a long and deep process which must occur here in Europe where our societies are slowly sliding towards fascism.

So the ecological question is this: what can we do in spaces whose metabolism we do not control at all? In my opinion, not much. Because to speak of the gesture that interests me, the decolonial gesture, it only has potential and strength if we control the conditions, the chemistry of the place and its potential mutations.

Then there is a very simple practical question: where to invest our energy? If we assume that we are a weak and limited minority, the question of what to do with the little we have is important. Once we have managed to let go of all desire for toxic places and worlds, once we have managed to redirect our desire towards other places and we - who are part of this minority - have stopped wanting to be the wallpaper of diversity for these places - it is clear that our energy must be invested in building other forms of places that we collectively control. Non-heroic places, that have varied life spans and modes of existence, that are fragile and constantly emerging, places below the surface of the visible, the surface of value extraction. Places where no one extracts only for him/herself, places that are not organized around any “Body of reference”. Places without a king, without a queen, even if they were black.

¹ Eye-opener is here the way Laura Nsengiyumva melted down an ice replica of the statue of Leopold II during her ‘PeoPL’ happening in 2018.

² See in this regard: Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference, *Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò*, in *The Philosopher*, vol. 108, no. 4 (“What is We?”) (<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo>)

The proposal of this project forces us to think in terms of scenes of representation. From a minority perspective, emancipation is no longer a question of representation - who speaks? - but also and above all a question of the scene of representation - where one speaks and for whose benefit one speaks. Towards what are we speaking? To ask the question in these terms is to go beyond the benevolent absorption of minority knowledge for the benefit of cognitive capitalism. We have learned how much contemporary art was driven by the sole dynamic of absorption of everything that tried to escape from it, as if any relation that would pose a limit to this field would be unacceptable, inaudible and non-negotiable. It is time to reorient our desires towards other sociabilities, other experiences, other ways of being together than those which consciously or not turn our lives into new fetishes in the windows of the arts. And as for the art world, it could simply accept its "outside", accept what is not and is sometimes not interested in it serenely, without animosity, putting conditions to the relation, putting its desire in other things, without seeing in art a solution to everything, seeing even in the desire of the arts to be everything and to be a solution to everything – another problem. This will not prevent us from drawing, writing and telling stories and poems, making films, inventing performances, but to do so while thinking of other forms of life and other relational economies than those inhabiting the figure of the hero and the white savior. This requires going to the roots of the economies of our lives and devoting time to them without being distracted by what is happening on the surface of the imperial body, seemingly affected by a sweet decolonial fever. We have no time for that, we have no cool hands for that.

First of all, we must learn to protect ourselves, learn to refuse, learn to live in other conditions. To negotiate our presence, to build in the interstices, in what is left for us to live. You are going to tell me that all this is a question of means, that if we frequently go to toxic places it is because it is there that the means, all the means, are concentrated. This is true. However, as far as public policy is concerned at least, we have to make sure that this be no longer the case. Just as we have to melt down the statues of Leopold II in order to recover the copper and tin extracted in the Congo in order to build something else that makes sense for the Congolese, creating links between the Congolese, the descendants of the Congolese, the Congolese diaspora, and all the others, we have to work on the fertile decomposition of art institutions in order to ensure that a whole new world of small inhabitable places grow on different scales. It will no longer be enough for us to fantasize about the great stories of the mushrooms at the end of the world in seminars, books and exhibitions. We will have to get to work with the matter of the worlds in which we live, in the spaces where something can still grow. Since there is no other world than this world, and it is already largely damaged. We are responsible for a new imagination and we must make it possible and desirable, we must practice it every day in enclaves without owners, without debt.

To end with a practical question, it has been uncomfortable for me to speak in the context of Brussels in the place of my friends and allies who live here and who have a more situated and acute knowledge about what is going on here. So I proposed to make this intervention from a Belgian mangrove to which I associate my voice and with which I slowly try to weave thoughts and ways of doing in this particular context that I could not inhabit in their place. I proposed to these friends, to these allies, to join us to share in this important debate, to defend serene ways of resisting because resistance is a way of knowing and the interval is a method of thinking in relation. Also, everything that has been refused to this project has informed it more surely than anything else. We must learn to share our disagreements and differences, to respect the space necessary for each one to breathe, because the place of alliances is not here and it is no longer there. But it will come.

Thank you.

Afterword:

Our speech is a place-in-becoming

Since we do not have a place, it is difficult to speak. The discomfort of minority speech in art institutions or places of academic knowledge is barely avowable, barely audible. Sometimes even shameful. It is a subject that is spoken about with low voices. How and why refuse to speak when invited with such enthusiasm? Why not seize the opportunity of this "black hour" that has recently taken the form of multiple exhibitions, seminars and celebrations - and sometimes even university lecturers and tenured appointments? At first, one could answer: why not? As a way to close a debate that is not the right one. Because my question here is rather: what else can we do? What else can we do other than to exist on a scene that we did not choose, but that chose us to speak? In the same way, to arrive more quickly at the heart of our subject and to avoid exhausting ourselves in false polemics, we could specify the relational institutional stakes by emphasizing that the question is not to know what institutions do - which by the way answers a rather coherent logic with regard to their history - but rather what they do not do? And this in two different ways: what do they not pay attention to, what do they not consider. But also and perhaps more importantly: what is it that cannot be fully accomplished in their space?

These questions allow us to clear up the misunderstanding that has taken hold and continues to maintain the confusion between diversity policies and decolonial practices. In

short, between representation and scenes of representation. As I will try to explain here, decolonial practices aim reparation, at nothing less than the re-foundation of the diverse. Diversity policies are based on the request to see other bodies at the center of an institutional photograph of an era. These are demands that are familiar to certain minorities and are paradoxically not the most difficult to fulfill under certain conditions - the most essential being to control the regime and the place of appearance, which will condition the project and its political scope.

If these diversity policies have their utility- as a surface for projection of possibilities for a whole part of the population, as a space of recognition and more prosaically as job opportunities - they are composed of spaces with limited autonomy. Even, as is the case today, they participate in the consent of precarious scenes of representation to become spectacles and to perform on dominant scenes. This centrifugal process is fatal - and ultimately ancient - and the politics of diversity are today synonymous with the absorption, with the convergence towards the centers of all the different *images of life* that can be exhibited there and thus transformed into market values, whether material or symbolic. If I insist here on the term *images of life* rather than *forms of life*, it is because the other aspect of this politics of diversity is obviously the assumption that certain individuals represent entire marginalized communities, because of their skin color, sexuality, habitus, nationality, etc. This assumption, this strategic ignorance even, ignores the differences in itinerary, geography, class and therefore privilege that are active within these minorities. That is to say despite all the filtering processes at work², that allow a body to succeed in presenting itself on this stage in order to perform what some will call a different identity, the aforementioned difference is always sufficiently mastered as to contribute to a paradoxical reinforcement of the dominant stage. These different people are asked to be empathetic mirrors rather than dirty faces³. If we expect any sort of effects in terms of social justice and care for who is not self, for those who live lives under threat, lives led beyond the living, then an approach by way of diversity politics presents serious limitations.

It is both to this centrifugal dynamic and this strategy of representation that my first speech *from zoom* to Brussels was opposed. This interpellation launched at Wiels - and which obviously does not only concern this honorable house whose programming is of quality - was a way of demanding the institution pay attention to what it is not and cannot be. Attention to what is not and cannot become self, to what in short does not come towards the self, is the very essence of what I would call a politics of the diverse. While art centers, museums, films, and university curricula noisily thematize ecological questions and the plantationocene, the point here is to understand what the capitalist regime of the

² See in this regard: Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference, *Olúfẹ́mí O. Táíwò*, in *The Philosopher*, vol. 108, no. 4 ("What is We?") (<https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/essay-taiwo>)

³ I develop this idea of "dirty faces" in the text *Dirty faces* to be published in 2021 in the collective work *The Art and Solidarity Reader* (Ed. Valiz, Netherlands) in order to try to imagine conditions of international solidarity that are not based on a principle of similarity, recognition and empathy.

plantation does to what is not the self, to what it does not think of as the self. *Nature, the environment*, and the non-human worlds that are nonetheless populated by multiple existences - some of them human - will be destroyed by ways of inhabiting the world through intoxication and disqualification. The plantation declares the place habitable at the same time as it negates what surrounds it, the *savage*, which has become synonymous with the uninhabitable, the unreadable, the inaudible, and the inarticulate. Also, in the case that interests us, the precariousness or even the disappearance of places of life, creation and meeting that proposed fragile forms of autonomy for a minority speech - one thinks of 'Le Space' in Brussels, of 'La Colonie' or 'Khasma' in the Paris region, among many others - take place at the same time as the emergence of minority spectacle in large institutions. The diverse is depopulated, while diversity performances become the rule. This is an important point. How to repopulate the diverse in the fields of art, culture and knowledge in the neoliberal era? It is a central question in the politics of the diverse which I would like to outline the contours of here.

What is important is to not merely pay attention to an epistemology of point of view, but also and especially to contribute to the formation of spaces where certain forms of life and manners of speaking can find the resources needed to produce considerable effects on their conditions of existence. This is why my intercession no longer has for its objective to effect change in museums - and to participate in the endless debate concerning their potential "de-colonialization" - but to repopulate their surroundings and to incite those who wish to move and invent places where alliances are composed in accordance with other motifs. One of the essential aspects of the dynamics I'm interested in here, to return to a more ecological vocabulary, is thus to imagine the circulation of knowledge of living to living, of knowledge situated in life experiences towards spaces that allow these lives to become more livable. This therefore concerns the possibilities of care, of a commons, of the collective composition of strategies of social justice and of all forms that contribute to the reinforcement of alternative agencies. If we cannot presume anything about the nature of these places-in-becoming, we can at least indicate that a movement is necessary, from situations of comfort, with limited risks, from scenes where minority knowledge is accumulated in proprietary perspectives and does not return towards a living common, as it is hoped we will believe.

To finish, I would like to come back to the question of speaking out since speaking out in a particular context always raises questions. Here the zoom dispositif initially allowed me to speak in relation, but at a distance. This situation offered a first precarious interval that I am working on with this text. To work with an interval is an active practice of relation. It means to invest one's energy and imagination in a gap that produces certain conditions. When I said that I did not wish to invest my time in decolonizing museums, it did not mean that I did not wish for the art institutions to change - like many others. It was rather a

matter of pointing out a field of action and enunciation. From where do we want to make things change? For me, this cannot come only from within institutions themselves, for they seem to me to offer very limited terrains of action, where ideas are too systematically put in the service of skillful strategies of reconfiguration – at a surface level – and of continued privileges. Even when they offer comfort, these institutions also impose impasses which in my view will not be moved through until a new global environment of thought and forms comes into being. I wish to consecrate my time to repopulating this environment, this world, banking on the fact that new power relations will appear to nourish the gap in relations and also the possibilities of the diverse.

Rennes, 19 March 2021

The series of “lessons” is composed of short texts from interventions – sometimes accompanied by a few note and reading suggestions. The principle is to observe a current and situated event from a de-colonial perspective. There is obviously no question of giving a lesson in the magisterial sense of the word, but rather to share what a situation teaches us, if we take the time to consider it beyond its appearances and diversions that certain authorized discourse and media hype produce. It is an exercise in attention for things that are barely audible or visible. When the smoke screen dissipates, motifs that will be useful in establishing new spaces for speech, life, and ideas slowly appear, other sources of wisdom, manners of feeling, representing, and transmitting. In sum, other aesthetics and political paths leading towards habitable places. This work also aspires to be as practical as possible and aims to engage in actions. Speaking of politics and actions today is a guarantee of a form of intellectual discredit in the name of scientificity. This is perhaps not the most serious thing, for engaging in actions with a political dimension means accepting one’s own part of risk, which seems to me today to be the only antidote, the only possible issue to escape from the neo-liberal economy of knowledge, from the extraction and comfortable accumulation of knowledge concerning fragile and unlivable lives, until they are completely depleted. It is the gesture of a living being towards another living being.