

## Facts on the symposium

Symposium 1 (1 day): September 2020 [View the 2020 symposium](#)

Symposium 2 (2 days): May 2021

### Organising team:

Julia Gerlach (AdK)

Lisa Benjes (inm-berlin)

Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen (Ultima)

Anne Appathurai (Sounds Now)

### Advisory Board (4 meetings total)

Du Yun

meLê yamomo

Lee Walters

Memory Biwa

Candice Hopkins

One of the above meetings also welcomed the advisory panel from an Open Space event held by the Akademie der Künste and inm-berlin held in 2019. This panel included:

Sandeep Bhagwati (Composer), Dahlia Borsche (Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD), Oliver Baurhenn (CTM), Elisa Erkelenz (VAN Outernational), Nina Ermlich (inm), Björn Gottstein (Donaueschinger Musiktage), Katja Heldt (Delegationsprogramm MdZM), Juliana Hodgkinson (Komponistin), Chung Il-Ryun (AsianArt Ensemble), Taica Replansky (CTM), and Hannes Seidl (Composer).

### Participants 2021

Registered: 103

Attended: around 60 (maximum number onscreen at one time: 40)

*Below are thoughts and recommendations that came out of meetings held with the Advisory Board before the event on May 6-7. These meetings were long and intense; sometimes uncomfortable. Ideas were discussed freely, without any agenda.*

#### I. The notion of decolonization

There was a lot of discussion around the term “decolonization”. Some viewed it as a catchword or overused concept, while others underlined its validity and even its importance as a phenomenon that still needs to be recognised and dealt with. “Diversity” evoked the same sensations, though perhaps slightly more negatively (it was seen similarly to the word “green” currently appearing on all household products). The term “non-colonial” was preferred in the end as a way to shift attitudes more positively (e.g. “non-colonial approaches to curating” as opposed to “decolonizing contemporary music”), though there was no strong consensus here.

Caution was also advised regarding our understanding of decolonization: we tend to lump all decolonial struggles together, but it is vital to remember that there are many colonialisms (i.e. previous Western European colonies in Asia and Africa, indigenous peoples on various continents, colonization within Eastern Europe). Each of these represents different and insidious frameworks to dismantle.

There is a sense of weariness among diverse artists and professionals with the “decorative fashion” in which decolonization is addressed. There is a heightened sense of patting the backs of white Europeans and telling them they are doing well, and in doing so, simply strengthening the colonial structure.

Diverse artists and professionals often have the impression that they are on show in some way. They are made to feel that their value as an artist or expert lies in their “difference”, that there is an expectation they will perform their identity somehow. Although there may be no disrespect from the organisers, this feeling is frustrating and leads to resentment.

It should be recognised that there is an emotional burden that exists on both sides. For diverse artists, the process of decolonization is unjust and exhausting, because it feels personal. But on the organiser’s side, there is the burden of wanting, but not knowing how to talk about such things. These two burdens are not always understood or acknowledged by the other side. This can cause tensions when working together.

Representation (i.e. putting visible minorities on stage) is a ruse dangled in front of non-white artists. This approach turns artists into commodities (e.g. “Black composer” instead of just “composer”), and markets are then created around that commodity. Once such a market has come into existence, it begins to contain (non-white) artists, who become oriented towards responding to that market. To counter this, we must step away from representation. In other words, we must strive to look at practices, not people.

For the purposes of decolonization, it is more productive to evaluate and critique curatorial practices by focusing on the outcomes.

## II. The framework of an event: non-colonial approaches

Decolonization is about PROCESS. The why, how and what in the creation of an event, must be bound together. Simply programming diverse artists is not decolonization. The term “diversity” has become sullied because too many organisers limit themselves to this approach. That is why the concept of curation is so important in decolonization. However, we must remember and accept that the practice of curation is not understood by everyone in the same way.

In preparing an event such as a symposium or a festival, one must always be aware of the framework. The World Fairs are a trope for how we curate. Even in some of the most interesting festivals in Europe, there is a feeling of “collecting the exotic”. Who is the festival being presented to? When we curate, who are we imagining to be the listener and the viewer? How can we get out of the frame of the heterosexual white male as the viewer? How do we understand the role of the cultural intermediary in a global time such as the present?

“Who is asking the question” and “who is answering”, are questions that must be ever present during the development of an event. The second question could also be framed as “whom are we instrumentalizing to achieve our goals?” This came up numerous times during our discussions. It is very revealing to look at the positioning of the people on either side of the question (i.e. the true power structure), and the expectations put on the person who is answering: are they, in fact, simply being addressed as a representative of their culture? Or as a representative of all non-whiteness? Will the questioner be disappointed if in fact they do not answer in this capacity? More insidiously, to what extent do diverse artists and experts put pressure on themselves to become the persona they think is expected? Is there a transfer of knowledge that is unilateral, i.e. always explaining their culture, their point of view as a “diverse” artist? This lack of reciprocity ends up feeling exploitative: the AB spoke of the exhausting feeling of always having a microphone pointed at their mouths. So how do we cultivate freedom instead of expectations? How do we ensure reciprocity?

This point can also be seen more widely, if we examine the relation between the will of (public or private) policy and the limitations this might place on artistic freedoms and processes of creation.

Related to the above, there was a very strong emphasis on the embodiment of care, on the gesture of generosity and hospitality. Experience has often led to feelings of hurt, resentment, insecurity and suspicion that simmer below the surface. Care is a concept [currently more present in visual arts curation](#). Making the artist/professional/speaker feel welcome, feel heard, feel valued as a human being is an important step in gaining trust and creating the proper conditions for collaboration. This ranges from small things (i.e. non-work moments such as meals) to larger things (i.e. remuneration; being welcomed into decision-making). All have equal importance in providing a feeling of safety, value and dignity.

Part of care is also creating a safe space to work. With regards to this, the importance of listening and acknowledging (particularly from the organiser’s side) cannot be overstated. Ensuring accountability (from organisers, from all participants) is an important element in the creation of a safe space.

Decolonization practices must also take into account an ingrained reluctance/unfamiliarity with speaking up, and/or cultural differences in the approach to discussion or conflict. Structural safeguards are required in order to ensure that marginalised voices are heard. Different strategies for communication can be useful in this context, for example writing instead of speaking.

“Whom do we want to bring into the discussion?” is the next question to ask. We need to understand the logic behind who is involved and who attends. Recognising that there is a systemic logic behind it, and comprehending what this logic is, will help us to develop the right solutions.

A non-colonial approach to an event should be 360 degrees: diversity on the stage, in front of the stage, behind the stage, in the administration and Board. To achieve true diversity is to implement it on all these levels.

Communication is an important consideration. The usual channels of communication will reach the usual people, leaving the current power structures in place. Moreover, the words chosen for use in communication are important. For the symposium, the AB was asked to read and approve all communication that went out. More than once, they made suggestions that shifted the negative focus on decolonization to a more positive “building-together” language.

The AB was highly approving of the development process used for the Curating Diversity symposium, declaring it “a model”. However, it is important to bear in mind that this process required a lot of time.

One more point, in reaction to the open call for works at the symposium: open calls, which seem fair and democratic as a process, actually reproduce a dangerous pattern. They buy into a neo-liberal capitalist structure that is not democratic at all: access is limited to those already “in”, and there is little transparency in selection processes.

### III. The notion of the canon

What is contemporary/classical/experimental/etc. music? Why are these identifications created at all? What is the majority thought behind that creation?

At some point comes the realisation that aspiring to be included in the canon means supporting the canon and thus, supporting a colonial mindset.

True decolonization breaks the system of (Western) hierarchy that determines who has value and who has none. Perhaps the only way to escape this is to opt out – to refuse to be part of the canon at all.

Therefore the goal, for some, is to dismantle the canon entirely.

It is worth examining how certain (diverse) composers become recognised in systems. And keeping in mind that once they are recognised within these systems, they become a part of them, belong to them. Here it is vital to recognise the dangers of *containment*. Artists must not bend to the hierarchy to the extent that it isn't possible to think about freedom.

Related to this, the idea of the small unit, the micro, can be beneficial. Thinking of things on a smaller (local) scale can take away from the monolithic definitions of “world music” and “new music”. And from there, create “a community of micros”.

Practically speaking, sharing musical practices – understood to include oral and folk traditions – is one organic way of showing that contemporary/experimental music and sound art is not only Western. Dissolving the current colonial recording industry should also be targeted.

### IV. The notion of agency

“Avenues for freedom” and “agency” were named as two ways to counter colonialism. (\**Curating Diversity, Part 2: Sound, Agency, Freedom* was one title discussed for the open space.) The desire for agency -- that is, the possibility to take action, to exercise one's own

power, to own the capacity to act without waiting for permission or opportunity -- was very strong. Decolonization should not be a freedom handed out or conceded by those in power: the focus should be on a “building together” model, the question being: what kind of world can we construct together?

There is a hunger for a new model of curation. Some suspicion of institutions was expressed: diverse artists do not want to be instrumentalized in “virtue-signalling”, i.e. showing funders and audience that they programme diverse artists, follow diversity workshops, etc. without deeper change. This runs so deep that there is even a resistance, in some cases, to working with institutions at all, in a rejection of “state-sanctioned” work. (*\*in this respect, the fact that the symposium provided a platform that brought people together outside the AdK was considered positive by one AB member*).

Decolonization implies a change to the people in power. While waiting for institutions to (slowly) implement change, alternative platforms and spaces, DIY approaches, are interesting to pursue (*\*note that one initiative coming out of the symposium was to create a database of touring information, for use by individuals initiating events on their own*).

How do we create platforms that operate not from the idea, but from the reality of equality?

In this context, supporting the agency of others is an important way out of decolonization. One idea is to create a space that provides an organic way of collaboration and knowledge sharing. Providing practical help (setting up infrastructure, helping people find grants for their initiatives, etc.) is also valuable. There is sometimes a feeling of “me against the world”.

Another idea: instead of being invited to the system to “deliver”, would it be possible (for institutions) to create spaces for existing networks in specific geographical areas (not necessarily within Europe) to work together on non-colonial approaches? How can we push forward the work that has already been done, and those who have been doing it? How can we re-invest in what people are doing – particularly if it’s questioning the dominant voice/narrative?

Online possibilities, particularly in a post-Covid world, should be further explored.

## V. Capitalism

Representation without ownership:

Origin and ownership of music in capitalism are vital concepts in working towards decolonialization. The notion of ownership in music is modern and Western: the strength of a “creolised” past in music (outside capitalism) is precisely that there is no ownership. How creolised musicians are perceived within the tension between origin and ownership is important to examine.

Decolonial processes take time. Unfortunately, this is precisely what is missing in our capitalist world. It is one reason that institutions and others skip – indeed, are forced to skip – actions that are essential to breaking down barriers: it simply takes too much time to find truly new voices, provide the necessary care, training, etc.

## VI. The importance of sustainability

Sustainability in decolonization endeavours is very important. There is a feeling among diverse artists and professionals of continually starting from scratch. There should be a focus on building upon the work that has already been done and making existing resources available. Currently so much is done at grassroots level. This work should be done, or at least shared, by the institutions, so that the burden is not on the individual to continually educate.

Decolonization is a commitment, because things will not happen overnight. Commitment to this cause will hopefully slowly erode unfair practices and decolonize our individual selves. Messiness and chaos must be welcomed because it means we are on the right track.

The history of music has been written in a particular way. More awareness of the real history of music will work against colonialist attitudes. If this were to happen, the repertoire commonly presented would change; indeed, the notion of repertoire itself would change.

Related to this is the question of archives and sound collections. An archive is in essence a socially constructed history. We need an offer of different histories. The notion of colonial archives should be challenged, and sound, music and songs repatriated.

The effort to decolonize should involve children. To create truly open minds, there should be a focus on providing a non-colonial musical upbringing right from a young age. This will lead to a different future, one that involves non-colonial food chains of music and sound.

Education in general could be expanded by establishing independent, fringe education programmes, thus reaching out to communities where formal music education is not possible.