

The Art Space as a Site of Radical Love

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Abstract

Within a European context, the reimagining of art spaces has recently become an urgent matter of concern. One obvious factor propelling the current changes of art institutional practices, is the growing social diversity of European nations and the heightened visibility of marginalized groups. Seeking to respond to these processes of transformation, art institutions have begun to explore how to collaborate with diversified local communities, how to address culturally mixed publics, and how to create caring and convivial sites of encounter in today's migration-induced societies. Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin provides an interesting case when seeking to explore such attempts at reimagining the role of the art institution as a site of love. This article takes its point of departure in the festive re-opening of the institution in June 2023, which included blessings, concerts, performances, processions, readings and rituals as well as the launch of the exhibition project "O Quilombismo: Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies". The article analyses and discusses how conviviality can be perceived as a friction-filled form of being-in-common, how curatorial modes of address can condition and produce alternative forms of commonality within today's culturally entangled societies, as well as how an exhibition such as "O Quilombismo" can contribute to the creation of sites of love by engaging with other epistemic and philosophical traditions such as the ones practised by the quilombos in Brazil, palenques in Colombia, and maroon communities in Jamaica. Drawing on the concept curatorialization as marronage, it seeks to radicalize the notion of love within an art institutional context, arguing for the importance of viewing love not only as a state of harmonious coexistence but also as a form of protest and political resistance.

Within a European context, the rethinking of institutional practices has recently become an urgent matter of concern, not least because of the continent's colonial histories. The destructive consequences of colonial rule, including the looting of objects and the displacement of people, have historically led to involuntary migratory movements and turned many art institutions into celebratory reminders of colonialism. Profound societal transformations are currently also taking place due to the cultural pluralisation of European populations in the wake of decades of intensified migration and globalisation. As a result of former and ongoing forms of migration, European societies have thus become sites of social contact and conflict, and their populations have to an increasing degree become globally entangled. In the midst of these global processes of transformation, art institutions have begun to explore how to collaborate with diversified local communities, how to address culturally mixed publics, and how to create caring and convivial sites of encounter in today's migration-induced societies. In other words, art institutional practices are currently being reconceptualised and renegotiated. For example, as Director of Van Abbemuseum Charles Esche has experimented with migration-sensitive and

hospitality-oriented institutional practices, Nina Möntmann has explored how art institutions can be decentralised within today's post-migrant societies, Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Kahmer have reflected critically on how art institutions can host relations of radical hospitality rather than enforcing a nation-regulated right to hospitality, and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung has entertained the idea that art institutions in today's friction-filled and migration-induced societies could become spaces of radical love.^[1]



O'Neil Lawrence, Bruno Zhu, Grada Kilomba, *Subversive Bodies in Conversation: Bodies as Joyfields, Bodies as Battlefields*, conversation as part of *Acts of Opening Again: A Choreography of Conviviality*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), 3.6.2023. Foto: Mathias Völzke/HKW

Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin provides an interesting case when seeking to explore such attempts at reimagining the role of the art institution. When re-opening in June 2023, HKW's programme included blessings, concerts, performances, processions, readings and rituals as well as the launch of the exhibition project "O Quilombismo: Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies". The curatorial team at HKW sought to relate this broad spectrum of activities to past and present practices of commonality, hospitality and the value of plurality. In this way, it aimed to inspire new ways of producing knowledge, adjusted to local contexts, and to create social spaces of encounter characterised by love, friendship and care. Stressing this agenda emphatically, the HKW team states on its website that the institution is envisioned as "a space in which love, respect, and generosity are realized through daily practice."^[2]

The HKW's new director laid an important foundation for this reimagining of the role of art institutions in Berlin in 2009 with the opening of Savvy Contemporary: a small-scale art space located in the culturally pluralised neighbourhood of Wedding. As founder and artistic director of Savvy Contemporary, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung consistently experimented with convivial modes of coming together. He thus envisioned the institution as a site of unconditional care where knowledge related to colonialism, migration, integration, discrimination, racism, and cultural pluralisation was collectively produced across otherwise presumed stable markers of difference and prescribed identity positions. Seeking to decentre the institution, Savvy Contemporary also became known for attending to its publics by experimenting with collective practices that allow for many points of access, engagement, and collaboration. For example, by engaging with a plurality of languages, by exploring a variety of mediums that embody and disseminate knowledges, and by drawing on a multiplicity of epistemic systems from Africa and the African diaspora, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, but also Europe and North America. HKW's opening show and its dedication to convivial modes of instituting thus resonate strongly with the

institutional experiments previously carried out at the small-scale art space of Savvy Contemporary. Looking forward, however, it also provides an intriguing lens through which to examine how new art spaces in today's highly diversified societies might function as sites of radical love.^[3]

In this article, I will explore how institutional practices can deal with the ongoing pluralisation processes characterising today's European communities. More specifically, I will focus on three questions: how is conviviality as a friction-filled form of being-in-common explored by an experimental exhibition space such as HKW? By means of which curatorial modes of address might new forms of commonality be created within today's culturally entangled societies? And how can an exhibition such as "O Quilombismo" contribute to the creation of sites of love, care and transcultural encounters by engaging with other epistemic and philosophical traditions such as the ones practised by the quilombos in Brazil, palenques in Colombia, and maroon communities in Jamaica. Seeking to address these questions I will begin by briefly outlining the history of HKW in order to illustrate the specific socio-political context within which it was founded as an institution.

The Historical Context of HKW

HKW was created as a cultural centre in post-war Europe for the purpose of holding cross-cultural meetings. As such, the architecture was developed with this intention in mind and mimics the interiors of international headquarters of political organisations, with multiple interpreter rooms in the auditorium. HKW's building is an architectural icon of Western post-war modernity designed by the American architect Hugh Stubbins. It is prominently located between Tiergarten, a large park originally designed as royal hunting grounds in the sixteenth century, and the government district, a cluster of buildings neighbouring the Reichstag along a stretch of land by the river Spree. Erected as the US contribution to the International Building Exhibition "Interbau" in 1957, the building's ideological implications are manifest not only in the fact that it was a gift offered by the United States government to the city of West Berlin in the context of the Cold War. The ideological implications are also concretely manifested in an inscription quoting Benjamin Franklin that greets visitors in the main foyer. Engraved into a stone wall on either side of the entrance, it reads, in English and German respectively: "God grant that not only the love of liberty, but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man may pervade all the nations of the earth so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on the surface and say 'this is my country'."

When developing the architectural concept, special emphasis was consequently placed on the symbolic character of the building as a forum for the free exchange of ideas. Comprising an auditorium that could seat up to 1,000 visitors, as well as exhibition spaces, offices and a restaurant, Stubbins's modernist design was intended to facilitate a forum for the free exchange of ideas. In terms of architectural design, the undulating form of the auditorium roof was conceived as a symbol of freedom and democracy. Located in West Berlin, just a few hundred metres from the former Berlin Wall, the building was furthermore envisioned, in Chair of the Benjamin Franklin Foundation Eleanor Dulles's words, as "a shining beacon of freedom" beaming toward the East.^[4] Viewed as the very embodiment of the idea of intellectual freedom, US Founding Father Benjamin Franklin was chosen as the foundation's name patron because the laying of the foundation stone for the Congress Hall coincided with the 250th anniversary of his death. Franklin's abovementioned quote thus served as a reminder of the building's mission, purpose and ideological symbolism. Within this specific context, when exploring how art institutions can function as sites of love, care and transcultural encounters, it is important to keep in mind that Franklin was not only a political leader and advocate of liberal democracy. He was also an owner of enslaved people and a beneficiary of the trade of enslaved people. His "love of freedom" was thus implicitly associated with a specific part of the world's population, namely the colonising and economically privileged citizens of the Westernised world.

In 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Congress Hall was renamed and inaugurated as Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), a new centre for non-European cultures. The centre was intended as a permanent venue for presenting so-called World Culture. However, this exhibition-related gesture of geographical decentring notwithstanding, it was not until 2023 that a substantial structural transformation of the institution was initiated in relation to the recruitment of decision-making staff members. At this point in time, Ndikung was appointed as the first non-white director of HKW, and he put together a highly diverse team whose biographical and professional experiences span multiple parts of the world. Today, this newly appointed HKW team is actively seeking to engage with Franklin's historical authority over the building and the institutions that have occupied it. More specifically, it is seeking to rewrite the history of coloniality and to cultivate more convivial, collective and pluriversal sites of encounter through its curatorial and institutional practices. Zooming in on a particular event, and drawing on a combination of participatory reflections, formal exhibition-making analysis of art projects and audience behaviour, I will now examine the opening exhibition, "O Quilombismo", which appeared as a paradigmatic example of the decolonial endeavour that HKW has recently embarked on.



raumlaborberlin, pavilion, part of Shaped to the Measure of the People's Songs, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), 2023. Photo: Nin Solis/HKW

Turning the Institution into a Site of Care and Conviviality

When approaching HKW during one of my visits on a hot summer's day, I first encountered the sounds of beating drums, call-and-response singing and rhythm-clapping. Coming closer, I noticed a group of small children cheerfully running around in a colourful pavilion while dancing to the sound of electronic beats. When reaching the entrance flanked by two columns, I saw a group of young people curiously touching and commenting upon the woven textiles that the vertical structures were draped in for the occasion. Before even entering the building, I had come across people congregating and engaging with artworks and exhibition-related activities in collectively oriented ways: a case in point that I will discuss in greater detail later in this text.

The exhibition on show, "O Quilombismo", was described by HKW as "a research undertaking, an exhibition, workshops and a series of performances that invite artists, activists, scholars, and people from other walks of life to imagine new forms of cultural and political resistance through diverse emancipation projects, past and present."^[5] The exhibition project's point of departure was the political philosophy of quilombismo as developed

by Brazilian artist, author and politician Abdias Nascimento (1914–2011). He defined the quilombos as communities created by escaped and emancipated enslaved people and he described them as societies of “fraternal and free reunion, or encounter; solidarity, living together, and existential communion.”^[6]

Historically, the tradition of quilombist struggle has existed throughout the Americas from the earliest decades of the 1500s, when African enslaved populations resisted European colonisation and founded new forms of community and societal organisation. Importantly, however, the quilombist struggle is not only perceived as a *historical* phenomenon. It is also viewed as a *contemporary* pursuit of justice and the creation of spaces of emancipation. As indicated in the subtitle “Of Resistance and Insisting”, emancipation is perceived as an ongoing *process*. In other words, once a free space is obtained after a fight, a new struggle begins when seeking to maintain that space. In this way, the curatorial concept emphasises the fact that spaces of freedom, egalitarianism and conviviality must continuously be cultivated. Consequently, the exhibition explicitly invites the visitor to “imagine what cultural resistance of our contemporary condition(s) could be, and how this might be informed by the cultural resistances and emancipation schemes of the past.”^[7] Following this line of thought, and paraphrasing Ndikung, quilombismo might consequently be perceived as a verb, rather than a noun.^[8] When exploring how quilombismo can be viewed as an ongoing pursuit of justice, I will choose to focus attention more specifically on the institution’s curatorial mode of address, on how the HKW team used the exhibition project as a point of departure for engaging with participatory and pluriversal modes of address, holistic forms of mediation and egalitarian forms of congregation based on love, care and communal alliances.

Curatorialisation as Marronage

The official reopening of HKW took place from 2 until 4 June 2023 under the title “Acts of Opening Again: A Choreography of Conviviality” and included a series of talks, performances, rituals, readings and concerts. Based on the notion of choreography, (the practice of organising sequences of movements of physical bodies,) visitors were invited to enter the building in communion following a ceremonial opening convened by the Haitian *Sèvitè Houngan* (Vodou priest) Jean-Daniel Lafontant and the performance ritual *When We Gather* by Cuban-born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons.



Subsequently, everyone participating in the event was encouraged to follow a score while meandering through the entirety of the building and encountering a plethora of projects. Not all these projects could be categorised as conventional works of art, nor did all practices follow the logic of an art exhibition. Rather, the projects presented explored how *quilombo* could be envisioned as a verb, or as an ongoing process, whose premises for decolonial modes of resistance developed in all kinds of different societal constellations and fields of force outside those recognised by a Western-dominated global art public.

In this respect, the curatorial approach of the recently reopened HKW in general, and the performative programme “Acts of Opening Again: A Choreography of Conviviality” in particular, can be said to resonate with recent theories on curating as an active form of knowledge production. According to curatorial theorist Simon Sheikh, it does not necessarily take on the form of a traditional exhibition, but employs “the thinking involved in exhibition-making and researching.”^[9] In this way, curatorial practice is not merely perceived as a means of “putting up exhibitions” and “displaying works of art”, as cultural theorist Irit Rogoff has noted.^[10] Rather, a shift of attention can be located towards the expanded notion of the curatorial. In their seminal anthology *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff argue for a distinction between curating and the curatorial:

If “curating” is a gamut of professional practices that had to do with setting up exhibitions and other modes of display, then “the curatorial” operates at a very different level: it explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator and views it as an event of knowledge. So to drive home a distinction between “curating” and “the curatorial” means to emphasize a shift from the staging of the event to the actual event itself: its enactment, dramatization and performance.^[11]

According to Martinon and Rogoff, the curatorial is viewed as an analytical tool and a mode of critical knowledge production that may or may not involve the curating of exhibitions. Interestingly, within this specific context, Ndikung has commented explicitly on the notion of the curatorial in his theoretical reflections on curating as a practice of care. Ndikung notes that the notion of the curatorial extends the space of care from selection and display to also encompass enactment, dramatisation and performance. This definitional shift ensures that events that have formerly been considered extracurricular to curating, like discursive programmes, symposia, public programmes, performances, reading spaces, etc., can be viewed as crucial components of the exhibition itself.^[12]

Although the curatorial in this way enables an adjustment of function and “a widened space of care for the practice”,^[13] Ndikung proposes to perform yet another terminological shift to that which he terms *curatorialisation*.^[14] Referencing Édouard Glissant’s reflections on the processual of *creolisation*, Ndikung argues that the term *curatorialisation* will expand the field of care in the sense that it will employ other strategies that “open up cracks and caveats of care that we might not have explored until now, and that constantly adapt themselves to the needs of the artists, art, and audiences, as well as times and spaces and most especially over extended periods of time before and beyond the exhibition itself.”^[15] *Curatorialisation* thus refers to a durational practice of care and conviviality.

However, for those who have been repressed due to the history of colonialism, enslavement, extraction, exploitation and racism, *curatorialisation* can also be related to the notion of marronage, the creation of hideouts by means of which slaves in, for instance, Barbados, Jamaica, Reunion and Suriname could escape from plantations and practise strategies of resistance. Ndikung in this way emphasises the importance of

positionality when engaging with *curatorialisation as marronage*. By stressing that for those who have been historically repressed due to the colonial matrix of power curatorialisation can also be related to the notion of marronage, he effectively calls attention to the fact that decolonial practice cannot be constructed *from or in opposition to* European models of knowledge, but rather from the theoretical, philosophical and artistic contributions that originate from the Global South. When actualised within the framework of contemporary art institutions, Ndikung furthermore notes that the notion of *curatorialisation as marronage* is an act of withdrawal an act that enables those tactically performing it to protest against the current state of affairs, to create loving environments for both oneself and ones kin, and to establish spaces of retreat in which to “organize, congregate peoples, knowledges, and things we care about and intend to care for.”^[16]



Tuli Mekondjo, Hermosa Intervención, Lisa Hilli, Restitution in Conversation: Feminist Perspectives on Restitution Beyond Ownership, conversation as part of Acts of Opening Again: A Choreography of Conviviality, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), 3.6.2023. Photo: Mathias Völzke/HKW

Experimenting Embodied Forms of Mediation

In accordance with the concept of *curatorialisation as marronage*, the reopening of HKW provided a platform that encompassed enactments, dramatisations and performances. In doing so, it also expanded the canon of aesthetics developed in the West that has tended to predominantly focus on the visual and the discursive, supplementing this with more bodily, affective and sensorially expanded forms of engagement. Drawing on a plurality of knowledges and epistemic systems from Africa and the African Diaspora, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, the exhibition “O Quilombismo” furthermore sought to engage visitors not as individuals but as a social collective. This was done by prioritising activities in the exhibition spaces and the surrounding areas that were based on participation and collaboration. For example, the invitation to individually wander through the “O Quilombismo” exhibition was accompanied by a series of collective walkthroughs facilitated every weekend by different members of the HKW team, from its Director and Chief Curator Ndikung, to Eric Otieno Sumba and Jill Winder from the Publication Practices division, and Marie Helene Pereira from the Performative Practices division. These participatory walkthroughs provided a possibility of engaging with the exhibition in a collective and dialogue-based way and to view the presented projects from a variety of perspectives.

Importantly, HKW also sought to address its publics by inviting them to take part in so-called “Quilombo

Dialogues". These were conducted by HKW mediators every week, alternatively in German, English, Turkish, Spanish, Arabic, and Farsi and afforded a means of experimenting with the conversational format that Elke Krasny has identified as a dominant paradigm within contemporary art institutions.^[17] Importantly, the choice of employing various languages when hosting these joint conversations not only signalled an attempt on the part of the institution to create inclusive entry points for non-English or non-German visitors and pluralise existing mediation strategies. By creating platforms for conversations based on different experiences, interests, questions, languages and terminologies, the HKW mediators also anticipate and call forth a public that actively engages in reimagining the institution as a space of epistemological diversity, as a site that, paraphrasing Boaventura de Sousa Santos, enables the production of "another knowledge beyond Northern epistemologies".^[18]

Reflecting the belief in quilombismo as a verb that insists on collectivism, egalitarianism and radical forms of care, HKW furthermore initiated "The School of Quilombismo" during the summer of 2023. The school was envisioned as a "free-roaming program that embodies and resonates with the imaginative, wayward, unorthodox, and self-determined pedagogical and knowledge practices of Africa and its diasporas."^[19] It assembled a highly heterogeneous group of participants and contributed to the decentring of the art institution by creating rhizomatic networks that spread out across multiple sites of Berlin, including Forum Brasil, Spore Initiative, EOTO, as well as online. Taking shape through embodied practices such as performances, listening sessions, dance parties and walks, "The School of Quilombo" facilitated communal gatherings that focused on anti-exploitative knowledge production, experimented with radical forms of pedagogy and inhabited the politics of marronage. In this way, it stressed that learning, creating and doing are activities that are nurtured in relation. Following this line of thought and referencing the decolonial theorist Rolando Vazquez, I will argue that the school attempted to "heal the colonial wound" by engaging, for example, in the task of listening, by opening up towards worlds of sensing and meaning that have been subjugated, suppressed or erased in the modern colonial order, and by advocating for a politics of radical care.^[20]

The bullerengue workshops were yet another example of the communal activities taking place as part of the "O Quilombismo" exhibition that were dedicated to bodily, affective and sensorially expanded forms of engagement. As mentioned earlier, I heard drums resonating throughout the building and accompanying clapping, singing, dancing and playing when I approached during one of my visits. These sonic impressions, it turned out, stemmed from a bullerengue workshop facilitated by artists maintaining this ancestral tradition within their communities. Bullerengue is an Afro-Columbian communitarian rhythmic culture, and as part of the workshops hosted by HKW throughout the exhibition period, Berlin-based members of different migrant communities, feminist and other advocacy groups rehearsed these sung dances accompanied by live drumming. Bullerengue is practised in circles, in which participants unify their voices through the repetition of mantra-like choruses. Through a call-and-response format of storytelling and an improvised practice of collective music making and dancing, it creates a sense of care and mutual commitment.

Historically, bullerengue is founded on forms of spirituality used for centuries as tools for community healing. As the facilitators of the workshops, Valeria Pacific and Esteban Cardona noted, bullerengue is an art form that aims to process difficulties, release emotional blockages and transcend fears through the repetition of mantra-like choruses that evoke a state of trance. According to them, songs are composed when one feels hurt to socialise and politicise a problem with the community. The practice of bullerengue thus attempts to resist experiences of violence linked to the history of colonialism, enslavement, extraction, exploitation and racism. Today, the facilitators of the workshops at HKW recounted, the practice of bullerengue culturally upholds the histories of oppression and resistance rooted in the Afro-Diasporic community. Straddling both the past, the present, and

the future, the bullerengue workshops at HKW sought to address the pain of those that carry the burden of colonially inflicted disenfranchisement. Importantly, however, the invitation to participate in the music and dance workshops was extended to all those engaging in anti-racist, intersectional, feminist and queer activism. In this way, the facilitators of the workshops acknowledged that those participating were positioned differently along the social axis of discrimination, such as those of gender, race and class. These differences notwithstanding, however, they insisted on creating anti-racist alliances of solidarity that cut across otherwise sedimented markers of difference. In this way, those participating were encouraged to contribute to the creation of that which Ndikung has termed *spaces of radical love* where people could converse with each other, show their wounds, acknowledge their vulnerability and engage in collective processes of healing.^[21]

Egalitarian Forms of Congregation

While the rhythmic cultures of bullerengue are historical and ongoing forms of resistance, seeking to counter colonial violence and create communal alliances, many other projects in the exhibition explicitly aimed to critique capitalism. Keeping this in mind, it is important to note that the philosophy and praxis of quilombismo was developed during a period of existential violence perpetrated by the conceptualisation of capitalism. As the decolonial thinker Anibal Quijano has argued, capitalism and racism are tightly interwoven. He thus coined the phrase “colonial matrix of power”, referring to a modern system of exploitation whose proliferation of racist debasement and production of global inequalities rests on a close intertwinement of colonialism and capitalism.^[22] In contradistinction to this, quilombismo can be considered as an economic system, built on the adaptation of African traditions of communitarianism and an economic alternative. According to Abdias Nascimento, a main point of reference for the exhibition, work within the framework of quilombismo is therefore not viewed as a form of oppression, exploitation or extraction. Rather, it is viewed as a mode of social liberation.^[23]

This critical approach to capitalist modes of oppression and extraction was actualised in many of the works presented in the exhibition. In the work of Moisés Patrício, for example, an initiated Candomblé priest from Brazil, who for almost 20 years has been performing rituals during which he puts various contents in his hands and offers them to humanity and the spirits. Despite the histories of disenfranchisement, dehumanisation and subjugation, African peoples around the world have sought to keep the spirit of offering alive, whether they be material or immaterial. As exemplified in the practice of Patrício, these offerings do not expect something in return they are a gift that is not transactional like the colonial, extractivist and capitalist models of giving that rely on an exchange. In this way, Patrício’s photographic series asks the beholder if they are ready to accept a non-transactional world system that embodies an unconditional generosity, irrespective of profit.

But how does “O Quilombismo”’s critique of racial and extractive capitalism, engagement with a wide spectrum of non-Western knowledges and epistemic systems, and emphasis on conviviality, radical solidarity and the politics of care relate more specifically to the notion of love? Seeking to address this question, I will in this last part of my article turn to Laura E. Pérez and her theoretical reflections on so-called *eros ideologies*.

Engaging with eros ideologies

In her book *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial* (2019), ethnic studies Professor Laura E. Pérez explores the decolonial through Western and non-Western thought concerning personal and interrelated well-being. Drawing upon a wide spectrum of references, including Jungian, people-of-colour and spiritual psychology, as well as non-Western spiritual philosophies regarding the interconnections of all being,

Pérez writes of the decolonial as an ongoing project rooted in love as an ideology to frame respectful coexistence within societies characterised by social and cultural pluralisation. As she puts it by way of a question, “isn’t it true that building love, joy, and creativity into our lives, here as anywhere else, is a profoundly liberating and decolonizing practice?”^[24]

Pérez defines decolonisation as a practice that critically intervenes in the histories of domination of one nation or state over another and the myths that were produced in various local contexts to legitimise social, political and economic subjugations by claiming that the cultures of the colonised were inferior. She thus convincingly argues that decolonisation is an endeavour that seeks to counter the dehumanisation produced by both historical and newer forms of colonisation. In doing so, Pérez applies a holistic approach that emphasises the integration of mind, body and spirit. Arguing that spiritual activism is a prerequisite to social change activism, she stresses that “the decolonial cannot only attend to outer social, cultural, economic, and political measures, laws, and policies. Practices that intend decolonial effects, I propose, must attend to the fertile ground of our psyches and our bodies, where the historic ideologies of colonization reseed and reproduce themselves hauntingly within us.”^[25]

According to Pérez, it is an important point that such decolonial effects cannot be produced solely by means of individualistic practices. Rather, we need to engage in social practices, i.e. form “coalitions across historically deep and policed differences on the basis of common interests against a neoliberal capitalist globalization politics.”^[26] In readings of artistic and institutional practices, Pérez identifies art as one of the most valuable laboratories for creating, imagining and experiencing such communal alliances. In this way, institutional practices can contribute to the creation of that which Pérez calls *eros ideologies*, understandings of social reality that emphasise interdependence and foreground a politics of compassion as the basis for a more just and democratic society.

Radicalizing the Practice of Love

Returning to HKW and the opening exhibition “O Quilombismo”, I contend that creating such communal alliances based on love, care and respect was a central aspect of what the project sought to do. Like *eros ideologies*, *quilombismo* is a term that traces different threads of thought, a body of philosophic and political practices across time, space and cultures. Similarly, in accordance with *eros ideologies*, *quilombismo* is perceived as a decolonial mode of resistance that seeks to counter various forms of suppression, exploitation and extraction.

These similarities notwithstanding, I argue that HKW’s “O Quilombismo” project also differed from Pérez’s reflections on the actualisation of *eros ideologies* within the framework of artistic and institutional practices. Firstly, Pérez points out that “[e]ros ideologies are plural. They arise in different cultures and time periods, and with different forms of specific expression to a people and to individuals. They have social and political effects. However, they are not the expression of one class of people, whether defined socially, economically, culturally, nationally, religiously.”^[27] Although Pérez in this way explicitly notes that *eros ideologies* are diverse as well as culturally and historically specific, she nevertheless tends to subsume very different sources of inspiration such as the writings of spiritual teachers and healing professionals who follow practices from Native American, African diasporic, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Sufi traditions under the same umbrella in her analytical reflections, thereby downplaying the friction-filled relations *between* and *within* these various threads of thought.



Installation view of the exhibition *O Quilombismo: Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), 2023. Photo: Laura Fiorio/HKW

In contrast, “O Quilombismo” provided a more specific and context-sensitive examination of diverse and contingent historical contexts of violence and spiritual survival. For example, this was done by stressing that the practice of quilombismo has manifested itself in a multiplicity of different, and tangentially interconnected, geographical and historical spaces. To list but a few, one could mention the insurrections and revolts by enslaved and other subjugated peoples that took place in the Americas under Spanish occupation in the sixteenth century in Panama, Honduras and today’s Colombia, the establishment of alternative systems of governance by formerly enslaved African peoples in Brazil in the seventeenth century, and the Windward Maroons, who were enslaved in the British colony of Jamaica, and who engaged in guerrilla warfare against the coloniser troops in the eighteenth century.^[28] Paying attention to cultural and historical specificities, “O Quilombismo” also emphasised the frictions and asymmetrical power relations at play within various threads of thought. For example, video works such as Anand Patwardhan’s *We Are Not Your Monkeys* (1996) points out that Hinduism not only provides a decolonial mode of resistance against Western philosophies and knowledges but also upholds a fragmenting caste hierarchy that legitimises discrimination and systemic suppression of the Dalits.

Secondly, “O Quilombismo” also performed a shift of perspective regarding the perception of the art institution as a site of love. As mentioned previously, Pérez argues that artistic and art institutional practices can experiment with a politics of care and contribute to the creation of coalitions based on common interests against a neoliberal capitalist globalisation politics. However, when advocating for the establishment of such caring and convivial sites of encounter in today’s migration-induced societies, she emphasises that eros ideologies are attentive to what indigenous, African, Asian and Ancient European ancestors taught as common wisdom, and that they seek to create “genuinely free, realized, peaceful, creative, and meaningful existence.”^[29] Following this observation, she tends to focus attention on the desire to “merge” and to form “good connections”, to exist in a state of harmonious coexistence and immanent togetherness.^[30]

Although the reopening of HKW in general and the launching of the exhibition “O Quilombismo” clearly also stressed the importance of envisioning the art institution as a site of love, care and conviviality, I suggest that they did so from a slightly different vantage point. By means of its title and its polyphonic constellation of presented projects, “O Quilombismo” highlighted the importance of insistence, resistance and fight. Similarly, in

the article “Defiance in/as Radical Love. Soliciting Friction Zones and Healing Spaces”, HKW Director Ndikung reflects on a more general level on art institutions as sites of radical love, as sites where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, where people can expose their wounds and vulnerabilities vis-à-vis each other and engage in healing processes, and where radical love can be enacted by leaving space not only for compassion but also for “confrontation, debate, quarrel, fight.”^[31] Expanding his argument, Ndikung notes that “[p]rotest is, in most cases, love. And protesting is an expression of radical love. Through art, boycotting, civil disobedience, marching, rioting, vigiling or otherwise.”^[32] Viewed from this perspective and keeping in mind the concept of *curatorialisation as marronage*, love and agonism are not necessarily perceived as being mutually exclusive. Rather, experimenting with the art institution as a site of radical love in today’s culturally pluralised societies can allow for the construction of participatory platforms that actively counteract the Western colonial narrative by functioning as both friction zones and healing spaces.

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Footnotes

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2. See <https://www.hkw.de/en/the-house/about/about#main> (accessed 2024-02-19).
3. HKW clearly operates on a larger scale than Savvy Contemporary. However, as Nina Möntmann aptly points out, HKW cannot be easily classified as an institution. With a history as a discursive, multidisciplinary space, without its own collection and with an economic structure based primarily on federal cultural funds and foundations, HKW’s institutional mode of organization differs significantly from many public and private museums that rely on generating profit and ensuring high visiting numbers. See: “Instituieren für eine Postmigrantische Gesellschaft. Nina Möntmann über die Neuausrichtung des Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.” *Text zur Kunst*, 29 November 2023. Available: [INSTITUIEREN FÜR EINE POSTMIGRANTISCHE GESELLSCHAFT Nina Möntmann über die Neuausrichtung des Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin \(textezurkunst.de\)](https://www.textezurkunst.de/instituieren-fuer-eine-postmigrantische-gesellschaft-nina-moentmann-ueber-die-neuausrichtung-des-haus-der-kulturen-der-welt-berlin/)
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15. Ibid., p. 50.
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20. Vazquez, Rolando. *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*. Amsterdam: Mondiaan Fund. 2020. p. 174.
21. Ndikung, "Defiance in/as Radical Love, pp. 227–28.
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23. Nascimento, "Quilombismo: An Afro-Brazilian Political Alternative", p. 161.
24. Pérez, Laura E., *Eros Ideologies: Writings on Art, Spirituality, and the Decolonial*. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press. 2019. p. 3.
25. Ibid., p. 4.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 10.
28. Ndikung, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng, "O Quilombismo. Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies." In *O Quilombismo Reader*. Berlin: HKW and Archive Books. 2023. pp. 14–32.
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30. Ibid., p. 16.
31. Ndikung, "Defiance in/as Radical Love', p. 227.
32. Ibid., p. 224.