

The Potosí Principle

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?



- MARÍA GALINDO
Instalación "Ave María, llena eres de rebeldía", 2010 (detalle)

- ANÓNIMO. ESCUELA DE POTOSÍ
Las novicias, siglo XVIII

DATES: 12 May - 6 September 2010

PLACE: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Nouvel 0

ORGANISED BY: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía y
Haus der Kulturen der Welt

With the collaboration of Ministerio de Culturas de Bolivia and Ministerio de Cultura de España.

CURATED BY: Max Jorge Hinderer, Alice Creischer y Andreas Siekmann

COORDINATED BY: Francisco Godoy

ITINERARY: Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Berlín (7 October 2010-2 January 2011)
Museo Nacional de Arte and Museo Nacional de Etnografía and Folklore de la Paz (February-May 2011)

The exhibition *The Potosí Principle*. “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” is curated by Alice Creischer, Andreas Siekmann and Max Jorge Hinderer. It offers a critical re-reading of the dynamics of global capitalism from the oblique viewpoint of the Spanish colonial empire and its imagery.

Art history has traditionally located the origins of modern art in the paintings of Courbet, Manet and the Impressionists: in other words, in that break with the traditional forms of art that was undertaken in order to reflect the immediacy of the subjective experience of reality. Romantic idealism, and Baudelaire’s “spleen” were other milestones in the modern perception of the world. Trapped in an account consisting of familiar names and settings – emblemized by the artist who moves from Paris to New York, occasionally stopping off in central Europe – we have created a closed universe of references that prevents us from understanding the cultural practices of an expanded modernity, which goes beyond such frameworks in order to express itself in contemporary global society. We have been surprisingly blind to the fact that, since the since the 16th century, the history of Europe has been inseparable from that of its colonies, and that modernity quite clearly does not exist without the centre-periphery relationships that first arose with colonialism.

What would happen if we substituted for Descartes’ “ego cogito” Hernán Cortés’ “ego conquiro”, or Kant’s concept of pure reason what Marx termed the principle of primitive accumulation? What if, instead of starting our account of the modern age in the England of the Industrial Revolution or the France of Napoleon III, we started it in vice-royal South America? The answers to these questions undoubtedly offer us an illegitimate view of history and a thorny, irreconcilable vision of modernity, that, never the less, sketches out a notably realistic history of the globalised world of today. The exhibition *The Potosí Principle* simultaneously denounces and champions the unacknowledged roots of that illegitimate modernity.

This approach is the one adopted by the Museo Reina Sofía in its recent history, in order to both define the narrative map of its own collections and to design its exhibition programme. Covering the same period of time as that in *The Potosí Principle*, some of our recent exhibitions have critically reinterpreted modernity through the particular gaze of the mentally disturbed and the socially excluded (for example, *Martín Ramírez. Reframing Confinement*), or have analysed the reinvention of modern utopia following its re-location to South America (*Drifts and Diversions*). In this sense, *The Potosí Principle* fulfils the Museum’s aim of encouraging alternative interpretations politically committed to our own time.

In contrast to the linear, evolutionist narrative of enlightened modernity, *The Potosí Principle* interconnects past and present in a temporal loop. Time contracts and unfolds in a baroque game of mirrors that previously reflected the colonial past (given concrete form in large-format historical paintings) and

now reflects the global present (expressed in the ideas of contemporary artists). In the 17th century, barely one hundred years after its discovery and conquest, Potosí was one of the most important cities on the planet with a population larger than London or Paris. The silver and other metals that were mined from the “Rich Hill”, as it was known, circulated the planet and were used to fund the Hapsburg wars in Europe and to repay that dynasty’s enormous loans to German and Genoese bankers. The exploitation of the Potosí mines produced the first accumulation of capital in the modern period and the forerunner and model for present-day financial globalisation. In Potosí this excess of wealth was founded on the *mita*, a slave-based system in which the indigenous population worked in sub-human conditions. More than five centuries later, Abu Dhabi, China and numerous other places are still characterised by processes of exploitation and accumulation with similar social consequences. Then as now, art had and has an inherent ambiguity. If, on the one hand, the experimentation and expansion of the field of knowledge associated with its practice serves to help us become better human beings, on the other, it could be said that the institution of art can easily act in complicity with a new global slavery, the commercialisation of subjective viewpoints, and the transformation of immaterial heritage – for example, historical memory - into a pure economic transaction. In aiming to show works from its collection in its new venue in Abu Dhabi, the Louvre makes them more accessible but also gains significant financial benefit.

In a similarly, the intensive proselytizing of the indigenous peoples helped them to become aware of their rights with regard to earlier modes of domination, while this proselytizing also functioned to consolidate the colonial system. None the less, art is political precisely because its very poetic structure has something within it that is impossible to assimilate, transforming it into an active element of liberation. Colonial paintings from Caquiaviri and Calamarca were responses to the ecclesiastical doctrine of the day and their function was an educational one. However, their particular use of the pictorial idiom, imported from the metropolis, allowed for an inversion of social structures. Saints and Virgins were reinterpreted in indigenous festivals and ceremonies, resulting in a hybrid spirituality devised to resist the colonial enterprise.

The Enlightenment aimed to establish a common measure that could harmonise the heterogeneous nature of social relations generated by colonial expansion, trade, and the growth of urban life. Everything that did not fit into that rational measure was considered to be outside the civilised self. However, as Eduardo Subirats has reminded us, Spanish Enlightenment thinkers hesitated over interpreting modern reason as a universal principle, over defining the secularisation of culture in its farthest consequences, and over fully implementing the moral and political principles of the autonomy of the individual. The intensity and speed of processes of primitive accumulation,

whose starting-point in Spain was an Empire based on economic and social models that prevented the development and consolidation of a process of colonial expansion similar to that which took place among the northern powers, resulted in a parallel dislocation in the dominating and dominated societies. As a result, modernity was baroque by nature almost from its outset.

If the baroque and the theatrical, were once anathema to the perfect incarnation of modernity, they now present themselves as an option for an alternative type of modernity. From Walter Benjamin to Gilles Deleuze, numerous intellectuals have reflected on this phenomenon. As an aesthetic category or philosophical proposition, the Baroque is a 19th- and 20th-century concept rather than a 17th-century one. For the northern world it represents the lack of moderation evident in the despotic methods of domination found in human behaviour: blind, violent and irrational ones that produce fanatical, aggressive and superstitious individuals. The Baroque is the subjugated “other” of Enlightenment modernity, and for that very reason the object of its fantasy of losing itself and its precise boundaries within that “other”. However, that dislocation also brings about a process of opening up and a blending of the systems of ways of seeing and representation, a “madness of seeing”, according to Christine Buci-Glucksmann, a yearning vision made flesh that generated types of knowledge inaccessible to the rational Cartesian individual. While the Enlightenment was only able to perceive the subjective viewpoints arising from colonial dynamics as aberrations, Baroque society did not avoid depicting the specificity of social relations, opting not to conceal them, however violent they might be. The arbitrary nature of language in the Baroque gave rise to its total ideological manipulation by the forces of power, but its disseminating power made it less controllable. Allegory, the representative mode based on the inevitable arbitrariness of language, typical of the baroque, allows for multiple signifiers and for appropriation and distortion.

Within the baroque space, *The Potosí Principle* finds not just the appropriate setting in which to test out its critical proposals, but also a potential framework within which to project the multiple, discordant histories of limitless contemporary modernity.

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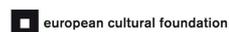
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