

CAMBRE_MARIA-CAROLINA_PROFESSOR

Title: Performative De-coloniality: The case of the Balot NFT

Abstract: The Balot NFT controversy arose when the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League (CATPC) created a Non-Fungible Token (NFT) of a carved wooden Congolese statue depicting a Belgian colonial administrator, Maximilien Balot (see <https://balot.org/>) as a placeholder for the original carving. In 1931, the Pende people revolted against the hated colonial agents that managed the plantations of Unilever committing rape and other atrocities. Afterwards, they carved a statue to contain and canalize the spirit of Balot: the statue, unlike the NFT, was not intended as a stand-in but rather as a manifestation of the angry officer's spirit contained. Its current location is in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) and despite many requests from Congolese artists and curators, it was not returned. In 2024, with much celebration, the statue was loaned to CATPC for a few brief months. This paper will examine the claim of CATPC, that the Balot NFT decolonizes the museum, and equates to the original artefact. This paper will also consider how/when the statue is/is not a placeholder, and the relationships between the spirit of Maximilien Balot – the statue – the NFT and how spatiality is mobilized by each of these in different contexts.

After reviewing some of the sociotechnical aspects of NFTs, I will turn to a conceptual approach for analysis. By invoking the notion of the *colonial eye* I will explore how questioning one's own acts of seeing and "the supposed solidity of the visible" can help one understand that "other things can be taking place... than those we think we are witnessing." (Shields 10). The *colonial eye* partially draws on Michael Baxandall's concept of the "period eye" as a form of seeing whereby "*some of the mental equipment one orders their visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience*" (Baxandall, 1972 [1988]40). After the case is examined and an analytical pathway proposed, the work of the stand-in or placeholder will be rendered in terms of its social and cultural, as well as didactic capacities. Thus, I will draw the outlines of a process that also opens us to considering that which is felt but not articulated, that which is not seen but creates conditions for visibility. We might consider that we cannot see that which creates the *conditions* for guiding our vision on *affective and aesthetic* levels. Yet, ways of coming to visibility are also "important social processes" that include articulating "the management of what is shown, what gets represented and made visible" (Abdo Malik Simone in Shields 8).

The counter-hegemonic, or even counter-conquest reversal and resignification of iconographic conventions falling outside disciplinary traditions of analysis call for the resemantization of representing and reporting on imagistic "data". This paper then, takes the destabilization offered by the tensions of counter-hegemonic presentation in art to ask: What are the implications for visual research? As an act of proprioception to participate in a broader chaotic composition, using the *colonial eye* as a way to take stock of a researcher's awareness of the conditions of visibility constructing their own seeing, can both highlight the conditions of becoming visible, and make visible *the relationship* between the viewer and the representation.

What becomes visible depends on certain ways of looking, which then establish an order of foci, relations, and visual priorities within a field. Observation *as such* does not exist as the eye is always already social. And yet both notions of observation and of experience in image

research, and in qualitative work more broadly, often rely on the problematic assumption that they are trim, tidy, and/or finite and somehow uniformly illuminated. Terms such as observation and experience imply pure practice and have been normalized to the extent that they are assumed to be self-evident. As such the practices of inquiry behind much research using visual methods remains under-examined and consequently undercuts its liberatory potential.

Emergent approaches to research rupture the *what is* of terminology and methods under pressure to adopt increasingly positivist, mechanistic, and reductive research practices in a lingering neoliberal academic climate. Thus, the challenge is “how to be bounded by method even in its transcendence” and avoid the tendency to turn a successful methodology into a dogmatic creed (Whitehead 1929). To “seek new suns” (Butler 1993), and to hold space “outside of someone else’s ancestral imagination” (Brown 2017), this paper will provoke some deeper problematizations of taken-for-granted concepts such as “observation,” and the need for a critical attitude towards visual experience, documentation, and creation as the core of visuality and image studies.

The interplay of thought and action implies examining an *ecology* of practices. Concepts bridge empirical worlds and their theoretical expressions. As a catalyst for moving toward deeper problematizations of assumptions, this paper introduces and operationalizes the concept of the *colonial eye* to better understand the work of the Balot NFT as possible placeholder and intended stand-in for the original statue. Thus, I directly aim to mobilize this concept based on an analysis of Baxandall’s construct and its extension and development through heuristic application to the case of the Balot NFT. The hope is to contribute to the use of image theory for scholars engaged in research with/by/through images broadly conceived.

Keywords: coloniality; artifice; NFT; visuality, art.

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