1000 WORDS

Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer, and Andreas Siekmann

Talk about "*Principio Potosí*," 2010 • Introduction by André Rottmann

This page: **Christian von Borries, Alice Creischer, and Andreas Siekmann, stage design for the performance *Dubai—Expanded Horizons: Museums Create a New Public Sphere*, 2009.**
Opposite page: **Harun Farocki, *Das Silber und das Kreuz* (The Silver and the Cross), 2010,** still from a color video, approx. 18 minutes.

FOUR DECADES AFTER ITS BIRTH, the art of institutional critique—that refractory offspring of 1960s site-specificity and Soviet factography—is under considerable pressure to settle into docile middle age. Of course, institutional critique's once radical strategies were absorbed into the canon almost immediately after they were introduced; but increasingly, it seems, they are invoked in purely formal fashion by artists who seek legitimation via recourse to a heroic past. At the same time, there is a renewed intensity in the scholarly push for historicization, via a wave of anthologies, conferences, exhibitions, and so on.

Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann's artistic practice, which encompasses curatorial projects as well as critical writings, cannot but appear anachronistic in this context—anachronistic, however, in the best sense. Since the 1990s, their work (which often involves collaboration with third parties) has distinguished itself by its productive exploration of an internal tension: The pair are engaged in an ongoing reflection, inspired by institutional critique, on the constraints that limit the possibilities for artistic action today, but they are simultaneously on a quest to revive militant forms of aesthetic and political commitment. One of their key enterprises, for example—begun in 2003 and still not completed—is an updating of artist Gerd Arntz and sociologist Otto Neurath's famed statistical atlas *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (Society and Economy, 1930), with its lucid visual mapping of industrial capitalism from the rubber plantations of Southeast Asia to the auto factories of Detroit. Reconfiguring and developing Arntz and Neurath's pictogrammatic language, Creischer and Siekmann are systematically depicting the workings of the global economy today. While this updated atlas seeks to capture current conditions and render them legible, the artists' exhibition projects aim at disrupting the rule of those same conditions within the microcosm of the art world. These projects are typically conceived and implemented in dialogue with other cultural producers and activist groups, and all intervene in the routines and protocols of the art world, even if only temporarily, in order to address both the artists' own involvement with institutions and the increasing complicity between museums and neoliberal ideology.

Potential conflicts are inherent in such activities, and this possibility is both the burden this sort of praxis must bear and the motor that powers it. "*Principio Potosí*: *¿Cómo podemos cantar el canto del Señor en tierra ajena?*" (The Potosí Principle: How Can We Sing the Song of the Lord in an Alien Land?) (2010), Creischer and Siekmann's most recent exhibition, is no exception. In collaboration with the writer and critic Max Jorge Hinderer—whose recent work explores the ways in which Bolivians, in recent decades, have deployed Christian iconography in political protests—the artists have gathered together some twenty paintings directly related to the Bolivian city of Potosí and its economic circuits from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Made by indigenous artists in workshops controlled by the Spanish, the paintings are primarily religious, with Catholic iconography often superimposed on or interpenetrated by indigenous motifs. In "*Principio Potosí*," these pictures function as a lens through which the afterlife and consequences of colonialism are brought into vivid focus. They are also the fulcrums of a series of contemporary projects and textual and documentary interventions included in the exhibition that not only investigate Potosí's history but also suggest linkages to present-day conditions of economic and cultural production in cities such as Beijing and Dubai. Two of these projects were created by Creischer, Hinderer, and Siekmann, while the majority were contributed by invited artists including Harun Farocki (whose 2010 video *Das Silber und das Kreuz* [The Silver and the Cross] juxtaposes contemporary and historical images of the city) and María Galindo and the collective Mujeres Creando (whose multiplatform *Ave María Ilena eres de rebeldía* [Ave María Ilena You Are Rebellious], 2010, includes a traditional religious procession in which Barbie dolls have replaced more orthodox relics). Over the course of a year, the show, which opened this past spring at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, will travel to the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and to the Museo Nacional de Arte and the Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore, La Paz, Bolivia—all venues with their own relation to the colonial past. In keeping with Creischer, Hinderer, and Siekmann's ethos, these relations will not be left unexamined as "*Principio Potosí*" makes its way from the old seats of colonial power to the territories in which that power was administered, and resisted.

—André Rottmann

ALICE CREISCHER, MAX JORGE HINDERER, AND ANDREAS SIEKMANN

POTOSÍ WAS A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY BOOMTOWN. Four hundred fifty years ago, it was one of the most important sites in the world for the mining of precious metals. To grasp just how important it was, it is crucial to understand that the silver extracted in South America was one of the decisive motors behind the development of modern capitalism. Quite simply, this metal capitalized Europe. It was mined via *mita*, or forced labor, and then, under Spanish monopoly, it flowed across the Atlantic, contributing to the creation of stock exchanges, to the rise of standing armies, to industrialization and labor migration. And the production of images in many ways paralleled the production of silver currency. A multigenerational army of indigenous painters (not only in Potosí, although we are exhibiting only Potosí paintings, but also in other colonial centers Cuzco and Lima) created mass-produced pictures in workshops. The images—like the silver coins minted in the sixteenth century in Potosí's Casa de la Moneda—then circulated around the globe under the control of the Hapsburgs, who ruled the Spanish Empire. This industrialized regime of reproduction should in turn be understood in the context of the Counter-Reformation: It both expressed and sustained a pictorial turn that was itself a strike against Protestant iconoclasm.

SO THESE ARE THE SPECIFIC HISTORICAL circumstances we are exploring in this endeavor, but like all our [Creischer and Siekmann's] past projects, "*Principio Potosí*" combines our personal interest in a complex set of issues with the desire to intervene in theoretical discourses and museum politics. When we worked on our project *Ex-Argentina*

between 2002 and 2004, studying the effects of neoliberal financial policies on labor relations in that country, we were forced to exclude the entire question of colonial history, because we simply did not yet know enough to address it; we had examined isolated aspects of this history in some of our previous work but had never been able to give it sustained attention. We realized that we were at a point where a critical engagement with the afterlife of colonial structures was essential for us. In 2006, we traveled to Potosí, where, for the first time, we saw pictures created in the Andean mining cities under Spanish rule—pictures that at that point had never been seen in Europe. After *Ex-Argentina*, the Reina Sofía asked us to develop a project. So we decided, without knowing what we were getting into, that this would be it. We would research the collections of museums within and beyond the Americas for pictures that had been produced in Potosí; we would bring the pictures to Madrid and curate an exhibition in which contemporary artists would respond to them in direct and engaging ways. But we should emphasize that this project is not being created on commission. Its subject is ours. We should also make it clear that the celebrations of the *bicentenario*—i.e., the two-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the decolonization of Latin America, an anniversary under whose banner our project is being implemented—are merely the occasion that allows us to bring in the funds required to realize a proposal of this scope.

NOW THAT THE THREE OF US have been working together on this new project, our aim is to illuminate the parallels between colonial and neoliberal regimes. We were decisively influenced by an essay by Bolivian historian Teresa Gisbert about the painting of the Andean Baroque and the Latin American arts industry. Gisbert argues that there is a definitive link between the pictures produced in the Andean region and the labor in the mines, one that can be read on a formal level as an expression of class struggle—that the pictures show traces of both oppression and resistance. At a certain point, the indigenous artists in the workshops—who were expected to paint up to three hundred pictures a month—defied the pressure of the workplace. They refused to take academic examinations, ceased to adhere to the rules of central perspective. With these interrelations between the economy, art, and resistance in mind, we use the term *principio Potosí* to describe the way in which cultural "surfaces" are subtended by material reality, and how cultural production functionally relates to economic mechanisms and technologies of power (such as strict population censuses, an incipient state monopoly on the health sector, the rigid control of image production, new settlement and migration policies). In fact, it is in Latin America and colonialist Europe at this time that we see the emergence and early refinements of biopower (and the resistance to it)—a development inscribed in these paintings.

Top: **María Galindo and Mujeres Creando, *Ave María llena eres de rebeldía* (Ave María llena You Are Rebellious), 2010,** video, cloth, spray paint on wall. Installation view, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. Bottom: **María Galindo and Mujeres Creando, *Ave María llena eres de rebeldía* (Ave María llena You Are Rebellious), 2010,** video, cloth, spray paint on wall. Production still from an untitled video.

We believe that the concept of historical linearity must be dispensed with, because it is intrinsically colonial. Against it, we set a deliberately polemical claim: Potosí is the present, it is now, it is European history.

These kinds of connections are key, since our project is not to exhibit cultural or art history but to look at the history of colonialism and to ask how the *principio Potosí* manifests itself today. To that end, the exhibition proposes links between an urban constellation—encompassing Dubai, London, Moscow, Beijing—and colonial Potosí. We realized early on that if we were going to tackle a project with this kind of global scope, we'd need to establish a curatorial model that would function like a network of correspondents. Acting on our behalf, friends and colleagues in these cities invited local artists, groups, and activists to participate. And since 2008 we have been working on the project as a team of three curators. To flesh out these parallels between past and present, we draw on Marx's concept of primitive accumulation—a global principle of value creation and exploitation, but also of resistance, that we claim has been operative across time and territory. Then as now, primitive accumulation was accompanied by a globalized art business that purported to act as a guarantor and messenger of positive values—Christianity in the past; human rights in present-day Dubai or Beijing—but instead furthered economic agendas.

Yet while we draw these parallels, we believe that the concept of historical linearity must be dispensed with, because it is intrinsically colonial. Against it, we set a deliberately polemical claim: Potosí is the present, it is now, it is European history. At the same time, we would like to instigate a discourse within the art world about modernity that begins with the sixteenth century and that concedes that modernity cannot be understood without the history of colonialism and its genocides. Such a discourse is diametrically opposed to the way the art world relates to modernist aesthetics—a relation we believe is nothing but nostalgia.

If we, as artists and writers, responsibly and independently conceive and curate exhibitions, that is because they give us an opportunity to critically examine how meanings are made. We want to create a truly communal process in which we, the team of curators, do not simply select newly produced work and then put it in the exhibition room; instead, we develop something in dialogue with the artists, seeking to avoid the usual divisions of labor. An artist whose work is selected by a curator is often excluded from important decisions; there is an acute and structural lack of communication. We want to change that.

The difficulties we encountered in working with the Reina Sofía (a severely vertical and bureaucratic organizational structure, and consequently one in which there is a total lack of transparency—at times, dealing with the institution felt like communicating with Kafka's Castle) exemplify the extent to which contemporary museums are inexperienced and ill equipped to deal with any form of collective production or with artists who programmatically occupy the role of curators.

There were other difficulties as well. The paintings on view come from institutions in Bolivia, Spain, and Belgium. It is easy to imagine how immensely complicated it was to get the loans we needed for the exhibition. To us, this aspect of curating was an entirely new experience, and we document this within the exhibition. We disclose that there are five pictures that haven't come—they are held by indigenous communities whose experience is that their possessions get stolen. Conversely, there are two pictures we cannot get from European museums because these institutions fear that their art may not return from the exhibition's stop in La Paz. And this brings us face-to-face with the problem of restitution. The persistent lack of sensitivity to the history of colonialism on the part of museums is striking, as is the value creation that immediately sets in once negotiations over a loan begin and European curators, like King Midas, touch a picture. An incredible form of rampant fetishization of pictures commences. In the process of assembling "*Principio Potosí*," an apparatus of power and diplomacy was set in motion that several times threatened the existence of our project. So when we confront the visitor with the unavailability of these paintings, we are opening up all of these issues.

During the process of planning this project, we sometimes felt as though we were navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. We were torn between the danger that our exhibition would become a state-sponsored enterprise and that of creating an indigenist project about alterity. We did not want either to happen. For we have come to the conclusion that the two are directly linked. The official culture wants the Other because it is a diversion from actual economic and political interdependencies and encourages desolidarization. That is why we felt compelled to develop, during our work on the project, a decidedly internationalist and anti-identitarian position that we hope will become tangible in the exhibition. □

Translated from German by Gerrit Jackson.

View of "*Principio Potosí*," 2010, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.