

Episode 1: Decolonial Dovetailing with Alessandra Ferrini

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

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Female Voice: This is a UAL Decolonising Arts Institute podcast created as part of the Decolonialising Archives Research Residency programme. This podcast is hosted by Dr Elisa Adami as part of her 2020 residency project, Decolonial Dovetailing.

Elisa: Hello, my name is Elisa Adami, and I'm currently a researcher in residence at the University of the Arts, Decolonising the Arts Institute, where I'm conducting research on Thorold Dickinson's archive housed at the UAL Archive and Special Collections Centre.

Titled Decolonial Dovetailing, my project zooms in on a micro event, a 1937 film screening that was organised by film director, Thorold Dickinson, and that dovetailed alternate reels from Italian and Soviet propaganda films, depicting the brutal invasion of Ethiopia by the Italian fascist regime in 1935.

This illegal invasion of one of the few existing African sovereign countries, which was also a member of the League of Nations, triggered a wave of anticolonial demonstrations and insurgencies around the world, as well as serving as a galvanizing factor for the then growing pan-African movement. It is against this particular background that I read Dickinson's 1937 screening, as well as his later film productions.

Today, I'm delighted to be in conversation with Alessandra Ferrini, a London-based visual artist, researcher and educator, and also a PhD candidate at the University of the Arts, London. Alessandra's practice spans across filmmaking, installation, performance lectures, editorial and pedagogic activities, experimenting with the expansion and hybridisation of the documentary film, her research interrogates the enduring legacies of colonialism and fascism, with a specific interest in the past and present network of relations between Italy, the Mediterranean region and the African continent.

Alessandra's work has featured in international exhibitions such as Manifesta 13 in 2020,

the second Lagos Biennial in 2019, and the Istanbul Biennial's collateral at Depo in 2019, among many other exhibitions. And, upcoming shows include the fifth Casablanca Biennial, a show at P21 Gallery in London, and a show at arge/kunst in Bozen, Italy. It's great to have you on, Alessandra.

Alessandra: Thank you. It's a pleasure.

Elisa: So, I want to start by talking about one of your latest projects, the installation, *My Heritage?* My Heritage, with a question mark. Now, it's important, that question mark there. And it's an exhibition that is currently on show as part of Rue d'Alger, an exhibition curated by Alessandro Gallicchio at the Italian Cultural Institute in Marseilles.

And this exhibition is one of the 86 projects of Les Parallèles du Sud, which is the official programme of collateral events of Manifesta 13. And this project, as we will see, is very much connected with the wave of anticolonial insurgencies, and pan-African movement that I was talking about before, but before we move on to that, can you tell me a bit more about the context of this project, and also specifically the location of this project?

Alessandra: Sure. Thanks. Well, the project has actually only been open for three hours, because of the lockdown, but it's technically still on, and will hopefully be opening again at the end of the lockdown, we're not sure exactly when. It's a project thought specifically for Casa d'Italia, which is the building that houses the cultural – Italian Cultural Institute, and also the Italian Consulate in Marseille.

And Casa d'Italia is a specific kind of building that was built – it's the equivalent to Casa del Fascio, where the building's basically the headquarters of the fascist party throughout Italy, the Casa del Fascio. And Casa d'Italia were the ones outside the national borders, and they were centres where you could find all sorts of activities, mostly for after work, sort of working men's clubs, you could find bars, you could find after-school clubs, and all sorts of leisure, but also of course, highly ideological places to build a certain kind of citizenship, and sort of reverence to the party.

So, Casa del Fascio, this one is specifically built in Marseille in 1935, so it's one of – the only one in France that was purposely built by the fascist regime, and it's significant in Marseille because Marseille has the biggest Italian population, had about 100,000 Italian migrants at the time, living there, so it was catering for a very large community. But throughout France, there were an estimated 50 Casa d'Italia, so it was quite a large number of them, because France actually absorbed quite a lot of the Italian migration.

And I think it's important for me to point out the large scale of actually the Italian diaspora, and you know, we're talking about tens of millions of people migrating from Italy, leaving Italy between the end of the 1800s, so basically just right after the Italian Unification, and then spanning all the way up to the end of fascism, and then there's going to be another wave, actually, after the Second World War. But overall, there's an

estimated 26 million people leaving Italy, so it's very large, and it interests many, many locations, and so this actually became a specific target of fascist policy, since the beginning.

I mean, this was in one of the first speeches by Mussolini in 1922, was how they were going to actually invest in the fascistisation of the Italians abroad. So, this site is a very loaded, connoted space, because it was built for that, but also, it was built in 1935 when there was a massive investment in this, and at the same time that there was an investment in colonial expansion and wars, so specifically the second Ethiopian war in 1935.

So, this is the space where the exhibition is housed, and I spend a lot of time now just going through certain historical information just because that's obviously the reason why I make this work, and it's also the reason why this exhibition has taken a certain kind of curatorial framework which is very much to do with asymmetrical relations in the Mediterranean, from a very French/Italian perspective. And so it features different perspectives and different positions, but also specifically, it's interested in looking at memorisation practices of this past.

Elisa: Yeah, and I think a very important part of your work is really bringing together these two aspects of the fascist foreign policy, right? So, there is like this process of fascistisation, as you were mentioning there, of Italians living abroad, so something that is catered for this kind of diasporic population, but there is also the other important aspect of the actual violent colonial aggression of Ethiopia that goes hand in hand with that same process, and what you are doing in the work is bringing these two aspects together.

And, I would like to talk a bit more about the actual pieces that compose the installation, My Heritage? And, I want to start from Abiet Abiet, which is a short video that is dedicated, and here I quote from your inscription, 'To the people I've quoted, alluded to, left out or forgotten, those voices I've appropriated or spoken in place of.' And, this dedication is actually dedicated to the voices of the people that you are actually quoting in this video, because you speak the words of a number of anticolonial activists and intellectuals like Ras Makonnen, CLR James, Amy Ashwood Garvey, but also Sylvia Pankhurst and Silvio Corio.

And when I was watching this video, I was actually struck by the importance of the sonic layer in this piece, which is absolutely preponderant over the image track, which is composed by archival documents, mainly. And so, I was thinking a bit about the importance of the sonic dimension of the archive of Black Radical Tradition, which is something that Paul Gilroy, for instance, talks about.

And I would like to ask you what it means, actually, to make these words resound in that particular space there, the Casa d'Italia in Marseille, that you have just described? And also, what does it mean, what are the implications of this act of appropriation, as you call it, this kind of re-speaking the words that you are performing there?

Alessandra: Yeah, thanks for the question. I mean, there's several considerations. I think I would start from, actually, the first things you noted about the disparity between the visual and the audio track of the video. And so, just to point out how the video, for me, the visual aspect of the video, was more as an act of quotation in a way, to just sort of bring back who these texts actually are taken from, who are they, who am I speaking in place of, really.

And so, it's the video, the visual is a sort of – it's there to remind who should be speaking, really, but the question of the sound being so preponderant as well, was very much what I really was focussing on with this piece, that's besides the most cultural pieces which act more as a contextualisation and an understanding of what kind of spaces we are stepping into, because what is important to understand is where the installation is located.

So, it's located in a vestibule, so right at the entrance of the exhibition, just before the huge corridor that then navigates through the middle of the exhibition. So to me, it was important to focus on the sound and the potential of the sound to really be, let's say, inescapable. So, the idea that you could stop as a viewer and read through the material, and look at the archival material in the space, or within the video, the visual track, but you could not really – you could choose that, but you couldn't really escape the sound, in a way, and to me ... So, that was the first consideration, that's why I wanted to have a sound piece there.

And the voices that are used in the soundtrack are there to remind of, basically, two things. One is what was going on, why the building was built. So, the building was inaugurated in 1935, just around, really, the beginning of the aggression on Ethiopia. So, it's to put that act of aggression and colonial expansion in relation with what was going on in terms of the fascistisations of Italians abroad. So, it's really to create that link, but also since you are in that space, it was a way to create, let's say, to give emphasis to these words so that they could enter and they could question the space.

And it is done through my voice, which is not a solution I took – I recurred to lightly. It's been, is still part of a lot of conflictuous thoughts in my mind, but it had to be me, in a way, because the whole intervention – because also, I referred to this not as a proper, finished piece, but more as an intervention in the building, it's thought as a series of notes and a series of – which I include the sound as a sort of a vocal, or sort of voice recording, sort of notes to myself, more than anyone else, really.

So, it's sort of mobilising, putting together, and making active a series of sources and materials that are contrasting, but that are part of what I've been thinking from my position, and from my specific process relating to this architecture, and things that I thought would need to be spelled out in different ways. So, the voice becomes just a way of reminding the viewer of the effects of the politics, and the ideology that the building actually is a symbol of. But also to try to inhibit a sort of – the viewer to be seduced [sic]

by the architecture, because I think this is a major problem with fascist architecture. It's something that, in Italy, has been – is still being discussed extensively to do with what they call a difficult heritage in Italy, which is really to do also with trying to understand how to deal with the architectural and artistic quality and value of this moment, of this kind of architecture, and how to relate that to the ideology it embraces, and it embodies, really. So, the voice, that kind of material, it's there to sort of try to disrupt this process, perhaps, of being seduced by the architecture.

Elisa: Yeah, and I really like this idea of the voice as being able to do so because it's such an inescapable thing, as you were saying, within that particular space. But, I want to go back to something that you were mentioning there, that has to do with the fact that this particular work is, of course, filtered through your voice because it's also filtered through your own particular position. So, you are actually trying to work out that historical moment, and that series of events that go together, really, through your own position.

And this question of positionality, I think, is really important, because you describe your own work there as a self-reflective process. And there is, for me, a sense of many different kind of places and positions that you are trying to understand. Of course, you are making this intervention on a fascist building in France, in Marseille, so there is a kind of geographical dislocation there, and you are doing it from the perspective of an Italian migrant living in London.

And this place, London, I think it's important because most of the material, most of the intellectuals, anticolonial intellectuals and activists that you are mentioning and quoting there, they were active in London, in the metropole of the British Empire at the time. And I think this referring, also, to this particular context is important in your piece, and also comes from your position as someone who's living in London.

And I have the sense that there is this, kind of, geographical fragmentation because the Italian aggression of Ethiopia was actually an event that had global repercussions, but you are trying to synthesize it through your personal position, so make sense of it.

And you do this especially with another piece in the exhibition called *Cascades*, which is this textile banner which presents a large scale diagram, which is also written with your own handwriting, so again, there is this process of personal filtering of all this information. Can you tell me a bit more about these questions of positionality, and how you deal with them in your work?

Alessandra: Sure. Yeah, I think in this, again, in this intervention, it was clear to me that there was no way that I would be able to do a work that was able to be encompassing all the different voices, all the global, as you say, repercussions of this event. I mean, I could try to tackle it, I could try to have certain insight into certain questions, but there were so many questions. And, again, it was a very small intervention within a vestibule, which was in itself a very difficult space to work with.

So, to me, it was important to think about the fact that this was going to be a very personal – I mean, it was going to be something that was obviously filtered through my own position and my own way of thinking, but also, what legacies and kind of ... I'd been reflecting upon and thinking as my own heritage, in a way, and how that obviously changed once you have been a migrant for a very long time, and I thought what was particularly interesting, in a way, those voice – in what Sylvia Pankhurst for instance, what the text I used from the New Times and Ethiopia News magazine – newspaper, for instance, were also questions of thinking how the event was obviously – had global reverberations, but also how, for instance, the British Empire and the French Empire did enable it.

And without having to really spell it out, what the texts do, as well, is they put in a global context, foreign fascist politics, and they put it in relation with the history of European imperial politics. And I think this is always very important for me, to do that kind of linking, because it's often – these histories of empire are often seen as well in a disconnected way, they're seen – and especially when we're looking at Italian history, because of its smaller scale in respect, for instance, to the British empire. Obviously the scale is completely different. But, that doesn't mean that the effects of it aren't equally devastating, and didn't equally impact the global politics at the time.

And in the case of the Ethiopian aggression, it definitely did have a global impact, and a global repercussion in the way it undermined the League of Nations and led to the Second World War, really. So, it's about re-inscribing that, it's about also showing how fascist politics, in going outside of its border, how – the kind of catastrophic nature of it, and what it's enabled.

So, going back what you were asking about positioning, and thinking about where I'm working from, which is also, a lot of this research started by encountering research by the historian and journalist, Alfio Bernabei, who's been working extensively on the Italian community in London, the antifascist and fascist communities here in London. And, he's been working, obviously, extensively, on Silvio Corio and his relation with Sylvia Pankhurst and the work they've done. And the work was instrumental in warning on the rising of fascism, and the danger inherent in it, which wasn't really how it was perceived at the beginning, even here in Britain where Churchill was actually supportive of Mussolini.

So it's for me interesting to go and find back those links, and understand as well where the critique was actually enacted, because obviously in Italy with the regime, there was space for resistance, but a lot of the people that were opposing it actually had to emigrate, as well, and a lot of the critique happened outside of the borders.

Yeah, so let's say, thinking about positionality was thinking about all those different layers, which of course, are also part of how I work. I work in – I'm based in London; a

lot of the work I do is to do with Italy and Italian politics, a lot of the, more so, let's say, cultural activism that I do, it is in Italy, but it's also done through filtering what I learn and how I learn, and the tools I actually use, they're actually coming from a different geography, the position, the kind of privileges that this position also gives me. So it was a way to think about all of these things, in a way, so yeah.

Elisa: Yeah, that's really great to hear about all these different layers that are there, and also try to make sense of this history, and actually the importance of, I think, centring radical critiques of empire that you find, especially in intellectuals like CLR James, that is one of the persons you mentioned there, but also Amy Ashwood Garvey, and the kind of critic of empire that they bring forward, which is not just a critique as rightly had to be done at the time of the fascist expansions, but it was also connecting with the British Empire and the French Empire, and what they were doing.

So, this sense there, I think, is very important because it can bring us to understand imperialism in a more complete sort of way, and not, as you were saying, cutting off different empires, that you have to pit one against the other, but understanding what is the unifying term there, and having a radical critique that rejects any form of imperialism, and this is a very important work to do, I think.

And going back to this question of my heritage that you pose in your exhibition, through you posing that particular work, because *My Heritage?* is the title, and it's you trying to make sense of, kind of, national heritage in a way, which is disavowed most of the times, that it's not acknowledged, it's actively, kind of, obscured from, like, the public conversation. And on the other hand, instead, looking at this other legacy, tapping into this radical anticolonial tradition, to find a criticism which is particularly important there.

And, I want to ask you more to articulate a bit this idea of heritage as an act of historical responsibility, because I think it's very important not to consider heritage just something that you kind of inherit passively from the past, but something that you act on in the present. Can you tell me a bit more about this?

Alessandra: Yeah, definitely. I mean, that's exactly the way the question is framed, is about the agency that we have in thinking about our heritage, and what the heritage actually mobilises, really. So, it was about thinking – of course, I mean, there is a tendency of thinking of everything in nationalist terms, and obviously it's one of the territory – of the tools used by nationalist discourse, as well.

So, it's about thinking beyond that, of course, but also not refusing it because obviously we have been brought up in cultures that push that on us. So, it's also about not escaping it, in a way. So, in thinking about, what are my responsibilities towards that, it's very much about thinking about what I cannot escape, in a way, and what I can do to change – I don't want to say to enact change, but to start conversations that are more complex, and

actually try to relate to other – to voices that have been erased, or still narratives that are generally not straightforwardly connected to that kind of heritage.

So, I guess in this work, the idea of the diagram, of the notes, is really about trying to understand – starting to build a constellation of different references, and I think when we're talking about heritage, there's obviously a tendency, that I do not agree with, but a tendency with establishing heroes, establishing role models, and so on. And I think there's also the danger in that, in looking back, in creating that kind of romantic view of history, and again, losing a bit the critical perspective in choosing new heroes, in a way.

So, I was trying to think about, again, some multiple voices and multiple way of seeing and understanding how – what I can choose to think about as my own responsibility, that isn't necessarily the burden of having to deal with the fascist colonial legacy, but where could I find examples of opposition to it, and how I can rethink them in the present as well, and sort of make treasure of some of those teachings.

Elisa: Yeah, absolutely, and it's of course an intervention that you do in the present, in that particular building which, it's an act of responsibility to act on a heritage that needs, actually, to be criticised, and actually reconnected to that history that we tend to forget, right? And so, your intervention is exactly doing that.

I want to maybe expand a bit the conversation, thinking about the fact that this is not the first work that you have done with colonial archives. You have been working with colonial archives, or archives of coloniality for a very long time now, and in a recent article that is titled 'Re-entering the Archive: Critical Reflections on Archives and Whiteness', you write about the privilege of the white researcher, and you write about the fact that the white researcher is actually free of colonial trauma. And so, it's the privilege there of being free of trauma.

And, I'm quoting here from something you write, where you say: 'We are not re-traumatised by looking, researching, discussing these histories of violence. Our artistic and academic careers are indeed based on the privilege that this attachment provides,' end of quote. And again, you talk about how this privilege comes with responsibilities, first of all of acknowledging, actually, that you have this privilege, and that means that you have to do a different kind of work when it comes to that colonial archive that you are dealing with.

Can you talk a bit more about the, kind of, ethical implications that are connected to this position, to the position of whiteness, and also the propositions that you set up in that article, to produce work that does not, and I quote here again, 'replicate colonial and racist relations'?

Alessandra: Yeah. So, yeah, I mean, I guess this is something in the making. It's something that you work and work, and you try to advance little – step by step because

obviously there's a lot of pitfalls, there's a lot of learning to do throughout the whole process. So, there's a lot of missteps at times, or things that you learn through making and through being critical about what it is that you're doing, and how.

And of course, there's the question of intentions that always come back when this kind of work is done. And I think this is where things can get really tricky, and where good intentions, for instance, are really, like, breeding a lot of – are actually things that worry me a lot, that I think a lot about. And, I think to – I try to interrogate myself a lot on why I'm doing this, because obviously I don't want to also fall into white saviour kind of mission, by trying to problematize my whiteness, and what this work implies.

So, there's a lot of things to think about and to reflect back constantly, and I think that's the first layer of the work, is to constantly doubt my own intention, and why I'm doing things, and what I'm trying to get out of it. Is it something that I'm doing solely for me, or what is this work trying to do, and where am I placing my intentions, and how can I be actually rethinking how I relate to the position I have as a researcher and as an artist?

And in this case, I mean, for instance, I kind of mentioned it before, but I have this position – I mean, I also deal with the fact that position is what I call of insider and outsider as well, towards this Italian context. So, it's another layer of privilege that I need to reflect and think about, of how I'm also detached from the actual context, how I work from a Northern European context where, for instance, there's a possibility of working as an artist researcher and within academia, that isn't necessarily the case for instance in Italy.

And so, thinking about all of these elements, to me, it's a way of thinking how I can, first of all, learning to listen, I think, is the first step for me, it's like not feeling that you have to speak all the time, or that you have to fill the spaces with your own voice, and knowing where, perhaps, yeah, to step back or to invite a conversation, where you are listening and you're not actually the person who is driving the conversation.

And then the other question for me, on how I tried to bridge, is to think about practice also in a more expanded way, and so how I can get outside of academia, outside of the art exhibition and art space, and think more in relation to – I mean, I feel uncomfortable calling it activism. I would say it's more, again, interventions and creating a community, creating a set of relations with different people, different organisations that already are there, and to think about how to be more active, and how to ask for certain things to change, and how to speak up.

And I think that's become more the place where I'm locating a lot of what I'm doing now that I am gaining more visibility, and I also feel that I am less precarious than I used to be, then I feel like I have a space to actually speak, and to speak up, and trying to mostly question institutional structures of power, more than – yeah, so it's become like a place where I'm trying to move on from the work, and then how that relates to that.

And I think, in this case of Rue d'Algier for instance, it's not as straightforward, but we have to remember as well, that the installation is done within the Italian Cultural Institute, which also speaks volumes to the way Italian fascist heritage is not looked at critically, it's how the buildings have been reused to, again, assert power. So, it's trying to think about all the hats I wear as someone who writes, who works in academia, works in art, but I also work a lot with the pedagogy, for instance, and how all these different positions I have the privilege of being involved in, and occupying, actually can allow me to do certain kind of work that is more disruptive, let's say.

Elisa: Yeah. Yeah, and it's this thing that you were saying about institutions, I think is crucial, how institutions really operate through certain practices that, in a way, replicate those kind of racist relations that you are instead trying to kind of undo, through your work, and not to replicate. And, this is done through the material organisations that these institutions have. So, it's really the community-making that you were discussing there, and this, also, collaborating and working with other institutions or other organisations, actually, grassroots organisations that are already existing, seems to be a very important path, really, and very important work to do. Well, thanks a lot for being so generous with your time and with your answers. It was great to have you on.

Alessandra: It's a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Female Voice: This podcast series is brought to you by the Decolonising Arts Institute at UAL, University of the Arts, London. The institute challenges colonial histories and imperial legacies, disrupting ways of seeing, listening, thinking and making, to drive social, cultural and institutional change. Special thanks to our podcast host, and guests, to Brigitte Hart for the podcast production, and to you for listening.

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