

Boats: sailing towards (de) colonizing identities

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates two artworks that depict opposing views on colonialism using sailing boat imagery: the Monument to the Discoveries and *The Boat* by Grada Kilomba. It analyzes public responses and how they articulate and challenge colonial Eurocentric power structures. Moreover, the article will consider the role of art in voicing political and social beliefs, as well as the significance of (de) colonial theories in discussions on national identities.

KEYWORDS: Decolonization. Contemporary Art. Artivism. Vandalism. Monument of the Discoveries. Grada Kilomba.



Barcos: navegando em direção à (des)colonização de identidades

RESUMO: Este artigo investiga duas obras de arte que retratam visões opostas sobre o colonialismo usando imagens de barcos: o Padrão dos Descobrimentos e *O Barco* de Grada Kilomba. Aqui se analisou as respostas públicas e como elas articulam e desafiam as estruturas de poder eurocêntricas coloniais. Além disso, o artigo considerará o papel da arte na expressão de crenças políticas e sociais, bem como a importância das teorias (des)coloniais nas discussões sobre identidades nacionais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Descolonização. Arte Contemporânea. Vandalismo. Padrão dos descobrimentos. Grada Kilomba.

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1 Introduction

Since 1958, the stone-based Monument of the Discoveries in Lisbon has depicted a sailing boat as a symbol of the colonial conquests of Portugal throughout time. Raised as a national symbol of the political beliefs of the prevailing extreme-right governorship of the time, this piece materializes conservative values linked to colonialism. Coming from an empire that for centuries relied on colonial conquests to profit, Portugal's rulers perpetuated these beliefs as part of their culture for civilians. Such a strategy was also part of political propaganda to silence ongoing whispers about the rise of independence from Portugal's last colonies in Africa.

Less than 2 km away from this statue, the artist Grada Kilomba exhibited the artwork *The Boat* in 2021 in the external area of the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT). This piece is a site-specific art installation that debates decolonial reflections using the symbology of the boat to discuss the transport of thousands of enslaved human beings shipped to the Americas. The piece was also the stage for three identical performances aimed at activating the reflections proposed and embodying the uneasiness of living in a black body in a post-colonial society.

Although both occurrences have opposing views about colonialism, the two emerged to sustain political and social viewpoints regarding this same topic – or its consequences of it. Through the framework of art historians such as Claire Bishop (2012) and Cristina Pratas Cruzeiro (2017), the activist (or *artist*) connotations of these artworks will be questioned. This will enable us to deepen our analysis of intentionally using art to voice political and social beliefs.

Another crucial point for this article's purpose is the audience's response to such artworks. In 2021, both artworks were the stage for the public's response to such viewpoints. The Monument of the Discoveries was graffitied while *The Boat* was occupied by a political party. The acts of vandalism – or interventions – that the artworks suffered reinforced how the colonial theme was still controversial, especially when the public eye had an opportunity to express their opinions. These occurrences come as evidence of the growing awareness of people regarding the social and political consequences of colonialism.

The case studies in question - and the public's reactions - will be analyzed through the frameworks of researchers on colonial matters, such as Anibal Quijano (2000), Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (2010). This will enable us to demonstrate how (de) colonial theories must be a central point when debating the (re) construction of national identities. Overall, the relevance of this article relies on reflections on how post-colonial, decolonial (and sometimes neocolonial) discourses have been arising in society using case studies from the art scene.

This article will investigate reframing the temporal symbology of the boat in the context proposed by these Portuguese artists and analyze how the same sign can expose opposing narratives of the same story. Moreover, we will inquire how these artworks try to shape or defy the notion of nationality and entangle temporal frameworks of the past to the present and future to articulate and disrupt colonial Eurocentric power structures and, hence, inequalities and imposed hierarchies. This article explores the *activist* use of the imagery of the boat to debate Portuguese (de)colonial expressions from the Monument of the Discoveries and *The Boat* from Grada Kilomba and recent public responses to these artworks.

2 Colonial Boats: From Sightseeing to Contemporary Artwork

According to their website, The Monument to the Discoveries was created by the architect Cottinelli Telmo and the sculptor Leopoldo de Almeida for the Portuguese World Exhibition in 1940 and was intended to be temporary (MONUMENT..., [s.d.]). The Monument was erected using light iron and cement frames as well as sculptures as part of an exhibition organized by the regime in 1940 to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Portugal (1140) and its independence from Spain (1640).

The second and permanent version was constructed in 1960, and both versions were built during *Estado Novo* which was a period in Portugal of authoritarian governorship. Evidently, the materials used for this version were more stable: rose-tinted masonry,

from the province of Leiria, and cement. The sculptures were done in limestone masonry from Sintra. Balona points out that:

The lateral sides of the monument, in the shape of a caravel facing the Tagus estuary, are occupied by an ascending parade of kings, conquerors, explorers, scholars and poets, led by Henry, the Navigator, and sculpted in the large-scale, epic style typical of the Estado Novo statuary. The façade was designed in the form of a cross resembling a sword – a powerful metaphor of the entanglements between discoveries, civilizing mission and conquest. (OLIVEIRA, 2016, p.16).

The permanent version was erected as a part of festivities regarding the 500 years of Infante Dom Henrique's (Henry the Navigator) death, and this piece supports the political views of patriotism and conservatism praised by Salazar's dictatorial government. At that time, Portugal still had colonies in Africa claiming independence, so the government would often reproduce the belief of national superiority to strengthen and assemble itself politically.

The Monument website mentions that this version of the Monument was a slightly redesigned in 1985, so that the public could enter the building to visit the top. Moreover, it added a space for temporary exhibitions and an auditorium. In 2017, Portuguese museologist Paula Vaz drew attention to the themes of temporary exhibitions in her internship report at this Monument. She claims that has been an awareness of creating exhibitions that debate the cultural scene of the city while creating new dynamic approaches related themes to the Monument's initial meanings. (VAZ, 2017). In 2021, an exhibition named "Visions of Empire" was displayed and aimed to foster reflections on the impacts of colonialism through photographs. The exhibition's brochure affirms that these photographs "also served to denounce the iniquities and violence of colonialism, encouraging aspirations for a more humane and egalitarian future that spanned various political hues and orientations" (VISION..., 2021, [s.p.]), which demonstrates awareness of social equality.

Image 1: Monument of the Discoveries.

Source: Monument... ([s.d.]).

In 2021, the artist Grada Kilomba exhibited the artwork *The Boat* at the external part of the MAAT, less than 2 km away from the Monument to the Discoveries. The Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba is a descendant of Cape Verdean and holds a degree in psychoanalysis and a PhD in arts from Freie University. It was not possible to assess through primary or secondary sources whether Kilomba created this artwork to make a direct parallel with the Monument of the Discoveries. Kilomba's piece is a site-specific art installation that explores decolonial reflections using the symbolism of the boat to foster a debate about the transport of millions of enslaved human beings who were shipped worldwide, but especially to the Americas. According to MAAT's website:

In the Western imaginary, a boat is easily associated with glory, freedom and maritime expansion, described as "discoveries" but, in the artist's view, "a continent with millions of people cannot be discovered" nor "one of the longest and most horrendous chapters of humanity – Slavery – can be erased". (GRADA..., 2021, [s.p.]).

The artwork consists of 140 wood blocks that went through a process of being superficially burned and then submitted to a water-based treatment. These blocks were placed on the external area of the MAAT creating the shape of a boat seen from above. Eighteen blocks that are in the core of this installation have verses of a poem written by Kilomba, which were imprinted in gold in six different languages. The first three languages are of African origin since the connection with these communities is surely a focal point for the artist. Portuguese and English are necessary, but the interesting insertion here is the Arabic language, which according to the artist was inserted to draw attention to the political conflicts that occurred in Palestine and Afghanistan in 2021. Such an insertion might have been relevant in the political scenario of that specific timeframe while it was being exhibited. However, it is difficult to continue to make a direct link with the concept and reflections proposed by the artist in the artwork itself and relate it to early – or modern – black slavery. Moreover, the artwork was reexhibited in Italy and the UK the following year, during which the Middle East conflicts diluted and were eclipsed by other mediatic ones, such as the combats between Ukraine and Russia. This fact weakens the original intention of the artist to draw attention to Middle East conflicts as the above-mentioned became more relevant to the European socio-political scenario in early 2022.

The blocks that create the artwork are placed with some centimetres between them to create a space where visitors can walk through, so the boat has large proportions of 32 m long. Still according to MAAT's webpage, Kilomba "invites the audience to enter a garden of memory, in which poems rest on burnt wooden blocks, recalling forgotten stories and identities. What stories are told? Where are they told? How are they told? And told by whom?" (GRADA..., 2021, [s.p.]). Thus, the artwork draws attention to unattended memories and identities created after the traumatic and violent past of enslaved African people for the benefit of European empires.

Image 2: *The Boat* by Grada Kilomba in 2021 at MAAT, Lisboa.



Source: Author's personal archive.

Part of this artwork is these material traces — the art installation, but the piece also has an intangible side that pertains to the use of these wooden blocks as a stage. Three identical performances complemented the artwork's poetic by embodying and expressing the concepts and intentions that Kilomba wanted to address through the tangible artwork that was being exhibited. This hybridization of media seems to be a trend among contemporary artists who want to use performativity to express their art, and yet also convey this through material traces. In this way, there is continuity, and the public can visit the artwork even if they have not watched the performance.

Each performance had three parts, and the poem imprinted on the blocks guided the event through an experience that used voice, bodies, movement, and music to address the scars of colonialism (GRADA..., 2021). The Kalaf Epalanga group created a melody for the poem that Kilomba wrote and the overall performance. At the beginning of the performance, a group of Afro-descendent slowly arrived at the sound of percussion beats and stood breathing and humming low notes slowly while two dancers created movement through the blocks and lay on the floor. Following this, a woman verbalizes the poem in Portuguese, and the group repeats each verse after her. After that, the group walks through the blocks touching them and singing sounds and meets in the centre to create a circle around the dancers lying on the ground. The whole group then uses dark wings while dancing, while the poem is verbalized. In the final part, the two dancers stand up to meet and hug while a soloist sings the poem for them, and finally, the whole group meets them singing. The performance is approximately one hour long, and it is a delegated performance, which means that Kilomba is not an active part of it.

Like the art installation, this performance explores the re-telling of the one-sided colonial history that is often told through a Eurocentric perspective while putting the colonized in the centre – not the colonizers. However it does so while creating a narrative through movement and voice. According to MAAT's webpage on the event:

Grada Kilomba works with the themes of memory and oblivion, the conscious and the unconscious, the visible and the invisible, inviting the participation of a corps of voices and dancers from African diaspora communities, who become the centre of a silenced history – remembering and paying homage to the millions of African people who were enslaved and transported at the bottom of ships (GRADA..., 2021, [s.p.]).

Both the Monument and Grada's art installation/performance are pieces conceived to spread a political or social viewpoint. While the first was raised to reinforce a political agenda linked to conservative values to continue having colonies, the latter draws

attention to the racial and social consequences of such actions. The use of the boat (or ship) comes as central imagery for both artworks as it was, evidently, the main means of transportation during the time.

Image 3: Performance *The Boat* by Grada Kilomba in 2021, Lisboa.



Source: O Barco... (2021).

3 The Activism of Art: A New Concept and an Old Strategy

The use of art to voice activist intentions is not uncommon when debating contemporary art. Art historians, artists, and curators have been adopting neologism *artivism* to refer to the trait of having political or social intentions explored in artworks. Art curators, artists, and writers, such as Claire Bishop (2012), reflect on art as activism that is relevant to this research, especially while debating contemporary pieces. The *artivist* attributes in Kilomba's artwork will be thoroughly explored to dissect the layers of such occurrences, yet these frameworks will be extended to question whether the Monument of the Discoveries can also be perceived as an *artivist* piece. Moreover, a brief view of Cristina Prata Cruzeiro's arguments on art and politics are considered in this analysis.

Kilomba's artwork carries an activist reflection on racial discrimination in Western societies (and worldwide) resulting from the social and political social system imposed through European colonialism. The artist, in this case, conceived this piece with the explicit intentionality of bringing awareness to the problematic racial hierarchy resulting from historical events, but, at the same time, this reflection aims to question this in our society. Using art to remember the violence thousands of bodies suffered centuries ago comes as an activist (and artist) occurrence and promotes a social and political reform in contrast with the prevailing one established.

A second and more subtle and indirect form of activism adopted would be that Kilomba added the translation of the poem in Arabic due to political events in Afghanistan that year. Although these events are not directly related to the main political agenda Kilomba was exploring with her artwork, she aims to draw attention to another political issue that she considers relevant to our society from a global perspective. This creates a second layer of activism that reinforces further *artivism* as an essential trait of the piece.

Moreover, Kilomba's choice of incorporating performativity into this artwork becomes as a coherent medium to debate this matter because it is intrinsic to one's personal experiences in society. The artist invited performers and musicians to dance, sing or play according to what she planned, but also asked people of the black community who were not strictly related to the art scene to join because she aimed to include members of the community themselves. With this, she intended to create proximity and representativeness with and of black people. The performance aims to embody memoirs of previous generations while touching on a very specific and crucial part of human history: the transportation of human beings as slaves from one continent to another. The body itself was a focal point during these events, so it is coherent that performativity mirrors and embodies such a debate.

Kilomba's framework can be applied to what art historians have been investigating and naming as an *artist* piece. The reasons that lead artists to include (or use as a starting point) social reflection in their creations is a point of debate. According to art historian Claire Bishop (2012), after around 1990, the presence of social

reflection within art production arose to extend the public's participation – even if only conceptually. While debating topics that can be seen as relatable in some sense, the audience participates:

[...] an analysis of this art must necessarily engage with concepts that have traditionally had more currency within the social sciences than in the humanities: community, society, empowerment, agency. As a result of artists' expanding curiosity in participation, specific vocabularies of social organisation and models of democracy have come to assume a new relevance for the analysis of contemporary art. But since participatory art is not only a social activity but also a symbolic one, both embedded in the world and at one remove from it, the positivist social sciences are ultimately less useful in this regard than the abstract reflections of political philosophy. This methodological aspect of the 'social turn' is one of the challenges faced by art historians and critics when dealing with contemporary art's expanded field. Participatory art demands that we find new ways of analysing art that are no longer linked solely to visibility, even though form remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning. (BISHOP, 2012, p.17).

As a piece conceived in 2021, Kilomba's artwork was already thought and developed within activist reflections – specifically decolonial ones. The artwork has roots in topics that are deeply embedded in social matters as it explores community, society, and racial empowerment. On the other hand, although the context in which the Monument of the Discoveries was conceived seems far from contemporary artwork, one can question whether this could also be seen as an *artist* piece.

The temporal frame that Bishop (2012) proposes is notably a conflicting point since the Monument was first conceived in 1940 — several decades before what she points out as the dissemination of what she names as the 'social turn'. Nonetheless, such a frame is arguable as other scholars perceive this given social turn as a trait that emerged much earlier through contemporary art artworks from the mid-19th century - or even earlier as it will be explored subsequently. However, this piece was conceived as a

part of political propaganda in favour of conservative and fascist values that aimed to reinforce colonial power. Therefore, it was also conceived within a framework that discusses social ideals within a specific community, society and (colonial) empowerment, while opposing social equality. By exclusively analyzing *activist* trait of both artworks while disassociating their political/social values, temporal frame and historical contextualization, one can view both pieces as activist pieces.

While deepening the reflections on the relationship between art and politics to better understand the case study of the Monument of the Discoveries, research on the art historian Cristina Pratas Cruzeiro (2017) will be considered. In her argument on the use of art within (and for) politics, she argues that:

If art has always had a relationship with politics, even as a voice of powers, the critical thinking that emerged with the Contemporary Era, as an antithetical mark of the Enlightenment itself, it heralded a tension in the relationship between culture and powers. Coincident with autonomization the artistic sphere and animated by a public process and the democratization of culture, this tension would begin to take place mainly from the 18th century onwards. [...] Art lost innocence and between freedom from romantic individualism and the social commitment of realisms, immediately assumed critical responsibilities, such as Daumier, Courbet or the importance of caricature in the 19th century, among other examples, demonstrate. A set of tensions were launched for culture: between artistic avant-gardes and political avant-gardes; between autonomy of the artistic sphere and its political and social context; between production and reception; between freedom and commitment; between critical and/or utopian dimension; etc.¹ (CRUZEIRO, 2017, p. 22).

In contrast to Bishop's proposed timeframe, Cruzeiro (2017) offers a different suggestion regarding art and politics. She argues for a much larger approach that starts around the Enlightenment as

¹ The translation is my own.

she points out artists having political and social engagement with their artworks as early as the 18th century. Through Cruzeiro's argument, the Monument of the Discoveries comes as a piece that is coherent with her views on the relationship between art and politics, especially as it blurs the lines between culture and political values while praising patriotism (from an extreme right party's viewpoint).

The use of art for activism, or "artivism" is a common occurrence in contemporary art debates. Kilomba's artwork specifically addresses racial discrimination and colonialism, using art to raise awareness of these issues and promote social and political reform. Art historian Claire Bishop (2012) argues that participatory art, which often includes social and political themes, can be analyzed through concepts traditionally used in the social sciences, such as community, society, empowerment, and agency. However, the symbolic nature of this type of art requires an understanding of the cultural and historical context in which it was created. Cruzeiro's arguments on the intersection of art and politics are also relevant to the analysis of both these artworks.

4 Vandalism or Intervention: Why Does (De)Colonial Art Bother? And Who?

While focusing on the reflections proposed herein (de)colonial lenses, one must consider not only the intentions of the artists conscientiously proposed for these artworks but also the consequences of their presence within the community in which they were inserted. The Monument of the Discoveries is located in a tourist sightseeing area in a region named Belém, which is an open public square; Kilomba's *The Boat* was placed on the external area of MAAT, so the public also has no access restrictions. Interestingly, both pieces drew the attention of the public, politically speaking, and were seen as a stage to voice political beliefs, which is coherent with Bishop's argumentation of participation as a pivotal point for *artist* pieces.

The Monument of the Discoveries was vandalized in August 2021 with graffiti of the sentence "Blindly sailing for monney [sic], humanity is drowning in a scarlet [sic] sea lia [sic]", which is a

statement criticizing colonialism, and the means to enable its thriving. According to local newspapers, police speculated the authorship of this action as from a French artist that used the pseudonym “lia”. Moreira (2021) published an article in *Renascença*, stating that the artist herself would have published on her Instagram page a video claiming ownership of the graffiti once she had left the country already (MOREIRA, 2021).

The message was erased on the same day, and the Monument was not permanently damaged. It was not possible to verify whether local authorities proceeded with this investigation and if the French artist or any other individual was legally prosecuted. It is relevant to mention that this sentence was written in English, and not in Portuguese, which might evoke questioning of the reasons that lead the artist to do such an intervention. Did the creator intend to expand the message’s reach beyond Portuguese speakers or was she using the opportunity to make draw attention to a general political statement that was not based on her own life experiences in Portugal?

Image 4: Monument of the Discoveries graffitied.



Source: Padrão... (2021).

Regardless of the motives and circumstances behind the graffiti, the episode was exposed to the media as an act of vandalism. Nonetheless, a much more liberal approach would be to see this as a temporary intervention that aims to activate the artwork to reopen a public debate on the values preached in the piece. Depending on the chosen narrative to discuss this episode, this situation can be seen as either a depreciation of the Portuguese ideologies from *Estado Novo* or opposition to the current social values of their society. Either way, given the resources used for the intervention, the act likely aimed more to defy and question rather than make cause permanent damage to the Monument.

As the post-colonial debate is not restricted to the Lusophone-speaking countries, similar cases of vandalism or intervention of public statues and sightseeing linked to the colonial era have been occurring throughout the world. The art historian Afonso Dias Ramos (2021) debates an event that arose under similar circumstances: the campaign to remove Cecil Rhodes's statue in Cape (2015), and the dispute over the exhibition of a painting that showed the lynched black body of Emmett Till. While discussing both episodes, he argues that:

There is a newfound impetus around colonially minded notions of reparation, repatriation, restitution, and restoration. Yet, this is matched by a rise in intolerance, nationalism, xenophobia, populism, and identitarianism. It is a time of unparalleled idolatry due to the proliferation of images, an increased preservation of heritage, and a visual turn in the humanities. It is a time of unrivaled iconoclasm, as tens of thousands of public symbols are being removed from former socialist countries. Are these paradoxes and contradictions the makings of a richly agonistic democratic society or the stirrings of a collapsing social consensus, a foretaste of some cultural civil war? (RAMOS, 2021, p. 159).

The advocacy for colonial reparation was possibly propelled by the urge to repair, retribute, and restore a society that normalized unjust social hierarchies. Nevertheless, as Ramos (2021) also points out that we live in a momentum where such acts are paired with actions that support nationalism and xenophobia. In

the following month, Kilomba's artwork would be the stage for extreme right-wing intervention. A political party posted a message on their Facebook page a message summoning its followers to rise against this artwork for a protest the following afternoon. In this message, they claimed that they should not allow the constant attacks against historical and cultural heritage, their ancestors' achievements, their history and identity, and, at last, their dignity. This artwork was created to explore a public political reflection on racism, but, remarkably, a group in this community believes that this piece attacked Portuguese identity, dignity and achievements. Even so, they view this as an attack against their historical and cultural heritage, which implies that, for this group, colonialism continues nowadays as an intrinsic part of their identity and must be protected from decolonizing reflections.

Image 5: Flyer inviting the party's followers to join the protest.



Source: Partido... (2021).

The artworks presented and the audience's (re)actions are valuable sources for exploring daily occurrences of what seems to be too academic, conceptual, or abstract theoretical frameworks of post-colonial and decolonial debates. As arguably one of the main voices of this discourse, Anibal Quijano (2000), a Peruvian sociologist, wrote an article in 2000 titled "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America" in which he discusses the factors that contributed to the rise of Eurocentric capitalism as the dominant global power through an analysis of America's colonization.

This article is often cited as a starting point for (de)colonial studies and has had a significant impact on the development of the decolonial theory in the 21st century. Quijano (2000) argues that the racial hierarchy established during colonization has persisted and is a key aspect of colonial power. According to the author, "The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established." (QUIJANO, 2000, p. 533) The framework proposed can be used to perceive the Monument of the Discoveries as an artwork raised to endure and resolidify the established matrix of colonialism while Kilomba criticizes one of the axes derived from this system: the racial one.

Moreover, the Argentinian semiotician Walter D. Mignolo has been deeply exploring the concept of coloniality in the last two decades by proposing theoretical frameworks presented as decolonial. According to the author, "Epistemic decolonization, or de-coloniality, becomes the horizon to imagine and act toward global futures in which the notion of a political enemy is replaced by intercultural communication and towards an-other rationality that puts life first and that places institutions at its service, rather than the other way around." (MIGNOLO; ESCOBAR, 2010, p. 9). Therefore, in contrast to (post)colonial studies, decolonial studies propose to analyze our current society from an alternative approach: the "darker side" - through the lenses of the ones colonized. While using the arguments proposed by Quijano (2000) and Mignolo and Escobar (2010), one can perceive Kilomba's artwork as decolonial as it does not only defy the colonial matrix as it

invites people to reflect on colonialism from the black communities perspective, using the story of slaves, in this case.

The matter of nationalism and identity is a central point when researching postcolonial and decolonial objects. The renowned sociologist Flora Kaplan (2006) has explored the idea of nation and identity within the museological context since the 1990s. Kaplan argues that “The identity of a nation is closely bound up with an ideology and worldview, purveyed and associated with the named space it occupies.” (KAPLAN, 2006, p.152) She also stresses how often national identities can be expressed through patriotism or nationalism. This celebration of the nation’s political ideologies was precisely the motivation for the Monument of the Discoveries: to praise Portugal’s conquests. A similar sense of patriotism arose when the extreme-right party protested against attacks on its identity when opposing Kilomba’s artwork.

On the other hand, Kaplan (2006) also claims that when another identity is enforced into a community, such as in the case of colonialism, feelings of resistance and alienation might emerge. She claims that “Individuals and groups who diverge from a nation’s prevailing ideology and worldview may then seek other ideas on which to base their identity and utilize those available to them.” (KAPLAN, 2006, p.153) As Portuguese, Kilomba diverges from the nationalist ideologies linked to the celebration of colonialism, and she seeks the memories and narratives of her ancestors to generate reflections on the identity of a colonized group.

5 The Imagery of Ships: Disrupting Still Waters

From the 15th century until the 20th century, Portugal had one of the longest colonial histories in Europe, and it was seemingly violent towards African communities. The imagery of boats was often used as the iconography of colonial conquerors during this period (and, in Portugal, still in the mid-20th century as part of the extreme right political propaganda). Considering that boats and ships were used extensively during Portuguese colonization throughout the centuries, especially during the early and mid-stages of the colonization of South America, Africa and Asia, this

image naturally comes as a symbol of praising such a period. On one hand, the Monument of the Discoveries uses the image of the boat with the connotation of dominance, and it was created within the political context of highlighting this idea of conquests and strength over other cultures.

On the other hand, Kilomba adopted the same symbol to explore another narrative of this event, and Grada Kilomba subverted the use of this symbol in this pre-established concept and dislocated it into another narrative about the same history. While Europeans often revisit the use of boats while reclaiming the “discovery” of other lands, African cultures are associated with the painful side of their history, which is slavery. The slave ships were used to transport people from their home countries, in African communities, mostly into the Americas to serve as cheap manpower. One of the artist’s visual inspirations for the art installation was a blueprint of a slave ship from the 18th century (Image 7). In it, one observes how humans were transported through the Atlantic Ocean. This image is very contrasting image when juxtaposed with the ship depicted at the Monument of the Discoveries as the narrative proposed unavoidably focuses on racial matters derived from slavery. Here, the inhumane conditions in which people were transported in slave ships for weeks are a central point.

Another worth mentioning occurrence in the art historiography of boats and slavery relates to J. W. Turner's acclaimed artwork *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying — Typhoon coming on*, from 1840. The creation of the painting as well as the social and political repercussions in the following decades (and even centuries) can be seen as an early example of a relationship between art and politics — such as in the argument raised by Cruzeiro (2017). In this painting, a ship is depicted during a storm and at the bottom part, there are shackles, sea creatures and bodies. According to art historian Leo Costello (2004), Turner painted this piece after reading a book about slave trading in which an episode about human cargo (130 people) being overthrown at the sea due to a shortage of drinkable water. Sensitized by this story, Turner painted the piece to criticize Britain's involvement with such practices. At the time, the debate on abolitionism also took place in the United States, and Costello (2004) claims that this artwork was used as socio-political propaganda in favour of reinforcing anti-slavery laws in both countries.

Although the events surrounding the artwork do not relate directly to the Portuguese slave trading, socio-political circumstances are relevant for this research. Once again, the framework of Bishop (2012) suggested that art as activism can be seen in different contexts when the temporal frame is readjusted to expand over contemporary pieces. This case reinforces the use of art in an activist context, especially given the connection to the political situation in which the artwork emerged.

**Image 7: Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying,
by J. W. Turner (1840).**



Source: The Slave... ([s.d.]).

Seemingly, knowledge regarding Portuguese colonialism is intrinsic to a better comprehension of the above-mentioned artworks; however, the iconography or symbology of boats is not necessarily driven by this specific narrative. There are various alternative connotations as this object has been present for millennia within cultures worldwide. For instance, the symbology of the boat can also be associated with the idea of transitioning to another spiritual dimension, and it is part of burial rituals in some Asian and Northern European cultures.

The imagery of ships has long been used as a symbol of colonial conquests, particularly in the context of Portugal's violent history of colonization. The Monument of the Discoveries in Portugal, for example, uses the image of a ship to represent a country's dominance over other cultures while. Kilomba's artwork, on the other hand, subverts this narrative by using the same symbol to explore the painful history of slavery and the slave ships used to transport

African people in the Americas. Moreover, another remarkable use of such a symbol is also observed in J. W. Turner's painting, created to criticize Britain's involvement in the slave trade and then used as propaganda in favour of anti-slavery laws. In these cases, art was used as activism to bring attention to important social and political issues – even subversively.

6 Final Considerations

It is difficult to outline people's perceptions of dominance and rejection resulting from colonialism. In particular, it is not easy to comprehend how this is actively or passively encoded into our perception of national identity either as colonizers or colonized communities. We observed that during *Estado Novo*, the colonial conquests were celebrated as a part of Portuguese identity through monuments such as the Monument of the Discoveries; however, this is a representative mark of a long colonial history that lasted centuries and is deeply rooted in Portuguese identity. In opposition to this mindset, not only black communities but also other minorities have raised their voices, which is the case of Kilomba through the artwork *The Boat*.

While investigating the case studies' use of art as activism and its relationship with politics, through the framework of Bishop (2012) and Cruzeiro (2017), this research deepens the understanding of such areas. Moreover, the audience's responses to these artworks enabled the research into (de)colonial theories from Quijano (2000) and Mignolo and Escobar (2010). Nonetheless, this study also explored the imagery of boats to praise colonial discourses, as well as the subversive adoption of his symbol to criticize it. Researching these artworks also hopefully allowed for a deeper understanding of the role that art can play in challenging and disrupting colonial Eurocentric power structures and the inequalities and hierarchies they impose.

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