



Open Research Online

Citation

Dohmen, Renate and Korporaal, Astrid (2024). Interlude 2: Trickster Abrakadabra: The Art of Hosting or Declaring Yourself a Guest. Third Text

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/94183/>

License

(CC-BY 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding



Interlude 2: Trickster Abrakadabra

The Art of Hosting or Declaring Yourself a Guest

Renate Dohmen & Astrid Korporaal

To cite this article: Renate Dohmen & Astrid Korporaal (25 Jan 2024): Interlude 2: Trickster Abrakadabra, Third Text, DOI: [10.1080/09528822.2024.2304450](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2024.2304450)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2024.2304450>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 25 Jan 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 76



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Interlude 2: Trickster Abrakadabra

The Art of Hosting or Declaring Yourself a Guest

Renate Dohmen and Astrid Korporaal

Renate I really liked your conference paper, with its resonances and differences in approach to my discussion of Miss Chief and what I refer to as her ‘art of rampage’. I am thinking about this conversation as an interlude. We’re both working on Indigenised artists and there are very interesting parallels and differences between our papers that are worth teasing out, I think. You are, for example, interested in visiting and the viewer, which I’m not really talking about, but it is such an important perspective, so your paper nicely complements mine in terms of what I don’t mention. And then you ask about visibility and decolonising, which is part of my question when discussing Monkman’s work, but you approach it quite differently, which adds another level to our discussion. My question is also how, as an academic, one can relate to the kind of work we are both doing, given the legacy of the colonial history of Euro-American engagements with Indigenised cultures both per se and the ways in which it haunts academic work.

Astrid I think it’s interesting to talk about what the terms ‘decolonial’, ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodern’ mean to us and how we use them, especially since the decolonial is such a contemporary buzzword. Reading your paper, I was drawn to the theme of the trickster, which I think comes up in different ways in both our texts. In my text I think it relates to disorientation. I ask myself what it means to use this term as an academic, as a white European woman, and how we treat this figure in Western theory and popular culture. From what I have read of Indigenous theory and literature, the trickster is not just

a fun and free-floating postmodern signifier but also a serious method that involves processing violence. That's why I also think your use of the term 'rampaging' in relation to Monkman's work is powerful. It made me think of the way the trickster has been neutralised or domesticated in a Western context.

Renate I completely agree with you that the trickster has been jollified as a happy-go-lucky figure, but is actually a lot more serious. Monkman's and Vizenor's presentation of the trickster figure is a response to the experience of colonial violence and oppression and is about surviving it. And there is the facet of the trickster Vizenor calls the 'evil gambler', who stands for the 'evil' in all of us, which needs to be acknowledged and balanced. So yes, the trickster is multifaceted and a force to be reckoned with. The trickster has power.

I noted that you use the term 'survivance' in your text as well: survivance of course is a compelling concept with its complete refusal of the victim position, which is where the trickster comes in. I noted that the Karrabing Collective's films are also pushing back against the victim role and are adopting a position of agency, which is also trickster territory, certainly with regard to the kind of 'speaking' that happens, and the element of the unexpected, the incongruous.

That's where my difficulty with Mignolo comes in: his underlying stance strikes me as binary.¹ For me this raises the question of where this leaves one when engaging with and writing *with*, or *nearby*, as Deniz Soezen has framed it in her presentation, with artists from Indigenised backgrounds, for example. Especially as I am coming from a European cultural origin and don't want to speak for, nor about, which to me is a colonial stance. Any attempts at engaging with such material need to be done with care and acknowledgment of co-implication. This is why I think the suggestion of delinking is too easy; it posits a possibility of leaving it all behind in an act of will which is just not feasible – we are immersed in the colonial. Things are much more messy and ingrained. It also invokes a notion of purity that implies contamination as its other, and hence invokes a binary, which is part of the structure of coloniality. So to me it suggests a reversing, a switching of sides, rather than the patient work of decolonising that is murky and needs ongoing and patient application.

Astrid I agree, the term can be confusing. I think 'delinking' is used by Mignolo to describe the need to distance yourself from universal ways of thinking to be able to see other options, rather than a way of thinking or being we can completely get rid of. Mignolo also talks about the decolonial as an option, and the importance of keeping different options open in response to the universal claim of modernity/coloniality. But he is most invested in a particular option, which he calls the decolonial, and yes, the term 'delinking' can still sound binary and oppositional. To me the question is about finding the balance as a writer, by describing something interesting and important while not closing off those other possibilities. And this relates to practices of survivance, which are not proposing universal solutions but are embedded in specific local contexts that continue to change. This seems to me to be part of the problem of 'decolonial' becoming a buzzword, and the general interest in Indigenous practices, that we need to be careful this doesn't become the extraction of a prescriptive formula.

1 Renate Dohmen, 'Urban Earthdivers and the Immodest Messiah as Decolonial Worldmakers: The Art of Kent Monkman', *Archivo Papers: Journal of Photography and Visual Culture*, special issue, *Decolonial Visualities: Indigenising Visual Culture Studies*, Nasheli Jimenez, ed, October 2023, pp 31–50, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10038040>

Renate Exactly.

Astrid And I think tricksters are not commanding or prescriptive. They are embedded in a collective, often getting into trouble and making a mess but also learning from that mess.

Renate I agree. If you think of carnival in Europe as a time when everything is turned upside down and the world is looked at in a different and often completely opposite way, and all the rules are unhinged. This is a traditional trickster moment in the year, perhaps. Decolonising and the trickster, thinking of Karrabing films, offers a vision that revolves around disorientation, as you can't expand your sensory apparatus in terms of how you're used to seeing without experiencing disorientation, it just doesn't work, and yes, it's not comfortable.

I wonder how this sits with the avant-garde approach, which also pivots on disorientation through confrontation with the incongruous, outrageous, unexpected, et cetera, and how this sits with the trickster as a perspective. I often feel there's an element of 'I'm right and you're wrong' involved with the European avant-garde, which the very term suggests, being ahead of the game. I don't think this is the trickster approach. With the avant-garde there is a hierarchy, it is not a situational co-creation. From a decolonial point of view it needs to be a different gesture than the avant-garde one. This is also why I find Monkman so interesting. He engages so deliberately with art history and its legacies, and unpacks them in trickster mode, that is, in a way that makes the point but does not wag the finger. The process and the ways a critique is presented make a difference and to me need to be part of the equation, which is also a question I have for myself as an author of academic texts.

Astrid Yes, the notion of avant-garde, which is linguistically connected to war, has this sense of hierarchy, which is also connected to the modern ideology of progress at any cost. While the trickster, I think, is interested in the cost, and the complexities of actions in a wider context.

Renate I agree. So there is a nuance to be worked out, between avant-garde motions and tricksterism. Karrabing, it seems to me, are also working on this edge; they are interested in shifting the visual approach to develop a counter-perspective. Hearing your paper made me think about the fact that Monkman does not approach the counter-colonial, or decolonial, or whatever you want to call it, by revising the traditional image space or playing with perspective; this is not an issue for him. I thought that was interesting because I hadn't really thought of it. It is striking to see how Monkman and, in your case, the Collective react differently to similar questions and issues. Monkman, for example, used to work in an abstract style when he started out, but abandoned it because he wanted a general audience to understand his work, and it therefore needed to be less 'esoteric' or not just be comprehensible for art aficionados. His decision to address a general audience determines his stance about perspective and his choice of adopting naturalist, narrative approaches in his work.

Astrid This is something I was reflecting on in relation to Monkman's way of inserting people into scenes. In the early settler landscape paintings of North America, no inhabitants are shown, or only allegorical figures. It seems to me that Monkman's paintings often feature a similar type of Romantic landscape while hosting all kinds of historical, mythical and actual figures, as well as mixing the colonisers and colonised. Is he disrupting the distanced view of the 'virgin land' with the messiness of human complexity and relationships? This also reminded me of the Western painting tradition of the self-portrait in the studio, which often shows the artist surrounded by their works, their patrons and friends. It seems to me this is something Monkman plays with: the contradictions between the story of the individual genius and the collective; between the genres of history, landscape and portrait painting that are already there in the European tradition.

Renate Yes, he does insert the missing presence of the Indigenised in North American landscape paintings of a pristine empty land in ways that playfully and forcefully critique the genre and the colonial politics that undergirds it. He also critiques the notion of the artist genius, often focused on Picasso, and of the individual, which is related of course – and has a lot of fun with it. There is of course the hospital scene in *Casualties of Modernity* (2015), where works of modern art are in intensive care and some on life support or deceased. I guess one could call this a kind of reworking of the studio as the space of the famed moment of creation.

And yes, he is mixing colonisers and the colonised in all kinds of unexpected ways. He for example claims nineteenth-century European artists as Miss Chief's best friends, rehearsing a non-binary gesture, crossing what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls the abyssal line. So he is not delinking but actively linking, saying somewhat tongue-in-cheek 'this is my community', laying claim to this essentially colonial history from which Indigenised peoples have historically been excluded. By inserting Miss Chief's presence, he is enacting an intervention, but without making big claims about it.

Thinking in terms of your paper, I guess Monkman's strategy of making the disavowed Indigenised presence visible through his work could be understood as declaring himself a guest, turning up at the house of art history and expecting, or demanding even, to be hosted, which is a bold move.

Astrid Yes, I think that's a good metaphor. There's something challenging about seeing certain cultural references linked to each other. Maybe this estrangement relates to the fact that with primitivism in European modern art there is a connection between cultures that is commonly acknowledged in rewriting art histories, but in terms of the early Romantic settler landscapes, there's still a sense that the 'new' world and the 'old' world were totally separate in their cultural imaginations. I was thinking of these depictions of the moment of colonial discovery, which show two cultural worlds, but in a very particular hierarchy. They don't show a shared world. That's what I'm trying to think about through the notion of visiting, that the colonists were guests who abused this relationship and constructed a narrative of themselves as representatives of the law,

with the right to manage the land, set up treaties and borders, and claim territories for their own cultural world. So, it's interesting to think of Monkman declaring himself a guest, the other way around, and somehow trying to reconstruct the possibilities for a shared world, without denying the violence of the colonists.

Renate This is really well put Astrid. There are also paintings of his which I didn't discuss, such as *The Daddies* (2016) where he is tackling a concrete political moment in Canadian history and its iconic representation in a nineteenth-century painting, which he is repainting. The event commemorates the signing of the confederation, when the British colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were united in the Dominion of Canada on 1 July 1867, gaining semi-independent status within the British Empire. The legal process depicted in the original painting is marked by the absence of Indigenised people even though it was their land that had changed legal status. Monkman repaints the image and inserts the Indigenised presence that was disavowed in the guise of a nude Miss Chief facing the lawmakers and claiming her place at the negotiating table. I am thinking of this painting since here she is literally and provocatively declaring herself a 'guest' as a political intervention. In a sense it is quite a simple move, yet it is strong visually and the perceived incongruity of the scene speaks volumes in many ways. And there is also the tongue-in-cheek trickster element at play as Miss Chief's nudity is confrontational rather than demure...

On a different note, I think you mentioned, past, present and future as the temporal continuum that's addressed in the work of the Collective, and I think Monkman's work does so as well, so this is a shared theme. His reworking of historic events and of art history is future-oriented, that is, it is premised on the idea that if one rewrites the past through art-historical interventions, it will create a different future, or open up new horizons for different futures to emerge.

This brings me back to our earlier discussion about his use of traditional representational means, certainly in his paintings, and the fact the representational space is not challenged per se in its mechanics. But while his approach to painting is relatively traditional, he adds incongruous elements that harbour a future direction or orientation. So even though on the surface things look 'traditional', there's a differenced approach to representation inherent in the work that maybe isn't obvious at first glance even though he is not experimenting with pictorial means. For me this aspect is interesting to realise and is brought out through our dialogue.

2 Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', speech to the Personal and the Political panel at the conference 'The Second Sex', New York City Institute for the Humanities, 29 October 1979, reprinted in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Crossing Press, Freedom, California, 1984, pp 110–114

Astrid As you're speaking about this I'm thinking about Audre Lorde's statement, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.² What does it mean for the Karrabing Collective or Monkman to take up these visual techniques? Maybe by asserting themselves as guests, they are asking us to imagine the past differently, as a house which hosted these different peoples, which then has an implication for how we imagine the future.

Renate I guess one would need to be an architect, to adapt 'the house' to the different guests arriving, to change its shape according to require-

ments or create a sort of mobile house which adapts itself and changes as its inhabitants or the people it hosts ebb and flow. Maybe we need to change the way we think about a house, allowing for structural change. It makes me think the house metaphor is potent, because it shows how difficult it is to decolonise. Redecorating the rooms won't do the trick, or hanging new decorations. What is required is structural change; the house needs to come down and be rebuilt in a different way. Andreotti also speaks of the house of modernity and emphasises the need to hospice modernity, to receive its lessons before moving on. I guess Mignolo's approach would be to walk away and 'just' build a new house. But what if it ends up being very similar to the old one, as the hospicing part has been skipped. Without composting the 'shit', as Andreotti would say, we can but fall back on what we know.

Astrid Maybe the argument for a position of pluralising and adding options is a contradiction in Mignolo's own work, or maybe it's an evolution of his ideas. This idea of having many options that exist at the same time, that coexist, changes the whole ecology of thought about the past and the future. It opens the possibilities for many different experiences to come in and declare themselves the guest and stay around, so we have to deal with them. This also relates to the theme of polyphony: another voice comes in and that changes the sound, which requires us to listen to each other even more closely.

Renate The notion of many options can come across as a bit too easy at times. It could be used as a way of avoiding the issues. Different options were always available, yet they were not adopted but cast aside and denigrated due to the power dynamics, which is the issue. They can certainly brush the issue of power dynamics under the carpet, as well as internal colonialism and the appropriation of Indigenised epistemologies, which also applies to Mignolo, and this is certainly a critique which has been raised from Indigenised quarters.³ So perhaps one needs to approach the notion of polyphony with some care as well; treating it not as a happy, harmonious sing-song but as experimental voicing where one has to react to the other sounds coming in and not expect them to fall into place.

Astrid I think this relates to the notion of survivance and affirming the alternatives to capitalist imperialism that continue to exist and evolve. Polyphony could be understood as a jazz experiment: everybody responds to the new voice coming in and something new can develop as a response, rather than keeping the original compositional frame, where everybody has to slot in. But it also doesn't mean that everyone has to be speaking at the same time, or that all options should be affirmed equally. The ability to respond involves listening and foregrounding the voices, options, rhythms that have been in the background. Delinking in this sense, I think, also involves refusing to let the logic of modernity/coloniality and Western teleological history mediate all our interactions and expressions of relationality.

Renate Yes, whatever you want to call it, what is key is listening – to yourself, to one another, the collective; to wait and hear what wants to be uttered, murmured, whispered, rustled, spoken, shouted, sung... Whatever wants to emerge. This is about a qualitative shift.

³ eg Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 'Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 111, no 1, 2012, pp 95–109, p 102, p 104; Breny Mendoza, 'Can the Subaltern Save Us?', *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, vol 1, no 1, 2018, pp 109–22

Astrid I think that's also the position of hosting and being hosted. The Karrabing Collective consider themselves as being hosted by the land; they don't own the land. That requires a certain position of being open to other things that might emerge on the land, because they're not the owners. They don't have the sense of borders that is connected to ownership, where they could say 'we are here so no one else should be here'. But they can address a visitor who is not acting respectfully, a visitor who is disrespecting their host, which is the land.

Renate So if they had a disrespectful visitor, how would they respond? I mean, that's the colonial story...

Astrid There is an acknowledgment of the settler reality in all their films. The way they deal with this, I feel, is similar to how you might treat a child or someone who doesn't understand the rules, who doesn't understand the consequences of their actions. These settlers should not be privy to certain knowledge, or allowed in certain spaces, because they're still in a different paradigm. Maybe it's unfair to compare settlers with children, but my point is that it's not a total rejection. In *The Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland* (2018) there's a debate about whether to allow the settlers to feel the full effect of their destructive behaviour, but members argue against this because the rest of the world would also be destroyed. So, there is no clear answer, and also no way to completely banish disrespectful visitors, because everything is interdependent. They have to try and interpret, improve and listen to the land. They take up the trickster role again and acknowledge that there is this violence there and that they might have to adapt their strategy. Because every day a new consequence might emerge, but also maybe a new solution or a new strategy to survive that moment.

Renate Yes, the situational and responsiveness to the moment are key. This makes me think of Vizenor. For example, he discusses how to write without falling into the trap of representation, which is when situations are frozen, become fixed. The question is how to keep the process flowing and open, and he takes inspiration from the storytelling traditions which are part of his heritage. When you have a live storytelling situation, the storyteller and the audience are in the same space and then the story can change according to what it needs to be for that particular audience, in this particular place and at this particular point in time. Writing such a story down, as anthropologists have done, and declaring it as its authentic version does not make sense from the Indigenised point of view, because it does not allow for variance in the retelling of the story. In fact, this is the wrong paradigm, that is, its colonial/abyssal. A story, 'traditionally' speaking – and maybe this is not the best word to use as I don't want to romanticise and invoke all those related tropes – so maybe the understanding of story Vizenor endorses is one of a living, breathing entity that grows and changes as it moves from place to place, encountering different audiences and contexts.

Which makes me think about stories in relation to paintings. I guess a painted image is fixed, but moments of reception can vary and curation, that is, the company it keeps in gallery spaces, brings different ways of understanding to the work. This would be the same for oral lore that

has been written down by anthropologists. I guess what matters is how a story or image comes along, which is the challenge Vizenor set himself, to write in an oral way in the sense of not rehearsing fixity, to craft words and stories in ways that evade the constraints of a single interpretation of a ‘one vision world’. And he is the master of that, I have to say, which make his texts so enjoyable but also perplexing and slippery.

Thinking about this makes me reflect on the use of film, the medium of the Karrabing Collective, and the ways in which it is more fluid than painting, in one way, yet is also fixed, because it’s in the can, and how they negotiate the medium and its constraints to avoid representational capture...

Astrid Yes, there is an emphasis on the ‘moving’ element of their moving-image work, both in the process of making the work and, as I’m trying to argue, in its reception. Instead of focusing on the legal and ‘truthful’ aspects of representation, their works create a space of collective storytelling that is also actively addressing the viewer.

Renate Yes, they create a lot of ambiguity and disorientation as part of this process. I like the approach of collective storytelling, of activating the viewer, as a counter to ‘regular’ representation. How to approach this is really a key issue. I guess it’s easy to go overboard and want to opt for the other side that has been suppressed for so long as a kind of rebalancing act. But such a move is yet another expression of the polarising that is culturally so ingrained and which both Monkman and Vizenor avoid. The way I see it, the challenge is to keep both sides engaged without saying one is better than the other, and without losing criticality. This is difficult because of the immense legacy of dominance of the colonial mode, so it is tempting to want to balance this history by emphasising its ‘other’, which is also needed of course.

I guess what I am trying to say is that hospicing is key and the acknowledgement of the colonial and all it stands for is not ‘out there’ but something we are deeply implicated with – we are part of it, just in different ways. That’s my question to myself as well, as an academic, how to negotiate the colonial legacy of knowledge production. Art history certainly is steeped in colonial history; colonialism was an important founding moment of the discipline. So how do you negotiate this legacy, which is inherent in the discipline and its ways of working? And what does this mean for how you write, how you speak, how you think? I guess Karrabing have found an answer, and Monkman and Vizenor have found theirs. It is certainly a question I have for myself: how does my writing, for example, need to change; on what kind of footing does it need to be to reckon with the legacy of coloniality in the field? Here thinking *with* is important, as is listening to what emerges, for there cannot be a formula. In that sense I found it interesting what you said about the use of metaphor in my piece, which I hadn’t noticed.

Astrid Your use of metaphor makes me think of Harney and Moten’s argument that the university should be a place for free thought and in its current form it is not, but that it is possible to create an ‘undercommons’ of solidarity within this space.⁴ Maybe that’s what metaphor also does, by holding different meanings and functions. It allows the

4 Fred Moten, Stefano Harney and Jack Halberstam, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe, Essex, 2013

reader the agency to sense different resonances, and to feel a kind of alliance or solidarity with its trickster element. There's a wink to the reader saying there's more here than just the surface, more than one story or community you can link to. This is different from black-and-white thinking, which only leaves one right option. So the plurality of metaphor acknowledges different interpretations, just as myths and fables of oral culture often have different meanings and can shift in relation to the context and urgency of a moment.

Renate That's a great way to frame metaphor – very potent. Another question I have is about engaging with the art market. Monkman is an individual artist who is hugely accomplished and who engages successfully with the art market and needs to do so to get his message across. Whereas I don't know where the Karrabing Collective is situated in comparison. Obviously they're shown a lot, but I guess they have a different profile in terms of being a collective?

Astrid I think the tension that is part of our conception of success in different cultural contexts is interesting. One of the questions that comes up in relation to the Karrabing Collective is whether it is 'fair' that Elizabeth Povinelli, their white North American member, is publishing books and teaching while other members are not. But this question holds the assumption that this is the successful position everyone strives to inhabit. To me, this does not seem to be the Collective's goal. Their aim is to have a relationship with the land and with each other and to grow this kinship. It helps their goal to show work and receive arts funding, but their goal is not to be recognised as a successful artist or academic by the Western artworld.

Renate To me that's striking because, in a sense, art by Indigenised Australians has probably been the first such art that made it big in the contemporary art market. So there's a particular precedent here, irrespective of whether or not one thinks of it as a good thing, and Karrabing rejecting the paradigm of artworld success (while being quite successful all the same) makes a lot of sense.

Returning to what it is we are doing by having this conversation, I guess we are claiming our space as guests, and the invitation is to think with and through the lens of the 'other' text. It's about creating a container that is hospitable and invites conversation. I really enjoyed this conversation and the space it provided to think through and with our projects. Thanks very much for making time for this conversation.

Astrid Yes, I agree, and this has also been a chance to expand our conversation in a hospitable way, with openness to how our thoughts can develop in dialogue. I have found this very enriching!

ORCID

Renate Dohmen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5701-1163>

Astrid Korporaal  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8905-3576>