

Other Views: Art History in (South) Africa and the Global South

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Federico Freschi

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Taking another view

Giacomo Gastaldi's upside-down map of Africa (Figure 1), produced by the great Venetian map-maker for Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi* in 1557, is one of those historical curiosities that is bound to elicit a response when viewed for the first time. Given that it looks – at least at first glance – remarkably like modern maps of the continent, the fact that it is upside-down is unsettling. Realising that this inversion is not the result of a careless printer's mistake but rather a carefully constructed cartographic device, one's first impulse – humour, irritation, cynicism – soon gives way to a more profound sense of the *Unheimlich*: the familiar is suddenly, unaccountably strange, the strange uncomfortably familiar. The cognitive dissonance it evokes not only highlights the subjectivity underlying the ostensibly objective act of mapping, but also serves as a clear reminder of the fragility of the consensus that constitutes received wisdom. Above all, it begs the question: can it be that everything one holds to be true may be literally overturned by the simple act of taking an unaccustomed point of view; by entering into an imaginative space where 'north' becomes 'south' and one's worldview no longer conforms to any conventional truth?

The historical record provides an ostensibly simple answer for Gastaldi's curious device: he was following a convention – established by a school of sixteenth-century Italian cartographers – of not positioning north at the top of the map. Imaginatively inscribed with the names of fictitious mountains and rivers, Gastaldi's map presents the continent – then largely unknown to Europeans – as both a Utopian idyll and a dangerous zone of primitive savagery. In hindsight, and given the European conquest of Africa, it cannot but reinforce the notion of the northern hemisphere's privileged view from above, as it were. Extending this privileged view from the North to encompass not only Africa but indeed those countries and regions that are collectively known as the 'Global South',¹ it also serves as a reminder, as Ahmed Cassim Bawa and Peter Vale (2007), point out, that 'the struggle for ideas is a western-based story in which the voices of the south are always silent: southern people emerge as objects in a project to order the outer reaches of frontier upon frontier.'

First and foremost an image, Gastaldi's map also reminds us of the importance of visual culture in determining the ways in which our perceptions of the world – and our places in it – are informed,

Corresponding author:

Federico Freschi, University of the Witwatersrand, 1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: Federico.freschi@wits.ac.za



Figure 1. Giacomo Gastaldi, *Prima Ostro Tavoloa* ['Upside-Down' Map of Africa], from Vol. I of *Ramusio's Navigazioni et viaggi*. Venice, Giunti, 1606. Hand-coloured engraving after woodcut original (1557). Trapezoid, 275 x (at greatest) 385mm. Library of Parliament, Cape Town, South Africa, ref. 25881 (used with permission).

shaped and ultimately constructed. Art history has a critical role to play in understanding and interrogating these constructions. But art history as it was – and in some ways continues to be – practised in the West has largely been, as Donald Preziosi (1989: 33) reminds us, 'a site for the production and performance of regnant ideology, one of the workshops in which the idea of the folk and of the nation was manufactured'. By extension, it has been largely complicit in the project of ordering, from a particularly Eurocentric point of view, what Bawa and Vale call 'the outer reaches of frontier upon frontier'.

The South African example is telling in this regard: as Anitra Nettleton (2006: 50) points out, so in thrall were South African art schools to the Western hegemony of art history that 'none of the schools or departments of fine arts at South African universities besides the University of the Witwatersrand² was to include historical African art in their syllabi prior to the 1990s'. Instead, they concentrated largely on reproducing (in the case of the English speaking institutions) the formalist traditions established at institutions such as the Courtauld, or (in the case of the Afrikaans speaking institutions) the philosophical tradition informed by the German *Kunsthistorisches* model. In both cases, African art history was understood to mean contemporary South African art, produced largely by white South African artists. In effect, 'the majority of people in South Africa were denied their own heritage, denied artistic ability or opportunity, and placed at the very bottom of a supposed hierarchy of cultural development' (Nettleton 2006: 41).



Figure 2. Classicism on the Highveld: The Great Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, designed by Emley and Williamson and Williamson and N.T. Cowin, 1922. Photo: F Freschi.

Happily, the situation in South Africa has, over the past two decades, been subject to massive redress and transformation, with (South) African art (both historical and contemporary) enjoying increasing attention in art history syllabi at both secondary and tertiary levels. However, the bigger question – both for South Africa and other post-colonial societies – remains: how do we address the unequal distribution of academic resources around the globe and challenges from post-colonial societies to the older methods and concepts of Western art history? These are questions that the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA) has begun to address. They were debated at a workshop entitled ‘Art History from the International to the Global: Imagining a New History for CIHA’ held at the Francine and Sterling Clark Art Institute in August 2007, and at the 32nd CIHA International Congress in Melbourne, entitled ‘Conflict, Migration and Convergence’, in January 2008. A key discussion at that congress was the extent to which the discipline of art history needed to be reconsidered ‘in order to establish cross-cultural dimensions as fundamental to its scope, method and vision’ (Anderson 2008). These discussions were continued at a CIHA Colloquium, hosted by its only African member association, the South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH), at the University of the Witwatersrand (Figure 2) in Johannesburg, South Africa, on January 12–15, 2011.

The largest urban university in South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand had its origins in South African School of Mines, founded in 1896, and was granted University status 1922. Still an urban campus, situated in the heart of the cosmopolitan metropolis of Johannesburg, it is spread over 400 hectares and comprises five faculties and 37 schools (including the Wits School of Arts).

The University of the Witwatersrand (or 'Wits', as it is commonly called) has a distinguished research reputation, boasting, amongst other notable achievements, 89 Rhodes Scholars and four Nobel Prize laureates. The campus is home to 14 museums and two art galleries, including the Origins Centre and the Wits Art Museum, which is the custodian of the Standard Bank Collection of African Art, the largest and most significant collection of African art on the continent.

Entitled 'Other Views: Art History in (South) Africa and the Global South', the principal focus of the colloquium was to take the 'other view', that is the view from the Global South. Inspired by Gastaldi's upside-down map of Africa, the colloquium invited the global community of art historians to take an unaccustomed point of view, and to imagine an intellectual space framed by imperatives from the 'south' rather than the 'north'. It invited a leap of the imagination: What if the centres of intellectual and financial power were to be reversed? What if the 'developing world' were to become the 'first world'? If 'South' were to become 'North'? In short, it urged the imagining of a public intellectual space where such polar reversals might happen, and in which new histories of art could emerge; histories that are not necessarily centred on Western-based systems, nor dependant on the West for validation.

The SAVAH agenda in context

As the largest and oldest association of professional art historians in South Africa, these ideas have been fundamental to SAVAH – over the past decade-and-a-half – in its mission to understand what may be at stake in practising art history in a post-colonial, post-apartheid context. Two issues are immediately apparent: first, to engage the notion of transformation as an active agent in imagining the discipline of art history as inclusive, relevant and sustainable in an African context; and second, to re-imagine what the role of professional art historians might be in giving substance to theoretical notions of what constitutes the transformed intellectual spaces of visual culture and art history.

Indeed, recent SAVAH conferences have served as platforms for critical debates on transformation, with a focus on the extent to which these debates have transpired within the context of institutional, historical, social and political changes in South Africa. Of particular concern has been the need to interrogate the ways in which the essentially Western discipline of art history is being (re) written and studied in South Africa in relation to South Africa's status within a wider African and global discourse. As was clearly demonstrated at both the Clark Workshop and the Melbourne Congress, these issues and problematics are not, of course, unique to South Africa. However, because of South Africa's well-developed academic infrastructure and the persistent legacy of its (art) historical ties with Europe and North America, coupled with its geographical location, it is well positioned to serve as a platform for the ongoing debate. For SAVAH, the debate is fuelled as much by the context of globalisation and the need to understand globalism as 'art history's most pressing issue' (Anderson 2008) as by the context of the changing political and academic landscape of South Africa in the past decade-and-a-half.

For SAVAH the debate has also been driven by a process of introspection, confronting both the extent of its complicity in perpetuating the hegemony of Western art history, and the need to redress historical inequalities both in the constitution of its membership, and its mandate as a professional organisation. The Association was founded as the South African Association of Art Historians (SAAAH) in 1984, partly as a response to a perceived need amongst the academic community of art historians to form an organised, professional body that could facilitate debate on art and architectural history, and partly in response to the exclusion of South African academics from the international arena due to the cultural boycott. It must be borne in mind that in the mid-1980s South Africa had reached a state of political crisis: the apartheid government was using

draconian measures – including the declaration of successive states of emergency – to suppress ever-increasing resistance and popular uprising, while external pressure to dismantle apartheid took the form of political and cultural sanctions. In this context, a professional organisation was essentially a matter of survival for South African art historians, who, because of the country's pariah status, found it almost impossible to access international networks, and were often denied publication in international journals (Ramgolam 2004 : 44).

Indeed, the need to establish a peer-reviewed journal for South African art historians was one of the first imperatives of the newly-formed Association. It was also to be the source of a major schism, with a struggle for control of the journal and its editorial policy between English- and Afrikaans-speaking members resulting in some members from Afrikaans-language institutions breaking away early on to form their own association, *Die Kunshistoriese Werkgroep* (The Art History Workgroup), with its own journal (Nettleton 2006: 40). Despite these vicissitudes, including – by the loss of the journal in the late 1990s, due partly to changing political circumstances and partly to lack of funding – the Association continued with a fairly stable membership. Initially membership was comprised initially largely of academics and museum professionals, but this soon expanded to include practising artists, art educators, and graduate students. Although formed with funding from the national government (Nettleton 2006: 40), the Association declared its left-leaning sympathies from the outset by manifestly rejecting any form of discrimination in the constitution of its membership. Nonetheless, its membership remained overwhelmingly white, a function largely of apartheid educational policies that did not deem the study of art suitable or necessary for non-whites, and the consequent Eurocentric bias of the institutional approaches, as discussed above.

Thus, although the Association continued – largely through its annual conferences³ – to promote its constitutional aims of advancing the history, theory and criticism of art in South Africa by ‘promoting research and publication; encouraging liaison and discussion; acting as a co-ordinating body; [and] participating in educational and cultural initiatives’ (as in its 2009 Constitution), it became clear by the late 1990s and early 2000s that transformation was a key imperative if the Association were to survive. The Constitution was amended to add the ‘addressing of historic imbalances’ as one of the Association’s central aims, and at a workshop held at the University of the Witwatersrand early in 2005 a number of issues were identified and debated in order to confront and assess the Association’s ongoing viability, and what transformation would entail in practice. The outcome of that workshop, which has continued to inform the Association’s vision, was a commitment not only to continuing its activities (not least its annual conferences and the networks – both formal and informal – that these facilitated), but also a commitment to change.

The first and most obvious of the latter was the name change from the South African Association of Art Historians (with its echoes of the United Kingdom’s ‘Association of Art Historians’) to the South African Visual Arts Historians. This not only provided a less cumbersome acronym than ‘SAAAH’, but was also reflective of the global turn in the discipline of art history towards a broader and more inclusive sense of ‘visual culture’, and is thus reflective of the Association’s commitment to transformation. In keeping with a widely-held desire, articulated at the 2005 workshop, toward extending and formalising its global networks, SAVAH became a member of CIHA in 2007, the first African country to do so. The ever-growing association with CIHA has made SAVAH part of a global network of art historians, and has the potential to substantially increase its national and international footprint. The demographics of SAVAH membership and council are also slowly changing in terms of ethnicity and age – indeed, SAVAH conference programmes of the past few years attest to an increased presence of graduate students and younger academics, as well as greater diversity in terms of race. SAVAH has also recently been registered as a Non-Profit

Organisation, which will serve to give it access to a wider community of organisations in civil society, with the associated benefits and increased visibility.

The fact of SAVAH's continued existence attests to the importance of visual culture in contemporary South Africa both inside and outside the Academy. Indeed, the themes and debates that the Association continues to engage at its national conferences make a substantial contribution to understanding who we are and what we do as a broader community of academics, artists, educators and citizens not only in South Africa, but also as global citizens. It is against this background that SAVAH has – somewhat audaciously, given its ingénue status within CIHA – successfully bid to host a colloquium under the auspices of CIHA. As noted above, by taking the position of 'The Other View', the colloquium aimed primarily to extend the debates that have been taking place nationally into a global context, thus both exercising its mandate and engaging CIHA's increased interest in the question of the relationship between globalisation and art history.

The SAVAH/CIHA colloquium

Given its geographical location in Africa, a principal focus of the SAVAH colloquium, as articulated in the Call for Papers,⁴ was how the study of art from the African continent is often impeded by a totalising notion of an undifferentiated 'Africa'. Clearly, this belies the histories, political trajectories and regional differences of the continent's many communities, nations and states, and offers the opportunity to pose questions such as: What is the counter point to the homogeneous 'African art' label? How can art history in an African context challenge traditional western art history with regard to notions of authenticity, individuality, artistic processes, methods and theories? What are the discourses of indigenous people's art practices, and what is the importance of early indigenous art for a history of art in South Africa and elsewhere? In what ways, and under what circumstances, can objects previously defined as 'craft' or 'utilitarian' be incorporated into the domain of 'art'? How is 'heritage' understood, collected and displayed? What are the ideologies behind collecting, patronage and restitution, and the use of objects, buildings and spaces? How do we negotiate questions of identity and culture in an increasingly 'global' world? What do we choose to study and why? How do we teach that which we choose to study?

These questions have wide and urgent relevance not only in South Africa and Africa, but also in the Global South. The Global South, as a cultural construct rather than a geographic term, allows the scope of the discussions to extend beyond Africa to encompass other communities and forms of artistic production, throughout history and across nations, which, within the dominant narratives of western art, have been ignored, marginalised, displaced and appropriated. The Global South may thus include Eastern Bloc artists largely unknown to the West during the Cold War, items traditionally regarded as 'women's work', First Nation peoples in Canada and indigenous people in Southern Africa, communities whose cultural artefacts were appropriated for 'universal museums' in the West, and people who have neither the power nor money to write their own art histories. In this way the colloquium will not be one on African art, but rather an international colloquium positioned in Africa.

Using the notion of the 'upside-down' worldview prompted by Gastaldi's map, the colloquium proposes a shifting – even if only temporarily – of the centre of discourse. While the existence of approaches to the practice and production of art and its histories other than the traditional Western narratives are increasingly evident in the academies of the Global South, it is clear that the power of talking, writing, researching and publishing about non-Western art forms still largely resides in the better-resourced northern hemisphere. In effect, the struggle to re-write art history is still largely

a Western-based story in which the voices of the developing world are at best marginalised and worst silenced.

As a framework for shifting the centre of power, the colloquium aimed to use and extend existing south-south dialogues. These are the new economic and cultural alliances that are being forged between the governments of India, Brazil and South Africa (the so-called 'IBSA Axis') and South Africa and the rest of the African continent, including the Indian Ocean islands. Such alliances in the political sphere are already creating a common platform for interaction with the Global North that is complementary rather than, as has been the case for so long, supplementary. The colloquium may well leverage off alliances that already exist in the cultural sphere, such as bilateral agreements between academic institutions like the University of the Witwatersrand and institutions in India and the rest of Africa, or the joint project of the South African and Mali governments to restore the manuscripts of the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu. Clearly, the colloquium cannot hope to cover all aspects and areas of Africa and the Global South, but it shall use the Global South construct as a framework to focus on Africa and in particular South Africa. The aim, ultimately, was to take the 'other view' and in so doing to complicate the history of art and the relationship between histories in the Global South and the 'North' or 'West'.

Conclusion: '(Un)making art history'

Returning to work recently from a research trip to the United States, I discovered that a graffitist had been at work in the History of Art Department's corridor at the Wits School of Arts. Normally this would be source of irritation, but this was no instance of gratuitous 'tagging' or wanton vandalism. Rather, the graffitist had carefully stenciled the words 'Make Art History' onto the door of a colleague's office (Figure 3). In fact, so neat and carefully drawn were the words that I assumed that they had been intentionally placed there by my colleague, only to be informed, when I commented on it, that he was as surprised by its appearance as I. Clearly an unusually neat graffitist had been at work, as the later discovery – on a notice board nearby and hidden beneath a poster – of what was clearly a 'trial run' attested (Figure 4).

The notion of 'making art history' in the context of a department where the bulk of undergraduate students are Fine Arts majors is as subtly ambiguous as it is subversive. A slight shift in emphasis, and the phrase changes meaning entirely, from an expression (celebratory? cynical?) of the kind of knowledge that is produced in the department of history of art – i.e., we 'make' art history in our lectures, seminars and research – to the subversive – and in the context of an art school, somewhat cynical – notion of advocating the end of art (making it, in other words, history). I found the ambiguity deeply satisfying. At once banal and thought-provoking, it seemed to suggest an active dialogue on the part of the graffitist with art history and its relationship to the practice of art, and as such was a heartening indication of the relevance of the discipline in a professional and intellectual climate where it increasingly has to justify its survival.

As is the nature of graffiti, it did not take long before this one was deliberately modified. For a short while a carefully cut out paper square with the letters 'UN' printed on it was stuck onto the door next to the stencilled words, such that the phrase now read 'unmake art history'. This modification disappeared as quickly as it had appeared – perhaps the paper square fell off, or perhaps the original graffitist objected to the intervention and removed it. Nonetheless, during its brief existence it made a point that was unequivocally directed at art history, clearly suggesting that it should be 'unmade'. Given my involvement with planning the SAVAH/CIHA colloquium, this idea resonated profoundly with me, as it seemed in some ways fundamental to the colloquium's rationale, and to SAVAH's commitment to transforming the discipline in South Africa. Taking the 'other



Figure 3. Unknown graffitist, 'Make Art History', spray paint on office door, Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010. Photo: F Freschi.



Figure 4. Unknown graffitist, 'Make Art History', spray paint on notice board, Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010. Photo: F Freschi.

view', it seems, may in some ways be akin to 'unmaking' art history: meaningful transformation cannot take place without a radical rethinking – an effective 'unmaking' – of the consensus that has so long separated the periphery from the centre, south from north. In so doing, we are not only promoting the 'other view', but were indeed 'making art history'.

Notes

1. Sweeping categories such as 'Global North' and 'Global South' are politically expedient terms, and as such are clearly an over-simplification of a complex set of historical, cultural, social, political and economic circumstances. In many respects they simply – and rather unhelpfully – reproduce the binaries of colonial Grand Narratives. In the context of an increasingly globalised world, it is also difficult to distinguish the boundaries of what exactly constitutes 'global north' and 'global south' in the academy (are white academics in the better-funded South African universities, for example, more or less part of the 'global south' than their black counterparts in American community colleges?). The aim of this colloquium is not to accept the notion of the 'Global South' as an unproblematic given, but rather to interrogate implicitly its constructed nature, and in that way add context and complexity to the debate.
2. African art was introduced into courses taught by the history of art department at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1978. This coincided with the establishment of a collection of African art at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Gallery (see Nettleton, 2006; Freschi 2009).
3. The Association has held annual conferences, hosted at different academic institutions around the country, since 1985. With the exceptions of two conferences, it has an unbroken record of published conference proceedings. The 25th Anniversary of the Association was celebrated at the 2009 conference, entitled 'The Politics of Change: Looking Backwards and Forwards' held at the University of Pretoria.
4. The Call for Papers was drawn up by the Colloquium Organising Committee, consisting of Federico Freschi (SAVAH Chairperson), Karen von Veh (ex-officio Chairperson) and Jillian Carman (Vice-Chairperson), and has been widely circulated via national and international networks.

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