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**Palestras**

## (Un)making art history: the South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH) and the question of globalisation

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Giacomo Gastaldi's upside-down map of Africa (**Figure 1**), produced by the great Venetian mapmaker 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 *Unheimliche*: 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 simply 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 and populated with mythical beasts and monsters, 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'<sup>1</sup>, it also serves as

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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 academics in the better-funded South African universities, for example, more or less part of the 'global south' than their counterparts in American community colleges?). The aim of the SAVAH/CIHA Colloquium discussed in this paper is not to accept the notion of the 'Global South' as an unproblematic given, but rather to interrogate implicitly its constructedness, and in that way add context and complexity to the debate.

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”.

As a visual artefact, 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, shaped and ultimately constructed. Art history clearly 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 are legitimate objects for study.

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 Witwatersrand<sup>2</sup> 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).

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 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 32<sup>nd</sup> CIHA International Congress in Melbourne, entitled ‘Conflict, Migration and Convergence’, in January 2008. One of the 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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).

These discussions will be continued at a CIHA Colloquium, to be hosted by its only African member association, the South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH), at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, in January 2011.

Entitled 'Other Views: Art History in (South) Africa and the Global South', the principal focus of the colloquium will be to take the 'other view', that is the view from the Global South. Inspired by Gastaldi's upside-down map of Africa, the colloquium invites a 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 invites 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 urges 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 response to the call for papers has been gratifyingly wide-ranging and diverse. A generous travel grant from the Getty Foundation in the United States will enable scholars from as far afield as Cameroon, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and India to present papers debating questions concerning various aspects of the theory and practice of art history in the Global South. The diversity of the responses is also an instructive insofar as it gives an insight into how a global agenda for art history – at least as viewed from the position of (South) Africa – might be imagined, a point to which I shall return later in this paper.

### **The SAVAHA Agenda in Context**

As the largest and oldest association of professional art historians in South Africa, the question of the transformation of the discipline have been fundamental to SAVAHA – 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 SAVAHA 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 in the constitution of its membership. 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 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 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, apartheid 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 noted above.

Thus, although the Association continued – largely through its annual conferences<sup>3</sup> – 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” (SAVAH 2009), 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 both of the global turn in the discipline of art history towards a broader and more inclusive sense of ‘visual studies’, and the fact that it is largely this ‘visual studies’ model that dominates the teaching of the discipline in the South African academy. Indeed, the History of Art department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg is the last such specialist entity left in South Africa: at the University of Cape Town art history is taught as a component of historical studies<sup>4</sup> and at Rhodes (Grahamstown) and Pretoria Universities it is expanded to include the broader field of Visual Culture studies. As Sandra Klopper (in Elkins, 2007: 129) notes, “the reason visual studies is triumphing in the African context is because it is abolishing hierarchies ... [in effect] including everything that was excluded from the hierarchies of modernism”, and is thus more open to allowing the acknowledgement of the cultural value of art objects and modes of practice that were excluded from the inherited grand narratives of the Euro-American tradition.

This is, of course, not without its problems. In its rush to revisionism over the past 15 years it seems that there has been some confusion in South African academe over the emergence of the so-called ‘new art history’ and the ‘visual turn’ in critical discourses with the *demise* of the discipline, rather than an expanding of its frontiers. In effect, the seeming insistence that art history has no legitimate place in the South African academy is not only debasing the discipline, but also, it seems to me, flirting dangerously with the prospect of producing a generation of under-educated graduates who can at best glibly engage with fashionable theories of the discourse of art, but at worst have no sense of its place

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.

in a broader historical and cultural context. It is also clear that this is very much at odds with global trends: both my presence here today and the large response to the SAVAH/CIHA Colloquium implies an international interest both in the discipline for its own sake, and for the ways in which it is applied in (South) Africa. On the other hand, the fact that only about one third of the papers submitted for the colloquium are by South African academics is indicative of the extent to which the discipline in South Africa has taken a beating. This has to be seen in light of the fact that South African universities have systematically been downscaling, sidelining or closing down their art history departments, and in effect leaving its histories of art to be written by scholars from elsewhere. That this potentially constitutes a return to a form of the cultural imperialism from which we sought to escape in the first place is deeply ironic, and deserves more attention than I can give it here<sup>AF</sup>.

Nonetheless, the very fact of SAVAH's continued existence attests to the importance of art history 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 became a member of CIHA in 2007, the first African country to do so. The ever-growing association with CIHA has given SAVAH access to a global network of art historians and offers significant potential to substantially increase its national and international footprint<sup>AF</sup>. It is also against this backdrop 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 aims 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.

Given its geographical location in Africa, the SAVAH/CIHA Colloquium has offered the opportunity to engage, amongst others, issues around 'Modernist Primitivism and Indigenous Modernisms' (Ruth Phillips); 'Documentary and Archival Practices in the Global South' (Rory Bester, Sean O'Toole and Dilip Menon); 'Art as an Act of Decolonisation' (Mario Pissarra); 'Engagements with Gender in the Art of the Global South' (Brenda Schmahmann); 'The Place of Traditional Cultures in Art History' (Kevin Murray); 'Who is Entitled to Tell the Black Artist's Story?' (David Koloane); and 'Changing Museums, Changing Art Histories' (Jillian Carman). Using the notion of the 'upside-down' worldview prompted by Gastaldi's map, the colloquium thus proposes a shifting – even if only temporarily – of the centre of discourse. The aim, ultimately, is 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, 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. 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.

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, as noted above, 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 stenciled 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 seems in some ways fundamental not only to SAVAH's commitment to transforming the discipline in South Africa, but also to the notion of a global art history. Taking the 'other 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 will not only be promoting the 'other view', but will indeed be 'making art history'.



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**Prima Ostro Tavola** ['Upside-Down' Map of Africa]  
Giacomo Gastaldi

from Vol. 1 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).