



## **Research Challenges in Art History Today - Thinking art history and globalization from experiences with Africa, Brazil, and art**

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*London snow Africa, London hole Brazil*, artwork done in 1998-1999, by Milton Machado, is a photographic ready-made that indicates the possibility and relevance of artistically articulate Brazilian, African and other geopolitical territories.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Africa, Brazil and art are socio-cultural topics that may be connected to each other and create a heterogeneous and imprecise field of research. The relations between these topics illuminate various themes, issues, works, authors, institutions, audiences, societies. Constitute a territory susceptible of being analyzed from different perspectives, according to different disciplines, as well as the intentions and objectives that guide them.

To historically think this multiple and not easily delimited field it is necessary more than the inclusion of new objects, actors and institutions, new themes and issues in the traditional perspective of art history. Far from the notion of style, the territory circumscribed by the connection between Africa, Brazil and art can be seen as an open field to multiple crossings, as a crossroads where different elements, subjects, points of view and ways of thinking are articulated, what demands confrontation and reconciliation of theories, methods, and discursive structures. Therefore, to

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<sup>1</sup> *London Snow Africa, London Hole Brazil* 1998–99 consists of a pair of images captured by Milton Machado on the streets of London: a snow-covered map of Africa and a hole in the asphalt resembling the map of Brazil. See [http://www.artafrica.info/novos-pdfs/artigo\\_38-en.pdf](http://www.artafrica.info/novos-pdfs/artigo_38-en.pdf) Access: 17 Jan 2014.

study this heteroclitite territory it is important to go beyond the usual boundaries of art history, connecting it to other disciplines and traditions.

In this sense, the study of the relations between art, Africa and Brazil may be linked to the contemporary demand for reviewing scope, principles and methods of art history, being associated with attempts of a global art history production. This can also be seen as a crossroads of different objects, thinking systems, agents, institutions, cultural traditions, modes of action and reflection (searching, collecting, displaying, teaching, writing, editing, and creating).

For the analysis of the connections triggered by territory configured by the articulation of Art, Africa and Brazil with respect to the global art history, this text will address questions raised by authors who have contributed to thinking challenges, practices and achievements in this fertile field of contemporary art history: David Summers (2003), Thomas da Costa Kaufmann (2004), John Onians (2004; 2006; 2007), Julian Bell (2008 [2007]), James Elkins (2007), David Carrier (2008), and Hans Belting (2009), among others.

These authors indicate that the issue of global art history is the one which several agents and related institutions have been recently dedicating to. According to James Elkins, global art history is the most interesting and important issue today in the art history field (Apud Kesner, 2007, p. 81). While debatable, this sense of urgency is linked to the fact of not being satisfactory the incorporation of non-Western artistic achievements and the unfolding of Western art on supposed margins of the global artistic system. The ideal of spanning all humanity persists in projects of global art history, which has always encouraged the ideas of art and art history in the West. However, it is not only human kindness that mobilizes the formulation of a history of art that could respond to the globalization process. On the one hand, the global art history responds to charges of discourses lined by multiculturalism, political corrections and postcolonial logic, which have questioned the Eurocentrism of traditional art history. On the opposite side, it is encouraged by the interest of institutions from the Western art system, especially the great encyclopedic museums, in the production of historical art interpretations that would give sense to their collections, most of cases consisting from arbitrary processes, inconsistent,

and little humanistic. Or, as noted by Aruna D'Souza, global art history is connected to the existing demand, in the United States of America, by college courses with international focus, which is related to the need of recruiting foreign students due to the crisis in public funding for education, as well as the emphasis on interdisciplinarity in the 1990s was linked to cuts in operating costs of U.S. universities (D'Souza, 2012, p. 178-179).

It stands immediately the need of expanding the spatial scope of historical record, surpassing their usual boundaries, once it is necessary to reach beyond an expanded Europe. Over time, in successive configurations in books published by Elie Faure (1990 [1919-1921]), Ernst H. Gombrich (1972 [1950]), Germain Bazin (1980 [1953]), Arnold Hauser (1990 [1953]), H. W. Janson (1986 [1962]), Fritz Baumgart (1994 [1972]), David Summers (2003), John Onians (2004) e Julian Bell (2008 [2007]), among many others, the art history was including the Near East, North of Africa and parts of Asia, America, mainly from North, Africa, and Oceania. A similar process is observable in museums, in its collections, exhibitions and departments, as well as in academic courses, college-wise or not.

In this sense, it is worth noting the proposal by Thomas da Costa Kaufmann, to differently articulate geography, history and art. Given the cultural turn, the consequent separation of the idea of geography as a science of physical space only, and the renewed possibilities of dialogue between history and geography, he proposes a geo-history of art that would articulate space and time in the analysis of artistic processes and achievements (Kaufmann, 2004). However, the challenge given by art history to contemporary processes of globalization is not just making a history of art that includes all the inhabited regions of the globe, human societies in their entirety. Puts up the challenge to overcome settings in which Europe and the United States of America appear as hegemonic centers. As proposed by Piotr Piotrowski, it is important to abandon what he refers as vertical art history, whose hierarchization arises from Europe centrality, by horizontal art history, which could deconstruct the prior, but not to set up other centers (Piotrowski, 2009). Certainly, the distinction between center and margins matters for specific situations and processes in art history, examples are many, as in artistic processes relating the junction of art, Africa and Brazil. But as art history indicates, exhaustively, centers and margins are

circumstantial, moving. What relativizes the notion of center and margin, leading to think when and to whom centrality and marginality assume sense. This implies interpretation of art based on geography without fixed centers and margins.

*Divisor*, by Ayrson Heráclito, is an artwork that makes you feel the Atlantic as a space of union of people, societies and cultures because of the African diaspora and the slave trade, but also, consequently, as a space of separation.<sup>2</sup> It is fission inherent to expansion, inseparable from her, which helps to see how, in the more inclusive and comprehensive art history to be produced, the break with centrality, unity and stability is linked to a heterogeneous and discontinuous temporal structure. Rupture that can be seen in the difficulty to reconcile and accommodate the chronological timelines of different social groups, as shown, for example, in the book of Julian Bell (2008 [2007]), or in the articulation attempt of artistic processes that link Africa and Brazil to the history of Western art, fission that also derives from the critique to historicism and its linear and homogeneous temporality. Both works from *Mestre Didi*, who are living testimonies of the permanence of values, meanings, forms and practices of an African region in Brazil, and the series of pictures in which Pierre Verger brought forth artistic and cultural survivals on both sides of the Atlantic speak of temporal structures other than chronological succession.

Both in artistic connections between Africa and Brazil, as in museum collections with them structured, the variety of objects determines a historical reflection that goes far beyond the boundaries of traditional artistic categories in the West, as well as their distinctions between liberal and mechanical arts, major and minor arts, plastic, scenic and musicals. Objectivity greatly expanded, forcing surpassing the object, which also stands for those who, as Alfred Gell, rethink the concept of Western art from other disciplines and confronts the cultural practices of other societies, proposing to understand as artworks objects and some unusual events such as traps to capture animals, and yam plantations, for example (Gell, 2001; 2005).

Following this path are the approximations of the European concept of art to similar formulations in other socio-cultural contexts. The latter are guided by the question

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://ayrsonheraclitoart.blogspot.com.br/2007/07/divisor-vidrosal-gua-e-azeite-de-dend.html>.

whether the ideas, the practices and institutional framework of art as existing in the West are found extensively in the globe. Or at least, it is possible to establish approaches to ideas, practices and institutions alike. Something similar to the work of Rubem Valentim,<sup>3</sup> who used symbols of *Candomblé* and *Umbanda* in conjunction with the principles and forms of constructivism, and the incorporation of other symbolic religious systems in order to set up a symbolism of universal scope.

Considering that the design of Rubem Valentim never intended to emancipate itself from the cultural territory as he understood its origin, one may wonder whether the desire for universality that animates these proposals of art history is not a global obsession. Would not be better to abandon the idea of gathering artifacts produced in different socio-cultural contexts in museums, books, courses, curriculums under the concept of art? Would not be better to insist on the particularity of the history of Western art, or Euro (North) American art, and provide other analytical frameworks for the other series of artifacts? After all, is not like that how museums are constituted yet, with sections corresponding to geopolitics? But that way would not Western art cease to be universal, becoming a human relative phenomenon and, consequently, making the West itself also relative? Or is there some sense in review the idea of art as a universal in other bases?

Indeed, recently, other proposals of the universal in art may be shown in art. In *Real Spaces*, David Summers proposes that the key element of artistic universalism is the real space consisting of persons, who experiment it with their bodies and share it with other bodies (Summers 2003). Clear social understanding of production and the use of art that is associated with the psychophysical peculiarities of human corporeality. What refers to John Onians and his proposal of neurological art history in which universalism derives from the human brain as an element of unity beyond the socio-cultural differences introduced over time and space (Onians, 2007). In most social perspective, David Carrier indicates in *A World Art History and its Objects*, that a genuine world art history begins to be possible when art historians from other contexts retaliate the look that the West applies on them, and

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<sup>3</sup> About Rubem Valentim, see biography in Portuguese: [www.itaucultural.org.br/aplicesternas/enciclopedia\\_ic/index.cfm?fuseaction=artistas\\_verbete=3245](http://www.itaucultural.org.br/aplicesternas/enciclopedia_ic/index.cfm?fuseaction=artistas_verbete=3245)

begin to interpret the Western art with strange principles to it, derived from their own artistic traditions (Carrier, 2008).

Here, fits a parenthesis. David Carrier focuses on four major traditions: the West, China, India and the Islamic world, while remaining bound to the idea of great civilizations. In this sense, it makes me think of smaller and impure contexts and processes. And for the acting agents in the so called margins of the West, in former colonial societies, it makes little sense the established differences made by Hans Belting between world art history and global art history, derived from the distinction between world art, which is characterized by opposition to European art presented as Western art, and global art, which is widely practiced today. Since the beginning of colonial European action in the fifteenth century, exchanges established between different societies produced an impure art, westernized, that the distinction of Hans Belting accepts only as a recent phenomenon (Belting, 2009).

It is easy to see that, compared to the issue of globalization, art history is changing. If you compare art history books published by Elie Faure, Germain Bazin, E. H. Gombrich, and H. W. Janson, Julian Bell, Onians John and David Summers, for example, it will be possible to realize that the history of art is changing, incorporating other modes which are understood as artistic production worldwide. This group of works published between the beginning of the twentieth century and the present time, indicates the slow change, but also that the discipline is in flux, in a process of transformation.

Is this a time of transition or an end in itself? In my point of view, this dynamic new face must be seen as a stage, as a moment, a transition situation, transition towards a situation in which art history is able to be impartial and balanced with respect to different times and places, and, also, longing for aggregation. Considering that it is not feasible to produce a history of art unified and fully balanced, one can ask whether it is possible to achieve this ideal, and if it is valid. Thus, would not the history of art dwell in the structure of meta-narratives, to resume the thought of Jean-François Lyotard (2000 [1979])? Would not this art history be a continuity of historicism? Going against the hand, would not it be appropriate to abandon the totalizing ideal and notion of progress inherent to the

historical formulation of Hegelian matrix? Would not be better to bet on a partial mosaic of incomplete stories, in a tense sum and even chaotic of multiple histories of art with structural principles, spatial focuses and temporal arrangements, in the "plurality of trans-regional narratives", as proposed by Piotr Piotrowski (2009: 84)?

To close this article, and keep opened the question, I propose the rapprochement of art history with global reach in its current stage, to *Nimbo/Oxalá*, by Ronald Duarte.<sup>4</sup> One can think of the set of ideas and achievements, proposals, methods and criticisms of the history of art as a dissipating cloud. Thus, one can predict that one day it would be fully sprinkled, traversing all historiographical, artistic and cultural institutional contexts. The question is whether, with this dissipation, some unity will be kept and will remain being history of art, or will have become another discipline. Is global art history an extension of traditional art history, which improves itself to become more comprehensive and also more dominant, or is it a critical historiographical practice that, to be faithful to old and new ideals, must effectively transform itself?

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<sup>4</sup> *Nimbo/Oxalá* is an interference by Ronald Duarte in the patio of Gustavo Capanema Palace, a symbol of Brazilian modernist architecture, whose design expresses some of the main ideals of Le Corbusier: the building suspended from the ground, fruition and total view of an open corner-less space, antiseptic and absolute control over chance and the unexpected. So, one Friday, the weekday consecrated to Oshalá, twenty actors dressed in white and carrying fire extinguishers, release a large white cloud. An artificial cloud, of course, but which conveys to us irruption of the sacred and designation of the infinite in pictorial tradition. Accessed 09 jan. 2014. <http://www.ronalduarte.com/index.php/nimbooxala-en>.

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