



## SOUTH AFRICAN VISUAL ARTS HISTORIANS (SAVAH)

### 30<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

11-13 September 2015

## POWER AND VISUAL CULTURE

To be hosted by the Visual Arts Department,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg

In 1985 the newly established South African Association of Art Historians (now the South African Visual Arts Historians - SAVAH) held its first conference at the Fine Arts Department at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg.

Thirty years on, it is auspicious that we will again host the conference here at what is now known as Visual Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (for a while known as the Centre for Visual Art).

The theme of the 1985 conference - *Diversity and Interaction*, elicited papers that grappled with the interface between visual culture and immanent social and political change. What emerged, among others, was a range of papers on cross-culturalism, art and ideology, and the critical reception of previously marginalised art. Besides convening annual conferences, a decade later SAVAH held *The Mechanisms of Power* conference in 1995 at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, once again addressing new and contested aspects of power and the visual arts.

For the 2015 conference the theme *Power and Visual Culture* was decided on in keeping with the exploration of power in the abovementioned conferences. In foregrounding shifting perspectives on diverse aspects of visual culture and its interface with or reflection of power, we invite contributors to explore vocabularies and strategies deployed to, among others, engage with, reflect on, uphold or critique power and its origins in a range of sources be they personal, political or institutional.

In addressing gender, social and political idealism, or merely in establishing alternate views of the world, visual culture has become increasingly central in foregrounding that which is silenced by power or self-censorship.

How have interpretations located in post-colonial deconstructive readings that dominated the discourse from the 1980s begun to shift? As various forms of power abuse and coercion are manifest globally and locally, have visual artists responded to this in variously engaging, directly or indirectly, with imposed or implicit power, or, in contrast, by asserting visual culture's 'functionlessness' (Adorno) or their subjectivities, among many other strategies of resistance to power?

Or is contemporary art still predominantly subject to the strategies of consumerism and commodification (Becker; Groys), art intended for the masses implicitly sanctioned at national and international exhibitions, biennials, and festivals. To Groys, paradoxically, art assumes power 'by appropriating the iconoclastic gestures directed against itself—by positioning itself simultaneously as an image and as a critique of the image' (Groys).

We invite papers on new anthropologies of creative intent, the revisiting of all facets of power, not only those that are seemingly coercive and constraining. Contributors are encouraged to address emergent dimensions in art practice, criticism and theory in South African and African visual culture. However papers are welcomed from those who wish to centre on aspects of their current research interests that may not appear to be accommodated in the theme selected for the 2015 conference.

***Please forward your preliminary proposals of 250 words to Linda Jones by 31 March 2015.***

Panel contributions are encouraged.

The conference co-ordinating team comprises:-

Jessica Draper (PhD Oxford University): [jessicaldraper@gmail.com](mailto:jessicaldraper@gmail.com)

Linda Jones (PhD candidate): [lindajoneskzn@gmail.com](mailto:lindajoneskzn@gmail.com)

Juliette Leeb-du Toit (UJ, WITS and UKZN): [leebdutoitj@gmail.com](mailto:leebdutoitj@gmail.com)

**Suggested themes which could include but are not exclusive to visual culture:-**

- Power and dissidence in contemporary South African visual arts
- The power vested in making and doing
- Art and its commodification/commoditization; relinquishing creative authority
- Art and power: shifting strategies and discourse (Adorno to Foucault)
- The power of the gaze from Africa (and the global South) (Mizroeff)

- Photography and power: shifting dimensions
- Visual culture and geo-philosophy: the power of place and displacement
- Politically motivated art in contemporary art discourse
- The visual arts under totalitarianism and visual arts today
- Covert ideological propaganda in the visual arts and media
- Mainstream gallerists, museums and power
- The image and/as critique of the image (Groys): subversive strategies in visual culture
- Re-gendering visual culture as dissidence
- Re-presenting memory and the past: new historical narratives as power strategies
- Animation in South Africa: current narratives
- South African design: the power of local idioms
- Rendering power visible
- Mass culture: facets of political, ideological and social control
- The relevance of the visual arts and culture revisited
- Empowering the global South: digital arts and the digital divide
- Unravelling the museum's presumed authority