

2016

South-South: Too Political?

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel

Ecole normale supérieure, PSL Research University., beatrice.joyeux-prunel@unige.ch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joyeux-Prunel, Béatrice. "South-South: Too Political?." *Artl@s Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (2016): Article 10.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC-BY-NC-SA license](#).

**South - South
Axes of Global Art**

ARTL@S BULLETIN

Volume 5, Issue 2

Fall 2016



Editor-in-Chief

Catherine Dossin
Purdue University

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel
École normale supérieure
PSL Research University Paris

Editorial Statement

The *ARTL@S BULLETIN* is a peer-reviewed, transdisciplinary journal devoted to spatial and transnational questions in the history of the arts and literature.

The journal promises to never separate methodology and history, and to support innovative research and new methodologies. Its ambition is twofold: 1. a focus on the “transnational” as constituted by exchange between the local and the global or between the national and the international, and 2. an openness to innovation in research methods, particularly the quantitative possibilities offered by digital mapping and data visualization.

By encouraging scholars to continuously shift the scope of their analysis from the national to the transnational, *ARTL@S BULLETIN* intends to contribute to the collective project of a global history of the arts.

Copyright Statement

ARTL@S BULLETIN (ISSN 2264-2668) is published by the École normale supérieure, 45, rue d’Ulm, 75005 Paris, France and the Centre national pour la recherche scientifique 16, rue Pierre et Marie Curie, 75005 Paris, PSL Research University, France. The online version of the *ARTL@S Bulletin* is hosted by Purdue Scholarly Publishing Services.

Compilation copyright © 2016 ENS-CNRS. Contents copyright © 2016 by the respective authors, artists, and other rights holders. All rights in the *ARTL@S BULLETIN* and its contents reserved by the École normale supérieure, the Centre national pour la Recherche scientifique and their respective owners. Except as permitted by the Copyright Act, including section 107 (the fair use doctrine), or other applicable law, no part of the contents of the *ARTL@S BULLETIN* may be reproduced without the written permission of the author(s) and/or other rights holders. The opinions expressed in the *ARTL@S BULLETIN* are those of the authors and not necessarily of the editors or publishers.

Cover: Ghana boy tunic (back),
collected in Djenné, Mali, 1993.
Private Collection

Table of Contents

4	South-South: Too Political? <i>Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel</i>
8	Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond <i>Yin Ker</i>
21	The Gentleman, the Craftsman and the Activist: Three Figures of the Sino-Indian Artistic Exchange in Colonial Bengal <i>Nicolas Nercam</i>
33	Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion <i>Victoria L. Rovine</i>
43	Literary and Theatrical Circulations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, from the Belgian Colonial Empire to the Africa of the Great Lakes. <i>Maëline Le Lay</i>
57	The Biennial of Dakar and South-South Circulations <i>Thomas Fillitz</i>
70	La Biennale d'Art Bantu Contemporain : passeport ethnique et circulations artistiques en Afrique sub-sahélienne <i>Nora Greani</i>
83	South Ways - Art Undercurrents across the South <i>Kevin D. Murray</i>
91	Index of the Disappeared: Representing the Invisible South <i>Bindu Bhadana</i>

South-South: Too Political?

When it comes to researching South-South relationships, the study of transnational artistic circulations tends to look at artistic relationships that are intercontinental or even triangular. Circulations within Latin America are the most common intercontinental ones, while triangular circulations usually consist of a link between two southern regions that is established somewhere in the North, by way of international platforms of exchange that are most frequently located in the USA or in France. It would perhaps be naïve to imagine that ‘pure’ South-South artistic circulations wholly uninfluenced by the North – or by the North Atlantic more specifically – might exist, since the North-South binary is in reality a synonym for the Occident/Peripheries pairing. As we know all too well, the very notion of art is one whose geography and history originate in the regions on either side of the North Atlantic. However, this issue of *ARTL@S Bulletin* features a number of examples that point to the possibility of a South-South circulation. First and foremost, these articles suggest that the paucity of enquiry into such relations is less to do with historical facts than a lack of incentives, sources, and institutional possibilities. It is only with sufficient time and willpower that we can begin to address this lack. With this in mind, the important role of digital databases of sources with a global scope becomes apparent, as do the reasons for the focus on the South that we have adopted for the ARTL@S project. These articles also invite us to consider how the South-South pairing is integrated into contemporary research, with their emphasis on

the powerful political imperative that underpins studies of such relationships—an imperative that seems to always point northwards in one way or another. This imperative sometimes leads to the application of pre-existing theories to studies of circulation between different parts of the world and of the roles of the individuals driving these circulations. When, regardless of the situation in question, we must always identify a dominator and a dominated party, a predator and a victim, a colonizer and a colonial subject, we risk developing a historical picture that is incomplete or distorted. Promoting studies into South-South circulation is something of an experiment, one that consists in first imagining configurations that differ from those proposed by postcolonial theory, in order to work more freely, whilst nonetheless allowing ourselves to return to such approaches at a later stage.

Africa, India, south-east Asia and even Australia are better represented in this issue than Latin America, a region that we have focused on in previous volumes. The thematic and methodological variety evident in the articles presented here points to a series of divisions along geographical lines: work on artistic circulation in Latin America often betrays a certain internalization by authors of expectations and habits linked to presentations given at international conferences, whereas contributions on Africa are less marked by this kind of normative “sophistication.” Researchers engaging with the latter region are faced with the necessity articulating sources, facts, networks, and events, and are thus obliged to undertake a more

descriptive approach before they can turn their attentions to interpretation. In short, the critical posture has yet to fully emerge in this field, with description for now taking precedent over critical analysis, and the approaches at work perhaps owing more to anthropology, ethnology, and sociology than to the history of art.

Critical thought emerges more readily within a supportive academic community that guarantees a receptive audience and interaction with other researchers. Relatively few art historians work on African art, and many of those interested in the field are steered towards anthropology for their doctorates. For those working on the colonial era and on the Indian subcontinent in particular, interaction with others seems to be somewhat easier: the footnotes in related articles alone attest to the existence of a scientific community capable of fostering debate. In India and in other parts of the British Empire, Western-style artistic activities coexisted with local ones from the 19th century onwards, and have been the object of numerous in-depth studies over previous decades. These studies have been able to draw upon archives that are often more comprehensive than those of other regions, as well as benefitting from a corpus of images, relatively abundant sources, biographies, bibliographies, and the dialogues that can be established through comparisons between these elements. Such bodies of sources can support real academic communities, and, more importantly, the artworks and art-related texts originating in such former colonial regions offer the kind of problematics that interest the researcher looking to respond to the questions raised by postcolonial approaches: broadly speaking, resistance is often recognizably encoded in works from the colonial period. Indian and Burmese modernities thus offer a worldview that is consistent with the schemas of postcolonial thought.¹ By studying Tagore and its school, for example, we can in fact contribute to an interpretative frame that, beyond simply resisting and subverting existing canonical perspectives, represents a genuine and distinct alternative. Of

¹ See Yin Ker, "[Śāntiniketan and Modern Southeast Asian Art: From Rabindranath Tagore to Bagyi Aung Soe and Beyond.](#)"

course, in doing so we run the risk of simply erecting a counter-model of modern art that is just as idealistic, normative, exclusive, and museum-oriented—in short, just as canonical. We risk reproducing a cliché that has become exhausted and exhausting through its own efficacy. However, if such potential pitfalls are carefully anticipated and taken into account, studies of these regions can become so many potential sites for the creation of a promising and productive approach that goes beyond disciplinary habits manufactured on either side of the North Atlantic.

The studies and stances we take become all the more delicate when the region in question is one in which artistic activities in the “beaux-arts” mould have historically been rare or entirely absent. The same is true of regions whose “artistic” art has been deemed insignificant by the canons of artistic value—canons which, unfortunately, we often perpetuate through omission. When writing about hitherto neglected regions, and Africa in particular, to articulate interesting subjects we must focus on the contemporary period, or turn to art that was not necessarily considered as such by its creators: be it the decorative and useful arts, such as in the article in this issue on African textiles and fashions, or “performing arts” of the Great Lakes region.² Art from the immediately contemporary period meanwhile returns us to better-known problems and questions; Biennials offer the best example of South-South circulation imaginable, with the discourses and practices of their artists integrate postcolonial theory.³

Through studying Biennials, we quickly come to realize that while their official discourses often strike an anti-Western, affirmatively peripheral or regional tone, the figures behind these discourses are often well integrated into the academic world of the North, and more specifically into

² See contributions by Victoria L. Rovine, "[Style Migrations: South-South Networks of African Fashion](#)"; Maëline Le Lay, "[Literary and Theatrical Circulations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, from the Belgian Colonial Empire to the Africa of the Great Lakes.](#)"

³ Thomas Fillitz, "[The Biennial of Dakar and South-South Circulations](#)"; Nora Greeni, "[La Biennale d'Art Bantu Contemporain : passeport ethnique et circulations artistiques en Afrique sub-sahélienne.](#)" See also the article by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "South as Method? Biennials Past and Present," in Gardner and Green (ed.), *Making Biennials in Contemporary Times. Essays from the World Biennial Forum n°2*, São Paulo: Biennial Foundation, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo and ICCO - Instituto de Cultura Contemporânea, 2014, 28-36.

Anglophone literary departments. A comparative sociological analysis meanwhile reveals a strong tension between two camps of artistic populations in southern Biennials, with the diaspora on the one hand and the “locals” on the other. Finally, an investigation of the social and economic contexts of Biennials (organizers, financing, collectors, exhibition spaces) and of their political and geopolitical surroundings (elections, regimes that are sometimes less than democratic, conflict or peace) reveals further interferences and contradictions that are glossed over in introductions and texts of biennial catalogues—which thus fail to reflect the postcolonial and decolonial questions unfolding in the history of art.

We might ask whether or not it is possible to interpret the circulation of contemporary art between regions in the South outside of the established schemas that require an aggressor and a victim, and despite the fact that the regions of the North are still more or less present in contemporary art. How can we take up a position in the field of South studies, with all its critical imperatives and demands, whilst accounting for the complexity that we quickly discover as we reconstitute contexts and networks of individuals? Studies presented in this volume on the Dakar Biennial and the biennial of Bantu art serve as examples of the tensions which can arise from a disconnect between the political and geographic conceptions of the South. The tension seems lesser in the context of diasporas: this is the case for the *Index of the Disappeared*, a contemporary work analysed at the end of this issue. Here, the political view dominates⁴: South is a keyword that stands as a catch-all term for opposition to various unscrupulous powers that are regrouped under the North label. But discussion of biennials cannot be restricted to simple observation and recording, but calls for a critical distance as well: we ought to ask, for example, where the artists who claim to represent the Souths come from. In a different, more local context—here that of Africa—the geographical notion of the Souths is superimposed

on an idealistic political notion of South-South solidarity. The South-South axis, where the political and the geographical are evoked together, has in fact often served the strategies of established powers, and even a form of unsettling ethnopolitics. By the same token, we might ask why the term North is used as shorthand for a broad and highly complex geopolitics of alliances, expropriation of raw materials, and transnational manipulation, often effectively reducing these questions to the maintenance of an internal and external order by the USA.

Perhaps the notion of a South-South axis has become too political, particularly on the world stage, where the enemies of this region are ever present and the nations of the powerful North exert an obsessive fascination. Yet perhaps, too, we should celebrate this dissension: it supports shared identities and inspires unique projects such as *South Ways*.⁵ Yet as magnificent a slice of life as the *South Ways* project was, it has not left behind traces such as a website, and has not staked a claim to the attention of historians, settling for witnesses and allies. Perhaps going further and undertaking historical enquiry is simply too dangerous, and risks revealing the overtly political nature of the notion of Souths and the blind spots that it entails. It would be worth accepting this state of affairs for what it is—a fact that we must accept and study even if we are often guilty of using the politicized notion of the South ourselves. Such a modesty might make it possible to imagine other approaches to South-South circulations, approaches that are perhaps less ambitious (and less in vogue) than the decolonial one, but which are no less productive. One possible approach consists of carefully tracking one idea or one object after another, and thereby retracing as best we can the concrete circulations of objects around the (geographic) South. It is worth reconstituting networks, circulations, and generations of artists—such as those moving between China and India⁶—before looking at the circulation of objects,

⁴ Bindu Bhadana, [“Index of the Disappeared: Representing the Invisible South.”](#)

⁵ Kevin D. Murray, [“South Ways - Art Undercurrents across the South.”](#)

⁶ Nicolas Nercam, [“The Gentleman, the Craftsman and the Activist: three figures of the Sino-Indian artistic exchange in colonial Bengal.”](#)

and the variations in their meaning and use as they move from one region to the next. Are such approaches—less overtly political than those of postcoloniality and decoloniality (something which is yet to be proven)—necessarily more naïve? They can be refreshing in an academic context in which the postcolonial and decolonial superego has become a major force that weighs heavily, sometimes too heavily, on our work, leading to a certain degree of repetition. When we investigate a given object, its debates and counter-debates should not be established in advance; when a motif or an object circulates, the processes of resemanticization that it undergoes are often surprising. Intriguing new motifs emerge from various encounters and meetings, often accompanied by a fascinating renewal of uses, functions, and values that is also influenced by the networks through which a given motif travels. There is much to be gleaned from this method in terms of extending our comprehension of artistic circulations between the Souths. Even if the political is clearly omnipresent, why not let the art, the objects, and what we might refer to as the facts, speak for themselves from time to time? If we truly believe that encounters, and those with certain objects in particular, can give rise to a reconfiguring of sensitivities—or at least a reconfiguring of the perception that we have of these sensitivities—then perhaps this approach, where the political is not a given priority, is in fact all the more political.