

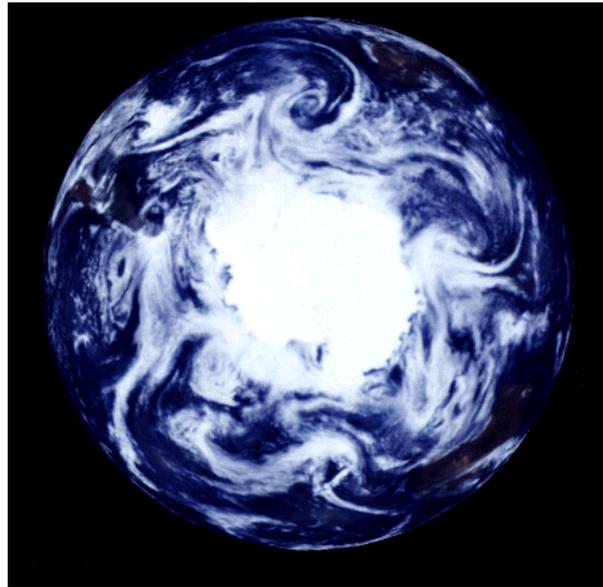
EDITORIAL: ARGUING FOR A SOUTHERN SALON

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A global initiative emanating from the South, The Johannesburg Salon, aims to provide a public space dedicated to the discussion of ideas across three domains: intellectual, political and aesthetic.

The Johannesburg Salon is an experiment. It is a contingent and in-process attempt to merge elements of an intellectual-cultural magazine with a public discussion forum. Notwithstanding the misgivings of many of our Anglophone writers (who associate the term Salon with amateur opera and sad canapés) we have called this forum a Salon in an attempt re-establish the ideal of a public space fundamentally dedicated to intellectual discussion; one that recognises the central place of ideas in public life. We also wish to rework the notion that such a forum is the exclusive domain of old Europe. *The Johannesburg Salon* is an attempt to utilize the opportunities for global conversation offered by the spatial and temporal compression of the virtual environment. The 21st Century manifestation of the internet allows *The Johannesburg Salon's* public to be from all over the world, and to meet simultaneously.

Through the *Salon* we wish to achieve a number of objectives across three domains: intellectual, political and aesthetic.



South Polar Projection of Earth
Photo: NASA

First, we wish to contribute to the formation of a fully democratic public sphere in South Africa and elsewhere in the world by fostering a culture of informed public debate. In part we hope to achieve this by making academic knowledge more broadly accessible. At present much of the knowledge produced by scholars and intellectuals fails to reach the public. This is very much the case for work generated by the Social Sciences and, to a lesser degree, the Humanities. As a result of the confinement of academic writing to a small circle of reception, the work that is being produced by scholars – which should be understood as a particular form of wealth – is generally not being deployed in the processes through which we are trying to build nations and address such global issues as underdevelopment, overconsumption, non-sustainability, inequality and violence. This has a deleterious effect on the na-

ture of public discussion and debate, and partially accounts for the impoverished nature of the public sphere around much of the world at present.

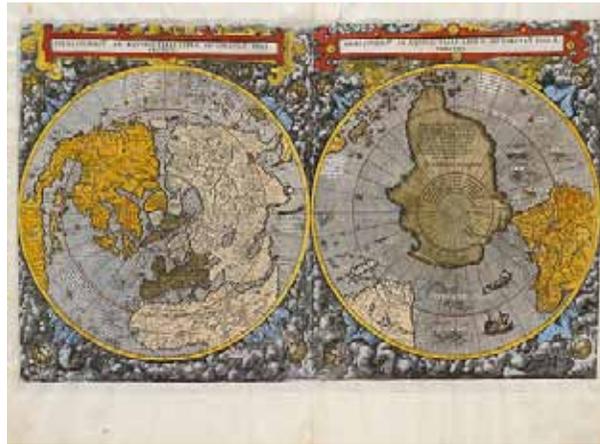
The goal of facilitating dialogue unlikely to happen in other forums is shared with our sister projects hosted on Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC) website. The four projects are intended to facilitate different kinds of meeting and conversation about ideas in distinct phases of evolution: these are communicated with various degrees of immediacy, and mediated by centralised JWTC organisation to different extents. For instance, *The Workshop* is the only face-to-face forum: it occurs once a year in Johannesburg and entails a significant amount of centralised organising. At the other end of the spectrum *The Network* ultimately should entail predominantly peer-to-peer communication. *The Blog* is the platform for ongoing, almost real-time dialogue, with the JWTC offering a facilitatory function through a moderator. *The Salon*, which will have four volumes per year, constitutes the most worked and mediated part of the overall project because it is edited. It is, however, our hope that ideas and conversations will wander from one forum on the JWTC site to another. For example, the photographic exhibition by Ariella Azoulay was part of *The Workshop*, generated a response on *The Blog*, and has become a feature in *The Salon Volume 1*. We hope that other features in *The Salon* will generate responses that will go onto *The Blog*, and perhaps inspire presentations in next year's *Workshop*.

The second objective in creating *The Johannesburg Salon* is to enable a negotiation of global trends and ideas from a base in the South. If it is the case that knowledge production is the primary means through which the wealth of nations is creat-

ed, it is also the case that most acknowledged knowledge is produced in the West (or the global North). We wish to shift, if even only slightly, the nature of global scholarly debates and public conversations that are currently dominated by the perspectives of the North and West. We see this *Salon*, therefore, as a global initiative emanating from the South. To facilitate this orientation, we have assembled a core group of writers comprised of scholars and intellectuals who are literally and figuratively based in the South. Figurative situatedness is made necessary by the complex reality of the global circulation and traffic of individuals that characterises the contemporary academy. We recognise that while physically some writers may be partially, or even wholly, hosted in Northern or Western institutions, their political, intellectual and/or aesthetic orientation is of the South.

Third, we wish to acknowledge the value of knowledge created and transmitted through modes apart from scholarly analysis expressed through written text. In particular we are interested in the realm of aesthetics: in capacity of the creative arts (visual, plastic, textual, sound, performance and digital, for instance) to reveal insights and facilitate particular kinds of understanding that are harder to achieve through academic research and critique. We therefore reserve feature space in *The Salon* for original art works, and for discussion about the processes of creative production.

A further principle driving *The Salon* is our wish to facilitate the public discussion of contingent ideas: ideas in process. We are interested in the generative possibilities of experimental, provisional thought and hope that *The Salon* will become a space for trialling ideas and generating dialogue. We are much



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encouraged by the intellectual generosity and courage with which the contributors to *Volume 1* have leapt into this interstitial space. Many have specifically responded to our requests to be provocative, to present content in a way that does not shy away from intelligent polemics, and to court controversy when necessary.

Our commitment to experimentation has meant that the project of *The Salon* has itself already been through several iterations: *Volume 1* is very different to that outlined in our preliminary plans. Initially we conceived of *The Salon* as a space where discussion of issues would evolve out of reviews of books and other scholarly and artistic representations and responses to contemporary conditions (film, poetry, music, and the visual arts, for instance). However, the interests of our writers have morphed the project into a space for think pieces that are not necessarily initially inspired by other texts. In many ways the writers featured in *Volume 1* are a self-selected

group who have in common the willingness to invest time and energy in an as yet unproven project, and the content comprises what these contributors most wish to write about in the present moment. Nevertheless a number of themes have emerged in *Volume 1* that engage some of *The Salon's* core agendas.

For instance, in keeping with our appreciation of the interpretative powers of the creative arts, there exists in this volume an interest in the power of the image, and its relationship with the imagination. We suggest that this is not surprising as the domination of the image is one of the foundational features of our times. In particular there is an interest in the capacity of the visual arts to communicate uniquely textured meaning with regard to the underside of life, what Jacques Lacan calls 'the Real': decay (see Pamila Gupta's piece), and the impact of sexual and military violence and resulting trauma at the level of the social and on individuals. (See articles by Sarah Nuttall with Penny Siopis, and the conversation around Ariella Azoulay's exhibition with Juan Orrantio and Ravinder Kauer). Furthermore, in a certain way Sarah Calburn's article and her work of architecture are about a visual response to the fear of violence.

Received notions about the intellectual relationship between the West and its Others are addressed by Ato Quayson in his argument that existential ennui, usually reserved for individuals in the urban West, effectively describes the struggles of archetypal rural characters in classic African fiction. Similarly, several contributors propose that the condition of postcoloniality is not exclusively experienced in former colonies, but also continues to affect the metropolitan countries that enjoyed colonial power. (See, for instance, articles by Peter Geshiere and



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his respondents, as well as those by Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe.) Together these arguments suggest that the circulation of ideas and the conditions they describe between the South and its Others is not direct or straightforward, but may best be described as what Sarah Nuttall terms her recent book 'entanglement'.

One of the most provocative thematics emerging from the debates over the contemporary reach and relevance of the idea of postcoloniality is a nascent plea for a slightly different, or at least additional, approach. Articulated most clearly, albeit in different ways, by Mbembe (in the article by Thomas Cousins) and Gilroy is the idea that what is needed to shift the world out of the present impasse in terms of typical relationships between former colonies and their colonisers is what Mbembe calls a politics and ethics of mutuality. Although Gilroy warns that a new and more productive path will not be possible until former perpetrators stop disavowing their colonial shadow.

The question of whether these and other provocations offered in *Volume 1* will enjoy valency beyond the small group of writers that propose them will be answered in the following months. Will readers respond and become writers? Will this Southern-based Salon attract an active global public? Are we right that such a venue is needed and desired and will be used?