

Bridging Art History and Critical Heritage Studies: A Conversation with Ömür Harmanşah

by Trinidad Rico

In 2015, Ömür Harmanşah's article *ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media*¹ charted an exciting direction for the growth of a critical heritage field. Examining the attention in the media to cultural heritage destruction—smashing of artifacts, iconoclastic bulldozing of archaeological sites, dynamiting of shrines, tombs, and burning of libraries and archives—Harmanşah questioned the “complacent acceptance of ISIS-authored imagery as documentary.” This was a timely wake-up call. The study of heritage and preservation has relied excessively, at times exclusively, on visual and textual documentary archives to establish its own priorities and approaches. Yet, traditional training and debates in this field had not engaged critically and meaningfully with the politics and nuances of visual analysis.² It took a cross-over scholar like Ömür Harmanşah, fluent in archaeological discourse and heritage ethics, to bring to the foreground the significance of a stronger theoretical and methodological partnership between art history and heritage studies, such as the one driving the Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies program at Rutgers.

Ömür Harmanşah is Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the School of Art & Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a landscape archaeologist and architectural historian, who writes on ancient West Asian architecture and material culture. He is passionate about fieldwork and cultural heritage through his ongoing field projects in Turkey. Lately, he has been focusing his energies on climate change and the Anthropocene and how the ecological crisis impacts the way we write history. In November of 2023, he was a Distinguished Speaker for the Department of Art History at Rutgers, after which we had a chance to discuss the history of tensions between our fields, current disciplinary intersections, and future directions.



Trinidad Rico is Associate Professor and Director of Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies in the Department of Art History of Rutgers University. Her ethnographic and archival research on heritage practices has focused on the mobilization of risk in post-disaster heritage in Indonesia, the negotiations between religious and heritage traditions in Qatar, and the role of rumor and secrecy in the emergence of atomic heritage in Argentina. Her latest publications include *Global Heritage, Religion, and Secularism* (2021, Cambridge University Press), *Methods and Methodologies in Heritage Studies* (2024, University College London Press) and the forthcoming volume *The Heritage State: Religion and Preservation in Contemporary Qatar* (Cornell University Press).



Ömür Harmanşah is Director of UIC's School of Art & Art History, and Associate Professor of Art History. His current research focuses on the history of landscapes in the Middle East and the politics of ecology, climate justice, place, and cultural heritage in the age of the Anthropocene. He is the author of *Cities and the Shaping of Memory in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge UP, 2013), and *Place, Memory, and Healing: An Archaeology of Anatolian Rock Monuments* (Routledge, 2015). Harmanşah directed a regional archaeological survey in Turkey titled *Yalburt Yaylası Archaeological Landscape Research Project* (2010-2021). He is working on a monograph titled *Landscapes of the Anthropocene: Archaeology, Fieldwork, and the Politics of Heritage in the Middle East* (under contract with Routledge). He is a co-author of Thames & Hudson's global art history textbook, *The History of Art: A Global View* (2021).

TR: Ömür, it is no secret that your work has been extremely influential for my work to the point of providing a clear rationale and roadmap for taking on the position of Director of CHAPS in 2017 and rethinking its curriculum. Before ‘Spectacles of Destruction,’ I had not given much thought to the uncritical circulation of images and the only time that the term ‘art historical’ had crossed my anthropological reading lists was to dismiss apolitical interpretations of complex cultural phenomena, naturally denoting an old disciplinary paradigm. Were you similarly alienated from heritage studies -a field largely derived from anthropology and a concern with the politics of the past- in your training? How were you introduced to this field?

ÖH: That’s very generous, Trinidad. Likewise, I must say that your *Heritage and the Visual Archive* conference, where I met you for the first time, was transformative for my thinking on this productive cross-over between critical visual studies and the politics of cultural heritage. That’s when I thought, OK, maybe I am not alone in pursuing this. I was actually introduced to heritage through the problematic and highly apolitical field of architectural conservation and heritage preservation in Turkey. The world of architectural restoration and conservation is highly conservative in Turkey (note the irony there), stuck between a narrow and naïve obsession with authenticity and the late capitalist desire to create little islands of nostalgic spaces to bring revenue through excess and touristic consumption. My friends joke about how all old buildings are, in one way or another, restored to become restaurants, regardless of their former function. This culinary takeover of architectural heritage carries the overtones of literal consuming of the material past. Communities and stakeholders are consistently excluded from that process. There is no clear platform for politics to take place. However, I am also a bit frustrated with art history as a discipline and its ways of producing knowledge, which is always performed at a safe distance from public platforms of image politics. In that sense, Christy Gruber’s intervention in the public debate around the use of images in Islam, for example, was very interesting and helpful to me.³

TR: Of course. I recognize that I am diving into Art History at a very exciting time, at least for debates on Islam. This is not our only thematic overlap. Despite our different trajectories, we met through a shared concern with decolonizing heritage methodologies and epistemologies. But I also learned through our interactions that decolonization can be a challenge in your field. As you were completing your book *The History of Art: A Global View*,⁴ you posted a concern on social media: “In response to my little box feature on the cultural biography of Egyptian obelisks (the way they traveled to Rome, Istanbul, Paris etc), one of [the anonymous readers] accused me of writing this “solely for the purpose of parading one’s anti-colonialist credentials...” [...] Is this how art historians see cultural biography/social life of things?”. Your Facebook circle of academics supported you, of course, calling the reviewer “closet colonialist”, a ‘non-closeted colonialist’, and the field of art history

overwhelmingly ‘conservative’. Many of these colleagues are themselves art historians. Is an engagement with heritage politics in your work an indicator of decolonization in art history, or are these separate conversations?

ÖH: I am glad you are bringing up social media here, because some of these sharp debates that are carried out on social media, do feed into my writing practice. Actually, [the] ISIS article owes a lot of its fearless argumentation to debates that already happened on Facebook and my responses to certain colleagues who pushed me to articulate my position. Now, the experience of writing a global art history textbook was an enormous wake-up call for me because I had to respond to dozens of anonymous readers in community colleges and higher learning institutions who teach various iterations of the art history survey. I had to process vast spreadsheets of evaluations for each of my chapters. We are talking about an army of art historians teaching a greater army of students who are offered very conservative and strictly circumscribed narratives. When you are trying to update or upset that narrative with new evidence (think about the impact of the new paradigm-shifting evidence in Graeber and Wengrow,⁵ for example), you are fighting an uphill battle because the army occupying the summit is so voluminous and protective of their domain. You can’t shift the paradigm in a textbook. That fight has to happen elsewhere. I learned that. Decolonization is not so much happening in the very core of the discipline but on its margins or remote satellites or borderlands, like visual culture and visual literacy, gender and sexuality studies, queer art history, Black studies, interdisciplinary arts, indigenous studies, comparative art history, and so on. These emergent agencies are kept safely at the gates by humanities gatekeepers, who are, however, severely challenged by the demands of the new generation of students, and the dropping enrollments to classes like Renaissance or Baroque Art. Here is my question for you: do you think heritage studies is acting as or can be one of those critical borderland zones on the edge of art history?

TR: Yes and no. The transformations in the field that gave rise to a so-called ‘critical turn’ over the last 30 years are exemplary, in many cases committing to significant epistemological and ontological shifts that represent strong examples of decolonization. But this epistemological revolution has also stalled in some ways. Structurally speaking, not being given a place to act as a stand-alone entity in the typical structures of higher learning in the United States and, instead, being relegated to a conversation that happens in the margins of other disciplines means that the future of the field is burdened by the baggage of these other traditional silos (anthropology, architecture, art history) in spaces that are not necessarily engaging critically with the propositions of a study of heritage. Conversely, I also fear that in many ways heritage studies gained so much productive territory that it has become complacent and in need of further examination, possibly as a response to being rejected from being incorporated at the center of these same disciplines that host it. An

example of this tension is the fact that curricula in heritage studies has not typically included any training in visual analysis, and this has clearly come at a cost. The CHAPS program at Rutgers offers advanced training in critical methods and methodologies but, for an expert engagement with ‘the visual,’ it is largely supported by other art history courses and colleagues. So, to return to the subject of many of our exchanges, how does the field grow in that direction? How can heritage and preservation programs retrofit this type of training, especially programs disconnected from art history departments – as they typically are?

ÖH: This is one of my favorite topics to discuss. I am a big advocate of (audio) visual or media literacy training for our students, a training that reaches beyond the humanities and draws students into the social sciences, the medical fields, engineering, science, and law. Just as we teach them critical reading and writing as their basic general education training, we must teach them visual and media literacy. New generations are already super attuned to this kind of training, so they would respond well. Our university’s reading and writing program has already mobilized the visual literacy component as part of the curriculum. This is already happening whether we like it or not. There is a massive movement towards slowing down the degrading presentation of images of human remains, regardless of whether they are ancient or contemporary. For a long time, I was really frustrated that my own art history department was not interested in this idea of focusing on visual literacy. Then I realized that it would have to be developed elsewhere, where visual culture is not a taboo, not in the art history context, which is still firmly committed to its humanistic genealogy.

TR: Creating more neutral spaces to incubate new approaches would be ideal. We had a similar challenge during the ‘critical turn’ in heritage, when calls for more anthropological methods are met with resistance by programs unrelated to anthropological training. In the US, one of the reactions to this call was to add the word ‘intangible heritage’ to what are essentially historic preservation programs more worried about the standards of documentation than the dynamic and changing social and cultural value of heritage, which includes in no small measure permitting other forms of expertise to emerge. There is very little commitment to considering how methods and methodologies themselves stagnate the field, which is why you are reprising your role of art historical oracle in my forthcoming volume *Methods and Methodologies in Heritage Studies*,⁶ re-iterating the problem of visibility in our work. Do you consider yourself a scholar in heritage studies now?

ÖH: Being a heritage studies scholar would be too big of a claim for me, I think. Because I am not sure if I am fully committed to the wide spectrum of heritage methods that people have been using and putting so much labor into. The way I connect to heritage most profoundly is through fieldwork,

as opposed to any museum-based, curatorial or artifact-based work. Fieldwork takes me to decolonial situations of engaging with local communities, to landscapes where heritage is embedded and actively living and flourishing, to the countryside where the extractive practices are undermining the entire institution of heritage, what David Turnbull calls 'knowledge spaces.'⁷ Knowledge spaces are spaces in which deep-seated knowledge is built into the fabric of the place. Fieldwork allows me to chronicle the current injustices that are taking place in the late capitalist countryside but also helps with experimental methodologies and creativity flowing. I published a recent chapter on this in a precarious heritage volume.⁸ If you read it, it sounds very angry and tiring, but this is the state of affairs, sadly. More hopefully, I am currently teaching a class titled World Architecture, Climate, and Ecology, where I am also grappling with the idea of indigenous architecture as an evolving body of knowledge and material practice.

TR: I certainly consider you a rare scholar in heritage studies and a methodological mentor, together with another cultural historian (of photography and museums) that I collaborate with, Mirjam Brusius, with whom I wrote a very recent piece on visual archives and heritage justice inspired by your work.⁹ There should be more of you. Who else should we be looking up to as we continue to build this bridge between our disciplines?

ÖH: You know, I am also interested in those who are engaging with the visibility of the Anthropocene, the landscapes of the Anthropocene, those who problematize visualizing the wounded planet, and the dramatic late capitalist regimes that are radically transforming the countryside. I am fascinated by the forensics of heritage sites and how we can mobilize the techniques of forensic, crime scene investigation but reconcile them with the wisdom of a geologist or an archaeologist reading the layers of slow deposition. Media archaeology or geology of media, for example, emerging out of critical media studies and communication fields, have a lot to offer to heritage studies. I have a feeling there is a future there for our discipline. With your sensible turn to atomic heritage, I am more inspired to think about this more effectively. This is a major area of intersection for our fields of research: sites of contamination as sites of memory. Do you see a potential in that direction?

TR: Certainly. It is interesting that we both, independently, arrived at the intersection of the history of science and environmental history following our particular interests and approaches. I am committed to this next step and hope to teach a Heritage of Science and Technology class next year. Our synchronicity takes me to the next question. I invited you as a speaker to the CHAPS symposium *Heritage and the Visual Archive* in 2018 and, since then, we have collaborated officially and unofficially, including co-chairing a widely successful Archaeological Institute of America double session sponsored by the Near Eastern Archaeology Interest Group. What is a good

venue to continue to grow our partnership and promote further cross-pollination of our fields?

ÖH: Yes, *Heritage and the Visual Archive* was a turning point for me, because it allowed me to gain hope again about mobilizing the visual studies field as a critical platform of research on heritage. It also helped me to link the ongoing critical work on archives meaningfully to what I was doing. I have had several graduate students in recent years engage with this kind of poetical reimagination of the archive through critical fabulation, introducing poetry, essay form writing, and fiction into their work as a way of rethinking the archive and the poetics of historical writing. I see a fruitful way forward there. I feel that there is a lot of potential in heritage studies to engage with something like that, bringing storytelling or film into play. The other thing I love about collaborating with you is that we have a passion for fieldwork, and a belief that sound theories to move us forward can only come from fieldwork. I wonder if there is a way to mobilize that shared passion into something productive. You have an endless appetite. I am imagining experimenting with fieldwork as a creative method that brings effective strategies from archaeology, from heritage studies, from ethnography, from public humanities, and from art and critical visual studies. There is a lot of room to think about fieldwork beyond data gathering and documentation but deeply and politically engages with places. I hope that resonates with you.

TR: You know I am a firm believer in the transformative power of ‘the field,’ be that a cultural landscape or an archive. I look forward to collaborating with you on that terrain.

Notes

- 1 Ömur Harmanşah. "ISIS, Heritage, and the Spectacles of Destruction in the Global Media" in *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 78, 3 (September 2015) 170-177.
- 2 With some notable exceptions, more recently: Colin Sterling, *Heritage, Photography, and the Affective Past* (London: Routledge, 2020); Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, ed., *The Lives of Images: Repetition, Reproduction and Circulation* (New York: Aperture, 2021).
- 3 Christine Gruber, *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019).
- 4 Jean Robertson, Deborah Hutton, Cynthia Colburn, Ömür Harmansah, Eric Kjellgren, Rex Koontz, De-nin Lee, Henry Luttikhuisen, Allison Lee Palmer, Stacey Sloboda, and Monica Blackmun Visonà, *The History of Art: A Global View: Prehistory to the Present* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2021).
- 5 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).
- 6 Rachel King and Trinidad Rico, *Methods and Methodologies in Heritage Studies* (London: University College London Press, 2024).
- 7 David Turnbull, *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology of Scientific and Indigenous Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 8 Ömur Harmanşah, "Rural Landscapes, Extraction, and Heritage Violence in the Middle East," in *Rethinking Heritage in Precarious Times: Coloniality, Climate Change, and Covid-19*, edited by Nicholas Shepherd (London: Routledge, 2023).
- 9 Mirjam Brusius and Trinidad Rico, "Counter-Archives as Heritage Justice: Photography, Invisible Labor, and the People inside Ruins" in *Journal of Visual Culture* 22,1 (2023): 64-92.