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Cover: A troop of Indians won the war against the Cowboys in Madagascar. This work by Nicholas Henry is among the award winning pictures of POPCAP '16, the piclet.org Prize for Contemporary African Photography. The pictures of the five winners will be on display in Basel from 3 to 17 September 2016 in Basel in combination with a workshop on photographic practice in Area Studies (see page 21).

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## Report: Re-Imagining African Cities. The Arts and Urban Politics (Basel, 11–12.3.2016)

■ FIONA SIEGENTHALER, LAURA BETTSCHEN, ENRIKA CHARLES

In recent years, African art scholarship has experienced remarkable changes internationally. Two trends are particularly significant. Firstly, research is increasingly interested in contemporary urban art practices and their socio-political contexts. This results in interdisciplinary studies that include research questions and methods ranging from history, anthropology, sociology, urban geography and architecture to art theory. This recent development is reflected in the projected new interdisciplinary Master program on Critical Urbanisms at the University of Basel where African arts, architecture and urban anthropology constitute a significant share of the courses. Secondly, scholars working in this field have increasingly sought exchange beyond their national or continental research traditions and associations. To give an example, on the occasion of the last European Conference on African Studies held in Paris in June 2015, the AEGIS collaborative research group Visual and Expressive Cultures was established with an explicit aim to promote collaboration between specialists in African art within Europe, and between European and African institutions as well as the long-standing US-based Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA). These new developments triggered the planning for a first workshop focusing on African cities as a place and subject of the visual and expressive arts – a topic that has been a research field at the Basel Institute of Social Anthropology for more than ten years.

In collaboration with the Centre for African Studies, the projected Programme on Critical Urbanisms (both at the University of Basel), and the AEGIS collaborative research group Visual and Expressive Cultures, the Institute for Social Anthropology organized the workshop Re-Imagining African Cities: The Arts and Urban Politics. The workshop brought together internationally established and junior experts in the field who pre-

sented their current research on arts and urban politics in African cities. The idea was to go beyond the usual conference format and create a two-day intensive workshop with a generous amount of time dedicated to the discussion of the individual papers and the workshop theme in general.

After an introduction to the workshop theme on Friday morning, Till Förster (University of Basel) introduced the keynote presentation by Dominique Malaquais (Institut des Mondes Africaines, Paris) who injected a sophisticated reflection on the meaning of failure in a collaborative art project that took place between a Congolese and a French artist. Time and Space in Question: Reinventing Cities offered a range of entry points that would re-appear regularly in the course of the workshop. At the same time, this presentation was unique in outlining the field of arts, urbanity and politics by starting with failure – something art scholarship tends to exclude in its often affirmative approach, although it is a crucial aspect of transnationally shaped urban artists' experiences like Mikilisme.

Her presentation was followed by Heike Becker's (University of the Western Cape) discussion of Public Art Interventions in Cape Town that challenge hegemonic power relations in South Africa by relating recent events like the Marikana massacre and the Rhodes Must Fall movement to the right to the city, often with interventions typical of activist street art. Joanna Grabski (Denison University, USA) used the examples of the Dak'art Biennale and the urban politics of former president Abdoulaye Wade to demonstrate how Dakar emerges as an Art World City through the politicization of the city's and the nation's past, present and future. After a joint lunch, Amy Schwartzott (North Carolina A & T State University, USA) discussed artists in Maputo who use urban Detritus as Media and mode of disarmament in the aftermath of civil war. This was followed by Iolanda Pensa (Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana SUPSI) and Marilyn Douala Bell (doul'Art, Cameroon) who presented a collaborative study on Public Art as a Driver of Urban Transformation in Douala, pointing to the importance of the

The workshop *Re-Imagining African Cities: The Arts and Urban Politics* offered BA, MA and doctoral students, postdocs and professors an opportunity for exchange and discussion (image: Fiona Siegenthaler 2016).

actual production process of art in public space for its local reception. In a presentation involving photography and acoustic recordings of Lagos, Carol Magee (University of North Carolina) reflected on how art situates a city like Lagos beyond its physical position by establishing, reaffirming and reshaping it globally within transnational artistic and audience networks. The day was concluded by Till Förster's presentation on *The Unbearable Lightness of African Cities*, which offered a conceptual layout of existing and possible future approaches to the study of artistic practices in African cities and their imagination in scholarly thought.

Saturday morning was dedicated to performative practices. In *Inclusion/Exclusion: Mobilizing Urban Masquerades from the (Socio-Political) Margins of Freetown*, Amanda Maples (University of California Santa Cruz) showed how Ode-Lay performance practices emerged among urban youth and developed from a clandestine practice to a publicly recognized cultural emblem with particularly urban aesthetics and a socio-political role. Similarly, in their presentation *Ragtag Wars: Children's Fancy Dress Parades as a Carnavalesque Suspension of Adulthood in the Historical City of Winneba, Ghana*, De-Valera Botchway and Awo Amoah Sarpong (University of the Cape Coast, Ghana) showed how the adult monopoly of Fancy Dress spectacles is appropriated, reinterpreted and mobilized by children as a stage for urban self-expression.

Malcolm Corrigan's (School of Oriental and African Studies, London) presentation *Reframing Johannesburg's Urban Politics through the Lens of the Chinese Camera Club of South Africa* gave an insight into photo practices of the Club during apartheid and the role urban architecture and infrastructure played for both staging civic and cosmopolitan belonging and subverting segregation politics. In her presentation *The Strug-*



*gle for Audiences and Resources in the City*, Fiona Siegenthaler (University of Basel) discussed strategies of artists in Uganda to address urban elites as potential patrons by tapping into their social spaces in Kampala, Uganda. Dominik Davies (University of Oxford, UK) presented his PhD project on *Urban Africomix: Collaboration, Production, Resistance* in which comics are understood as both a product of and a platform for critical socio-political reflection on urban life in Africa. Ayala Levin (Hebrew University in Jerusalem) in turn offered in *Popular Art and the Semiotics of Citizenship* an analysis of Julian Beinart's meticulous documentation and celebration of façades of the standardized government housing units that were decorated by their users in the Western Native Township of Johannesburg in the 1960s.

The concluding discussion summarized topics that had re-emerged and proven important in the course of the workshop. Four main points came up repeatedly throughout

the papers and the discussions. The first is the question of how artists tend to look at cities in Africa and how this can be made productive for urban theory. Another important point of reflection is the significance of audiences. How do different artistic practices support the formation of audiences? How do artistic articulations create social space? And how accessible is the social space in which art audiences emerge? Third, we need to ask how the practice and theorisation of image and imagination relates to performance and representation respectively. Lastly, experience as an aesthetic and sensual formative process gained momentum. If we experience something with our ears, does it actually change the way we see something? Do certain discursive and aesthetic practices change our perception of the urban?

In summary, artistic practices intricately interweave with other discursive forces and social practices in urban contexts. This in turn raises theoretical questions that find varying answers in the empirical study of particular case studies. For instance, art seems to shape discursive formations as much as it is shaped by them, and therefore power politics always are at play, albeit in varying ways. Secondly, almost all presentations made clear that art does not only take place in African cities, but that it purposefully or unwittingly relates to them in aesthetic, political, symbolic and practice-relevant ways. Aesthetic and social practices thereby sometimes overlap while at times they clearly diverge, opposing art as a metaphoric practice to the everyday and thus modulating the latter. The keynote presentation and ensuing discussions also showed that while art is a place in which urban imaginations are expressed, it is also the place where the realization of urban imaginations can fail.

The speakers and their audience – BA, MA and doctoral students, postdocs and professors – had an inspired exchange during and beyond the sessions. The workshop was conceived as an initiating event for further scholarly exchange and discussion about art and urban politics in African cities. The prospects with regard to future activities are promising. A selection of the presented papers is being published, and future

collaboration is envisaged in the framework of international conferences in the coming years. The Swiss-African Research Cooperation (SARECO), as a sponsor of our colleagues coming from Cameroon and Ghana, crucially helped kick-starting this exchange, while the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft (FAG) generously contributed to the travel expenses of our overseas and European colleagues.

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