



Programme Point Sud 2018

Imaginary Worlds: An Artistic and Social Scientific Exploration of Imaginaries and Digital Practices in Africa

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Report



Imaginary Worlds: An Artistic and Social Scientific Exploration of Imaginaries and Digital Practices in Africa

Conveners

Prof. Richard Rottenburg, Anthropology, University of Halle

Dr. Malik Ndiaye, Art History, IFAN, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar

Dr. Julien McHardy, Anthropology, University of Halle

Marion Louisgrand Sylla, Curator, Director Kër Thiossane

Themes and Objectives

The *Imaginary Worlds*, seminar and public debating program explored how the spread of digital technologies, infrastructures and practices in Africa changes and shifts imaginaries of what Africa is and can be, and how the imaginaries of Africa in turn shape digital practices. Imaginaries, as we understand them here, do not reside in dreamworlds alone but take part in the ongoing processes that bring the worlds we inhabit into being. Carried by and partially realized – made real – in practices, dreams, technologies, social orderings and infrastructurings, imaginaries inform an unstable field where concepts, values, aesthetics, legitimacies, desires, memories, possible futures and powers are negotiated. From our research interest in the mutual emergence of imaginaries and digital practices, and our methodological experiment of bringing artistic and social scientific research into conversation sprung a range of questions that we explored during the workshop:

- How do imaginaries materialize in digital practices?
- How are digital practices and technologies shaped by imaginaries of what Africa is and can be?
- Do digital imaginaries differ from other technologically mediated imaginaries?
- How does the global circulation of digital imaginaries change the ways in which they materialize?
- How are uneven patterns of circulation, in an information infrastructure dominated by the global north, perpetuated?
- How does the emergence of ‘local’ digital cultures change imaginaries and how can ‘local’ be defined in a globally connected digital infrastructure?
- How do new forms of local, digital production such as Maker Spaces affect digital imaginaries?
- How can we think about and practice the decolonialization of the internet?
- Can artistic engagements with imaginaries help us unlock new conditions of possibility for unexpected futures and better lives?
- Can the notion of non-alignment, based on the historical non-alignment movement, help us to conceptualize the decolonization of digital practices?



Figure 1: Afropixel wall text, Kër Thioissane, 2018

The objectives of *Imaginary Worlds* were fivefold:

1. to contribute to an exploration of how imaginaries and practices relate in the realm of the digital in Africa;
2. to experiment with collaborations between artists and social scientists in order to identify productive methods for analyzing links between practices and imaginaries that neither discipline alone is well equipped to trace;
3. to build and strengthen research relations between relevant artists and scientists especially between Senegal, South Africa, Brazil and Germany;
4. to engage a broader audience beyond the workshop through a one day program of public talks and performances that will form part of the Dak' Art Biennial;
5. to develop and publish the contributions as an Open Access publication that will include both textual and audio-visual contributions.

Methodology and Results

Thinking of Africa and the digital as partially connected worlds entangled in an autopoietic process rather than singular and separate entities, as we propose here, raises empirical and theoretical questions about the conceptual status of imaginaries, about their circulation and about the processes by which they materialize. It also raises a methodological challenge, namely, how imaginaries can be engaged and analyzed? We posit that imaginaries, even though they form an established object of social scientific enquiry, remain difficult to 'capture' by social scientific means (with regards to digital methods and imaginaries see Jasanoff and Kim 2015; Marres 2017). While social scientific methods struggle to 'capture' the affective, somewhat elusive quality of imaginaries, artistic work explicitly engaged in the production of imaginaries often fails to trace the roots of imaginaries in ordinary practices and infrastructures (Diagne 2011; Wakeford 2012). In a methodological experiment that addresses this tension, *Imaginary Worlds* brought together digital media artists who deal with digital imaginaries and social scientists with an interest in digital practices. This encounter led to several consequent artistic and social scientific works that explicitly engage each other, as well as a much harder to measure exchange of ideas and approaches.



Figure 2: 'Core Dump' performance. Francois Knotze, Afropixel, Kër Thioissane 2018

Sustainability of the Event

The Imaginary Worlds program led to series of results, some of which remain yet to be completed.

1. **A two-day seminar event** hosted by the *Faculté des Sciences et Technologies de l'Education et de la Formation (FASTEF)* at the *Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar* with 25 local and international artists, maker, architect, designer and social scientists' participants
2. **Two half-day public debates** hosted by the arts and social innovation space *Kër Thioissane*. The first event examined Dakar as a site of alternative digital practices and discussed if and how the notion of non-alignment might inform decolonial digital practices. The second brought together digital practioners and maker spaces to review and discuss the state and possibilities for the digital economy and alternative forms of digital production and innovation in Dakar.
3. The seminar and public debates were **part of the *Afropixel Festival*** that formed part of the off-program of the *Dak'Art Biennale*. The two-day seminar and the two public debates that formed ***Imaginary Worlds*** attracted **more than 100 participants**. The overall *Afropixel Festival* attracted **a total of almost 10.000 people**.
4. The *Imaginary Worlds* program was **publicized in the *Afropixel Festival* booklet**.
5. The Senegalse journalist and curator Mamadou Diallo directed a **15-minute documentary** of the festival for the *Digital Imaginaries* project in cooperation with the ZKM film team. The film includes footage of the *Imaginary Worlds* seminar and debates as well as interviews with participants. The film was shown as a large double channel projection at the Wits Art Museum from 24.07.–23.09.2018 and at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien | Karlsruhe from 17.11.2018 – 17.03.2019 reaching a substantial audience in South Africa, Germany and beyond. In addition, the documentary will also be released online.
6. Following the last exhibition event of *Digital Imaginaries* at the ZKM, we are planning an **Open Access, 300-page edition** to be published in September 2019. The book will contain social scientific and artistic contributions, many of which are shaped and inspired by the *Imaginary Worlds* program in Dakar.



Figure 3: Afopixel Brochure, Kër Thioissane 2018



Figure 4: Public Debate at Kër Thioossane, 2018

Participants

1. Dr. Amah Edo, Anthropology, MIT, Massachusetts, USA
2. Prof. Babacar Fall, History, FASTEf, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
3. Daniel Sciboz, Designer, Researcher, Dakar, Senegal
4. DK Ossey, Architect, Accra, Ghana
5. Fiona Rankin-Smith, Curator, Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa
6. Francois Knoetze, Artist, Cape Town, South Africa
7. Jeromil Rojo, Hacker, Researcher, Dyne.org, Amsterdam, Netherlands
8. Prof. Joseph Tonda, Sociology, University Omar Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
9. Dr. Julien Mc Hardy, Anthropology, University of Halle, Germany
10. Dr. Malik Ndiaye, Art History, IFAN, University Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal
11. Mamadou Diallo, Curator, Dakar, Senegal
12. Marcus Neustetter, Artist, Johannesburg, South Africa
13. Dr. Michel Wahome, Anthropology, Oxford Internet Institute, United Kingdom
14. Oulimata Gueye, Curator, Researcher, Paris/Dakar, France
15. Philipp Ziegler, Curator, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany
16. Prof. Richard Rottenburg, Anthropology, University of Halle, Germany
17. Sename Koffi Agbodjinou, Architect, L'Africaine d'architecture / WoeLab, Lome, Togo
18. Tabita Rezaire, Artist, Johannesburg, South Africa
19. Prof. Tahani Nadim, STS, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany
20. Tegan Bristow, MA, Digital Art, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
21. Thomas Hervé Mboa Nkoudou, MA, Sociology, University of Laval, Quebec, Canada
22. Yasmine Abbas, Architect, Paris/Accra, France
23. Younes Baba Ali, Artist, Casablanca, Morocco
24. Christina Zartmann, Filmmacherin, ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany
25. Marion Louisgrand Sylla, Curator, Director Kër Thioossane, Dakar, Senegal