

Research Project

Visual Culture in Urban Africa I

Third-party funded project

Project title Visual Culture in Urban Africa I

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In the past ten to fifteen years, the circulation of images and the visualising of things that are not necessarily visual has accelerated to an extent that the global circulation of images seems to have become an end in itself. However, this process started long before it has been addressed in the terms of globalisation. In the last century, many societies throughout the world underwent rapid changes of their visual culture, and in particular the areas formerly under colonial rule faced a unique transformation of their aesthetic practices. A strong tendency to address this transformation in terms of rupture and decay prevailed for a long time, in particular in Africa where timeless traditions of art seemed to be whipped off by the overwhelming power of the West, its consumer culture and its art world. More recent studies have shown, however, that the outcome is an aesthetic practice of its own right – a novel visuality that neither may be attributed to local “tradition” nor to global “influence”. In most cases, visual culture is embedded in an everyday practice offering a space for plural realities that coexist and often are in conflict with each other.

This project aims at inquiring into the key points of interface and interaction between the diverging strands of visual culture and aesthetic practice in an urban African life-world. Fundamental to the study is the concern with how artistic forms of expression and fine art were produced and reproduced. Another concern is how people imagine, see and represent their post-colonial life-worldly reality. The overall aim is to inquire into the growing interconnectedness of the local and the global, and into the complexity of the circulation of images from a perspective that once would have been labelled marginal. The project may thereby contribute to a better understanding of such processes and offers a wide range of comparative perspectives on similar transformations around the world, although taking Bamenda in Cameroon as an African city as its starting point.

The project inquires into three fields, corresponding to three strands of visual culture: photography, painting, video, and, at a later stage, new media, in particular the internet. All three have contributed to the growing interconnectedness of African visual cultures with one another and with the global production of pictures and images. Photography was the first to spread over the continent, and some genres of photography served as models for painting developed around the mid 20th century and later. The two media are interrelated and, more recently, were complemented by other, electronic media, in particular by TV, video and the internet. The modes of seeing, however, crosscut all popular media, although they take a particular form depending on the interaction with the medium.

We therefore adopt an approach with two methodological perspectives: One that addresses the materiality of the media, and a second perspective that looks into how actors use them. The two cross-cutting

perspectives aim at answering key questions that have been raised in neighbouring fields of anthropology: How do local media and art change in processes of globalisation? What new types of visibility do the spectators engage in?

The project and a related PhD project address three fields: photography, painting and video. This project financed by the Swiss Science Foundation covers the first two media: Photography is the subject of a PhD project by René Egloff, while Till Förster will work on painting. Video is the subject of an ongoing PhD project by Babson Ajibade who has a grant from the canton of Basel City. His work is integrated into the general framework of the project.

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