

IN/FLUX

Meeting with Katadiou Diallo, Dominique Malaquais and Silke Schmickl

Written by Julie Crenn

How to develop innovative ways of supporting, exhibiting, reading, writing, seeing and spreading the word about the creative diversity of a continent and its diasporas? Three women have come together in an undertaking that seeks to address these and related questions : Silke Schmickl, Kadiatou Diallo and Dominique Malaquais. Schmickl is the founder of Lowave, a curatorial platform that produces DVDs and publications centered on experimental film, video and performance and that organizes exhibitions, performances and conferences focusing on the work of emergent artists worldwide.^[1] Diallo and Malaquais are co-founders of SPARCK (Space for Pan-African Research, Creation and Knowledge), a multidisciplinary program of artist residencies, workshops, exhibitions, publications and research initiatives.^[2] From a shared interest in dialogue and exchange, in questioning categories and breaking down barriers, a partnership has emerged whose goal is to highlight critically engaged artistic scenes. Together, SPARCK and Lowave seek to create spaces where artists in the fields of experimental film and video can share practices and points of view, ensuring greater visibility of a genre that tends to be under-represented in the North and South alike and amplifying the interculturality that characterizes art scenes across Africa and the diaspora. Underlying this joint endeavor is a *mise-en-pratique* of relation such as Glissant defines it - a making of connections that opens the way to that which

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is alternative, surprising and diverse.
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Julie Crenn: How was Lowave born, what were your initial objectives and how has your project evolved since 2002?

Silke Schmickl: Lowave started as a DVD publishing house in the field of experimental cinema and video art in Paris in 2002. We wanted to explore new distribution possibilities for artist films via the DVD format, in order to make them accessible and allow them to travel beyond the gallery and festival circuits. Over the years, we have evolved into a platform for curatorial research, principally on the subject of moving images. Today, our activities include exhibition conceptions, film programming and performances, production of audiovisual projects, artistic consultations, teaching and workshops. The singularity of Lowave's work is its international scope, with a strong interest in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, highlighting emerging artists, and the use of interdisciplinary and intercultural crossings. Enhancing the wealth of experimental scenes and video art, Lowave has collaborated with institutions such as the Centre Georges Pompidou, the French Cinémathèque, The British Film Institute, The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, the Centre National de la Cinématographie and UNESCO.

J.C.: What is SPARCK and how do you work together?

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Dominique Malaquais & Kadiatou Diallo: SPARCK - Space for Pan-African
Research, Creation and Knowledge - is a curatorial platform centered

on innovative approaches to postcolonial urban space. Through experimental multi-disciplinary arts residencies, workshops, exhibitions, publications and performances, it seeks to highlight and, where possible, to foster alternative ways of thinking about cities: takes on contemporary urban cultures and imaginaries that actively question the status quo.

SPARCK was initiated in 2008, by the two of us: artist/educator/catalyst Kadiatou Diallo, based in Cape Town, and scholar/writer Dominique Malaquais, based in Paris. An experiment in decentralization, it is a mobile platform that docks with partner initiatives and institutions on a project-by-project basis. From street to studio and online, since its inception SPARCK has staged projects in over a dozen cities in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe.

J.C.: You publish DVDs and books together. Do you have other activities?

S.S. / K.D. / D.M.: Together, SPARCK and Lowave have developed two projects, both centered on experimental video and film. The first is called *IN/FLUX: Mediatrips from the African World*. It is a three-volume compilation of experimental videos and films by creators whose work, produced in Africa and the Diaspora, explores the urban condition worldwide. The focus is not on African cities per se, but on ways in which cities across the globe might be imagined, analyzed, dreamed and reworked from Africa. The first volume centers on themes of urban movement and displacement.

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The second addresses urban memory and the third examines ways in which bodies impact on the shape and the meaning of urban environments. A wide variety of genres and styles is represented. Documentary gazes and oneiric explorations of Afrofuturist universes rub shoulders with animation and video-game inspired approaches to storytelling and representation; mock music-videos and takeoffs on horror-flick aesthetics appear side by side with first-person and epistolary narratives; performance and installation art mix and meld with spy- and hand-held camera zoom-ins. Each volume includes interviews, images and/or texts about the filmmakers - material that contextualizes their work - and a booklet containing a critical essay on the films. The essay in *IN/FLUX* volume 1 is by Dominique. The second is by art historian and filmmaker Joanna Grabski and the third is by Stacy Hardy, a writer and artist who has a fabulous film in volume 1. *IN/FLUX* 1 came out in 2010. It has been exhibited on various occasions and in different contexts: at Art Basel within the Focus 11 framework, at film festivals in Cyprus and New York City, in art house cinemas in Paris and Basel, cinematheques (Madrid), universities (Harvard), workshops (Art Bakery)... *IN/FLUX* 2 and 3 will come out this Spring.

The second project on which we have collaborated is called *URBAN/FLUX*. It is a film festival that we organized in Johannesburg last September and that we would like to travel, now, in Europe and North America. As the festival's title suggests, the focus remains cities. The works selected come from over twenty countries. Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas are represented. Four programs of ten films each make up the festival: (1) Urban Moves & Politricks; (2) Histori(cities) & Future Cities; (3) Herstories / (Un)Tender Cities; (4) SoundCity & Cityscapes. The festival was accompanied by a three-day workshop lead by South African artist Thenjiwe Nkosi. Under Thenji's guidance, young filmmakers, most of them in high school, produced a series of short videos about Johannesburg, using in-camera editing techniques. The results, several quite accomplished, were screened at the festival venue, as a closing event.

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J.C.: Did you notice a lack of representation of experimental films and video creation – a lack that is especially obvious when it comes to arts produced outside the West?

S.S.: Video art celebrates its 50th anniversary this year and the moving image is certainly one of the most striking artistic genres of our times and an integral part of today's art activities. Nevertheless its distribution and exhibition still seem to cause problems for some institutions and curators, which might be explained by the technical requirements of the genre, time-space constraints and constantly changing formats. So yes, video art and experimental films are often underrepresented, both in the West and in non-Western societies. It should be noted, however, that younger art institutions outside of Europe, such as SALT in Istanbul, have often done a better job than their more established Western counterparts of integrating film features in their permanent exhibition set ups. SALT's walk-in cinema is a case in point.

What is exciting in today's distribution possibilities is that the same work can be installed in a museum, screened in a cinema, a lecture theatre, or be seen on a DVD or on the Internet. It's this flexibility of the medium that interests me, and also how the perception and the audience change depending on the context. This flexibility of the medium also generates an uncommon circulation of artworks and has made it possible for us to discover works from countries we have never travelled to, from artists we have never met in person. Our research/exhibition/DVD project *Resistance[s]*, dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa, which we initiated in 2005, was the first project where we experienced the power and impact of this manifold and alternative circulation. The experience was very enriching and encouraged us to develop other avant-garde film collections, such as *Re:Frame*

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(India), *Conditioned* (Turkey) and of course *IN/FLUX*.
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K.D.: Experimental film and video is present and expanding in leaps and bounds across the so-called Global South. The issue, then, is not one of lack of production, but one of preconceptions: what kinds of work people (curators, audiences, collectors) expect to see coming out of the South and what impact this has on if/what they choose to think about or represent this work. The problem, in other words, in both the North and South, is often one of focus, or (absence of) attention.

One of SPARCK's goals is to help develop platforms that address this situation. With this in mind, in 2011, with a partner in Karachi, the Amin Gulgee Gallery, we staged a two-day intervention titled *Imag[IN]ing Cities*. The event showcased digital works - predominantly video, but also photography, sound and installation - by over fifty artists from Africa and South Asia. It was a first: no such thing had been done in Pakistan before. Reactions from the public were extremely positive, underscoring how essential it is to foster spaces that counter preconceived notions of what genres of art are being made where.

J.C.: Can you tell me more about the content of *IN/FLUX*?

D.M.: The works selected are not meant to tell a smooth or unified

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story. Nor are they intended to constitute a survey. They were chosen ^{as d}
because, individually and as a group, they seem to us to pose
uncomfortable questions about the violence – political, economic, social, psychological – that attends living in an urban, late capitalist world. Some do so with great humor, others in a deadly serious way and still others without seeming to address such questions at all. The result – and this was very much the goal – is emphatically non-consensual: if you were to bring all of the filmmakers together in one room, heated conversations would likely result. Add the curators to the mix and things would get still more complicated, for we don't bring a single point of view to the project either.

A key question has been the matter of what it means to make a compilation of films from Africa and the Diaspora. Why this focus? In a world characterized first and foremost by flux, an unmooring of space, place and belonging, does it make sense? The answer is both no and yes. No, for it runs the risk of ghettoizing artists and curators who mostly think of themselves as global citizens. From this point of view, it is arguably too restrictive. Yes, because it foregrounds work that engages with precisely this outlook: work that hacks away at clichés about what constitutes “Africa.” This latter point, for us, is key. The goal of IN/FLUX is not to define, but instead to complicate and, if possible, to explode categories. So the answer is mixed and it is messy – and that is exactly as things should be.

K.D.: The makers of these films come from a multiplicity of backgrounds, in terms of geography, history and culture, as well as, and more importantly, in terms of their individual artistry. This has made for a beautiful assembly of very different visual languages and narrative styles and a wide range of tools and techniques. Just as the content of the IN/FLUX collection does not – and is not intended to – tell a unified story, the forms of filmmaking used here are not homogenous or typically “African” – whatever that might/could mean. Rather, the scope of visual and artistic language showcased is suggestive of the variety of works being produced in and from Africa today, and might redirect the focus back towards art as a universal

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means of communication.

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J.C.: African arts (video, cinema, performance) are highly represented in your publications. Can you tell me more about your specific involvement with African arts?

S.S.: Lowave's interest in art from Africa, as well as Asia, has been constantly growing over the last five years due to thrilling encounters and outstanding art discoveries. Our general approach is in the first instance intuitive, empiric and not strategic and we have been attracted by these emerging scenes because of their effervescent creativity and artistic quality. And also their political commitment - making art can still be a risky enterprise in some geographical contexts. We were of course also glad to assist artists in gaining greater visibility and to fill a gap in places where there was no distribution before.

K.D.: I happen to live in Africa and work with artists from Africa who work in Africa. This informs in important ways how I think about creativity and the world more broadly. The question for me, however, is not about "African art" as such. In fact, I am not sure what the term refers to exactly. Certainly, it is not a matter of being/working on the continent alone. The artists with whom I/we work do not practice in geographical isolation. They interact - physically and virtually - with a global artists' community. They are equal players and contributors in the field who can use the specificity of their context to engage much larger questions and conversations. It is the nature of these conversations, initiated from Africa and extending worldwide, that interests me.

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D.M.: Personally, my focus is less on African art per se - the category strikes me as both too restrictive and too general at the same time - than on art that questions unequal power relationships. In particular, I am interested in work that considers how inequality on a global scale is perpetuated by political and economic states of affairs that find their roots in the emergence of capitalism as a world system. I am moved by creative practices that engage with the structural violence of this system - with the sheer, unmitigated horror of much that it has brought into being and the ways in which it has managed to replicate itself, doing ever greater damage to ever more people. Some of the most sustained and the most thoughtful reflections on the nature and the mechanisms of this violence, as well as on the means deployed to counter it, it seems to me, have come from creators hailing from parts of the world that were subjected to slavery and colonialism.

J.C.: How do you work with artists?

S.S.: We see the artists with whom we work as partners, as allies in the production of a thought, a visual idea, a social or political statement. Our collaboration is in general a long-term one that is constantly renewed by incoming projects. We never represent the complete body of work of an artist, only a selection of works, which makes our collaboration precise and light at the same time.

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K.D.: What is unique to SPARCK is its process. It is intrinsically responsive in nature, meaning that projects evolve from a desire and need of the creators involved. Works are not commissioned. There is no application process. Instead, projects are developed in ongoing conversation with the artists over time. This means that they are rarely one-off undertakings. Instead, SPARCK projects tend to have several incarnations, both within and outside the program's ambit. In all instances, collaboration is key. SPARCK understands itself as a node in a network that is continuously expanding and morphing. The program exists and functions (only) because of the relationships in the network.

Julie Crenn is an art historian and critic. She earned a PhD from the University of Bordeaux in 2012 on a thesis about contemporary textile practices, and is conducting research on African contemporary art under the umbrellas of Africultures, Afrikadaa, Politique Africaine et Afrique in Visu among others.

[1] LOWAVE: <http://www.lowave.com/en/>.

[2] SPARCK: <http://www.sparck.org/>.