

Africa, scattered in the web and contained in a notebook

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We know it well: the Internet is becoming more and more central to our lives, strengthening our relationships and making them easier, intensifying the connections between different parts of the world. It nourishes the hopes for a widespread and networked democracy, but also allows increasingly extensive forms of political control and economic exploitation of people's lives.

The rhetoric of the global village intertwines with the reality of a digital divide that places some areas of the planet, and Africa in particular, in a position of inferiority (Fuchs, Horak 2008): although the Internet is virtually available to anyone, the possibilities to access it and stay connected are not equally distributed among individuals. We are all on the Internet, but we are not visible and influential in the same way: how much is Africa featured on the Internet and how relevant are Africans in contributing to the image and representation of their own country?

Is there really room, in Africa, for cyborg-utopian ravings advocating a freedom from the materiality of corporeal existence by virtue of a second life, an ethereal virtual reality, which, just like Second Life, looks very much like a cartoon? These are mere diversions clashing with the harshness of people's life and subjugation, as well as with social uses of the Internet aimed at enhancing "real-life" relationships, rather than supplanting them with artificial paradises. Wikipedia, and WikiAfrica in particular, shows us the possibility of a shared, social construction of knowledge, which starts from the grassroots. The Arab Spring's revolutionary wave in North Africa once again reminds us of the potential of the Internet as a medium of social mobilisation.

Although the cybernauts' rhetorical discourses (which are quite similar to those on the global free market) emphasise the annulment of spatial distances due to the ubiquity of real-time communication, all migrants landing on Lampedusa from the Libyan and Tunisian coasts are well aware that Africa is more than just a sitography. Africa cannot be reduced to a fluctuating, deterritorialised and freely available signifier: the reality is that people coming from this country encounter many obstacles on their way.

All this has nothing to do with Africa's "backwardness" or with the alleged resistance of a "traditional" Africa to modernity: the simplistic idea of an eternal Africa existing in a timeless space (that of savannas, of deserts and forests, of Conrad's heart of darkness, of Livingstone's explorations, of the Paris-Dakar Rally) is actually strictly related to the post-modern idea of a supermarket-world where cultural differences are goods to be displayed on shelves and tossed into our shopping trolleys with just one click (Bargna 2010).

Much like the Orient of Orientalism (Said 1999), Africa is torn between reality and imagination, it is much less solid and homogeneous than we might expect, but is also much tougher, more resistant and cumbersome than we wished. This

is neither a country where “cultures”, “tribes” and “ethnic groups” are encapsulated in a space outside history, doomed to repetition or disappearance, nor a place for the soul (as in our exotic projections). It is not even a collection of aesthetic forms and experiences (masks, dances and safaris) to be selected from a catalogue and added to one’s bouquet of tourist attractions or World Art objects.

The Internet is playing a big part in this. Like all other technologies, the web is a social product based on a material foundation, it is culturally constructed and, in turn, it produces culture. In this respect, it is not different from other technologies used to process and communicate knowledge, which have mediated our relationship with reality, shaping both the world and ourselves: the mnemotechniques of oral cultures, the ideographic or alphabetic scripts, printing, cartography, photography, films and museums, just to mention a few. What we call “Africa” is shaped and reshaped, and made visible, by the social technologies that allow it to take on a distinctive form. From this perspective, Africa is not only in Africa, but also somewhere else (and certainly on the Internet): it is the result of a multitude of unequal relationships and quite asymmetrical perspectives, which have been following one another over time and space. Authors and icons emerge from these anonymous also highly individualised perspectives: Hegel, Karen Blixen, Tarzan, Marcel Griaule, Josephine Baker, Samuel Eto’o, Tintin, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, along with many others, have contributed in many ways to shaping the conflicting, multifaceted and complex image of Africa that today flows across global mediascapes.

However, in order to establish itself as a significant reality, as an object of knowledge and power, Africa must be taken in at a glance, it must be seen from the outside as a whole, focusing on its unity rather than multiplicity. We need someone like Vasco de Gama sailing around Cape Horn, a navigation technology that makes it possible, a cartography able to translate this experience into a knowledge that can be communicated at a distance, allowing others to follow the same route (Bargna 1998; Latour 1986). Africa, just like Europe, is the result of a connection that establishes it as an inside opposed to an outside: it has always been an intercultural and artificial reality. This is not a fault, because such are the traits of any social and cultural product.

It is in our embodiment and response to the gaze of the Other that we experience a sense of belonging to a common reality, whether it is called Africa, Europe or America. As long as we are with people like us, what appears is only what distinguishes us from each other. Identities and differences are established on a different scale and from other criteria (such as, the belonging to different villages or social groups). Thus, Pan-Africanism does not even come from Africa but from Paris and New York, from the diaspora, and tries to make Africa, by supporting an anti-colonial movement that is actually inspired by the idea of Africa conveyed by Westerners’ colonial, missionary and ethnological discourses (Mudimbe 2007). The Afrocentrism adopted by some African philosophers

(Asante 1987) is therefore not less ethnocentric than Eurocentrism or any other kind of nativism: we are never alone and we are never the first ones. Even autochthony is just a ghost: we are all migrants.

Starting from what we said about the Internet and Africa, let's now try to understand the sense of a virtual exhibition on Africa. We talked about the impossibility of reducing the materiality of reality to some illusory or deceptive virtual reality, but we also pointed out the existence of a sort of constitutive gap, a detachment of Africa from itself, which is more the result of a relationship with the outside world than an endogenous production.

Exhibitions and museums, from the great universal and colonial exhibitions up to the contemporary art biennials, have been among the places and devices that, in various ways, have contributed to shaping Africa (Arnoldi 1999; Ravenhill 1996; Amselle 2007). In such places, Africa has established itself as a real and virtual image, a fictional picture somehow detached from reality but actually able to produce effects of reality, also lending itself to local forms of re-appropriation. Just a little example: most of the "neo-traditional" art in circulation today in Africa is not inspired by local models, but draws on reproductions of European and American art catalogues.

Today's exhibitions and museums increasingly work as "contact zones" (Clifford 1999), spaces for exchanging views and challenging authorities, where identities are negotiated and made visible.

Even virtual exhibitions follow the same trend: although they make use of new technologies and must be understood in their peculiarities, they do not introduce a radical discontinuity with the past.

On closer inspection, the Internet is not only a communication technology that can be used for exhibitions, but it can also be regarded, on the whole, as a Great Library and Museum, a collection of collections, no longer constrained within the walls of buildings that are always too small (Rieu 2007). Virtual museums and exhibitions, and the Internet on the whole, create and extend what Malraux (2007) referred to as an imaginary Museum to be contained in the pages of a book, bringing together things that are physically distant. On the one hand, they dematerialise objects and experiences; on the other hand, by creating immersive and interactive environments, they try to enhance the visitor's involvement, going beyond the contemplative experience of a viewer placed in front of a screen. At a deeper level, these technologies also change the strategies for the resolution of conflicts related to material properties: western museums are filled with objects stolen from Africa and other countries during the colonial period, which are today claimed back by their owners. These objects can physically stay where they are and be virtually returned as data banks or virtual exhibitions. Is it a "real" restitution or a strategy to avoid it? More in general: does a virtual visit dispense us from looking at the actual works of art in person? Do virtual reproductions make material works of art superfluous?

In the perspective of an anthropology of the contemporary world, which also takes account of the digital forms of culture (Escobar 1994; Coleman 2010;

Budka 2011), we may wonder how, and to what extent, these new social forms of construction of reality are created and negotiated; how they are perceived by visitors, and how they affect their beliefs and opinions; how people of different genders, social classes, cultural and geographical backgrounds make different uses of them (Niezen 2005); how these operations are related to more general transformations occurring in contemporary museology, in the whole art system, in cultural policies and economy.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to have a multi-sited ethnography, operating both online and offline, aimed at studying the actual functioning of these devices, their stated and actual objectives, the rhetorical discourses implied, the material resources they draw upon, and the relationships they produce online and offline.

Chapter Zero - AtWork does not limit itself to bringing together some works of art in a virtual space, but combines two different ways of collecting, shaping, recording and filing experiences, and makes them collide: digital technologies and notebooks, manual skills and engineering, past and present.

Most of what we call “Africa” comes from books and illustrations (essays, novels, biographies, travel stories – Miller 1985, Koivunen 2009), but a notebook is not a book. Sometimes, as a collection of notes, it represents a preliminary step to writing a book (as an album of drawings may precede a work of art), but it can also be a finished product, a private, intimate diary not intended for publication or, as in our case, not regarded as a mere support, but as an integral part of a finished work of art.

Notebooks are strictly associated with travelling, and so with Africa. There is no anthropologist or artist (or tourist, quite often) without a notebook: in the African masks and sculptures dating back to colonial times, anthropologists are depicted with a notebook in their hands. This is enough to identify them as such (even if, today, they also use recorders and video cameras).

The reason why notebooks are so strictly connected with travelling is clear: they are small and light, so they can be easily carried around. The hardcover makes it easier to write notes even without having to lean on something for support or take a seat. But it is not just a matter of functionality: a travel notebook is the object of an intense emotional attachment and a strong aesthetic fascination. It soon becomes one with the person who carries it around in his or her pocket. While travelling, its pages are gradually filled up, almost simultaneously with the events experienced. The ways in which each individual uses spaces, distributing signs and drawings in a particular combination of fullness and emptiness, are an expression of one’s individual style, an indelible personal mark. For this reason, unlike a printed book, a notebook is meant to be looked at, more than read. In a manuscript, calligraphy is probably more important than meanings. This makes it quite similar to a work of art.

What is particularly fascinating in a notebook is the feeling of not having to do with something finished (as in the case of books or many works of art), but of experiencing events while they unfold. A notebook seems to disclose life, along

with a sense of uncertainty and imponderability, in a way that a finished work, however open it may be, is unable to do. Of course, things are not exactly like that: even a private diary is, in some way, addressed to someone. We write in the secret hope of being read or reading our notes again in the future. Although less codified, the notes and sketches of a notebook also comply with conventional rules and follow a well-established tradition (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995). The same, of course, goes for the idea of Africa conveyed by travel notebooks.

For these reasons, a work of art that makes use of a notebook does not rely on a neutral, merely material object, but is connected, more or less consciously, to a cultural, immaterial heritage, which is rich in echoes and references.

This is even more so when notebooks are associated with such a brand as Moleskine. By reproducing “the legendary notebook used for the past two centuries by artists and thinkers, from Vincent Van Gogh to Pablo Picasso, from Ernest Hemingway to Bruce Chatwin”, Moleskine endows the object with an aura that is available to anyone for a reasonable price. With its black, anonymous and austere cover, Moleskine gives a touch of asceticism and refined anachronism to our colourful visual culture, taking us back to a time when travelling used to be exploration and adventure, while also providing a creative space – so we are told – “closely connected to the digital world” and today’s lifestyle. As if to say, for taking a run-up you have to take a step back.

It is in this real and imaginary space, a complex and multifaceted environment defined by multiple temporal frames, that the artists featured in this exhibition present their works.

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