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FAVT: FUTURE AFRICA VISIONS IN TIME

An exhibition by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies

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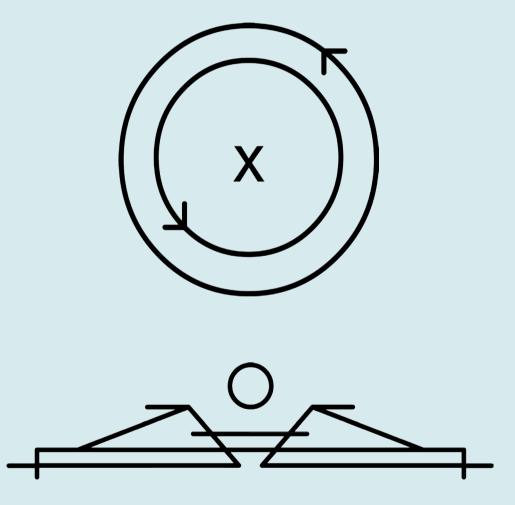


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Thika Road mad boys_Until death do us part_Wazungu wausi (Black white men) Sam Hopkins/ John Kamicha

In conversation with Florian Stoll

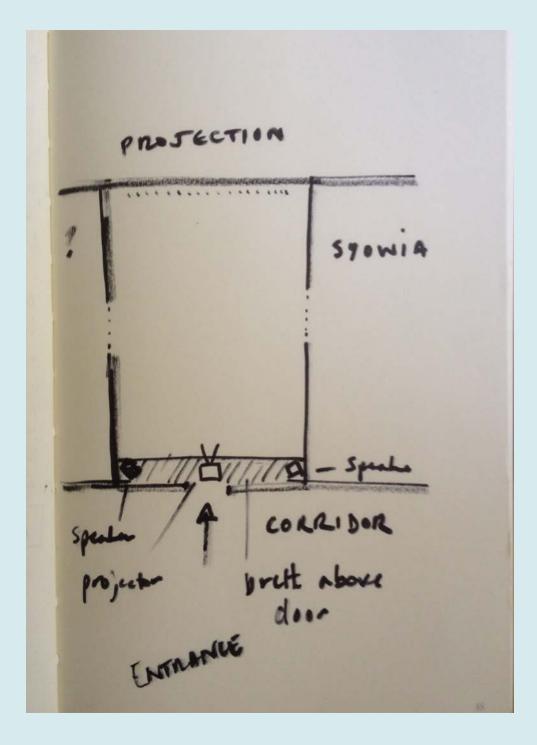


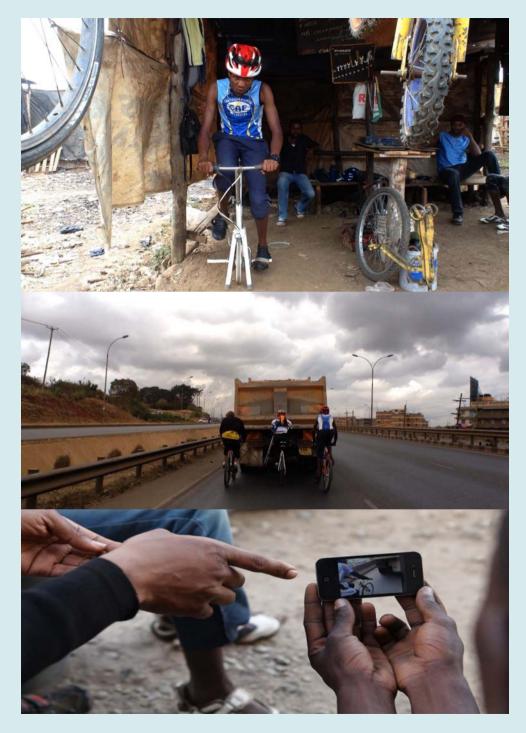
Thika Road mad boys_Until death do us part_Wazungu wausi (Black white men)

The growth and expansion of Nairobi, economically, infra-structurally and culturally, has over the past few years been a subject of significant academic and media attention. One expression, and perhaps consequence, of this growth is an emerging bicycle subculture. A group of cyclists, many of whom are also artists, are building a bike scene, with a distinct set of cultures, practices and languages. Although some of the signs and symbols of this subculture are perhaps familiar to an international audience, the way they are performed in Nairobi is radically different.

Cycling in Nairobi can be dangerous and involves dodging corrupt police, traffic and thieves, generally in that order. The cyclists themselves are maverick and some almost outlaws, but largely they are middle class. This seeming contradiction is vividly expressed in the bike scene. For example groups of cyclists go on weekend bike tours, a perhaps almost conservative, European tradition. But the way this is enacted in Kenya seems more hedonistic than conservative, a kind bicycle-binge of drugs, alcohol, meat, and sleeping rough at the end of the night.

Why do these young men chose to eschew the traditional middle class values of buying a car, a house and living a safe life? Why do they identify so strongly with a subculture developed around a bike? How does the bike identity relate to other identities, such as ethnic and gender roles? The Bike Gang is a collectively made experimental film, involving one group of bikers as chroniclers and re-enacters of their everyday life, dreams and hallucinations.





Video stills & process pictures, Sam Hopkins, 2015



Video stills & process pictures, Sam Hopkins, 2015



Sam Hopkins

Sam Hopkins is an artist whose work responds to the specific social and political context within which he is living; as such he can be de-

scribed as a contextual artist. In a sense his art is maybe more akin to documentary; probing, investigating and re-imagining stories, characters and elements of daily life. Rather than working with strategies of reference and allusion, his position is to try to make autonomous works; art which can be 'read' without necessarily knowing a specific canon of Art. As his practice is triggered and defined by a context, it exhibits a broad spectrum of both media and content. Although wary of grand narratives, much of his work seems to orbit around issues of public space and the negotiation of participatory practice. Critical to this engagement is a keen attentiveness to the ways in which media produce realities, as opposed to simply transmitting them.

Born in 1979 in Rome, he was raised in Kenya and England before studying History and Spanish in Edinburgh and Cuba. He then proceeded to postgraduate studies in Contemporary Art in Oxford and Weimar, returning to Nairobi on a permanent basis in 2006. As well as working with Slum TV and Urban Mirror he is also a frequent collaborator of the Nairobi-based collective Maasai Mbili. He has participated in, both as artist and curator, a broad spectrum of local and international exhibitions. He is currently a PhD research candidate at the University of the Arts London (UAL). He was recently named one of the 100 Leading Global Thinkers of 2014 by Foreign Policy (FP) Magazine.

Florian Stoll

Florian Stoll received his PhD in 2011 from Albrecht-Ludwigs-University in Freiburg for his thesis on social milieus and their use of time in Recife, Brazil. He



holds a Magister in Philosophy and Sociology. Since May 1st, 2013 he teaches at the University of Bayreuth and works as Post-Doc researcher in the Project "Middle Classes on the Rise: Concepts of the Future among Freedom, Consumption, Tradition and Moral", part of the Bayreuth Academy for Advanced African Studies Project "FUTURE AFRICA – Visions in Time".

He is also part of the transnational research group "Global Inequality, Social Classification and Existence" under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Boike Rehbein (Humboldt-Universität Berlin).

Some of his publications include:

Stoll, Florian 2012: "Leben im Moment? Milieus in Brasilien und ihr Umgang mit Zeit". Frankfurt/Main; Campus.

Stoll, Florian; Leithäuser, Thomas (Herausgeber; 2014) Mirian Goldenberg (Autorin) (Hrsg.) 2014: Untreu. Konstanz; UVK.

Neubert, Dieter/Stoll, Florian (2015; in press): "Socio-cultural diversity of the African middle class. The case of urban Kenya." in: academy reflects no. 1, IAS Working Paper Series no. 14. Institut für Afrika Studien. Universität Bayreuth.

In conversation with Sam Hopkins

Can you briefly explain your project/ research and your approach to this?

Sam Hopkins: I am interested in how identities in Nairobi are experienced, negotiated and narrated. For me, an identity, is something which constantly changes depending on what situation you are in, and who you are with. I do not believe that an identity is something which is ascribed to you that you cannot change. Identities seem to me more a narrative of belonging, a story you author in negotiation with a set of shifting circumstances. Subcultures are a particularly interesting exemple of this, and represent a counter-narrative of identity premised on inclusive identities of choice, rather than exclusive identities of birth, as proposed by the official narratives of the museum, the school book and the mainstream media. "The Bike Gang" is a collaboratively-made film which explores this notion of identity through strategies of participation and (re)enactment.

Which format/ method did you choose as the way of researching/ communicating your findings or questions?

SH: I work with film, or moving image, but not so much as a way of communicating 'findings' as a means of catalysing and generating 'findings'; the film is not so much the representation of an idea, as the idea itself. A collectively-made film provides a framework and a context in which certain situations can be re-enacted and re-staged. Hence the ways in which different actors imagine and articulate themselves are made explicit and can be contested and discussed. Critical to this approach is the expanding field of mobile phone filmmaking which further blurs the boundary between filmmaker and subject.

Can you explain how the term "Future"is reflected in your project? How do you relate to the topic Future Africa and Visions in Time and did your idea of the terms change?

SH: As I write this before the film has been made, it is quite a difficult question to answer. At the moment I hope the term Future can be used as a generative concept and a filmmaking strategy. My idea is that if the film is set in the future, in an imaginary time and space, then hopefully the participants in the film will feel less under pressure to talk about the present. Nevertheless, as the film is being shot in the present time, I think the (re)enacted scenes cannot help but speak of this present, that is to say 2015. That is at least my idea now, I imagine it will change radically when we start filming.

How did the cooperation with your partner (artist/scientist) influence you in your thinking about your project?

SH: Again, our cooperation is still in the very initial phases, but even still, I have a sense of a potential impact. Working with social scientists makes me ask myself why I have chosen to make an experimental art film as opposed to working with the tools of social science? In a way, it pushes me to try and define what I am doing. If what I am doing is 'art' not 'science' then what makes it different and why is that important? These are of course huge questions with no one answer. Perhaps for now I can say that I am not at all interested in making an authoritative document about an objective, measurable 'Truth', particularly when the subject of that document are people. My ambitions are to make something that acknowledges its own subjectivity, that lays no claim to being true in the absolute sense, but proposed a collaboratively-produced, contestable idea.

How do you think an interdisciplinary approach (Science and Arts) like this can create new knowledge?

SH: I think there is a certain kind of utopic potential of Interdisciplinary practice which goes like this; different disciplines have different strategies for producing knowledge, and hence produce different knowledges. Working together provides the possibility of sharing different perspectives on the same issues, thus expanding knowledge. I share this idea, but recently I have been wondering whether this overlooks an essential ingredient of the approach, namely the perspective that the interdisciplinary approach offers on one's own discipline. For me, working in an interdisciplinary project with social scientists has made visible a set of assumptions about art practice that would have remained undetected otherwise.

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Dr. Florian Stoll, Uni Bayreuth/Germany, Yokohama Panel: Sociological Images of the Future, 16.07.2014: Future visions in social milieus among the middle-class of Nairobi and Mombasa – Empirical results and theoretization of future concepts

In this paper I will focus on my own research on future visions in the middle classes of Nairobi and Mombasa. These results will be the basis for a theoretical interpretation of these views on future. The various future visions among the different social groups (=milieus) in the middle classes of these two Kenyan cities point at certain social developments and can thus be interpreted as paradigmatic tendencies in the present society. While the social context of the milieus and their future visions might reflect global tendencies like forms of urbanisation they are at the same time higly local as they are adaptations to specific conditions - as the term 'glocalization' (Robertson) suggests.

Different social milieus in the middle classes of Nairobi and Mombasa have certain lifestyles and related future visions which reflect different tendencies of the contemporary social world. Kenya is a very interesting case study as the country has undergone considerable change and an increased integration into global structures in the last 20 years while it is still a developing country. Especially the differences in future orientations of East Africa's dynamic economic center Nairobi and the old multicultural coastal town Mombasa can reveal a variety of future references. Thus I will demonstrate by paradigmatic examples how future orientations of milieus in urban Kenya reflect specific social developments and how they can contribute to the theoretical interpretation of sociological future concepts. This way the paper even tries to (re)construct social theory from a specific perspective of the Global South.

In conversation with Florian Stoll

Can you briefly explain your project/ research and your approach to this?

Florian Stoll: The sub-project "Middle Classes on the Rise" is interested in the future visions of members of the middle class in Kenya and other African countries. It contains an anthropological and a sociological wing. With the improvement of the socio-economic situation for parts of the African population we observe a growth of a 'middle class', aside from the still existing poverty of the larger part of the population. The people of the middle class are in a position to choose how they will use or spend parts of their income beyond basic needs. This opportunity allows them to set priorities concerning their lifestyle according to their plans for the future.

My research examines on the basis of empirical data which sociocultural groups with different lifestyles – social milieus – can be found in the middle classes of Nairobi and Mombasa. Going beyond the class concept the study of milieus can consider sociocultural factors such as different values, typical characteristics and imaginations of the future. In addition I develop on the basis of the empirical data a conceptual frame which helps to understand the diversity of the milieus – specific sets of meanings, symbolic boundaries and the connection of situational small lifeworlds. This frame combines the milieu concept with different approaches from Cultural Sociology (J. Alexander, R. Collins, M. Lamont) to explain why and how socio-cultural elements are crucial for a milieu.

Which format/ method did you choose as the way of researching/ communicating your findings or questions?

FS: Our research is based on qualitative interviews, observation and the analysis of media reports and supported by the analysis of statistical data. The results are presented in scholarly papers and articles and in presentations at conferences. We would like to present results also in Kenya in a less scholarly format by lectures directed to a non-scientific public.

Can you explain how the term "Future" is reflected in your project? How do you relate to the topic Future Africa and Visions in Time and did your idea of the terms change?

FS: Is there any social action that has no reference to the future? Future is always someone's future imagination and depends therefore from the societal and cultural context. In our study we examine how the different sociocultural backgrounds (e.g. with different values, aims in life, consumption decisions) are related to certain imaginations of the future and social action. This includes not only visions of the future of individuals or milieus as well as societal ideas of a good future.

How did the cooperation with your partner (artist/scientist) influence you in your thinking about your project?

FS: 'Influence' is a very strong word and it is at the moment a bit early to answer how Sam's art project influenced my research. In Sam's work on the "Bike Gang" I find the question especially interesting to which degree people think and act in different situations in the same way. It touches one of my central questions for empirical research, how much continuity exists in different situational small lifeworlds and where the ruptures are (family vs. friends vs. partnership vs. religion).

Apart from the work with Sam I had many talks with James Muriuki and Syowia Kyambi, too. After a presentation of Prof. J. Alexander in May 2015, he (J.A.) and members of the Bayreuth Academy discussed about "How to be middle class in Nairobi" with photos of James Muriuki as a visual background.

How do you think an interdisciplinary approach (Science and Arts) like this can create new knowledge?

FS: Artists follow their own logics which is very different from the scientific logic that is less intuitive. A possible way to create new knowledge is that scientists and artists examine the same topic or question – but from very different angles and combine their views without adapting themselves to the respective other field.

Field Work, Florian Stoll

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