

Self-styling Locality in *Cryptic: A Traveler's Diary*

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Almost from the first media products created by sub-Saharan African media artists, theories of identity have relied on “a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious—albeit fallen—past (tradition) and a redeemed future” promised by independence from colonial rule (Mbembe 2002, 249-250). Operating at the center of these constructs was a struggle to reclaim an *authentic* African self from a colonial legacy that dehumanized and denigrated black African culture. As the redemption promised by Independence failed to materialize, however, and globalization grew in influence, the old boundaries of locality and race as markers of authentic Africanness appear to have been destabilized. Instead, “African imaginations of the self” are now moving beyond the restrictions of “race and geography” to propose new models of identity that posit self as “born out of disparate but often intersecting practices” which “open the way for *self-styling*” (242). Self, therefore, becomes a temporal condition that transcends geography, and is created by moving forward in time and repeatedly challenged and changed by traversing flows of personal, local and global histories.

By drawing “referents from both local and global sources,” IngridMwangiRobertHutter’s digital artwork, *Cryptic: A Traveler's Diary* (2007) challenges static modalities of self and locality in favor of open-ended self-stylings that view identity as a process of becoming (265). Dedicated to surmounting difference in its many forms, the collective comprised by IngridMwangiRobertHutter brings together artistic expressions that bridge racial and geographical boundaries by merging disparate times and locales into a transglobal expression of self. As Achille Mbembe argues, theories of African identity have long spun between the twin poles of what he describes as “nativism” and “Afro-radicalism” (240). Under these schema, African identity is predicated on racial difference and/or “Marxist and nationalist categories” in order “to develop an imaginaire of culture” (240). However, as the pressure of globalism contributes to the economic and political strife of African nations attempting to rise above subsistence economies, these categories have begun to break down as absolute determinants

of Africanness. At the heart of these arguments is the notion that, just as Africa has been forged at the crossroads of multiple histories, so too have African identities. This is not an abrogation of the histories of colonialism that oppressed African cultures. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that such colonial legacies have created a variety of investments in Africanity, not all of which are inscribed within blackness alone. Instead of configuring Africanness within “territorialized identity and a racialized geography” it becomes possible, as Mbembe suggests, to view African identities “as a vast network of affinities” that encompass the many histories found within the continent’s boundaries (257, 258). From this perspective, Africans are no longer isolated victims at the mercy of globalizing influences, but are actants on the global platform.

For digital artists IngridMwangiRobertHutter, transnationality is inherent in their approach to art and African identity. Ingrid Mwangi, born in Kenya of Kenyan and German parents, and Robert Hutter, whose background is German, chose to become identified as a collective under the name IngridMwangiRobertHutter in order for their work to reflect “a level of equality in respect to gender as well as to cultural/geographical backgrounds.”¹ Thus, the collective, like the works it generates, spans the boundaries between nations, bodies and identities, and interrogates the spaces between Africa and colonialism, black and white, and self and other.²

Cryptic: A Traveler's Diary is an example of such an investigation. The artwork was originally exhibited as part of a group exhibition entitled *30 et presque-songes* which took place in September 2007 at the Centre Culturel Albert Camus in Antananarivo, Madagascar. A transdisciplinary group exhibition, *30 et presque-songes* featured artists from Madagascar and around the world working in a variety of disciplines including design, video, fashion and architecture, among others. As an installation, *Cryptic* is comprised of a large-scale black box which gallery spectators enter. The floor of the box is light-colored and covered with various designs comprised of black liquid chalk letters inspired by

alphabets from different cultures. The walls, which are black, are also similarly decorated, but in this case, the designs are executed in white liquid chalk. By blurring the boundaries between alphabet and artistic design, *Cryptic* draws attention to the process of cultural transfer and the impossibility of assigning static meaning to language, art or self in a global context where journey is as much a function of self as origin.

In synchronicity with the designs, *Cryptic* evidences the affiliative process of journey and self through a video loop projected on one wall. The images of the video were shot over the length of a year and document the collective's travel through a variety of nation spaces.³ Images for the video were then created by digitally combining landscapes of Nairobi, Tokyo, Heights of Aripo in Trinidad, Western Desert of Egypt and Dakar into an imaginary locale that questions how journey and intersecting histories affect identity. For example, one striking sequence begins with a long shot of a desert. Over this is superimposed a medium long shot of Mwangi standing at the windows of a skyscraper overlooking a Tokyo cityscape. As the two images merge, the hills of the desert seemingly become the background of the cityscape, combining geography, space and time. Mwangi's figure, prominent on the left side of the image, mediates between the two spaces as she inscribes invisible letters on the window with her finger. The sequence then cuts to a medium shot of Mwangi at the window, still tracing invisible letters. Again, the city scene is superimposed over the desert, but this time a series of shots of Mwangi walking across

the desert landscape is also visible. As the desert figure walks towards the city figure, the cityscape fades to reveal Mwangi, in a long shot, walking alone across the desert. The effect of this sequence suggests that all journeys across borders are connected, and thus inscribe that connection on self. In this context, Mwangi's identity is not only African and German, but also an amalgam of all the borders and histories she has crossed in her lifetime. Viewed in this fashion, African identity ceases to be a static product of a singular history of oppression, and is instead portrayed as an active agent in affecting the global flows of culture.

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- 1 This statement is taken from IngridMwangiRobertHutter's website. For more information, please consult IngridMwangiRobertHutter's "The Collective Idea. Reflections on the Retrospective Formation of a Collective" located at http://www.ingridmwangi.de/mh/text_ingrid_mwangi_collective.html.
 - 2 The collective's works have been exhibited worldwide, and include such works as *IngridMwangiRobertHutter: Selected Videos* at The Rotunda Gallery (2007) in New York, *Man of War* (2006), at Kunstverein Ingolstadt in Germany and *Beauty/beast* (2005) at the Wella Museum in Darmstadt, Germany.
 - 3 See photographs of the installation and artists' statements at the following URL: http://www.ingridmwangi.de/mh/cryptic_a_travelers_diary_2007_installation.html

References

- Mbembe, Achille. 2002. "African Modes of Self-Writing." Trans. Steven Rendall. In *Public Culture* 14(1). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 239-273.