

CO-CREATIVE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

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We present a series of artist-led interventions with the Festival de l'Eau in Burkina Faso, that span the decade, 2000-2010. Its long term nature offers rare insight into sustained relationships with rural, hard to reach communities. We reflect on the ways the collaborative creative situations we established can draw upon similar processes as participatory design and whether they are relevant in a context of North-South cultural exchange.



Camel Zecri, co-organiser of Festival de l'Eau, in discussion with village elders in Léri.

INTRODUCTION

The Festival de l'Eau went to Burkina Faso in 2000 and came back in 2010. This particular context allowed for a sustained relationship with rural, hard to reach communities. By bringing electronic media technologies to destinations off the grid from main information and utilities infrastructures situates these means of creative production in contexts that reveal their potential to facilitate cross cultural communication and actualization of local identity in global contexts.

We describe in this paper the approach of the Festival de l'Eau and some of the activities that involved both the artists and the local population in an often spontaneous, collaborative way. "Postcolonial computing," as coined by Irani in the domain of human-computer interaction (HCI), offers an "alternative sensibility to the process of design" that acknowledges the cultural specificity of a location and the questions of power at stake with the use of digital technologies. [5] Here we apply Irani's analytical framework exposing the "culturally located and power laden" aspects of design practice, to the creative arts. We consider whether the collaborative creative situations we established in Burkina Faso draw upon similar processes from bottom-up methods of participatory design and whether they are relevant in a context of North-South cultural exchange.

FESTIVAL DE L'EAU

The Festival de l'Eau is an artist-led initiative of musicians Camel Zekri and Dominique Chevaucher, founded in the late 1990's with a series of artist exchanges between Europe and Africa that took place in the form of concert tours by boat to remote villages in Niger, the Central African Republic, and Burkina Faso. This was followed by concerts on alternate years in Europe with the African musicians met on location. While the project uses the word, "festival" in its title, it is not a regular artistic event in the classic sense of the word. It was, instead, a series of itinerant activities focusing on improvised music as a conduit to cultural exchange. In this sense, the word festival is used in its definition as celebration – festival de l'eau as "celebration of water."

In 2000, a group of 15 European musicians toured six rural villages along the Mouhoun River in Burkina Faso. The tour took place by boat, allowing the artists to reach villages that were inaccessible by road and entirely off the utilities and power grid. A gasoline driven electric generator powered a sound system, laptop computers, and synthesizers to enable performances of electronic music alongside traditional African music. In 2001, 2003, and 2009, the same group of musicians from Europe and Burkina Faso met again for concerts in European venues such as the Fondation Cartier in Paris.

In 2010, four of the original European musicians regrouped to revisit some of the same villages. While in 2000, the tour by pirogue (a canoe-like river boat) took 3 weeks and toured six villages, the 2010 tour was abbreviated – taking place by van in just one week, and revisiting 3 of the 6 villages. While there had been advances in infrastructure over the decade since the original journey, two of the three villages remained without electricity, and access to one of them by van was arduous.

Chevaucher and Zekri had worked with video archives from the 2000 tour to produce four short films: one presenting the Festival de l'Eau in an impressionistic documentary, and one film for each of the 3 villages revisited in 2010 specifically documenting the arrival, meeting, encampment, and concert in 2000. At the beginning of the evening event and concert, the film corresponding to that village was screened for the inhabitants of the village outdoors in public space. We sought to identify villagers who might have been present at the original 2000 tour, perhaps appeared in the film, for interview.

For the 2010 return, the Festival de l'Eau invited researchers from the Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy (SiDE) project at Culture Lab Newcastle. [10] With this involvement, one additional field researcher and a battery of portable media capture equipment was deployed to document the encounter and to deliver additional activities beyond music concerts. The availability of video projection equipment locally to supplement this added a visual component not present in the 2000 edition of the festival.

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

In addition to the film screening and concerts, at one village, in Léri, we conducted a half-day digital photography workshop in the village school. The group was comprised of twelve school children aged between 11 and 13.

The workshop began with mutual oral introductions, with each student writing their name on sheets of paper that were later used as chapter marks in the final slide show of photographs. We next distributed 3 low cost, minimally featured digital cameras, and introduced their basic operation, and practiced with them in the classroom. We formed three groups of four children (each group comprised of two girls and

two boys) and sent on a photographic journey of the village, each accompanied by one of the researchers or musicians. In each group, the four children took their turn with one digital camera, snapping photos of their village and their surroundings.

After an initial tour of the village, the children went back to the classroom and downloaded the pictures onto a laptop computer. As a group, we looked at them together and commented on them. One of the groups went out on a second tour, this time without an accompanying adult. The workshop facilitators compiled a slide show of all the photographs, and used images of the paper sheets with handwritten names to identify which group had taken which photos. In the evening, after the film screening and before the concert, the slide show was projected using the video projector for all in the village.

OBSERVATIONS

The Festival de l'Eau was organised in an artist-led, grassroots manner. This enabled it to be agile, and access remote villages that had not attracted the attention of larger scale cultural initiatives, humanitarian or industrial initiatives. The villages were chosen in part by the festival organisers for these reasons. While this gave us a rare glimpse into daily life in rural Burkina Faso at a human proximity that might otherwise be difficult to achieve, the outcomes of the work, and the impact of cultural exchange are difficult to quantify. Here we offer empirical reflection on the effect we observed, and the interaction we engaged in, that touches on the effects of memory of a decade-long re-encounter, and question of identity, and the potential of a culturally, politically neutral use of digital technologies as facilitator of cultural exchange.

The most compelling opportunity presented by the project was the ten year time span over which it took place. This offered a unique chance to conduct a longitudinal study, all within the constraints and limits of improvised encounters. To have remained in contact, or to have re-contacted three of the same villages a decade apart means that a long term relationship had been established, lending a real form of legacy to the original 2000 trip. According to the organisers, Chevaucher and Zekri, the ephemeral and transitory nature of cultural exchange is often an element that can undermine deeper ties. Here we can argue that a form of sustained relationship had been established, cultivating trust that enabled rich interaction on the return despite its more rapid nature, and facilitated the increased types of activity conducted on the second trip.

The ten year span of images created a unique situation for reflexivity and memory. We documented the reaction of villagers as they viewed the film of the 2000 trip with video cameras. Individual moments of recognition, surprise, and collective reactions of glee were characteristic. Children saw their parents at a younger age. Some revered village elders had since passed away and were remembered. That there was a clear joy and enthusiasm upon our return, and a real memory of the 2000 event. Our return was a total surprise, and the resulting happiness was the clearest emotion that was expressed in conversation.

We attempted, with limited success, to organise interviews with and ask casual questions of those who may have been at the concert in 2000. In one extended interview, conducted through a non-professional interpreter, of a villager Zante Kolé in the village of Walo, we were able to make the following observations. The interviewee took the opportunity of the interview to articulate a need for development and infrastructural improvements to take place in order to enhance the quality of life and socio-economic viability of the village. This was corroborated in two other interviews in the city of Dedougou and

town of Ouessa, where discussion of the need of infrastructural improvements touched on Internet access. The question remains whether articulation of this need was opportunistic or whether it is tied in a more profound way to the form of cultural exchange we put in place. Tempering expectation to the bounds of the original (in this case artistic) mission is instrumental here.

In the digital photography workshop, we gave very few directions as to what the children were to capture with the cameras. In one of the group, a certain girl, Odette decided to take pictures of her household and courtyard, the other one, Asséta, took pictures of the cotton exchange market, one of the boy, Souleymane, reported on a family courtyard and the other one, Drissa, took pictures of people in the back alleys of the village. After they were able to see the pictures when they came back to their classroom, we invited them to do another round of documentation, this time on their own. From the pictures they brought back the second time, we noticed that they were more focused on the subjects and attentive at details: they reported on a funeral that was happening that morning, by the village mosque. Looking at the first batch of pictures and being able to reflect back at them may have guided them to choose to report on a unique event.

Mutual trust that had been developed over the course of the decade-long relationship created a situation where rights to image and to video and photographic representation were not issues.

The Festival de l'Eau not only offered a context of transcultural musical collaboration but also invited the local population to attend a video screening and to look back at a ten-year old event to which their village participated. Involving the new generation into a digital photography workshop as they documented the life of their village for one morning and conducting spontaneous interviews throughout the journey enabled the festival to pursue an informal cultural exchange with the local population, initiated years before and in another form than musical.

With these creative means - music, digital photography, video interview, we aimed to establish a relationship with the people we would interact with, that would be driven by a collaborative approach and not be based on power. We draw upon fields of participatory design and apply a bottom up design ethos to the creative use of digital technologies.

Co-creation (co-design, co-created creative expression) allows users of a particular product, system or service to actively participate to and to share responsibilities in the design process and its outcomes. The expansion of participatory design methods have influenced a shift in design practice, [7] particularly where digital technology, interaction design, creative practice and interdisciplinary research are involved - an environment that the researchers involved in this project are coming from.

The participatory approach in co-creative use of digital technologies allows us to introduce these technologies to the local population in a non-prescriptive way. This offers an alternative to power-based, hierarchical and top-down decision-making processes that impose technology on new users, and may in certain circumstances overlook needs that can variate according to cultural or practical contexts. [5]

Because the project was undertaken in a West African country, we address the potential heightened relevance of participatory design in a non-Western context and its possible role in bridging the "digital divide." [3] Indeed, we can relate these ambitions of non-power driven relationships to the aspirations at play in postcolonialism : that of contesting colonialism's power structures and remaining hierarchical heritage. [1] And we notice that other projects seem to have certain similarities in term of context,

methodology and tools, thus possibly constituting a wider acceptance of co-creative processes among researchers, and practitioners. [6]

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH IN RELATED WORK

Our approach builds upon those of similar creative projects that place an emphasis on digital technologies, cultural exchange and participatory design in non-Western contexts and in African countries.

There are a number of projects initiated by research laboratories and institutes. *RAW* is an audiophotography project developed at the Media Lab Europe Human Connectedness group and took place in Mali. It deployed audio and still-image recording technologies configured in such a way as to afford capturing accounts of everyday life with minimal mediation by third parties. [2] By shifting the attention to the ordinary (as opposed to extra-ordinary events), the project aimed to enable accounts less pervious to stereotypes and clichés that might blur the understanding of a different culture than one's own. Furthermore, the content remained unedited throughout the process ("raw"), implementing what was called a "minimal mediation" from the researchers involved (or third-parties). And as it integrated a non-selection process in its design, the authors of the accounts were spontaneous and direct in their approach of the content recorded. Yet, it assumes that it's not entirely a bottom-up approach as the concept was originally driven by an artist's perspective.

Mobile Learning for Development, of London Knowledge Lab, looks at international development, mobile technologies and learning in Nigeria, Kenya, and Zambia. It establishes a dynamic of co-design in the creation of knowledge exchange platforms through a series of workshops and open online resources.

Made in Burkina is a project developed by the Madeira Interactive Technologies Institute which leveraged support of media companies, European local government, and World Bank funded African NGO's to put in place broadband infrastructure in provincial Burkina Faso. In the researcher's report of his work, it's relevant to note that as he came to install an infrastructure and teach local population uses of Internet tools for communication and even micro-businesses (such as Google tools, YouTube, online publisher Lulu, etc), he also drew design lessons from his observations of local uses of services and from the projects elaborated by the participants of his workshops. These design lessons are shaping his current work. [4]

Events such as conferences and festivals in cultural and other sectors promote local initiatives through participation in international networks. Forum InnovAfrica presented innovative initiatives in communication and information technologies in francophone West Africa and was organised as a collaboration of Fondation Internet Nouvelle Génération (FING), a French technology innovation NGO and ANPE Mali, the Malian employment agency.

Kër Thioossane is a Dakar-based organization and place that promotes creativity and cultural expression, in particular with new media technologies. They have established Rose des vents numériques, a knowledge sharing network and program between Senegal, Mali, South Africa and the Caribbeans, within which have been organized festivals such as AfroPixel, artist residencies and workshops. International grassroots meetings in "Do It Yourself" (DIY) movements have had local chapters in Africa, with *Upgrade!Dakar* promoting local digital artists and practitioners as part of the international Upgrade! Network.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the observations made in our field work and the different studies cited above, we argue for a collaborative approach and co-design processes that support the case for non-power driven relationships. Furthermore, we consider that elements at stake in participatory design - user-centred design, empowerment, responsibility, democratisation of process - can be relevant in post-colonialism contexts where the local population may not have been involved in decision-making processes and bear the consequences of non-adapted solutions, such as digital technologies, brought on by Western interests. [9]

Because digital technologies are the tools that form the basis of the collaboration we propose, be they through our own design, or simply through creatively use (re-use or misuse), we should address the values that they carry in a post-colonial context. Studies surrounding the “digital divide” [8] address issues of unequal access to technology and policy centered on access may be criticized on the basis that digital technology enforces a gap. Could it be that within its design and uses, digital technology could enable an equal type of relationship? The argument could be made that with technology that is developed in a Western country, that power still lies in with the owner of the technology. While it would be simplistic to consider that this is not an issue, recent world events do point to cases where, for example, knowledge sharing with social networking, can enable forms of empowerment. A collaborative arts-based approach, as we document here, makes possible ways of introducing digital technology in co-creative ways, ways in which all parties involved define, subvert or reinvent its uses and outcomes.

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