Conversation Session: Mediated Empowerment

Using Media and Technology to Amplify the Voices of Local Communities

Category: Socially engaged media art

Panel conveners: Jill Scott and Eugenio Tisselli

Speakers in presentation sequence:

– Nan Kolè from Gqom Oh! (Durban, South Africa)

gqomubhenga@gmail.com

– Jill Scott from Eskin4 (Zurich, Switzerland)

info@jillscott.org

– Stefanie Wuschitz and Patricia J. Reis from Mz* Baltazar (Vienna, Austria)

stefanie.wuschitz@gmail.com, **patriciajoaoreis@gmail.com**

– Eugenio Tisselli from ojoVoz (Barcelona, Spain)

eugenio@openculture.agency

ABSTRACT

How can media and technology be used to amplify the voices of local communities? Various groups are now forming to provide local communities with new media art opportunities for visibility and empowerment. These communities are micro communities or micro-cultures, often with immaterial infrastructures or unorthodox approaches. The organizers are interested in media art as a voice for autonomy and collaboration, and all focus on small scale human-centered activities that promote anti-monopoly and community orientation. Their activities aim to empower local users with hands on experience and technological understanding. They focus on curiosity and confidence through demystification and intersectional participation, indeed they value the very need to share and learn about each others differences. All all cases, the voices of the members from local communities are seldom heard and need to be recognized, celebrated and amplified.

In this panel four representatives from current media-based initiatives talk about their own deep engagement with their respective communities. They explore the relevance of these initiatives within their local and broader contexts, and focus on both the different and similar ways they engage with actors: artists, scientists, technologists and activists. They reflect on how these socially-engaged transdisciplinary collaborations may bring about empowerment and investigate the long-term potentials of the media and technologies that are put to use. Specific topics will be addressed like access, visibility, empowerment, feminism, the commons, ownership, colonialism and post-colonialism, appropriation, and reciprocity. The diverse disciplines of the communities represented in this panel – *small scale farming, street music, feminist hacking and visual impairment*–guarantee a rich discussion, backed by the depth of their theoretical approaches and the solidarity of hands-on and on-the-ground experiences for each community.

Bios and Abstracts

Nan Kolè DJ and label owner Nan Kolè is a natural-born musical activist. A long-time advocate of contemporary African music and trans-national cultural exchange and runs the label Gqom Oh!

URL: https://www.residentadvisor.net/dj/nankole

Gqom Oh!

Gqom Oh! is a record label and entire movement set up to spread the Gqom music and culture from the Durban townships. Spreading a consistent and powerful message the label provides a conduit and a pedestal for the joyous aesthetic to be experienced outside also of the South African territory. In terms of vision, label head - Nan Kolè has collated a lexicon of primal and futuristic styles selecting only the most innovative flows to be an intrinsic part of his curatorial pallet. A coarse blend of infectious carnal pop culture paired with a DIY ethos ensures a continuous and inexhaustible supply chain of ghetto infused time-bombs which are creating huge ripples across the atlantic with outlets such as Rolling Stone, Fader and Pitchfork launching acclaim. The Gqom community evoke a tight-knit brotherhood, often displayed at impromptu taxi-rank gatherings where they celebrate life and creativity. Tracks withhold a strong narrative and with a bright timbre, mask any traces of oppression. Gqom has its own conscious and unconscious language, one of erasing suffering, one of defiance and one of projecting a brighter future but on top of all of that it's about dance and freedom of expression.

Jill Scott is a media artist, educator and writer. Her focus is on Art and Science research and she works with creative teams of programmers and AI experts to explore neuroscience, ecology and sensory perception.

URL: https://www.jillscott.org/artwork/current_e_skin.html

Eskin 4 for the visually impaired

Eskin is a long term project to empower blind users with wearable and usable technology, and encouraging participants in workshops to be creative and to customize their own sound and tactile information from local environments. Our aim is to gather cross-model information through local workshops and help users add to the design of the technology itself. Over time, eskin has become a set of wearable interfaces, which constitute our past and present attempts to electronically simulate the perceptive modalities of the human skin: pressure, temperature, vibration and proprioception. These four modalities constitute our biggest human organ, constantly detecting and reacting to environmental realities. The interfaces explore the cross-modal potentials of tactile and acoustic feedback, the enhanced orientation of cognitive mapping and the need to embody the interaction in the digital environment. The content often cumulates from the comments by the workshop participants and can include samples from their daily narratives mixed with trigger points from wearable computing and teachers from improvisational movement. The workshop usually cumulate in performance called Eskin 4 the Visually Impaired. Together with experts the teachers of the workshops encourage the participants to customize and sample sounds and allow for them to be changed in an easy way. The resultant performances provide an insight into heightened levels of sensory perception for others (the seeing audience) while the experience empowers the participants with a high level of creative experience and knowledge exchange that can be reused and redeveloped by these same communities again.

Stefanie Wuschitz and Patricia J. Reis

Stefanie Wuschitz works at the intersection of research, art and technology, with a particular focus on Critical Media Practices (feminist hacking, open source technology, peer production. In 2009 she founded the feminist hackerspace *Mz* Baltazar's Laboratory* in Vienna, encouraging technology that is developed from a female perspective. She is collaborating with scholars in the fields of Human Computer Interaction, STS and Digital Art.

Patrícia J. Reis is an installation media artist based in Vienna (At) whose practice encompasses different formats and media to examine how interactive technology is shaping humans bodily and politically. She is a board member of the collective Mz* Baltazar's Lab, a feminist hackerspace based in Vienna that aims at generating a culture of fearless making and empower creativity.
URL: http://www.mzbaltazarslaboratory.org/about/

Mz* Baltazar Lab

We are a feminist hackerspace in Vienna. We organize queer-feminist tech workshops and contemporary visual art exhibitions at our lab. Mz Baltazar's Lab aims at generating a culture of fearless making! An environment that fosters creativity, activism and provocative thinking! We try to build an accessible, inclusive, open, safer and radical space, from which to evolve as people and as community. Open Source Technology is at the root of our philosophy, it enables us to share and collaborate without restrictions. We need this space to experiment with things as gender, hardware or ourselves. Transparent, open technology (open source technology) is very important to us, because through this kind of shared resource we can learn about software and hardware without any hindrance and develop them together. We need the common framework to play with, and sometimes question, a variety of things, such as gender, hardware, and even our self (or construction). Our workshops are for women, trans, cyber feminists, non-binary artists and feminist hackers…they represent different, sometimes contradicting concepts and strategies. Some to gain agency and visibility, others to enhance tech literacy, to create a room of one's own or a safer space, to manage collective living, to work with a non-binary perspective on gender and situated knowledge, to agree on a code of conduct or an idea of justice. Participants are encouraged to create hands-on objects and artistic prototypes that express our experience and comment on recent national and international events.

Eugenio Tisselli is a media artist and programmer. He is the director of the ojoVoz, a sociotechnical platform for the collaborative creation of community memories.
URL: http://ojovoz.net

ojoVoz - Sauti ya wakulima

Sauti ya wakulima (The voice of the farmers in Swahili) is an ongoing project that aims to provide small-scale farming communities with a sociotechnical platform that enables their reciprocal exchange of agricultural knowledge. Sauti ya wakulima started in 2011, and has helped a growing number of small-scale farmers in different regions in Tanzania to amplify their voices by creating networks of mutual exchange of knowledge, particularly in the context of diverse challenges, such as anthropogenic climate change. In its initial phase, Sauti ya wakulima reached a limited number of farmers living in the community of Chambezi, in the Coastal Region of Tanzania, who used mobile phones to share contents on a collaborative online platform. The

original participants of the project claimed ownership of the project by reshaping its goals, and successfully created a knowledge base of more than 3000 images and sound recordings that reflects their ways of coping with the many challenges they face. In its current phase, the project is expanding and will shortly reach approximately 5000 farmers living in different regions of the country, thanks to the support of Swiss NGO Swissaid and other local organizations. In this new stage, Sauti ya wakulima will be recast as a platform for the sharing of knowledge on agroecology by bringing together farmers and experts from local and international institutions. In this way, the project aims to trigger fruitful and mututally respectful interactions between different domains of knowledge and practice (scientific and farmer-held), while helping farmers in their efforts of taking up more sustainable agricultural practices.

Main Contact: Eugenio Tiselli
eugenio@openculture.agency