Connected to the Umbilical of the World

Andreas Hirsch: There are questions that are posed in the wrong way, which is why there are no correct answers to them. But it can make sense to ask such a question anyway because doing so lets you find out what's actually wrong with the point of view that the question represents. One such question might be: Is Africa plugged-in or unplugged?

Davis O. Nejo: Plugged-in or unplugged—there's nothing wrong with the question, since it's one that is continually posed in Africa as well, whether in relation to business, politics, technology or religion.

But there's something I have to explain up front. There is a certain tendency to consider the continent of Africa as a single land, and to forget that Africa currently consists of 54 countries. Although the people in Africa accept being called Africans, they are nevertheless citizens of different countries.

It's a part of African tradition to be either plugged-in or unplugged. In African tradition, for example, a young man or a young woman gets plugged-in through a special ceremony, or he/she remains unplugged because he/she refuses to go through with this ceremony or doesn't belong to this particular group. So then, what does being plugged-in or unplugged consist of? When we speak of plugged-in today, we mean people who are connected to the so-called umbilical of the world—those, for example, who have a TV and a computer at home or who go out to the movies. But unplugged doesn't mean that people—even those in other cultures—who don't have these devices don't receive the information, since there is an informal, culturally-determined way to obtain information. It is precisely here that more should be invested, because then the question of plugged-in or unplugged will become obsolete—like a matter of fashion that is in or out—and new ways of achieving cultural communication will be opened up. I call that cross-cultural communication. If we're speaking of Africa, then Africa is plugged-in too since it's connected to the so-called umbilical of the world.

Which part of Africa do we mean when we speak of plugged-in or unplugged? Do we mean large African cities like Johannesburg, Cairo, Lagos, Accra, Tripoli, etc. or do we mean small villages that are more plugged-in—in a different sense of the word—than some countries that believe themselves to be plugged-in? The technological upgrading of these areas is, in any case, the future of economic growth. Now, whether the question is thus wrong or right depends upon the perspective of the person posing it. So, at this point, I will ask the person who posed the question a few questions of my own:

1. Are you plugged-in when you're spiritually plugged-in, acoustically plugged-in, telephonically plugged-in, or are you plugged-in only when you're online?
2. Who specifies the criteria? According to statistical criteria, an estimated 80% of European households have a computer; however, each of these devices is used only by an estimated one to four persons. In 1998 in Nigeria, for example, there
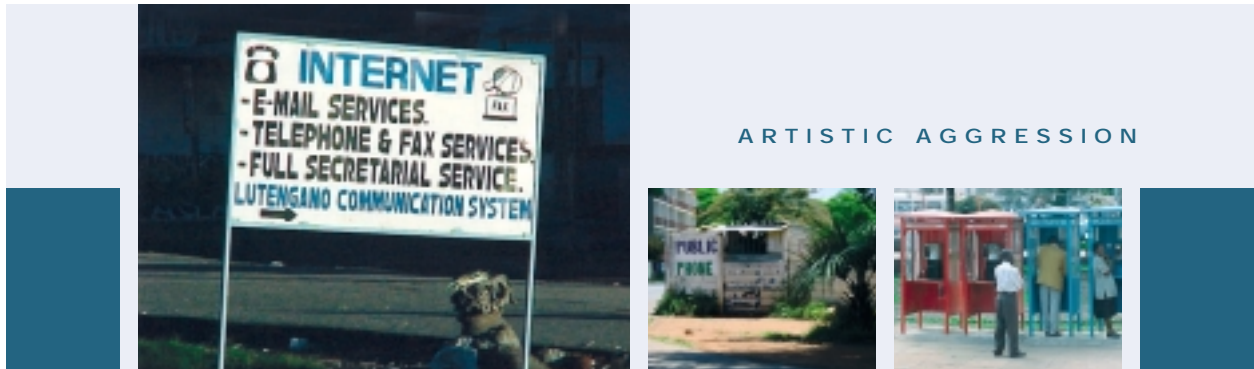
were only 10,000 Internet hook-ups (trend: steeply rising) for a population of 106 million (see www3.sn.apc.org/africa). These 10,000 hook-ups, however, are used by up to 2,000,000 persons (approximately 200 individuals per computer). This yields a completely different picture. By now, there are definitely five times more Internet hook-ups than there were in 1998—after all, since the first Internet café opened up in Senegal, they've been sprouting up like mushrooms all over Africa.

The telecommunications market is undergoing a similar development. According to the International Telecommunications Union's *African Indicators Report* (see "New African," June 2002, p. 34), there were 14 million landline telephone hook-ups and a million cellular subscribers in 1996 in all 54 African countries. By 2001, the figures had risen to 28 million cellular and 22 million landline subscribers. This example illustrates the rapid development of the telecommunications market in Africa. We are really looking forward to seeing the results of the next statistical survey!

What about the large group of Africans living in the diaspora who maintain links to their homeland? What significance can be attributed to them passing on information by being plugged-in to their native country? In Europe and the US in recent years, there's been a boom in telecenters run by Africans to facilitate contact between people in the diaspora and their homeland. Some of them also own telecenters in Africa.

3. What use is being plugged-in or unplugged to us? That's the next question we should ask—culturally, politically and religiously.

Africa can be plugged-in only when Africans' ideas and possibilities are accepted, respected and supported. But the way I see it, the African success story will fail to materialize even after 100 years of G-8 meetings without reparations payments for slavery and exploitation.

Andreas Hirsch: Media art plays a central role in your work just as it does at Ars Electronica. Media art is also a matter of working artistically with modern technology, thematicizing the media themselves, etc. If we briefly focus on this aspect of the many facets of plugged-in or unplugged that you've cited, how does the situation look in this particular area?

Davis O. Nejo: Media art was something I began to study as a child in Nigeria. I was one of the youngest in my circle of friends to build a 16mm projector on my own, and I showed short film sequences with it. When I attended the Academy of Film in Vienna, my reason for pursuing these studies at the time was to document and archive the different African cultures—and particularly my own Yoruba culture— on audiovisual and later virtual media. This was evident in my 1998 exhibition "Afrome-di@rt—Contemporary Media Art from Africa," which can still be viewed on the Web at the Online Archive for Media Art from Africa (www.crossculturalcommunication.org).

Where Hollywood Meets Bollywood

Africa was confronted by these media technologies from the very outset. Consider, for example, the documentary films about Africa shot by travelers from Europe. Even back in those days, some Africans were involved in this plugged-in system in that they were members of the production crew—even if their names didn't appear in the credits. It was simply the case, unfortunately, that the situation was difficult for others: first of all, it was impossible in many parts of Africa to purchase professional cameras, and, secondly, the technical preconditions for film development were nonexistent. That changed in 1948 in Ghana with the founding of the Gold Coast Film Union, which had the best 35mm film equipment in all of tropical Africa. The first showing of a film in Africa (in Egypt) had already taken place in 1896, but it took another 31 years for the first African film to be shot *(Leila* by Istephan Rosti and Werdad Orfi). In any case, this technology is "new" all over the world; otherwise, it wouldn't be called a "new" technology. And throughout the world today, many more films are being produced—in India, in Africa, etc. Hollywood and Bollywood stand side-by-side now in Africa.

Andreas Hirsch: As you said, the answer is a question of perspective. From a European perspective, Europe is rather unplugged with respect to African cultural contexts. Knowledge about the work you've mentioned is pretty damn meager.

Davis O. Nejo: The new technology is a tool for those people who would like to get involved in it. Not many Europeans deal with Africa. The interest in Africa is very limited. Let me put it this way: any child in Africa has more information about Europe than is available in Europe about Africa. The information that Westerners have about Africans—their way of life and work, daily existence, culture, religion, language, and countries—is restricted to a level of exoticism, dance, crises, hunger, etc. Europe is plugged into Africa with its development aid policy. That's why a discourse like the one taking place at this year's Ars Electronica Festival is very important in order to shed some light on things and to open up new paths.

Davis O. Nejo, 1976

The entire world is like a spaceship, and we're all on a journey. When something has an impact on this world, it affects everybody, as we all saw on September 11. Matters of importance plug people into one another. Then, there's no longer a separate Africa, Europe or America; then everyone pulls together in the same direction.

Andreas Hirsch: The different sectors of art production make use of different channels—among them, established and less established channels that are all part of the art system consisting of galleries, museums, art publications, etc. For sectors like media art, there are, in turn, subsystems including festivals like Ars Electronica. There also exist more informal channels through which a great deal of information flows. In concrete terms, what significance do these channels have for your work as a curator for media art from Africa?

Davis O. Nejo: I'm not here to reinvent the wheel. This is why I as an independent curator can work with all available channels. I'm happy that my friend Okwui Enwezor is the curator of this year's Documenta 11, and that the Biennale in Dakar is a success. The available possibilities have by no means been exhausted. "There are not yet enough museums that are able to provide access to art, and particularly new media art," said Oladele Kuku, a curator and a friend of mine. The new media are doing a good job in this area. Here, a new way has opened up with the World Wide Web, for example.

In going about my job as a curator for the Ars Electronica Festival, I've selected works according to the following criteria: artists whose works deal with the theme "Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts," those who are also involved in traditional art and artists of the young generation. The selected artists include Emeka Udemba, Moataz Nasr, Souyabou Kandji, Bouna Medoune Seye, Baba Diawara et frères, as well as my works in the context of @rtScreen and the "HSC—High Social Cinema—Horror-Sitcom-Comedy Film" project.

Andreas Hirsch: What's the concept of @rtScreen?

Davis O. Nejo: *@rtScreen* will premier at Ars Electronica 2002 and then continue to run afterwards. *@rtScreen* is a new dimension in the presentation of art and culture in public space. What people do in public space, what atmosphere emerges there, and how art establishes a connection with this space are among the themes that will be treated in the context of *@rtScreen*.

It's an interactive project that people can also see in the Internet. *@rtScreen* will then take place worldwide on all continents with artists from a wide range of countries. In setting this up, we're working together with many different institutions—universities, associations, artistic and cultural organizations—and collecting their works.

@rtScreen will not just restrict itself to projections or playback of video material on monitors, and it will not only be presented on existing screens or integrated into their programs; instead, new "screens"—media interfaces, installations, etc.— are going to be created by the artists themselves. This will be launched at our first presentation at the Ars Electronica Festival.

The basic idea behind *@rtScreen* is: "To screen the arts to a possible minimum, so that you can show it on an open space."

Andreas Hirsch: Your project for Ars Electronica 2002 strongly concentrates on creating sites of encounter and interaction. This is very much in line with qualities of communication that are strongly represented in African tradition: opportunities for exchange, and putting art in a situation where it's not being shown in elitist isolation in a museum but rather among the proverbial "people on the street." How do you plan to go about reaching people in this way?

Davis O. Nejo: People who leave their homes and walk down the street enter a separate world—the public space. This space can be, for example, a train station where everyone is in a hurry to board a train and be on their way. It's possible that a work of art might not attract much attention under these circumstances, but an artist might be attracted by the idea of doing something precisely there and in this atmosphere. Such artists are the ones I'd like to support with my project.

Videocover   DVD-Cover

Why do I do this? Because I see that communication is important to people, since the interaction between art and the public engenders an atmosphere that either slows down or speeds up our perception. In this situation, the information should be provided that makes it possible to experience something together with others. That's this "sphere" which it's important to fill with content and not to leave empty. It's a matter of this "filling" of places with well thought-out works and ideas that can be taken up by others and carried on in their own style. This ought to become an institutionalized way of seeing art, one in which things proceed from the inside to the outside. That's the fundamental sense of media art—that artists are given the opportunity to present their works to the public.

Andreas Hirsch: Let's now turn to another field of artistic production. In Nigeria, there's an intensive video and film production scene that disseminates its products very quickly and distributes them to people in Africa and in the diaspora. What elements make up the cultural core of this scene? There are horror films, sitcoms etc. How does this scene function, how did it take shape and how did it develop?

Davis O. Nejo: In Nigeria, this scene developed out of the oral tradition of the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. In Nigeria, there are 260 different languages and ethnic groups with their own cultures, which of course, also exerted a strong influence in this area. Here, different religions, worldviews, and cultural variations make essential contributions to the success of these videos.
The first film showings in English-speaking West Africa took place in 1903 in Lagos; from 1925 on, movie theaters were being erected everywhere. Then came the so-called "cinema busses" that brought films to people throughout the country, even where there where no movie theaters. So, they were plugged-in too. The films were shown in public spaces—marketplaces, crossroads, etc.
In 1959, the first TV station in Ibadan, Nigeria was set up. There was only state-owned television and most of the films were imported. Nevertheless, many films were also being produced in Nigeria. The first 100% Nigerian film to achieve international fame was the 1970 production *Kongi's Harvest* by Ossie Davis based on a book by Nobel Prize-winning author Wole Soyinka. In the beginning, Nigeria consisted of four parts: East, West, North and South. When the first 12 provinces were established after the Biafra War, each province had its own TV station. Today there

are 36 provinces; in addition, there are two state-owned TV stations, and 14 licenses for privately owned TV stations were handed out in 1999.

When the first video cameras began to appear around 1980, people started to work with this equipment. The films produced thereby are very special since they often have to do with mythology. They depict traditions and culture that the people had previously heard only from storytellers, and feature images that they had had only in their imagination before. The production of these stories on video has proved to be the right way, since they have led the various different cultures to begin to take an interest in the history of other ethnic groups, which has promoted understanding among them. That's why I call these videos in my work for Ars Electronica "HSC—High Social Cinema—Horror-Sitcom-Comic Films."

At first, there were semi-professional production firms, but these produced more and more films over time. One consequence of this was that there was more money available for these people to buy better equipment. New productions in other genres established themselves—for instance, sitcoms and comic films in which advertising helped finance the films.

Since these productions are not understood on the international market, they are produced mainly for domestic audiences. Just like music, though, these films also enjoy great popularity in the diaspora, since they remind people of their roots and their homeland. There is an enormous potential audience in Nigeria with its population of 120 million plus several million interested individuals in the diaspora. The film quality is so good that some first-run films can completely pack the theaters. Although the problem with pirated copies hasn't really been solved yet, new technologies like DVD and VideoDisc have made the productions more secure.

> Who knows which media will emerge in the future and how fast Africa will be able to get plugged into them?

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald

Here, some key data on telephone, radio and Internet in Nigeria:

Telephone Systems in Nigeria:
- Domestic Infrastructure: intercity traffic is carried by coaxial cable, microwave radio relay, a domestic communications satellite system with 19 earth stations, and a coastal submarine cable; mobile cellular facilities and the Internet are available
- International: satellite earth stations—3 Intelsat (2 Atlantic Ocean and 1 Indian Ocean); coaxial submarine cable SAFE (South African Far East).

Radios:
Radio Frequencies: 82 AM, 35 FM, 11 shortwave (1998)
Number of Radios: 23.5 million (1997)

Internet:
Internet Providers: 11 (2000)
Internet Users: 100,000 (2000)