

AFRICA.CONT: the place of music in the project

J.A. Fernandes Dias*

The AFRICA.CONT project evolves from a challenge that was launched for us and takes place because of the political will to respond to the absence in Portugal of a platform. In other words, a platform that fosters an understanding of contemporary African cultural creation, inserted within an inevitable context of development of Europe-Africa relations. The great enthusiasm with which we received the invitation to design and project this institution results from a concordance with this diagnosis, and with the proposed official agendas.

AFRICA.CONT was thus born as project of a platform for the development of relations of communication, cooperation and interaction between Europe, the African countries and their diasporas. Based on the affirmation of parity relations, privileging interaction of autonomous realities in their differentiation of roots and mental, intellectual and cultural structures, stemming from different histories, environments and forms of social, economical and political organisation; but all crossed by the same modernity and contemporaneity, and by the same challenges that globalisation processes put forward to them. And noncommittal regarding political trends, religious confessions, advocacy groups and business groups, is prepared its institutionalisation as a private foundation of public interest.

The cultural center AFRICA.CONT will be a dynamic and comprehensive space in geographical and political terms - from North Africa to South Africa, from Cape Verde to the Horn of Africa, and towards its European extensions and the Americas, the Middle East and South Asia. But it also wants to consider major cultural constellations, integrating all forms of African culture as an agent of contemporary globality: music but also visual arts, dance and theater, photography, film and video, architecture, urbanisation and design, literature and the humanities, fashion and cookery, including internet and electronics as cultural vehicles and supports par excellence of contemporaneity. We are also fully aware that we are living in a globalised world, where African cultural developments are interconnected with attempts to rethink the West and its cultural productions, out of its traditional hegemonic auto-narrative. That responds to a new consciousness of the world, and the art world, and do not resign itself to a tolerance based on paternalism, quotas and political correctness.

The program will include in-house productions, as well as co-productions with national and international institutions, that circulate; and will still be able to welcome

* Anthropologist and professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Universidade de Lisboa and consultant of the Service of Fine Arts of the Gulbenkian Foundation and directs the project Africa.cont (<http://Africa.cont/>).

relevant external initiatives. And will be developed in close cooperation with international and national experts. Its development is suggested in two formats. A large multidisciplinary annual project, whether thematic or regional - about a theme or a particular region, a pluridisciplinary program will be developed that extends itself over several months, and integrates the visual arts, cinema, comics, dance, music, theater, photography, literature and the humanities; with exhibitions, performances, shows, conferences, debates and readings. In addition, temporary events in various disciplines, and of shorter duration, but always seeking to establish a program that creates the context for these events. In addition to these temporary programs, it will work towards the creation of a range of services on a permanent basis and in process - the development of research projects, of residencies for African creators, the creation of a center of documentation, literature and media, which incorporates various disciplines, and of an educational program aimed at different age groups and different audiences.

Expected to start its full operation in 2012, after the construction of its installations (with a project of the Tanzanian architect David Adjaye), AFRICA.CONT will meanwhile keep a light and disperse schedule, using alternative spaces available in Lisbon. Thus, from March to May 2009, a cinema cycle took place - *African Screen-Novos Cinemas de Africa* curated by Manthia Diawara and Lydie Diakhaté - in twelve sessions, with discussions involving many of the presented filmmakers. In June, architect David Adjaye presented the preliminary study of the architectonic project, in the space where AFRICA.CONT will settle - Tercenas do Marquês, at Avenida 24 de Julho. And in December, we gathered a set of international personalities that are relevant in the African cultural world, in the meeting *Encontro Africa.Cont*; for two intense days, we reflected and discussed together what AFRICA.CONT is, what it can do and what it should be, thus following our aim from the beginning to work with Africa more than about Africa. Already in 2010, we will start the residencies of artists, and we will present three exhibitions - of photography, architecture and visual arts; and we organize a concert in which Victor Gama and the Kronos Quartet will present themselves with a program that sees its world premiere in New York in March of this year.

But music has so far taken up a significant place in the provisional programming. Already at the official presentation of the *Projecto* AFRICA.CONT in December 2008, Wyza premiered the show *Bakongo* at Cinema São Jorge, preceded by Grupo Wonderfull's Kova M that danced *Íman*. And in September, on the terraces of Tercenas do Marquês, three big names of three different musical areas of Africa presented themselves. The event was curated by our collaborator Paula Nascimento, who united the Kora Jazz Trio, the Ethiopian Mulatu Astatke & The Heliocentrics, and the Cape Verdean group Ferro Gaita, from the afternoon into the night.

But music will always occupy an important place in our programming. Whether in the final programming, in the two types of initiatives listed; or in the provisional stage

that we are in now, for many reasons. Its ubiquity in Africa, with the musical diversity and richness of the continent. Its importance in cultural, political and social life of the African populations; contemporaneously, but also traditionally. Its unique ability to articulate different genres, traditional and modern, African and others; of translating them to each other, resulting in a hybrid genres in a proliferation that is unmatched in any other cultural area; what has always happened – it suffices to think of Afro-Caribbean merengue, rumba or salsa, of Magrebean gnawa, of Brazilian lundun, choro or forró, of Cape Verdean morna or mazurca, coladeira, funaná, batuko tabanka, of North American jazz and blues; but that has an unprecedented scale in recent decades - afrobeat, rai, reggae, hip-hop, zouk, kizomba and kuduro or marra-benta. Since the twentieth century, it is difficult to find genres in popular music that have not been marked by the sounds of Africa. And, conversely, the urban musics of Africa and its diasporas have learned like no other how to talk with all exogenous traditions. All this implies that music is a place par excellence for the discussion about globalisation, and to think about concepts such as world culture (world culture and world music) versus global culture, which dominate the contemporary debates.

And then, certainly after what has been written so far, there is a clear majority interest of diverse audiences in the musics from Africa. They are, without a doubt, the African cultural form that most crosses generations, social classes, worldviews, musical interests. It is equally more accessible, given its global spread.