DIPLOMA THESIS

**TO WHOM DOES THE PROJECT BELONG?**
Connecting Ethiopian and Western Perspectives in a Web-Documentary

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES

Addis Ababa in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, means 'new flower'. The rapid and often controversial transformation of this city has been the focus and the central motif of our web documentary project we have pursued for the last 12 months.

*New Flower*, our web-doc project of the same name, is the result of numerous conversations, research, and involvement in activities with local artists, scholars, and neighbourhood people in Addis. The project presents a collective perspective, and is the result of a collaborative authorship with some of the local stakeholders in the field of culture and art. Practically, it consists of an online platform presenting voices critical towards the accelerating urbanization, through the perspective of three local artists. Helen, Mihret, and Mulugeta have various personal connections and therefore reflections that resonate with general concern towards the idea of 'modernization' and its effect on heritage, memory, and community. Their personal stories are interwoven with background information on the Ethio-Chinese development model, as well as relevant historical and cultural phenomena. The project aims to challenge both the typical Ethiopian and Western opinions about the concept of development through tangible situations in everyday life. Documenting this complexity and summarizing its effects, while remain engaging to a wide audience is a process demanding group work, and the involvement of various disciplines. Transdisciplinarity is the foundation of this project, where the organization of material necessitates the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives in order to connect the abstract to the concrete and subjective on many different levels.

Internet-based documentary is an emerging and still undefined genre in the realm of new media projects. Similar projects elsewhere can be described as interactive-docs, transmedia documentaries, cross-platform docs, or pervasive media. These web-docs on the internet have however one thing in common: the web itself, and, as a consequence, a platform to create and receive that is not restricted to the medium of filmmaking and cinema. In other words, we are talking about web-based interfaces, where creation is organized along a spectrum of disciplines: In the making of a web-doc, coding, Internet surfing habits, or contemporary routines of information consumption become just as important factors as cinematic tools. According to the way this content is organized and presented on the platform, the tools used can vary greatly: some rather go to the direction of social media, or gaming structure, others follow the techniques of online journals (New York Times, The Guardian, Al Jazeera): scroll parallax, video series.

So why did we choose this format? The problem of time stands at the center of the ambiguity of the transformation of the city, where the critical claims are often not about the change, but rather the speed. Between our two visits, barely 6 months had passed, but we nevertheless returned to quite a different Addis: new buildings and roundabouts grew out of nowhere, the first tram cars

were ready to be tested, while the first time the rails were crooked and still under construction. To capture the ephemeral nature of urbanization, we turned to a similarly moment-based format: web-documentary. Web-based project are at the mercy of ever-accelerating technological development. Take a look at Adobe's Flash platform, not long ago it was the most common tool to build the visuals of a website with, and now it is completely out of fashion, used by none, and sadly the old webpages don't display well with most modern browsers. In a couple of years, our web-doc will be just as aged as the picture of current Addis. Maybe an institution will take over maintaining the interface, adding it to an archive. The "innovative" format of today in a couple of years will be what is the old-school *Super Mario* games are for us now. However, perhaps this could also be the day when this project would live up to its category: documentary.

## PERSONAL MOTIVATION

Last spring, the catalogue for an exhibition entitled *The Enigma of New and Modern* accidentally landed on my lap while I was spending time with artists who have been connected to the Ethiopian capital. It is hard to say whether it was more my friends' concerns regarding the fast urbanization of Addis Ababa, or the works in the exhibition catalogue that drove me there, but one thing became very clear: the stories told by people experiencing firsthand the reality of the fastest transforming African city didn't correspond with what I could find in the media, or the vague image I had in my mind about Ethiopia. This led me to wonder: why are the contemporary voices of Ethiopia are so hard to come across? I dug out more and more documents on the making of the new "Capital of Africa" and Ethiopian "modernity", and came to a conclusion: The emerging international appearance of contemporary African art in general and what it communicates stand in strong contrast with the western narrative supplied by the media and ethnographic documentaries. How the Ethiopian artists had drawn on the vast transformation of Addis in *The Enigma of New and Modern* felt much more representative, while the western remarks were losing credibility with their same old images of disaster.

This was something that I felt had to change, and so our journey began. A young documentary filmmaker colleague accompanied me on my first trip to Addis, driven by curiosity and the hope to find answers to our questions. While we got engaged with various people from the progressive art scene, and while the city as a whole began to reveal itself, it became obvious that this project should function as a platform for local artists who were working in an experimental field, where they could tell their own stories connected to the city. We spent most of our time with the core members of an artist collective called *Netsa Art Village*, who told us a lot about how they feel and see the ongoing urbanization that has been a focus point in their agenda and activity. On our second visit, we asked some of the artists directly if they were interested in making a series of videos based on the conversations we'd been having about the city.

During our stay it wasn't just the fast-transforming Addis that changed greatly but also ourselves. Our colleagues became our friends, and unexpected we

realized that our mentality was more similar to our Ethiopian colleagues than we thought. As always, the reasons are various, and are a mixture of both subjective and cultural factors, but one commonality between Ethiopia and Hungary we could identify was that and both countries fairly deviate from the surrounding nations in history, heritage, and language, therefore developed a sense of uniqueness, and able to create quite a national pride.

Despite the geographical and cultural distance between Hungary and Ethiopia, strangely a lot emerged in common in our attitude while working together, especially in the understanding of situations when critique cannot be said out loud, and alternative solutions had to be found. Also it has to be mentioned that both countries share a few decades of history lived under a Soviet-style socialist regime, and quite many Ethiopian students studied in Hungary or other countries of the Eastern block, due to the friendly relation between the socialist countries at that time. Perhaps because of these historic ties, we found that many Ethiopians had prior knowledge of Hungary, and we quickly became the center of attention when it emerged that we were Hungarians. This greatly facilitated our interactions with local people.

The other aspect that became an important concern of mine in the project arose from my emerging consciousness about the preconceived ideas I had projected on Ethiopia. This thesis investigates the reasons for the creation of this biased vision of mine towards the transforming Addis Ababa through questioning the Western understanding of modernity and development. It introduces as well dilemmas on the level of aesthetics, production, and distribution of a documentary project, and conjoining these problems to the Western predetermined gaze on Africa.

## COMPETING MODELS

The consequences of the observation of global problems through the Western eyes manifests itself on multiple levels. In this chapter, I'm investigating on a personal level some aspects of socio-political mechanisms that happen on a larger scale. This larger scale is discussed in the next chapter.

Being part of a creative project, working with a bigger group of people for a longer period of time with great intensity might result in a personal revision. In such a process, probably anyone would undergo changes caused by experiences, being tested in situations, establishing relationships, or learning new skills in one way or another. This whole concept gets another twist when all of it is happening in and according to a different culture, with its own way of organization, communication, and socialization. Therefore you are tremendously dependent on your local colleagues, while you are realizing that all you thought you knew is not really coherent with what you are experiencing. So before I go along, I need to express how lucky I was to be immediately trusted and taken in by colleagues from Ethiopia, who have been patient but straightforward in their directions of how to listen and behave. Without their remarks and guidance most of the things I discovered would have remained hidden.

Just as a stranger can be the mirror of a foreign society, the society doesn't hesitate to hold the mirror right back at the stranger. While working in an intercultural cooperation there is plenty revealed about the people involved, and with flexibility and humor this can turn into the real power of a project. Intercultural dialogue began to play an important role in our concept as a learning process, both in our conceptual framing, and creating a good flow in our practice. Here I must mention that art and/or artistic tools, acting as a sort of platform, were a key element to unlocking the door to comprehension.

To give an example: the fact that we're artists immediately established our relationship towards the authorities. Right after our arrival, the first thing was to get all the official papers, so we would be able to run around with a camera hanging around our neck. This process turned out to be a bureaucratic disaster, even more complicated the second time we came to Addis. The situation of the official distrust towards us for being artists wanting to cooperate with local artists gave a tough start, but at least provided an insight into the world of art-making in Addis. Without official film permits, it would have been a constant trouble with the police and often with locals even just to have a camera around. So we had to spend two weeks of nonstop running from bureau to bureau, where it always appeared they already had a big fat folder about us, and our local partners immediately received phone calls saying that if we start filming without papers they would get in trouble. Going through this process cost a great deal of energy, but in the same time there was a lesson taught: we have no idea about what is going on in this city, so we'd better to be listening to the locals.

Turning back to the case of recognizing my own preconceived ideas about Addis: I'm not saying that clichés didn't get proven to some extent, rather I am underlining that they had been observed from a very distant perspective, which failed to see the complexity of an extremely complicated picture. So much anxiety oscillates around vast global issues related to developing countries that most of the people feel that they are failing to understand the ongoing actions, and even start doubting whether it is possible at all. I'd like to put a finger on what I found to be one of the biggest obstacles in my case: There was so much more focus put on approaching the theme than the actual procedure of just doing it. So much depends on the "How" and "with Whom" in relation to pursuing the "What". A real "aha" moment was when I realized what I originally wanted to talk about was not what I really wanted to, or even ever wanted to talk about. Therefore, the early intention remained, while at the same time there was a shift in formulation and emphasizing the aspect of content.

So why not begin with what I had been thinking about Ethiopia until I actually got there?

1.  As it is a hot topic, I couldn't miss reading about China colonizing Africa, shamelessly exploiting the emerging economies. I assumed that the Chinese influence might also be an indicator of an authoritarian government exercising its power in Ethiopia, and it really became a question: what if it could be done in a democratic way?

2. My first impression of the Ethiopian government was that was evil, corrupt, and dictatorial, doing no good for its own country, until I was introduced to the local perspective that pulled the ground out from under my judgment, and made me reformulate it.

4. Since the European literature was more available, I didn't look well enough to find their equivalent in local scholarly sources. I wasn't thinking that it didn't exist in English, yet when this big number of fantastic literature turned up out of the blue I was surprised. (Although it completely makes sense that the local intellectuals talk more to the point, and more precisely especially about their own case.) Adding to this matter, it also made me blush when I realized that these intellectuals have embraced the entire Western literature of their profession, and it made me wonder whether their Western equivalents have embraced the relevant African sources as well.

5. I thought it might be a bit sensitive to talk about the matter of poverty and the exploitation of the country, since this is what foreigners all want to talk about. It turned out to be no matter of courtesy so long as the dialogue is working on eye level, and balanced with honesty and sense of humor.

6. I was wrong to simply assume that Ethiopia is a homogenized unity, and not realizing in advance the complexity of actions, frictions, and compromises of approximately 68 ethnic groups living together in a country, not to mention quite the mix in Addis.

The list could go on with plenty other, more minor things.

**The mix of fact and fiction about the global power shift**

Deborah Brautigam explains the reaction to the new wave of Chinese aid and economic cooperation across Africa as a troubling picture based on a sometimes sensational mix of fact and fiction, all circulating rapidly through the Internet. Some questions become evident: What will this mean for poverty and development in Africa? And what will it mean for the Western influence in Africa and our own approach to development and aid? The first-world countries haven't come up with a "recipe" for effective aid, and a reliable proof is lacking that their assistance actually promotes development, regardless of sixty years of aid, evaluation, strategies and publications.

Meanwhile, the political-economic schism between the West and the East is widening. On the Western side stands the standard based on private capitalism as a model of economic growth, liberal democracy, and putting political rights ahead of economic rights. On the Chinese side, there is state capitalism, a lack of emphasis on democracy, and prioritized economic rights. Despite the deep-seated assumption among westerners that the whole world should adopt the western model, the Chinese method of development has collected a great number of followers in emerging economies. The reason is the promise of the best and fastest standard of living improvements in a very short amount of time.

We can say that the world is rapidly, in historical terms, not being controlled and shaped by the developed countries, but by the developing world. Its consequence is  that the West is rapidly losing its influence and the world is

becoming unfamiliar to us. Formed by unknown cultures, we are failing to understand it through the gaze of Western eyes, using Western concepts, and relying on Western experience. Martin Jacques' journalistic standpoint came to me as a clear explanation of my arrogance towards the Chinese presence in Africa. He explains that our presumption that "as countries modernize they also westernize" by now has been proven to be an illusion being ignored by the West, especially by Europe. The general reaction towards the Chinese progression is critique steeped in fear. The assumption that modernity is a product of competition, market, and technology is ousted, and it must be admitted that it is equally shaped by history and culture, consequently it is clear that that Chinese modernity will never be like Western modernity.

**"China, China"**

Just as China's former status from the West differs regarding relations of power, what is a key to understand the African trust towards China is that it is a success story of a developing country. Whenever Ethiopians see a foreigner on the street they would say 'Ferengi' (meaning foreigner in Amharic) followed most probably by a joke about her. Lately 'Ferengi' is rather altering to 'China' because most of the fairer skinned people they have around these days are Chinese, and for those who haven't seen that many foreigners before it is all the same.

After being engaged in conversations with a variety of people in Addis about the topic, one thing became clear: they all seemed to agree that at least now they see something happening: they have roads, railways, living standards in general are getting better. Perhaps construction sites slice Addis up, but its infrastructure is growing, so as the impression that this is for all. And this is in sharp contrast with the general perception of where Western donor aid went: a few built immerse wealth from it and are now living in gated communities, separated from those who couldn't escape the so-called 'Ethiopian tragedy'. Or as Dr. Elizabeth Giorgis depicted it, "*gated mansions resemble a Disneyland in the midst of massive poverty*"[1]. Of course people have doubts about the presence of the Chinese too, their shops and restaurants popping up, and rumors spread amongst them about Chinese fabric factories that have moved to the Ethiopian countryside are heavily polluting the environment. However, the overall impression of the Addis-based locals remains that is better to choose China over the West to do business with, because they treat them as partners and don't look down on them by forcing their own ideas on them about democracy.

Recalling the night we arrived to Addis the first time: It was 2 am and our taxi got lost, so it took some fuss to finally get to our accommodation, where we were told that there is a problem, namely that we are both females. We couldn't stay in the same room, there had to be two separate rooms taken. We were so tired that we didn't know if it was a bad joke or huge rip off. We attempted to argue: wouldn't it be worse to stay in a room with an unknown

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[1] **Giorgis E. W.** (2013) *Addis Ababa: The Enigma of New and modern.* Modern Art Museum: Gebre Kristos Desta Center. Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. p.13

man than a woman? The response was it wouldn't be, because homosexuality is illegal in Ethiopia, so by law we can't sleep in the same room. The next days we moved twice till we found a place where we didn't have to pay for two rooms, and so the issue was settled, but the topic kept me occupied for our entire stay. I must admit that I was quite judgmental towards this aspect of Addis, but after a month I realized that the acceptance of gay rights is the smallest issue in a city where stabilizing electricity and water is the real concern. Adding to the complications surrounding 'Ethiopian identity' there are more substantial arguments: fear of losing cultural capital and dealing with friction between different ethnic groups. I had to admit that from an external perspective it is easy to pick on the problems being obvious to us, but these might not be the most pressing troubles of the city's residents.

There is a split between what people believe in the West and in the rest of the world regarding the improvement of living standards rather than fighting for democratic elections, which doesn't mean that ideally they wouldn't prefer democracy. A certain amount of alienation has been created between the West and the emerging economies due to the West pressuring change in legal and political structures. On the other hand, China portrays itself as a developing country, a successful example owing to its economic growth to move 300 million people out of poverty, or making education available to the masses. Unlike the U.S., China has improved income inequality, and has done so without changing the political system and provided visible results of development both inside the country, and across its borders, for example providing infrastructure from Capetown to Cairo. It became obvious that democracy is not necessarily a prerequisite to economic growth, and for the first time, in the form of China, a real challenge to the economic and political principles of Western ideology has emerged.


**Developmental state**

According to Rapley[2], the successes that followed interventionist policies of East Asian states (Four Asian Tigers) evolved in a new theory in development studies called the developmental state. Although it necessitates state interventionism, it does not restrict socio-economic development, as it was often the case in the former centralized socialist economies. While the role of the Ethiopian state in socio-economic development is certain, it is still very difficult to assume that it succeeds in replicating what has been achieved in East Asia or in China. Asnake Kefale points out that the developmental state in East Asia triumphed under unique local, regional, and international contexts, including authoritarian rule. She raises the question as to whether or not it is possible to bring development at the same time as democracy.

"*We will make poverty history.*" - Sounds the slogan of Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) lead by the country's long serving

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[2] Rapley (2002:119). In **Kefale A.** "Narratives of Developmentalism and Development in Ethiopia: Some preliminary explorations". *African Studies in Europe*. 2012. Web. http://www.aegis-eu.org/archive/ecas4/ecas-4/panels/41-60/panel-57/Asnake-Kefale-Full-paper.pdf

Prime Minister, Mr. Meles Zenawi until his death in 2012. At the beginning of the millennium, the EPRDF introduced the term 'developmental state' applying it to the country, and portrayed poverty as the fiercest enemy of the country. The ideology of developmentalism became part of their political campaign that got encouraged by the controversial elections in 2005, and again in 2010, when the ambitious five-year "Growth and Transformation Plan" was initiated.

When you walk around in Addis it is hard to miss the extensive positivist narrative of the government, picturing the effort taken to move the country forward. The former prime minister, Mr. Meles Zenawi, appears on huge billboards often surrounded by working class people in a futuristic environment. The enlarged slogans of 'WAY TO THE FUTURE', 'NEW CAPITAL', and the likes, are all over the city. Either the huge governmental campaign got to the people, or the public sentiment of readiness to make change was already there, but one thing is sure; the common voice of Addis agrees on that the government is devoted to make things better. Indeed it's hard to miss the enormous effort that the leadership has taken to develop the capital, building infrastructure, improving living standards, and generating all-around prosperity. In a very short period of time, Addis has become a suitable investment junctions and very attractive destination to visit. The network of new roads, high-rise buildings and condominium housing complexes are transforming the city for good, establishing a picture of a new horizon. The government has undertaken change at a stunning depth, scale, and speed, following a model given by, and using plenty of construction workers, architects and contractors borrowed from, China.

What was indicated was that the complexity of the situation can't be neglected, and that different elements of the present processes taking place in Ethiopia do exist, and these elements, clearly different from a Westerner's point of view. However it must be mentioned that we are still talking about an authoritarian state criminalizing the 'anti-developmental' tone, which is basically the articulation of any kind of critique. So as well it often happens that critique targeting the socio-cultural effect of change, while offering an alternative, is often mistranslated by officials as a threat and of anti-governmental nature.

## HOUSING

A significant aspect of the above-detailed transformation of the city, and an area of major difficulties, is housing developments. Most of the time the large numbers of urban migrants causes accelerated urbanization in developing countries, and Ethiopia is no exception. The rapid increase of population in Addis has burdened the limited existing infrastructures, social apparel and basic needs like housing. The renewal of the inner circle and intermediate zones of the city has an emphasis on the development plan of Addis Ababa.

This extreme urge to change the core of the capital, where as a consequence housing prices are increasing rapidly, has put another strain on the shoulders of city dwellers, who usually earn too little to keep up with the prices. Also,

they are often subject to both market and governmental pressure to move from these areas, freeing up space for new office buildings, or other commercial buildings. This new wave of urban migration further aggravates the already pressing housing situation and demands immediate solutions. In concrete umbers, the central area of Addis is home to about 40% of the population, an estimated 3 million people.

While these flats, equipped with running water and electricity, provide an acceptable living environment, especially compared to the slum houses some new residents are arriving from, this solution is not free of controversies. Access to newly built condominium units works according to a state lottery. Parallel to constructing the condominium blocks, the lottery is drawn and some receive their flats provided they can pay for it. Even though the inhabitants' domestic money saving efforts are enhanced by the urbanization policy and the heavily-subsidized prices, there is still big crowd that could never afford condominium houses. This is adding to another problem, namely that the demand is much bigger than the number of already built units. So people need to move to the marginal areas temporally or until they can both afford and get access to a free flat.

The new housing system also brings along a new lifestyle, and the separation of communities is one of the biggest threats to the residents. *" [While] trying to replicate similar values, [they are] simultaneously demolishing essential and significant components of cultural fabrics",* Elias Yitbarek[3] observes, when talking about the newly built condominium housing units that are replacing demolished slums.

*"The influence of European modernism [and from this aspect the Chinese model is no different] has become so potent that it has engulfed the disposition of all aspects of life of developing countries, such as Ethiopia. The prerequisite of European modernism had been industrialization. Its drawbacks are being extensively debated during the current age and, particularly, its exasperated characteristics of neglect for cultural aspects that have resulted in a dehumanized and faceless urban character."* argues Elias Yitbarek[4] in the essay *"Slums": Change and Modernity.* He stresses the importance of keeping the positive qualities of existing indigenous variety, state-provided spaces for interaction and transportation, such as makeshift kitchens, street vendors selling goods, and movements of pedestrian vehicles. The preservation of similar activities on the streets is a matter of survival and safety for low-income people. Architectural motives originating from slums should be transferred into urban development patterns in order, he argues, to avoid the misinterpretations of architectural modernism focusing solely on material features above culture. He calls for "another modernism" that accepts the development claims, as long as it answers the need of socio-economic concerns of the low-income residents.

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[3]**Yitbarek E.** (2012) *"Slums": Change and Modernity.*In **Giorgis E. W.** *What is "Zemenawinet"?- Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity.* Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (ISBN 978-99944-987-1-0). p.52

[4] **Yitbarek E.** (2012) *"Slums": Change and Modernity.*In **Giorgis E. W.** *What is "Zemenawinet"?- Perspectives on Ethiopian Modernity.* Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (ISBN 978-99944-987-1-0). p.51

*"It's modernity's capacity to legitimize the violence of its irrationality in the very name of reason"* says Achille Mbembe[5], a position that resonates well with Dr. Elizabeth Giorgis' concern. "For the State, the broader field of alterity is instead subsumed with changes in traditional cultures and indigenous infrastructures are believed to have blocked technology and development." Dr. Giorgis[6] puts the focal point on emphasizing the importance of the self-organized community that for instance occurred in the institution of *idir*, the "neighbourhood organization" set up to help each other in times of crisis, or manifested in common events of everyday life such as coffee ceremonies or taking care of each others' children, etc. As soon as these communities are pulled apart, relations built through a lifetime have to be reestablished, not to mention that the relocation of the people is based on their income, which is leading to the emergent segregation between different classes.

This fear of the inability to maintain communal activities so much encoded in the Ethiopian society, and its consequent loss of connection with the society's roots, serves as a major theme for the younger generation of artists in Addis. The artist collective *Netsa Art Village* that we have been cooperating with is also targeting this issue.

## ETHIOPIAN CONTEMPORARY ART, FUNCTIONS AND FORMS

*"... if you think about where important movements are being made, sometimes they happen in the centre, but the most exciting artists are those who live simultaneously in the centre and at the periphery."*- Stuart Hall[7]

In the last two decades, the overall situation of research on contemporary and modern African art has improved exceedingly, and it has resulted in the production of numerous well-researched books, dissertations, exhibitions, and catalogues. Several Western-based museums of modern and contemporary art have been altering their collection and exhibition policies, leading to a change in paradigm, heading to a multicultural direction, and embracing a much more global art historical perspective. Contemporary African artists are better recognized than before, although still to a smaller extent than the Westerners. Nevertheless, contrary to earlier exhibitions and texts on African modern art, a critical framework has been arranged by a number of representations of African modernism and postmodernism those engage with all sectors of artistic practice, and challenge the previous image of Africa in art history. Various events and literature has been produced that captures the contemporary landscape of African art as both complex and interdisciplinary, for instance: Africa remix, The short century, Seven stories about modern art in Africa, Authentic/Ex-Centric, Looking both ways, A fiction of authenticity, Snap judgments, and Who knows tomorrow.

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[5] **Mbembe A.** (2005) *On the Postcolony: A brief response to ctitics*. Qui Parle 15, 2, p. 3
[6] **Giorgis E. W.** (2013) *Addis Ababa: The Enigma of New and modern.* Modern Art Museum: Gebre Kristos Desta Center. Addis Ababa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. p.13
[7] **Hall S. & Maharaj S.** (2001) *Museums of Modern Art and the End of History.* London: Iniva. p. 21–22

It must be also be said that the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor curated the Venice Biennale in 2015, becoming the first African curator in the exhibition's 120-year history. Chika Okeke-Agulu, artist and art historian describes it as "*the first truly and positively global art show that can't be compared to anything.*" Enwezor's mission to challenge the zeitgeist by bringing African artists to the front leaves its mark on the prestigious exhibition. One might say that after this biennale, any allegedly international contemporary exhibition not representing a reasonable number of African artists will look small and narrow-minded. However, issues of misrepresentation can't be entirely avoided in the 56th Venice Biennale. Although critics launched a petition against the fraudulent representation of Kenya, the reasons remained unclear: why are six out of eight artists representing the African country from China? Voices of contemporary African art call it a colossal embarrassment to the country and to the continent undermining the work that is coming out of the East African country.

Looking away from the celebrated African talents and turning into another direction, we see a tragic image, supplied by the media, of immigrants suffering from an awful fate, and images of poverty and crime. What the most fascinating discovery for me was that local artists - here I'm not talking about the diasporas- have a lot to say on their representation in the Western media. The understanding of the work of contemporary African artists in the art world is following a similar path to that we are taking in our project. *"Their work must be understood within the parameters of such global discourses and practices. However, the intersections of these discourses with race, gender, sexuality, and other existential experiences are perhaps among the most striking 12 aspects of the art created by contemporary artists throughout Africa and the diaspora. Here, it is helpful to use the discourse of comparative modernities to reread modernism—and by extension postmodernism— outside the West as performative acts translated and staged through difference."* explains Timothy Mitchell[8] in The Stage of Modernity.

It is important to understand the discourses and the theoretical context of these artists and observe the techniques, genres, media, visual language they use: They are knowledgeable about contemporary visual culture, particularly discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism. The influence of the concepts and vocabulary of contemporary global art is present also in their conceptualization and ways of archiving. Contemporary artists located in Africa, due to the lack of resources, operate on a more personal, smaller scale than the diaspora moving in from the West. However, it doesn't mean that they are not concerned about their image in the West and don't reflect on it.

**Netsa means 'free'**

A group of freshly graduated artists established *Netsa Art Village* in 2008. Mihret, who happens to be one of the protagonists of our web-doc, is the

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[8] **Mitchell T.** (2000)*"The Stage of Modernity", in Questions of Modernity.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 15–16

director of this collective, being responsible for most of the activities they are organizing. The aim of the organization was to fill in a gap between the artists and the community through raising socially sensitive arguments, arranging various events including concerts, poetry evenings, talks and workshops as well as exhibitions. Throughout the years Netsa became an incubator for experimental artistic actions in Addis, such as the series of performances entitled *Wax and Gold*, and also attracted international cooperation on multiple levels to Addis. Our project was made in cooperation with artists and through connections of the Netsa Art Village.

In order to understand the essence of Amharic communication in general, and its function in the artistic context, a key phenomenon needs to be explained, which is called *Semena Worq* ("*Wax and Gold*"). Literally, it refers to the natural secretion of gold undergoing the process of purification. As a literary system, wax and gold is based on the ambiguity between the overt and the hidden. While the plain meaning, on the surface, known as Sem (= wax), is quite harmless, the implied meaning often a critique, and occasionally spiritual, is known as Werq (= gold). Besides its literary manifestation, the concept of wax and gold has origins in the theology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The dualism arranges a framework for showing the constant tension between the material and the spiritual. The scholar Levine[9] explains the various social benefits of the wax and gold phenomenon: an endless supply of humor, sophisticated means to insult someone in an acceptable manner, a technique for defending the private sphere, and a medium to criticize authority. This diversity between the open and hidden runs through the Ethiopian society.

More and more frequently appearing artistic actions in public space receive an instant response and interaction from their 'audience' that has something to do with the really strong cultural context interwoven with the use of metaphors in various level of thinking and communication. The artists we have been cooperating with use the public space as their playground (so long as the police doesn't arrest them). Despite being the Addis-based pioneers of a still-uncommon form of public performance, its potential is utilized through twisting cultural codes already given, creating a dynamic cooperation between the performer and the pedestrians.

There is an example appearing in our web-doc that originally was performed as part of the Wax and Gold project organized by the Netsa Art Village. Mulugeta Gebrekidan's metaphorical work is telling visible and sometimes invisible stories of the city development. In this case he reflect upon the construction of new roads, and the emergence of numerous new roundabouts encircling and often replacing historical sites and monuments. Mulugeta's performance takes place in one of the busiest roundabouts that displays a huge Samsung emblem, where he poses as a martyr all painted gold with a spear and a shield staring at the giant logo. Gebrekidan was standing in the roundabout for hours, and all we could hear was a constant and immediate

[9] **Levine. D. N.** (2012) *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture*. Essex: Phoenix books. p. 9

response from the people passing by: cars horning, whistles and verbal remarks filled the air. Apparently the ambiguity of a supposedly public spaces being privatized, advertisements replacing the embodiment of national memory is the concern of many.

## DILEMMAS ON THREE LEVELS: AESTHETICS, PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

*"The films of exotic peoples and places that we have come to associate with ethnographic documentary are actually deviations from true documentary. In their representation of human societies, they routinely sacrifice the infinite complexity of reality in an attempt to produce a definitive cultural analysis for the sake of entertainment and the forwarding of a political or social agenda. These films have been both a product and a reinforcement of our Western biases about African cultures, biases which underlie our willingness to accept an overly constructed and simplified perception of Africa."* - Louie Yang[10] on Trinh T. Minh-ha's Reassemblage

Our web-doc is in the postproduction phrase, and there is a high probability that it will become part of a bigger program. Since it is still an ongoing process, I would like to here outline our concerns about how to proceed with what we are doing. To some extent, these are solutions found to certain dilemmas that will be also discussed later on.

### Aesthetics

- The gaze of the naïve eye perceive things differently: certain visuals and cultural aspects are interpreted differently in Addis and in Europe. For example, the image of a person carrying five boxes on his head is really an everyday life scenario in Ethiopia. However, we must be alert if we want to feed off of the exotic picture in the European gaze toward Africa. Therefore has to be a constant awareness on how to keep the focus on the points that are made, and if we are operating with the exotic, figure out for what reason.

- Aiming to make the project interesting for the Ethiopian audience means we cannot exclude local phenomena that might mislead the external gaze. This becomes the question of how to create a collective imagery that directs the focus to the bottom line?

- How do the protagonists position themselves inside of the local art scene, and does this project represent them properly?

- Does the web format help to create a collective language that allows for communication to different groups of audiences?

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[10] **Yang L.** "Reassemblage: The Enlightenment of Documentary". *Cornell University*. 1997. Web.
http://www.arts.cornell.edu/knight_institute/publicationsprizes/discoveries/discoveriesfall1997/02louieyang.pdf

**Production and distribution**

Once I was pitching our web-doc to group of producers and broadcast editors, and after the pitch a response came that we have nice material, but they would like to see more tragic events, like girls going home alone in the dark, pregnant women working on the construction sites, etc. I felt bad being accused of banalizing the seriousness of events by not showing extremity. It is not impossible to find funding in the film/TV sector, but the expectation will often arise to provide them with images of a distorted, tragic Africa.

Documentary filmmaking is usually a sovereign and freelance attempt, thus there is a great pressure coming from those who are able to finance projects, and therefore preserving aims and professional expectations can be a challenge for the project. The ethical aspect of documentary has been increasingly discussed in the past decade in response to the accelerated competition of the industry, which is increasingly focusing on entertainment and marketability. (For instance let's picture a typical afternoon TV program showing who did what in a homicide that happened a couple of years ago. It is a regular example of entertainment without adding to anyone's social sensitivity or knowledge.)

Looking at the processes of production, it isn't uncommon that a film has to be almost entirely shot before there's a chance to get funded. Broadcast editors and production firms are less and less likely to invest into something where they can't see the final result. Going through a documentary process, on the other hand, it isn't necessarily possible, even halfway, to see the final outcome of a project. Therefore, in order to access grants, a fictitious story has to be presented, articulating or fabricating aspects that would make the film more beneficial for investors while distributing it.

If the fortunate situation occurs that the filmmaker finances a certain amount of the production privately, another option is filming either a convincing pilot or the film to some extent. In this case, the makers or the production company itself is investing in the production to attract further support. In this situation there is already an investment to be post-financed to avoid losing money, and the result is that filmmakers try and match the broadcast editors and production companies' needs and tastes. Again, it is not impossible to find a flexible production company that would back up the agenda of a so-called 'impact project', even if wouldn't necessarily be a financial success. It is just not simple, especially when the topic is something about Africa, as everybody already has a certain idea of how it should be.

Although in our case a certain safety in the form of the university funding was given, the project can't be excluded from the systems of media production and distribution. Even though profit making is not our aim at any level, audience-building and  distribution can't be looked over, since in the case of an 'impact project' the definition of success is reaching various layers of people. Likewise, the need to find a sustainable funding strategy that allows us to keep our artistic independence in the future remains. What I'm trying to express here is the need to find an alternative way of producing and

distributing the web-doc so that the autonomy of the makers and the agenda is less compromised. In the attempt to escape cooperation with the traditional channels of cinema and TV, the web platform appeared to be a convenient solution.

Working on the diverse terrain of new media projects requires a different frame of mind than the cinematic approach. Web-docs are often judged by the expectation that it will give a similar experience as a film, which will clearly never happen. This medium has its own ways of engaging the audience. The 'cinematic metaphors', such as the three-act structure has to be given up, and the dramaturgy should emerge entirely through the means of the online interface. Specific to this medium, and also the most demanding part is the design of an ideal user experience, which means that a new condition comes in: testing and prototyping. Another important aspect emerges that a web-doc is an (almost) equal cooperation of many from different disciplines, and a project as such can only be developed through collaboration, which also makes the process quite slow, but also democratic. This collaborative project development manifests on various levels, such as group work while filming, an extended group work during postproduction, and even bigger group work while building an audience on both off- and on-line platforms. It isn't the basic technical reasons that call for the collaborative creation process, but rather the revision of content from different perspectives in order to communicate common point and a collective vision.

Just like the experience generated, the channels and principles of outreach also differ from film. In order to reach the audience, it is less about distribution and more about circulation: building a solid foundation in social media networks and being present in various formats on- and off-line. Most of the successful Web-docs, for example, usually have a web-info portal that can be connected to web series (a video channel), and occasionally to an installation, or perhaps an audio book. Furthermore, it is building on "the audience having an audience" in the cyberspace, which is basically commenting, blogging, creating memes out of a given theme. For example the Dr. Who tumblr (microblogging platform) is a success story based on fans creating content based on the TV series and sharing with one another. Clearly our case is nothing like Dr. Who, but this profound shift in technology where you begin to feel bigger than yourself is a potential, and can result in linking different groups of audiences to each other.

**WEB-DOC AS A METHOD**

"Someone made a point that uploading your film to Vimeo is not the same as making an interactive, Web-native documentary. One is using the Internet as another pipe, the other is using the Internet with all of its hyperlinking capabilities, pulling in rich data, and creating interactive experiences for the user."- explains Ingrid Kopp, the director of the Tribeca Film Digital Initiatives in one of her presentations. Internet should be looked at as a medium, rather than a vehicle that changes what you can do. Of course technology doesn't necessarily create the story, but it expands the table of available tools. Here I need to emphasize that the technocratic 'solutionarism' is a common trap

while looking for new fields to conquer and motivated by being innovative and trendy. According to my experience, the makers need to be very precise on what they'd like to get through while working with the emerging formats of web-doc because it is easy to become intoxicated by the diversity of attractive formats and options. The struggle with the language spoken in digital storytelling reflects what happens in practice when the ensemble of technology, internet culture and reception is constantly changing. So to have some certainty, I'd like to highlight points as to on what basis we chose to realize our project in this way.

- Collaborative authorship between the two sides, even the changing of roles, engagement of audience in both directions.

- Left with no choice: when it comes to Africa, the authentic ways of documentary film production and distribution are often more interested in poverty-porn than complexity of actions and marginal stories.

- While using this platform, it is possible to take in broader spectrum of information in a shorter amount of time, because of it's interlinked structure.

- It is platform that can be linked to and hosted on different surfaces. Our future plans: connecting through social media the Ethiopian and Western audiences, and involving live actions, such as talks and installations on the topic.

- Possibility to cooperate with other resources already online related to our topic and therefore reaching an audience who would be interested in our project. (This is my Africa project and other projects of diaspora or the afropunk movement, channels of online media, such as ob-doc NYT)

**Doubts:**

- There is an inverse relation between the availability of a web-doc and its design. More precisely, the better the quality is (HD videos, animations etc.), the harder it is to access from places where the Internet connection is slow. Since both reaching an Addis-based audience and its success in festivals is dependent on this design, it is both crucial and difficult to decide where to draw the line. The only solution could be designing a format that can be reached through 2G or 3G smartphone networks and a webpage version. This means more work, time and money. Connecting the absurdity of the situation to the previously mentioned funding difficulties: even online there is a distinction between the Western and African audience, and the professional judgment of a web based project goes alongside Western standards.

- Cooperation between the coders and filmmakers; there's confusion and distrust and a lack of structure and infrastructure on both sides.

- The need to have an exit strategy. Since a webpage and its content have to be hosted, maintained, after a couple of years a cultural donor has to be found to take over these duties. Also if we manage to build up an online community around the project, it can not be abandoned, on all platforms used there has to be updates about the status and accessibility of the project.

## CONCLUSION

Transdiciplinarity is the foundation of our project.

Jürgen Mittelstrass[11] argues that there is an asymmetry between the development of problems and the development of disciplines. He says that this asymmetry can be traced back to the contradiction between the increasing specialization of disciplines on the one hand, and the highly complex problems to be solved on the other. Ecological issues are a typical example of this, as they can be only solved through the cooperation of many specialized competences. As we observe the loosening of disciplinary borders, the term interdisciplinary has come to represent a feeling of improvement, and leading to a new order of understanding. Mittelstrass in fact calls the interdisciplinary the transdisciplinary, as it removes disciplinary dead-ends that barricade research solutions, and is based on concrete, long-lasting cooperations that alter the disciplinary demands themselves.

I'd like to underline the paradox of the issue: in the face of problems of great complexity, institutions are producing professionals with a very sharp tunnel vision. Applying this notion on our case: there exists an extremely complex field both in the context of urbanization of Addis Ababa and its mediation by us, relevant professionals from reasonably distant fields, and on the top of everything slim prospects of support coming from the film industry. How do we solve the problem? How do we maintain a sense of collective and resolve all perspectives into a project that is speaking a common language without discrediting the agenda? A transdisciplinary approach had to be developed in the form of a web-documentary that is flexible enough for intercultural dialogue and collaborative project development to prevail.

At the end of the day, web-doc is more than a change of design from a linear to a non-linear experience. While has often been the goal of traditional documentaries to ask for reform in industry and/or government, the potential to enhance immediate dialogue, connect audiences, and equally represent the cooperating parties can be even greater in the process of making and spreading a web-documentary project. Inevitably it is quite challenging and time-consuming, but there are project that call for this effort, as otherwise the compromises of operating in traditional sectors can't be avoided.

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