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Filling the Blank Space of Global Art Peripheries: Measurements of Art Mobility and their Ambivalence in Nairobi, Kenya

Olivier Marcel*

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Abstract

In recent years, art made in Africa, particularly in the metropolitan context, has witnessed a substantial increase in attention coming from transnational institutions. While many researchers have pointed out the deceitful nature of contemporary art's globalization, this turn of events still challenges the way we conceive the space of contemporary art. In this paper I use cartography as a critical tool to approach the international mobility facilitated by two art organizations based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Résumé

On assiste depuis quelques années à une forte montée d'intérêt d'institutions transnationales de l'art pour l'Afrique et cela particulièrement dans le contexte métropolitain. Alors que plusieurs chercheurs ont souligné le côté illusoire de cette mondialisation de l'art contemporain, ces événements interrogent néanmoins la façon dont nous concevons l'espace de l'art. Dans cet article, j'utilise la cartographie comme outil d'analyse critique des mobilités internationales facilitées par deux organisations artistiques basées à Nairobi, au Kenya.

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Introduction: The Blank Space Syndrome in Art Peripheries¹

In the process of mapping the modern world and drawing the contours of the continents, early geographers invented a conventional representation: blank space. Before the great exploration missions, the unknown was literally filled with allegoric representations, tribal characters, elephants, sea monsters, etc. It is only at the beginning of the 18th century, at the dawn of colonization, that blankness became a way to express uncertainty or lack of verified knowledge.² The ideological underpinnings of this shift in cartographic convention are made clear in Isabelle Surun's research on the mapping of Africa: blankness not only represented the unknown but also served as an economic and scientific incentive to the colonial enterprise, enticing explorers to the quest of filling the maps and locating commodities. Later, this function was distorted and the remaining blank spaces, areas that were either inaccessible or uninteresting to the explorers, were associated with isolation or backwardness. Is the blank space on the early maps of Africa the same blank space that has been graphically and symbolically representing peripheries on the world map of art? In other words, is a lack of knowledge what prevents us from "creating a place for peripheries,"³ or are maps biased in a way that imprisons Africa in this blank space, like a self-fulfilling prophecy?

It can be argued that the globalization of art is experiencing a similar blank space syndrome. Maps – both physical and imaginary – have now become part and parcel of the worlding of art from the South and of the spatial turn in contemporary art. As we will see in this paper, they illustrate brochures and reports of art organizations or

funding corporations, they are underlying in the titles of exhibitions, in the displayed identity of artists, and in the national flags of biennale's pavilions. Most importantly, maps are interiorized by art actors themselves and performed through their discourses and practices. In this context, it has become critical to interrogate the representation of art space. Furthermore, it seems decisive for the social study of art to be equipped with tools to measure the effectiveness of spatial claims and classifications that have proliferated in artistic discourse.

Nairobi is a place where the notion of being included "on the map" is critical. Throughout its short history, East Africa's largest metropolis has been highly dependent on foreign donors, foreign markets and exterior assistance that have justified their authority based on the claim that Kenya is a developing country and fundamentally a periphery.⁴ A recent illustration is an African art auction that occurred in London in June 2013 and gave exposure to Kenyan art in one of the most prestigious auction houses. Following the event, the Nairobi art world was in awe and the imaginary map was made quite explicit. A critic and artist from Nairobi commented on the event in the following terms: "[...] we can all linger in the glory of what happened at the "Bonhams: Africa Now" auction where Kenyan art was further engrained on the map, and deservedly so."⁵ This widespread perception is an invitation to seriously consider the art geography in such a region. It should be said that the auction was for charity and it's classification as "African art" tends to restrict the event to a narrow niche within contemporary art. Furthermore, the fact that Kenyan art had to travel to the old imperial capital to "appear on the map" is revealing of the spatial hierarchy that weighs on Kenyan art actors at such international events. Far from the euphoric discourse of the local art world, sociologist Alain Quemin warns about the deceitful nature of the contemporary globalization of art. Looking at objective indicators

¹ This paper is based on a presentation and the following discussions at the conference "Global Art History and the Peripheries," Artl@s, Paris, June 12-14, 2013.

² Isabelle Surun, "Le blanc sur la carte, matrice de nouvelles représentations des espaces africaines," in *Comblant les blancs de la carte: modalités et enjeux de la construction des savoirs géographiques (XVIIe-XXe siècle)*, dir. Isabelle Laboulais-Lesage (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2004), 117-144.

³ Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Catherine Dossin and Michela Passini, "Global Art History and the Peripheries," Artl@s conference abstract, 2013.

⁴ Olivier Marcel, "From Theatre Royal to Pop-Up Galleries, a Timeline of Art Venues in Nairobi," *Mambo! Research Findings in Eastern Africa* 11/3 (2013)

⁵ Zihan Kassam, "The Word From Bond Street." *The Star*, June 4, 2013.

from the economic sphere (auctions and fairs) and the institutional sphere (museums, art centers and biennials), he demonstrates that non-western countries are still largely excluded from international contemporary art.⁶ However, his conclusions fail to take into account the complexity of what occurs at events such as the “Bonhams: Africa Now” auction. Did the artists who attend the auction momentarily leave their “peripheral status” back in Nairobi or were they actually performing the periphery in the course of this mobility? In fact, the answer to this question involves different conceptions of contemporary art space.

Quemin’s understanding of a periphery in contemporary art is limited to “the countries that don’t belong to the double core that is a few European countries and the United States.”⁷ His approach is strictly topographical: space is defined by fixed positions and stratified territories. The periphery is anything “outside” of the center and is therefore defined by negative space or lack of substance, as revealed by the indicators. Geographers have written extensively to point out the limits of such a restrictive use of the center-periphery model.⁸ For them, the concept of periphery should be applied to a relative and evolving position rather than an absolute and definitive one, a place that is fundamentally part of a given system rather than outside of it, and a place that experiences dissymmetrical interactions rather than one that is excluded from them. Following Jacques Lévy’s writings on the philosophical approaches to space, we can try and put forward the benefits of a topological or relational approach in the understanding of art peripheries.⁹ Looking at artist’s international mobility, this paper aims to provide some methodological solutions to take into account the

complex relations weaved between center and periphery.

Decentering Sources

In 1998, geographer Vincent Veschambre attempted to map “where contemporary artists live and work.”¹⁰ Using proportionate circles to locate their whereabouts, his maps displayed Paris and New-York’s attractiveness within a selection of artists’ careers and demonstrated how much they are still deeply entrenched in an unequal and dissymmetrical system. In his visual output, Africa shines by its glaring blankness. This blankness can be explained by the type of source used: a directory of the most internationally renowned artists in the form of an art guide, which was published in France by a French art historian and marketed for French art collectors. The main criterion is therefore economic accomplishment in French institutions. Veschambre is aware of the inherent bias contained in the source and warns that the sampling sharply favors France and Europe. Despite this bias, his mapping is still accurate in the sense that it shows centrality of cities like New-York or Paris in the western market of contemporary art. This leads to the question of how to map the periphery other than with misleading blank space?

The Bonhams auction is a testimony of the existence of peripheral activity that is not accounted for in the sources used by Veschambre or Quemin. Indeed, the eight artists who were invited to the auction didn’t arrive from nowhere. Before travelling to London, their work was validated by a complex set of intermediary institutions. The periphery can therefore be approached by decentering the source and looking at how the center is actually experienced out of the center. In Nairobi, two key institutions – the Goethe-Institut and Kuona Trust – have been very keen on creating linkages with central networks

⁶ Alain Quemin, “L’illusion de l’abolition des frontières dans le monde de l’art contemporain international : la place des pays ‘périphériques’ à l’ère de la globalisation et du métissage,” *Sociologie et sociétés* 34/2 (2002): 15-40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, my translation.

⁸ Jacques Lévy, “Centre/périphérie,” in *Dictionnaire de la Géographie*, dir. J. Lévy et M. Lussault (Belin, 2003), 141; Christian Grataloup, “Centre/périphérie,” *Hypergéométrie* (2004); Nadine Cattani, “Centre-Périphérie,” in *Dictionnaire des mondialisations*, ed. Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin (Armand Colin, 2006), 47-49.

⁹ Jacques Lévy, “A Cartographic Turn?” *EspacesTemps.net / Travaux* (2012).

¹⁰ Vincent Veschambre, “Vit et travaille à New York et à Paris. Les hauts-lieux de la création,” *Mappemonde* 52/4 (1998): 16-20.

and therefore appear to be at the forefront of centre/periphery relations.



Figure 1
Triangle Network brochure, 2002-2003.

Both the Goethe-Institut and Kuona Trust share a strong internationalist discourse that is well illustrated by this map, published in a promotional brochure for the Triangle Network, a network of artists that Kuona Trust is part of. While the designated purpose is to locate centers belonging to the network, it also appears heavily invested with a spatial ideology that is to level the hierarchy between places. Indeed, every little triangle is identical, indicating they are all of equal importance. This is further established by the way that the network appears inclusive: overlapping spheres conveniently covering entire continents, suggesting the global reach of a network that is not hindered by political boundaries, economic inequalities or national identities. The three subsets colorfully bypass North and South or West and East divides, creating imaginary interconnected entities. This sense of interconnectedness visually echoes with the discourse held in both Nairobi institutions: by “connecting with the international circuit” or “disseminating emerging international practices”, they claim membership to a globally encompassing community.

At this point, maps can serve as a tool to confront the discourse with the effective mobility facilitated in those places.

Measuring Encounters

A way to go beyond the discourses of these institutions is to look at the geographical information directly contained in their activity reports. The Goethe-Institut’s event program lists featured artists and their national identity (understood as a sense of belonging rather than citizenship). Similarly, the yearly reports that Kuona Trust submits to their funders displays the identity of the artist invited to their workshop. As we will see later on, this type of information that associates individuals with one single identity drastically simplifies migratory trajectories. However, it is interesting to note the identity is assigned by the institution itself. In a way, through this truncated information, we can assume the institutions sell out their own spatial scheme (See Fig.2).

The German cultural center arrived in Nairobi in 1963, the year Kenya gained independence. As a cultural center, it was initially focused on promoting the German language and a contemporary image of Germany. In recent years, the institute has strived to do more than this founding mission. According to Johannes Hossfeld, the director of the institute since 2007, “there has been a globalization in the art scene and in the intellectual scene and nobody would think about projects in terms of strict bilateral relation.”¹¹ Due to its very central location in downtown Nairobi and also on the account of an important budget increase in 2008, the Goethe-Institut has become a major actor of art in Nairobi. The map covers the activity since this date. In Hossfeld’s discourse, the international dimension of the center’s activity is paramount: “We try to bring the local artists up with the international art scene. We work exclusively with artists who are connected or connectable with the international art circuit.”¹²

Looking at the national identity of the 268 artists who physically travelled to the institute between

¹¹ Interview with Johannes Hossfeld, director of the Goethe-Institut in Nairobi, October 2011, in his office.

¹² Ibid.

2009 and 2013, we can see the contours of the international network they promote are more confined than what the official discourse suggests. Indeed, while the activity of the German cultural center in Nairobi is international for over 40 percent of the artists showcased, they massively originate from Europe. If we combine the influx of German, Austrian and Polish artists (dark blue arrow), with whom Germany has diplomatic partnership programs, and Kenyan artists hosted in the center, bilateral exchange still represents almost 80 percent of the activity.¹³ In that sense, spatial measurements clearly show the Goethe-Institut is still a foreign cultural center. Within the 20 percent remaining, roughly half come from the rest of Europe (pale blue arrows). Those are mainly countries that do not own a national cultural center in Nairobi such as Spain or Sweden, or those that don't have good enough infrastructure like Italy that has an office-like venue rather than a multidisciplinary gallery space like the Goethe-Institut. The second half originates from other African countries (orange arrows). Those are most notably Sub-Saharan metropolitan areas like Lagos, Luanda or Johannesburg, cities that also happen to host major Goethe institutes.

The map shows very weak involvement of the institute with neighboring countries (red arrows). This tends to show that the institute is not acting as a regional center that polarizes activity but rather like a node that facilitates circulation within a broader network. Other most notable absentees are the Asian and both North and South American continents (beige arrows). Pan-African activity put aside, only a couple of events would qualify as South-South mobility. This restricted geographical focus can be explained by the "Aktion Afrika" policy framework initiated by the federal foreign minister that fosters the "development of pan-African projects that aim at an artistic reflection of the current political, economic and social problems on the continent".¹⁴

The influx or absence of artists therefore reflects a specific geopolitical agenda rather than an encompassing wave of artistic internationalization. Although it calls for further analysis of the events and institutional architecture, the mapping of such an art center's activity helps to frame an underlying spatial agenda: the Goethe-Institut in Nairobi is a place where the German cultural network can appear as the orchestrator of the dialogue between Europe and Africa (See Fig. 3).

Kuona Trust offers an interesting point of comparison with the network provided by the Goethe-Institut. Now located in a leafy Nairobi suburb, the Kuona Trust is an art center that hosts artists' studios, organizes workshops and exhibitions for visual arts. The trust was initiated in 1995 by Rob Burnet, a British cultural entrepreneur who was then an employee in a commercial art gallery in Nairobi. According to him, "in the early 1990's the only spaces easily accessible to artists were the galleries, whose unavoidable commercial imperatives discouraged artists from interacting together and inevitably drove the work towards a style appealing to the tourists."¹⁵ This observation brought him to plan the reorientation of the local art market. In 1995, Burnet travelled back to England and found both a horizon and a roadmap to serve his project. The art exhibition Africa'95, organized in London, marked an important rise in interest of the western art world for peripheries.¹⁶ Kuona Trust is typical of the organizations that positioned themselves upstream to tap into the creativity increasingly put forward in big art events organized in Europe.¹⁷ Burnet also met with Robert Loder, a noble English businessman and art collector who was one of the organizers of Africa'95. Loder is also one of the initiators of the international network of artists called Triangle Network that the Nairobi art center is affiliated with. It aims to generate "peer-to-peer learning, professional development for artists and the

¹³ The musical project titled "BLNRB-NRBLN" (2010-2011) was archetypal of this bilateral logic: bringing Berlin to Nairobi and vice versa.

¹⁴ Goethe-Institut press kit (2008), 2.

¹⁵ Rob Burnet, *Kuona* at 17 (2012), 38.

¹⁶ Michèle Coquet, "Africa 95 à Londres," *Journal des africanistes* 66 (1996): 315-317.

¹⁷ Interestingly, 'kuona' is the Kiswahili word for 'to see.'

dissemination of emerging international art practices.”¹⁸ Combining development goals in an international scope, Kuona Trust has managed to attract donor money from organizations such as the Ford Foundation (USA) and Hivos (Netherlands) and it exclusively lives off their funding.

The map based on Kuona Trust’s yearly reports shows that the funding countries (dark blue arrows) are again decisive contributors to the activity of the center. Nevertheless, compared to the Goethe-Institut, the visual art center has developed quite a different international pattern. Firstly, in accordance with its founding objective to identify local creativity, the space is a lot more open to regional interactions (red and orange arrows): Ugandan, Sudanese or Tanzanian artists are the main international influx and over 75 percent of the artists hosted are African. Beyond this African horizon, the network has established more substantial connections with both South America and Asia that are almost completely absent in the German cultural center. Robert Loder claims the network is not driven from above and developed organically.¹⁹ Since the Kuona Trust organizes artist-led workshops that foster exchange between artists, language could partially explain the pattern. However, a closer look at the countries represented suggests the network follows a specific geopolitical logic that is more confined than what a strictly linguistic criterion would produce. The network in which the Triangle Network wants to disseminate ideas and nurture talent seems insidiously linked with countries that were at one time part of the British Empire or members of the Commonwealth of Nations: Nigeria, Zimbabwe, India, Pakistan or Australia. Further interpretation of these maps would require historical and anthropological perspectives that fall out of the scope of this article. Nevertheless, we can say the map of Nairobi’s attractiveness is once again defined by

an exterior network rather than by the city’s inner dynamics.

The encounters organized by both these institutions are selective in the sense that they are defined by particular networks and spatial priorities. What these maps illustrate is the different reach – intended or not – of institutions within Nairobi. But beyond their descriptive quality, the visual meaning of these maps is a lot more ambivalent than the proportionate circles used for showing centrality (as in Veschambre’s maps). Indeed, the arrows directed towards Nairobi don’t automatically suggest a simple relation of domination of the center over its periphery. Instead, they indicate that through these institutions, Nairobi belongs to different networks in which dissymmetrical relations can be experienced. Part of the ambiguity of this way of representing circulations is in the focus on institutions rather than individuals. Many reasons can justify having an art project in Nairobi. Furthermore, in an artist’s career, having an exhibition in Nairobi can be very different in importance and meaning: it could just be a fortuitous tourist destination or part of a more defined spatial strategy. That is why I will now confront the information provided by event programs and yearly reports with sources emanating from individual actors.

Measuring Footprints

Artist’s curriculum vitae are another source that generates useful geographical information for the understanding of art mobility in Nairobi.²⁰ Generally produced by the artists themselves, they provide a list of the events, dates and venues that counted in their careers. Cartograms can be an efficient way to spatially transcribe this biographical information (birth, studies and career). Instead of representing the Euclidean distance separating exhibitions, the idea is to alter

¹⁸ Description found on: www.trianglenetwork.org. The name Triangle originates in the connection between the three founding countries: USA, England and Canada.

¹⁹ Robert Loder and Anthony Caro, “Networked: Dialogue and Exchange in the Global Art Ecology,” London, November 26-27, 2011.

²⁰ The use of CVs for Kenyan artists is a relatively new phenomenon that should be linked with the individualization of artists and the advent of modernist conceptions of originality and unicity in the 1960’s. For an art historical perspective on this, see: Sydney Kasfir, *L’art contemporain africain* (Thames&Hudson, 1999), 129.

the size of every area of accomplishment depending on the relative place it occupies in the artist's career: the more exhibitions, workshops or residencies in a given area, the bigger it will appear. This technique aims to represent artist's spatial footprint: where do artists from Nairobi accomplish themselves and what is the situation of Nairobi within these artists' careers? As with institutional discourses, cartography can be a tool for pondering labels such as "international artist" or "jet artist"²¹ in the light of effective mobility. I will now confront the footprints of three artists considered as international who have made part of their career in Nairobi institutions.

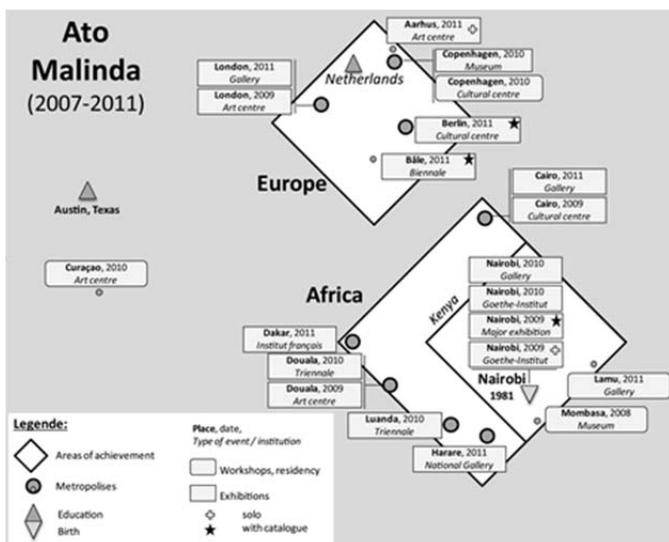


Figure 4
Ato Malinda's artistic footprint. Source: Ato Malinda, *Contact Zones Nrb*, Vol.4, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012), 124-125.
Research and mapping: Olivier Marcel, 2013.

Ato Malinda is an artist who has an international aura in the Nairobi contemporary art scene. Born in Kenya in 1981, she grew up in the Netherlands and studied art history in the United States before returning to her hometown in 2004. The process of repatriation of artists and intellectuals is characteristic of the period following the departure of the authoritarian leader

Daniel arap Moi in 2003.²² Malinda's return was a difficult but very conscious move. In her own words: "Coming back to Kenya was also very isolating [...]. It has taken me years to find this space to be who I am, because who I am is also partly who I was in the US."²³ While the cultural and artistic environment contrasts sharply with her previous experiences, the idea of returning to the roots is a founding experience that serves as material of her performances.²⁴ According to Hossfeld, the Goethe-Institut's director, she is "someone who basically socialized in the West and now tries to recover her African identity."²⁵ The cartogram covers her artistic practice since living in Nairobi. Borrowing a pun made by Paul Gilroy, we can say it makes visible the external "routes" of her quest for "roots."²⁶

Malinda's trajectory clearly embraces this dual diasporic identity, shared between Europe and Africa. Nairobi has, of course, become important in her practice since it is the place she lives in: she rented a studio at Kuona Trust, organized multiple exhibitions at the Goethe-Institut and performed in the city's streets.²⁷ Meanwhile, the illustration shows her career is mostly played outside of the Kenyan scene, most notably in a series of African metropolises: Nairobi, but also Cairo, Dakar, Douala, Luanda or Harare. This metropolitan network constitutes an area of accomplishment that rivals with her European exhibitions both in number and prestige. Indeed, many of those exhibitions were convened by influential curators such as Simon Njami (curator of *Africa Remix* and the *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie*) or Christine Eyene (curator at the Dakar and Basel biennales): an artistic intelligentsia that surpasses national scenes to focus on a broader "Afropolitan" experience. Interestingly, Njami and Malinda met during a project initiated in Nairobi. In Malinda's

²² For instance, it is at the same time that the famed writer and intellectual Ngugi wa Thiong'o returned from exile.

²³ Ato Malinda, *Contact Zones Nrb*, Vol.4, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012), 15.

²⁴ For instance, her performance titled "Looking at Art; Looking at Africa; Looking at Art" (Goethe-Institut, 2009) can be read as an allegoric take on circulatory migrations and identity.

²⁵ Interview with Johannes Hossfeld, *ibid*.

²⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁷ For instance, her performance "Is Free Dumb" (2010) was interacting with the Kenya National Archives.

²¹ Raymonde Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché* (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 355.

career, Nairobi could be the enabling node that gives her access to this community.

Beyond Africa, her mobility is largely oriented to high profile institutions in European cultural capitals such as London or Berlin. Surprisingly, she has not returned to the USA despite having spent some time in Austin for her studies. We can hypothesize this is due to the stronger presence of European cultural cooperation in Nairobi that provides more opportunities. On the contrary, her residency in the Caribbean – an opportunity she grabbed through a Dutch institution during one of her travels – shows Malinda is an actor of her own mobility, capable of weaving a spatial footprint that is coherent with her practice. Despite being an isolated destination in her actual footprint, this residency was an important move in her discourse and gives depth to the postcolonial commentary of her work. This questions the methodology used to produce these cartograms: solo and catalogue parameters only give career oriented information on the hierarchy of events that doesn't always match the artist's perceived experience.

Institut for his projects and is also a challenge to any national categorization. Born in Italy of an English father and a Ukrainian mother, raised in Kenya, he studied art in Germany, social sculpture in England and philosophy and history in Cuba.²⁸ His attitude towards his spatial trajectory sharply contrasts with Malinda's. Being white and practicing in a postcolonial city, he is quick to dismiss his own itinerary and denies its relevancy to explain artworks that he conceives foremost as "contextual:" "I think it is absurd to validate someone's artistic work because of where they come from. It is somehow tautological."²⁹ Nevertheless, his spatial motivations become quite clear when talking about his work. For instance, in the course of a discussion on one of his collaborations with the Nairobi art collective Maasai Mbili, Hopkins confesses he was impressed by the "advanced conceptual approach to memory" he discovered during his studies at the Bauhaus University and explained he wanted to "take this legacy of German commemorative practices and work it with Kenyan artists."³⁰ This perspective can explain why the Goethe-Institute, whose director was also trained as an art historian in Germany, is such a welcoming anchor for his practice.

His artistic footprint is of particular interest when compared to that of Malinda since they have frequented the same Nairobi institutions with almost opposite spatial logics. A remarkable feature is the absence of any interactions with the rest of Africa. His practice and audience are contained by the Kenyan capital city and a host of cultural and artistic institutions in Germany and Britain. In Nairobi, he is genuinely "intrigued by the premise" and most of his projects are collaborations with local artistic communities, striving to build meaning from the context. But Hopkins makes clear he wants his work to "exist beyond the context."³¹ The illustration shows this

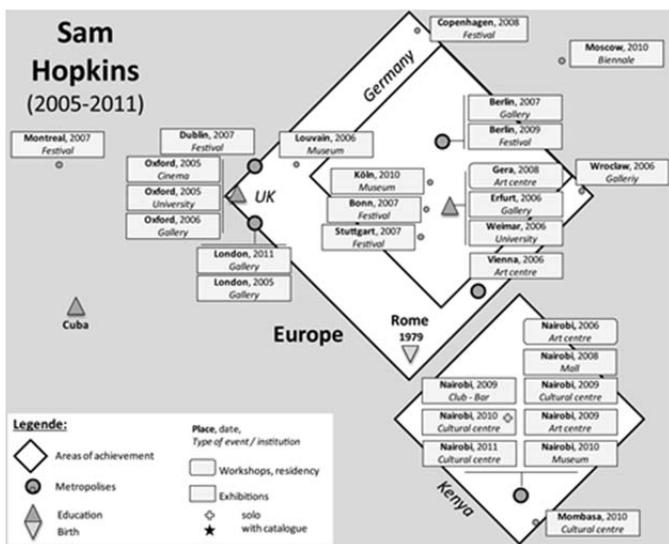


Figure 5
Sam Hopkins' artistic footprint. Source: Sam Hopkins, *Contact Zones Nrb*, Vol.2, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012),124-125.
Research and mapping: Olivier Marcel, 2013.

Sam Hopkins is another multimedia artist who has heavily relied on both Kuona Trust and Goethe-

²⁸ In the yearly reports of Kuona Trust, he is alternatively referred to as British or Kenyan.

²⁹ Sam Hopkins, *Contact Zones Nrb*, Vol.2, (Moderne Kunst Nürnberg, 2012), 10-12.

³⁰ Interview with Sam Hopkins, October 2011, Nairobi. Hopkins was talking about the collaborative project titled "Conversations in Silence" (2011) facilitated by the Goethe-Institut in conjunction with the Bauhaus University of Weimar.

³¹ Sam Hopkins, *Contact Zones Nrb*.

is actually the case: the themes he works on – such as memory, popular culture or public space – make easy connections between urban Africa and European academic and artistic environments. This explains why cities such as Oxford, Weimar or more recently Bayreuth are important destinations. Without searching to validate or discard his work, the footprint sheds light on a circulatory pattern of mobility. We see an artist whose career has been mostly defined in Europe and who has invested in Nairobi as a creative periphery, using the rich material provided by its social and political context to rework artistic ideas and processes while still relying on western cultural institutions.

back to 1998, the illustration is limited to the period between 2007 and 2011 for comparison purposes. We can see how broad her footprint is, roving in four continents almost every year. However, mapping her career information shows the unequal distribution of her accomplishments. For this highly transnational artist, Europe and USA polarizes most of her activity. Looking closely at the countries in which she has toured, like Spain or Germany, we see the diverse range of cultural institutions she interacted with (history centers, art galleries and museums). This integration in the artistic scenes she visits is probably a key difference with the mobility of artists living in Nairobi who are usually depending on a funding organization that limits the journey in time and scope. With Ingrid Mwangi, we have an example of an artist of the Kenyan diaspora who grew independently of the Nairobi art scene and is now recognized in central western art institutions.

The illustration shows yet another pattern in which Nairobi can be included. Mwangi, whose work tackles the collision of different worlds, relies on a broad African identity emancipated from national references. For instance, in the titles of her group exhibitions, we see a recurring African horizon: “An African Contemporary Journey,” “African Digital Art,” “Imagining Africa,” “the African Body,” or “African Art and the Diaspora”. In 2007, she was at the Venice biennale in Sindika Dokolo’s “African pavilion.”³³ Mwangi makes regular visits to high profile contemporary art events in African metropolises, matching Malinda’s African experience. Nevertheless, while these events can be prestigious, they appear to be marginal in her overall footprint. Interestingly, she hasn’t established any interactions with other peripheral regions such as South America or India. It is unclear whether this unbalance was a choice to emphasize her African identity or the product of institutional networks that are more preoccupied by linking periphery and center than linking peripheries together. In any case, Nairobi appears

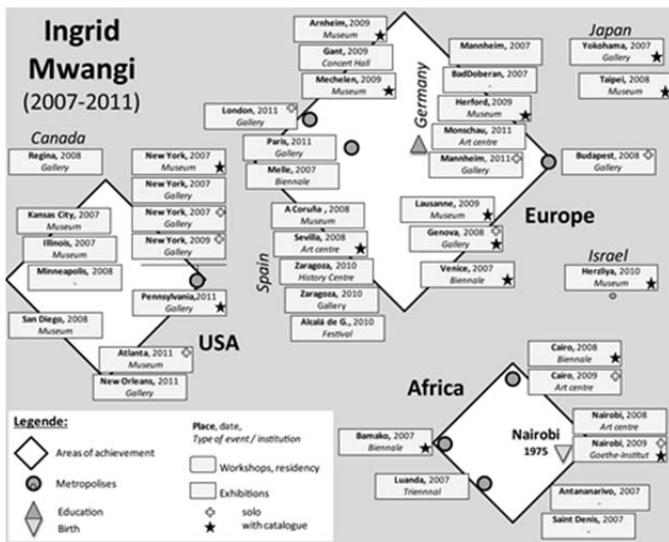


Figure 6
 Ingrid Mwangi's artistic footprint. Source: Artist's website
 (<http://www.ingridmwangi.de>). Research and mapping: Olivier Marcel, 2013.

Ingrid Mwangi, associated with her German counterpart Robert Hutter, is more established than the two previous artists and is a recognized name in the contemporary art market. She too defines herself as a “hyphenated person.”³² Born in Nairobi in 1975 of a Kenyan father and a German mother, she migrated to Germany at the age of 15 and studied art at the University of Saarbrücken, where she still lives and works. While her CV runs

³² Erin Schwartz, “Ingrid Mwangi, enacting the body as stage,” *Acrawsa ejournal* 6/1 (2010).

³³ “African Pavilion” – 52nd Venice Biennale International Contemporary Art Exhibition, Artiglierie dell’Arsenale, 10th June – 21st November 2007. In the press release, Ingrid Mwangi represents Kenya.

here as an anchor rather than a hub, a place where the artist can find a community and an institutional network that is receptive to her practice.

These cartograms, put side to side, demonstrate how Nairobi can occupy very different positions in artist's careers. However, while the different patterns shed light on uneven spatial experiences, their interpretation remains problematic. What is the level of agency of these artists in the making of their footprint: how much is strategically intended and how much is contingent on economic opportunism or on the networks that reached for them? Furthermore, to what extent is it the artist's own footprint: do the artists leave a trace where they travel or do the places they frequent influence their practice? These maps are clues to further investigation of the geography of art.

Conclusion: Rendering the Unequal Shapes and Scales of International Art Mobility

It is now widely recognized that major exhibitions and biennales organized since the 1990's have been trailblazers for non-western art.³⁴ The subsequent worlding of art from the South has brought some to claim the "collapse of distance."³⁵ Such statements are serious challenges for the social study of art and invite us to rethink our conception of art space. Indeed, the distance between places and actors should not be only considered as continuous topographical space but also as reticular territories that are unequal in shape and scale. In this paper, I have strived to show how cartography can be used as a tool to reassert the discontinuities and hierarchies of the space of art and ultimately uncover the ideology contained in the spatial claims and classifications that proliferate in contemporary art discourses.

³⁴ Joëlle Busca, *L'art contemporain africain: du colonialisme au postcolonialisme* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

³⁵ Okwui Enwezor, *Intense Proximity, Art as network* (Paris: La Triennale, 2012).

The maps based on the international traffic in different Nairobi institutions show how globalization is experienced differently depending on the networks that reach the city. The cartograms based on artists CVs show there is not one single international circuit. Instead, artists appear to integrate space to multiple strategies of mobility. Using a comparative approach between institutions and artists acting in the same city allows us to distinguish recurring patterns and measure nuances in particular trajectories. Through these representations, Nairobi appears crossed by an array of different spatial interactions that contest the Universalist vision of an encompassing globalization and complexify the idea of periphery.

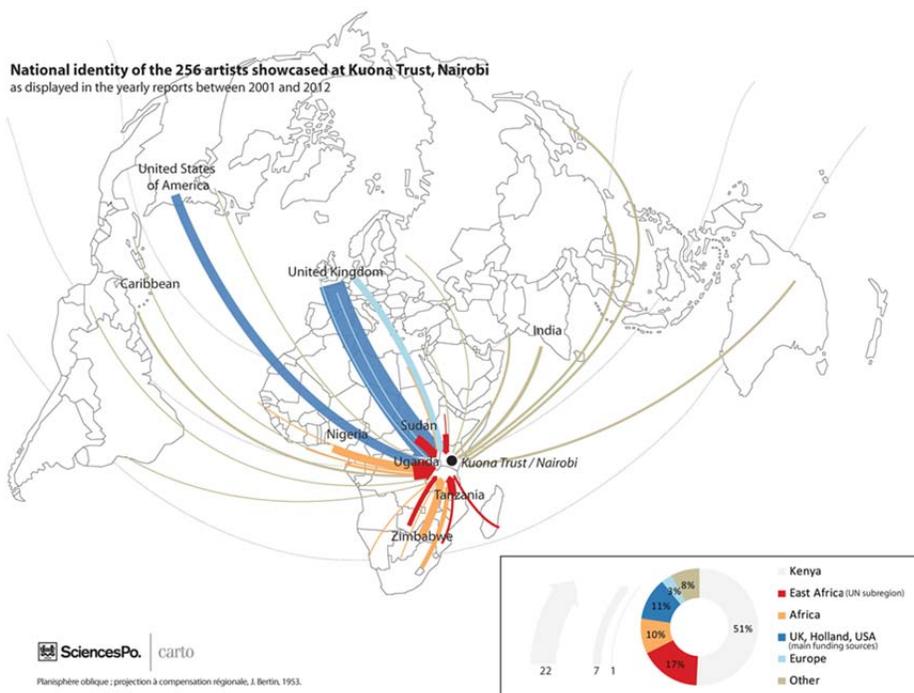


Figure 2

Artists who physically travelled to the Goethe-Institute of Nairobi between 2009 and 2013. Source: event programs of the Goethe-Institute of Nairobi between January 2009 and May 2013. Base map: Atelier de cartographie de Sciences Po, 2011 (<http://cartographie.sciences-po.fr>). Research and mapping: Olivier Marcel, 2013.

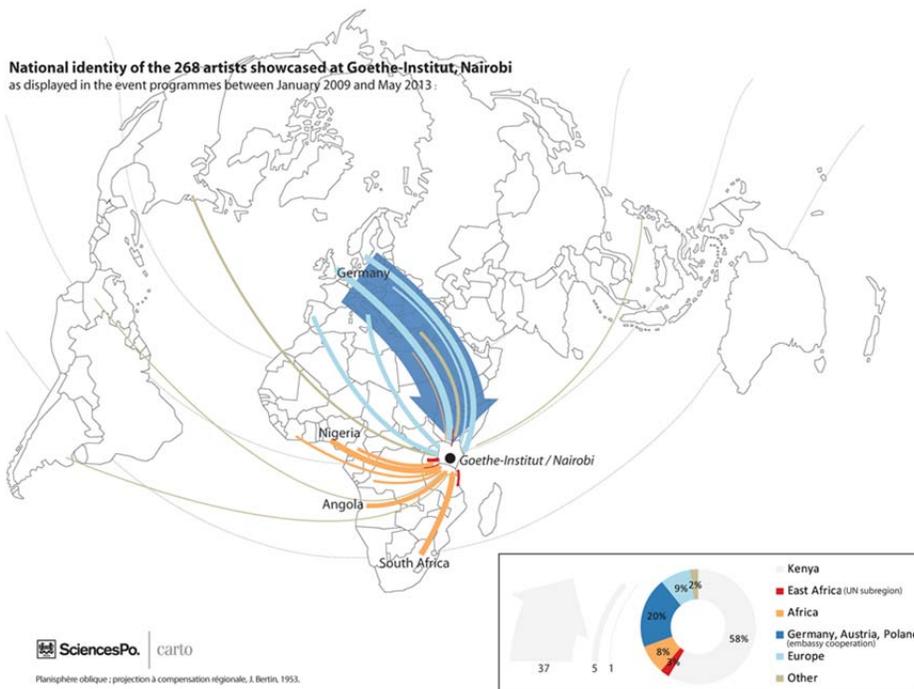


Figure 3

Artists who physically travelled to Kuona Trust between 2001 and 2012. Source: Kuona Trust yearly reports 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2010-01, 2011-12. Base map: Atelier de cartographie de Sciences Po, 2011 (<http://cartographie.sciences-po.fr>). Research and mapping: Olivier Marcel, 2013.