

AT THE EUROPE GATEWAY:

NEW MEDIA IN AFRICA

PARTICIPANTS FROM THREE
CONTINENTS MET AT THE EUROPE
GATEWAY IN JUNE 2017 FOR A
WORKSHOP ON AFRICA.



The New Media and Literary Initiatives in Africa group has sponsored workshops and artists-in-residence for the past several years at IU, all addressing new media and artistic and social practices in Africa. “One of the purposes of our research group is

collaborating with colleagues in African universities and in Europe rather than always bringing people to IU,” said Beth Buggenhagen, associate professor of anthropology and one of the group’s founding members. Maria Grosz-Ngaté, associate director emerita of IU’s African Studies Program and another founding member, added, “When the Europe Gateway opened, we saw a good opportunity to broaden what we’ve been doing.”

Faculty members from Humboldt University and the University of Bayreuth came together with faculty members from IU to discuss Africa’s innovative use of technology in art and society. John Hanson, director of the IU African Studies Program and another founding member, did not attend the workshop but has proposed the subject for one of IU’s Emerging Areas of Research initiatives. “Africans are seizing new media in ways people wouldn’t expect,” Hanson said. “Some African governments have been repressive, not encouraging their citizens to participate in politics. New media is a way for them to engage in important issues.”

Buggenhagen continued, “Strapped for so long by the larger structural forces in

their lives, they have become innovative at making things work without an elaborate state infrastructure. Mobile phones were used in ways that developers did not anticipate, such as using text messaging to transfer money, to deliver health care, and to organize ride sharing.”

John Hanson noted the impact on art. “African objects that have been valorized in the West often were associated with ritual activities that are no longer practiced, partly because of the expansion of Christianity and Islam across the continent. Contemporary African artists are considering new ways to think about those old images.”

Buggenhagen added, “Contemporary photographers work with archival images to produce new digital works. They get young people to reconsider and embrace the older images and to think about their future. Artists such as Romauld Hazoume are making masks out of petrol bottles to comment on political and economic events. They’re working with found objects, elements in their precarious urban environments. They are capturing what it is to live in an African city. It was our wish as scholars that the media producers, the writers, the filmmakers, aren’t just the



Scholars based in the United States and Germany discuss future collaborations at the concluding roundtable of the conference “African Artistic Practices and New Media.”

subjects of our research, but that they are our interlocutors, so one of the reasons we went to Europe was that there are so many residencies for writers and artists, and we were hoping to have that collaboration.” An evening roundtable brought Zimbabwean novelist Petina Gappah, Nigerian satirist Elnathan John, and Nigerian American artist Emkea Alams into a discussion of artists and the digital space.

“We wanted to play a leadership role, and the gateway allowed us to do that,” Hanson said. Grosz-Ngaté concurred: “We could have done it at Humboldt or Bayreuth, but then it would have been associated with one institution,” she said. “The gateway was a neutral place.

We made sure to collaborate at each instance of planning to ensure that we had a consensus with program representatives from each institution.” Hanson added, “They wouldn’t have organized a conference on this theme without us, and the gateway made it possible for us to do it.”

Grosz-Ngaté pointed to the importance of the place. “For me it was really interesting to see how scholars now in Germany approach some of these issues and to hear about the topics they’re working on. I think the roundtable at the end brought out some issues that we need to grapple with, and they felt the same way hearing about what we’re doing.”

Buggenhagen noted a particular surprise for her at the conference. “I learned a lot about my colleagues at IU. We had time to engage each other on a scholarly level; we don’t have time to do that at IU because we have to talk about courses or administrative details. I’m really excited about being a professor again.”

Hanson noted that the gateway moved this program out of North America into a larger world. “The face-to-face exchange created a basis for collaboration that would not have existed if we hadn’t had this event,” he said. The conference papers will be published in *Africa Today*, an academic journal edited by African Studies faculty and

published by IU. Hanson and Grosz-Ngaté continued the discussion in a conference at the University of Bayreuth in December. ■

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