INTRO

Welcome to ISOE exhibition news #2! We proudly present the latest developments in our ISOE (In Search of Europe?) exhibition and research project and want to share some insights into our work with you. Since the launch of the first ISOE newsletter a lot of things have happened. We are busy launching a preliminary ISOE website in the beginning of September 2012, with in-depth information concerning the whole project. Check out the following link: www.zmo.de/ISOE/home.html.

On page 2 to 4 (Focus #1) of this newsletter, you will find ISOE curator Daniela Swarowsky’s underlying idea for the ISOE pre-events. You will also receive an update on the first successfully conducted events, as well as a short overview on all upcoming ISOE pre-events. On page 5 to 7 (Focus #2) we will take a close look into the beginnings of two art-science collaborations between ISOE researchers Samuli Schielke and Bettina Gräf and their artistic partners. ISOE’s new assistant editor André Becht, a cultural anthropologist himself, has met with both for an interview.

ARTISTIC COOPERATION PARTNERS

As already laid out in ISOE exhibition news #1, the keystone of the ISOE exhibition is the collaboration between visual artists/photographers and researchers. During the first part of 2012, the six ISOE researchers, all based in Europe, were finally paired up with artists mainly from the countries of research: France, Turkey, Egypt, and Mozambique.

Anissa Michalon & Claire Soton, an artist duo from Paris have started to collaborate with cultural anthropologist, Dr. Aïssatou Mbodj (CNRS, Paris).

Esra Ersen, Turkish video artist, works together with historian/Ottomanist, Leyla von Mende (ZMO, Berlin).

Mohamed Abdelkarim, an upcoming artist from Cairo joins historian (Islamic studies) Dr. Bettina Gräf (ZMO, Berlin).

Gemuce, painter and sculptor from Maputo, MZ, teams up with cultural anthropologist, Vanessa Diaz (ZMO, Berlin).

Our Foreign Agenda, a recently-founded group of writers and artists from Alexandria, EG, cooperates with cultural anthropologist, Dr. Samuli Schielke (ZMO, Berlin).

Charlotte Menin, an Italian photographer based in Berlin, collaborates with cultural anthropologist, Dr. Knut Graw (Catholic University of Leuven).
In Search of Europe’s theme has, in fact, less to do with Europe itself than the title seems to suggest, and more with a historical moment found in other parts of the world, such as in Africa, the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire, where European standards and ideologies became and are still partly setting the norm. It is core to the curatorial concept that a broader circle of cultural producers contribute to the development of the exhibition project. It is therefore essential that the artistic-research exchange begins one year prior to the final exhibition in Berlin, by means of laboratories, symposia, interventions and smaller lecture-performances, in which artists, local cultural producers, theoreticians and the respective researchers are involved: the ISOE pre-events.

The goal is to investigate the overall theme of the ISOE project within existing local discourses. For this reason, exchange with cultural activists, cultural producers and initiatives will be encouraged in the various countries in which the research is conducted. A broader circle of engagement should make lasting contributions to this exchange, especially in some centers of socio-political discourses, such as in Dakar, Paris, Alexandria, and Istanbul. These ISOE pre-events will be held throughout 2012, co-developed in close collaboration with cultural producers on site, who act as hosts and have been invited to critically comment on the ISOE topics.

The materials emerging from these processes will come together at the main exhibition in Berlin at the end of 2013. These will be documented either in the exhibition or the exhibition catalog.

**IDEA BEHIND THE ISOE PRE-EVENTS**

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**ISOE PRE-EVENT SCHEDULE**

**DAKAR - MAY 2012**

On 13 May, within the framework of the OFF program of the African Biennale, Dak’Art, Swarowsky successfully staged a collaboration with the Berlin-based, Senegalese artist and cultural activist Mansour Ciss at Espace Timtimol: the lecture-performance Notre agenda étranger: La commissaire d’exposition Européene et l’artiste Sénégalais (Our Foreign Agenda: The European Curator and the Senegalese Diaspora Artist).

**PARIS - JUNE 2012**

On 23 June, Daniela Swarowsky and anthropologist Aissatou Mbodj organized and curated a film screening (Les Lettres Filmmées: Correspondence, Messages from Paradise #2). This was followed by a debate entitled, Migrer ici, comment en parler là-bas? (How to Talk About the Experience of Migration Back Home?) held during the 4e Festival de Cinéma des Foyers, hosted by Attention Chantier at Foyer Lorraine in Paris, a migrant hostel mostly used by West African migrants, often sans-papiers.

**ALEXANDRIA - OCTOBER 2012**

As an entry point into the Alexandria art scene, Daniela Swarowsky and Samuli Schielke developed the audio-play, Our Foreign Agenda: The European Curator, the Orientalist and the Egyptian Translator.

“We, the curator and the researcher, come to Egypt to conduct research on the unequal relationship between Europe and Egypt. Paradoxically, we are part of this very system we criticize, as our project is funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research, who’s open call for projects was titled, Europe Seen from Outside – a commission to research the image people from the South have of Europe. Although we are deliber­ately trying another approach, the risk of instrumentalization is a given. How can we encounter our Egyptian partners at the same level? At the same time, we are not the only ones who are biased: The Egyptian art and cultural scene is fairly dependent on Western funding and quite a few cultural producers have gained status and a good lifestyle by tapping into European funds...” excerpt from the OFA concept, D. Swarowsky, Fall 2011.

This piece became the basis for a two-week laboratory with the title Our Foreign Agenda (OFA) lab, which will be another ISOE pre-event held this October in Alexandria in close collaboration with
the cultural associations, El Madina Performing and Digital Arts, Gudran Association for Art and Development and Eskenderella Association for Cultures and Arts.

ISTANBUL – DECEMBER 2012
In a possible collaboration with DEPO Istanbul and a group of Istanbul-based artists, Daniela Swarowsky and Samuli Schielke are planning to introduce their conceptual approach to the ISOE exhibition and research project under the framework of a workshop around (artistic) research practices.

PARIS - FEBRUARY 2013
Based on Aissatou Mbodj’s research on West African migration in the Parisian foyers, Swarowsky and Mbodj developed the idea of a symposium with the title, La représentation visuelle de l’immigration ouest-africaine en France en art contemporain, photographie et cinéma: héritages, genres, renouvellements (The Visual Representation of West African Migrants in French Image Production). This event is planned for February 2013, in cooperation with the artspace Espace Khiasma and Le Silo, a collective dedicated to moving images.

**REVIEW PRE-EVENT DAKAR SEEN BY THE EUROPEAN CURATOR**

“I invited Berlin-based Senegalese artist and cultural activist Mansour Ciss to co-write with me an ironic satire about each of our roles, in the form of a dialogue. The starting point for The European Curator and the Senegalese Diaspora Artist was both of our trips from Berlin to Dakar to attend the Dak’Art Biennial. Through our satire, I wanted to find out about our individual agendas behind the journey to this important African art event, the agenda of the Dakar art scene, the international guests, the European influence on it, and what the locals think about this event.

I felt that Mansour welcomed this challenge to dive into a North-South dialogue with me. I was equally grateful for his openness to enter such a risky endeavor. On top of being a good collaborator, Mansour turned out to possess a wealth of knowledge on present and historical conditions in Senegal.

It took many emails and phone calls until we were finally able, thanks to Mansour Ciss’s extensive network in Dakar, to find a suitable location to stage our lecture-performance, Our Foreign Agenda: The European Curator and the Senegalese Diaspora Artist, during the Dak’Art OFF program at Espace Timtimol, on May 13, 2012.

The discursive play around misconceptions towards the other, and how to dissolve them, took many directions and de-tours. It went from the question of Africa’s search for its own history, and why Senegalese intellectuals and artists still leave this work to European researchers, to how far France’s (and the Global North’s) hegemony is visible in an event like the Dak’Art Biennial, and even more so the Dak’Art OFF program, larger than the main event and funded by the French corporation Eiffage. And what about the locals? Most of the Dakar population turned out to be unaware of these highly-funded events, which seemed to go unpublicized in any popular neighborhood; only one Dak’Art poster in public space was scouted. My research was to discover who this Biennial was targeted towards? Who has an interest in it? And for what reason? What was the attitude of the local artists towards the Biennal? A successful Diaspora artist, showing his work internationally, how is Mansour Ciss viewed by them? Many interesting answers and new questions arose.

The debate following the performance
turned out to be almost as long as the performance itself. The audience, which consisted of local artists, old colleagues of Mansour Ciss from the Village des Arts, international guests and local cultural producers, engaged in a very intense, sometimes controversial discussion. Some thanked the performers for their experiment, which they found daring and refreshing, and for them provided an opportunity to talk about sensitive issues. An important theme throughout the whole event was contemporaneity versus tradition in the arts, which started throughout the lecture-debate. During the following discussion some criticized Mansour Ciss for giving up his traditional discipline as a sculptor to become a conceptual artist in Berlin, saying that he has left his African roots. Yet others viewed his project, Deberlinisation, and his introduction of the Afro, as truly committed to Pan-African ideals.

The entire performance, as well as the debate, was documented by several video cameras and we aim to produce a documentation video of the whole event for the ISOE exhibition, and hopefully also show it at the next edition of the Dak’Art OFF, in 2014.”

Daniela Swarowsky, Berlin, July 2012

“I must admit that I was preoccupied with other projects when Daniela approached me with her idea for Our Foreign Agenda: The European curator and the Senegalese Diaspora artist. But her concept was really intriguing and after some hesitation I agreed to participate in this adventure.”

Everything started spontaneously. After two meetings in Berlin and a third weekend in Villa Gottfried near Dakar, we defined the topics we wanted to explore. Daniela wrote a loose script of our discussions. But first we needed a suitable place for our performance in Dakar. We finally found a host in Espace Timtimol, who offered us their space. Our fourth meeting was the performance itself, which was videotaped and was the documentation of the fruit of this brief collaboration between the European curator and the Senegalese artist.

We find ourselves in Dakar. It is Sunday May 13th 2012 around 4 pm under the Sahel heat, and our performance has begun. Since our first meeting we discussed all the possible ways that misunderstandings could arise, as the discourse around African contemporary art remains problematic. In fact, at each of our meetings I insisted within the framework of our discussions that all theories and concepts developed in Africa in terms of modern and contemporary art are all European-based. That is why, in our performance, we have been circling around one most prominent question: how to define the practice and interpretation of contemporary art in Africa. Because for me there exists only one kind of contemporary art differentiated only by that of the practitioner, be they Chinese or African. The environment plays an important role for artists in their choice of materials and techniques.

The dialogue between the curator, Daniela Swarowsky and the artist, Mansour Ciss triggered a rich debate at Dak’Art in which the public was an active participant. Artist, Zulu Mbaye contributed in speaking about his view on the Dak’Art Biennial. He spoke further on how the biennale is a platform for African contemporary art (l’Art africain contemporain). “But what one gets to see is not African contemporary art, but contemporary art from Africa (l’art contemporain africain)” Mbaye says. “That means that the Dak’Art Biennial shows us that African artists in 2012 are making ‘contemporary art’ when they should be showing us African art in its ‘actual’ state, if we are to follow the biennials’ understanding of the ‘contemporary’ as announced in their title!”

This detail gives you some idea of the intensity of the debate. It is because of the North-South dialogue with its recognition of partition and of the ‘Other’ that has established a real cultural exchange through furthering and appreciating the value of these reflections.

To summarize, I believe that such exchanges and encounters should be left in a ‘to be continued’ state as it is more important than ever to keep the dialogue open.”

Mansour Ciss Kanakassy, Berlin, July 2012
SAMULI SCHIELKE: MIRRORING EUROPE BETWEEN CONTESTING AGENDAS

In Dr. Samuli Schielke’s anthropological research entitled, Engaging the World Between Egypt and Europe - Reasons to Write After 2011, he examines the existential reasons for, and consequences of, writing poetry, fiction, or social criticism.

Regarding the ISOE exhibition, he decided to work with a group of about ten writers and artists, ironically calling themselves, Our Foreign Agenda. The name was adopted after a debate organized by Schielke and Swarowsky in Alexandria, based on their audio play, Our Foreign Agenda: The European Curator, the Orientalist and the Egyptian Translator, in collaboration with Gudran Cultural Association in November 2011. The discussion was about the relationship between Alexandrian artists and international curators, funders and researchers.

Dear Samuli, what are your personal expectations regarding the ISOE exhibition project?
I am interested in people’s careers and their expectations in particular cultural scenes, especially in situations where people are compelled to look at themselves through the eyes of foreigners, when producing work for exhibitions or applying for funding for their projects. Participating in this exchange is for me also a chance to find new approaches, directions and ways of developing my research.

With regard to content, can you describe on which basis your collaboration has started?
I am already working with writers and poets on my own research project, including some people of a more internationally-connected cultural scene in Alexandria, but who are not necessarily involved in the international Biennial art circuit.

The debate Daniela and I organized this past November was the fascinating starting point of this collaboration for the ISOE exhibition. There was such a strong awareness of the fact that there is something strange going on: if people of the cultural and art scene permanently have to act in accordance to selections made by some curators (mostly from the Global North), who define standards and aesthetic styles (of the Global South), then this is also a problem of contemporary art. Contemporary art in a place like Egypt speaks in the name of society. But it does not speak “out of the society”, so to speak. It is very much focused on reconfirming the expectations of an international art audience.

At the same time European cultural funders are supporting specific aesthetic styles, formats and artistic mediums, currents of thought and sites of sociality. In Alexandria, there is this image of cosmopolitan Alexandria, which is very nice and cool. It is exactly this very image that is actively reproduced by international cultural funding bodies, yet it ignores other realities of the city and reproduces the expectations of a certain class in Egypt and of a European audience.

Have you already chosen a specific focus within these topics? Are there any artistic formats emerging at the current stage of your collaboration?
Daniela Swarowsky took up this subject matter because of the interesting paradox it contains, regarding her task as the curator of the ISOE exhibition project to observe and define particular criteria and standards in her artistic choices, when coming to Egypt or any other place in the Global South.

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the Orientalist and the Egyptian Translator. It was produced by Daniela, Mukhtar Shehata, and myself. Abdalla Daif from Gudran Association helped with the staging and recording of the audio play. The term ‘Our Foreign Agenda’ is an ironic reference to Omar Suleiman, the former Egyptian intelligence chief and vice president, who accused the protesters on Tahrir Square of acting on behalf of foreign agendas.

The audio play operates with exaggerated stereotypes. It is a discussion between an arrogant art curator, a researcher who is out of touch with reality, and an Egyptian translator who is only interested in money and women. During the aforementioned debate with the larger group of cultural producers, we had a lively discussion in which question were raised, such as: Why do we always have to focus on the other? Do we see the other as a mirror of ourselves? Or, like through a window, to see something else? What does it mean that we produce art, culture and literature, bearing in mind the goal to satisfy an audience who is somewhere outside or beyond? The collective, Our Foreign Agenda (OFA), my collaborators for the exhibition project, was founded by participants from this first debate.

In this first stage, OFA is focused on an audience in Alexandria, questioning what it means to internalize the view of the other. This is where the OFA lab, the ISOE pre-event in October in Alexandria, comes in. We want to enable a critical involvement by not making curatorial standards a self-evident starting point, but rather opening them up to debate. That’s why there are different stages in this collaborative process. In the second stage, parts of OFA lab will find their way into the ISOE exhibition. At this point, the problem of curatorial standardization will pose itself again – a difficulty which can’t be dissolved, but which should be faced. Which concrete directions will the collaboration between myself and the artists take? This will only become clear after the Alexandria pre-event in October, and at our ISOE workshop in November in Berlin.

Interview by André Becht

BETTINA GRÄF: BETWEEN IDEOLOGISED ISLAM AND CAPITALISM AS RELIGION

In her research project, Public Debates in Transcultural Space: The Concept of Islam as a System (nizam) at the Beginning of the Cold War, Dr. Bettina Gräf follows debates about capitalism, communism, and Islam in the 1940s and 1950s. For the ISOE exhibition, she collaborates with the young Egyptian artist, Mohamed Abdelkarim, who is living in Cairo and is currently fellow at Ashkal Alwan for Contemporary Arts - The Home Works Academy in Beirut.

During an interview for ISOE exhibition news #2, Bettina Gräf provided insight into the prelude of her collaboration with Mohamed Abdelkarim:

In the beginning of the ISOE exhibition project, Bettina Gräf was at first cautious towards the project. Her skepticism evolved out of considerations easy to comprehend: she was wondering if there would be any chance to find an artist who would be willing to deal with her topic at all. Art and Islamic political thought did not seem to fit together. In addition to the continuously tense situation in Egypt, her own project deals with a highly political and controversial topic. Nonetheless, at the same time she was...
very curious and looking forward to get in contact with artists.

In November 2011, the expected moment arrived. ISOE exhibition curator, Daniela Swarowsky joined Bettina Gräf in Egypt for part of her fieldwork, introducing several artists of different generations and milieux to her. Swarowsky, who conducted extensive research on her previous visits to Cairo, organized informal meetings at artists’ studios, which Gräf described as exciting and impressive experiences.

Bettina Gräf’s first personal contact with Mohamed Abdelkarim took place at Groppi’s, a famous café in downtown Cairo. During her stay, it turned out that they both had worked on similar topics, which revealed unexpected commonalities. Mohamed Abdelkarim grew up in Minya, a town in Upper Egypt with a history of radical student movements since the 1970s. It was here that al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya developed. Especially because of his own experiences in Minya, Mohamed is personally interested in the subject of politicized religions, a topic Bettina Gräf has recurrently worked on in her scientific career. However another shared field of interest appeared: Mohamed Abdelkarim has repeatedly made artistic explorations to come to grips with different manifestations of modern ideologies, and its interrelations with Islam and religion in general. One of his artistic attempts, for example, dealt with the contentious issue of forms of religious expression emerging out of capitalism.

Since their first encounter, the two have met again in Beirut and have since established ways in which to develop their team-work. Bettina Gräf for instance, is not only keeping Mohamed Abdelkarim regularly updated on her own research project, both of them share their views regularly. Early on, a blog was founded to exchange their knowledge and opinions about Islam and capitalism. Since then, friends of Abdelkarim and Gräf from Egypt and Germany have been participating and their discussion has evolved into a private platform for personal views and opinions about capitalism. The two are now acting as translators and hosts of this blog.

As Bettina Gräf said, both are looking forward to participating in the ISOE workshop this November, especially with regards to the topic of contemporaneity in the arts and the chance to be involved in a global art market beyond attributions like ethnic or African art.

Interview by André Becht
ISOE WORKSHOP NOVEMBER 2012

Artistic-Academic Research: Joint or Individual Experiments?
A year before the final exhibition, this second ISOE workshop, from November 5th - 10th, is an important stage in the processesual development of In Search of Europe. The goal of this workshop is to provide the six dialogue groups, each comprising a researcher and an artist, with a theoretical and methodological toolbox for their interdisciplinary collaborations. A critical examination of the limits and potentials of process-oriented, trans-cultural collaboration between researchers and artists is also part of the workshop program.

A small series of public events will accompany the ISOE workshop: among others, a cooperation with Tobias Hering and the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video-art is planned within the framework of the Living Archive Project: About Archival Work as Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice, which will feature the work of Portuguese artist, Catarina Simão. Simão will also talk on November 8th at the ZMO Colloquium (linked with the ISOE workshop) about her ongoing artistic-research project, Fora de Campo: On the Mozambique Film Archive.

NEW COOPERATIONS IN PARIS

ISOE is expanding! During her previous stays in Paris, Swarowsky has built up new relationships with several cultural producers and potential collaborators, regarding the pre-event, La représentation visuelle de l’immigration ouest-africaine en France en art contemporain, photographie et cinéma: héritages, genres, renouvellements, planned for February, 2013.

Le Silo, a Paris collective dedicated to moving images, and the artspace, Khiasma, founded in 2004, will both be involved in the concept and design of the upcoming Paris ISOE pre-event.

ISOE EXHIBITION TEAM
EXHIBITION
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Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien Mariannenplatz 2/ D-10997 Berlin

IMPRINT
Editor: Daniela Swarowsky
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A project of:

Z MO
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Fund by:

Federal Ministry of Education and Research