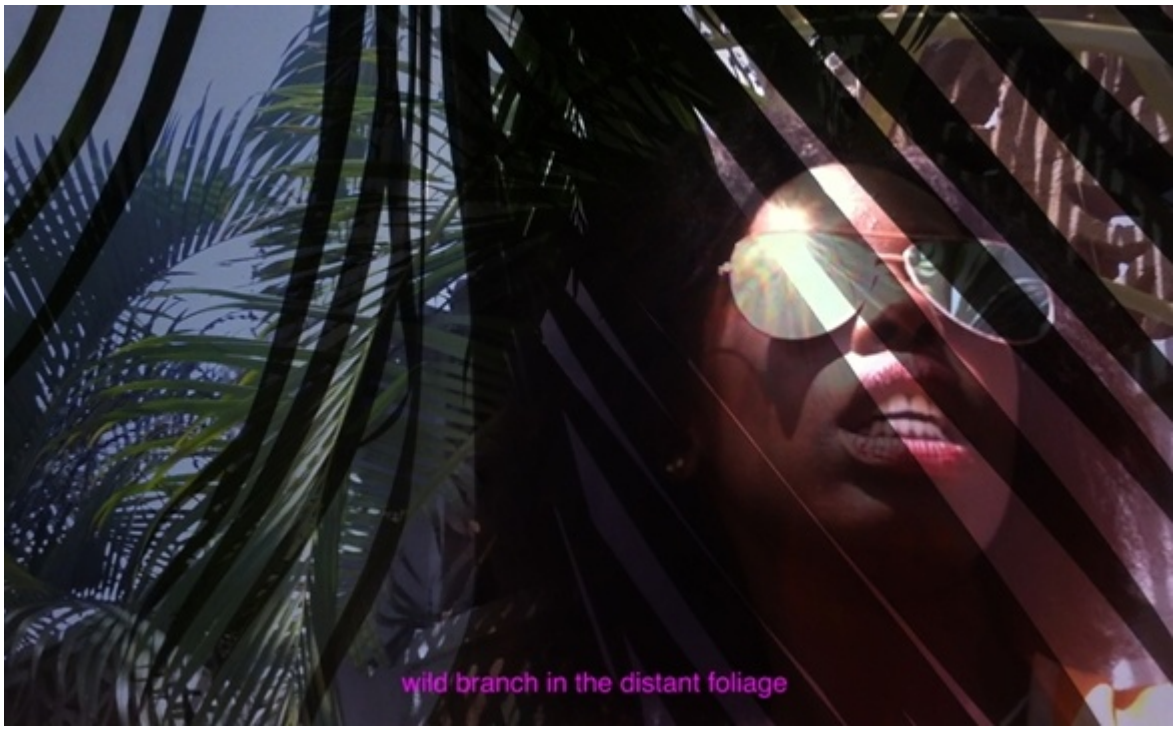
Inside Seven Hills - Kampala Art Biennial 2016

Elise Atangana



Julien Creuzet, LOVA LOVA, SAFARI GO, 2016. Video still, 9'17". Courtesy the artist.

My interest in the notion of mobility began in 2008 when I was working on an experimental programme for disadvantaged youth at the SNCF Foundation (a charitable body set up by the French railway company). The project, entitled *Transeuropéen,* invited schools to travel to different European capitals for a period of three weeks. The pedagogical aspects focused on the preparation of the journey during classes held over several months. The aim was to promote another vision of European mobility and citizenship and to conclude with an artistic project.

A few years ago, I started a conversation with Mobile Lives Forum. The aim of this new SNCF Research Institute is 'preparing mobility transition' through mobile lifestyles. The Institute's approach is interdisciplinary, inviting researchers and artists to work together. Reference is made to a comment by the sociologist Vincent Kaufmann: 'Questioning displacement means asking why are we in motion?'

Mobility refers to the physical movement of goods, objects and services; the travel of people for work, leisure, migration and escape; imaginative travel in images and media; and communication and virtual travel through connected technologies. The sociologist, John Urry sees mobility as a core of a social change.[1]

When I started, in 2015, to research the global notion of mobility in my curatorial projects, I felt that it was relevant to merge my experiences at SNCF and in the art world. My first exhibition on the topic, 'Entry Prohibited to Foreigners',gave me the opportunity to experiment with a new approach to the art space through artists' intimate and collective narratives on different forms of mobility.

Building Seven Hills curatorial project

When I received an invitation to curate an exhibition for the 2nd Kampala Art Biennale, 2016, I decided to explore mobility transformations in Uganda in connection with East Africa and South Asia. Having co-curated the 2014 Dakar Biennale, I found the prospect of working with a young and independent structure very exciting. I wanted to work freely, connecting to the city environment and its politics of space. On a first trip to Kampala, I discovered that the context and the place was open to experimentation,

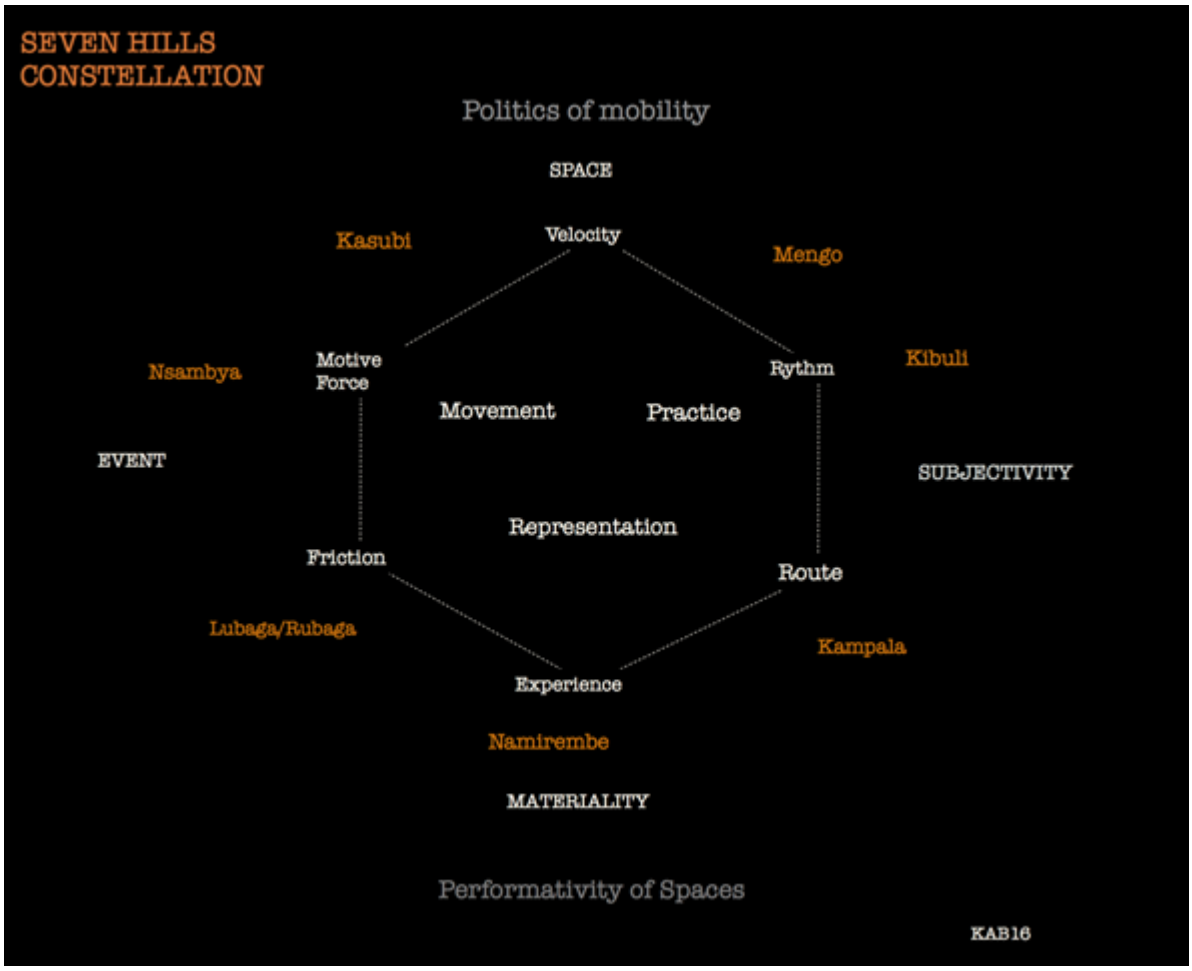
imagination and organic processes.

Then, a six-weeks residency at Delfina Foundation, 'Public domain season 2', allowed me to develop the direction of the project. Time to step back and get a space to think and exchange was necessary in order to dig into the subject for Kampala's curatorial agenda, but also to develop a potential long-term research project. The key to my strategy was a dialogue engaged in with resident artists, artistic directors, the Delfina team and networks, as well as researchers at Lancaster University and their Mobility Lab. With the residents, the discussion usually brought us to questions of control and freedom in the internet sphere and the use of new technology and social media. Resources and reading sessions at the Lancaster University Mobility Lab, with its welcoming researchers, helped me to draw a conceptual approach and new perspective. Finally, these interactions led me to engage in my work on physical and virtual mobilities.

In the project 'Entry Prohibited To Foreigners', I had started building the narrative of the exhibition from the work of artists, who offered different perspectives on displacement or the immobility of people, objects, ideas and information. For 'Seven Hills', I posed a question about the notion of power and domination in relation to both the internal and external notions of individuals' mobility.

Like Rome or San Francisco, Kampala was built on seven hills, in this case by the Buganda kingdom: Mango hill, Kabuli hill, Namerembe hill, Lubaga hill, Nsambya hill and Kampala hill. The Biennale's title, *Seven Hills*, is an evocation of the historical colonial heritage and the consequences for the region and their inhabitants. As Benard Acema writes: 'First of all Kampala was designed with a boundary "Ring Road" that encompasses only two hills of the city – Kololo Hill and Nakasero Hill. This ring road goes around this area only.'[2] The German architect Ernest May chosen by the British established a new hierarchy around two hills. In the center resided the English, while a second perimeter was reserved for Asians. The Buganda people were restricted to the periphery.

Today, Kampala city spreads across 24 hills, a low-rise sprawl that stretches to the shore of Lake Victoria. 'The resident population of 1.8 million swells to 4.5 million during the day and is growing at 4 percent a year.'[3] The Biennale's proposal was to produce collective meanings about the city and its development from the past, through the present and toward the future. I proposed two parallel approaches: the 'Politics of mobility' and 'Performativity of Spaces' to question mobility and space in an empiricalway and create a dynamic context of thoughts and imagination.



KAB16 curatorial plan, © Elise Atangana.

The plan shows the aspects of Politics of Mobility.[4] The geographer Tim Cresswell analyses mobility (movement, representation and practice) as a production for power and relations of domination. In that case, mobility could be considered as resources allowing different possibilities of access, in different level: motive force, velocity, rhythm, routes, experience and friction.

From that perspective, the project invited artists to explore in parallel the notion of performativity of space[5] by cultural geographer, J.D. Dewsbury. How individuals operate through their bodies, gestures, habits, micro-movements? How can the capacities of individuals activate a space in an event (time), a materiality (body) and with subjectivity (consciousness)? What are the creative and dynamic strategies for performing the present in space?

Globally, the project reflected on how we inhabit mobility today in relation to the past but with an eye on the future, and asked, can we redistribute the power between public and private space?

A plurality of artists, from everywhere

Eleven artists from different places in the world, including Ugandan artists, were selected for a residency in Kampala. Some constituted a new generation of artists, while others were more established, but were willing to explore a new context or approach. I was very interested in the diversity of the group.

I invited the artists to engage with the notion of movement on a personal level in a non-representational, performative way. Within that relatively broad frame, they were able to experiment,

draw a story, a real or fictional narrative through their experience in Kampala. We were all living in the same group of beautiful old-fashioned guesthouses. Living together in peaceful space creates affinity. I felt more like an insider, witnessed the nature of their working process as well as great moments of friendship. From the beginning of our conversations, my question was about their expectations. I wanted them to experiment in every way they wanted. My role was more that of a facilitator, creating the best conditions to develop or initiate their projects, giving them the maximum freedom to confront new situations. Some student volunteers also worked alongside the artists during the residency. 32° East Uganda Art Trust, one of the most active art resource centers in Kampala, opened its studio for the artists' productions.

The second group of artists was selected through an open call focused on virtual mobility. The concept dealt with the ability of new technology to create new experiences of mobility, from the distortion of distance to co-presence. I originally intended to select seven projects from the open call to show at the biennale, but in the end I added another seven works, with a focus on six videos. The overall selection of artists was composed of twelve nationalities: seven from Africa, four from Europe, one from India. The major presence of Ugandan artists was due to the excellent projects they proposed, which some connected to the Kampala context. The fact that these artists were present in Kampala made it easier to show their works. They took the opportunity of the open call to come out of their comfort zones, propose new subjects and use different technics. The open call became a way to connect with them and start a conversation on the range of their practices and concepts.

Proximity, immediacy and organic modus operandi

As newcomers to the Biennale circle, we failed to get the expected resources, despite all our efforts and ambition. The biennale was set up with low budget and relied on the commitment of a very passionate and efficient team, both young and experimental. I teamed up in France with Graphica design agency and L'agence à Paris to collaborate on production and communication.

The director Daudi Karungi and I worked together on the coordination, dealing with partners, institutions, production (works / space) and the schedule. All the logistics were very efficient, thanks to the brilliant administrator. The challenge, as usual, was space logistics, and as usual, we faced unexpected changes and challenges. Seven spaces were allocated, six for shows and one for a conference.

There were two temporalities to be taken into consideration: the production of the projects during the residency and the installation of works already produced from the open call. My main role was to supervise the production of artworks and exhibitions. The key was to deliver information in real time and always stay connected. So we created different groups on WhatsApp to manage and to receive the information (artists, production, communication, management). We were a small team but always mobile. This helped us to work collaboratively, sharing tips and information. For some people in the team, it was their first experience. All were committed to finding solutions to technical problems in order to produce the shows.

This experience of the Biennale in terms of intensity, organic process, passion, friendship and a collective reflection of togetherness was priceless. Multidisciplinary artworks were distributed across different locations throughout Kampala: the temporary exhibition space at the Ugandan Museum, the Art School space at Makerere University, Nommo gallery, Kampala Railway station, with video and multimedia installations, as well as Afriart gallery. Performances were planned during the open week in almost every space.

Mapping the Biennale



Sajan Mani, *liquidity Ar*, 2016. 50 hours performance, Photo: Gilbert Frank Daniels, Courtesy of the artist.

This 2nd edition of the Biennale was a chance for the event to establish itself on the global art-world map, as well as connecting to local situations. The Biennale was well-received, and well-communicated in social media, with an emerging online strategy, which could and should be developed for the next edition.

Collective and informal conversations with artists on the process of the Biennale were organised. The Biennale also triggered a debate with KCCA (Kampala Capital City Authority) experts, researchers and innovators on city transformation and the link with innovation. What emerged was that there is a lack of means for engineering resources andtoo little collaboration with local start-ups, which could contribute to developing local solutions to improve mobility in the city, for example using city data. In Kampala 60% of the population do not use means of transport, but walk to work. The density of cars during rush hour, however, remains considerable, as in many big cities. Inhabitants felt that gentrification and frenetic changes were taking place in the city without any dialogue, which was creating inequalities and resistance. In parallel, Kampala is becoming an international reference for its financial model for city development.

The main challenge for Kampala Art Biennale is to address a wider local audience, currently more focused on music festivals sponsored by the city. The education programme organised with city schools on the 'mobility challenge' aims to ground the Biennale in a long-term perspective. The next edition may focus on a local curatorial approach, a way to find new organic strategies to bring art closer to city dwellers.

Kampala Biennale web site

Facebook KAB16

[1] John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

[2] Bernard Acema, 'The Racism Behind Kampala – scare-a-hero', (originally from Acema's, 'Kampala's Racist Design and its Mental Effects on Ugandans Today').

[3] Liam Taylor, 'How One African City Is Flipping the Script on Urban Development – Next City'.

[4] Tim Cresswell, 'Toward a Politics of Mobility', in *African Cities Reader II – Mobilities and Fixtures*, Chimurenga and the African Center for Cities, pp.159–71.

[5] J.D. Dewsbury, ' Non-representational landscapes and the performative affective forces of habit: from "Live" to "Blank"', *Cultural Geographies* 2015, Vol. 22(1), pp.29–47.

Elise Atangana

Elise Atangana is a curator and producer based in Paris. Her research focuses on the links between physical and virtual mobilities/immobilities (movement, representation, practice), and considers their relation with contemporary art practice. How can space be activated by the physical and virtual movement of individuals? How is artistic practice influenced by these new mobilities? She curated *Seven Hills*, Kampala Art Biennale, Uganda (2016), *Entry Prohibited to Foreigners*, Havremagasinet, Sweden (2015), and co-curated *Producing the Common*, the international exhibition of the 11th Dakar Biennale (2014). In 2015, she participated in a Delfina Foundation residency and was a jury member of Artes Mundi Prize 6, as well as a selector of the Artes Mundi 7 shortlist. She is a member of the acquisitions board of Nord-Pas de Calais Regional Fund of Contemporary Art.