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Art as a Space to Produce What
We Would Never Have Thought
We Needed

Iolanda Pensa

Introduction
We would never have thought that what we needed was a radio station.
(Head of the development organization of Bessengué, 2003)

In 2003, the artist Goddy Leye promoted Bessengué City, a public art event organized in a neighborhood of Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon. The project, supported by the international funds of RAIN-Rijksakademie International Network, involved four artists in producing site-specific artworks in Bessengué, a neighborhood that UN Habitat terms a slum. Within this project, the sound artist James Beckett created a one-kilometer-range radio station, easily authorized to broadcast in Cameroon, since it was an artwork. The inhabitants of Bessengué—an informal settlement, constantly threatened with forced eviction, without streets, electricity, sanitation, access to clean water or waste management, positioned in a hazardous location regularly impacted by floods during the rainy season and dangerously connected to a major road—were the first neighborhood of Douala to have their own radio station. A group of young people and the community started volunteering to produce radio programs, and the simple technical equipment was located in a shelter created by the artist Jesus Palomino. One year later, after the end of the Bessengué City public art event and during the summer holidays, the radio station was still broadcasting. Ten years later, after a series of art-based workshops and projects (Les Ateliers Urbains de Bessengué,1 Bessengué City,2 Bourne Fountain,3 La Passerelle4 and the SUD Salon Urbain de Douala5), Bessengué has a development committee, streets, electricity and fountains with access to clean water. The place where many public art interventions have been implemented is now a shared space, a place people care for, where people meet and children play. It is not an anonymous slum; it is now the neighborhood of Bessengué.

What is all this? Art or development? A community radio or an artwork? This chapter argues that the most relevant contemporary art projects which actually produce development and social change are 'system errors.' When it is hard to say what is what, and when something is one thing but also 'something else,' it is probably here that we can find the most fruitful relationship between
art and development. The relationship is not a direct one of cause and effect. Art triggers the exceptional and makes people say, ‘ça reveille.’ It wakes us up.

To contextualize this argument, this chapter highlights features of the system that frames the production of art, in particular in the so-called ‘developing’ countries: dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the binary logic of national vs. international, local vs. global, authentic vs. Westernized, the determinant operating structure of the project and the role of stakeholders. Understanding the system which frames art and development shows that art which produces development is indeed an error of the system, something the system is not necessarily designed for. This chapter draws on the findings of the research project ‘Mobile A2K: Culture and Safety in Africa. Documenting and assessing the impact of cultural events and public art on urban safety (2011–2014).’

The System

Art historians struggle to speak about the artistic production of the world. Despite attempts to bring out new concepts and approaches (Zijlman and Van Damme 2008) and reorganize knowledge in new ways (Deepwell 1997; Fisher 1994; Oguibe and Enwezor 1999; Summers 2003), a heavy Western historical legacy continues to entrap our ability to represent, recognize and organize the complexity of the exceptions that fill and feed art history.

Trapped in a Line: Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion

The art history told by Ernst Gombrich (1950) is the bestseller with which and against which we must negotiate (Elkins 2002): the approach of Gombrich represents the symbol of our still-common practice of constructing history and knowledge around a line, where what comes next is the development of what was there before. The problem is that linear art history implies homogeneity of context, which is not a feature of our world. How do we deal with this? Despite attempts at rewriting history or dropping the idea of linear progressive history, the art history we know is still a tangle of wires.

The way artistic production is studied in Africa and linked to Africa within art history is a good example. So-called ‘traditional’ African art is documented in the history of African art, in studies related to anthropology, visual anthropology, twentieth-century art (Flam 2003), national art histories and contemporary African art. The same content is separately framed by different disciplines and lives parallel lives. In the case of so-called ‘traditional’ African art, even its name is changed: artifact, craft, primitive art, popular art, airport art, art.

The Binary Logic: National vs. International, Local vs. Global, Authentic vs. Westernized

Art history is highly national: each country builds its own history and teaches it at school. The construction of a national art history requires a
process of national art exegesis and a strategy of dissemination. James Elkins (2007) notes that throughout Africa, only 79 art schools can be listed, and there is no tradition of non-Western art history (distinct from criticism). Indeed, until independence, national art histories in Africa were histories of the colonizing countries (Said 1979). Only later did the new national process of rewriting art histories start (Harney 2004). National art exegesis and its dissemination represent a strategy to which we are simply accustomed.

Thanks particularly to post-colonial studies, the fact that art history and national art history stretch beyond borders has been acknowledged more widely. This new awareness has produced another direction for research (Harris 2011) and a schizophrenic result: on the one hand, scholars take the production of the world much more into consideration, and on the other hand, the world is accused of losing its authenticity and being ‘Westernized.’

This new attempt at exploring the world more broadly and bridging geographies, histories and contexts exists in tension with our current taxonomic systems: productions are still, largely considered to be either national or international, and what is international tends to be considered either ‘Westernized’ or peripheral (Bydler 2004).

Analyzing artistic production in Africa (artworks, biennials, public art, art residencies, independent spaces and artists’ initiatives) helps us to question such binaries, and to realize that national and international, local and global, authentic and Westernized, project and work of art, art and development are not antithetical concepts, although they are so often presented as such. To clarify, it is important to debunk the assumption that the art system is simply made up of artists, curators, critics, dealers, museums, galleries and art collectors.

Project vs. Artwork: The Project System With Objectives, Activities and Expected Results

Contemporary artistic production is part of a system that determines its own characteristics and values. The system we are accustomed to is made up of artists, curators, critics, dealers, museums, galleries and art collectors. Yet, such a portrayal actually represents an incredibly small number of places, works and experts that are, together, commonly perceived as the center of art. The immense rest—because it does not fit—is considered periphery. There are various degrees of periphery depending on the extent to which a certain place echoes the so-called center of art. When the periphery just does not work that way and lacks most of the components of the recognized system, it is believed that there is essentially no contemporary art in those places. However, as Maharaj (2002, p. 72) argues, there exists an immense multiplicity of production sites in Africa, Asia and elsewhere:

Developments in China, South Africa, India, Nigeria—sites of emergency and emergence—suggest several incipient practices, models and
experiments, some hardly recognizable as art in terms of the gallery-museum system. But if they do not look like art, they count as art—spasmic, interdisciplinary probes, transitive, haphazard cognitive investigations; dissipating interactions, imaginary archiving; epidemiological statistics, questionnaires and proceedings; auctions and commotions that are not pre-scripted.

His description reflects an operating system of art that has grown exponentially since the Second World War—the project system. The initial model of the World Bank—disseminated through the key roles played by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the European Commission—has spread around the world through foundations and non-profit organizations and governments that have embarked on a strategy of funding based on objectives, activities and expected results which respond to needs. The system based on projects has spread so widely and with such impact that even productions that do not receive financial support are talking about themselves defining objectives, activities and expected results (Pensa 2013). Regardless of funding, the transformation of artworks into projects has determined the discourse, the wording and the way artists, curators and institutions work. Institutions have had to adapt to the new system (a theater, for example, which does not receive state funding, has to produce projects: it has to develop outreach activities, educational programs, training and multidisciplinary international partnerships and so on. Artists also have started responding to new clients, interested in urban and economic development, social change, community building, integration, outreach and so on). This does not imply that the arts are no longer a space of experimentation, research and freedom, but it implies that the client is not only the collector (or the person looking for a painting for his/her living room) or the museum.

This project system is mostly present in the so-called ‘developing’ countries, where development contributions paid by international organizations are an institutionalized component of the local economy which also supports, directly or indirectly, the arts. This presence has influenced the format of cultural productions and their operating systems (i.e., biennials, public art, art residencies, independent spaces and artists’ initiatives) and it has enriched the international dimension of national art by reinforcing the links between countries, continents and areas of the world.

Evaluating Development: Talking About Development and Social Change vs. Producing Development and Social Change

When it comes to art and social change, the first question to answer is, who asked that art should produce development outcomes? The contention that art produces development and social change is variously connected to the social role of art, to the requirements of potential grant-makers, to the specific national context that encourages artists to intervene and to the
international context which expects artists to represent the geography of the world and their otherness. Talking about art and social change and doing it are, however, quite different things. In none of the cases mentioned earlier has art really been asked to ‘produce’ social outcomes.

The social role is framed by the intentionality of artists and groups and the theoretical stance presented in their statements and manifestos. To meet the demands of grant-makers, producing a project and then sending a report that states that the project has been carried out as planned will do. To claim ‘engagement,’ institutions, artists themselves, curators and critics just have to tell the story and emphasize the commitment of artists and works. So everything can be done simply by talking about development and social change, but not necessarily by producing it.

The project structure employed by grant-makers is self-referential and trapped into the logic of ‘responding to a need.’ What art can do is something really experimental and unexpected, but the way in which projects are structured and then evaluated makes it difficult to devise satisfactory indicators in this field (an issue addressed by other chapters in this book). An innovative method that the NGO Arts Collaboratory is trialing is to evaluate whether and how far an existing situation has changed before and after the intervention of a project rather than assess the project itself. This evaluation system may reveal the unforeseen changes and reactions triggered by the project, but from the donors’ point of view, it is far more difficult. It requires a mid-term evaluation and transforms the project into a component of a process without a direct correlation between investment and outcome. Grant-makers prefer to focus on specific, measurable results: the number of people involved, training and professionalization, infrastructure built and economic productivity. The uniqueness of a work of art can be considered neither in the project nor in its assessment. In all other cases, specifically related to the world of art, the fact that an artwork produces development and social change is not a criterion of artistic quality.9 The intentionality of artists and groups and the story of the work are useful elements in order to understand, analyze and contextualize cultural production, but art can be valuable even if it does not produce development and social change.

The ability of art to produce development and social change may be relevant for the development community, but what art are we talking about?

Evaluating Art: Art vs. Development

The easiest way to assess art is within its system. So, how can artistic quality be assessed in the ‘system’ of development?

In disciplines other than art history, the problem of selecting artworks and analyzing their quality is that very different productions all end up simply being labeled ‘art’ (theater as therapy, popular art, workshops, painting, sculptures, public art, performances, school projects and projects promoted by local art centers and so on). It is possible to narrow the field through
specific selections (carried out by cultural institutions, donors, exhibitions),
entrusting to others the task of qualitative analysis of the works, but this
approach is not common. More usually, a selection is carried out directly,
not according to the artistic quality of the work, but according to its ability
to 'produce' development.

Within this selection, the dichotomy between the national and interna-
tional level plays an important role. Authenticity hunting starts there. The
nationality of the artists, the place where they live, their education or
self-education, the materials and languages used in their works become par-
ticularly important as selection criteria, because they are easier to justify
than subjective criteria such as artistic quality (which would require a legit-
imacy within another type of system).

**Art Produced in the So-Called ‘Developing’ Countries**

The system which frames art is a tangle of wires, in which disciplines and
a series of national and international art histories perpetuate the practice
of constructing knowledge around a line, where what comes next is the
development of what was there before. It is a system which looks for homo-
genity, it includes and excludes, and it defines centers according to what it
knows, and it condemns to the periphery whatever it does not know.

Art produced in the so-called developing countries suffers a series of sys-
temic problems. It is not much known outside its country, and its country
does not necessarily invest in producing a process of national art exegesis
and a strategy of dissemination. It is often supported directly or indirectly by
international organizations, and its most used operating system is the project
(something different from the system made up of artists, curators, critics,
dealers, museums, galleries and art collectors), a situation which provides
national art with a highly international dimension. When the art produced
in the so-called developing countries is observed as part of the phenome-
one called the ‘internationalization of art,’ there are three possibilities: it
is considered nonexistent, it is selected according to its capacity to provide
the viewer with a convincing idea of the nation or continent that it should
represent or it is blamed for losing its authenticity and becoming 'Western-
ized.' Differently from cultural production elsewhere, art in these countries
is often expected to be socially engaged or to produce development, despite
its capacity of producing development being tangential to determining its
artistic quality, and its artistic quality is difficult to evaluate outside the art
system.

**The System Error**

Art which produces development is a ‘system error.’ It is a system error
because it has artistic value and it actually produces development: two things
which together do not fit into the current system.
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‘Mobile A2K: Culture and Safety in Africa’: Research to Document and Assess the Impact of Cultural Events and Public Art on Urban Safety

Bridging art and development has been at the center of ‘Mobile A2K: Culture and Safety in Africa. Documenting and assessing the impact of cultural events and public art on urban safety,’ an interdisciplinary research investigation developed between 2011 and 2014 by an international team of scholars in the fields of art, design, architecture, communication, anthropology and sociology and representatives of cultural institutions. The research focused on cultural events and public art produced between 1991 and 2013 in Douala in Cameroon, Luanda in Angola and Johannesburg in South Africa. The aim of the research was to document and assess the impact of cultural events and public art on urban safety. The research was implemented using literature reviews, field research, qualitative interviews, panoramic reports, case studies, visual representations and a comparative analysis. In relation to art and development, the research did two specific things: it applied by default on its content the open license ‘Creative Commons attribution share alike,’ and it observed the impact of art on urban safety.

Creative Commons attribution share alike is a license which allows anyone to share, copy and redistribute content in any medium or format and to adapt, remix, transform and build upon it for any purpose, even commercially. This license has two restrictions: the work needs to be attributed, and those who use it need to adopt the same license. Research produces background knowledge: literature reviews, interviews and documentation. This background knowledge is not the ‘core business’ of research, it is preparatory work necessary to build a theory or to provide evidence. In this regard, hard sciences and social sciences are very different: while hard sciences are aware of the value of their database for further research, social sciences rarely provide open access to background knowledge (such as interviews and notes). Furthermore, in the field of arts, very few journals are open access and, in particular in contemporary art, most of the studies are published in copyrighted books rather than journals. Adopting open licenses is a start at unraveling the skein of art history. In a system which continues to trap knowledge around disciplinary and linear histories, facilitating reuse and remix is the first easy step in constructing communicating vessels. Furthermore, Creative Commons attribution share alike is the license of Wikipedia, the encyclopedia with over 500 million readers and the mainstream online reference. With its unlimited potential for articles and links, Wikipedia is a revolutionary tool to document the artistic production of the world. The sum of articles can allow our current knowledge constructed around disciplinary and linear histories to cross over and to relate to practices and institutions, with the effects of acknowledging the art produced in the so-called ‘developing’ countries and of providing multiple entry points to contemporary mainstream information. To sabotage the system that currently frames
art is a necessity if we want to link art and development in a way that just
does not construct a new disciplinary and linear history, and new exclusions.

Mobile A2K sought to study the unexpected fallout of cultural events and
public art in the three contexts of Douala, Luanda and Johannesburg. The con-
cept of safety—defined as livability, civil cohabitation and social cohesion—is
deeply related to achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least
100 million slum dwellers (Millennium Development Goal 7d), but it is not
a direct objective, neither of the institutions and artists promoting cultural
events and public art in the cities at the center of our research, nor of the public
administrations, donors and grant-makers supporting them. Evaluating art by
looking at a potential unexpected fallout allowed the research to avoid getting
trapped in the expectations of stakeholders and internal evaluation criteria.
The selection of the artworks at the center of the research was based on the
art curatorial intent of the promoters; we didn’t explore artworks produced
independently by artists or artworks produced without art curatorial intent.

The research started with the following questions:

(1) How do cultural events and public art affect urban safety in African cities?
(2) Can we assess these changes as positive according to a group of factors?

The hypothesis was that art is a space for experimentation and research,
not directly connected to urban safety, but capable of triggering unforeseen
ways of producing higher livability, civil cohabitation and social cohesion.

What emerged from the point of view of art and development is that
the ability of art to trigger unforeseen ways of producing higher livability,
civil cohabitation and social cohesion is directly connected to its capacity of
generating a system error. This error occurs in two different ways: inside the
production process and inside the work itself.

Charisma Generates System Errors

The future spatial practitioner may, as suggested by Miessen and Baser (2006,
p. 25) ‘be understood as an outsider who, instead of trying to set up or sustain
common denominators of consensus, enters existing situations or projects by
deliberately instigating conflicts between often-delineated fields of knowl-
dge.’ As ‘an enabler, a facilitator of interaction that stimulates alternative
debates and speculations’ (2006, p. 25), the personal charisma of this figure
can generate a system error. When a community works with an artist or a
curator, there is an opportunity to meet outsiders,¹¹ to discuss topics outside
everyday life and to observe problems and opportunities from a new point
of view. The uniqueness of the experience—enhanced by the charisma of the
artist or curator who activates it—has the effect of sabotaging habits. Within
a community, there may be representatives for negotiating with the govern-
ment and with the institutions for development and cooperation, but when
a work of art is produced, it can be difficult to determine who the contact
A person is and the debate tends to expand. When there is no ‘representative,’
the process of art production produces a new reference group. This phenom-
omenon is particularly significant when the work is carried out in an informal
neighborhood that is threatened by forced eviction. The process of creation
and production and the need to negotiate the land and the maintenance of
the work of art all become an opportunity for the community to aggregate
around something new. The ability of the process to produce a transforma-
tion inside the community is strongly determined by the awareness of the
value of the novelty: if the process is to have an effect, the community must
feel like a protagonist, the center of something exceptional. The awareness of
this exceptionality emerges in several ways: through comparison with other
people (the feeling of being involved in something that others do not have),
through the presence of people outside the community (the feeling that one’s
territory is somehow ‘attractive’) and through the personal charisma of the
curator and of the artist (who may have the ability to activate a community
and communicate the value of what they are doing).

Personal charisma can also influence people’s lives and decisions. The way
an artist or a curator lives and works can inspire people to take new oppor-
tunities into account. This may be observed in the personal experience of
some of the people involved in the production of the works and the creation
of new initiatives arising from their experience.

Figure 6.1 Hervé Yamguen, Les mots écrits de New Bell, Douala, 2010.
The Artwork as a System Error

A work of art itself may be a system error, but to be perceived as such, the work must be visible. Artworks produce different reactions depending on the perspective they are viewed from. When the work is completely immersed in a place, it may not be visible; people notice new infrastructure or a better atmosphere, but they do not necessarily notice the work, its content and message. At the same time, placed in a square or in a roundabout, a monument or a very large work of art tends to be perceived by the local public as a public statement. The emphasis is placed on the client, the observation of the work focuses on the dynamics of power and its message tends to be read as political and ideological. In both cases, the artwork is rarely capable of creating a relationship with its observer, unless the observer is there especially to look at the work (as in the case of external visitors and tourists). To see the work, a certain distance is needed.

The perception of the system error is evident in the words of those who have looked at the work and commented on it. In the words of the observer, the work is both itself and something else, it is a bridge and the beginning of a journey.

Let me tell you about the power of art. For a person to think of building a bed in a park, in public view, I call it the power of art. Whenever we see a bed we think of the bedroom. But in a park... it is so unique. This is a blanket. The person who was doing it was so gifted. Thumbs up to the person who did this.

(Philemon Diale, City Power worker coincidentally at the Troyeville Bed, July 2013. Interview collected by Caroline Wanjiku Kihato)

Troyeville Bedtime Stories is a white sculpture located in a park of Troyeville realized by Johannes Dreyer with the shape of a bed. The work is maintained by the artist and the community, and it has not been ruined despite the park not being surrounded by a fence and having no security guards opening and closing the gates, like in other parks of Johannesburg.

Caroline Wanjiku Kihato refers to the capacity of the artwork to transgress borders. The subject of the work is at once intimate and public, domestic and social. As Caroline Wanjiku Kihato describes it, the installation peels off the layers of society—it blows up the boundaries between public and private spaces at once exposing the intimacy of romance and domestic violence, the mundane and aspirational, the alien and familiar, reality and fantasy. The Troyeville bed is a transgressor, pushing the boundaries of official versus unofficially sanctioned art and crossing the line of what is visible and invisible in public space.

Le Jardin Sonore by Lucas Grandin is a garden built as a small building of three floors in height, where the plants placed in different levels are irrigated by a system that collects rainwater in a cistern and distributes it drip by drip into tins producing musical harmony. The building is artwork,
Figure 6.2 Lucas Grandin, Le jardin sonore, Douala, 2010.

infrastructure and botanical garden, and the third floor is a viewpoint over the river Wouri. The peculiarity of the structure located close to the homes of Bonamouiti is that despite its functionality, it is an anomaly compared to other structures normally built within neighborhoods (wells, fountains, sewers, paved streets, bridges) and a garden in the city of Douala, where there are no parks or public gardens. Around it, a friendly place has been created where children play and people meet.

**The Need for the Exceptional**

Art which produces development and social change is a system error. It is a system error because it succeeds in injecting new discussions and speculations into existing situations, it humanizes and it leads people to carry out unexpected actions. It is a system error because art is not requested to produce development and social change, and what produces it is not necessarily evaluated as *art*. So, once we have both—art and development—we are facing something exceptional.

The exceptional is the most annoying and relevant aspect of art in relationship to development. Art can be reproduced (Benjamin 1968), but it is not scalable. In the production of public art, we can highlight protagonists and aspects of the process and we can anticipate some of the reactions according to the location and the land negotiations involved, but we cannot
define *a priori* which artwork will produce development and social change. It is indeed the capacity of being a space for experimentation and research which brings art to trigger the exceptional. When looking at ‘impact,’ it is never a direct cause-effect relationship. We can collect evidence that the production of an artwork has boosted the development of a site or neighborhood (new traders, higher value of land, maintenance, new initiatives, other people in the area imitating the artwork design and colors, presence of visitors, less criminality), but we cannot directly connect the artwork to the effect, because to do so it we would have to consider everything except ‘art.’

Considering art and development as a system error creates a space to acknowledge experimentation and research, beyond the assessment criterion for those who finance it and beyond the dichotomy of national and international, local and global, authentic and Westernized, project and work of art, art and development.

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Notes

1. Les Ateliers Urbains de Bessengué was a workshop with international artists organized by doual’art in 2001 in Bessengué. The artists involved worked in the neighborhood of Bessengué, producing paintings, sculptures, murals and performances. doual’art is a not-for-profit cultural organization and art center, founded in 1991 in Douala, Cameroon, and focused on contemporary art and urban transformation. *Doual’art*. Online: [www.doualart.org](http://www.doualart.org) (accessed 3 December 2015).
2. Bessengué City was an art project curated by Goddy Leye in 2001 in Bessengué. The project involved the artists James Beckett, Goddy Leye, Hartanto, Jesus Palomino and the local community in producing artworks. The radio station was the artwork produced by the sound artist James Beckett. Bessengué City was organized with the support of the program R.A.I.N. Rain Artists’ Initiative Network and it led to the establishment of the art organization artBakery, based in Bonendale, just on the outskirts of Douala.
3. Bourne Fountain is a small building with a shop and fountain designed by the architect and designer Danièle Diwouta Kotto in 2003 and produced by doual’art. The design of the construction took as a model the shelter created by Jesus Palomino in the project Bessengué City.
4. La Passerelle is a bridge and artwork by Alioum Moussa, produced by doual’art in 2005 in Douala, Bessengué. The jury who selected the work included members of the community of Bessengué.

5. The SUD Salon Urbain de Douala is a triennial festival of public art organized in Douala since 2007 and promoted by doual’art.

6. Other expressions are used, such as global art or internationalization of the arts.

7. Related references can be found in the history of institutions, in reports and internal documents and in the wide literature associated with project management.

8. Among the international relationships supported by grant-makers are South-South relationships, networks, festivals, partnerships and exchanges. Please refer, in the context of Africa, for example, to the programs of Pro Helvetia, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Goethe Institute, the European Commission, Arts Collaboratory, the Prince Claus Fund, Triangle Arts Trust, the Ford Foundation, Africalia, Young Arab Theatre Fund.

9. An interesting counterexample here is that of curators Clémentine Deliss and Okwui Enwezor, who have highlighted and framed two groups of artists (Laboratoire Agit-Art and Huit Facettes Interaction) in ways that emphasize the performative aspect of their practice. In both cases, their work is associated with development and social change. See Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, (dir.) Clémentine Deliss, Flammarion, Paris and New York, 1995, and Documenta 1 Platform 5: Exhibition, (dir.) Okwui Enwezor, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002.


11. An outsider can be a person who comes from outside the community, a foreigner or even a member of their community perceived in a new way because of the situation.

References


