

'Bricks in Madagascar'
Project Bie Michels
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'Bricks in Madagascar' is a participative and intercultural art project, content-wise supported by Petra Van Brabandt from the research group Art&Narrativity at St. Lucas School of Arts Antwerp.

An anthropological art act, including its ethical/aesthetic dimensions in a postcolonial context, starting from the brick culture in Antananarivo (Madagascar). The brick as both object and point of departure for understanding the cultural context, in interaction with local workers, artists, an anthropologist. A total installation featuring my film installation and answers (art works) by the participating Madagascan artists.

The concept

In my opinion, the brick is a universal object, simultaneously historical and contemporary. It's an accessible yet layered starting point to approach different cultures in their complexity. For me, intercultural exchange is the only way of dealing with the world and its changes, but it's also a minefield of misunderstandings, power relations, and blind spots. The project does not pretend to be able to avoid this minefield, yet doesn't want to shy away from the postcolonial issue, both socially and artistically.

My interest in **brick** is the direct result of my previous projects, in which I examined the anthropological relationship between man and thing. It's an object that exactly fits in the human hand, a bearer of human measure and a part of a building. In this way, it reflects society and its social structures. At the same time, it's the pre-eminent symbol of our relationship with soil, earth, and matter. It's in **Madagascar**, in 2013, that the image of the brick suddenly appeared to me very pregnantly, especially in the capital **Antananarivo**. The traditional production process is still omnipresent and alive: the human being (hand) as the measure of the creative process, the environment as the provider of raw materials, and the human need for functional buildings as the goal of the building process. In Antananarivo, the brick site seems to be a city within a city, which is a breathtaking image. Despite major social problems (quality of living, ecology, ...), the still widely used traditional brick architecture remains a symbol of the contemporary city and society. Because of that I found many artists, during my second trip (summer 2016), that were interested in participating in the project.

Not a desire for primitivism, but the brick as a way to gain understanding of the people's contact with soil, earth, tradition on the one hand, and the current developments on the other: Madagascar is at the crossroads of African, Asian and European influences, it evolves at an incredibly interesting double speed. It is amazing how the bond with the earth resists in a society permeated with internet and mobile phones. Like everywhere, brick competes with concrete. Madagascar is the fifth poorest country in the world, without structural arts initiatives or arts training, yet with a vibrant contemporary art scene and, most importantly, a desire to search for new forms and expressions.

How do I translate an anthropological given into work? Which is the relationship between the aesthetic and political dimensions of the image in the anthropological, postcolonial art act? What is an adequate method to *learn* from the Malagasy culture (instead of just understanding it)? How to keep this project far from sentimentalism and Western hegemonic discourse, or the exploitation of African beauty in an aesthetic image? How to counter

voyeurism and the subordination of the 'object' (the Other)? Here, sources of inspiration are Catherine Russell, Achile Mbembe, Claire Bishop,...

Concretely

In collaboration with CRAAM (Centre de Ressources des Arts Actuels de Madagascar), I organised a **workshop** with local artists. Interaction with artists was a good start in how to look. The workshop took place at the site of the brick production. The objective was to arrive – through improvisations and physical interactions – at personal meanings and stories, and reflections on the brick and (class) society. The brick site seems a fictional world with unidentifiable settlements and strange architectural forms. I had **conversations** with the brick workers about their craft, economy and land distribution. **The Madagascan anthropologist** Prof. Rafolo Andrianaivoarivony spoke about the traditions that partly are still prevalent: about architecture and symbolic spatial planning, the bond with the land and classes, stones and canonisations. Everything was recorded. There are also **recordings** of houses and earth, the residential area of the brick workers, markets full of objects, a zebumarket... Through all these recorded fragments, I want to represent reality as an allegory that is not illustrative but a re-construction or evocation of these events. In doing so, I want to highlight the complexity of a culture, of culture *tout court*. This way the viewer will not be able to clearly identify the displayed reality or reduce it to a straightforward narrative, and will question his/her own relationship with traditions, land *and* the Other. **The film installation** will consist of three projections in which different realities will intersect.

I have asked both young and more established **artists** to influence my creative process by formulating responses at different times, through sketches, texts, photos,... **This question and answer game** will initially take place through the internet. To that end I will conduct - during a third trip in spring 2017 - new interviews with artists and record some more footage. **Petra Van Brabandt** will accompany me to write about these dialogues and events. Her text will also be part of the project.

All this should result in a joint **exhibition** in collaboration with the artists, first in the **IFM (Institut Français de Madagascar) or CRAAM**, both in Antananarivo (summer 2017). Afterwards I want to transfer the works to **Belgium** and invite a number of artists to show the project – that by then will be further developed – here and to comment on it (late 2017 or 2018).