Video Slink Uganda is a multi-part project that explores the language of video, cultural translations and transpositions, as well as contemporary media distribution and reproduction. It consists of curated short-form experimental videos by contemporary African/African-American artists that will be shown and “performed” in the video halls of Uganda.

Local performer/pirates called VJs first translate the films into the primary local language of Luganda before burning them to DVD. Dubbing all the voices, making jokes, and explaining the on-screen action, these VJs then act as both interpreter and commentator.

Starting in 1986, the earliest of Ugandan black market videos were dubbed by VJs live in front of an audience. Live translations soon became recorded: the VJ would bring the DVD to be pirated to the recording studio. Using a remote control jerry-rigged with a wooden clothespin to keep the electrical circuit either open or closed, the VJ would mute the sound while he translated the voices. The earliest VJs would translate with an emphasis on description. Starting about 1998, VJs began increasing their interpretive and performative role, recognizing that their charisma drove up ticket sales. Like the carney barker or the MC, the VJ’s talent lay in his ability to operate on a meta-level, acting as various characters but also in the inbetween.

The predominance of media screened in Ugandan video halls are highly commercial enterprises — Hollywood action movies, Nollywood dramas, Bollywood musicals, and pornography — whose simplified narratives and styles propone conservative values about gender, global politics, nationhood, and consumerism. Conspicuously absent are critical voices and alternative perspectives.

Video Slinking Uganda

Video Slink Uganda is a multi-part project of curated short-form experimental videos by contemporary African/African-American artists. For the exhibition in Uganda these experimental videos will be burned onto pirated DVDs that play before the main feature film in video halls. In keeping with local traditions of viewership, a handful of VJs translate these shorts before burning them onto commercially pirated DVDs.

None of the selected video shorts are documentaries, none are linear, and none rely on language as their primary mode of communication. Instead, they appropriate and subvert mainstream cinematic tropes, using repetition, simultaneity, and the compression of time and space as a way to question customary modes of perception.

By both transposing these works into a different cinematic culture and asking the VJs to translate these works into Luganda, Video Slink Uganda pronounces the asymmetry between not only image, sound, and language but between cultures. The selected videos are as follows:

Paul D. Miller a.k.a. Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid

New York is Now (2006)

New York is Now, created by African-American artist, musician, and writer Paul D. Miller a.k.a. Dj Spooky that Subliminal Kid, portrays New York City at the edge of the recorded imagination. Composed of found footage appropriated from material as diverse as Duke Ellington’s “Harlem Tone Poem,” Hans Arp’s “Rhythmus 21,” Thomas Edison’s vignettes of the electrification of Coney Island, and other archival bits and pieces from the 20th century, New York is Now embodies Miller’s signature approach to remixing digital culture and the framework for Video Slink Uganda as a project: both are...
founded in a logic of disjunction, adjacency, and improvisa-
tion. In describing New York Is Now, Miller refers to the sci-
cence fiction writer William Gibson’s notion that “the future is al-
ready here, it’s just unevenly distributed.” In foregrounding the
coterminal relationship between technological distribu-
tion, wealth, and location, both Gibson’s quote and Miller’s
work together highlight the way that cultural transposition
mediates and renders visible these asymmetries.

Hank Willis Thomas and Terence Nance

Untitled (video short produced for Films4Peace) (2012)

An allegory about peace and reconciliation, this short video
by African-American artists Hank Willis Thomas and
Terence Nance depicts a group of male characters attempt-
ing to overpower elements in a forested landscape with
brute force. The female characters, working in concert with
each other and their surrounding natural elements (trees,
rocks, earth, water, and light) together arrest the conflict and
restore harmony.

Kamau Patton

Thresholds (2005)

Thresholds, created by African-American artist Kamau Patton,
features an elaborately-decorated altar animated by fire-
crackers and split in half with the left and right sides of the
screens mirroring each other. A masked character sings a
hand-held bell as he slowly crouches out then in towards the
center of the kaleidoscope-void, where digital decay, dissolu-
tion, and dissonance play against ritual, archetype, and the
center of the kaleidoscope-void, where digital decay, dissolu-
tion, and dissonance play against ritual, archetype, and the
existence of origination.

Akosa Adouna Ovusu

Intermittent Delight (2007)

Intermittent Delight by Ghanaian-American artist Akossa
Adouna Ovusu juxtaposes montages of West-African women
weaving textiles against 1950s scenes of Anglo-American
caricatures and shimmying next to a modern refrigerator. The
repeated array of pattern and décor draws new associations
between producing and consuming societies.

Zina Saro-Wiwa

Phyllis (2011)

Directed by Zina Saro-Wiwa, a British Nigerian filmmaker,
reporter, and artist, Phyllis features a Nigerian woman
obessed with wig-wearing. Each wig she dons triggers a
transformative process, personifying her otherwise solitary
and stark quotidian life to which she returns when she
removes her wig. A vampire, Phyllis seeks others to indoctrinate,
persuading what Saro-Wiwa refers to as the contagious and
unforgiving treatment of single women in Nollywood and Nigeria, while also pointing out the way in
which the derivative itself functions as a form of currency and
stability.

Rashaad Newsome

Grand Duchess of Gainesville (2011)

African-American artist Rashaad Newsome’s work samples
motifs from Aristocratic, hip-hop, and pop culture to create a
new iconography that merges coats of honor with car rims,
fake Rolex watches, and cruise ships. In merging “old bling” and
“new bling,” Newsome’s work draws attention to the
depreciation inherent in cultural transposition. Further still, the
blackmarket. It is possible and even likely that my work
will be translated, mistranslated, misquoted, misunderstood, mis-
treated, mocked, pirated, duplicated, denided, sold on dusty streets and crowded markets.

Another section inverts the contractual agreement between
museums and galleries to “return the artwork undam-
aged.” However, the organizers of Video Slink Uganda promise to return the damage—those “artifacts of mis-
translations, the bits that are dubbed, doubled, and born anew.” Further, the contract stipulates that “The Organizers agree to submit to the Artist a Damage Report which will be provided to the Artist, as well as to the general public.” In yielding to the interpretive context of Ugandan blackmar-
ket cinema, these works, then, evidence the decodification
inherent in cultural transposition. Further still, the
Video Slink Uganda project as a whole serves as an agent of
the de/re/negotiation process by which these works become
Others.

-Marisa Jahn and Paul Falzone © 2013
2012-2013 Franchise Program Winner

The Felicities of Mistranslation and Infidelities

Contracts penned between Western art and media agencies
(museums, galleries, producers) and artists typically outline
the distribution, reproduction, and profits of the work. In
doing so, a certain stability is ensured; this system of exclu-
sion in fact produces what Jacques Derrida refers to as the
‘bastard.’ “Bastards appear and (disappear) to enact impro-
priety. Accordingly, the bastard might be named ‘impropriety itself’ [. . .] Bastards, however, cannot be named properly and
the one thing impropriety cannot be one thing.”

By comparison, cultures built upon a largely informal or
blackmarket economy thrive on piracy and derivation as
an inevitable force with its own set of tacit rules. Here, the
illegitimate (the bastard) is not disavowed. Instead, the copy,
bootleg, or knockoff becomes the currency itself, and in-
deed the distribution, reproduction, and profits of the work. In
yielding to the interpretive context of Ugandan blackmar-
ket cinema, these works, then, evidence the decodification
inherent in cultural transposition. Further still, the
Video Slink Uganda project as a whole serves as an agent of
the de/re/negotiation process by which these works become
Others.

-Saya Woolfalk