

CODED MESSAGES: CHAINS (Version 2)

Coded Messages: CHAINS traverses the contextual boundaries between the traditional culture of the Ewe people of Ghana and the cyberculture of the World Wide Web. African master-drummer Francis Kofi has collaborated with American multimedia composer Andruud Kerne and designer Melissa Lang to brew an intense performance which explores the semiotics of tradition in the postmodern age. As multinational capitalism leaves no alternative to itself, no culture is left immune to its effects. In the remote village of Anyako, CNN, Whitney Houston, and other artifacts of the information age exist alongside centuries old traditions.

In the last two years, the World Wide Web has been espoused as a liberating medium which has the power to bring all people together. Yet, a map of Internet service providers in Africa shows that continent participates marginally. In both contexts - traditional Ewe culture and cyberculture - the loss is paramount. In a twist of irony, Coded Messages: CHAINS reverses those losses. This installation brings the immensely rich culture of the Ewe people to the World Wide Web for the first time; yet, the people who are being represented have never seen this installation, and, as long as the Internet remains a medium for the technologically privileged, may never do so.

Based on the 1994 intercultural performances of the same name that were held in Ghana, this Web installation features vibrant footage of traditional Ewe drumming and dancing, alongside revealing exhibitions of on-line culture. The juxtapositions are intentional as we attempt to bridge the contexts. At first glance, they may seem to have nothing in common. Yet, similarities and correspondences become more and more apparent as the visitor travels through these pages.

We explore the manifestations of the omnipresent "code" within both contexts. Every culture is defined by certain social "codes". For the Ewe people, traditional music and dance reinforce the internal cohesion of their society. In Coded Messages: CHAINS the visitor meets performances from another cultural world, with an interpretation of their code. In our "guerilla" links to multinational sites on the World Wide Web, we bring the viewer face to face with the "code" that this culture promotes. The sites represent themselves, and through their juxtaposition with other elements of the installation, their meaning is decoded. Participant/visitors of Coded Messages: CHAINS interactively cross the boundaries between the contexts we present. How is communication via drum language similar to "hot links"? How is the "code" of the traditional war dance, Adzogbo, different from that of advertisers on the World Wide Web? Together we read the "Coded Messages" around us. They have the power to enslave or free us if we know the code.

Netscape 1.1 and helper applications are required to enjoy the full benefit of these pages.

Point your browser to the following URL:

<http://found.cs.nyu.edu/andruid/CHAINS.html>

E-mail inquiries and comments to:

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Coded Messages: CHAINS is hosted by the NYU Center for Digital Multimedia
a
(http://found.cs.nyu.edu/CATHome_new.html) and Courant Institute Media
Research Lab (<http://found.cs.nyu.edu/MRL/>)

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