

**Colonial History, Curatorial Practice and Cross-Cultural Conflict  
at the Bamako Biennial of African photography (1994-2007)**

By

Marie Lortie

School for Studies in Art and Culture, Department of Art History

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine also known as the Bamako Biennial in the context of colonial history, contemporary art and Bamako, Mali. By analyzing the catalogue essays to the past seven Biennials, I explore the roles of Primitivism and contemporaneity in the discourse surrounding African photography at this event. I also consider the role of the catalogues' formats in asserting the fine art status of the Biennial and the African photography on view. My treatment of the Biennial's impact within Bamako addresses Malian desire for autonomy, the divergent aesthetic values between the local community and the Biennial and the detrimental results of the Biennial's top down approach to management for a local artist-run center in Bamako.

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My research trip to the 2007 Bamako Biennial revolutionized my perception of this event. Samuel Sidibé (Director, National Museum of Mali), Hama Goro (Director, Centre Soleil D’Afrique) and Minga S. Siddick (Administrator, Centre de Formation Photographique) were willing interviewees for whose time and thoughtful responses to the Biennial I am truly indebted. I would also like to thank the staff at the Maison de la Photographie Africaine in Bamako, and particularly Diakaridia Fomba who kindly helped me compile local press coverage and documentation on the Bamako Biennial which significantly impacted this project. Back home, Diawoye Diabaté at the Malian Embassy in Ottawa translated the Bambara passages of the 2007 promotional song for the Biennial. Finally, I would like to extend a special thank you to Frances Lortie and Jason McKeever, who accompanied and supported me throughout my research in Bamako.

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## INTRODUCTION

Seydou Keita (c.1921-2001) was a studio photographer whose portraits of Bamakois in contemporary Western dress and accessories reflect a society in transition following Mali's independence from France, in 1960. Since 1990s, his photography has become a mainstay in the repertoire of major art institutions and collections, worldwide. However, while powerful players such as The Centre for African Art in New York City and Jean Pigozzi's Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC) may be credited with transforming and widely publicizing his work, his introduction to the broader art world was initiated under much more intimate circumstances. Its ordinary moment was that of an encounter between two photographers in Bamako, Mali: Seydou Keita and Françoise Huguier. This encounter simultaneously inspired the idea for the *Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine* [Encounters of African Photography] typically referred to in English as the Bamako Biennial.<sup>1</sup>

Françoise Huguier is a French photojournalist who frequently conducts reportage work in Africa for Agence VU. Her familiarity with the continent and particularly her love of Mali led her to become acquainted with a number of photographers in Bamako such as Malick Sidibé, a retired Bamakois photographer to whom she brings her camera for repair. It was Malick Sidibé who suggested she meet an older colleague of his in Bamako, Seydou Keita.<sup>2</sup> She did so and was struck by the beauty of Seydou Keita's post-independence portraits and especially his meticulous archiving of his negatives, which

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<sup>1</sup> This event was officially referred to as the *Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine* [Encounters of African Photography] from 1994 to 2003. From 2005 onwards it has been renamed the *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* [African Encounters of Photography]. However, it is commonly known as the *Biennale de Bamako* [Bamako Biennial]. This is how it is referred to in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Erica Nimis, "De Nadar à Keita : Une Histoire Franco-Malienne de la Photographie," in *Mali-France : Regards sur une Histoire Partagée* (Bamako and Paris : Éditions Donniya and Karthala, 2005), 391.

was not common practice in photographic studios of the region. His work inspired her and a French colleague, Bernard Descamps, to campaign for the development of an African photography biennial to publicize the quality and uniqueness of the work of African photographers to the world.

While the original idea for the Bamako Biennial was proposed by Françoise Huguier and Bernard Decamps, they turned to the Malian and French governments to support its realization. In France, they collaborated with Afrique en Créations, an association within the French government's Ministère des affaires étrangères and Ministère de la culture et de la communication founded in 1990. Its mandate to support the development of the African cultural sector corresponded exactly with the nature of the proposed biennial. The Bamako Biennial became one of its earliest initiatives.

### **The Bamako Biennial**

The first Bamako Biennial was presented between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1994, in Bamako, Mali. Pursuant to the vision of Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps, it showcased photographers from across the continent in fourteen monographic and three group exhibitions held at various venues around Bamako including the Palais de la Culture, the Lycée Askia Mohammed (a school), the Institut National des Arts, the Galerie San Toro (a private gallery), the Centre Culturel Français, the Site de la Foire Exposition de Bamako [Bamako's exhibition site] and even the Stade Modibo Keita (the soccer stadium). While no exhibition catalogue was published, it was accompanied by a twenty-page, black and white booklet in the format and style of an issue of the photographic journal *Photographies Magazine*. Its cover is adorned by one of

Seydou Keita's portraits (see *Appendix I*). This Biennial was the first in a continuing series, the seventh of which was held between November 24<sup>th</sup> and December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007.

While Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps were intimately involved in the first Bamako Biennial as its two Artistic Directors, by the third Biennial in 1998, they had withdrawn from its organization, thereby allowing Afrique en Créations to take the helm. Under this agency's control, the Biennial has evolved in size and scope, adopted a fine art focus and gained considerable international visibility. It has also produced increasingly substantial and comprehensive exhibition catalogues and progressively commissioned more famous personalities as Head Curator.

As a biennial of growing international artistic influence and an embodiment of France's contemporary cultural relations with the continent, the Bamako Biennial is an important object of study. This thesis investigates this event to determine its effectiveness in contextualizing and supporting contemporary African photography and its relationship to the colonial legacy between France and Mali. To do so, it explores the context in which the Bamako Biennial emerged and the way in which its catalogues contextualize and interpret the African photography on view. In addition, the Biennials' reverberations within Bamako are considered, including its relations with Malian partners and viewers and its impact on the development of Bamako's cultural infrastructure. My discussion ends by questioning the extent to which this event is an instance of neo-colonial engagement of the French in Bamako. I will argue that the Bamako Biennial is rooted in French colonialism due to its history and its adoption of a set of primitivist assumptions about African art and culture. However, given the nature of this event as a cooperation between France and Mali, I conclude by pointing to the extent to which pressure and

input from local Malian organizers and participants has shaped this event's approaches and values over the past decade and a half.

### **Literature Review**

Apart from a small number of reviews printed in France and Mali, to date the Bamako Biennial has been critically explored in only a few publications. Among these is a master's thesis entitled "Les Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie 2005" by Jeanne Mercier, a French history student.<sup>3</sup> Her project explores the development of this event and evaluates its ambitions and impact within Mali through the lens of the 2005 Biennial. While our projects differ due to our divergent disciplines, her description of the organizational evolution of the Bamako Biennial has been useful to my study. Erika Nimis, another French scholar, also addressed this event in "De Nadar à Keita: Une Histoire Franco-Malienne de la Photographie," published in the anthology *Mali-France : Regards sur une Histoire Partagée*.<sup>4</sup> She discusses the Biennial within the larger context of the history of photography in Mali. Although brief, her essay touches on a number of issues relevant to my study, including the event's history and its inability to satisfy the demands of Malian photographers and viewers. Finally, Jean-Loup Amselle's study of African art, *L'art de la friche: essai sur l'art contemporain*, explores the Biennial in the context of French cultural policy.<sup>5</sup> His comments on Afrique en Créations and his discussion of Simon Njami figure in this project.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Mercier, "Les Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie 2005" (DEA/master's thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Erica Nimis, "De Nadar à Keita : Une Histoire Franco-Malienne de la Photographie," in *Mali-France : Regards sur une Histoire Partagée* (Bamako and Paris : Éditions Donniya and Karthala, 2005), 383-403.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Loup Amselle, *L'Art de la friche: essai sur l'art contemporain* (Paris : Flammarion, c2005).

As an instance of French cultural involvement in West Africa, this project also draws from several recent studies on French cultural policy. Herman Lebovics' *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* provides a clear overview of the philosophies and practices developed during the colonial period. He compellingly argues that these have continued to shape France's cultural policies since the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> Key sources concerned with French cultural policy in the face of globalization include *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France* by David L. Loosely and *France in an Age of Globalization*, an extended interview with France's foreign minister from 1997 to 2002, Hubert Védrine, who testifies to the importance of France's cultural influence to its international profile in an age of globalization.<sup>7</sup> The manner in which French cultural policies affect its former colonies has been explored by Anton Andereggen, who addresses this issue among many others in his book *France's Relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa*.<sup>8</sup>

French involvement with African art has left specific historical aesthetic and artistic legacies that must be considered in relation to the Bamako Biennial. Early influences include France's collecting activities during the colonial period and the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* which resulted primarily from the fascination of French artists with African sculpture in the early twentieth century. More recent events include the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou, the introduction of non-Western arts to the Louvre and current conflicts over the newly inaugurated Musée du

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<sup>6</sup>Herman Lebovics, *Bringing the Empire back home: France in the global age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup>David. L. Loosely, *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France* (Oxford [England]; Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers, 1995); Hubert Védrine, *France in an Age of Globalization*, trans. Philip H. Gordon (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>Anton Andereggen, *France's Relationship with Sub-Saharan Africa* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994).

Quai Branly. Important literature in this area includes James Clifford's "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" and particularly his essay "On Ethnographic Surrealism" which explores the ties between Surrealists and the development of ethnography in France in the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>9</sup> The catalogue to the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* clearly reveals the primitivizing attitude of the Western art establishment in the late twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Sally Price's most recent publication, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, explores the politics behind the establishment of this institution and contemporary expressions of primitivism within Western institutions.<sup>11</sup>

In its consideration of an African biennial art exhibition, my project also draws from literature on the globalization of the art world and particularly the phenomenon of so-called "Third World Biennials," referred to here as Non-Western Biennials. Notable sources on the topic include Ivo Mesquita's essay "Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials" in *Beyond the Box: diverging curatorial practices*, the discussion led by James Meyer in *ArtForum's* "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition" and Marcus Verhagen's "Biennial Inc." in *Art Monthly*.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Harney's analysis of the Dak'Art contemporary art fair and its

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<sup>9</sup> James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers, 2004); James Clifford. "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol. 23, no. 4 (October, 1981): 539-564.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris: Editions Centre Pompidou, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Ivo Mesquita, "Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennials Biennial," in *Beyond the Box: Diverging Curatorial Practices*, ed. Melanie Townsend (Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 2003); James Meyer et al., "Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition," *Artforum* (November 2003): 153-163; Marcus Verhagen, "Biennial Inc.," *Art Monthly* no.287 (June 2005) HW Wilson (accessed February 26, 2008).

history in her book *In Senghor's Shadow* is another significant source on the topic.<sup>13</sup> Her study emphasizes the powerful roles of Western actors at such events due to their financial involvement, all the while advocating for Senegalese artists to participate in international art circuits on their own terms.

Given the unique focus of the Bamako Biennial, sources on African photography and particularly on African portrait photography have been important to this project. A key general source on the topic is the Bamako Biennial's own *L'Afrique en regards: Une Brève Histoire de la photographie*.<sup>14</sup> It includes an exploration of the history of photography as a whole with a focus on its early production in Africa. Erika Nimis' publication, noted above, also provides a comprehensive history of photography in Mali. Michelle Lamunière's exhibition catalogue *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé* has also been valuable, particularly for her discussion of the history, purpose and value of studio photography within Bamako.<sup>15</sup>

### **Methodological and Theoretical Approach**

Due to the lack of scholarly literature directly addressing the Bamako Biennial, its exhibition catalogues have been central to this thesis. Ranging from brief, black and white booklets to substantial large-format catalogues, my investigation drew heavily from these primary documents. For my second chapter, I analyzed the Biennial's catalogues' essays and their structures to explore the evolution of the Biennial's interpretive approach to African photography and its underlying conceptualization of the field. For my third

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<sup>13</sup>Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup>Dagara Dakin, "La photographie en Afrique," in *L'Afrique en regards*, ed. Martin van der Belen (France : Editions Filigranes, 2005).

<sup>15</sup>Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 2001).

chapter, the catalogues' forewords were points of entry for my examination of the event's impact on the community in Bamako, including its Malian organizers, local viewers and cultural workers. To support my analysis, each of the catalogues is thoroughly described in more detail in *Appendix I*.

In addition, I have amassed and consulted contemporary journalistic and critical writing about the Biennial. Primarily, these comprise documentation collected during my research trip to the Bamako Biennial in 2007 including articles and reviews published in Bamako's daily newspapers *L'ESSOR Quotidien* and *L'Indépendant*, as well as pamphlets, hand-outs and other ephemeral documentation from the event. A song created and distributed to publicize the 2007 Biennial to local Bamakois and a printed textile celebrating Malick Sidibé's receipt of the Venice Biennale's *Golden Lion Award* provide important insights into local attitudes towards the Biennial that are of central importance to the third chapter of this thesis.

Interviews have also been an important component of my research. In particular, interviews with cultural workers in Bamako provided an important counterpart to the Biennial's catalogues. Whereas the catalogues are a product of the Biennial's institutional structure which is largely based in France, Malian and Bamakois cultural workers provided personal and direct insights into how the Biennial has impacted their community. Interviewees included Samuel Sidibé, Director of the National Museum of Mali, Hama Goro, Director of the Centre Soleil D'Afrique, a local artist-run center in Bamako, and Minga S. Siddick, an administrator at the Centre de Formation Photographique, a training center for local photographers in Bamako. These interviews were informal and unstructured. While I had specific questions for each interviewee

addressing their interaction with and perception of the Bamako Biennial, these discussions evolved organically out of the information they provided.

Theoretically, this project has drawn from discussions of Primitivism by Johannes Fabian, Sally Price and Rashid Araeen. Sally Price's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* led me to the concept of the "ethnographic present," adapted from Fabian's earlier publication *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*.<sup>16</sup> Rasheed Araeen's essay "From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts" provides important insights into the continued influence of Primitivism in contemporary Western art institutions.<sup>17</sup> He asserts that the primitivization of non-Western artists continues, and that the colonial values that dominated during the development of the prominent European institutions are still active, today.<sup>18</sup> From his perspective, this history has particularly impacted Western art institutions which remain notorious for their perpetuation of racist stereotypes through the primitivization of non-Western artists and their work.

Art theory from an anthropological perspective shaped my discussion on the revalorization of Seydou Keita's portrait photography by the international art market and my exploration of the relation between this event and the Malian community. James Clifford's seminal essay "On Collecting Art and Culture" as well as Maruska Svasek's *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* were central to this evaluation.<sup>19</sup> Both authors argue that artifacts change value as they travel from one cultural context to

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<sup>16</sup>Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup>Rashid Araeen, "From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts," in *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. Susan Hiller (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Araeen, 159.

<sup>19</sup> James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998): 94-107; Maruska Svasek, *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (London ; Ann Arbor, MI : Pluto Press, 2007).

another. Both also recognize the key role of the museum and the Western concept of fine art to this process.

Finally, photographic theory informed my analysis of the event's conceptualisation of the medium and the process of aestheticisation of African photography. Allan Sekula's "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" has been an important source in this regard since he considers the role of cultural context in the construction of meaning around photographs.<sup>20</sup> On the specific topic of the aestheticisation of photography, Douglas Crimp's "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject" and excerpts from Susan Sontag's *On Photography* shaped my discussion of photography's transition from sources of information to aesthetic objects in the West and particularly, what is lost in this metamorphosis.<sup>21</sup> More recent discussions of the cultural meanings of photography, particularly as gathered in the anthology *Photography Theory* also informed my study.<sup>22</sup>

More broadly, my approach and thinking during the course of this project have been influenced by contemporary globalization theory and particularly that of Arjun Appadurai's "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy". In this essay, Appadurai theorizes five dimensions of global cultural flow (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes). These are not objectively given relations, rather they are constructs influenced by many actors including nationstates, multinationals, diasporic communities and subnational groupings, right down to the

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<sup>20</sup> Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> Donald Crimp, "The Museum's Old, the Library's New Subject," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Susan Sontag, "On Photography," in *Illuminations: Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, ed. Liz Heron and Val Williams (London and New York: IB Tauris Pub., 1996).

<sup>22</sup> James Elkins, ed. *Photography Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007).

individual.<sup>23</sup> His approach strongly influenced mine as I explored the Bamako Biennial as an event in relation to these global forces.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

My first chapter, *The Origins of the Bamako Biennial*, explores the historical and contemporary contexts that likely influenced the establishment of the Bamako Biennial. Historically, this includes the evolution of French cultural policy in West Africa as well as the privileged status of Mali in France due to the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* (1931-33). The first Biennial also coincided with a shift in perceptions of modern and contemporary African art in France and the West. This chapter highlights key moments in this shift including the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* presented at the Pompidou Center, the introduction of non-Western art to the Louvre, and the aestheticisation of Seydou Keita's portrait photography and its resulting rise to fame in the West.

My second chapter, *The Development of the Bamako Biennial*, addresses the evolution of the Bamako Biennial's interpretive and conceptual approach to African photography by contrasting the visions of its two main curators over the past decade and a half, Louis Mesplé and Simon Njami. Based primarily on a close reading of the Biennial's past catalogues, and especially their introductory essays, the discussion centers on what these texts reveal about the organization of the event and what their materiality suggests about the event's artistic values. It tracks the evolution of the Bamako Biennial's approach from an ethnocentric vision of African photography rooted in Primitivism to an approach that asserts the contemporaneity of African photographers and their production.

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<sup>23</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the global Cultural Economy," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 329.

This discussion also addresses the perception and role of the African Diaspora at the Biennial as well as the significance of the Bamako Biennial's catalogues as framing devices for the African photography they contain and the event as a whole.

My third chapter, *The Local Impact of the Bamako Biennial*, examines the relationship between the Biennial and organizers, viewers, artists and cultural workers in Bamako. More specifically, drawing from a close reading of the event's catalogues, and the interviews and documentation collected during the 2007 Bamako Biennial, it explores instances of tension between local participants and the event in the contemporary cultural context of Bamako. Three issues in particular that are addressed are the Malian desire for autonomous control of the Biennial, the contrast between African and Western constructs of art and the repercussions of its top-down approach to management. These issues have impacted Malian partners, local viewers and Bamako's cultural workers in significant ways including the alienation of local audiences, poor administration of the event and threatening the livelihood of a local artist-run center.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of the Bamako Biennial

Françoise Huguier's conviction that there was a need for an event such as the Bamako Biennial was informed by her personal and professional experiences in Africa: It was partly fueled by her love of Mali but was also greatly influenced by her knowledge that Western news agencies who wished to commission local photographers for reportage work in Africa were often at a loss to identify qualified candidates.<sup>24</sup> As a result, she lobbied both the Malian and French governments to initiate a biennial of African photography to publicize their existence and the quality of their production.<sup>25</sup> While the Malian government was enthusiastic, the French on the other hand, were skeptical.<sup>26</sup> Even when presented with images by Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, now both famous worldwide, their work was characterized as nothing extraordinary, and Sidibé was even dismissed as simply a "photographe de boîtes de nuit" [photographer of night clubs].<sup>27</sup>

Although Huguier eventually succeeded in persuading CulturesFrance of the value of an African photography biennial in the early 1990s, this chapter argues that its establishment was facilitated by a convergence of favorable historical, political and contemporary art trends in France. The chapter therefore, examines relevant aspects of the shared history between these two nations focusing on the persistence of French cultural policy in West Africa in the post-independence period. The particular status of Mali within the French imaginary due to the ethnographic *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* (1931-33), will also be considered. With respect to contemporary art influences, this chapter will explore the development of African art's status in the West in the late 1980s and

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<sup>24</sup> Photography Magazine Online, "Rencontres africaines de la photographie 2005 / Le Mali de Françoise Huguier," <http://www.photographie.com/?pubid=103271> (accessed July 05, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

early 1990s. Key moments in this transition are the 1989 exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at the Center Pompidou, the wave of French public support for the inclusion of non-Western art in the Louvre and the aestheticisation of African portrait photography by André Magnin and its resulting success in the Western art world.

### **Colonialism and the History of French Cultural Policy in West Africa**

While France's contact with the African continent dates back to the slave trade during the seventeenth century, it wasn't until the Second Empire in the mid-1850s that France's modern Black African empire was born.<sup>28</sup> The entirety of modern-day Mali was conquered in 1898.<sup>29</sup> During the following period of colonization, it was known as French Sudan (1922-1959) and a part of Francophone West Africa. It gained its independence in 1960.

As a colony among others in West Africa, Mali was subject to the imposition of the French language and its corresponding traditions of law, administration and education.<sup>30</sup> It was also subject to France's "mission civilisatrice" [civilizing mission]. Fueled by France's belief in its cultural superiority and its corresponding responsibility to export French culture, France's civilizing mission was a rigorous program of assimilation.<sup>31</sup> The implementation of this policy emanated from Paris where French bureaucrats were trained to manage colonies at the *École Coloniale*, later renamed the *École nationale de la France d'outre-mer*.<sup>32</sup> Among the subjects they studied was a

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<sup>28</sup> Anderreggen, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, 1880-1995* (Cambridge [England] ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Anderreggen, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Lebovics, 62.

“standard” French culture to be spread abroad.<sup>33</sup> Termed “hub and spoke”, this model of cultural diffusion sanctions Parisian culture as national and distributes it throughout France and abroad.<sup>34</sup>

While the “mission civilisatrice” is a colonial ideology, the organization of the Bamako Biennial is evidence that it remains influential for the headquarters of *Afrique en Créations*, and thus the Bamako Biennial remain in Paris and the Biennial’s conception, organization and production are predominantly realized in France. Moreover, since the event’s Head Curators to date have all been French or French-trained, French actors continue to hold interpretive control, despite their varying degrees of qualification for the job. While local organizers vie increasingly for conceptual and administrative control, the Bamako Biennial essentially remains a French initiative predominantly defined and controlled in Paris.

The Ministère de la culture et de la communication that oversees *CulturesFrance* and *Afrique en Créations* also originated in France’s former colonial empire. While the civilizing mission was initially established to secure the loyalty of French colonies, it gradually developed important markets for French products and established French-oriented elites who took control after decolonization.<sup>35</sup> As a result, to assure the perpetuation of French influence in the Empire after its dissolution, Charles de Gaulle established France’s first Ministry of culture in 1959.<sup>36</sup> The new Ministry, headed by André Malraux, had as its mission to:

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<sup>33</sup> Lebovics, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Lebovics, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Andereggen, 102.

<sup>36</sup> Lebovics. 58.

Rendre accessibles les oeuvres capitales de l'humanité, et d'abord de la France, au plus grand nombre de Français, assurer la plus vaste audience à notre patrimoine culturel, et favoriser la création des œuvres de l'art et de l'esprit qui l'enrichissent...<sup>37</sup>  
[Make accessible the capital works of humanity, and particularly France, to the largest number of Frenchmen, assure the largest audience for our cultural patrimony, and favour the creation of works of art and of the spirit that enriches them...]

Thus, the new Ministry aimed to make French culture available to as many French citizens as possible while also working towards expanding its audience; this vast audience would chiefly include France's former empire. To facilitate this project, Malraux sought to strengthen French cultural influence in its former colonies by establishing "Maisons de la culture" [Houses of Culture].<sup>38</sup> The first of these in Africa was established in the capital of Mali's neighbor, Senegal, in 1959.<sup>39</sup> It is also noteworthy that the Ministry's initial mission included disseminating the spirit of French cultural production, echoing André Malraux's conviction that culture was a means of cohesion capable of transcending divisions by creating a community with shared values.<sup>40</sup> In other words, by normalizing Euro-French culture, the Ministry would facilitate cultural cohesion between France and its former Empire and thus, cultivate continuing loyalty to France. The ministry has since expanded its channels of diffusion to include mass media, cultural exchange programs and evolving cultural initiatives such as the Bamako Biennial.<sup>41</sup>

As a product of this history, the Bamako Biennial has adopted practices initiated during colonialism including the hub and spoke model discussed above and by perpetuating France's cultural involvement in its former West African colonies. Furthermore, given the mandate and history of the French Ministry of culture that

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<sup>37</sup> Looseley, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Lebovics, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Amselle, 134.

<sup>40</sup> Looseley, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Andereggen, 100.

oversees the Biennial, such cultural initiatives are far from innocent but, rather, have important political and economic implications.

### **French Cultural Policy in the Age of Globalization**

As globalization has sped up, maintaining cultural ties with former colonies has become imperative for France as a tool for securing markets and political sway in Africa. From a French perspective, globalization is equivalent to a loss of global cultural diversity, predominantly due to American cultural domination.<sup>42</sup> France has thus appointed itself as the voice of opposition to this process by speaking out against American cultural encroachment while trying to work realistically to preserve its distinct language and culture.<sup>43</sup> Hubert Védrine, the French foreign minister from 1997 to 2002, made this explicit when he asserted:

It is possible to salute this American vitality and at the same time refuse to disappear oneself. France will share in the adventure of globalization, which will also be marked by France. Our entire foreign policy is built around this idea.<sup>44</sup>

To assure that globalization is “marked by France”, the French government has been working to reaffirm the importance of its language and culture at home and abroad. This has included what Védrine refers to as “new, dynamic, and forward-leaning policies and diplomacy”<sup>45</sup> as well as using pre-existing channels, such as the Francophonie. In fact, one of the earliest expressions of France’s resistance to globalization was in 1986, when François Mitterand’s government organized the first of the biennial Francophonie summits intended to reverse the declining relevance of the French language.<sup>46</sup> According

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<sup>42</sup> Védrine, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Lebovics, 180.

<sup>44</sup> Védrine, 45.

<sup>45</sup> Védrine, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Védrine, 23.

to Védérine, the Francophonie still “stands forth as an expression of the rejection of cultural and linguistic uniformity.”<sup>47</sup> The implications of this outlook on the Bamako Biennial are most evident in the establishment and goals of its parent institution *Afrique en Créations*.

*Afrique en Créations* was born out of a conference entitled “Créations artistique, dialogue des cultures, développement : les enjeux des la coopération et du développement” [Artistic creation, dialogue between cultures, development : what is at stake in cooperation and development] which took place in 1990. Uniting over three hundred artists and cultural workers from France and Africa, this conference put forth a renewed vision of cultural cooperation between France and West Africa. Rather than reinforce former practices in which France imposed its techniques and productions on others through its *Maisons de la Culture*, this renewed approach values the “dimension culturelle du développement” [the cultural dimension of development] by emphasizing the role of cooperation in the construction of a franco-african culture.<sup>48</sup> The Bamako Biennial conforms to this new approach since it a product of cultural cooperation and focused on contemporary artistic production. It also reinforces pre-existing initiatives such as the Francophonie since it is advertised, conducted and immortalized in its accompanying catalogue, primarily in French.

While the history of French cultural policy in its former colonies contextualizes the French government’s investment in a contemporary artistic initiative such as the Bamako Biennial, it does not reveal why Mali should be the site for this event. In other words, why launch this African photography biennial in Bamako as opposed to anywhere

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<sup>47</sup> Védérine, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Amselle, 145.

else in West Africa, or on the continent? Arguably, the location of this Biennial in Bamako can be attributed to an important episode in France's colonial history which conferred a privileged status on Mali within the French imaginary, the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti*.

### **The *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* and the Valorization of Mali in France**

The *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* was a unique French ethnographic mission led by Marcel Griaule and composed of French linguists, ethnographers, a musicologist, a painter and a naturalist. Between 1931 and 1933 it travelled from the West to the East coast of the African continent, studying and describing the different cultures encountered along the way. The mission also brought back a considerable number of objects for exhibition in France. The enthusiastic disposition of the French towards this project in the 1930s was due to Africa's positive image within the country at the time. This resulted from artistic and historical circumstances specific to post-World War I France.

The aesthetic appreciation of African artifacts in France began with the Cubists in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup> For Picasso, Bracque and others, there was an elemental "magic" to African sculpture which they valued and attempted to recreate in their work.<sup>50</sup> In the 1920s, the Surrealists also turned to non-Western art however, for entirely different reasons; their interest was fueled by their disillusionment with Western ideology and culture in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>51</sup> From their perspective, the exoticism and "irrationality" of African sculpture in particular, was a welcome

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<sup>49</sup> Jean Guiart, "The Musée de l'Homme, the Arts, and Africa," in *African Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York City: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1985), 13.

<sup>50</sup> Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," 641.

<sup>51</sup> Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," 542.

alternative to the bankrupted traditions of the West.<sup>52</sup> At the time, interest in Africa also extended to a broader French public which had become sympathetic to the continent due to its support during the war.

The emergence of the Other as a alternative to Western culture simultaneously led to the development of ethnography in France. In fact, a number of Surrealist artists eventually became ethnographers, as was the case with Michel Leiris, who later participated in the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti*.<sup>53</sup> By the time of this mission, the African continent had become a fully developed exoticism within the imaginary of the French public that France's institutions were eager to satisfy.<sup>54</sup> It was the convergence of these diverse currents within French culture that made the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* financially feasible.<sup>55</sup>

The repercussions of this historic mission persist to this day. One of its most significant triumphs was the extensive study and documentation of Mali's Dogon culture, one of the most complete descriptions of a tribal group on record, anywhere.<sup>56</sup> As a result, the Dogon culture acquired a privileged status within the French art establishment. This is made explicit at the recently inaugurated Quai Branly Museum, where the first object one encounters in the permanent exhibition is a Dogon sculpture dating from the tenth to eleventh centuries. Moreover, French esteem for the Dogon culture instigated a significant tourist industry that has made Mali a popular destination for French travellers to the continent.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 555.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 542.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 556.

This history is very relevant to the Bamako Biennial. When asked why she chose Bamako as the site for this event, Françoise Huguier has repeatedly stated that “Je connaissais bien le Mali que j’aime beaucoup” [I knew Mali well and liked it very much].<sup>57</sup> This explains how she became familiar with Malick Sidibé and through him, Seydou Keita. Moreover, France’s favourable disposition towards Mali likely also contributed to Afrique en Créations’ support of this event. The impact of this privileged relationship on the initiation of the Bamako Biennial is worth emphasizing because there is little evidence that Mali’s photographic tradition should be privileged above that of any other West African nation.

Despite the significant attention received by Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, Mali’s photographic tradition is younger and less publicized than those of other African nations. This is the case for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is due to Mali’s distance from the Coast, which prevented it from receiving the technology of the camera until very late: whereas photography was introduced on the continent as early as 1840, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that interior nations such as Mali became engaged with this technology.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, Africans under French control had much less freedom than those under the English because of the imperial powers’ different approaches to colonialism. Whereas the English allowed a local photographic industry to develop, the French maintained a monopoly over photographic technology and the industry within West Africa.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, whereas Nigeria’s first locally-run photographic studios opened in the 1880s, it was not until the 1930s that Malians in

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<sup>57</sup> Françoise Huguier, interview by Balkissa Maiga, *BKO Photo* no. 3 (November 13, 2005): 8.

<sup>58</sup> Dakin, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Erica Nimis, “De Nadar à Keita: Une histoire Franco-Malienne de la photographie,” in *Mali-France : Regards sur une histoire partagée* (Bamako and Paris: Éditions Donniya and Karthala, 2005), 389.

Bamako obtained access to training and equipment from established European photographers in the region such as Pierre Garnier.<sup>60</sup> This discrepancy has had important repercussions for the development of photography in these two nations. A rich tradition of photo-journalism and art photography emerged in Nigeria, producing internationally renowned photographers such as Jack Phillips, Billyrose, Peter Obe, Okhai Ojeikere and Sunmi Smart-Cole, while there was no parallel development in Mali.<sup>61</sup> Although this history does not discount the value of Malian photography, it does call into question Françoise Huguier's and Afrique en Créations' decision to hold the African Photography Encounters in Mali. Clearly, it reinforces the privileged relation between France and Mali.

### **The Institutional Legitimization of African Art and the Aestheticisation of African Portrait Photography**

Besides historical considerations, the founding of the Biennial also corresponds to a particular moment when the Western art establishment was opening up to African and non-Western artistic production. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the convergence of a number of key events signaled a new era for both African material culture and modern and contemporary non-Western arts in Western institutions and particularly in France.

#### *Paris 1989 : Les Magiciens de la Terre*

Before 1989, modern and contemporary African art had been struggling to gain the attention of the West. Most likely, it was the persistent emphasis on 'primitive' art that continued to marginalize this work. The connoisseurs who dominated the African art

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<sup>60</sup> Darkin, 48.

<sup>61</sup> Darkin, 46.

market throughout the twentieth century valued the pure aesthetic forms of traditional African art and were thus disinterested and conceptually ill-equipped to handle the sophisticated urban art work that was being produced.<sup>62</sup> However, the growing interest in modern and contemporary non-Western art, including that produced in Africa, surged forth with the 1989 exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* at the Pompidou Center, in Paris.

*Les Magiciens de la Terre* was a large-scale exhibition of global scope. The curators focused on current non-Western artistic production to demonstrate its value and contemporary sensibility. The exhibition presented modern and contemporary works from Africa, Asia and South America, juxtaposed with a number of works by Western artists deemed by the curators to express similar contents and aesthetic values. The criteria for their selection was that they drew inspiration from the non-Western cultures represented.<sup>63</sup>

For Jean-Hubert Martin the exhibition's main organizer and curator, *Les Magiciens de la Terre* recognized that all cultures create art and that artistic production transcends linguistic barriers, and facilitates contact and exchange in an increasingly globalized world.<sup>64</sup> For Pierre Gaudibert, a researcher in non-Western art and one of the catalogue's authors, it was simply time for the international art scene to include non-Western art:

...ces termes aujourd'hui scandaleusement réstrictifs – art international, exposition internationale, etc. – devraient désormais traduire une ouverture réelle vers les autres pays non-occidentaux du globe : près des trois quarts de l'humanité!<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> John Povey, "First Word," *African Arts* 23, no.4 (October 1990): 8.

<sup>63</sup> Martin, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Pierre Gaudibert, "La planète tout entière, enfin..." in *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris : Editions Centre Pompidou, 1989), 18.

[...those terms today scandalously restrictive – international art, international exhibition, etc.- should translate to a real opening towards non-Western countries of the globe from now on: close to three quarters of humanity!]

As a result of its inclusiveness, *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, has been described as having marked the “véritablement l’irruption du multiculturalisme dans l’art contemporain” [the veritable eruption of multiculturalism in contemporary art].<sup>66</sup> However, at the time, a debate arose around this exhibition similar to the one ignited by the 1984 *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In both cases, although to a lesser extent with the *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, these exhibitions were considered locked into an early twentieth-century primitivist moment.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, *Les Magiciens de la Terre* had a ripple effect in the Western art world. It was the first of a series of influential large-scale exhibitions that specifically addressed modern and contemporary non-Western arts. Thus, that same year *The Other Story* was presented at the Hayward Gallery and a year later in New York City, *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* opened at the Studio Museum Harlem followed closely by *Africa Explores* at the Center for African Art. These exhibitions ushered in a new perception of non-Western arts by introducing and validating their modern and contemporary production.

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<sup>66</sup> Amselle, 140.

<sup>67</sup> For more on the substantial debates that took place around *Les Magiciens de la Terre* see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “The Whole Earth Show: An Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin,” *Art in America* 77 (5) (May, 1989): 150-159, 211-213; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Jean-Hubert Martin, “Interview” [on the conception of the ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ exhibition], *Third text; Third World perspectives on contemporary art and culture* (London) 6 (spring 1989): 19-27 and; Eleanor Heartney, “The whole earth show, part II,” *Art in America* 77 (7) 9 (July 1989): 90-97. For criticism of *Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art* see James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern”; Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley, Calif. University of California Press: 1998) 1-45, 118-157; Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks,” in *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985): 181-210; Thomas McEvelley, “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: ‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art,” in *Art and Otherness* (Kingston NY: McPherson and Company, 1992) and; William Rubin, “Modernist Primitivism,” in *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, vol. I (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984): 1-84.

If these exhibitions increased Western interest in non-Western arts, they also led to calls for authorial self-representation by non-Western artists.<sup>68</sup> This reaction was exacerbated by the exoticisation of their work within these exhibitions.<sup>69</sup> As a result, the 1990s were a period in which a large number of non-Western Biennials were established as venues where artists from outside the west could participate in the global contemporary art system on their own terms.<sup>70</sup> These events provided platforms for artists, curators, and critics from regions with colonial histories to gather away from the influence of the Western art market.<sup>71</sup> In Africa, such events emerged in Cairo, Egypt (1986), Dakar, Senegal (1992), Johannesburg, South Africa (1995), Lagos, Nigeria (1995) and most recently, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (2003). The establishment of the Bamako Biennial in 1994 must also be considered within the context of this “age of biennials”.

As these developments were taking place in the field of modern and contemporary art, conflicting visions of the values of African material culture were coming to a head over the issue of whether or not non-Western art should be presented at the Louvre.

*Paris 1990: “Pour que les chefs-d'œuvre du monde entier naissent libres et égaux”*

Endorsement of the presentation of non-Western art in the Louvre began with Guillaume Apollinaire’s advocacy in 1909. However, it was Jacques Kerchache, a dealer of African art, who saw it to fruition in the last decade of the twentieth century. In 1990,

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<sup>68</sup> Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, “‘Made in Africa’ Biennale: Afrika Heritage and the Politics of Representation,” *South African Art Initiative Forum*, posted June 13, 2007, <http://www.asai.co.za/forum.php?id=49> (accessed July 29, 2008).

<sup>69</sup> Harney, 236.

<sup>70</sup> Harney, 236.

<sup>71</sup> Harney, 236.

Kerchache published the manifesto “Pour que les chefs-d'œuvre du monde entier naissent libres et égaux” [So that the masterpieces of the whole world can be born free and equal] in the Parisian daily, *Libération*. His statement was endorsed by over 148 international personalities who called for the greatest works from Africa, Oceania and the Americas to be installed in the Louvre.<sup>72</sup> This issue gained considerable momentum when Jacques Chirac, a friend and ally of Jacques Kerchache, took up the cause.<sup>73</sup> Chirac asserted “there is no more a hierarchy of arts than there is among peoples” and considered it deplorable that three-quarters of the world’s humanity was unrepresented at the Louvre.<sup>74</sup> Not long after being sworn in as Président in 1995, Chirac’s office announced that non-European art would be exhibited in newly renovated galleries at the Louvre named the “Pavillon des Sessions” to open in 1998.<sup>75</sup>

For France, the decision to include ‘primitive’ art in the Louvre was an unparalleled affirmation of the value of African art. It reflected the positive attitude towards African art not only of the French elite but also of the French government. This incident also demonstrates the extent to which the French government controls its national cultural institutions. The prominence of culture to France’s identity at home and abroad is such that public authority continues to play a direct role in French cultural institutions.<sup>76</sup> This fact is also worth highlighting with respect to the Bamako Biennial, since it reinforces the extent to which this event’s inception and practices are informed by government values and policy.

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<sup>72</sup> Lebovics, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Price, *Paris Primitive*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>75</sup> Lebovics, 145.

<sup>76</sup> Price, *Paris Primitive*, 27.

*Paris/Mali 1992: André Magnin and Aestheticisation of African portrait photography*

In the year following the publication of Kerchache's manifesto, Françoise Huguier returned from Mali to organize a small exhibition of Seydou Keita's work and begin campaigning for a biennial in its honour. Keita's portraits received broader visibility when they were exhibited again a year later in *Africa Explores* at the Centre for African Art in New York City, but it was in 1992 that their definitive exposure to the Western art world took place. That year, André Magnin travelled to meet Seydou Keita in Bamako on behalf of the Swiss collector Jean Pigozzi and returned to Europe with over 900 of his negatives.<sup>77</sup>

Jean Pigozzi, the Swiss heir to the Fiat car company's fortune, had been inspired to collect contemporary African art after his visit to *Les Magiciens de la Terre*:

It had a profound effect on me. Before this show, I had no idea that so much amazing contemporary art was being made in Africa. After the show...I decided to collect mainly African art.<sup>78</sup>

To do so, he enlisted the help of André Magnin, the curator of African art for *Les Magiciens de la Terre*. Together they have built the world's most comprehensive collection of contemporary African art. Initially acquiring works from the African artists in *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, André Magnin has since been the project's scout, travelling around the continent in search of art that has aesthetic impact, made predominantly by self-taught artists.<sup>79</sup> His choices are then approved and purchased by Jean Pigozzi. The resulting collection is known as the Contemporary African Artists Collection (CAAC) and is based in Paris. While Pigozzi and Magnin did not 'discover' Seydou Keita, André

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<sup>77</sup> Rips, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/arts/22rips.html> (accessed Feb 05, 2007)..

<sup>78</sup> Jean Pigozzi, "A Collecting life," in *Arts of Africa: Jean Pigozzi's Contemporary Collection*, ed. André Magnin (Monaco: Grimaldi Forum Monaco, 2005), 13.

<sup>79</sup> Pigozzi, 16.

Magnin contributed significantly to the aestheticisation of his photographs thereby transforming them into the art icons that they are today.

Seydou Keita conceived his portraits in post-independence Mali as mementos or souvenirs of people or special events.<sup>80</sup> As Malians began migrating in large numbers to cities from rural areas, these portraits became important tokens, exchanged between loved ones before leaving or mailed home from the city.<sup>81</sup> Thus, they were intimate objects kept in albums or hung on the walls of domestic spaces.<sup>82</sup> While valued in this way in their original Malian context, Seydou Keita's images were transformed into works of 'art' through a process of aestheticisation once they travelled to the West.

Aestheticisation occurs when artifacts produced for different reasons are appropriated by museums or dealers and given the status of 'art'.<sup>83</sup> The transition of these objects into the Western social and cultural contexts initiate such changes.<sup>84</sup> Through their recontextualization in the museum and art gallery setting, the meanings assigned to portrait photography by Malians were replaced by a new set of meanings: portrait photography was transformed into 'art'.

While the process of aestheticizing the work of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé was initiated by their transition from Mali's portrait studios to the headquarters of the CAAC, Magnin was important to this process since he actively promoted it by fundamentally altering the formats of these photos. In his hands, Seydou Keita's prints grew from their original 5 by 7 inches formats, to 20 by 24 inches for a show in 1997 and

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<sup>80</sup> Lamunière, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>83</sup> Svasek, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Svasek, 11.

were eventually enlarged up to 48 by 60 inches, in some cases.<sup>85</sup> This established their status as autonomous objects by distancing them from their original purpose in Bamako where they were privately commissioned works and were printed in an intimate scale.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, at a time when some of the most influential art photography—including work by Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Thomas Struth—was being presented in mammoth scale, this reformatting signaled to Western viewers the work of Keita and Sidibé as ‘art’. The deliberate assertion of photography’s art status was still necessary since its elevation to the status of fine art was relatively recent, even in the West.

It was not until about the 1960s that photography was widely accepted as an aesthetic form.<sup>87</sup> At that time, it was promoted, particularly by John Szarkowski of the Museum of Modern Art, as “an art form that can distinguish itself in its essential qualities from all other art forms.”<sup>88</sup> As a result, photography was redefined and recontextualized in the museum where its value shifted from the purpose of information, documentation, evidence, illustration and reportage, to the singular, all-encompassing purpose of aesthetics.<sup>89</sup> Thus, for photography to acquire autonomy to enter the museum and gain its aesthetic appreciation, its informational purposes had to be dismantled and destroyed.”<sup>90</sup>

This process is not unlike what Malian portrait photography underwent as it was

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<sup>85</sup> Rips, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/22/arts/22rips.html> (accessed Feb 05, 2007).

<sup>86</sup> Lamuniere, 11.

<sup>87</sup> While photography was predominantly considered a documentary form before this time, nonetheless, there were advocates for its status as an art form. Oscar Rejlander was chief among them in the nineteenth century and by the turn-of-the-century, photography had its first full artistic movement: Pictorialism. Institutionally, Pictorialist societies and Alfred Stieglitz’s galleries presented photography as art and the founding of the Museum of Modern Art’s photography department in the nineteen thirties validated photography within conventional systems of high art. See Christopher Phillips, “The Judgement Seat of Photography...,” in *The Contest of Meaning*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>88</sup> Donald Crimp, “The Museum’s Old, the Library’s New Subject,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 423; John Szarkowski, “Introduction,” in *The Photographer’s Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

<sup>89</sup> Crimp, 423.

<sup>90</sup> Crimp, 423; Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 286-301.

dissociated from its former purpose in West Africa to become autonomous and aestheticized as 'art'. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Keita and Sidibé achieved widespread international fame just before and now during what Geoffrey Batchen discusses as a vernacular turn: an interest in vernacular photography among scholars.<sup>91</sup>

Since the mid-nineties, Seydou Keita's profile in the West has increased to the extent that he is now recognized as the "father of African photography".<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Malick Sidibé, has garnered a great deal of attention, culminating in his receipt of the Golden Lion Award for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2007. However, their work's transition to fine art took place in a foreign cultural context and Sidibé is still puzzled by the popularity of his works in the West.<sup>93</sup> He now assumes it is because his images provide reassuring representations of the continent in contrast to what is broadcast by Western media:

Les Occidentaux se rassurent et font jouer la fibre nostalgique devant ces portraits de Bamakois, entrepris à la fin des années 1950, loin des misères du continent. J'ai pensé au début que l'Occident mettait un peu de piment pour vendre des photos venu d'ailleurs, sans que je sois totalement persuadé de mon talent. Les gens préfèrent voir l'harmonie des temps anciens.<sup>94</sup>  
[Westerners are reassured and emphasize the nostalgia in these portraits of Bamakois taken at the end of the 1950s, far from the misery of the continent. At first, I thought that the West was simply spicing up the market to sell photos from elsewhere, without being totally persuaded of my talent. People prefer to see the harmony of the past.]

The fact that Sidibé has difficulty rationalizing the relevance and value of his own works exposes the extent to which these images acquired new agency within the Western context of the CAAC.

The importance of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé to the international profile of the Bamako Biennial cannot be overstated. Their widespread recognition has brought a

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<sup>91</sup>Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not : Photography & Remembrance* (Amsterdam : Van Gogh Museum ; New York : Princeton Architectural Press, c2004).

<sup>92</sup> Nimis, 395.

<sup>93</sup> Nimis, 396.

<sup>94</sup> Nimis, 396.

great deal of attention to African photography and therefore the Bamako Biennial continually reinforces its ties with these artists. As discussed, the cover of the first biennial catalogue was adorned by one of Seydou Keita's portraits, and his work was presented in a solo within that year's Biennial. In 1996, portrait photography dominated the event and Seydou Keita is mentioned in the catalogue's introduction as the prototypical photographer in the field. In 1998, another exhibition of studio photography was presented and Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita are mentioned within the catalogue's introduction with reference to the first Biennial in 1994. In 2001, they are again evoked as the inspiration for the establishment of the Biennial while studio photography from the same period is the subject of three exhibitions. In 2003, Seydou Keita is mentioned in the introduction and is the subject of a post-humous retrospective exhibition. In 2005 Malick Sidibé is mentioned in the catalogue's introduction, his work is the subject of a solo exhibition and portrait photography is the subject of an exhibition that includes work by both artists. Finally, in 2007, Malick Sidibé is celebrated in the catalogue's introduction for having been awarded the Golden Lion Award. To further celebrate Sidibé's success, a printed textile was produced for the 2007 Biennial both to recognize his success and to advertise the event (Fig.1). Since commemorative cloth like this is typically made only for people and events of national importance in West Africa, his presentation in this format signals his recognition by the broader art world for local audiences. The repeated reference to these photographers within the Biennial's documentation reveals the extent to which it wishes to be associated with them, benefit from their success and extend their prestige to the field as a whole, thereby further validating the importance of the Bamako Biennial on the world stage.

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Development of the Bamako Biennial**

Catalogues are important records of exhibitions once they close; they mark the permanent record of their content, aesthetic and conceptual values and their approach to the work on display. In the case of non-Western biennials, such publications become all the more important since a significant segment of their intended audience lives abroad. Given that most of these foreign viewers cannot necessarily travel to the event, the catalogues are one of their key points of access to the event's exhibitions and activities. This is the case with the Bamako Biennial where the exhibition catalogues are central to disseminating information and insight about the event's activities, values and goals to foreign audiences. They work alongside international press coverage to reach their intended audience abroad.

This thesis treats the Bamako Biennial's catalogues accordingly, assigning them a central role in creating and disseminating a distinct image of this event and the African photography on view. In this chapter, I will analyze the catalogues' organization and essays to compare the approaches of Louis Mesplé and Simon Njami, the two main curators who have presided over this event as it found its footing within the international contemporary art world. By doing so, I will determine how these two curators characterized, interpreted and contextualized African photographers and their production at the Bamako Biennial. This discussion will also address the perception and role of the African Diaspora at the Biennial as well as the role and significance of the catalogues as framing devices for the African photography they contain and the event as a whole.

## Louis Mesplé: Primitivism at the Bamako Biennial

Louis Mesplé is a French journalist, critic and former director of the Rencontres D'Arles, an annual photography festival in France. As such, he has ample experience in the field of art and photography. However, his lack of knowledge of the medium in its African context becomes clear in his catalogue essay for the second Bamako Biennial, in 1996. In this essay as discussed below, he perceives African photographers and their production as primitive, thereby disassociating them both from their cultural significance to Bamako and their relation to the history of the medium in the West.

Much like the documentation of the 1994 Biennial, the catalogue to the 1996 Biennial is a short, twenty-eight page magazine-style booklet published in a series by *Extrait de Cimaise*. Each individual exhibition at this event is represented by a short text and a single representative image. However, these are all contextualized within the broader field of African photography as it is theorized in the booklet's introduction, "Sur la photographie africaine" [On African Photography] by Louis Mesplé.

Mesplé's discussion focuses on the work of studio portraitists in Mali, the most renowned of whom is Seydou Keita. He states that African photography in general, and studio photography in particular, are founded on "des perceptions traditionnelles, sur un artisanat lié à l'art plastique original [traditional perceptions, grounded in a craft tied to original art practice]."<sup>95</sup> Mesplé clarifies this statement further on when he explains that:

La photographie des "studioistes" reprend globalement les caractéristiques de la sculpture africaine dont la définition (rapide) est d'être un objet "chargé" de rituels et de symboles, tout en alliant des fonctions utilitaires et artistiques.<sup>96</sup>

[The photography of "studioists" adopts overall the characteristics of African sculpture of which the (quick) definition is an object "charged" with rituals and symbols, all the while linking utilitarian and artistic functions.]

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<sup>95</sup> Louis Mesplé, "21ème Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine," *Extrait de Cimaise* 244 (Novembre-December, 1996) : (no pagination).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, (no pagination).

Thus, he situates photography in Africa in relation to African sculpture, likely the African art form with which he is most familiar given its notoriety in the West.

Mesplé's perception of African photography as "laden with rituals and symbols" is the first concrete sign of his characterization of this work as Primitive since he exoticizes it by associating it with paganism.<sup>97</sup> Yet there is little evidence of any such relation between these disparate art practices on the continent. To be fair to Mesplé, there is some basis for the evocation of symbolism in these works since it is well documented that the subjects of Seydou Keita's studio images would pose with objects considered expressive of their social roles in the community, their wealth, cosmopolitanism and modernity.<sup>98</sup> For example, the subject of an *Untitled* portrait by Seydou Keita dating from 1956-57 (Fig.2) seems to deliberately display his watch while posing with a clock and radio, presumably to convey his wealth and modernity to the viewer. Similarly, in a second *Untitled* portrait dating from the same period (Fig. 3) a woman poses with a sewing machine, probably the tool of her trade. However, even if the evocation of symbolism is appropriate to a discussion of these works, their relation to African sculpture is tenuous and never clearly explained. More than anything else, it reveals Mesplé's limited knowledge about the history of photography in Africa.

That this comparison signals Louis Mesplé's primitivizing approach to African photography becomes clear through his repeated statements that relate modern African photography to communal traditions, thereby perpetuating the view that non-Western arts represent shared ideas conveyed through collectively developed modes of expression.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 37.

<sup>98</sup> Lamunière, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 46.

This approach roots African photographers in a timeless communal past rather than attributing their work to individual creativity in the context of the modern, urban environment of twentieth century, West African cities. Instances of this approach permeate Mesplé's essay. For example, in addition to the quote already discussed that relates this photography to "traditional perceptions", he later asserts that, in opposition to Western practitioners, the African studio photographer "...met en jeu un héritage dont il discerne l'adéquation traditionnelle et formelle avec ses sujets" [...brings a heritage into play... in which he finds traditional and formal elements appropriate to his subjects...].<sup>100</sup> Again, further on, he describes how the African studio photographer "se tourne vers une recherche des signes et des formes puisés dans son environnement ancestral et contemporain" [turns toward a research of signs and forms drawn from his ancestral and contemporary environments].<sup>101</sup> By tying African photographers to an undefined past, Mesplé casts them into the ethnographic present identified by Johannes Fabian and defined by Sally Price as "a device that abstracts cultural expression from the flow of historical time and hence collapses individuals and whole generations into composite figures alleged to represent their fellows past and present."<sup>102</sup>

This approach also has the side-effect of creating a stark distinction between the work of non-Western photographers and those of Western origin. In his essay, Mesplé further emphasizes this distinction by contrasting them on the grounds that Western studio photographers prefer neutral décor, whereas African studio photographers bring what he calls "a heritage into play", through the use of décor and props that amplify the

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<sup>100</sup> Mesplé, (no pagination).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid..

<sup>102</sup> Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 57.

identity of the sitter.<sup>103</sup> In fact, this statement is misguided since such inclusions are exactly what typify Renaissance, Baroque and eighteenth century portraiture which are never thought of as “Primitive”. Moreover, it is well documented that early portrait photographers in the United States and Europe used sets and props to lend their sitters character and prestige.

According to the photo studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg, sitters for photographic portraits in the United States and Europe during the nineteenth century were encouraged to will themselves into their desired self-expression through fashion, hairstyle and visual symbols of personal achievement and economic success.<sup>104</sup> This gradually extended to the studios’ settings by replacing plain backdrops with painted ones, and through the introduction of studio props such as columns, chairs, tables, rugs, books, sculptures, and flowers to reflect the sitter’s interests, attitudes, or aspirations.<sup>105</sup> For example, part of the success of the *carte-de-visites* portraits taken by André Disdéri in the mid-nineteenth century (Fig. 4) was due to the elaborate sets and props sitters used to construct an image of self-satisfaction and prosperity.<sup>106</sup>

The overall effect of Louis Mesplé’s emphasis on the distinction between the history of photographic portraiture in Africa and the West is the exoticization of African photographers when, clearly, their practice could be related to the medium’s history in the West.

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<sup>103</sup> Mesplé, (no pagination).

<sup>104</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *A.A.E. Disdéri and the Carte-de-Visite Portrait Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

If Mesplé's interpretive errors are damaging because they convey irrelevant, misleading and even false information about African photography, their most detrimental impact is that they disconnect these photographs from the specific historical and political context in which they were produced. This is evident for example, when Mesplé concludes that African studio photographers are "less documentarists of an era than the continuators of a tradition of pictorial representation of the individual in society."<sup>107</sup> This statement is problematic because in reality, these images carry important historical significance: Since Seydou Keita was one of the first African photographers working in Bamako in the early 1940s, these photographs are amongst the earliest instances of African self-representation through photography for a local audience.<sup>108</sup> Thus, they represent freedom from the gaze of Western photographers and their modes of representation. Moreover, given the ties between the medium of photography and colonization, this act also represents the wresting of a western technology, often used in the service of imperialism, and adapting it to Malian modes of representation.

In these images, the studio of the photographer is a stage for the construction of self-image where, as described by Okwui Enwezor, "The sitters are the creators of their own personal image repertoires: who they are; who they want to become; what sort of mask to inhabit; and what prosthetic devices they need to achieve that look".<sup>109</sup> The importance of this new relationship between photographer and sitter has been further emphasized by researchers in the field such as Michelle Lamunière. As she states in her catalogue on the work of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé "we are convinced of the

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<sup>107</sup> Mesplé, (no pagination).

<sup>108</sup> Lamunière, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 28.

truthfulness of these portraits, and are moved by the obvious sense of trust between photographer and sitter.”<sup>110</sup>

### **Contextualizing Louis Mesplé’s Primitivist Discourse**

Louis Mesplé was not the only curator struggling with the conceptualization of modern and contemporary African art during the 1990s. While early exhibitions of modern and contemporary African art ushered in an exciting new phase in Western perceptions of the continent’s artistic production, this emerging field was couched in interpretive uncertainty. Susan Vogel for example, admits that the lack of resources and the limits to her experience as an ‘intimate outsider’ left her at a loss to fully engage with the modern and contemporary works presented in the 1991 exhibition *Africa Explores* at the Centre for African Art in New York City. As a result, the exhibition:

...draws in part from the substantial literature on traditional art that has accumulated over the past century...; on the considerable, rather recent literature on ‘popular’ art, which addresses that art mainly as a social document; and on a small but growing literature on ‘contemporary’ art, most of which is tightly focused. What the main issues are in the larger picture, where the connections lie, who the important artists, teachers and other actors are, what the criteria for quality might be, and who might judge – these questions are still being sorted out..<sup>111</sup>

Therefore, Susan Vogel feels unqualified to evaluate the work on view because of her inexperience and the dearth of information available concerning modern and contemporary production on the continent. Given her comments, it is not surprising that most early initiatives in the field were plagued by doubt and uncertainty, reflecting the lack of a critical theory with which curators could engage the work exhibited.<sup>112</sup> As a result, curators of these early exhibitions depended heavily on the established literature

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>111</sup> Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art* (New York City: Neues Publishing Co., 1991), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Povey, 8.

on 'primitive' art to understand and contextualize the continent's more recent production. Louis Mesplé was thus, to a certain extent, a victim to these challenges in his catalogue essay for the 1996 Bamako Biennial: the lack of information available on modern and contemporary African photography coupled with the pervasiveness of the Primitive discourse led to his interpretive shortfalls. As a result, although the 1996 Bamako Biennial was among the early exhibitions that were breaking ground by displaying modern and contemporary African art, it remained inappropriately rooted in an earlier twentieth-century Primitivist discourse.

### **Simon Njami: The International Contemporaneity of African Photographers**

Since the 1996 Bamako Biennial, Mesplé has not authored a substantial catalogue essay for the event. In the following 1998 catalogue, he wrote a short opening statement on the theme of "Prendre L'image" [To Capture the Image], the theme of that year's event. It was not until the following Biennial in 2001 that a substantial introductory essay was reintroduced to the catalogue to contextualize the work on display. This was authored by the newly appointed Head Curator of the Biennial: Simon Njami. In opposition to the approach of Louis Mesplé, Simon Njami's conceptualization of the field was rooted in the concept of contemporaneity.

Simon Njami is an independent curator of Cameroonian origin best known for his role as cofounder and editor in chief of *Revue Noire*, a French publishing house focused on African art. Its establishment in 1990 was largely a reaction to *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, which Njami criticized for adopting an ethnocentric approach to non-Western art

that denied African practitioners the status of contemporary artists.<sup>113</sup> Thus, his publishing house focused primarily on modern and contemporary African art, emphasized its fine art status and contextualized it within the broader, international contemporary art scene.<sup>114</sup> This approach asserts the contemporaneity of African artists through their perceived technological, artistic and political interrelationship with practitioners worldwide.

Njami's vision of contemporaneity heavily informed his essay for the 2001 catalogue. As a result, the discourse Njami builds around African photography diverges significantly from that of Louis Mesplé. In fact, certain passages in the 2001 catalogue read as direct rebuttals to Mesplé's 1996 text. In that essay, Simon Njami explores the history of photography in Africa and inter-relates its development and character with those of the medium in the West.

Simon Njami opens his essay for the 2001 catalogue, entitled "Chronicles of a Millennium", with the Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty's assertion that "Photography is a death".<sup>115</sup> Njami interprets this to mean that photographs are markers of the passage of time. He then weaves a narrative about a number of photographs of famous figures by African photographers represented at the Biennial: Senegalese Abdou Fari Faey's images of Djibril Diop Mambéty (Fig. 5), Cameroonian Bill Akwa Betoté's images of Francis Bebey (Fig. 6), a compatriot artist, musician and writer, and Philippe Koudjina's images of Pier Pasolini and Maria Callas arriving in Niamey, Niger to shoot the film 'Medea'.<sup>116</sup> Given the variety of images and emotions these photographs evoke,

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<sup>113</sup> Amselle, 142.

<sup>114</sup> Amselle, 142.

<sup>115</sup> Simon Njami, *Mémoires Intimes d'un Nouveau Millénaire* (Paris : Éditions Éric Koehler, 2001), 9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Njami ends his introduction by asserting that photography cannot simply be described as a death because it is more than a mechanical reproduction of a moment in time. Rather, he asserts that it is transformative due to the agency of the photographer: “It is a matter of transubstantiation.”<sup>117</sup>

This opening passage is important because, in contrast to Mesplé, who never discusses the history of photography in its African context, Simon Njami demonstrates a rich tradition of photography in West Africa and situates it in relation to other important cultural producers and historical events. He thus brings photography out of the indeterminate past evoked by Mesplé and into contemporary history and asserts the important, active role of this medium within that history. Moreover, in this opening passage he refers to Francis Bebey as “my uncle, as we’d say in Africa.”<sup>118</sup> Njami thereby underscores his personal connection and familiarity with the African continent likely to validate his role as curator at the Biennial.

Since the argument in this opening discussion is that photography is an instance of transformation and, thus, difficult to define, Njami proceeds by asserting that one must discuss the medium of photography itself “before trying to give it a nature that exceeds its primary function or finality and confines it within the narrow, ambiguous limits of ethnology...”.<sup>119</sup> This passage no doubt refers to and directly counters Mesplé’s discussion which relates African photography to African sculpture. Furthermore, it initiates his discussion of the history of photography on the continent and its relation to the history of the medium in the West.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 10.

Njami posits that both continents, Europe and Africa, received the technology of the camera almost simultaneously: "...not a year went by without this French invention penetrating Africa."<sup>120</sup> At the time, the technology was not only used by Europeans in Africa, but was also circulated to local populations since, "it is established that Africans got to know the invention and produced their first images as early as 1840"<sup>121</sup>. Njami proceeds to establish a relation between this medium and the continent's emancipation linked to photography's representational capacity. He asserts that photography was instrumental to this process by allowing Africans to re-appropriate their own image.<sup>122</sup> He comments that a comparison of photographic images produced by Africans with those of Western ethnologists, anthropologists and colonialists working on the continent demonstrates "that the same reality, depending on which point of view it comes from, can be portrayed with radically different, even contradictory, implications".<sup>123</sup>

Once he establishes the history of the medium on the continent, Njami attempts to define the field of contemporary African photography. He begins by defining the medium, itself and puts forth a conceptualization of photography as writing or language which he later characterizes as universal.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, he casts the process of photography in indexical terms as "the objective trace of a subject, printed onto film".<sup>125</sup>

At first glance, this approach seems inappropriately rooted in Modernist visions of photography that characterize this medium as transparent, thereby producing an unmediated representation of the world.<sup>126</sup> This vision is problematic because it does not

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 11; see also James Elkins ed. *Photography Theory*. (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>126</sup> Sekula, 86.

recognize the agency of photographers nor their cultural specificity.<sup>127</sup> However, as Njami's discussion proceeds, it becomes clear that his vision of the field does not conform to these values. In fact, Njami seems to recognize how ideologically problematic this model is since he couples his assertion that photography is a universal language with a qualification that photographers from the African continent do not have a uniform approach. Rather, he posits that the endless variety of customs, cultures and histories that exist in Africa prevent the field of African photography from being homogenous. In his words, "the social reality of Africa prevents such approximations."<sup>128</sup>

Given his approach, Njami does not believe one can draw broad conclusions about the nature and trends of African photography, as a whole. Rather, he posits that the only way to approach photography produced on the African continent is individually, "in the singular rather than the plural."<sup>129</sup> He concludes this section by asserting that "If an African photography does exist it is, like the African languages, multiple, ambivalent and contradictory."<sup>130</sup> He then demonstrates this diversity by referencing the work of other participating photographers such as Ricardo Rangel's images of Maputo (Fig. 7) and Georges Hallett's images from South Africa (Fig. 8).

The fact that Njami discusses photography as both a universal language and as culturally and individually specific seems contradictory. However, considered from a different perspective, his conceptualization of photography as a universal language may have been politically motivated to empower African photographers: By casting the medium as universal, he places African practitioners on a level playing field with

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 13.

photographers from the West and worldwide. Moreover, since he later qualifies this statement by asserting that each photographer's use of this universal language is unique, his approach successfully equates African photography with that of the West without resulting in a homogeneous view of the field. This approach echoes the assertion of contemporaneity for which *Revue Noire* stood.

The end of Njami's essay for the 2001 catalogue is similar to its opening: He closes by further exposing his relation to the continent. In fact, he reveals his position as an African living in the Diaspora by making reference to a "photograph taken in Lausanne with my mother and my father smiling at the camera."<sup>131</sup>

Clearly, Simon Njami's approach to the content of the 2001 Bamako Biennial lies in stark contrast to that of Louis Mesplé: Njami explores the history of the medium on the continent, suggests parallel trajectories for the development of photography in Africa and in the West and evokes multiple, concrete examples of the recent photography on view. However, Simon Njami not only introduced a new approach to African photography within the discourse at this event, but also initiated a change of perspective with respect to African identity and the scope of the biennial.

### **Broadening the Scope of the Bamako Biennial**

From the outset, the conceptualization of African photographers at the Bamako Biennial was restricted to those living and working on the continent. This is not surprising since *Afrique en Créations* developed this event to improve visibility for photographers living and working on the continent and to provide them with better access to the international market. However, this view is also problematic because it ignores the

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

African identity of artists living in the Diaspora. Simon Njami's intervention at the event gradually reversed this trend.

Njami's appointment as Head Curator of the Biennial in 2001 was not his first collaboration with Afrique en Créations. In fact, *Revue Noire* was founded in the same year as Afrique en Créations (1990) and its activities were largely funded by that association. Moreover, Njami had previously been involved in the organization of the Bamako Biennial as well. Since he organized a group exhibition entitled *Nouvelle Photographie* for the first Biennial in 1994. The text he wrote to accompany that exhibition further illuminates his approach to contemporary African production:

Le regard sur l'Afrique est aujourd'hui porté par des photographes africains dont l'œil nouveau lit la modernité de l'Afrique avec ses détresses, ses chocs culturels, ses choix, ses libertés, ses modes de vie et de pensée. Une Afrique non bornée par son territoire, car les hommes d'Afrique sont aujourd'hui sur tous les continents.<sup>132</sup>

[The viewpoint on Africa is today evaluated by African photographers whose renewed visions interpret Africa's modernity with its distresses, cultural shocks, choices, freedoms, lifestyles and thoughts. An Africa not restricted by its territory because Africans are today on all continents.]

This passage suggests Simon Njami's approach to the Africans working in the Diaspora: he considers them African artists, nonetheless. This perception is reflected in Njami's curatorial practice at the Bamako Biennial: Since he took the helm in 2001, the Diaspora has been increasingly represented at this event.

The Diaspora was first acknowledged at the Bamako Biennial by an exhibition under the heading "Diaspora: Royaume-Uni" [Diaspora: United Kingdom], in 2001. Entitled *Back in the Day*, this exhibition presented four artists from the Diaspora living in the UK: Vanley Burke (born in Jamaica), Clement Cooper (born in the UK), Armet Francis (born in Jamaica) and Horace Ove (born in Trinidad). In the following Biennial in 2003, a similar exhibition was organized under the heading "Diaspora". This

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<sup>132</sup> *Rencontres de la photographie Africaine* (Paris: Photographie Magazines, 1994), no pagination.

exhibition entitled *Cuba* presented twelve artists from that country: Alain Pino Hernandez, Alfredo Ramos Fernandez, Alina Isable, Cirenaica Moreira, Giorgio Viera, Juan Carlos Alom Jimenez, Jorge Luis Alvarez Pupo, Cristobal Herrera Ulashkevich, Rene de Jesus Pena Gonzales, Liudmila Velasco, Pedor Abascal Vazquez and Ramon Pacheco Salazar. In both cases, the catalogue essays that accompany these exhibitions reinforce the relationship between these photographers and the African continent. Thus, the 2001 essay on *Back in the Day* asserts:

International relationships were being brokered, alliances were being forged throughout the UK, the Caribbean, the USA and Africa. Black British photographers began to see themselves as part of a global struggle and a voice for the black diasporic African communities... It is not surprising then that for three of the photographers here, Ove, Francis and Burke the African connection has been an essential element within their practice. All three still cite the continent as being crucial to their development personally and politically.<sup>133</sup>

Likewise, the essay accompanying the 2003 *Cuba* exhibition notes that:

Despite the “Diaspora”, this selection of photographs and authors does not translate the reality of our African ancestors’ enforced emigration to Cuba. It merely exposes what Cuba is today, its culture, its photography and the inevitable influence which our African heritage has had upon it.<sup>134</sup>

These exhibitions suggest a continuum between Africans on the continent and those in the Diaspora. In the case of the artists from *Back in the Day*, they envision their relationship with the continent as one of solidarity and inspiration whereas the *Cuba* exhibition acknowledges the influence of African heritage on contemporary Cuba. Nonetheless, the use of the term Diaspora in these exhibitions is very broad since most of the artists presented were not of African origin. Perhaps this explains their presentation within separate exhibitions from the continental Africans at the Biennial. However, these exhibitions do not represent the large number of African photographers presented at this event who are, like Simon Njami, recent immigrants to Europe or the Americas or first

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<sup>133</sup> Njami, *Mémoires Intimes d'un Nouveau Millénaire*, 201.

<sup>134</sup> Simon Njami, *Rites Sacrés/Rites Profanes* (Paris : Éditions Éric Koehler, 2003), 168.

generation Europeans or North Americans. Likely in response to these practitioners, the event has progressively recognized and integrated the Diaspora into its exhibitions more seamlessly. This was facilitated by Simon Njami's restructuring of the Bamako Biennial. When Njami took the helm of the Bamako Biennial in 2001, he restructured the event around an International Exhibition to which African artists of all backgrounds were invited to apply. Thus, for each biennial, approximately thirty artists have been selected for inclusion in this exhibition which is considered the showcase of the event.

Simon Njami has recognized the African identities of artists in the Diaspora by gradually integrating them into the International Exhibition. As early as 2003, this exhibition included artists from the Diaspora whose nationalities were described by hyphenated identities: Sophie Elbaz "France-Algeria", Michèle Magma "DRC-France", Ingrid Mwangi "Kenya-Germany" and Roberto Stephenson "Haiti-Italy". To these were added artists without specific ties to the continent such as Salomé Prisca described as from "France Diaspora". This approach to describing identity has remained fairly consistent at the Biennial since 2003 as a way of envisioning the identities of artists in the Diaspora that reveals their immigration abroad but continues to justify their representation at this event.

This change was important at the Biennial since it reflects the fact that many photographers who have recently relocated to the Diaspora remain in close contact with their communities, families and ways of being back home. Thus, they are not immediately cut off from the continent after immigration but remain in continuous dialogue with their native land and culture. Elizabeth Harney discusses this issue in relation to Senegalese artists:

In search for greater opportunities, audiences, and experiences, some artists have chosen the option of emigration, or, in other cases, have been forced into exile for political reasons, usually European cities. In leaving Senegal, they have participated in the transnational networks that characterize this moment of nomadology and deterritorialization. However, their choice is often impermanent and does not simply produce rootless “citizens of the world” so hybridized and displaced that they no longer participate in local networks. Rather, many of these individuals meet in Paris, London, or Berlin to work together and make frequent trips home, often spending the European winter months in Senegal, exhibiting in local galleries.<sup>135</sup>

In other words, African photographers who have recently emigrated from the continent do not simply adopt the customs or national identities of their countries of destination. Rather, they remain in dialogue with their native countries, communities and artistic backgrounds. While this only applies to artists who have recently relocated to the West, it is nonetheless an important factor at the Biennial since most of the photographers presented either live on the continent, have recently immigrated or are first generation Westerners.

While categorizing artists according to nationalities will always be a reductive practice, this shift at the Biennial is significant because it further recognizes the complication of nationality in a globalized world. Furthermore, it acknowledges that these artists exist, live and work in Europe and particularly in France. Thus, by extension, they cannot be easily cast as ‘other’ as has historically been the case, but must be recognized to a certain extent also as Western.

Although these changes have suggested the relevance of Diaspora to the Bamako Biennial, it must be noted that Diasporic experience has never been explicitly addressed or discussed within Njami’s essays. Rather, he has consistently discussed the work on display within the context of the African continent. For instance, in his 2007 catalogue essay treating the theme of “The City and Beyond”, he discusses the African city and makes specific reference to Abidjan (Ivory Coast). He never mentions Paris or London,

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<sup>135</sup> Harney, 230.

even though these urban centers were the subject of a number of photographs exhibited in the International Exhibition. In fact, the closest the discourse in the catalogue has come to explicitly recognizing Diaspora was in the foreword to the 2007 Biennial which recognizes the participation of photographers from the continent and abroad by opening with “For the photographers native of Africa and its Diaspora...” Perhaps soon the Biennial catalogue’s introductory essay will put the work of photographers from the continent and its Diaspora in dialogue, thereby fulfilling Njami’s vision of contemporaneity and recognizing the lived transnational experience of most artists today.

Alongside these developments with reference to the Diaspora, the Bamako Biennial has also taken steps to further internationalize its content. Since 2001, the event has presented a more inclusive vision of contemporary photography by initiating an “Invited Country” program which invited one country to organize a national exhibition of photography. The invited countries thus far have been Germany (2003), Spain (2005), and Finland (2007). This inclusiveness has also been reinforced by the integration of other exhibitions of non-African work at the event. For instance, in 2003, there were exhibitions under the heading *Another Gaze* which included exhibitions from the Nordic Countries, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.

While the broadened scope of the Biennial has been evident in a number of trends and initiatives, its most definitive statement came in 2005 when the event changed its name. Whereas up until 2003 what is commonly referred to as the Bamako Biennial had been officially known as the “Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine” [Encounters of African Photography], in 2005 it was re-baptized as the “Rencontres Africaine de la Photographie” [African Photography Encounters]. Thus, whereas its original name

clearly signified the event's exclusive focus on African photographers, the name change signaled that the Biennial had become an international photography biennial that takes place on African soil. This further emphasizes the international contemporaneity of the artists on display since it puts photographers from various nationalities in dialogue with each other. In a 2007 interview, Simon Njami was asked to elaborate on this name change:

Le titre original en 1994 était "Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine" il a évolué vers "Les Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie". Cette évolution procède de la même volonté d'ouverture des cadres que pour l'espace de la photographie. En 2003 l'Allemagne, en 2005 l'Espagne, et cette année la Finlande, à la Pyramide du souvenir. Il me semble essentiel que le reste du monde connaisse l'Afrique et se retrouve ici, et vice versa...  
[The original title in 1994 was "Encounters of African Photography", but it has evolved towards "African Encounters of photography". This evolution proceeds from the same will to open both the framework and the exhibitions of photography. In 2003 Germany, in 2005 Spain, and this year Finland at the Pyramid of Memory. It seems to me essential that the rest of the world should know Africa and meet here, and vice versa...]<sup>136</sup>

Thus, Simon Njami suggests that this name change was born of the same spirit as the initiation of the "Invited Country" program: to establish a truly international exchange at this event.

### **Asserting the Fine Art Status of African Photography**

As Editor in Chief of *Revue Noire's* publications, one of the ways in which Njami asserted the fine art value of African production was through the luxuriousness of his books and catalogues.<sup>137</sup> This was a deliberate choice meant to contextualize the work displayed in such a way as to assert its value as fine art and put *Revue Noire's* publications on an equal footing with other fine art publications on the market.<sup>138</sup> When

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<sup>136</sup> Simon Njami, "Entretien," *BKO Photo* no. 1(November 25th, 2007): 3. (*my translation*)

<sup>137</sup> Amselle, 142.

<sup>138</sup> Amselle, 142.

appointed as Head Curator for the 2001 Bamako Biennial, Njami adopted a similar strategy to assert the value of contemporary African photography at the event.

The catalogue of the 2001 Bamako Biennial starkly contrasts with those of the three preceding Biennials. In comparison with the small-scale publications that came before, it is a large, ten by thirteen-format catalogue, numbering 253 pages. Moreover, it is no longer published by a magazine publishing house as was previously the case, but by a Paris publishing house, Éditions Eric Koehler. Whereas the images presented previously were uniform and predominantly black and white, as of 2001, the catalogues include images in various formats including many full-page reproductions, in both black and white as well as color.

Since these catalogues act as framing devices for the event and the photography on view, this transformation is significant. These large, glossy, colourful catalogues are monuments to the Biennial. Their boldness and quality imply the corresponding worth of the Bamako Biennial, its fine art focus and its relevance within the contemporary art scene. This context is particularly important since photographic meaning is context-determined.<sup>139</sup> In other words, photographic interpretation differs significantly depending on the context within which it is presented (eg. a newspaper or a museum). Thus it is important for the images to be properly contextualized within a fine art publication to assure their readability as such. His alteration of the catalogues clearly asserts their fine art status.

The way Njami redesigned the catalogue to prioritize the fine art properties of photography underscored a shift in the Biennial's overall focus. As previously discussed, one of the main reasons for Françoise Huguiet's initiation of the Biennial was to

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<sup>139</sup> Sekulla, 86.

publicize the existence of African photographers to Western news agencies. Thus, the emphasis was originally on professional photographers who created documentary and journalistic images. This was reflected in the types of exhibitions that initially dominated the event. For instance, at the first biennial, twelve of the sixteen artists presented were described as photojournalists or documentary photographers and many were affiliated with news agencies or governments on the continent. The Biennial's initial focus on professional documentary and photojournalist photographers was most clearly indicated within the 1996 event which included an exhibition entitled "Travaux d'auteurs" [Artists' Works]. This was the only instance in which photographers were explicitly referred to as artists before the 2001 Biennial. Moreover, the fact that this exhibition explicitly labeled the work on view as art reveals that the Biennial perceived the rest of the work on display at this event as something else. It is also important to recognize the historical focus of the early Biennials. This is evident in the foreword to the 1994 catalogue in which Huguier laments the difficulty of unearthing the historical African photography on view from the continent's archives. Exhibitions of photography taken between the 1950s and the 1970s were prominent within the initial Biennials. However, this changed after 2001 as signaled by the reconceived catalogues and the introduction of the International Exhibition which was explicitly designed to be a survey of contemporary African photography from across the continent.

Analysing the discourse and framing of photography at the Bamako Biennial is an important endeavor because the unique focus of this event and its increasing visibility has assigned it a central role in constructing a canon of modern and contemporary African

photography. As a result, the influence of its curators cannot be overemphasized. They act as cultural brokers between African photographers and the Western art market and, as such, have great power over the development of the field and the careers of its practitioners. This chapter has revealed and contrasted the two main approaches to African photography that shaped the Bamako Biennial before and after 2001. However, my criticism of Louis Mesplé for his Primitivist approach in comparison to Simon Njami's emphasis on contemporaneity should not be understood as unequivocal praise for the approach of the latter. In fact, Njami's universalism and his insistence on the contemporaneity is also a contested approach to African art. While Njami should be praised for his assertion of the value of contemporary African production and for initiating an influx of international production to a less frequented location such as Bamako, he can also be challenged for the assumptions he makes concerning the equivalent experience of artists living and working on the continent and those in the Diaspora and their Western contemporaries. One of the key criticisms of this approach, made by Elizabeth Harney, is its "false allusion of equality between artists heralding from vastly different, economic, political and social environments."<sup>140</sup> Moreover, the international fine art sensibility it privileges has been charged with reflecting "a privileged, cosmopolitan diaspora experience."<sup>141</sup> At the Bamako Biennial, such a charge hits close to home since Njami is from Cameroon but has largely lived in the Diaspora. Figures such as himself and Okwui Enwezor have been labeled an African Diasporic

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<sup>140</sup> Harney, 232.

<sup>141</sup> Nancy Hynes, "Art for Africa's sake," in *Prospect Magazine* no. 29 (April 1998), [http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=4200](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=4200) (accessed July 15, 2008).

intelligentsia living an elite existence abroad, and they have been criticized for speaking with authority on behalf of a continent where they no longer reside.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

### **CHAPTER THREE: The Local Impact of the Bamako Biennial**

The relationship between art biennials and their host cities is often strained. This results primarily from the fact that their specific geographical locations are not central to their artistic goals or vision. Rather, they target an international, specialized audience, often relying on renowned curators to draw attention from abroad.<sup>143</sup> Although an aspect of all biennials, such tension comes into relief most starkly at non-Western biennials. Since these aim to facilitate the participation of non-Western artists in the international art market, not only are their aesthetic and conceptual goals specific, but they also originate in a cultural context that is foreign to their geographical location. This can easily lead to the alienation of local viewers, artists and cultural workers.

Not surprisingly, the Bamako Biennial has not been immune to such problems. Tension between the event's French and Malian organizers is evident in catalogue texts and it was also expressed by three local cultural workers interviewed during the 2007 Bamako Biennial. This chapter will explore these instances of tension and attempt to determine their sources. Three issues in particular that will be addressed are the Malian desire for autonomous control of the event, the contrast between African and Western constructs of art and the repercussions of the top-down approach to management of the Biennial. These issues have affected Malian partners, local viewers and Bamako's cultural workers in significant ways including alienating local audiences, poor administration of the event and threatening the livelihood of a local artist-run centre.

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<sup>143</sup> Meyer et al. ,156.

## **Malian Desire for Autonomy**

The most obvious source of tension at the Bamako Biennial is the question of who has primary control of the event. While it was initiated as a cooperative project between France and Mali, it has nevertheless been predominantly organized and conceptualized in France. However, over the course of the biennial, local pressure for increased responsibility has afforded Malian partners more organizational and conceptual control of the Biennial. This struggle for autonomy is evident in past catalogues texts and came to the fore during interviews in 2007.

Although the preceding chapter focused on the biennial through its catalogues by exploring the words of its curators and changes in catalogue format, the catalogues also afford a window onto Malian perceptions of the event. Since the event's inception, Malians have consistently authored a foreword to each catalogue. Although these forewords are short texts at the beginning of the catalogues, they have been important spaces for local representatives to voice their thoughts about the state of the Biennial. The fact that, in most cases, they are the only source of local intervention in the catalogues exemplifies the secondary status of Malians in the organization of the event. Nonetheless, these marginal spaces have been effective for the expression of local perspectives and concerns.

The authors of the catalogues' forewords have included important public figures in Mali as well as Malian partners in the organization of the Biennial. They are: Bakary Koniba Traore (Minister of Culture and Communication, Mali) in 1994 and 1996; Alpha Oumar Konaré (President of Mali) in 1998; Pascal Baba Coulibaly (Minister of Culture,

Mali) in 2001; and Moussa Konaté (Director of the Bamako Biennial) in 2003, 2005 and 2007.

Before 2001, these texts were authored by government officials who are predominantly positive about the Biennial. They express their enthusiasm for the upcoming Biennial, state its growth in size and importance since its inception and their hopes for its continued development. Given the vagueness of their comments and their status as government agents, these forewords read, to a certain extent, as political rhetoric. However, once Moussa Konaté was appointed Director and began authoring the forewords in 2003, they become much more specific and even include technical details about the organization and presentation of the upcoming Biennial. Due to his direct involvement, Konaté has been able to provide insight into the event's workings unavailable to government officials. As a result, the tone and subject of the catalogues' forewords shift significantly once he takes the helm.

While Konaté remains essentially celebratory about the event, his forewords never fail to advocate for increased local involvement in the Biennial. However, it is within the 2005 catalogue that Konaté expresses his most pointed criticism of the Biennial and particularly of the persistence of French control over its organization.

Much like all of the Bamako Biennial's catalogues since 2001, the 2005 catalogue entitled *Un Autre Monde* [Another World] is a hefty 253-page publication. It opens with a table of contents followed by Moussa Konaté's foreword presented in two columns, one in French and the other, its English translation. This catalogue also predictably includes a six-page introductory essay by Simon Njami, a presentation of each artist in the International Exhibition as well as features on each exhibition presented that year.

Entitled “Un tournant décisif“ [A Decisive Turning Point], Konaté’s foreword to this catalogue opens on a positive note by stating that the 2005 Biennial “...aura été précédée par le développement et la mise en oeuvre de programmes et d’activités qui confèrent à cette édition un caractère particulier” [...will be uniquely colored by the program of events and activities that have taken place prior to its opening].<sup>144</sup> This program included the establishment of the African Photography Centre in Bamako and the workshops and a Masterclass offered to a select number of photographers before the opening of the event. These events were important in the evolution of the Biennial. In particular, the establishment of the African Photography Centre in Bamako could be considered the literal turning point that Konaté’s title refers to, since it was established to eventually take over the production of the Biennial from *Afrique en Créations*. However, beyond this positive opening, Konaté’s foreword expresses an overall dissatisfaction with the lack of local infrastructure and input the Bamakois authorities had over the execution of this event.

Konaté reveals that, while local involvement and relevance have increased at the Biennial, Malian expectations for the event had not been met. He writes:

...la biennale photographique ne saurait répondre véritablement aux espoirs suscités que si les partenaires des Rencontres conjuguent leurs efforts pour faire de Bamako un Centre de ressources dans le domaine de la photographie en Afrique, la voie la mieux indiquée pour assurer la construction d’un imaginaire africain moderne et promouvoir la recherche. La constitution d’archives photographiques des Rencontres à Bamako est une des urgences qui traduira la volonté politique des autorités maliennes de donner une assise institutionnelle plus forte à la manifestation, contribuer à la professionnalisation du secteur de la photographie et créer une mémoire permanente.<sup>145</sup>

[... in order to fulfill the many hopes and expectations arising from the Encounters, a concerted effort will be needed from all partners involved in order to establish Bamako as a fully-fledged resource centre for African photography – undoubtedly the best way to support the development of a modern African imagination and to promote artistic research in Africa. The absence of archived material from the Bamako Encounters is currently a handicap to the political will of Bamako’s authorities, who have agreed to establish the African Photography Centre as a means to strengthen

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<sup>144</sup>Simon Njami, *Un autre monde/Another world* (Paris : Éditions Eric Koehler, 2005), 7.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

the institutional foundations of the event and support the professionalisation of the photography sector.]<sup>146</sup>

In other words, Malian authorities have established the African Photography Centre to strengthen the local institutional foundations of the event. Their goal is to establish Bamako as a resource centre for African photography, but, thus far their will has been frustrated by the absence of the event's archives, which remain in France. Moussa Konaté's emphasis on the need for an effort from all partners involved suggests that French authorities had been uncooperative in initiating the transfer of the archives - and likely also of institutional control - to the African Photography Centre and local actors. Konaté closes his foreword by reasserting the need for change within the event's organizational structure. While he acknowledges that the event had reached a state of maturity, he asserts that "Toutefois, de nouveaux ajustements sont nécessaires" [there is need for an adjustment].<sup>147</sup> Given all he has written, there is little doubt that this adjustment involves shifting the resources and responsibility for the Bamako Biennial to Bamako.

This desire for a transfer of control to local authorities was echoed in interviews with cultural workers in Bamako, in November 2007. Most prominently, Samuel Sidibé, the Director of the National Museum of Mali, expressed similar sentiments. He was familiar with the Biennial due to the longstanding partnership between his institution and this event. Initially, the National Museum provided technical support for the Biennial by assisting with mounting its exhibitions at its original venue in Bamako, the Palais de la Culture. However, between 2001 and 2003 the National Museum underwent major renovations including the introduction of new exhibition halls (Fig. 9), a Boutique (Fig.

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<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 7.

10), and a Café called the “African Grill” (Fig. 11). Since then, the National Museum has become the primary venue for the Bamako Biennial. Thus, in 2007, the International Exhibition was hung in the National Museum’s new exhibition hall, and the Museum’s grounds were the site of the Biennial’s major events including its opening (Fig. 12), film screenings, artists’ portfolio reviews and main receptions. In Samuel Sidibé’s words, the National Museum of Mali is now the “centre nerveux” or nervous system of the event.<sup>148</sup> As a result, Sidibé has become increasingly involved with its presentation and execution.

In the course of the interview, Sidibé expressed severe dissatisfaction with the organization of the Biennial. In particular, he described the relation between French organizers from CulturesFrance (the organization that oversees *Afrique en Créations*) and their Malian counterparts as “complicated”, stating that:

Je pense que cet événement est trop compliquer pour que le partenariat qui est à la base de sont emplacement ne soit pas un partenariat facile.... Aujourd’hui on a une production qui se développe avec CulturesFrance et le Mali dans un certain nombre de difficulté de communication, d’absence de clarté. Et moi, en approchant la Biennial cette année de plus près, ça m’a beaucoup perturbé.<sup>149</sup>

[I think that this event is too complicated for the partnership that supports its presentation to not be an easy one... Today we have a production that is developed between CulturesFrance and Mali with a certain number of difficulties of communication, absences of clarity. And myself, because I have had a closer involvement in the Biennial this year, I have been very disturbed.]

Sidibé thus reveals that cooperation between French and local organizers had not been easy or smooth, specifically in terms of communication and clarity between the two parties. In his words, their relationship and its resulting complications have left him “very disturbed”.

Sidibé proceeded to describe his vision for a “simpler” organization of the event:

...il me semble que ça peu être bien, de mon point vue, de réfléchir à une forme d’organisation qui sois beaucoup plus simple. Je pense que le mieux serait qu’au niveau du Mali, on met en place

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<sup>148</sup> Samuel Sidibé, interview by author, Bamako, Mali, December 12, 2007.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

l'essentiel de l'organisation sinon la totalité de l'organisation.... une organisation beaucoup plus centré mais pas deux partenaires qui ont une relation un peu compliquée.<sup>150</sup>  
[...it seems to me that it would be good, from my point of view, to think about an organization that would be much simpler. I think that the best would be that, in terms of Mali, we put in place the key parts of the organization if not the entire organization... an organization much more centered rather than two partners who have a bit of a complicated relationship.]

Sidibé clearly advocates for primary control of the event's organization to be located in Mali, both to avoid the complications of difficult relations between French and local organizers and for the sake of efficiency and simplicity. Throughout this interview, Sidibé's use of the words "simple" and "complicated" seemed to represent more complex issues than these words superficially reveal. They were likely euphemisms for relations, attitudes and practices with colonial resonances that continue to powerfully impact contact between France and Mali, today.

Samuel Sidibé's desire for autonomy was echoed by another cultural worker in Mali: Hama Goro (Fig. 13), Director of the Centre Soleil D'Afrique, an artist-run centre in Bamako. Established in 1999, Centre Soleil d'Afrique (Fig. 14-15) is focused on promoting the plastic arts in Mali through education, workshops, exhibitions and conferences of national and international scope.<sup>151</sup> It is also involved in training local artists, particularly in new media, by providing them access to technology and training on computers and in video production.<sup>152</sup> Located in the Lafiabougou neighbourhood of Bamako, this centre is a convivial space for artists to meet, work and exhibit their work. It has an inner courtyard with a number of sculptures on display (Fig. 16), an outdoor studio, an indoor exhibition space (Fig. 17) and a computer lab (Fig. 18) used for training artists in digital imaging.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Hama Goro, in conversation with the author, Bamako, Mali, December 10, 2007.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Centre Soleil d’Afrique has been involved with the Bamako Biennial since 2001. While it has not participated directly, it has consistently organized parallel exhibitions to, in Hama Goro’s words, “augmenter le pouvoir du Biennial” [increase the influence of the Biennial].<sup>153</sup> According to Goro, the Bamako Biennial is a positive initiative. However, he feels that local Bamakois and the Malian government must be more supportive of the event for it to realize its full potential in the city.<sup>154</sup> From his perspective, the event should become an autonomous Malian initiative so that it could have increased visibility, significance and relevance within Bamako.<sup>155</sup> This would increase the event’s “ampleur”<sup>156</sup> or impact. Thus, his perspective differs from that of Samuel Sidibé, the Director of the National Museum. In both cases, their perspectives seem colored by the nature of their work. Since Samuel Sidibé is involved with the organization of the event, he advocates for Malian control to increase its efficiency, whereas Hama Goro’s preoccupation with promoting contemporary artists in Bamako lead him to advocate for local control to increase local attention, press coverage and support for the event and thus, more broadly, all contemporary art practice in Bamako.

### **Conflicts between Western and African Constructs of Art at the Bamako Biennial**

Since the primary mission of the Bamako Biennial is to facilitate the participation of African photographers in the international art market, it is foremost a fine art event. As we have seen, this goal corresponds to Simon Njami’s values and vision for the Biennial. To define itself as such the Bamako Biennial has adopted a number of important Western

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

signifiers that frame the event and the work exhibited as fine art. The revised nature of the catalogues as of 2001, as discussed in the preceding chapter, is one example. Similarly the renovations to the National Museum of Mali between 2001 and 2003 bear all the signs of a Western art museum, further emphasizing the Biennial's construction as a fine art event from a Western perspective.

While these framing devices correspond exactly to the stated goals of the Bamako Biennial, its fine art values have alienated local audiences in Bamako. In fact, the absence of local participation has become one of its major shortfalls. Thus, in the 2001 foreword, Ibrahim Loutou and Olivier Poivre D'Arvoir, the Vice-President and Director of the AFAA (Association française d'actions artistiques) admit that "la population Malienne, il faut l'avouer, ne s'est jamais sentie totalement impliquée dans les différentes manifestations" [... the Malian population, it must be admitted, has never felt totally engaged by its various events].<sup>157</sup> To rectify the situation, they announced that the Biennial's activities have been extended throughout Mali to include local residents across the country in the festivities. They also appointed Malian Abdoulaye Konaté as Director and Simon Njami as Head Curator of the Biennial that year, as attempts to make locals feel more represented by this event.<sup>158</sup> However, in his interview, Samuel Sidibé revealed that such initiatives had so far been largely ineffective.

From Samuel Sidibé's perspective, steps taken by the Biennial to reach the Bamakois, had not yet succeeded:

Le lien entre la Biennale et la communauté a toujours été une préoccupation. Je ne suis pas absolument sûr qu'on est arrivé encore à résoudre la question de façon satisfaisante. Mais depuis quelques éditions on essaie de développer des activités, des projets parallèles à l'événement elle-

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<sup>157</sup> Njami, *Mémoires Intimes d'un Nouveau Millénaire*, iii.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

même pour faire en sorte que la question de la photographie s'installe au sein de la communauté.<sup>159</sup>

[The relationship between the Biennial and the community has always been a preoccupation. I am not absolutely sure that we have yet resolved the question satisfactorily. But during the past few Biennials we have been trying to develop activities, projects parallel to the event itself to allow for photography to become of interest to the community.]

Thus, he acknowledges that local participation has been an important concern but that the event has not yet managed to appeal to the community because the photography displayed has not secured their interest. To increase local participation in the event, he thus proposes two strategies for future Biennials:

...de faire que la biennale sorte un peu des salles d'expositions. C'est un souhait important. Mais ça devrait être fait aussi dans une réflexion plus poussée sur la relation entre les Maliens et la photographie. Son caractère international est superbe, il faut garder son caractère international. Mais pour qu'elle ait une relation avec la communauté, la biennale doit aussi partir d'une réflexion entre la vision que les Maliens ont de la photographie et son action.<sup>160</sup>

[... to take the Biennial outside of the exhibition halls, a bit. That's an important wish. But it should also be done as part of a more profound reflection on the relation between Malians and photography. Its international character is superb, we must retain its international character. However, for it to have a relation with the community, the Biennial must also start with a reflection on the vision Malians have of photography and its production.]

Therefore, Sidibé clearly recognizes the aesthetic and conceptual conflicts between the Bamako Biennial and the community. As a result, he proposes to initiate parallel activities that take place outside the Museum and represent local values and applications of photography. Such exhibitions would prioritize portrait and marriage photography as well as photo-journalism.<sup>161</sup> He also advocates for these exhibitions to present work by local photographers:

Je crois qu'on pourrait faire une belle exposition avec une sélection de tous les studios de Bamako. Une exposition comme ça serait beaucoup plus regardé par les Maliens. Parce que ça renvoie à eux.<sup>162</sup>

[I believe that we could organize a nice exhibition with a selection of images from all the studios of Bamako. An exhibition like that would be much more attended by the Malians. Because it represents them.]

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Samuel Sidibé, interview by author, Bamako, Mali, December 12, 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

These activities would thereby also represent the community. Essentially, the activities that Sidibé proposes for the community are stripped of the Western signifiers that permeate the rest of the event such as the Museum and Western conceptualizations of fine art. While this certainly would not apply to all the exhibitions and activities of the Biennial since Sidibé wants to conserve its international dimension, by divesting parts of the Biennial of these signifiers it would more likely appeal to local interests and sensibilities.

The fact that the local community has been alienated by this event is not surprising since the category of fine art is culturally determined. In other words, definitions of art are not objective but rather shaped by political, economic, social and cultural factors that are historically specific.<sup>163</sup> Since this event was established to appeal to an international market still largely shaped by Western values, the discourse and context that surround the Biennial's exhibitions originate in a milieu that is foreign to most local viewers. As a result, they are not in attendance.

If the category of fine art alienates many local viewers, it is important to add that photographic meaning is also subject to cultural definition. As described in the first chapter, by the 1960s photography was increasingly becoming aestheticized or framed within conventional notions of fine art. As these images gained their agency as art, "photographs cease to be 'about' their subjects in the same direct or primary way; they become studies in the possibility of photography."<sup>164</sup> In other words, they became prized for their aesthetic rather than documentary value. Since this process also occurred in a cultural context foreign to most Bamakois, photography's re-evaluation as art with

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<sup>163</sup> Svasek, 7.

<sup>164</sup> Sontag, 231.

predominantly aesthetic values further alienates them from the Biennial's activities. At the same time, Samuel Sidibé's proposed move beyond fine art photography also reflects trends in photography studies and curatorial practice in recent years that turn toward vernacular photography.<sup>165</sup>

While most of the work exhibited at the Bamako Biennial until now does not appeal to Bamakois, Samuel Sidibé's comments bring to light types of photography that may engage this audience: portrait photography, marriage photography and photo-journalism. Moreover, he advocates for exhibitions that would represent the community back to itself. While it is still worth questioning the extent to which the exhibition framework itself contributes to the alienation of local populations, a change in content and setting would be a first step toward engaging them in the photographic activities of the Biennial.

Perhaps in response to the aesthetic and conceptual chasm between organizers and local participants at the Bamako Biennial, this event has sought increasingly creative ways to engage this community by keeping their values in mind. For the 2007 Biennial, two such initiatives were the "Anthem to African photography" and a unique portraiture project in the neighborhoods of Bamako, "Portraits Décalés".

### **Foto Fasa: L'Hymne de la Photographie Africaine<sup>166</sup>**

For the 2007 Bamako Biennial, Toumani Diabate, Kassé M. Diabate and Pamela Bishop, three artists in Bamako, composed a song to generate local interest in the event. Entitled "Foto Fasa: L'Hymne de la Photographie Africaine" [Foto Fasa: The Anthem of

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<sup>165</sup> Batchen.

<sup>166</sup> See Appendix II for full song's transcription and translation.

African Photography], it is performed in French, English and Bambara (the primary Malian language spoken in Bamako). The use of these three languages signals the international nature of the event, while asserting the importance of local perspectives and participation. Each singer performs in one of the three languages and they alternate throughout the song. The composition is both political and historical as it attempts to argue for the importance of photography to Malians.

This song reveals the extent to which the medium of photography and the way in which its practitioners are discussed within Mali differs from the concepts of photography espoused by the Biennial. By trying to contextualize the event and its photography in a way that will appeal to Malians, the song reveals their primary value for photography as a memento of friends and loved ones. Moreover, it outlines the terms in which the skills of photographers are discussed in a Malian cultural context – they are celebrated not for their stylistic achievements, but according to their ethnicities and family histories. At the heart of the song is the following passage:

Quand deux amoureux se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.  
Quand des amis se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.  
Envois-moi ta photo pour que je le garde en souvenir.  
C'est grâce aux photographes que les gens arrivent à échanger des photos.  
Les photographes sont à saluer, parce qu'ils font du bon travail.  
[When two lovers separate, the first thing they do is exchange photos.  
When two friends separate, the first thing they do is exchange photos.  
Send me your photo so I can keep it in memory of you.  
It's thanks to photographers that people can exchange photos.  
Photographers are to be saluted, because they do good work.]

This verse recounts the historical use of photographs in Mali to memorialize someone by evoking the situation of lovers or friends separating and exchanging their photographs. The photographs these anecdotes refer to are portraits, thereby reinforcing the value of this genre in Mali. This lends weight to Sidibé's argument that an exhibition of portrait

photography would be more appealing to Malians than the fine art photography predominantly represented at this event.

If the first part of this song emphasizes why photography is important to Malians, the second half cites specific examples of noted photographers from all over the continent. In French, the singer appropriately makes dedications to photographers from French speaking countries: “Pierrot Men de Madagascar” and “Samuel Fosso du Cameroon”. The English singer evokes the names of photographers from anglophone African nations: “Akinbodé Akinbiyi from Nigeria”, “Santu Mofokeng from South Africa” and “the big Angel Ricardo from Mozambique”. As for the singer performing in Bambara, his dedications are longer and describe each photographer in terms of their ethnic background within Mali:

Les Maliens écoutez-moi, je viens de me souvenir à l’instant de certaines personnes: Malick Sidibé, Malick Sidibé.  
Il fait parti des gens humble, honte, discret, réservé. Des grands nobles pas offensifs.  
L’événement me rappelle aussi de Seydou Keita.  
La bravure de son peuple; Seydou est descendant d’une famille d’empereur.  
Adbourame Sakaly... Ce dernier aussi a été un grand photographe.  
L’amour l’a arraché de notre affection.  
[Malians, listen to me, I just remembered at this moment a few people...  
Malick Sidibé, Malick Sidibé... He is from a humble people, proud, discrete, reserved; Great peaceful noblemen.  
The event also reminds me of Seydou Keita.  
The bravery of his people; Seydou Keita is descended from a family of emperors.  
Adbourame Sakaly... He was also a great photographer.  
Love has taken him from our affection.]

Thus, this passage evokes the names of three Malian photographers: Malick Sidibé, Seydou Keita and Adbourame Sakaly. To prove their worth to a Malian audience, the singer evokes their ethnic backgrounds and particularly the virtues of their ethnic groups. This manner of discussing their worth is culturally specific and foreign to the discourse of the Biennial. Finally, through its evocation of Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita, this song further reinforces the importance of these two figures to the event.

Besides these passages, there are also French and English verses that assert the value of the Biennial. These focus primarily on its value as an instance of self-representation and freedom from The Western gaze. Thus, the French singer posits:

Il nous a fallu longtemps pour cette liberté,  
Nous avions confiance, nous avions espérer,  
La route a été longue, les batailles été dur  
Mais au bout du chemin, notre image était pur.<sup>167</sup>  
[It took us a long time to gain this freedom,  
We had faith and we hoped,  
The road was long and the battles were difficult,  
But at the end of the road, our image was pure.]

The first three lines of this verse evoke the liberation struggle from colonialism while the last line makes reference to the righteousness of the battle and thus, the purity of their image. Therefore, this verse ties representation to emancipation from colonialism.

Likewise, the English verse states:

We came a long way to get our freedom,  
We always knew this day would come.  
This day of journey and battles and courage,  
But at last we have been given back our image.  
An image of our own, an image that we own,  
Let's get together and celebrate in Bamako, Bamako, oh Bamako.<sup>168</sup>

This passage seems to be a rough translation of the previous French one, since it emphasizes the importance of self-representation in the process of emancipation. Thus, it clearly distinguishes between European and local representations: “An image of our own, an image that we own...”.<sup>169</sup> On the poster that advertises this song (Fig. 19), this specific passage is attributed to Simon Njami. Thus, this song must have been inspired by the curator’s emphasis on the political implications of self-representation.

In addition to the content of the song, the platform of music itself was a deliberate choice. Firstly, it responds to the high illiteracy rate among Malians. Clearly, this reality

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<sup>167</sup> Toumani Diabate, Kassé M. Diabate and Pamela Bishop. *Foto Fasa: L'Hymne de la Photographie Africaine*, Éditions Balani's, 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

has created problems of communication between the event and the local population, particularly since posters have always been an important method to advertise the event in Bamako. Amadou Konaté, a journalist and advisor at the Ministry of Culture of Mali, confirmed this lack of communication at the opening event to the 2007 Biennial:

Ces Rencontres sont une belle initiative mais il faut reconnaître que le public Malien est absent de ce vernissage... Il y a eu un véritable manque de communication avec cette population en majorité analphabète. Néanmoins, les Rencontres cultivent le goût de l'image auprès de la jeune génération.<sup>170</sup>

[The Encounters are a nice initiative but we must recognize that the Malian public is absent from this opening... There was a real absence of communication with this population that is in majority illiterate. Nonetheless, the Encounters cultivate a taste for the image in the younger generation.]

Thus, the vehicle of music and its oral transmission of information about the event are important to assuring communication with the Malian public. It is thus no surprise that *ESSOR*, the local daily newspaper, referred to the “Anthem to African Photography” as “une des innovations majeures de l'édition” [One of the major innovations of this year's Biennial]. This same article addresses further reasons for this song's importance to this event:

..il fallait ajouter aux expositions rendant hommage aux photographes, un élément nouveau que le public pourrait s'appropriier même après la manifestation. La musique était le support le mieux indiqué. Cela d'autant plus que les héros sont toujours chantés sur le continent”.<sup>171</sup>

[... a new element that the public could appropriate even after the event had to be added to the exhibitions in tribute to the photographers. Music was the best platform, in this regard. That in addition to the fact that heroes are always sung on the continent.]

Thus, this song not only advertised the event to Malians, but it was conceived as something the Malians themselves could appropriate after the event, thereby making it their own. Moreover, the idea of evoking local photographers such as Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé in a song corresponded to Malian commemorative customs.

The “Anthem” was not the only new initiative at the Bamako Biennial in 2007 that emerged out of a consideration for Malian values and customs. Among the initiatives

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<sup>170</sup> Amadou Konaté, “Dixit”, *BKO Photo* no. 1 (November 25, 2007): 8.

<sup>171</sup> M. Konate, “La Photo a son Hymne,” *L'ESSOR Quotidien* no. 16083, 46th year, Novembre 27, 2007.

known as ‘Contours’ [Surroundings] was *Portrait Décalés*. This mobile portrait project resembled practices characteristic of Malian masquerade traditions and was a great success within the neighborhoods of Bamako.

### **“Portraits Décalés”**

“Portraits Décalés” was organized by a local initiative, Cinéma Numérique Ambulant (CNA). Usually, CNA travels to smaller communities without electricity in Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to project digital movies. However, for the 2007 Bamako Biennial, this group undertook a unique project called “Portraits Décalés” for which a group of photographers travelled to different neighbourhoods in Bamako where they spent the day taking portraits of local residents. In the evening they projected a slide show of their results.

Each sitter chose a background image from a database of works by the European photography collective Tendance Floue and posed as they wished in front of it.<sup>172</sup> The types of backgrounds available to them were varied. There were photographs of famous monuments such as the Eiffel Tower the Berlin Wall and New York Times Square; famous people such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy; natural settings including the seaside and the desert; as well as unidentified architectural spaces (Fig. 20). The team taking the portraits was comprised of two female interns studying photography in Bamako at the Centre de Formation Photographique (CFP) and a local Malian portrait photographer.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Christian Lambert, in conversation with the author, Bamako, Mali, November 28, 2007.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

This project seemed to arouse great public interest in Bamako. As noted above, at the end of each day, portraits from the neighbourhood were assembled into a slideshow and presented back to the community. These presentations were animated by an entertainer who spoke and sang in Bambara and was accompanied by music (Fig. 21). This event was also interactive because the animator often called out to the audience, who would respond.

International guests were invited to attend one of these projection evenings because their portraits had been taken earlier that day at the National Museum. The foreigners seemed out of place at the slideshow presentation, standing on the periphery of the seated crowd of locals and unable to understand the animation or recognize most of the subjects of the portraits presented. The large local audience however, and particularly the children, demonstrated their delight at the entertainer's commentary and the projected images through frequent bouts of laughter and joyful squeals. Furthermore, this project allowed the Bamakois to reveal their personalities and beliefs by interacting with the content of their chosen backgrounds. For example, the backdrop image of the French President Nicolas Sarkozy inspired a large variety of poses that reflected individual perspectives on this politician and his policies (Fig. 22). The images from each neighbourhood were also printed and displayed together in a large-scale mural in front of the Centre de Formation Photographique (Fig.23).

In many ways, this portrait project corresponds to Sidibé's guidelines: the images are portraits, a popular form of photography in Mali, and they represent the community. However, it is quite likely that this activity was also influenced by the indigenous practice of masquerade. Masquerade is characterized as a "multimedia theatrical

assemblage that also included costume, dance, music and song”.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, much as the interaction between the portrait sitters and their backgrounds allowed them to express their individuality and values, so too within masquerade, “participants can explore and comment upon their lives through the arts.”<sup>175</sup> Finally, the interactive quality of the projection evenings of *Portraits Décalés* recall the ways that actors and participants collaborate to give social meaning to the imaginary worlds presented in masquerade theatre. Thus, much like the “Anthem to African Photography”, *Portraits Décalés* drew its practices from local customs to successfully engage Bamakois in the Biennial’s activities.

Despite the success and sensitivity of such initiatives as the Anthem and “Portraits Décalés”, tensions and miscommunications between the Bamako Biennial and the Malian public remain a challenge to the Biennial. Moreover, of great concern is the tension between its organizers and participating artists created by the aestheticisation of photography privileged by the event. This is most clearly evinced within the catalogue’s descriptions on the event’s workshops and Masterclass. These workshops are effectively microcosms of the event, revealing the aesthetic and conceptual tensions that arise between African participants and French organizers at the Bamako Biennial.

### **Conflicts at the Bamako Biennial Masterclass and Workshops**

Training courses or workshops have been organized in conjunction with the Bamako Biennial since its inception, but, they were not fully treated within the events’ catalogues until 2005. That year’s catalogue features three workshops held in Burkina

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<sup>174</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, *Playing with Time: Art and performance in Central Mali* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995): vii.

<sup>175</sup> Arnoldi, xv.

Faso, Congo and Gabon and a Masterclass held in Bamako in the winter of 2005. Each of these is represented by written accounts from the workshops' leaders and images produced by its participants.

The 2005 Masterclass, as recounted in the catalogue of that year, was led by Alain Bizo, a French photographer from the VU Agency and Jacques Leenhardt, a French sociologist and art critic. Leenhardt is the author of the catalogue's account. The Masterclass' participants were established photographers from all over the continent: Emmanuel Bakary Daou (Mali), Mamadou Konate (Mali), Ouassa Pangassy Sangare (Mali), Amadou Sow (Mali), Rui Assubuji (Mozambique), Tomas Cumbana (Mozambique), Abilio Alexandre Macovela (Mozambique), Acamo Maquinasse (Mozambique), David Brazier (Zimbabwe), Calvin Dondo (Zimbabwe), Tamuka Mtengwa (Zimbabwe), Fidelis Zvomuya (Zimbabwe), Peter Mckenzie (South Africa), Oupa Nkosi (South Africa), Ingrid Lehlohnolo Masondo (South Africa) and Usha Seejarim (South Africa).

Entitled "The Bamako Studio", the 2005 catalogue's two-page account, discusses the activities undertaken during the Masterclass and the interaction and conflicts that arose between its organizers and participants. He begins by describing the workshop's opening activity. It was one of "self-positioning" where "...each photographer brought what they themselves had conceived, produced and enjoyed".<sup>176</sup> This was an opportunity for each artist to explain their work and set "the rules of the game, the framework that the workshop needs if it is to run smoothly".<sup>177</sup> This activity seems particularly important in a cross-cultural workshop in which, as Leenhardt admits, each had his or her own

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<sup>176</sup> Njami, *Un autre monde/Another world*, 191.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

“experiences, knowledge and personal or cultural interests”.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, the participating artists were not emerging photographers but well-established professionals with developed approaches and considerable experience in the field. No doubt, this added another level both of richness and complexity to their interaction during the workshop.

In fact, it is clear that despite this practice of “self-positioning,” conflicts arose between Masterclass leaders and participants. Predictably, these clashes addressed issues of aesthetics in art and ran along cultural lines. Disagreements about symbolic and aesthetic criteria “led to an important discussion on the choices that we, the French contingent, had made on perhaps overly aesthetic grounds.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, Leenhardt explicitly states that the artistic values between the French organizers of this workshop and its participants were at odds, since the French leaders of the workshop clearly valued aesthetics more than the participating African photographers. This is not surprising given that most of the participant photographers work in documentary photography or photo-journalism. As a result, their work is driven primarily by a documentary impetus rather than aesthetic concerns. In fact, the conflict between these photographers and the workshop leaders is not dissimilar to the conflict between the photographic values of the Malian viewers and the Biennial discussed above. In both cases, the fine art values upheld by the Biennial are foreign to viewers and participants from the continent due to their cultural origins within the West.

The 2005 workshop also recreated the power imbalance inherent at the Bamako Biennial. Just as predominantly French actors selected the photography according to Western fine art values, so too were Alain Bizot and Jacques Leenhardt charged with

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 191.

mounting an exhibition of images produced during the workshop. As a result, the participants would essentially have to conform to the organizers' values to be assured representation in the resulting exhibition. Thus, while Leenhardt casts this workshop as a neutral learning space where "the aim... is not to be right but to exchange reasons for thinking and feeling", in fact there were unavoidable power relations at play within this exercise. However, to the two leaders' credit, Leenhardt describes how:

After the debate, Alain and I had to make new choices for the exhibition. But this time, he was influenced by the dialogue that had taken place, which in any case reflected the subjectivity of opinions that we were entirely prepared to accept in our capacity as "curators" of the exhibition.<sup>180</sup>

While this statement favorably represents these curators as open-minded to alternative approaches to photography, their perspectives were nonetheless empowered in the context of this workshop.

While it may seem as though such power relations are inherent to all artists' workshops, in fact there exist alternative approaches that diminish power imbalances between their leaders and participants. One such alternative approach is clearly elucidated among the workshops described in the catalogue to the following Biennial in 2007. The four workshops featured in that catalogue took place in South Africa, Botswana, Gabon and Haiti. The one which provides the most stark contrast to the approach of the 2005 Masterclass was organized by the Market Photo Workshop in South Africa.

The Market Photo Workshop was established in the late 1980s as a training centre to "provide visual literacy and practical training in photography to photographers who were excluded from formal training in tertiary education institutions and government policies at the time."<sup>181</sup> Thus, it is a politically motivated institution that exists primarily

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 191-2.

<sup>181</sup> Simon Njami, *Bamako 2007: Dans la ville et au-delà* (Paris : Éditions Marval, 2007), 220.

to serve its community. As a result it holds a different approach to developing the field of African photography than the Bamako Biennial.

The short, half-page description in the 2007 catalogue describing the organization's workshop was authored by the Director of the Market Photo Workshop, John Fleetwood. It is titled "Short Change", the name given to the workshop's resulting exhibition that "tracks responses to transformation from Apartheid to the decade-old democracy"<sup>182</sup> in South Africa. Fleetwood's discussion includes a description of the exhibition followed by a brief overview of the history and values of his school. What quickly becomes apparent is the extent to which the approach to photographic production and instruction in the South African workshop was student-centered. The school works with the students, building on their individual visions of photography "to make and tell stories of their own."<sup>183</sup> In other words, it nurtures the production of its student photographers rather than imposing a vision of photography on their development. Rather than expect its artists to conform to market desires, it "relies heavily on the photographic industry to absorb and understand photographers with particular photographic training and cultural/aesthetic approach."<sup>184</sup> Clearly, this organization with its community values and student-focused approach encourages African photographers to develop their practice more organically and individually than at the Bamako Biennial. This account provides a stark contrast to the approach adopted by Bizot and Leenhardt for the 2005 Bamako Biennial Masterclass, where the workshop is described as a meeting of two different perspectives rather than a student-focused workshop that builds on their individual strengths.

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 220.

To a certain extent the approach of the Bamako Biennial can be described as top down since it does not take local context and participation into account but, rather, imposes fine art values without much concern for their relevance to the broader population. Thus, it is an event conceptualized by and for elites that puts high-end art photography before visions of the field which would broadly engage and benefit Malian society. This approach has not only created tension at the Biennial due to its imposition of artistic values, but has also had important economic repercussions for a local photography training centre, Le Centre de Formation Photographique.

### **Top-down delivery at the Bamako Biennial and its Impact on the Centre de Formation Photographique**

The Centre de Formation Photographique (CFP) is a centre for training, exhibiting and supporting the work of local female photographers in Bamako. According to its website, the focus on the female photographer stems from her position as “le membre le plus sensible et le plus vulnérable du corps social” [the most sensitive and vulnerable member of society].<sup>185</sup> CFP was created in 1998 with the support of Helvétas-Mali, a non-governmental Swiss organization, to complement the Bamako Biennial and support further participation in the event by local photographers.<sup>186</sup> Since 2005, CFP has become autonomous and depends on its own fundraising efforts and the profits generated by its photographic services to cover its operating costs.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Centre de Formation Photographique, “Association CFP,” <http://www.cfp-bamako.org/> (accessed June 3, 2008).

<sup>186</sup> Minga S. Siddick, in conversation with the author, Bamako, Mali, November 28, 2007.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

The CFP's primary activities include lending cameras to promising local female photographers and offering training, exhibition opportunities and professional exchanges and meetings.<sup>188</sup> It is equipped with a class/conference room, exhibition spaces (Fig. 24, 25), a studio (Fig. 26), a professional laboratory and a multimedia room with computers.<sup>189</sup> Its focus is on art photography rather than on strictly commercial work such as portraiture or photo-journalism.<sup>190</sup>

This organization has participated in the Bamako Biennial in a number of ways. Firstly, every two years it helps a number of its most promising students prepare portfolios to apply to the event. For example, for the 2007 Biennial, it assisted five applicants with their portfolios, two of whom were selected by the jury for presentation at the Biennial: Adama Bamba and Harandane Dicko. Secondly, the CFP has also acted as a partner of the event since it has been involved with printing the photographs exhibited at the Biennial. In 2003, the CFP printed the works for the "Contours" [Surroundings] exhibitions and in 2005, it printed the images for the International Exhibition. The institution is equipped with highly sophisticated machinery to produce black and white gelatin silver prints and digital photographic images.<sup>191</sup> However, the CFP's printing contract was not renewed for the 2007 Biennial and this has threatened its capacity to operate within Bamako.

Minga S. Siddick, an administrator at the CFP, described the rupture between his institution and the Biennial organizers during my visit there in November 2007. The

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<sup>188</sup> Centre de Formation Photographique, "Association CFP." CFP , <http://www.cfp-bamako.org/> (accessed June 3, 2008).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Minga S. Siddick, in conversation with the author, Bamako, Mali, November 28, 2007.

<sup>191</sup> Centre de Formation Photographique, "Association CFP." CFP , <http://www.cfp-bamako.org/> (accessed June 3, 2008).

printing capacities of the CFP were facilitated by the purchase of highly specialized equipment in 2005. With contributions of 5 million Euros from France for its purchase and 500 000 CFA (African Francs) from Helvetas in Switzerland to cover the transportation costs, this important purchase was meant to ensure that the institution had the means to support itself by selling its specialized printing services to the Bamako Biennial and other relevant parties in Bamako and Mali. As discussed, the CFP was thus able to gain financial support from the Biennial by providing such services in 2003 and 2005. However, for the 2007 Biennial, the CFP was not awarded such support. According to Minga S. Siddick, this resulted from the fact that the contracts for this Biennial were open to competition from abroad. In other words, various companies and organizations were invited to submit bids for the contracts and a European company won. As a result, all of the event's images were printed in Europe and flown to Bamako on the eve of the event.

The loss of this contract will no doubt reduce this institution's impact within Bamako since it depends almost exclusively on such contracts for its survival. While Siddick did not wholly understand why his institution was not selected, Sidibé, the Director of the National Museum, stated that the CFP lost the contract because it did not have the resources to produce the variety of formats necessitated by the event.<sup>192</sup> He explained that there was a huge range of work that needed to be printed and that the CFP was not able to produce the necessary range of sizes and quality that the images called for.<sup>193</sup> In his words, they did not have the "technicité" [technical capacity] to fulfill the

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<sup>192</sup> Samuel Sidibé, interview by author, Bamako, Mali, December 12, 2007.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

contract.<sup>194</sup> While this may be true, one wonders why the CFP's capacities were satisfactory for the past two Biennials but not in 2007? Could they not have been commissioned to print at least the photographs they were capable of producing, leaving the others for a specialized company abroad? More fundamentally, why should satisfying the aesthetic demands of the event and its artists come before supporting the local cultural infrastructure in Bamako?

This incident clearly reveals the top down approach to management at the Biennial. The decision to award the 2007 printing contract to a foreign company reflects its unwillingness to compromise its fine art values for the sake of the community. Moreover, it clearly positions this event within the context of economic globalization where global competition and free trade values allow transnational corporations to function across borders without consideration for their impact on local production and consumption.

If the Bamako Biennial can be criticized for neglecting its responsibility to the local community through its top down approach, so to can the sponsored purchase of the CFP's highly specialized printing equipment be called into question: To what extent is this, too, an instance of top down delivery of art world technologies? In other words, if the French and the Swiss facilitated this purchase, why did they prioritize a type of printing technology that is so specialized that it must depend not on local contracts, but only on contracts associated with highly specialized art events such as the Bamako Biennial? It seems as though this purchase is also an instance of decision making from the top down, without consideration for the local artistic and commercial realities of Mali.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

Given the persistence of the conflicts outlined in this chapter, what is the future of the Bamako Biennial within the Malian community? On the one hand, it appears likely that it will be hard for local organizers to obtain their desired autonomy because of France's persistent desire to control the event. Moreover, the continued involvement of the French seems secure at least for the near future, since its domination is intimately related to economics and the significant disparity between the financial contributions from Europe and Mali in the realization of the Bamako Biennial is likely to continue. For instance, for the 2007 Biennial, contributions from the European Union totaled 220 million African Francs whereas the Malian government contributed 60 million.<sup>195</sup> As long as this disparity holds true, the input of local and foreign organizers will likely remain uneven.

If there is any hope for the improvement of the Biennial's relevance to local participants, it lies in the fluidity of the constructs of the art market and cultural context.

According to theorist Maruska Svasek, context

...should not be thought of as a static, secure box in which supposedly unproblematic categories of art are kept, but as a setting that is liable to change... context might be better thought of as a river, which has the power to divert its own course or erode its banks and reshape the landscape.<sup>196</sup>

If context is always in a state of change and adaptation, perhaps over the long term the Bamako Biennial's activities will influence the cultural context of Mali and its artistic values. To a certain extent this process has already begun. For example, it is interesting to note that the major cultural organizations within Bamako were all founded after the establishment of the Biennial in 1994: the Centre de Formation Photographique was founded in 1998, the Centre Soleil D'Afrique in 1999 and the National Museum

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<sup>195</sup> Alou Badra Haidara. "7èmes Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie de Bamako: Vingt cinq photographes retenus don't trios Maliens pour l'exposition photo," *L'Indépendant* no 1837, November 9, 2007.

<sup>196</sup> Svasek, 6.

underwent major renovations to accommodate the Biennial between 2001 and 2003. These developments reveal the extent to which this event has impacted the consciousness and cultural landscape of Bamako already. Moreover, while the cultural context of Bamako shifts in response to the Biennial, so too may the Biennial's values shift as a result of its cultural and geographical setting. To a certain extent, such a process has also begun since, as explored in this chapter, the event is continually trying to adapt its activities to appeal to local interests. As the Biennial continues this process of adaptation, perhaps its own values will also be impacted by that process. It is to be hoped that, in spite of the financial inequality between these two partners, this process of adaptation can be an even one.

## CONCLUSION

Exploring the origins and workings of the Bamako Biennial is essential to understanding its underlying values as well as its conceptual and material impact on the emerging field of African photography. This is important since it is among a select number of institutions that identify, contextualize and publicize African photography. As such, its influence in the field is much like that of collectors of traditional African arts who “dominated the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic values in the study and exhibition of African art”.<sup>197</sup> The Bamako Biennial plays a central role in the development and canonization of this emerging field.

My First Chapter addressed the impact of the history of French colonialism on the formation and practices of the Biennial. I argued that the willingness of the French government to support this Biennial was not without historical precedent. Rather, it was strongly influenced by the history of French cultural policy in the region and the particular status of Mali within the French imaginary that resulted from the *Mission Dakar-Djibouti*. I also explored the convergence of events within the contemporary art world that likely contributed to France’s interest in establishing such an initiative in the early 1990s. Among them were the powerful roles played by private collector Jean Pigozzi and his associate André Magnin in the recontextualization and aestheticisation of African portrait photography. This initiated the canonization of African portrait photography in the West to which the Bamako Biennial and prominent exhibitions such as *In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present* (Guggenheim Museum) and *Snap*

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<sup>197</sup> Christopher Steiner, “The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art,” in *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London and New York : Routledge, 2002), 133.

*Judgments* (International Centre of Photography) curated by Okwui Enwezor have since furthered.

To determine the ways in which the Biennial has conceptualized this emerging field, my study identified and examined the Biennial's past catalogues as key entry points into its values and approaches to African photography. Through a close analysis of their content and structure in Chapter Two, I demonstrated an evolution from the Primitivist approach of Louis Mesplé in the 1996 catalogue to Simon Njami's emphasis on the contemporaneity of African photographers and their production, after 2001. Moreover, by pointing to the shift in the formats of the catalogues after 2001, I discussed them as important framing devices which assert the fine art values of the Biennial and the African photography it displays.

Interviews and documentation collected during the 2007 Biennial fundamentally shaped my discussion of the impact of the Biennial within Bamako, Mali in Chapter Three. These sources clearly demonstrated Malian desire for autonomy, the disparate artistic values of the event and the community, and the pitfalls of the Biennial's top down approach to administration. However, it also acknowledged progressive initiatives at the 2007 Biennial that targeted local audiences by building on indigenous artistic values and practices characteristic such as traditional masquerades.

While the impact of colonialism at the Bamako Biennial was only directly addressed in my First Chapter, the persistent domination of French actors in the curatorial and managerial approaches at the Biennial is evident throughout this project. These findings demonstrate the extent to which the colonial past continues to powerfully impact relations between France and West Africa today. In his essay "From Primitivism to

Ethnic Arts”, Rashid Araeen asserts that such primitivization continues because the underlying values of contemporary Western institutions were developed during the colonial era.<sup>198</sup> As a result, they continue to deploy a worldview developed within the colonial context.<sup>199</sup> This argument seems particularly relevant to the Bamako Biennial since it operates under the umbrella of the French Ministry of Culture, established to perpetuate the powerful ties developed between France and West Africa during the colonial period. In addition, the primitive stereotypes upheld by such institutions also mirror popular Western perceptions of the Other. Thus, as described by Olu Oguibe,

...it is important to keep in mind that institutional predilections, though structured, methodical, and self-generating, are nevertheless inseparable from the broad cultural dispositions that inform them, and in this regard the attitude of cultural institutions, the market, and the critical establishment toward non-Western contemporary artists is only a reflection of deep-seated, firmly entrenched predispositions within Western Society itself.<sup>200</sup>

As a result, the colonial legacy which is historically entrenched in Western institutions and society facilitates the ongoing perception and treatment of non-Westerners as primitive.

Given the persistence of colonial perceptions and practices at the Biennial it would seem that it could be described as a neo-colonial initiative by France. However, I would argue that this label is too simplistic and inappropriate because of the changes the Biennial has already undergone to adapt its relevance and impact within Bamako.

My findings in Chapter Three demonstrate the extent to which local organizers and viewers in Bamako have effected change in the institution of the Biennial to accommodate their cultural values. This is clearly the result of continuous local pressure by Malian organizers to improve the Biennial’s merit and relevance within Mali.

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<sup>198</sup> Araeen, 159.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>200</sup> Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xiv.

However, more fundamentally, the adaptation of this event over time seems to be a direct result of its location in West Africa. In other words, since the Biennial is presented in Bamako, the cooperation and participation of Malians in its organization and presentation are necessary to its realization. As a result, their perspectives cannot be ignored. As discussed by Okwui Enwezor,

...the expansion of the exhibition to the periphery forced changes in the attitudes of curators; for not only were they exposed to complex social, political, economic, and cultural arrangements, they were also confronted with their inability to translate practices that were no longer dependent on the mechanisms of the market and the logic of canon formation, and hence needed a different kind of engagement.<sup>201</sup>

Thus, while initiatives such as the Bamako Biennial often suffer a form of ‘overlordship’ due to outside sources of funding, their location outside the West forces organizers to be adaptable to local interests and demands. As demonstrated at the Bamako Biennial, the will of local players forces foreign governing bodies and curators to take local desires and perspectives into account.<sup>202</sup>

While my discussion contributes to an understanding of the Bamako Biennial and its impact within Bamako as well as the broader art world, it also raises a number of issues that could not be addressed within the scope of this thesis. Among these are the relationship between artists on the continent and those in the Diaspora at the Biennial: What is the relationship between these artists? How do their perceptions of their production and the broader field of African photography compare? In addition, broader questions about the workings and impact of the Biennial are also in need of consideration: What impact has this event had on the production and reception of African photography on the continent and in the Diaspora? How do the touring exhibitions that follow the close of each Bamako Biennial represent this event abroad and how are these

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<sup>201</sup>James Meyer et al.,163.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 230.

exhibitions received in their new cultural contexts? How is this event shaped by the process of globalization and what does the Biennial reveal about globalization's impact on cultural production and reception in Africa? Finally, another issue which must be addressed is the impact of indigenous African art practices on the Biennial and on the production and reception of modern and contemporary African photography. While I touched on this subject in Chapter Three, my lack of training in traditional African art prevented me from further engaging in this discussion. As I pursue my studies in the field of contemporary African art and French cultural policy at the Doctoral level, I intend to further my knowledge of traditional African art to enrich my understanding of contemporary African artistic production and its relation to indigenous practices on the continent.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. Printed cloth to advertise 2007 Bamako Biennial. Portrait in center by Malick Sidibé. Caption below refers to Sidibé's receipt of the Golden Lion Award at the 2007 Venice Biennale.



Figure 2. Seydou Keita. *Untitled* (1956-57).



Figure 3. Seydou Keita. *Untitled* (1956-57).

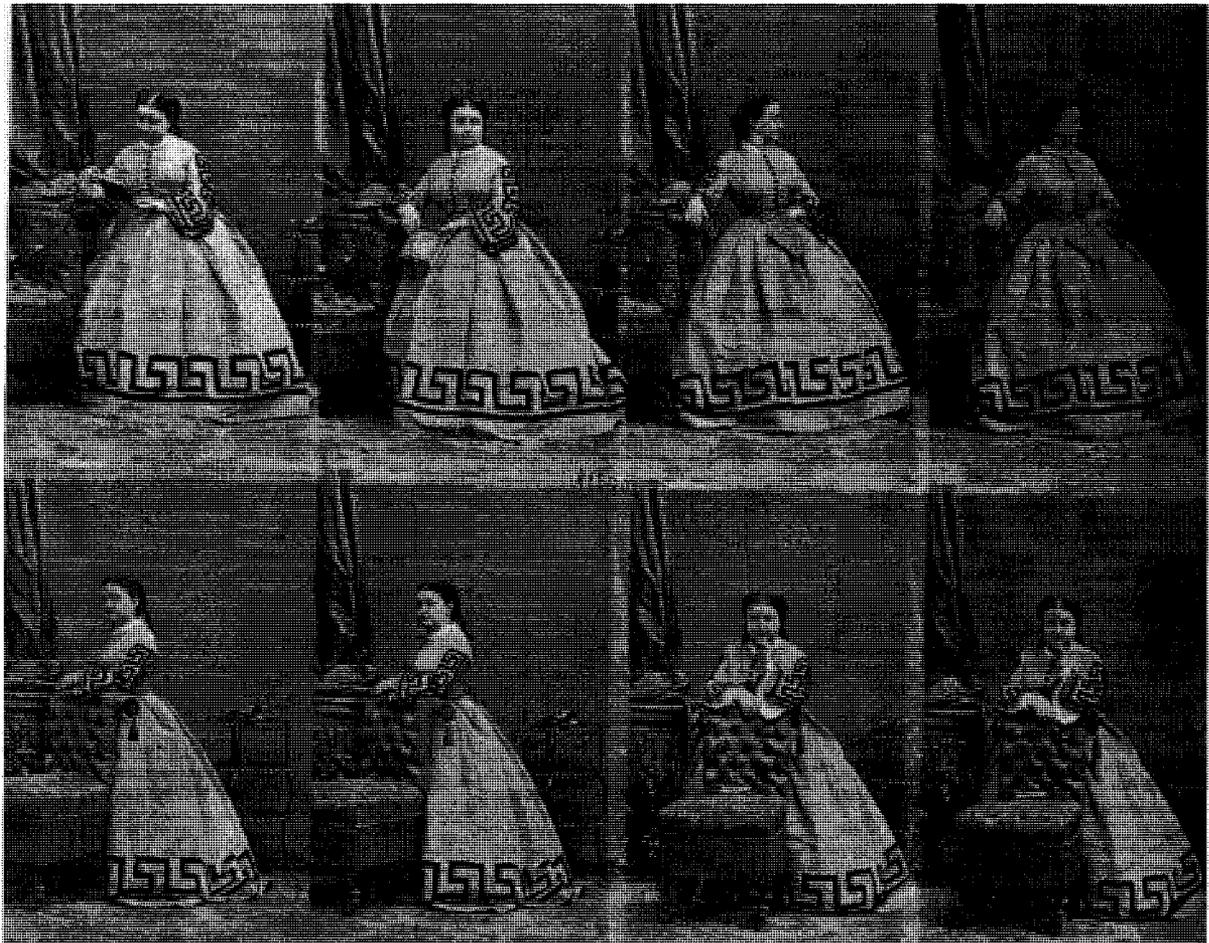


Figure 4. André Disdéri. *Princess Buonaparte Gabrielli* c. 1862. Uncut *carte-de-visite* cards.

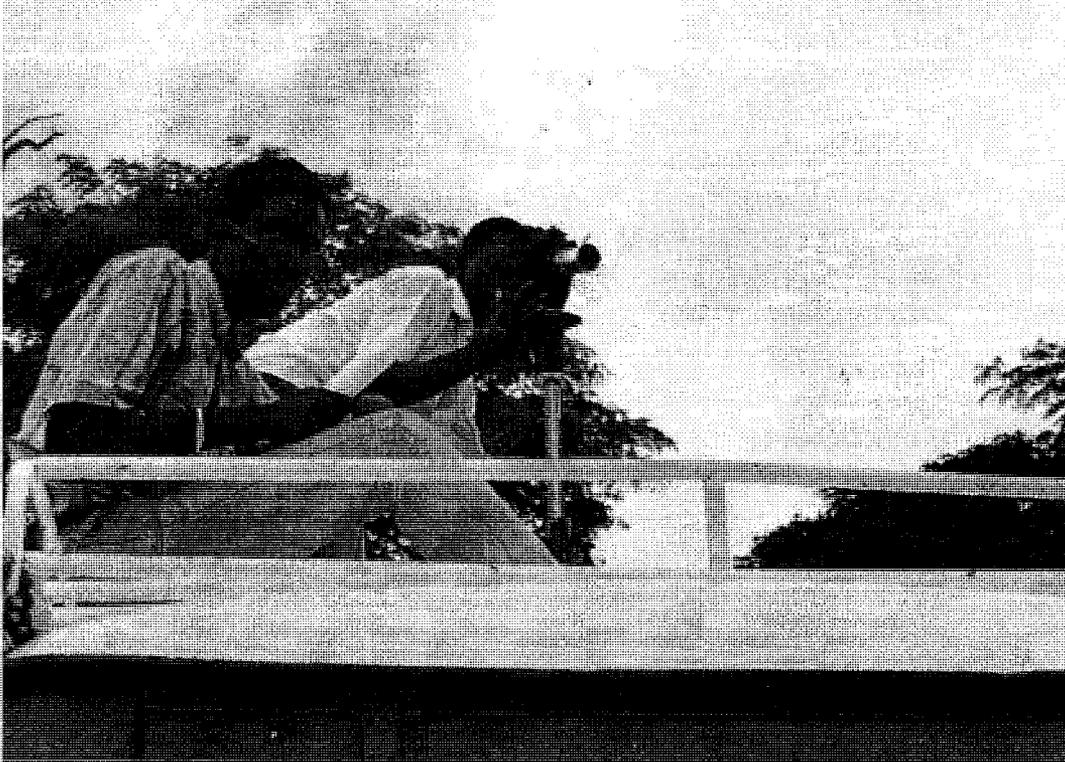


Figure 5. Abdou Fari Faye. *Djibril Diop Mambéty sur le tournage de Touki-Bouki*. Date unknown.



Figure 6. Bill Akwa Betoté. *Francis Bebey en concert*. Date unknown.



Figure 7. Ricardo Rangel. *Untitled*. Date unknown.



Figure 8. George Hallett. *Untitled*. Date unknown.



Figure 9. Permanent Exhibition Hall, National Museum of Mali, Bamako (December 08, 2007).



Figure 10. Boutique, National Museum of Mali, Bamako (December 08, 2007).



Figure 11. Café “African Grill”, National Museum of Mali, Bamako (December 08, 2007).



Figure 12. Opening of the 2007 Bamako Biennial, National Museum of Mali, Bamako (November 23, 2007).



Figure 13. Hama Goro, Director of the Centre Soleil D'Afrique in Computer Lab, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).



Figure 14. Centre Soleil D'Afrique, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).



Figure 15. Centre Soleil D'Afrique, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).

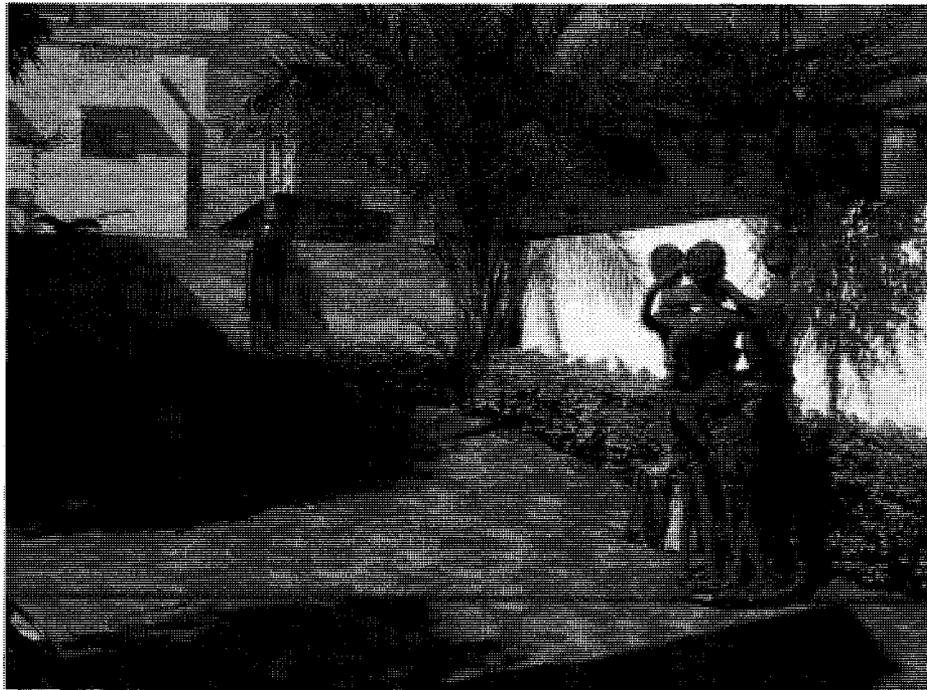


Figure 16. Sculpture Garden, Centre Soleil D'Afrique, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).



Figure 17. Exhibition room, Centre Soleil D'Afrique, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).



Figure 18. Computer room, Centre Soleil D'Afrique, Bamako, Mali (December 07, 2007).

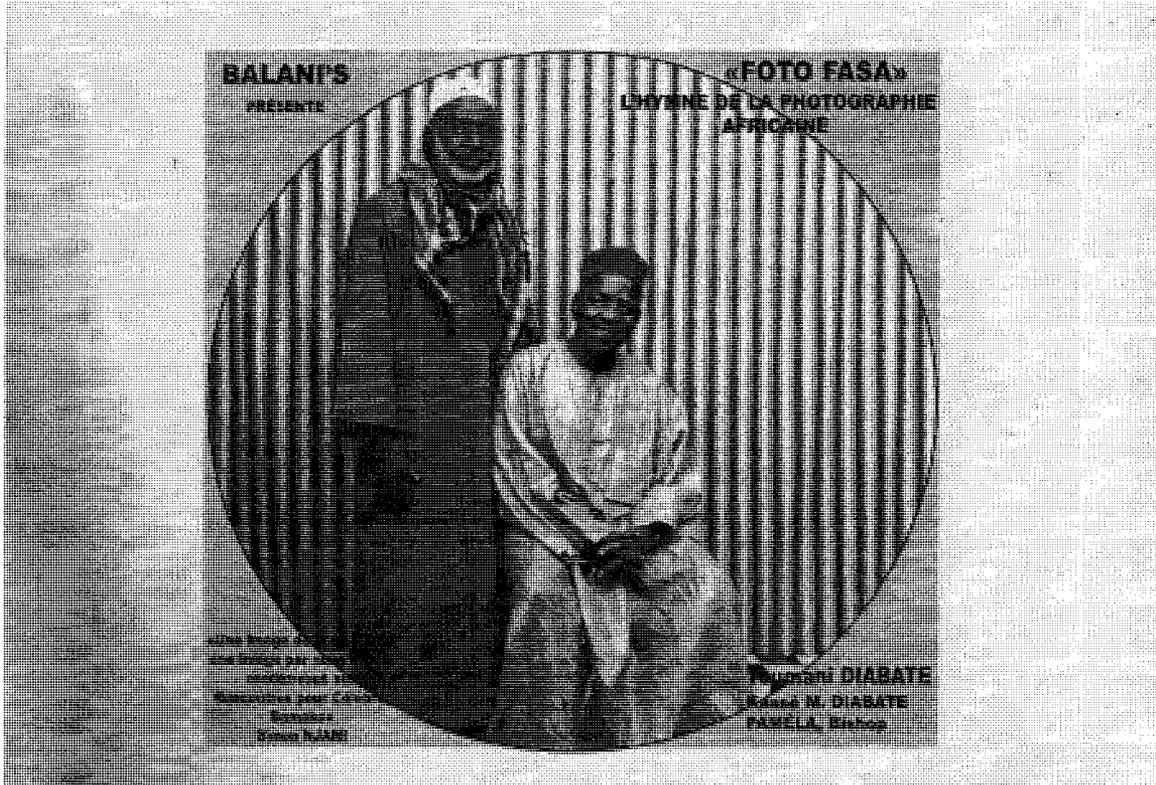


Figure 19. Artist unknown. *Publicity for "Foto Fasa" L'Hymne de la Photographie Africaine* [Anthem for African Photography] 2007.

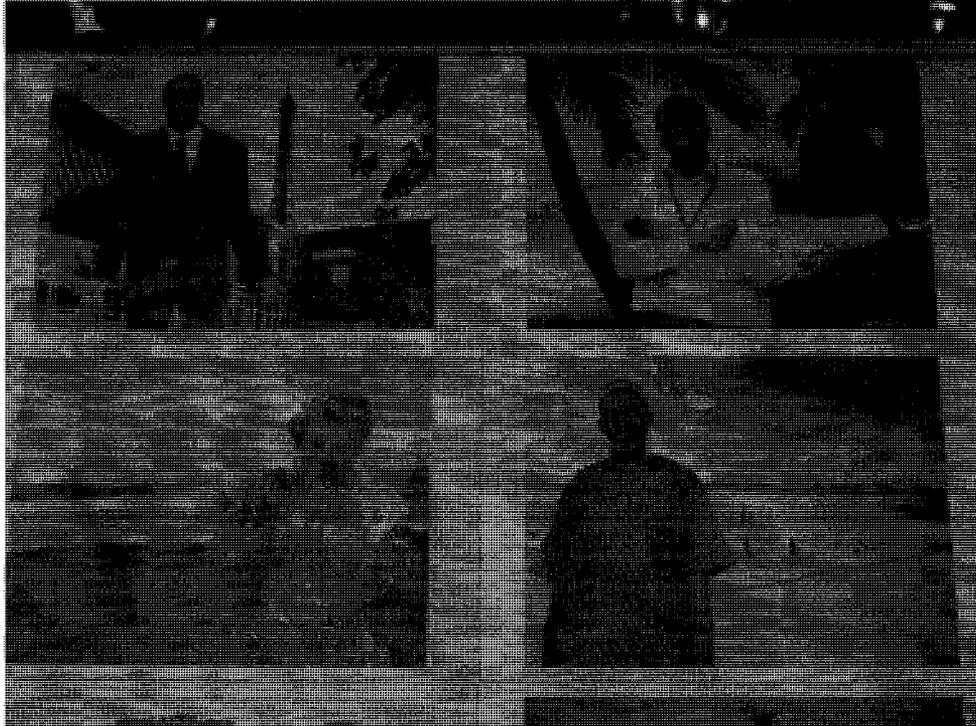


Figure 20. Portraits from 'Portraits Décalés', Bamako, Mali (November 24, 2007).

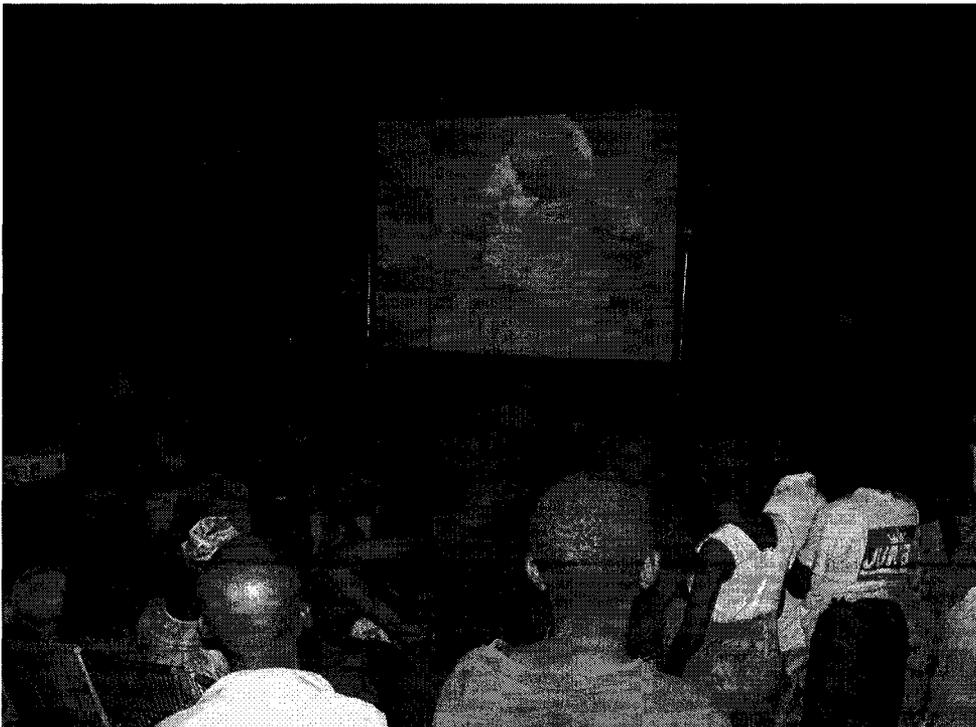


Figure 21. Projection of 'Portraits Décalés', Bamako, Mali (November 24, 2007).



Figure 22. Anonymous portrait from 'Portraits Décalés', Bamako, Mali (November 26, 2007).

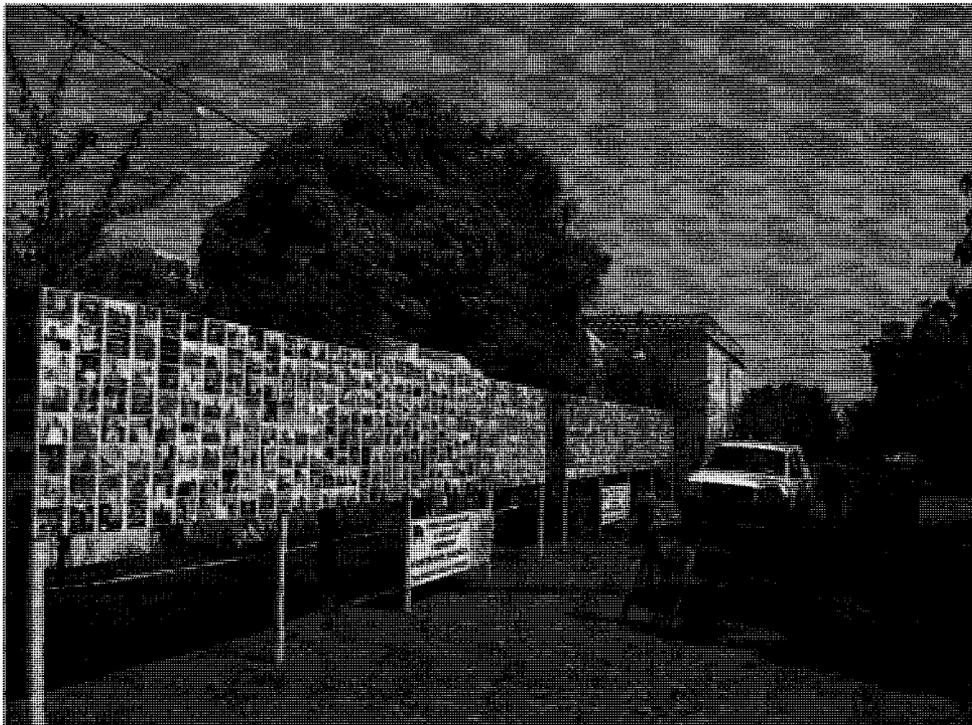


Figure 23. Mural of images from 'Portraits Décalés', Bamako, Mali (November 27, 2007).



Figure 24. Outdoor Exhibition Space, Centre de Formation Photographique, Bamako, Mali (November 26, 2007).

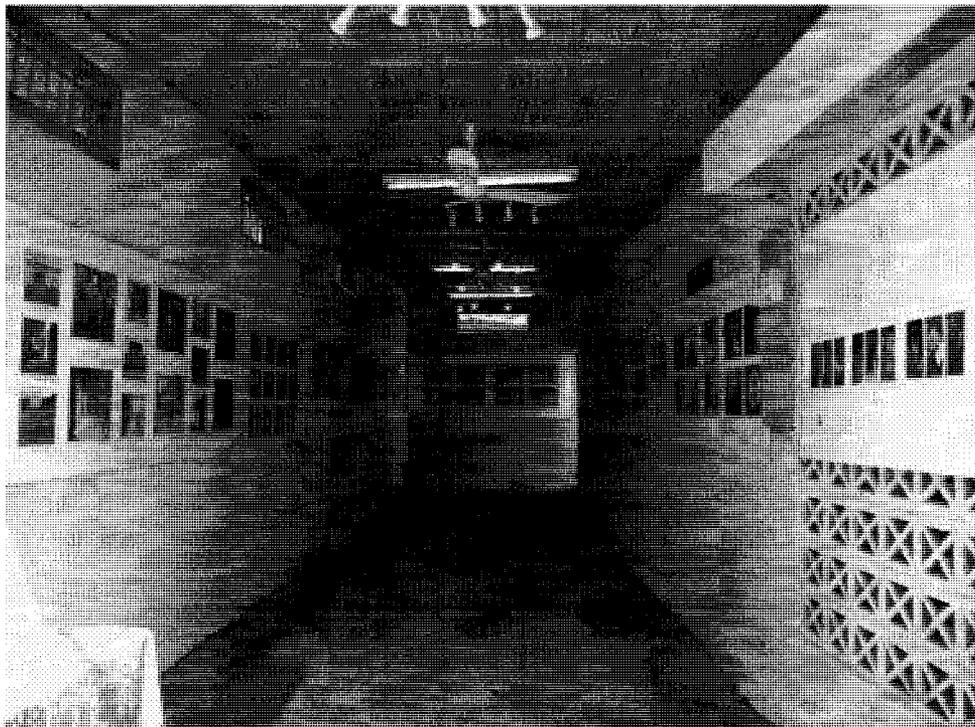


Figure 25. Outdoor hallway and exhibition space, Centre de Formation Photographique, Bamako, Mali (November 26, 2007).



Figure 26. Studio, Centre de Formation Photographique, Bamako, Mali (November 26, 2007).

## APPENDIX 1 : Bamako Biennial Catalogue Descriptions 1994-2007

### 1994 Bamako Biennial

The documentation published alongside the 1994 Bamako Biennial is a twenty-page, black and white booklet of the size and style of a magazine. Its cover image is one of Seydou Keita's Untitled portraits. It opens with a Preface by the Malian Minister of Culture and Communication, Bakary Koniba Traore followed by an introduction on the opposite page by Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps which explains and justifies the initiation of the Bamako Biennial.

This event included **Monographic exhibitions** of the work of Seydou Keita, Malick Sidibé, Alioune Bâ, Django Cisse and Racine Keita from Mali; Santu Mofokeng, Ingrid Hudson and Jenny Gordon from South Africa; Samuel Fosso from the Central African Republic; Pierrot Men from Madagascar; Moussa M'Baye, Djibril Sy and Boubacar Touré-Mandemory from Senegal; and Yves Pitchen from Mauritius. Three **Group exhibitions** are also represented: one of still-shots from the cinema archives of Guinée; one of images from the archives of "L'Amap", the Agence Malien de presse et de publicité; and an exhibition organized by the French publishing house Revue Noire. The catalogue has no table of contents. Rather, it just goes straight to exhibition presentations. These are a page per exhibition, each including a short descriptive paragraph on the artist or artists presented and a representative image. It offers no translation from the French.



## 1996 Bamako Biennial

The publication accompanying the 1996 Bamako Biennial is a twenty-eight page booklet published in a series by *Extrait de Cimaise*. The cover is a hand-tinted portrait by the Ethiopian portrait studio PhotoSemir. It opens with a Preface by the same Malian government official as in 1994, M. Bakary Koniba Traore. However, the contribution by Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps in the former catalogue is replaced by an unsigned description of the history and purpose of the Bamako Biennial. Following these is a three-page Introduction entitled “Sur la photographie africaine”. This is followed by the table of contents, including a list of the event’s exhibitions.

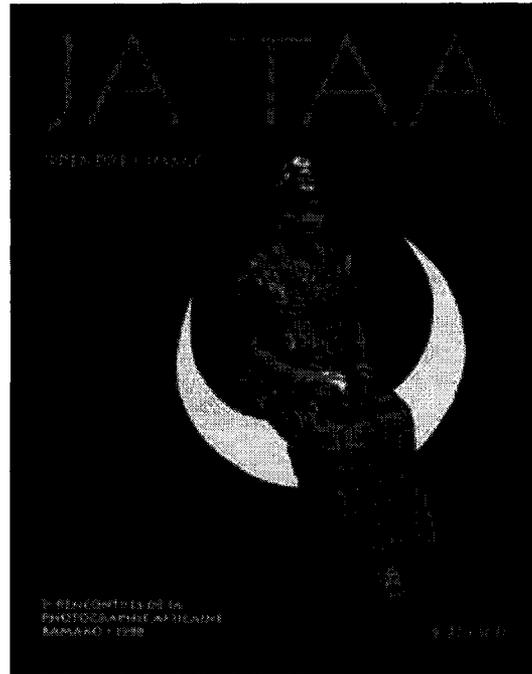


The exhibitions are organized according to themes. They are **Photo-reportage**, including exhibitions on Khamis Ramadham and Jacob Waweru (Kenya), A Mozambique Collective, the Archives of the ONEP (Niger) and Alexander Joe (Zimbabwe); **Le Portrait** [The Portrait], with exhibitions on André Nonga Tassebedo (Burkina Faso), Cornelius Azagloe Augustt (Ivory Coast), Ethiopian Portraits, Adama Kouyaté (Mali) and Kélétigui Touré (Mali); **Travaux d’auteurs** [Creative Works] with exhibitions of Andrew Tshabangu (South Africa), Jean Brundrit (South Africa) and Thomas Nintcheu; **“Invited” exhibitions** including *Afrique et Démocratie* [Africa and Democracy] (West Africa), *24 poses pour un vélo* [24 poses on a bicycle], *Regards Croisés* [Cross Examination] (Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Djibouti). It also includes an exhibition at the French Cultural Center in Ségou (a city east of Bamako) and an exhibition Festival “Off”. Each exhibition is represented by a page-long feature including an image and a short text, similar to the booklet to the preceding Biennial. All the texts have an English translation alongside.

## 1998 Bamako Biennial: Ja Taa “Prendre l’image”

The 1998 Biennial is the first to adopt a theme: Ja Taa “Prendre l’image” [Capture the image]. It is sixty-nine pages long, includes black and white as well as color images and was published by Actes Sud. It includes a Foreword by the President of the Republic of Mali and two short texts: a two page essay by Salah Hassan, Professor of African Studies and Research Center at Cornell University and a three-quarter page text by Louis Mesplé.

The exhibitions are organized under National headings. **Ghana** is represented by the exhibitions Aperçus de la photographie au Ghana [Overview of photography in Ghana], Le jour de l’Indépendance [Independence Day], Photographes Studio de Ghana [Studio photographers of Ghana], Funérailles ghanéennes [Ghanian Funerals] and Boxing Ghana; **Algeria** is represented by the exhibition 1971-1998; **Mali** is represented by Masques et symbols [Masks and symbols], Hommages [Tributes] and Paures de quotidien [Everyday Appearance]; **Angola** is represented by the exhibition Diptico; Morocco is represented by Décagrage [Unframe]; **Tunisia** is represented by the exhibition Fête de l’Aïd el Kebir; **South Africa** is represented by Fire-walking Ceremony, Bo-Kaap, The Warwick Avenue Triangle, Mamelodi Hostel, Rural Women of Southern Africa and Regardez-moi (1890-1950) [Look at me]; **Ivory Coast**, is represented by Une recherche personnelle [A personal search]; **Mozambique** is represented by Cabo Delgado; **Madagascar** is represented by the group exhibition Jeunes reporters photographes [Young photographic reporters]; **Egypt** is represented by Halayeb, montagne d’Elba [Halayeb, Elba mountain]; and **Niger** is represented by L’Atelier Niamey [The Niamey workshop]. There is another heading without a specific national affiliation: **Afrique par elle meme** [Africa by Africa] which includes three additional exhibitions. Within the catalogue each of these sections is represented by a



short introduction and a number of representative images. At the end of the catalogue an “English version” presents translations of the short introductions to each exhibition in the catalogue.

### **2001 Bamako Biennial: Mémoires Intimes d’un Nouveau Millénaire**

The theme of the 2001 Biennial is Mémoires Intimes d’un Nouveau Millénaire [Intimate Memories of a new Millenium]. The catalogue to the 2001 Bamako Biennial is a large-format, 10 by 13 inch catalogue, numbering 253 pages published by Éditions Eric Koehler. It includes images in various formats including many full-page reproductions in black and white as well as color. It opens with a Foreword by a representative from the Malian Ministry of Culture, Pascal Baba Coulibaly and one by Ibrahim Loutou and Olivier Poivre D’Avor from the Association AFAA. After these is a

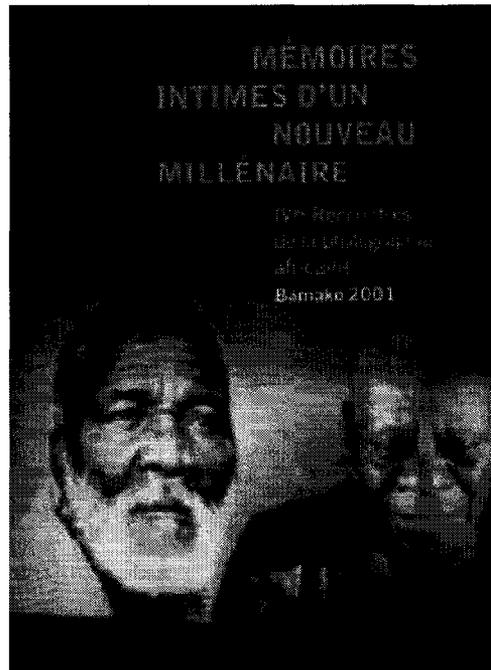


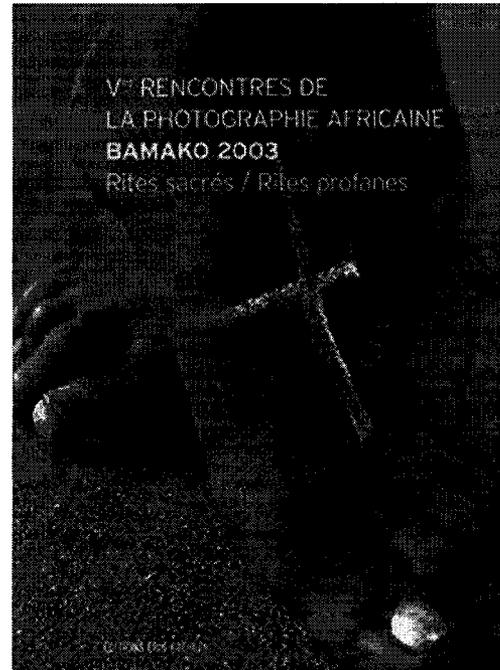
Table of Contents, followed by the 5-page Introduction by Simon Njami entitled “Chronique d’un millénaire” [Chronicles of a Millenium] and a shorter text on the Bamako Biennial’s trajectory thus far by Amadou Chab Touré from Mali.

The exhibitions include an **International Exhibition** presenting thirty-two artists from across the continent; **Monographic Exhibitions** on Bill Akwa Betoté (Cameroon), David Damoison (Martinique), Sadio Diakité (Mali), Doudou Diop (Sénégal), Gabriel Fasunon (Nigeria), George Hallett (South Africa), Philippe Koudjina (Niger) and Ricardo Rangel (Mozambique); **National Exhibitions** for the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Morocco, Mali, Ivory Coast and South Africa; **Thematic Exhibitions** on Diaspora: United Kingdom, and others entitled Patrimoine [Patrimony], Photographie du Plateau [Photography from the Palteau], Caravane de la Poésie [Caraven of Poetry] and Photographes Ambulants [Travelling Photographers]; and finally exhibitions **Contrechamp** [Outside the field] entitled ABC Africa and Canary Islands. Each artist in

the International Exhibition is represented by two pages in the catalogue including a short paragraph on their work and a selection of their images. The other exhibitions include a text and some representative images over a few pages. The entire catalogue is translated into English as each text is presented in two columns, one in each language.

### **2003 Bamako Biennial: Rites Sacrés / Rites Profanes**

The theme of the 2003 Biennial is Rites Sacrés / Rites Profanes [Sacred Rituals / Profane Rituals]. Much like the preceding catalogue, it is large-format, 10 by 13 inch, numbering 253 pages and published by Éditions Eric Koehler. It includes images in various formats including many full-page reproductions in black and white as well as color. It opens with a Foreword by Moussa Konaté, a Malian who has been appointed Director of the Bamako Biennial. On the page facing is an English translation of his text. Following these is the Table of Contents. Simon Njami is again author of a seven-page Introduction.

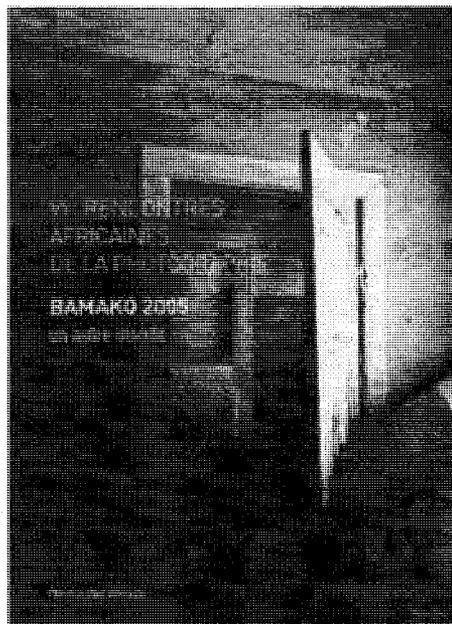


The exhibitions include **Tributes** to Mohammed Dib, Seydou Keita and Van Leo; the **International Exhibition**; **Monographic Exhibitions** on Nabil Boutros (Egypt), John Mauluka (Zimbabwe), Santu Mofokeng (South Africa) and Eustaquio Neves (Brazil); **National Exhibitions** on Egypt, Mozambique, Senegal and Zimbabwe; an exhibition under the heading of **Diaspora** from Cuba; **Thematic exhibitions** on Fashion and Death in Benin; exhibitions on the theme of **Memory** by The Albany Fund, Youssef Safeiddine and on Bamako 2001; the exhibition from the **Guest Country**, Germany; an exhibition on the Ports of Africa; Exhibitions under the heading **Champs/Contrechamps** [Inside/Outside the Field] on the Ports of Africa; and finally **Another Gaze** from the Canary Islands, Nordic Countries, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands. The catalogue's appendixes include Curators' biographies and an index of photographers. The

entire catalogue is translated into English as each text is presented in two columns, one in each language.

### **2005 Bamako Biennial: Un Autre Monde**

The theme of the 2005 Biennial is Un Autre Monde [Another World]. The format and style of the publication are the same as the two preceding catalogues. It is also published by Éditions Eric Koehler and includes images in various formats including many full-page reproductions in black and white as well as color. It opens with a “Foreword” by Moussa Konaté, who was appointed to Director of the Bamako Biennial in 2003. It includes a five-page Introduction by Simon Njami.



The exhibitions include **Tributes** to Gilbert Albany and John Mauluka; **Monographic Exhibitions** for Malick Sidibé, Dorris Haron Kasco, Youssouf Sogodogo and Serge Jongué; the **International Exhibition**; **National Exhibitions** for Algeria, Soudan and Mali; **Guest Country** exhibition from Spain; exhibitions on the theme of **Memory** by Ranjith Kally, the Bamako Laureates, Fatimah Tuggar and Emeka Okereke; exhibitions on the **Masterclasses and workshops**; exhibitions that were part of the **Contours** of the event including Jane Alexander, Allan de Souza, Moataz Nasr, Pascale Marthine Tayou, on Filmmakers, David Pierre Fila, The Canarie Islands, Rafael Hierro Rivero and Magnolia Soto Perez; and exhibitions under the heading **Another Gaze** featuring presentations by private galleries, Alain Bizos and Guy Tillim. The catalogue closes with biographies of the curators and an artist index. Again, the entire catalogue is bilingual in French and English.

## 2007 Bamako Biennial: Dans la Ville et Au-Dela

The theme of the 2007 Biennial is Dans la Ville et Au-deal [The City and Beyond]. This catalogue's format is a bit different from the previous catalogues: rather than the familiar ten by thirteen inch catalogues it is an eight and a half by eleven inch, 269-page catalogue published by Éditions Marval. It opens with Forewords by Moussa Konaté and representatives of Culturefrances, Olivier Poivre d'Arvor and Sophie Renaud. These are followed by Simon Njami's 10 page Introduction in French and English.



The exhibitions include the **International Exhibition**; a series entitled **New Pictures** by Berry Bickle (Zimbabwe), Zoulikha Bouabdellah (Algeria), Loulou Cherinet (Ethiopia), Jellel Gasteli (Tunisia), Ingridmwangiroberthutter (Kenya), Amal Kenawy (Egypt), Nicène Kossentini (Tunisia), Thando Mama (South Africa), Moatar Nasr (Egypt) and Patrice Félix Tchicaya (RDC); **Tributes** to Serge Emmanuel Jongué and Armand Seth Maksim; a **Monographic Exhibition** for Samuel Fosso; the events **Contours** including exhibitions of Cinéma Numérique Ambulant (Mali), Fondation Jean-Paul Blanchère (Mali-France), Hôpital Sominé Dolo (Mali), Sébastien Cailleux (France-Algeria), Espaces de Perception (Canary Islands) and Antoine Tempé (France); **Guest Country** exhibition from Finland; exhibitions on the **Masterclasses and workshops** and; exhibitions of the photographers who won awards at the **2005 Biennial** including Rana El Nembr (Egypt), Fatoumata Diabaté (Mali), Zohra Bensemra (Algeria), Ulrich-Rodney Mahoungou (Congo), Uchechukwu JamesIroha (Nigeria), Mamadou Konaté (Mali) and Mikhael Subotzky (South Africa). The catalogue closes with biographies of the artists and curators. Again, the entire catalogue is bilingual in French and English.

## **APPENDIX 2 : “Foto-Fasa : L’Hymne da la Photographie Africaine” Transcribed and Translated**

### **Foto-Fasa : L’Hymne da la Photographie Africaine**

[Foto-Fasa “The Anthem of African Photography”<sup>203</sup>

Sortez nos photographes,  
Sortez pour qu’on se rencontrent,  
Sortez pour qu’on se rencontrent,  
Les photographes du Mali, sortez pour qu’on se rencontrent.  
Photographes de Bamako, sortez pour qu’on se rencontrent.  
La photographie d’Afrique, c’est une bonne chose.  
Les photographes à Bamako sont à saluer.

[Come out photographers,  
Come out so we can meet,  
Come out so we can meet,  
Photographers of Mali, Come out so we can meet.  
Photographers of Bamako, Come out so we can meet.  
African photography is a good thing,  
The photographers of Bamako are to be saluted.]

Il nous a fallu longtemps pour cette liberté, nous avions confiance nous avions espérer.  
La route a été longue, les batailles été dur mais au bout du chemin notre image était pur.

[It took us a long time to gain this freedom, we had faith and we hoped.  
The road was long and the battles were difficult, but at the end of the road, our image was pure.]

Quand deuz amoureux se séparent, la première des choses c’est d’échanger des photos.  
Quand des amis se séparent, la première des choses c’est d’échanger des photos.  
Envois-moi ta photo pour que je le garde en souvenir.  
C’est grâce aux photographes que les gens arrivent à échanger des photos.  
Les photographes sont à saluer, parce qu’ils font du bon travail.

[When two lovers separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.  
When two friends separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.  
Send me your photo so I can keep it in memory of you.  
It’s thanks to photographers that people can exchange photos.

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<sup>203</sup> Lyrics in italics were translated into French from their original Bambara by Diawoye Diabaté (2<sup>nd</sup> Advisor, Malian Embassy, Ottawa, Canada) May 9, 2008. French to English translation was performed by the author.

Photographers are to be saluted, because they do good work.]  
We came a long way to get our freedom, we always knew this day would come.  
This day of journey and battles and courage, but at last we have been given back our  
image.

Oh yeah. An image of our own, an image that we own.  
Let's get together and celebrate in Bamako, Bamako, oh Bamako.

Une image de nous-même une image par nous même, rendez-vous au Rencontres pour  
fêter Bamako!

Dédicace à Pierrot Man de Madagascar, Samuel Fosso du Cameroon et à tous les  
photographes Africaines.

[An image of ourselves an image by us, rendez-vous at the Encounters to celebrate  
Bamako!

Dedication to Pierrot Men from Madagascar, Samuel Fosso from Cameroon and to all  
African photographers.]

Les Maliens écoutez-moi, je viens de me souvenir à l'instant de certaines personnes:  
Malick Sidibé, Malick Sidibé.

Il fait parti des gens humble, honte, discret, réservé. Des grands nobles pas offensifs.  
L'événement me rappelle aussi de Seydou Keita.

La bravure de son peuple; Seydou est descendent d'une famille d'empereur.

Adbourame Sakaly... Ce dernier aussi a été un grand photographe.

L'amour l'a arraché de notre affection.

Quand deuz amoureux se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.

Quand des amis se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.

Envois-moi ta photo de souvenir.

[Maliens, listen to me, I just remembered at this moment a few people...

Malick Sidibé, Malick Sidibé... He is from a humble people, proud, discrete, reserved;  
Great peaceful noblemen.

The event also reminds me of Seydou Keita.

The bravery of his people; Seydou Keita is descended from a family of emperors.

Adbourame Sakaly... He was also a great photographer.

Love has taken him from our affection.

When two lovers separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.

When two friends separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.

Send me your photo so I can keep in your memory.]

Special Dedicace for all African photographers.

Thank you Akimbodia Kambe from Nigeria, Santoo MoofKane from South Africa and  
the big Angel Ricardo from Mozambique. God bless.

Quand deuz amoureux se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.  
Quand des amis se séparent, la première des choses c'est d'échanger des photos.  
Envois-moi ta photo de souvenir.  
Tout ça est grâce aux photographes, donc nous remercions les photographes.  
C'est grâce aux photographes que tout cela est possible, donc nous remercions les photographes.

[When two lovers separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.  
When two friends separate, the first this they do is exchange photos.  
Send me your photo so I can keep in your memory.  
It's thanks to photographers that people can exchange photos.  
Photographers are to be saluted, because they do good work.]