

## **Elaborations on the New Image: 7th African Encounters of Photography, Bamako 7<sup>ème</sup> Les Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine**

### **Aura Seikkula**

Curated by Simon Njami and organised around different dimensions of lens-based medium: photography, new images and cinema, the 7<sup>ème</sup> Les Rencontres de la Photographie Africaine took place between November 24 and December 23, 2007 in several venues of the Mali capital. The general concept of the biennale was to transcend traditional methods of exhibiting the still/ static image; works and projects of photographers who adopt other mediums to extend their works, and visual artists working on the image through installations and time-based works on screen were given exposure to extend the limits of the biennale..

With his selection of projects, Njami looked into the city and what lies beyond, *urbi and orbi*, providing photographers with the opportunity to study the development of an African town, emphasising the fading of the increasingly abstract border between the town and its surroundings. This concept was devised to be a strong theme that would link to the local public in order to lead to a return to the *œuvre* of great African photographers, with renowned artists who have strong roots in the African collective memory.

The main photographic exhibitions were held at the premises of the Musée national du Mali (1), Musée du district de Bamako and Bibliothèque Nationale. The exhibition at the national museum presented artists from the African continent as well as a monographic exhibition of Samuel Fosso and tribute exhibitions devoted to two recently deceased photographers: Seth Maksim (Madagascar) and Serge Jongue (Guiana). Additionally in the national library the results of different photography workshops in Africa were on display.

In every edition, the African Photography Encounters invite a foreign country to present its photographic contemporary creation at the regional museum. In this edition Finnish photographers had the honour to contribute to the event.

Under the title 'New Images' artists explored with commissioned videos and installations the intersections of visual formats. Introducing the dimension of video aimed at two goals: to show other ways of envisaging images and to diversify the photographic art outside traditions of portraits and photojournalism. These aims were well achieved, even though and sadly the video program endured due to the technical overload.

**Insights in Representation** The contemporary world is continuously being redefined by the globalization of economy and geopolitical conflicts. Transnational trading, migration, global communication and new technologies are transforming various aspects of our life. Simultaneously every individual is struggling to negotiate with the deconstruction of cultural memory, identity and values prompted by these transformations. Ever more artists are taking the responsibility in using their artistic tools and mediums.

Africa is a world in its own right, with as much diversity as the entire planet with a huge linguistic, cultural and religious complexity. The last few years has witnessed more visual arts presentations and exchanges from around the world on the continent. In spite of its attendant problems and the potential homogenising effects on developing countries,

globalisation has made Africa seem less distant and less inaccessible engendering interesting meeting points for regions that may seem poles apart. This notion is well discussed in many of the works. So does Nabil Boutros in dwelling into histories of Egypt with his work 'L'egypte est un pays moderne!' (2006) as well as Jellel Gasteli in 2134 TU 74, where a Toyota unfolds as a pure symbol of globalism.

This discussion continues in the work of Moataz Nasr, who involves both political and personal issues in his art. In the video work Cairo Walk (2007) Nasr probes into the urban reflections of the modern clashing with the ancient and various aspects of Egyptian society. The ambience is building on the everyday. Both Nasr and Boutros seem to approach the same sides of the development and the ever existing ancient, but irony sets them apart. A preference for narrative or the use of strong colours does not necessarily lead to incomprehension is well illustrated by them. Fouad Maazouz gives a standpoint to this with his series Ici et est l'ailleurs (2005-2006) in following static movement, traces of light, of smoke and of sun which draws me in to the German notion of Stilleben.

Ali Chraïbi shows the true nature of the constructions of a city by taking us on a journey into a universal city in Downtown Memories (2000). The shapes and shades of black and white urban structures seem familiar, but the vision is blurred and distant, through rain and fragmented light. Nicene Kossentini displays the same structures and forms in Rue Saint Jacques (2007). The urban structures and the earlier mentioned borders are discussed also by Heba Farid questions on landscape architecture in Quite Celebration, Genius Loci (2003) as well as by Mouna Karray in Murmurer (2007). Karray builds on anonymous surfaces of urban construction, where human traces of past life are recorded in concrete.

Zoulikha Bouabdellah works with the urban components in She on asphalt (2007). Her work is shedding the light upon heavy themes of gender, culture and religion but still succeeds in pointing out her principles accurately in an accessible way. Her work is an urban metaphor, a version of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where female figures are casting their shadows upon a road, building the character through movement. In addition to Bouabdellah also Fakhri el Ghezal and Amal Kenawy are dwelling into the status and situation(al)s of women in their works, Portrait de la Mere. The Abdel Basset Patchwork (2006) and You will be Killed (2006) respectively.

**Mohamed El Baz' Bricoler l'incurable** creates indefinable, unique, startling, fun-loving, often cruel and sometimes tender work which responds to daily headlines. "Tinkering with the Incurable" is taken from Romanian philosopher Cioran's book, Syllogismes de l'amerture: "To be modern is to tinker in the incurable".

Naturally the goal was to present heterogeneity and distinctiveness and to avoid simplifying an entire region, a continent with preconceived ideas. At the centre of the conception stands the presentation of the biased stereotypes connected with the structures which have for so long dominated and monopolized. The most significant result is this transnational exhibition, where the works engaged with preconceived ideas about Islamic and Arab culture and shared a combination of humour and irony. As such they constituted perfect impressions of the exhibition's conception. This rethinking of culture's representation and the elaboration of its possible forms is in my opinion one of the most essential approaches the Bamako

Encounters offers to the artists and its audiences. As a result the viewer is drawn into this world to a much more powerful extent that presumably unintentionally delimits as the prevailing other.

As Georges Didi-Hubermann points out, the essential move toward historicizing the image that builds representational failure into itself as well as the search for a new revolutionary visual language by the inspiration of the new technologies is in the core essence of the approach towards the new image. The Bamako Encounters aimed to show how a photograph's static image of time can produce a false illusion of permanence and objectivity, the standpoint—which could also be referred as manipulation or staging— is strengthened as soon as the image starts to move.

Telling..: Finnish Contemporary Photography Exhibition In every edition, the African Photography Encounters invite a foreign country to present its photographic contemporary creation. This situation has allowed two geographic regions considered 'peripheral' to meet and has turned traditional hierarchies on their head. An exhibition about African photography provides an opportunity to gain an insight into the gazes from the neighbouring continent, and to understand that these gazes –as is the case everywhere– are infinitely diverse, something which does not prevent them from bearing nuances which strengthen the interest in changing perspective.

Most African countries have scant direct knowledge about Finland and other Nordic countries. The little contact that does exist has been limited to developmental aid programmes or foreign diplomacy in which culture is a negligible component and artistic interaction is non-existent. Telling.. is one of the first group exhibitions of Finnish contemporary art on the African continent. Most of the seven participating photographers and video artists are products of the Helsinki School and have exhibited their work all over the world.

The 'Nordic' artists are famous for their visual investigation of landscape and nature. Whilst remaining an important aspect, this exhibition prefers to foreground artist's narratives against the background of landscape. Outside the commonalities of national identity and artistic medium, they explore and sometimes collapse the distance between public/private, exterior/interior, and global/local, allowing the personality of the individual to manifest through the variety of the stories they wish to tell. They bring their individual aesthetic and thematic preoccupations to the exhibition framed around the ambiguous word telling for which the viewer is left to determine the degree of truth or lie, of fiction or reality. There is no denying the narrative power of the camera as a tool in documenting, interpreting, and reproducing lives, realities, identities and cultures. The focus of Veli Grano's work for over 20 years has been people who ordinarily might be considered as 'strange' or unsociable. These are individuals who have created alternative worlds for themselves in which they pursue their interests and visions with a passion or obsession that goes beyond the normal. In the work *Tangible Cosmologies*, Grano focuses on individuals with obsessive hobbies or collecting habits such as a man who collects beer cans, another who collects radios or a lady who collects glass ornaments. The objects that they collect, surround or immerse themselves in becomes the entire focus of their lives to the exclusion of little or only necessary human contact.

Riita Paivlainen, like Grano, documents people but her images are not filled with individuals but of traces that people live behind. For over a decade a recurring and central theme of Paivlainen's work has been her interest in old clothing. Her process involves working at 10 (sometime minus twenty) degrees Celsius in order to attain freezing of old clothing and creating sculptural installations which carry 'silent unknown stories and histories', all captured in her photographs. Her work is about 'memory and remembrances' and the clothes help in revealing the kind of person and even the period to which they may have belonged. The imagery attempts to reveal the personality of someone that has been present but have moved on.

Jari Silomaki's Weather Diaries project records global events from his local position. A time constrained project with a 10 year duration started in 2001, Silomaki has set himself the task of taking one picture a day every day for the last couple of years. Each image is coupled with a text that takes the form of a diary that records both personal and global events. As Silomaki moves about his personal activities, his photographs records events that have a widespread or historic impact.

In her work Marja Helander reflects on her Sámi background. She studies the conflict between the traditional Sámi way of living and contemporary society. Her works also consider the dual identity between the Finnish and the Sámi culture. Her photos tell of a modern individual, who is totally lost in her traditional environment. She doesn't understand her position. She walks on the mountains following the footsteps of her ancestors, reindeer breeders. The movement continues, but the frame of reference is different.

Nanna Saarhelo's Sleep with me series places the photographer next to her object – under the scrutinizing eye of the camera – and the space behind the camera is vacated. Saarhelo studies the human relations: as shared choreographies are formed during the night, sometimes the movements appear as if synchronised. However, the people photographed are present only in a dream world, outside the boundaries of the photograph, and it becomes difficult to define their personal qualities.

In their work The Public Complaints choir, a video installation, which has taken place in 4 cities, Helsinki, Birmingham, Hamburg and St Petersburg, Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen invite people from the cities to complain about everything thus engaging in a universal phenomenon. The ensuing results range from the banal everyday quirks to global issues, which are delivered through the singing of a choir. Whilst Mali and Finland may seem to present opposite characteristic of cold/hot, snow/heat, forest/desert, white/red and developed/developing there are interweaving threads, there are some commonalities between the countries. This manifests in their passion for photography, the beautiful landscapes and their rich cultural heritages. Mali has one of the most active, well-researched and consequently well-known photography scenes in Africa and the Bamako Encounters brings an innumerable amount of photographers working in diverse styles to the country. With the success, diversity of aesthetic and technical expertise, the Finnish exhibition will continue and consolidate the tradition of cultural exchange.

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Conflict: Third Party Observations for the European museum for Peace, Stadtschaling Austria. Seikkula is co-organising a series of seminars entitled: Co-active - Possibilities for collaboration held in various contemporary art centres in the Nordic countries.

**Footnotes** : The 7th African Encounters of Photography of Bamako took place November 24-December 23, 2007 at several locations and venues in the Mali capital..

*1-The museum was massively active in 2007, hosting another brilliant project that preceded the biennale, Contact Zone, curated by three important curators who work within the continent: N'Gone Phall (Senegal), Rachida Tricki (Tunisia) and Bisi Silva (Nigeria) and hosted works of Huda Lutfi, Khaled Hafez, Hasan Echair, Ammar Bourras, Delel Tengour, among other artists.*

Sammy Baloji (RDC Congo), Adama Bamba (Mali), Nadia Berkani (France-Algeria), Jodi Bieber (South Africa), Marie-Ange Bordas (France-Brazil), Nabil Boutros (Egypt), Mohamed Camara (Mali), Ali Chraïbi (Morocco), Pierre Crocquet (South Africa), Emmanuel Bakary Daou (Mali), Harandane Dicko (Mali), Saïdou Dicko (Burkina Faso), Calvin Dondo (Zimbabwe), Mohamed El Baz (Morocco), Fakhri El Ghezal (Tunisia), Ghislain El Magambo Gulda (RDC Congo), Dimitri Fagbohoun (Benin), Heba Farid (Egypt), Sal Idriss (Ghana), Fanie Jason (South Africa), Mouna Karray (Tunisia), Fouad Maazouz (Morocco), Edgar Marsy (La Réunion), Pierrot Men (Madagascar), Santu Mofokeng (South Africa), Aïda Muluneh (Ethiopia), Soavina Ramaroson (Madagascar), Sylvain Ralaivaohita (Madagascar), Sergio Santimano (Mozambique), Tsegaye (Ethiopia), Andrew Tshabangu (South Africa), Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi (Zimbabwe) Lolo Veleko (South Africa).

Berry Bickle (Zimbabwe living in Mozambique), Jellel Gasteli (Tunisia), Ingrid Mwangi (Kenya), Moataz Nasr (Egypt) and Patrice Felix Tchicaya (RDC Congo) Invitations: Said Adrus (India-Uganda), Loulou Cherinet (Ethiopia), Amal Kenawy (Egypt), Nicène Kossentini (Tunisia) and Thando Mama (South Africa). A video workshop reproduction organised by the Fondation Jean-Paul Blanchère presents the works of Mohamed El Baz (Morocco), Achillekà Kounguem (Cameroon), Marcus Kreiss (France), Michèle Magema Ogonga (Kenya), Adrien Sina (France) and Guy Wouete (Cameroon).