

*Hunter gatherers in Bamako* by Lien Botha

**The 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the Bamako Encounters: *For a sustainable world* - Artistic Directors: Michket Krifa and Laura Serani, Bamako, Mali from 1 November 2011 - 1 January 2012**

Background and context:

“Since 1994, the Bamako Encounters (Rencontres de Bamako), co-organized and co-produced by Mali’s Ministry of Culture and l’Institut Français, have been held every two years in Bamako. International in scope, this cultural event focusing on issues in contemporary photography and video features exhibits, professional encounters, workshops, public projections and a catalogue, which serve as a catalyst for the Continent’s artists, image professionals and the public at large. The Bamako Encounters is aimed at promoting the various trends in contemporary photography and video in Africa by creating international exchange among artists, the public, curators, commissioners, the media and collectors. The Bamako Encounters work with a highly diverse group of local and international partners (museums, galleries, foundations, art centres, public places, French cultural centres, art schools, photography training centres and cultural associations) to present a series of exhibits scattered throughout the city, thereby turning Bamako into a vast group exhibit, at once coherent and stimulating, centring on a guiding concept.”<sup>1</sup>

The photographers of twenty seven African countries were gathered from 1-6 November 2011 in Bamako to engage with various activities and events organized around the Encounters. It was a rollercoaster ride between exhibition openings, workshops, lectures and endless informal discussions. The main venue is the Musée National with the Pan African exhibition curated by Michket Krifa and Laura Serani; hosting 45 photographers, 10 video artists and for the first time extending into the grounds of the adjoining Parc National with scenography by Franck Houndégla. In adjacent buildings the *Mali Photo Archives* curated by Samuel Sidibé, Sokona Tounkara and Laura Serani with works by seminal Malian photographers Soungalo Malé, Abderramane Sakaly and Malick Sidibé has been installed. Another wing is dedicated to Simon Njami’s revisited compilation of the Sindika Dokolo collection.

Additional venues and exhibitions includes the Institut Français where the “active utopia” of Philippe Bordas is on view, Gallery Ina hosts the Ghanaian photographer Nii Obodai’s *From the edge to the core* which functions as a narrative installation dealing with the confrontation between the legacy of history and the present. David Goldblatt’s *Ex Offenders* and 2009 Jury Prize Winner Abdoulaye Barry’s images of night-fishermen on Lake Chad called *Pêcheurs de nuit* is on view at the Musée du District. At Memorial Modibo Keita which is the venue closest to the River Niger, there are five exhibitions including a tribute to the Cameroonian video artist Goddy Leye who

passed away in February 2011. Numerous alternative venues hosting over a dozen fringe events (OFF) are also sprawled throughout the city and this is possibly where the emergence of a next generation of brave new witnesses will come from in order to sustain the impetus of our photographic fervour.

According to the Director Samuel Sidibé : “It is true that the theme “sustainable development” selected by the Biennale is very vast, but authentic. I think that we are all, more than ever, aware of today’s crucial environmental, social and economic debates. Artists are particularly affected by these questions, as witnessed by their work and the diversity of their themes: pollution, the degradation of the environment, poverty, etc...” 2

“For these 9<sup>th</sup> Encounters, we have invited African photographers and video artists to show, denounce but also identify the axes for action, signs of resistance or prevention for the construction of a sustainable world. The different works presented tackle the theme through documentary and journalistic approaches or within metaphorical and fictional metaphors.” 3

Such were our first two days amidst additions and alterations in the *Hotel Columbus*. Fiction to fiction, dust to dust and in the hallway a faux *Mona Lisa* which i meant to photograph but never did. We travel between *Columbus* and *Hotel Nord Sud* (where we were supposed to stay) to gather the photographers and curators who are staying there. Two days later we join our compadres at latter abode but our kindred Egyptian colleague Khaled Hafez decides to stay behind. He has nothing more to say to Monsieur Diallo, manager of the *Nord Sud*. Soon after this Khaled Hafez wins the *Fondation Blachère* prize for his short video entitled “*The A77A Project:On Presidents & Superheroes*”, 2009 (Egyptian profanity used to express frustration). Someone suggests tea with Monsieur Diallo but one suspects that Hafez would rather take his protagonist Anubis for a walk through Tahrir Square.

A lot of time was spent in a mini-bus. It became a moving deposit for vital exchanges amidst lively conversations and drive-by recordings which would end up who knows where in another future. The image of Lebo and Ntombe had become the event poster; stuck to the door which would slide open and shift the perception of the Company’s garden on wheels in another ex -colony. In the drive-by you sometimes see more than you realise. There were small nurseries on numerous street corners and the leaves of the karaté trees seemed like hands, waving. Colour, colours worn upright spun around conversations one could only guess at, open-air furniture stores and

rudimentary kitchens eliciting the smell of fire reminiscent of our Highveld winters. And then there were live animals because it was the advent of the Tabaski festival.

The dead animals belonged to the fetish market which we encountered between the opening of *Les Chasseurs du Mali* and Nii Obodai's *From the edge to the core* whilst trying to keep up with a camerawoman and her guide (our lift). The exhibitions became a blurr as we weaved our way past the stacked monkey skulls, dried birds, coiled snakes, tiny lizards and endless children grabbing at your sway while you were pulling them along the menacing corridor of our languishing world.

On the third day I surrender to the image and the Pan African kaleidoscope. Sometimes it is exactly the absence of any human or animal presence within a photograph which reverberates beyond words. Francois-Xavier Gbré's *Tracks*(2009) is the result of no man's lands, residual zones such as the *Elizabeth Hotel I, Tiberias* which reminds one of a deserted dovecote. His large images with their disintegrating contents are flawless, accentuating its entropic metaphor. Fatoumata Diabaté's series called *L'Homme en animal* (2011) consists of black and white images of children from the Malian town of Sikasso portraying animals moving through a fantasy world. In the unease which they evoke they seem to hover somewhere between the gothic extensions of Roger Ballen and the surreal children framed by Ralph Eugene Meatyard.

In this season of tender democracy *The Arab Spring: a tribute to Tunisian and Egyptian Artists* is a propitious component to this year's *Encounters* and reverberates beyond the borders of Cairo to the ironic status of liberation at the heart of its most southern ally.

The subjects of Nana Kofi Acquah's *Slaughter Boys* (2011) bleeds back into the sea. The images has a raw quality adding to the content and what seems like a degree of desaturation which contributes to the sombre reality of this bleak vista of an abattoir. Roberto Stephenson's *Tent Camps* of wanderings around Port-au-Prince expresses the fragility of our existence accumulated in the aftermath of the earthquake of January 2010 which left an estimated one million people in Haiti homeless.

Two black and white videos which are particularly evocative largely because of their subtle referencing are South African photographer Brent Mestre's *The Stranger Who Licked Salt Back Into our eyes* (2009). This work creates the history of the arrival of a stranger in a land where he has come to find himself and his love. At work is an image maker with an acute sense of collating image and stitching a tale with all the pathos and subtlety that has resulted in epic works such as Theo Angelopoulos' *Ulysses's Gaze*. Em' Kal Eyongakpa who hails from Cameroon has produced a

video of photographs called *Round and Round* (2010 ) shot in continuous mode and depicting the impossible outcome of a cyclist in a suit treading water. We are here but not here.

Outside in harsh light the fractured grave portraits of Ethiopian photographer Michael Tsegaye's *Inferno* are echoed by the mottled shadows. The allusion to the redundant chemical residue of our medium has the last say.

For the most part nothing here is invented or imagined. It reflects our continent in the tremours of a new colonial exploitation, despite the fact that in 2010 many African countries celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their independence and the end of colonization. There are recurring sites of investigation such as the Agbogbloshie market in Accra, Ghana and as Jelle Bouwhuis stated in his review on the *Bamako Encounters* in Nafas art magazine, this kind of repeat pattern has the potential of challenging both authorship and authentication <sup>4</sup>. Not so in the case of Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo the photographer from Burkina Fasso who's cropped shot of the human error at the refuse dump at Akouédo in Abidjan is as haunting and miserable in its exposure of human existence as the silt of its detritus. His images seem to be enough. They end in exactly the right amount of content in order for the viewer to surrender to its sense of disillusionment. Beyond this you would encounter Colonel Walter E. Kurtz.

On the fourth day in Bamako Daniel Naudé told me the story of how he hunted down a rabbit outside a small Karoo town in the middle of the night in order to obtain meat with which to lure the dogs he had been trying to photograph for days. With the same meticulous detail that constitutes his work, a narrative of eloquent necessity seems to accompany him on his journeys in search of tame beasts. We are sitting in the gardens of the Musée National. Large installed images are returning our gaze and the heat has become curiously bearable. Perhaps because the intensity of everything else is so severe.

At dusk on the fifth day we finally make it to the popular *bla bla* bar – the area is teeming with life emanating from the makeshift shops and street hawkers who are spilling into the disintegrating roads. Photographer Elise Fitte Duval's ghostly "mouton" seems like a cut-out which was copied and pasted from one story to the next. Goats are stacked on the roofs of the emerald green Peugeot-taxis, pulled on ropes, on the back of motorcycles, blaring and gasping to the captivating sounds of Toumani Diabate's kora. Tabaski is drawing closer and every household is in preparation of this cardinal event on the Muslim calendar. We perch on a derelict wall on a sidewalk next to Avenue De La Liberté and surrender to the hypnotic ritual of chaotic order in

front of us: mesmerized by the tall slender women moving like swallows in their indigo blue dresses amidst the dust and the heat and the poverty. The night becomes a catatonic symphony.

On the sixth day a stranger invites us for Tabaski.

By the seventh day the *Bamako Encounters* renders Sarah Thornton's version of *Seven days in the art world* as a stroll through Central Park. And yet there are parallels. The photographer has the option of the shutter which means that you can survive on the outskirts. It is the rot of privilege we should avoid at all cost and a true photographer usually does. What the curators and the dealers and the collectors and the critics seldom experience is the fractional conversation and the grit. And they are never there when you are skinning the animal.

Nearly a month later Akintunde Akinleye's testimony of the huge waste of Nigerian oil fields, entitled "*Hell from Heaven*", follows me home. This time it is installed on an ivy verge which is trailing Government avenue in the Company's Garden, Cape Town as part of "*The freedom to create*". There are other shots by other photographers, but the image of a man in a rubbled landscape whose face has been covered by a hopeless baptism renders everything else invisible.

\*In 2009, there were 24,000 visitors to the Bamako Encounters. 83 artists from 55 countries in the African continent exhibited their work and were invited to take part in the opening week, for which over 300 professionals from the world of contemporary art travelled to Bamako. The Biennial exhibitions then toured around 20 countries in three continents. Last but not least, in terms of economic effects, a total of €87,300 was paid to all the artists in copyright fees for their participation in the Bamako Encounters and the international circulation of their works.

#### **References:**

1. *Sidwaya* Quotidien, November 11, 2011
2. Samuel Sidibé, Executive Officer of the *Bamako Encounters*, Interview with Christian Caujolle, La Lettre de la Photographie.com, 31.10.2011
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