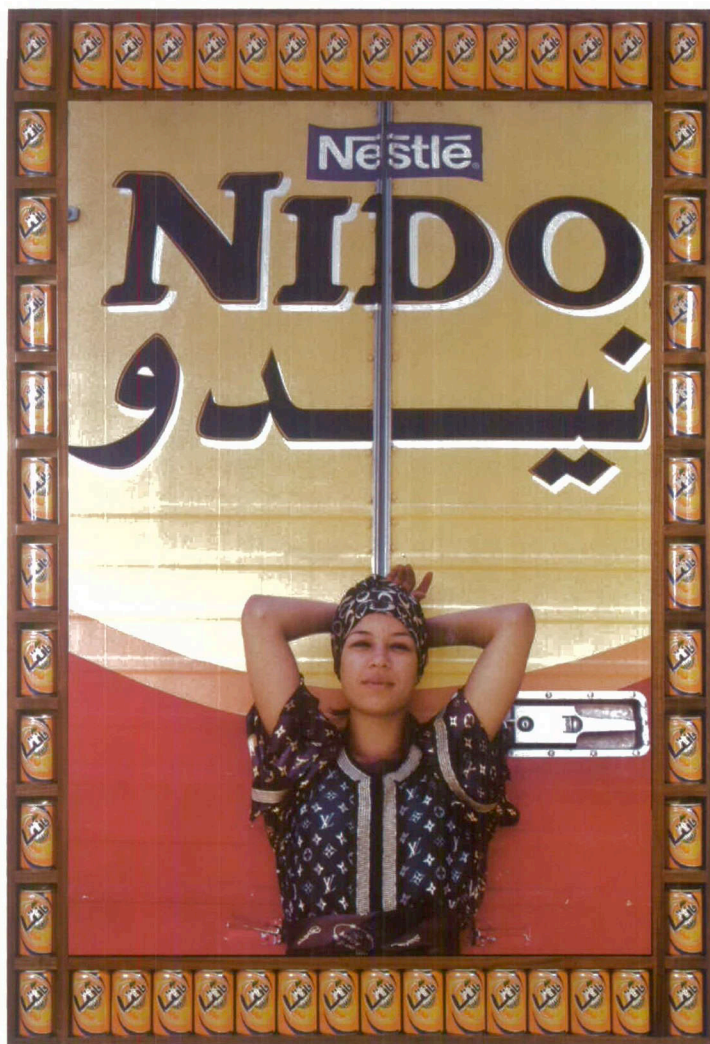


RENCONTRES DE BAMAKO



The eighth edition of the biennial Rencontres de Bamako presented much excellent work and many contradictions, in shows distributed throughout several venues in Mali's capital city.

The pan-African exhibition at the National Museum included an exceptionally strong showing from Central Africa. Armel Louzala from the Republic of Congo and Alain Wandimoyi from the Democratic Republic of Congo both engaged the impact of the brutal wars that have ravaged their countries for more than a decade. Deftly weaving together multiple narrative threads, these images depart radically from more familiar journalistic depictions of the subject. Their inclusion here also marks a departure in curatorial vision from past editions of the festival, which have tended to favor fine-art photography over documentary and reportage. Wandimoyi's photograph of Olive Lembe Kabila, wife of DRC president Joseph Kabila, on an official visit to the Bulengo refugee camp in North Kivu, captured the elusive connections between the province's 1,300,000 internally displaced people and the country's political elite. Formally arresting and analytically bold, it lingered in memory as the focal point of the gallery.

The appearance of such work alongside more playful projects may also signal the increasing sophistication and range of a rising generation of photographers. Baudouin Mouanda had an exquisite solo show on "La SAPE" (La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes), a kind of gentleman's association whose members face off in the streets of Brazzaville in public contests of dazzling sartorial style. The siting of this exhibition in the museum's textile galleries was spot-on from the standpoint of subject matter—but from that of access, it was disastrous: these galleries require a fee for entry, ensuring that few would see the exhibition after the wave of international visitors had gone.

Elsewhere in the pan-African galleries, topical issues such as migration, deportation, and asylum-seeking dominated. This was clearly in response to the biennial's designated theme of "Borders"—which was set in Paris by Culturesfrance (an agency of the French ministries of foreign affairs, culture, and communication) rather than by the event's creative directors, Michket Krifa and Laura Serani, or their Malian partners. These issues are acutely relevant to millions of Africans, yet the thematic frame was overbroad. Curatorial decisions to group certain works together aggravated this impression and tended to emphasize pat interpretations. Photographs by Lebohang Mashiloane, Jodi Bieber, and Myriam Abdelaziz depicting refugees (Somali, Mozambican, and Darfurian) were lumped together without respect for their varied intentions. Other work spoke openly of borders but was ambivalent in tone: four self-portraits by Robert Mafuta, including one with his identification number from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees emblazoned under a barcode on his back, and Fidisoa A. J. Ramanahadray's strangely lyrical scenes of incarceration and law enforcement.

A number of young artists are approaching the topics of sexuality and gendered subjectivities with revealing equanimity. The sense of cultural estrangement in the work of Zanele Muholi is exhilaratingly vivid, and the inclusion here of her depictions of black queer bodies and desires gently pokes at the conservatism evidenced in earlier Bamako selections. The transgendered, elegant *Miss D'vine* (2007) is riveting against a blue sky; the image was produced as a twenty-foot banner and dominated the entrance to the Palais de la Culture in a heartening curatorial gesture. Recall that the photographs of Jean Brundrit that were chosen for the 1996 Rencontres dealt with the topic of artistic censorship, since displaying her work on lesbian personae was, at that time in Bamako, out of the question.

THIS PAGE: Hassan Hajjaj, *Nido Bouchra*, photograph framed in walnut and empty cans, 2000; **OPPOSITE:** Zanele Muholi, *Miss D'vine I*, 2007; **PAGE 76:** Lilia Benzid, *Cimetière de Zaafrane* (Zaafrane cemetery), 2008–9.

Hajjaj: © the artist; Muholi: © the artist/courtesy Michael Stevenson, Cape Town; Benzid: courtesy the artist

Majida Khattari smartly plays with the lingering allure of Orientalist painting: her photographic light-box figures pop in dimensional space, emphasizing the flatness of historic and contemporary renderings of North African or “Oriental” identity. In his multimedia project *Living Queer Africans* (2007), Nigerian artist Andrew Esiebo presented an incisive portrait of a young African man living in Europe. The piece brought together two trends notable in this year’s biennial: the presentation of still images as video (as seen in works by Riason Naidoo, Abraham Oghobase, and Mounir Fatmi) and photographers’ explorations beyond well-worn paths to and from the colonial metropole.

In Lilia Benzid’s images—one of the festival’s hidden gems—we see a garden of tombstones nestled in the desert plains of Tunisia; swaddled with cardigans, turbans, shawls, and beads, the anthropomorphized stone markers repose with silk flowers or mugs of water. The ground ripples with signs of fresh loss.

Visitors and artists alike mentioned radical disparities in presentations. Some photographers displayed fifty or sixty images, others four or five. The most arresting installation drew accidental attention to these disparities and to some imagined alternatives. Along an airy arcade at the Palais de la Culture, an expanse of wood panels held a mash-up of pasted prints, lush screened works, and panorama-format posters drawn from a workshop held in Matola, Mozambique, attended by photographers from eastern and southern Africa. Non-precious and sometimes unlabeled, works by Sammy Baloji, Berry Bickle, Albino Mahumana, René Paul Savignan, Andrew Tshabangu, and Pierrot Men glinted in the afternoon sun. The collage effect recalled posters papering any



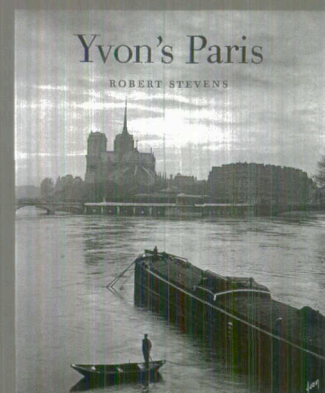
SELECTED BOOKS

EXCERPTS

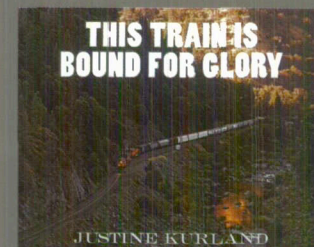
Robert Stevens YVON'S PARIS

New York: Norton, 2010

The Parisians have a word, *flânerie*, that in English is similar to strolling, promenading, roaming—walking the streets without appointments, destinations, or deadlines. When a person walks the streets this way he or she makes discoveries others would miss. Paris is a city made for *flâneurs*. What could be more enjoyable than a stroll through the city from the avenues of trees in the Tuileries Garden, past the seemingly endless Louvre and the grand square in front of towering and stately Notre Dame de Paris, through the Left Bank with its galleries and shops and into the Luxembourg Garden with its glorious central pond?



As he made his way around Paris one truth was abundantly clear: [Jean] Pierre [Yves Petit] disliked photographing in the midday sun. It was like recording an image at the moment when the scene lacked character. He preferred making his images closer to sunrise or sunset when shadows are most dramatic. The drama and character of clouds were important to this work and he tried to include them whenever he could. Sometimes he chose to record the way the streets looked during fog, after storms, in the shimmering afterglow of rain or the transforming whiteness of snow. These things made his images unforgettable.



Justine Kurland THIS TRAIN IS BOUND FOR GLORY

New York: Ecstatic Peace Library, 2010

What is Freedom? Like so many vaporous abstractions, it all depends on who you talk to. Janis Joplin's idea of freedom is different from Martin Luther King Jr.'s which is, in turn far different from George W. Bush's. And yet all lay claim to some crucial American tendency embodied in the word. The same semantic confusion goes for other signal

(continued on next page)

(Kurland continued)

American virtues, too: Liberty, Justice, and the Pursuit of Happiness, all change color and shape depending on who carries the flag. . . .

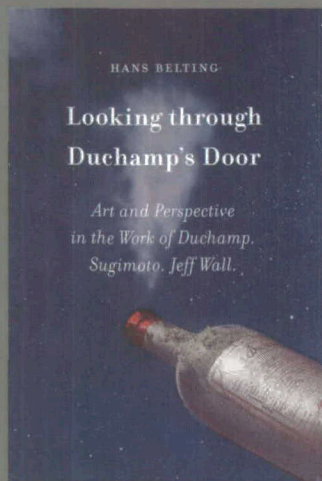
The legacy of American idealism is among the major subjects in the photography of Justine Kurland, who since the mid 90s has been arranging scenes in which the abstractions of principle—be it Freedom, Liberty, Community, what have you—sink down into the flesh and dirt of the everyday. From teenage girls caught up in group fantasies to pregnant women clustered in anticipation of maternal bliss to communitarians gathered to commemorate the brute endurance of their togetherness, Kurland's images capture not so much a given ideal as the process of ideals turning into shared practice, which is to say not so much Freedom as the interpretation of Freedom—or, in a sadder way, the illusion of Freedom.

—from Jonathan Raymond's foreword

**Hans Belting
LOOKING THROUGH
DUCHAMP'S DOOR**

Cologne: Walther König, 2010

Perspective no longer seems to be a theme for modern art, having shaken off that legacy more than a century ago. If perspective is linked to the gaze, however, its formula can express the fact that the naïve view of art has entered a state of crisis. Once perspective was a way of looking, but now it has become a metaphor for a problem. This *mise en scène* of the gaze also affects the concept of the work, which is in turn closely tied to the concept of art. Suddenly a clearing opens up in the thicket of modern art if we no longer understand perspective in the sense of a new manipulation of the viewer's



gaze, interrupting the view of the work. Why else does art exist if not to be seen? But what does seeing mean once art has parted ways with depiction?

But perspective also offers a common denominator to associate three artists with one another who are usually treated only in separate monographs. Not one of them kept to the old perspective, but each of them invented his own form of perspective, which could be called meta-perspective, a type of self-representation and hide-and-seek. The connection becomes very clear when we recall that both Hiroshi Sugimoto and Jeff Wall looked through the keyhole of [Marcel] Duchamp's late work at the same time in Philadelphia in the 1970s. It was a key experience in the literal sense, helping them to find their way into art. In what follows, perspective will be treated as a strategy. It provides a keyword that makes it possible to avoid both clinging to the usual monograph and falling into the trap of the old linear art history. Because two of my subjects are living artists who have been celebrated in monographs, my approach is not without risk.

urban landscape. It also provoked reflection about approaches to display and curation in a local context. Why not open the event to smaller, discrete curatorial projects that tap into artistic collaborations? Might not this make room for more visions and encourage a less top-down and institution-heavy approach?

Concerns about sustainability persist as the festival has expanded and cannot be reduced solely to a matter of location—in one of Africa's poorest nations and in its fastest-growing city—or to the narrow remit of backers, or to the Paris-based remote-planning apparatus. Video displays missing DVDs or not reset after routine power outages were commonplace—and have been lamented for years—raising questions about the transmission of information over time and among the various players. The quality of the prints (all executed in Paris) was uneven, and this problem was compounded by errors in printing and an apparent lack of discussion or exchange of test prints among photographers, printers, and curators. An unlabeled display of works by Malian photographers was an impolitic omission. Posters and banners of the exhibition works shone throughout the city and on the exterior walls of the museum gardens, but these went up only after the majority of the artists and international visitors had departed. They caught the eye of passing commuters, however, and sparked many an interesting conversation. It is to its credit that the *Rencontres de Bamako* has incited these conversations, and symptomatic of larger flaws in its planning and oversight that they remain, for the time being, on the outside. ♡

—Jennifer Bajorek and Erin Haney

The eighth Rencontres de Bamako took place November 7–December 7, 2009.

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