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# Eye on Bamako: Conversations on the African Photography Biennial

*Jennifer Bajorek and Erin Haney*

## **Abstract**

The Rencontres de Bamako or 'African Photography Biennial', held in Mali's capital city, is the only biennial devoted to photography from Africa and the only international photography festival routinely held on the African continent. Since its first edition in 1994, the event has picked up impressive momentum and has caught the attention of jet-setting curators, critics, and dealers and brought exposure and international patronage to a lucky handful of photographers. The biennial has also been controversial. Some of the reasons for this controversy are familiar and echo long-standing issues in the presentation of African art to Euro-American audiences. Other criticisms raise broader problems connected with the globalization of markets and of image culture. These are increasingly voiced by a younger generation of artists, activists, and curators who are exploring new ways of working in and with the global art market. This essay seeks to give a critical and analytical account of the biennial, through conversations with key players, and it explores emergent strategies to avoid dependence on the old North-South funding structures.

## **Key words**

African photographers ■ arts activism ■ arts policy  
■ international biennials ■ photography ■ Rencontres de Bamako

## **Photography Drives the Trend**

**T**HE RENCONTRES de Bamako or 'African Photography Biennial', held in Mali's capital city, has picked up impressive momentum over the years. The only biennial devoted to photography from Africa and the only international photography festival routinely held on the African continent, the event has succeeded in catching the attention of jet-setting

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curators, critics, and dealers, bringing exposure and international patronage to a lucky handful of photographers since its first edition in 1994. On the one hand, this success reflects increasing interest in African photography and in African art more generally on the part of museum and gallery-going publics in Europe and North America. Once the exclusive preserve of collectors more interested in primitivism and primitivizing interpretations of 19th- and 20th-century collected objects than in contemporary African realities, the market for African art has exploded to encompass a diversity of media, practices, and forms. With the international *succès fou* of two studio photographers from Bamako, Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, whose work found new life and, quite literally, global recirculation in galleries and museums in the 1990s, photography has played an important role in securing critical and curatorial as well as popular interest in modern and contemporary African art.<sup>1</sup> Photography and photographers from Africa have not only benefited from, but have in many instances clearly driven, the current trend.

The biennial has also been controversial. Many of the criticisms that have been voiced raise broader problems connected with the globalization of markets and of image culture. Although it was not initially conceived in this climate, the event can now be counted as one in a wave of new biennials hosted in southern capitals.<sup>2</sup> While we can only applaud the extension of mass exhibitions and related institutions beyond the hegemony of Venice and New York (old-world values and new-world concentrations of capital), not enough has changed in the presentation of work by southern artists to audiences elsewhere. Even where curators have sought to redraw the lines of colonial and imperial legacies through thoughtful and committed presentation strategies, the organization and administration of such events have tended to perpetuate and, in many cases it seems, aggravate longstanding asymmetries of power.<sup>3</sup> The same holds, a fortiori, for the funding structures and philosophies of sponsors, raising a host of broader questions about the future of such events, particularly those that are, like this one, staged North-to-South.

Other reasons for contestation are highly specific to the scene in Bamako, the fastest-growing city on the African continent and the capital of one of its poorest countries. Significantly, the biennial can proudly claim its origin in a spontaneous and close-knit collaboration between French and Malian photographers. Despite this history, it was repeatedly pointed out to us in Bamako, where we travelled for the biennial's 8th edition this past November, that efforts to include Malian artists have been scant and uneven at best. In several impolitic cases that were called to our attention – such as when labels were omitted from an exhibition of work by Malian photographers in the Palais de la Culture this year – these efforts had clearly failed. The photographers ultimately wrote their names by hand on bits of paper and stuck them to the wall with tape and blue tack, at the urging of the museum's cleaning staff.<sup>4</sup> Investments in training and infrastructure, where they exist, have not been enough to address radical disparities in access to material and other resources that exist in different sites in Africa. Judging from the conversations we had in Bamako, it seemed that



**Figure 1** Signage for monographic exhibition by Hassan Hajjaj outside the gallery of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Bamako, Mali, November 2009, during the 8th edition of the *Rencontres de Bamako*. Photograph: Jennifer Bajorek

sponsors' approaches had not always kept pace with developments on the continent.

At the opposite extreme, the event has excited a generation of young artists, activists, and organizers who, frustrated and left feeling alienated by their experience of these limitations, are forming new alliances and building their own networks, not remote-controlled from Paris. In cities as different as Lagos and Lubumbashi, Abidjan and Algiers, Johannesburg and Addis, initiatives are being devised with a focus on platforms for discourse, overtures to local audiences, and the cultivation of new markets, without which the prospects for new forms of presentation remain limited. A common thread running through nearly all of the conversations that we had in Bamako emphasized the need for more teaching and critical exchange that would take place in Africa and, above all, photographer-to-photographer. Creative approaches in the never-ending search for alternative funding sources and structures are much in evidence and are clearly in tune with the more general impulse to think and work South-to-South.

These and other observations suggest that there is a need for deeper and more sustained critical analysis of the event. If we seek to judge the state of things now, it is only because we, like many, hope to develop new criteria by which to make decisions about the future. How can the *Rencontres* do more with its positioning? Beyond these crucial achievements of bringing recognition to new artists and providing venues for exchange and networking, what can it do to augment and support the initiatives of artists?

African photography is, in many ways, entirely different. Its local stories offer a fundamental challenge to the 'global' operating in biennial discourse. Across the continent, from 1840 onward, African and resident photographers worked in a wide range of registers, many well in place by the onslaught of formal colonial rule. Early African photography was not considered a European import, and its complex trajectories account in part for the exceptionalism of the medium. With the establishment of African studios, itinerants, and the explosion of enthusiasts starting in the 1890s, the medium and its practitioners became deeply rooted in African internationalist creative practices and circulations. In contradistinction to academic art institutions under the colonial system, photography developed its own sets of internal logics and display strategies in the midst of practitioners working across colonial, linguistic, and geographic borders.<sup>5</sup>

The recent recirculation of work by studio photographers working in Africa in the middle of the last century has played an important role in securing recognition for photography as a decidedly modern medium of expression. It has also contributed to our understanding of photography's remarkable adaptation, through creativity and experimentation in African contexts, to local needs and desires. How might the specificities both of photography's history and of its contemporary practice on the continent be mined to make the event more meaningful for photographers, artists, and audiences, in Bamako and elsewhere?

### **Evolving Visions, Growing Pains**

The *Rencontres de Bamako* grew from a spontaneous collaboration between French and Malian photographers. It was not imagined as a long-term venture, and its first organizers almost certainly could not have fathomed its expansion to a highly visible event now in existence for over 15 years. This history stands out in a policy world dominated throughout Africa today by NGOs and development agencies promoting 'culture and development', and by the competing agendas of government, para-governmental, and private sponsors.

Alioune Bâ vividly remembers his first exchanges with French photographer Françoise Huguier. She was in Bamako in 1992 to exhibit work from her project, *Sur les traces de l'Afrique fantôme*, in which she retraced the steps of Michel Leiris on his travels in Africa. In 1992, Bâ was already a professional photographer and staff photographer of the National Museum of Mali, a post he holds to this day. Bâ and his colleagues, the technical staff in the museum's audiovisual department, were charged with the task of mounting Huguier's exhibition:

[T]hey asked us, as museum staff, to hang Françoise's pictures on the wall. When they asked us to do that, as a photographer, I said to myself, now, I wonder what kind of photographs these are. I was curious. Well, I agree absolutely. Françoise is a great photographer. She did some very fine work. *L'Afrique fantôme* was very good. But when I saw that, I said, some of



**Figure 2** Amsatou Diallo, president of the Association des Femmes Photographes de Mali, in the photo studio run by the Association in the gardens of the Musée National du Mali, Bamako, Mali. Photograph: Jennifer Bajorek

these shots, they are the same kind that I take myself. And so, afterwards, after the show was over, she came here . . . and we talked, and we got along very well. It was a very friendly exchange. . . . She said, ‘I can’t promise you anything but when I go back to France, I’ll see what we can organize.’<sup>6</sup>

There was, at this time, no talk of a festival but rather simply a vision of photographers working together on the basis of budding personal and professional relationships, and of their shared experiences. Huguier had also met Seydou Keïta in Bamako, in whose work she became deeply interested and began to promote in France. Soon thereafter Huguier returned, having created a small association in France to support a Franco-Malian venture (Atout Centre), and bringing with her another French photographer, Bernard Décran. The project undertaken on this visit was very different from the current festival in several key respects. It was premised on the production of new work in Mali; it emphasized the documentation of local Malian sites; above all, it was designed to foster close collaboration between photographers, who carried out thematic assignments in pairs. Huguier worked with Django Cissé, a Malian photographer known locally for his postcard scenes. Their work was focused on the theme of colonial architecture in and around Bamako. Bâ and Décran formed the second team, leaving the city for a provincial mining region in order to document methods of traditional gold mining. As Bâ explains, he and Décran not only travelled and did all of their shooting together, but, after returning to Bamako, they developed and printed their photographs together, working in the same darkroom. The French photographers were so pleased with the result that they immediately proposed an exhibition in France. It was on the occasion

of this exhibition that the project was understood to merit French government sponsorship, and it was handed over to the body then known as 'Afrique en créations'. Thereafter the project was formalized as a regular exhibition, to be repeated biennially in Bamako.<sup>7</sup>

The ins and outs of French sponsorship and the politics of the *Rencontres*' Parisian administration were recounted for us, sometimes in astonishing detail, by veteran photographers, many of whom have been travelling to Bamako since the first edition of the biennial. The principal sponsor was 'Afrique en créations' from 1994 until 2000, when this organization merged with the Agence Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA). The 2001, 2003, and 2005 editions were sponsored by the AFAA, in which 'Afrique en créations' persisted as a department. In 2006, Culturesfrance, an agency overseeing arts and cultural exchange programming in the international arena (with a heavy emphasis on the former colonial territories) for two French ministries, the ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ministry of Culture and Communication, was created in a merger of the AFAA with the Association pour la Diffusion de la Pensée Française (ADPF). Culturesfrance absorbed 'Afrique en créations' and its programmes and combined them with an agency responsible for French arts and culture programmes in the Caribbean in a single department: 'Afrique et Caraïbes en créations'. Since the 2007 edition, Culturesfrance has been the *Rencontres*' principal sponsor.<sup>8</sup>

That photographers have found it necessary to follow the machinations of French bureaucracy – as responsibility for the biennial changed hands and ministries and agencies were combined or merged with one another over the years – is itself entirely symptomatic and points to the most glaring problem in the *Rencontres*' funding structure: its dependence on a foreign government agency as its principal financial sponsor. The strength of French sponsors' commitment is to be commended, but it has become frankly double-edged. Dependence on French funding has contributed to a sense of parochialism and encouraged top-down directives. It has also touched off sensitivities, and understandably so, about the more overtly neo-colonial aspects of cultural diplomacy. Less obvious perhaps but no less problematic, it has had the unintended consequence of producing artificial concentrations of capital and investment in structures in a single site.

In the words of Ananías Léki Dago, a photographer from Côte d'Ivoire who has exhibited at the Bamako festival from early days and who has also mounted a pioneering festival in Abidjan: 'The problem is that French cultural policies don't help us to become independent... They organize everything in France and then they come here. They cook there and they come to eat here.'<sup>9</sup> Léki Dago's own festival, the '*Rencontres du Sud*' (the title was intended to echo the *Rencontres d'Arles*), held for the first time in Abidjan in 2000, was by all accounts extremely successful. This time the 'cooking' was done entirely in Côte d'Ivoire. And yet, with this success, Léki Dago found that he had unwittingly set himself up for censure.

Some feared that if a second photography festival were to take off in a second African capital, this would divert precious funding from Paris and detract from the Bamako biennial's gathering strength.<sup>10</sup> In actual fact, the event's principal sponsor was the Prince Claus Fund, with secondary funding coming from the Centre Culturel Français in Abidjan, Kodak, and the French advertising agency Publimode. Not all of the sponsors were Parisian, and Prince Claus in particular are known for their careful efforts to see funding go directly to Africans based on the continent, as distinct from Culturesfrance. But the facts were not sufficient to quell the anxiety of some, who did not want to see a permanent festival establish itself in Abidjan.

Another artist, who is not Malian but who has lived in Bamako for several years, told us the story of how, when he was invited to propose a project for inclusion in the 2009 edition of the Bamako Rencontres, was given an appointment at a Paris address. Still other photographers we talked to in Mali in November explained that they were facing protracted layovers and multi-day treks home from Bamako because they had refused to fly to other African cities (Maputo, Harare) on the flights that had been offered them – via Paris.

Not surprisingly, given the pervasiveness of offensive and frustrating episodes such as these and the persistence of a top-down approach to the event's planning and administration, the biennial has come to be identified by many with the promotion of French national interests. Peter Anders, Head of Cultural Programmes for Sub-Saharan Africa at the Goethe Institut, voiced a widespread perception that the biennial is a 'decoration or representation of national interests.'<sup>11</sup> The identification with France is disappointing, and for some it borders on tragic, given the specificity of the event's genesis in an open-ended effort conceived by, and for, photographers. Bâ said that, although the Rencontres had been a boon to him personally – he has exhibited and travelled abroad as a result of his participation – it had become *une coquille vide* for many photographers living in Mali.<sup>12</sup> The identification of the event with French national interests is, finally, out of touch with the zeitgeist, when artists worldwide are fighting notions of art and culture as instrumental to the projects of government.<sup>13</sup>

Still other pitfalls of the event's funding structure can be illuminated by recent critiques of the 'culture and development' mentality that currently underwrites many North-to-South initiatives. Achille Mbembe has written at length about the accumulated damage caused by patron-client relationships on both the fate of African states and the fabric of African societies.<sup>14</sup> In a recent interview with Vivian Paulissen, Mbembe addressed the role played by cultural funding agencies in maintaining these relationships in the contemporary moment:

Relationships between Western cultural funding agencies and local 'recipients' (individual artists and organizations) have never been so bad.... Instead of spaces of mutuality, recognition and respect, donor agencies



have established throughout the Continent countless networks of patron-client relationships. These relationships are not one-dimensional. They are characterized by deep levels of collusion and complicity, unequal transactions, at times mistrust, and in any case reciprocal instrumentalization.<sup>15</sup>

While it is possible to take issue with Mbembe's understanding of art as primarily a form of individualistic expression (voiced elsewhere in the interview: this idea is a loaded one in African art history), his critique of the premises of many 'culture and development' projects is spot on.<sup>16</sup> Even where these projects have not directly fed patron-client relationships, they have not resulted in a just or equitable distribution of resources, less still in a redistribution of power. In the words of Mbembe:

Over the last decade Western European financial contribution to the development of arts and culture in Africa has been steadily declining. The paradox is that as they put less and less money on the table, European agencies increased the severity of the conditions of accessing their meager subsidies. . . . We can keep dressing up the unlimited power of the donors and the myriad forms of humiliation and indignity visited upon their 'recipients' in the fancy language of 'partnership', 'empowerment' or even 'international friendship'. These words won't mask the brutality of the encounter between those who have money and resources but hardly any good or useful ideas and those who have some good ideas but hardly any money.<sup>17</sup>

Few could disagree that there is an element of brute power politics underwriting all North-to-South initiatives. We would stress an even more fundamental and equally sinister element of the 'culture and development' mentality, which is that it lumps together the aims of artists and arts organizations with those of development agencies. It is not a given that the aims of artists are one with the aims of 'development', or that these can even sit comfortably under a single conceptual and ideological umbrella. Other complexities of the *Rencontres*, however, cannot be grasped within the framework of a critique of contemporary funding logics.

### **'Searching for Network . . . ?'**

When all is said and done, the biennial stands as a kind of accidental instance of the felicities and exchanges that *can* happen because of, and sometimes in spite of, the organizational structures in Paris. Networking and meeting at places like Bamako (and Dakar, Johannesburg, Accra, Nairobi, and Algiers) is particularly important when access to online networks of exchange and conversation remains out of reach for many artists living on the continent. Disparities have only grown as the commercial side of the market and related aspects of career development – opportunities to circulate and look at images and texts – have moved over to electronic



**Figure 3** In the Pan-African exhibition galleries of the Musée National du Mali, Bamako, Mali, November 2009, during the 8th edition of the Rencontres de Bamako. Photograph: Jennifer Bajorek

media and forums. Connections are slow and can be costly, even if in theory large parts of the continent have significant and expanding mobile coverage. For this generation, the *sine-qua-non* is the web, but access hinges on good Internet cafes, cash for a website, and a critical mass of computers, not to mention good national governance and unrestricted Internet and telephone communication. These resources and infrastructure are far from widespread, and they vary radically by site for much of the continent at this writing.

Time and again in Bamako last November, we were reminded that this larger lack of infrastructure and exchange between centres has rendered opportunities for personal networking, such as those found at the biennial, crucial. Quite apart from the obvious differences in the qualities of exchange between face-to-face and virtual connections, it is important to stress the necessity of personal exchange when developing what is, for many, still a quite new means of thinking about their work in this medium. There is a strong consensus amongst many, even as opportunities to exhibit both on and off the continent continue to grow, that there is a 'lack of criticism on the continent'.<sup>18</sup> Chances for artists and curators to exchange face-to-face about artists' work, but also more broadly about what is happening in discourses and markets located elsewhere, seem particularly difficult to come by. Recent efforts by the organizers to pay for artists' travel (via mobility grants provided by Puma Creative and its Creative Africa Network) to Bamako were essential for many of the photographers to be present and are a necessary step in realizing the opportunities for dialogue and space for critical conversation which alone can address this lacuna.

Beyond bringing artists together, the organizers of the 2009 *Rencontres* provided some means of access to curators and a few collectors. For those whose ability to sell work online (where a significant amount of photography sales occur) is constrained, even momentary access to a small but expanding external market is invaluable. To this end, the festival definitely served its purpose, but only for those savvy enough to market themselves thoughtfully and in a sophisticated way. More than one photographer we spoke to complained that information about portfolio review sessions and meetings with prospective buyers or their agents was haphazardly disseminated, disclosed only selectively to those who were already 'in the know', or, in other instances, simply not translated from French into English, limiting access to these kinds of opportunities to photographers who had already achieved a modicum of international success or, in the second case, to those who were francophone.

Perhaps more crucially, Bamako has set a stage for networking between photographers. This kind of networking leads to critical new partnerships between photographers working sometimes in the same city, country, or region, and sometimes across broad distances and other divides. These partnerships are already generating ideas for structures and events that seem destined to avoid some of the *Rencontres*' pitfalls.

It is surprising to realize and difficult to overstate the disparities in access to international creative networks between photographers working on the continent. South African cities are blessed with a plugged-in and *au courant* infrastructure. Cairo and other north African cities have a gallery scene and buzz, as do Lagos and Dakar, even if in the latter case this is largely cyclic and due to the presence of the *Dak'art* biennial. Within these a framework of exhibitions, established artists, and circulating news provide some structure, but these densities appear to be proliferating in deep rather than broadening tracks. The question is not whether there are photographers working. Rather it is finding those engaged in conversations about contemporary arts internationally.

For Aida Muluneh, a photographer with contacts and support in the US in place by the time she returned to Addis Ababa to work full time, participating in the *Rencontres*, as she did in 2007, was formative. She learned of Bamako by accident of a random search online, submitted work, and went on to claim the European Union prize at the 2007 edition. She says: 'It was the first time in my career that I actually got to meet other photographers from Africa . . . so for me that was a great opportunity for networking, the fact that we meet in one space, we see each other's work, and then we get a chance to talk.'<sup>19</sup>

Networks are everything, for placing oneself and one's work in a context commonly referred to as 'global'. Léki Dago recalls his frustration at wondering what lay beyond the local market in Abidjan. His first taste of the Bamako biennial brought with it a realization of the possibilities of a larger, if still predominantly French, international market: 'For that, I thank Bamako. . . . Even if at first it was a bit confusing, the situation . . .



**Figure 4** Poster-format print, made from a photograph in the national archives of the Republic of Mali, hung on an exterior wall in the city during the 8th edition of the *Rencontres de Bamako*. Photograph: Erin Haney

allowed me to understand that the world of photography is more than that. It's bigger. I saw that, and that pushed me.<sup>20</sup> It was precisely because he recognized the benefit of the networks he found in Bamako and through his connection with *Revue Noire* that Léki Dago also sought to do something for practitioners whose work went unnoticed because they were not plugged into these networks. A major goal of his *Rencontres du Sud* (held in Abidjan for the first time in 2000) was thus to work with photographers and others in Côte d'Ivoire to create notice of their work among Ivoirian audiences.

Léki Dago is rightly concerned about the narrowing point of view that is enforced when a single festival is given a monopoly on showcasing work by African photographers. Despite his misgivings, he comes: 'My brothers

and sisters are here. I have to see them . . . I think that we have to recognize that Bamako is the only important event for photography in Africa, so let's go there, and when we meet each other, let's talk. Let's talk about what we can do, how we can organize ourselves amongst ourselves, from where we are now.<sup>21</sup>

In Addis Ababa, Muluneh's efforts have centred on an activist conversation with photographers, not just those based in Ethiopia, but those shooting in Africa or with an interest in contemporary issues on the continent. She returned to Addis from abroad to create a series of educational photography initiatives administered through her non-profit 'DESTA for Africa'. She continues these efforts even as she moves into other arenas. Teaching is for her a fundamental aspect of changing the situation in her country at a local level; indeed she is consumed by providing and encouraging high-level instruction, access to technology, student exchanges – a full educational immersion. She says: 'We have plenty of photographers, what we don't have is institutionalized training. We don't have a proper photography program . . . for those who [may be] more interested in exhibiting . . . there isn't proper training in order to be able to compete. We have the oldest art school in Africa, Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts and Design, and there isn't a photo department.'<sup>22</sup> Education must comprise free virtual access to ideas and images and ensure the acquisition of fluency in the commercial possibilities that the web provides. Muluneh is concerned that some of the photographers of the 2009 edition have no online presence, and insists that it is imperative that online capability (and education in marketing and advertising one's portfolio) get up to speed: 'We're really missing out, especially we photographers, because most of the sales happen online.'<sup>23</sup>

Kader Attia's concern for education and networking plays out in his investment in conversations. Noting that the art world of European capitals can be extremely hostile to artists, he has invested extraordinary energy in exhibitions in Africa, as well as in mentoring other artists and photographers working there. Born in France to Algerian parents (his youth was split between Algeria and France), Attia's work centres on some of these very questions, about centre and periphery, place and point of view, and he is interested in or compelled by the bifurcation between making tactile and experiential installations and pieces that are more stringently conceptual and spare.

His practice, as both an artist and as an organizer, places a strong emphasis on concepts, and on plugging into a network of artists, both younger and more seasoned. He says: 'I'm more somebody who's trying to create a network, a network of the mind. That is my way of thinking, what I think, what I believe in.'<sup>24</sup> He sees personal interactions with artists new to the external market as vital. His activism is focused on conversations with younger artists, and on mitigating the hostilities that are out there, so that they don't make the same mistakes others have already made in the contemporary art market. He wants to transmit and share knowledge, not

only to encourage relevant and interesting work, but to encourage the kinds of conversations that are moving one step further away from the post-colonial moment.

Given this urgent need for face-to-face exchanges, it comes as no surprise that collectives and artist-run compounds have sprung up around the continent. The variation among their approaches is significant. Some collectives have arisen as a means of redressing the lack of contemporary arts institutions, and are thus about fostering conversation among artists as much as generating audiences. Others provide venues for self-taught artists to interact with professionals and mentors. The collective ‘Depth of Field’ was established by young photographers in Lagos in 2001, working together to critique each other’s work and to share resources, including a library, publicity, web visibility, and a general forum for discussing strategies.<sup>25</sup> Their project is ongoing and has encouraged off-shoots such as the younger collective, ‘Black Box’, also of Lagos. University students at Nsukka created the Pan-African Circle of Artists in 1991; notable efforts include its *Overcoming Maps* initiative, driving to foster international conversations, travelling exhibitions, and extended programming since 2001, and it has been widely active in west Africa, as well as Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia.<sup>26</sup>

Barthélémy Togo’s art space and compound, ‘Bandjoun Station’, in western Cameroon, is the fruit both of his commercial success and of his determination to create the arts infrastructure that he sees as lacking. Goddy Leye’s ‘Art Bakery’ was founded as an artist residency programme in his home in Douala, Cameroon, and aims to encourage partnerships with African and other artists in a workshop setting. Another artist who has shown at Bamako, Sammy Baloji, has been a part of collectives in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, from the very early days of his career, particularly the ‘Friends of the Hall of the Star’, from 2008. Baudouin Mouanda and Armel Louzala, both of whom participated in the 2009 edition of the *Rencontres*, are among 23 members of the Congo-Brazzaville collective ‘Génération Elili’.

Members of all of these collectives have shown at the Bamako biennial over the years, and have taken advantage of the opportunities it provides to showcase their unity and claim a collective presence.<sup>27</sup> If Bamako has become a significant first step for young photographers to exhibit work, its longer-term and more significant contribution is clearly the opportunity it provides to form and consolidate artists’ networks. Beyond the urgent need to continue the conversation after the biennial has ended and everyone has gone home, the lack of local infrastructure and audiences continues to throw up obstacles.

### **Observations from the Ground on Building Structures**

One response from Europe to the lack of infrastructure in Bamako has been to throw money at projects supporting photography there, no doubt with good intentions and with the imagined outcome that new institutions and

education would directly benefit from and contribute to the traffic and resources associated with the *Rencontres*. Indeed, donor cash seems to have spurred into the city since the festival's inception. For instance, the Swiss funded a state-of-the-art photo lab, the *Cadre de promotion pour la formation en photographie* (CFP). There is also a new elite art school, the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasseké Kouyaté* (CAMP), as well as the lovely new compound for the *Musée National du Mali*. But the lack of a competitive market, and the widely-known difficulties in getting photographic supplies into ports and across borders, have put the CFP's production quotes out of the realm of competitive prices. This edition, like many before it, was produced with printing, framing, shipping, and insurance costs in French hands, while Bamako's nascent photography-focused institutions continue to derive little benefit from the regular flood of photographs and enthusiasts to the city. In the case of many of these projects aimed at institution-building, it is too soon to tell how things will play out. The CAMP, for example, has been extremely successful in recruiting students broadly within Africa – a significant number of students come from outside Mali – and opportunities for training and study abroad now extend all the way to the United States. Yet the best graduates will land jobs outside Mali; the more successful the conservatoire is in providing training to internationally recognized standards, the more it will feed an inadvertent wave of brain drain and can expect its young talent to expatriate.

Whether one works from Paris or from the heart of Mali's national museum complex, there are persistent difficulties in tracking down the many diverse African creative networks already in place. Samuel Sidibé, the Director of the *Musée National du Mali*, and part of the creative direction for the past edition, described the difficulties in broadcasting calls for portfolio submission across more than 50 countries. He hopes that African journalists positioned across the continent, to whom the festival has only just begun to reach out and toward whom it will continue to make overtures, will get the word out more quickly next time around. He says: 'The organizers should be capable of creating a network of professionals in every country of Africa . . . so that in every country where photographers are working . . . photography continues to survive. . . . It is in this way that you construct a public, little by little.'<sup>28</sup>

With shrinking budgets at international levels as well as shrinking foundation budgets, it's easy to imagine that the few extant arts institutions on the continent are feeling the pinch. Attia nonetheless noted significant improvements in Algiers, including the opening of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in December 2007. In the summer of 2009, the museum hosted the month-long Pan-African Culture Festival in Algiers, more than 40 years after the city's historic initial edition. In the planning phase, a year in advance of the event, Algeria hosted the Ministers of Culture of the over 30 African nations who were participating. It was an

extraordinary political gesture for an authoritarian regime to invest so heavily in the arts and culture, in a country that has prioritized military spending over anything else; estimates for the festival run to 32 million euros in operating costs, with all funds apparently coming from the country's administration.

While acknowledging various critiques of the festival, Attia underscores the symbolic power of the festival's impressive mobilization of institutional forces, internationally, within Africa:

The Pan-African festival was very important, of course politically, but I think ethically [as well.] Peripheric countries are helping each other, investing money, especially in cultural projects. It sounds like another step [away from] the post-colonial era. To me the most important thing is that outside the centre, these countries are able to develop their own projects. OK, you can criticize the quality, you can criticize the paradox between the policies of the governments and what we see in the art exhibitions, but what you actually see is that the institutional space of the West is the same. So the most important [thing] is to give to artists (when I speak about artists, I speak about musicians, painters, theatre directors, everything) a stake.<sup>29</sup>

Like Sidibé's vision of creating an official network of professionals in every country in Africa – they would be plugged into Bamako during the biennial but would remain connected afterwards, promoting enduring trans-national exchanges – Attia's understanding of the creation of institutional networks internationally in Africa differs markedly from an older policy vision, which emphasized investment in infrastructure on the national level.

Very few African nations have art budgets, and activists on the continent who work to support or create arts institutions and infrastructure are up against significant odds. The Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos (CCA), a gallery space and resource centre founded by Bisi Silva, is nearly three years old now. In providing a multifaceted venue that complements Lagos's (and Nigeria's) thriving contemporary art scene, she is always mindful that her contributions will be measured in the long term. To that end, CCA has never shied away from experimentation, and has been willing to try new things in order to get feedback and see how they played out. Silva, together with CCA staff and fellows, have hosted workshops and residencies, they have raised funds to mount exhibitions and write publications, they have compiled and opened a library. During themed programming, they have encouraged local and visiting artists to work with unfamiliar media such as video and photography. Two pervasive questions have guided many of CCA's projects: what is possible given the city's, and the continent's, infrastructure, and what can CCA do which will provide the most significant benefit in the long term?



Silva explains:

First of all, I think we are happy with what we have done. It's been absolutely challenging . . . to do such a thing within Nigeria. And it's been absolutely fascinating as well . . . absolutely fulfilling. Because we see that the potential is there; yet the infrastructure is not there. And I remember one of the things that I used to say when I first started working was . . . what kind of curatorial practice can one have in an environment where . . . there's a huge structural deficit . . . what's possible? . . . You know, given the lack of public funding, and the dwindling funding available whether it's local or internationally, we need to be thinking about new models.<sup>30</sup>

Silva has garnered significant support from a number of European foundations, and she has made great strides in putting new work and artists up on local platforms while at the same time drawing devoted international audiences. Yet in the end mounting exhibitions is labour-intensive and expensive, and the exhibitions themselves are ephemeral. CCA exhibitions might travel to one or two other sites, but again, the lack of infrastructure and limited budgets hinder the possibilities for travel.

Above all, Silva believes it is fundamental to encourage a vibrant and more incisive critical discourse between artists and the larger community. Keenly aware of the limitations of exhibitions and related platforms, she puts a premium on building this discourse in everything she does: encouraging careful thinking and conceptualization of projects from the artists with whom she works, in residencies, workshops, and portfolio reviews. These concerns, for sustainable and measurable products and for new platforms for dialogue on the arts, dovetail nicely with her plans for the future, defined by a focus on publication projects: 'What can one do that will go to a wider audience around the world, which shows the work, something that helps develop a local and continental discourse, that provides a platform for emerging young curators, writers, art historians, whatever the case might be, and gives them some kind of space?' Publications appeal for the directness of articulation, but also because they are valuable and durable.<sup>31</sup>

In Ethiopia, Muluneh has finally found the strictures of working within the framework of an NGO too onerous. She has agilely turned her organization to a more commercial position by privatizing her association, and she has set her sights even higher, to creating new structures and platforms for photographers. Her event, the first ever Addis Ababa International Photography Festival, will open this December and will include projections and exhibits of artists in public governmental spaces. The programme will also include a portfolio review, workshops, conferences, and auctions. Her approach to existing resources is both broad and imaginative: 'I deal with the Tourism Board, I deal with the Mayor's Office . . . in order to utilize . . . what's available . . . With all the art activities in Ethiopia, our focus has to be to create spaces that are professional, where

young artists can exhibit their work, and foreigners can come and exhibit their work, and they'll be able to maintain a standard.<sup>32</sup> Muluneh is quick to emphasize that African governments need convincing on setting aside funding for artists, and the bulk of her support is coming from Europe. But she envisions corporations and individuals eventually contributing to the festival, and she maintains the need for a new model. Her proposals evoke the depth at which she is trying to work within the system to improve and rethink how cultural funding should be allocated. Arts infrastructures in Africa, to the extent they exist, derive significant funding from Europe. So bearing this in mind, Muluneh's assessment is rooted in the present situation, where funding is diversifying and being reimaged: 'In all honesty, we're at the point now where we need commerce, not charity.'<sup>33</sup>

Funders who are looking to move beyond the current limited models might think of supporting this kind of arts start-up. Based on the conversations we had with Muluneh and other young artists and organizers who are working in this direction, investors can expect such organizations to have plans and ideas enough about becoming self-sustaining. This kind of model veers dramatically away from supporting more ephemeral kinds of institutions, and if it does not exclude exhibitions, it is no longer preoccupied with display as the only, nor even the best, line to markets and to cultivating future opportunities. Artists and activists will need to have, and continue to acquire, fluency in presenting work, planning for markets, education, and exchanges, and thus to circumvent the restrictions inherent in the system. Muluneh herself brings young people into each meeting she has, and in doing so educates them about expectations. 'The hustle that we did in New York and the hustle we do here, they're really no different. . . . Young people in Ethiopia need to learn leadership skills and how to use the budgets available for projects in Ethiopia.'<sup>34</sup>

What artist-activists like Léki Dago, Attia, Silva, and Muluneh are alluding to and what they are striving to achieve stands in sharp relief to the curatorial paradigm at Bamako. South-to-South initiatives are still in the process of on-the-ground testing. If they work best in the end, it may well be for the simple reason that there are fewer strings attached (or so we would hope). At the same time, it is unlikely that funding from the North will disappear entirely; nor should it. The smartest bets among funders will be in innovation and support for the many different varieties of networking that are happening amongst artists now, and in the building of creative infrastructure. The artists' networks and the new structures they are devising are not revolutionary, but they are well-considered and innovative, and they matter very much now – and will doubtless continue to matter in the future – to African artists.

In conclusion, it is worth underscoring another realization brought about for many who travelled to Bamako for the biennial: the relevance (or irrelevance) of blood and soil to anchor African creativity at this point in time. Muluneh put it this way: 'This is why the Bamako [biennial] is sort of limiting because you have to be of African descent in order to participate

there, but for me, I think we need to break away from this categorization of only Africans exhibiting together, Europeans together, and on and on. To me it's more interesting if everyone exhibits their work together and we can also learn from each other as well.<sup>35</sup>

This calls to mind the point Alioune Bâ made when, during our extended chat in his office in the National Museum, he stopped to show us his collection of official event posters. The first posters were emblazoned with the name: 'Biennale de la photographie *africaine*' (Biennial of African Photography). Bâ told us that he, along with others, advocated a change to the present name: 'Biennale *africaine* de la photographie'. The new placement of the adjective changes the name to suggest a different intention, from a biennial presenting so-called 'African photography' to a biennial that is itself African. Bâ explained that he wanted the title to reflect more accurately his experience of the event, and the connections he was making, through it, with many different kinds of people.

Whatever else the *Rencontres* was at the time, it had already become – as it remains – a gathering of photographers from all over the world. As the essentialist and exoticist readings of African creativity and contemporary production are dismantled, there is more room to concentrate on what today's artists are most concerned with: making good art, raising the bar on what is possible and what can be imagined, and the new and, we hope, much larger dialogues that are already starting from that point.

### Notes

1. Key dates and events help to give a sense of Keïta's 'discovery' and recirculation in the late 1990s. In 1991, an unattributed print was included in an exhibition in New York: 'Africa Explores', curated by Susan Vogel at the Center for African Art. After seeing this print, French curator André Magnin travelled to Bamako in search of the photographer. He turned out to be Keïta, who was active in Bamako, then the capital of French Soudan, from the early 1940s. Magnin, who was connected with the Swiss art collector and heir to the Simca automotive fortune, Jean Pigozzi, removed several hundred of Keïta's negatives to Geneva (home to Pigozzi's Contemporary African Art Collection) and Paris, where multiple signed prints were produced, at dimensions far beyond their original format, and sold on the European market, where French fashion designer and gallerist Agnès B. was among the first to buy them. The terms of Magnin's agreement with the photographer have since been contested by his estate (see Vine, 2003; Rips, 2006). Other decisions about the photographs' printing, including not only format but also contrast and levels of black and white, have also been controversial (see Vine, 2003, Bigham, 1999). The subsequent decade saw the transfer of still more of Keïta's negatives from his home in Bamako to Geneva and high-profile exhibitions in European, American, and Asian capitals, and battles for representation by two New York galleries, Larry Gagosian and Sean Kelly. Museums such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York now own prints of Keïta's photographs. As Bigham has pointed out, when a Keïta print was displayed in the permanent-collection galleries of the Met's Department of Photographs in the

summer of 1998, Keïta became ‘the first living African artist to be exhibited in the museum outside the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing galleries of “traditional African art”’ (Bigham, 1999: 63). Keïta died in 2001. In January of 2006, *The New York Times* devoted a Sunday ‘Arts and Leisure’ spread to his work.

2. These capitals were Havana; Gwangju and Seoul; Guangzhou and Shanghai; Dakar; Johannesburg; Luanda. It should be noted that the São Paulo biennial, in existence since 1951, is the second-longest running biennial, after Venice. African artists including Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya exhibited at the São Paulo biennale as early as 1963, as did Ibrahim El Salahi (1963), Iba Ndiaye (1963) and Papa Ibra Tall (1965), to mention a few. In effect, São Paulo had a global aspiration beyond Euro-America from the beginning. In other accounts, Jean-Hubert Martin’s *Magiciens de la terre*, held in 1989 at the Beaubourg in Paris, is considered by many to have been the first contemporary art exhibition with global aspirations. Its treatment of African materials in particular has met with much criticism (see Busca, 2000).

3. See, for example, Léon’s (2001) analysis of the Havana Biennial.

4. Personal interview with Amadou Keïta, Bamako, Mali, 21 November 2009 and personal interview with Harandane Dicko, Bamako, Mali, 21 November 2009.

5. For an overview of the history of photography in Africa see Haney (2010). See also Ogbechie and Peffer (2010), which presents recent scholarship on photography in Africa.

6. Personal interview with Alioune Bâ, Bamako, Mali, 22 November 2009.

7. Personal interview with Alioune Bâ, Bamako, Mali, 22 November 2009. There are of course other accounts of the origins of the Bamako biennial. In all those that we have heard or of which we are aware, Huguier’s visit to Bamako figures prominently.

8. For a description of the restructurings of the relevant French ministries, agencies, and departments, see the official documentation on the Culturesfrance website, particularly ‘*Culturesfrance mode d’emploi*’, available at <http://www.culturesfrance.com/Culturesfrance-mode-d-emploi/pu9.html> (accessed 6 April 2010). It is worth noting, in this context, the names of the event’s successive creative directors. For the first two editions (1994 and 1996), there were no creative directors, although the event was strongly marked by the influence of Jean-Loup Pivin and his Paris-based publishing house, Revue Noire. Louis Mesplé was named creative director of the 1998 edition, and all subsequent editions have had named creative or curatorial direction. Simon Njami, with whose direction the event is, today, most closely identified, was named creative director for the 2001 edition (postponed from 2000) and saw it through three successive editions, stepping down after 2007. Michket Krifa and Laura Serani were named jointly as creative directors of the 2009 edition (personal interview with Ananías Léki Dago, Bamako, Mali, 15 November 2009). See also the catalogues for the 7th, 6th, 5th, 4th, and 3rd editions of the Rencontres: Rencontres africaines de la photographie, 7th, 2007, Bamako, Mali, *Dans la ville et au-delà: Bamako 2007, VIIes Rencontres africaines de la photographie*, exh. cat., Bamako festival of photography (Paris, 2007). Rencontres africaines de la photographie, 6th, 2005, Bamako, Mali, *Un Autre Monde, VIes Rencontres africaines de la Photographie*, exh. cat., Bamako festival of photography (Paris, 2005). Rencontres africaines de

la photographie, 5th, 2003, Bamako, Mali, *Rites Sacrés/Rites profanes, Ves Rencontres africaines de la Photographie*, exh. cat., Bamako festival of photography (Paris, 2003). *Rencontres africaines de la photographie*, 4th, 2001, Bamako, Mali, *Mémoires intimes d'un nouveau millénaire, Ives Rencontres africaines de la Photographie*, exh. cat., Bamako festival of photography (Paris, 2001). *Rencontres africaines de la photographie*, 3rd, 1998, Bamako, Mali, *Ja taa = 'prendre l'image': 3e Rencontres de la photographie africaine*, exh. cat. Bamako festival of photography (Arles, 1998).

9. Personal interview with Ananías Léki Dago, Bamako, Mali, 15 November 2009.

10. The *Rencontres du Sud* led to critical acclaim and the production of a catalogue locally in Côte d'Ivoire. Luc Gnago, who exhibited in the 2000 *Rencontres du Sud*, was subsequently hired as Reuters staff photographer for sub-Saharan Africa. A further testament to its success is the fact that it opened in Abidjan, against all odds, in February 2000, barely a month after Côte d'Ivoire was rocked by the coup d'état of 24 December 1999. The coup was accompanied by considerable violence (rioting, looting, and a wave of mutinies by the country's armed forces), and there followed a protracted period of civil unrest and political upheaval. For more information about the *Rencontres du Sud*, see Héric Libong's interview with Ananías Léki Dago, published in *Africultures*, 1 December 2000: <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=1665> (accessed 10 November 2009).

11. Personal interview with Peter Anders, Bamako, Mali, 20 November 2010. In 2007, Anders, working closely with Simon Njami, launched a Goethe-sponsored portfolio review workshop that was held in Maputo, Mozambique. In 2009, a second workshop was held in Bamako, with the same core group of invited participants. The workshop was designed to address what Anders and many others perceive as a 'lack of criticism' on the continent, with a focus on exposing participating photographers to critique of their work by a team of specialist curators over the long term. The event was decidedly 'off-programme' and was not officially connected with the *Rencontres*, and yet it piggybacked on the biennial's trading days.

12. Personal interview with Alioune Bâ, Bamako, Mali, 22 November 2009.

13. For a selection of recent reflections on the relationship of the biennial to this type of art see *Open 16*, No. 16 (2009), 'The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon: Strategies in Neo-Political Times'. It should be noted that the contributors to this volume are all curators and philosophers living and working in Europe. The journal *Third Text* has recently published an issue addressing similar questions. Unfortunately, we have not been able to obtain it at the time of this writing.

14. See Mbembe (2001).

15. See Mbembe and Paulissen (2009).

16. See Pamela Allara's (2009) rejoinder to Mbembe.

17. See Mbembe and Paulissen (2009).

18. Personal interview with Peter Anders, Bamako, Mali, 20 November 2010.

19. Personal interview with Aida Muluneh, via telephone/skype, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Washington, DC, 16 April 2010.

20. Personal interview with Ananías Léki Dago, Bamako, Mali, 15 November 2009.
21. Personal interview with Ananías Léki Dago, Bamako, Mali, 15 November 2009.
22. Personal interview with Aida Muluneh, via telephone/skype, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Washington, DC, 16 April 2010.
23. Personal interview with Aida Muluneh, via telephone/skype, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Washington, DC, 16 April 2010.
24. Personal interview with Kader Attia, Washington, DC, 25 February 2010.
25. Personal interviews Haney with Kelechi Amadi-Obi, Uche James-Iroha, Zaynab Odunsi, Amaize Ojeikere, Emeka Okereke, and Toyin Sokefun-Bello, 26 January, 28 January, 29 January, 2005 in Lagos, and 16 March, 18 March 2005 in London.
26. Personal communication, Smooth Ugochukwu, 28 July 2010; *PACA Inaugural Exhibition* (Enugu: PACA and British Council, 1992); *Overcoming Maps 3* (Enugu: PACA, 2004); Ugochukwu's forthcoming doctoral thesis, 'Mainstreaming/Alternativity: Pan-African Biennales in the Making of Contemporary African Art' (Atlanta: Emory University, 2010).
27. Notable in this regard was the collective adventure undertaken by a group of Nigerian photographers, who traveled overland by bus (and later, after their bus broke down, by public transportation) from Lagos to Bamako in order to participate in this year's edition. See 'Invisible Borders': [www.invisible-borders.blogspot.com](http://www.invisible-borders.blogspot.com).
28. Personal interview with Samuel Sidibé, Bamako, Mali, 17 November 2009.
29. Personal interview with Kader Attia, Washington, DC, 25 February 2010.
30. Personal interview with Bisi Silva, via telephone/skype, Lagos, Nigeria – Washington, DC, 23 April 2010.
31. Personal interview with Bisi Silva, via telephone/skype, Lagos, Nigeria – Washington, DC, 23 April 2010.
32. Personal interview with Aida Muluneh, via telephone/skype, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Washington, DC, 16 April 2010.
33. Personal interview with Aida Muluneh, via telephone/skype, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – Washington, DC, 16 April 2010.
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