

Africa in search of sustainability

By *Ati Metwaly*



The Arab Spring exhibition, photo from *Artocratie* (Artocracy), part of the *Inside Out* project by JR held in Tunisia.

Road to the highest artistic podium

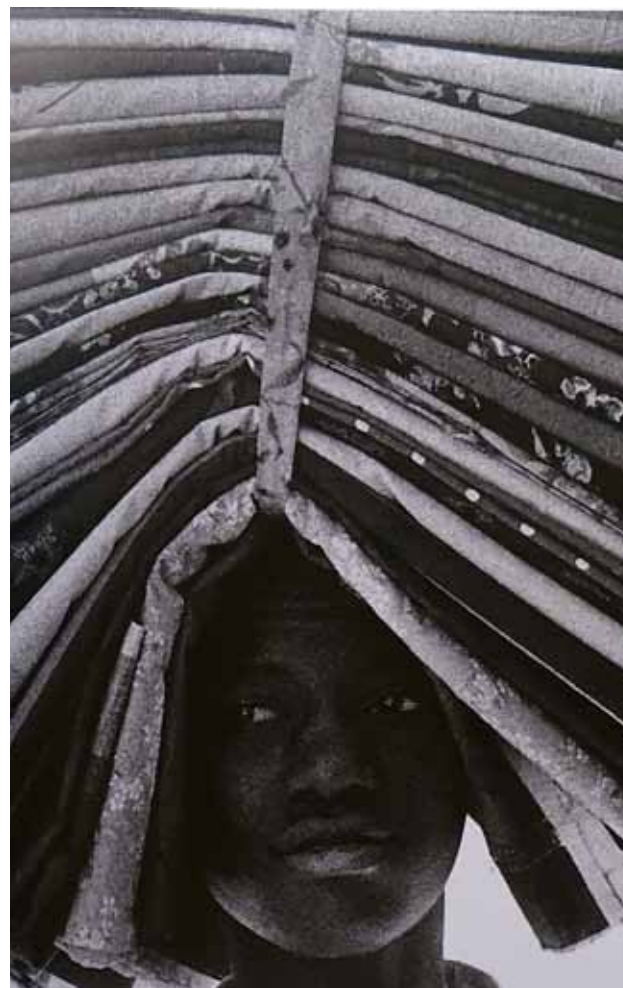
The brainchild of two French photographers. Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps, the first edition of the Bamako African Photography Biennial (*Rencontres de Bamako – Bamako Encounters*) saw daylight in 1994. The biennial was the initiative of the *Afrique en créations* (African Creations) association with support of the Malian government. Fifty photographers from fifteen African countries brought their artistic wealth to Bamako, highlighting political, social and economic dimensions. The first edition of the biennial allowed the African artists to meet and initiate a dynamic dialogue through which they were able to discover, for the first time, the heritage of countries documented through their artwork. Within the second edition of *Bamako Encounters*, successful agreements with the

Malian Ministry of Culture and Communication, the French Mission of Artistic Action and Cooperation in Bamako, and *Afrique en Création*, encouraged the biennial to develop and give additional exposure to the chosen works outside Malian capital, reaching France. Held under the title “Art and Tradition of Portraiture in Africa,” the second edition of the biennial, held in 1996, drew in a larger, international audience to the works of African photographers. The third edition of the biennial took place in 1998 and presented works characterized by a variety of artistic styles and presented by country. Today, after 14 years of continuous artistic and thematic development, dynamic creative exchanges, supported by a strong media backbone, the *Bamako African Photography Biennial* has become one of the most important artistic platforms showcasing

African photography while creating a vibrant exchange of thoughts between artists and their audience. The biennial has also gone through significant changes within its contents and thematic material. “First Encounters” concentrated on African portraiture, people and cultures, and throughout its consecutive editions, the artistic directors and curators aimed to look deeper into the continent, its social and political struggles and their reflection on the lives of all African populations. Being an important insight into the African artistic and social heritage, the consecutive exhibitions turned into a contemporary documentation of accumulated artistic experience, knowledge and history of the continent.

Africa’s creative testimonies

The 9th edition of the African Photography Biennial kicked off on 1 November 2011. The opening was attended by the crème-de-la-crème of the French and Malian arts scene, along with the governmental officials and supporters of the biennial initiative: Hamane Niang, Mali Minister of Culture; Giacomo Durazzo, EU Chief of Delegation in Mali; Cissé Mariam Kaidama Sidibé, Mali Prime Minister; and Frédéric Mitterrand, French Minister of Culture. As the core exhibition continued in Bamako until 1 January 2012, the first week of this ambitious event (1-6 November) was filled with workshops, lectures and portfolio presentations, artistic openings, screenings of films on photographic arts and meetings. Paralleling the exhibitions, the activities aimed to create an important exchange of thoughts between the artists, curators, academics and the audiences. The 9th edition of the biennial provided a detailed picture of the most surprising, shocking and inspiring realities of the continent. Through the title “For a Sustainable World,” this year’s artistic directors Michket Krifa and Laura Serani looked at Africa as a large reservoir of creativity, human force and identity. Forty-five photographers and 10 video artists from 27 African countries presented a total of 280 works, testifying to the quest for a sustainable world with the aim of outlining challenges and constraints dominating African realities. The artists identified and underscored several areas in need of action. Their works gave evidence of resistance and revealed a hope for building a sustainable world. All the narratives, nevertheless,



Pan-African Exhibition, Mouna Karray from Tunisia. Series *L'Equilibre precarie* (The Precarious Balance) 2006-11. The National Museum of Mali.

created strong messages, raised awareness and called for global mobilization to save the continent. The biennial combined a few exhibitions with “Pan-African” as a main exhibition theme. Works by artists from Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Mali, Congo, Togo, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Africa and many more were displayed inside the National Museum of Mali in Bamako. Some photographs in enlarged format were placed at the open air exhibition, set at the garden of the museum and expanding towards the neighboring National Park of Mali. In this edition the artists refused to turn a blind eye on an endless list of environmental, social and political issues. Ecological concerns, exhaustion or shortages of water and food,

exploitation of natural resources, deforestation and pollution, religious and ideological struggles, are no longer issues raised by activists and visionaries only. They have become equally alarming to artists. It is through their photography that they shed light on major concerns shattering the continent, distressing its cultures and people's well-being. With their creative documentations, the artists play an important role in the societies that they represent, giving them voice and drawing international attention to alarming realities, while the biennial became the perfect canvas for artistic voices expressing the most troublesome issues of the continent. At the same time, it was impossible to ignore the historical reality and the fact that many problems have been generated within the past half-century. The biennial that searches for the sustainability of the continent comes 50 years after the main wave of African decolonization and the continent's quest for independence and decent life. When in the early 1960s, French, British and Spanish colonies started calling for independence, they looked forward to radical social and economic changes. Has this liberation managed to ameliorate issues of the quality of life or brought a long-awaited happiness? The artists give a creative assessment and indulge into discussions... The conclusion one draws from the exhibition is that Africa is bleeding on an economic, social and political level. Corruption and capitalistic exploiters, globalization, authoritarian regimes, internal struggles, religious and traditional clashes, and other similar concerns, make it difficult for people to find a sustainable life in a world that is hardly bearable. The 9th edition of the African Photography Biennial becomes a balance sheet, and an important eye-opener on the struggles of African countries.

Photographers as chroniclers

Documentation created by the photographers and video artists is fresh and valid. Being citizens and protagonists in the continent, they go deep into the problems by presenting the shocking life conditions in many African countries, displaying the many issues that challenge the well-being of their nations, families and individuals. As such, artists prove once again that their role is no longer that of a passive observer. Today, artists are active contributors to society and employ important tools

that reveal their reality to the world, which instigates calls for action and intervention. Through his lens, George Osodi from Nigeria underscores the shocking contrast between his oil-rich country and 70 percent of the population living on less than one dollar a day. The disturbing images of injustice carry a deplorable duality, for example, children playing in the middle of the deadly gas flares. Similarly, Akintunde Akinleye from Nigeria, depicts people living in utter poverty in a wetland that is slowly but surely vanishing as it is engorged by lakes of waste and oil. The poverty is equally depressing in the photographs by Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso. Titled poignantly *Human error*, Ouedraogo captures people living in garbage dumps. They are usually unaware of the danger of hazardously toxic waste, and continue to harvest their crops to feed their children. Toxic waste returns in work by Kiripi Katembo from Congo, depicting their appalling effect on water and air. Elisse Fitte-Duval showcases the effects of climate changes on the lives of many villages in Martinique and how the elevation water levels has caused significant parts of urban areas, fields and households to become submerged. Too impoverished to look for shelter elsewhere, people continue living with their feet literally in water. Photographers from Mali envision life as a constant struggle. They consider the 21st century to be preying on the environment. Bakary Emmanuel Daou's (Mali) black and white photographic series titled *Is our world sustainable?* presents people in relation to plastic which, as the artist believes, has particularly long-lasting characteristics, the artificial durability of which is not necessarily beneficial for human kind. In a way, Daou sees people themselves turning into plastic, struggling in a plastic life, and running after tomorrow while destroying the present.

In his video work *The Light*, Malian artist Bakary Diallo compares people to lemons, which are caught in the grip of dictatorship and war. He sees people suppressed and suffocating, yet ready to give their lives for freedom, justice, peace and progress. Diallo's message reaches beyond his country and, as such, portrays struggles as far as North Africa with the Arab Spring in 2011.

With the biennial searching for a sustainable world, the positioning of North African artists remains very particular. Artists from western and central Africa



Pan-African Exhibition, still from the award-winning video by Khaled Hafez from Egypt: A77a Project: On Presidents & Superheroes, 2009.

analyze the deterioration of their everyday realities: deforestation and political and social instabilities. Those wounds remain painfully open and it is the sense of never-ending tragedy that creates an alarming dialogue. In the works of North African artists there is a sense of an evident alienation and a search for national unity which was destroyed by years of authoritative regimes and the impact of identity suffocating censorship through religious, social or political means.

In her 2009 series titled *Dislocation*, the Algerian artist Katia Kameli looks at the roofs of the buildings where sheets and clothing dry freely in the air, and satellite dishes are the window to the larger world. The juxtaposition of temporal and special elements is soaked within Algerian limitations.

The Arab Spring calling for freedom

The Pan-African exhibition was not lacking in representation from North Africa, with several Tunisians and Egyptians, in particular, reflecting on the years leading up to the revolutions. These artists also highlighted the sudden artistic proliferation that happened due to the revolutions' outbreaks on 14 January in Tunisia, followed by 25 January in Egypt.

Tunisian Hichem Driss presented his series *Le Grand Parcours* created in 2009 and 2010. He named it after Tunisia's National Road GP1, which runs close to the Libyan border. Driss tells a story about people living along the road, their lives and shattered dreams. Their hopeless faces are drawn by the brutality of the events in the area. In *Les Faire Ailleurs* (Elsewhere), Sophia

Baraket raises the question of Africa being considered a dumping ground for waste, trash of used spare parts. Western Africa's suffering and North Africa's calls for dignity are reflected in Mouna Karray's series *L'Equilibre precaire* (The Precarious Balance). Created between 2006 and 2011 the photographs present sellers from Niamey, the capital of Niger. Karray did not have solid plans to display works until the Tunisian revolution. Mohamed Bouazizi, a young street vendor in Tunisia, torched himself to death to protest the humiliating confiscation of his goods by the local authorities. Bouazizi's suicide was one of the major sparks of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and, consequently, the Arab Spring. Karray found relevance with the sellers in Niger: the same accumulated pain and anger that exploded in the Arab Spring countries.

In the *Fragments d'un vecu en Tunisie*, Lofti Ghariani captures the crowds that filled the streets of the Tunisian capital on 14 January as they demanded the removal of the authoritarian ruler of Tunisia, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. On her part, Egyptian Nermine Hammam's shot of Tahrir Square in Cairo, in her series *Revolution*, reflects the same dynamics and force of the millions of people asking for change and hoping for a better life.

Along parallel lines, *The A77a Project: On Presidents and Superheroes*, a video created in 2009 by Egyptian artist, Khaled Hafez, reflects the last decades of Egyptian history through the eyes of one of the Ancient Egyptian God Anubis. The video creates a dynamic assessment of the rulers, people, and demonstrations – social, traditional and religious – and contrasts aspects that contributed equally to the events in January and the following months.

The Arab Spring erupted in full force in January 2011, while the exhibition's organizers, artistic directors and logistical team were in the middle of setting the 9th edition of the African Photography Biennial. This year, Bamako Biennial dedicated a separate exhibition to the Arab Spring. Curated by Michket Krifa, Tunisian herself, a special exhibition titled "The Arab Spring" was held at the Memorial Mobido Keita, displaying works by Tunisian and Egyptian artists.

Here, Nermine Hammam and Khaled Hafez returned with their works related strictly to the Egyptian Revolution. Hafez presented a video titled *Field*

Statements: Images from Tahrir Square, wherein he incorporated a series of 13 artistic statements, prepared by the Egyptian artist, which each contributed to the piece with a few minutes of either video work or photography about the 18 initial days of the Egyptian revolution that culminated in the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak.

Within "The Arab Spring" exhibition, Hammam's *Upekkha* series set Egyptian soldiers in unconventional and rather utopian surroundings: among fields of flowers or mountains covered with snow, or contemplating natural scenery. Works created at the beginning of 2011, shortly after the 18 days, represent the artist's emotions towards the army. Though Egyptians' feelings on the military have been seriously altered by the months of rule by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), Hammam's work documents the emotions that overwhelmed millions in the first weeks following the initial 18 days of the Egyptian revolution. The majority of Egyptians' discontent towards SCAF now contrasts with the positive sentiments that shine through the photographs of the military.

Photographic documentation of Artocracy, the Tunisian *Inside Out* project, that took place in six Tunisian cities in March 2011, reminds us of a change taking place in Tunisia. In a country where the only portraits were those of the former president Ben Ali, the *Inside Out* project chose Tunisians as subjects, covering the walls of governmental buildings and police stations with their images. This artistic experiment, lead by artist JR, incorporated five Tunisian photographers, with Hichem Driss and Sophia Baraket among them. But, *Inside Out* reached far beyond artistic messages, it carried important social statements testifying to a crucial change that happened on the ideological level in the country.

The Arab Spring exhibition included, also, a video work by Faten Gaddes: *Liberte que tu nous tiens* (Freedom When You Hold Us). In this 20-minute film, Gaddes looks at the Jasmine Revolution against the backdrop of Tunisian history: Ben Ali's rule and his fall, repressions, social tensions, women's roles, Libyan refugees settling at the Tunisian borders and so on. Like Hafez, Gaddes collected works by many Tunisian artists incorporating video, photography, cartoons and caricature, clips of

demonstrations, graffiti, stencils, and paid homage to the martyrs.

The Arab Spring exhibition was not limited to the depiction of the major 21st century historical events. There were an equal number of social and ideological aspects that were shown through the works. Not only was it the revolution that bubbled with energy captured by the lens, but also many artists played a double-role becoming both documentarians and the core protagonists of the revolution. Their introspective works carry an autobiographical element, while setting a rich reservoir of historical documentation.

The ideological change is seen through the shift from photography serving aesthetic purposes towards brave shots of anger, revolt and hope within the authoritarian reality. The do-or-die resilience of the protesters brought about a change that 30 years of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt would have never have allowed to be expressed. As new doors have opened, North Africa will still need to distance itself in order to build artistic reflections generated by these events.

Mali's own wealth

Amongst the depictions of Africa and the Arab Spring as top social concerns, the biennial did not neglect the presentation of its own photographic heritage. Situated near the same space, separate halls of the National Museum of Mali held the Mali Photography Archives – an exhibition co-curated by Samuel Sidibé, director of the National Museum of Mali along with Sokona Tounkara and Laura Serani. The exhibition provided an important insight into the craft and passion of the artists, as well as otherwise unreachable documentation of the times, lifestyles and tastes of Malians.

The project displayed works by three remarkable Malian photographers: Malick Sidibé, Abderramane Sakaly and Soungalo Malé, showcasing true artistry and historic heritage, eternalized in the black and white photography. Without a doubt, this project was a unique witness to a key period of Mali's history, spanning the end of World War II to the 1980s.

Born in 1935, Malick Sidibé, who received special honors during the 9th Biennial, is considered to be one of the most important, world renowned,



Pan-African Exhibition, Omar Victor Diop from Senegal. Series Fashion 2112, 2011. The National Museum of Mali.

Malian photographers. He received many prestigious international awards, including Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for lifetime achievements (2007) and ICP Infinity Award for lifetime achievement. His works were exhibited at the major photography and arts events in the USA, Switzerland, Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, Sweden, France, Portugal, etc. A documentary was even dedicated to the Malian photographer. Directed by Cosima Spender, "Dolce Vita Africana" (2008) highlights Malick Sidibé and his photography as an



Side wall of the National Museum of Mali with the attendees of the opening ceremony of Bamako Encounters.

important form of historical documentation on Malian social history.

Similarly, another very important exhibition curated by Simon Njami, displayed a collection of photographs from the personal collection of Mr. Sindika Dokolo. Considered one of the most remarkable private collections of the region, the per Dokolo exhibition, included black and white photography acquired systematically and meticulously over a decade, dating back to the 1960s and depicted “Us”, the concept of “Self.” and self personification.

The portraiture of the African continent, various common people from different walks of life, from the West and East, North and South, are immortalized in the collection, with their identities forever commemorated and documented.

Within the context of the country, the biennial tries to find its validity and acceptance within the Bamako audience by setting large prints on the wall surrounding the museum and the National Park.

According to Michket Krifa, this year’s “Encounters” integrated with schools by inviting students to visit the exhibitions. Organizers also managed to attract a number of national television channels to support the event by reporting updates to the public.

Though in its 9th edition, the biennial reached an unprecedented success on the international arena reputation wise. There is still space for extensive work to reach all layers of the Malian audience, which, paradoxically, are among the main protagonists depicted in the works of the artists.

Beyond the Biennial

The Pan-African exhibition, The Arab Spring, Photography Archives, as well as Monographs curated by Michket Krifa and David Goldblatt, are all representations on a theme and are among the many creative activities of the 9th Bamako “Encounters”.

The rich material tackled in this year’s biennial provokes debate and incites reflection. The continent presents itself through its very own artistic production, purified of the touristic or colonial sensational angles that dominated many depictions of Africa in earlier decades. Today, within a few weeks of the biennial, Bamako became a home to artistic self-evaluation and the thousands of truthful stories told by people and nations through the photographic lens and the eye of a camera. Sometimes painful reality is uplifted with some poetic accents expressed by the artists. Empty Skies, 2008 by an Egyptian artist, Amal Kenawy, is a short, animated cartoon, inspired by a poem. The video was originally created for the Museum of Modern Arts in Tokyo and an exhibition entitled “Drawing Emotion”. Amr Fekry also from Egypt displayed his series Cairo Flying Patterns, 2009, where minarets and domes reach towards the sky, with imprints on the photo of iconography borrowed from the architecture.

Though soothing in their content, even works that do not present directly the major concerns of the continent are still strongly connected to the traditional, religious or historical heritage of their creators. For example, the case of Omar Victor Diop from Senegal, who hides behind the study of fashion aesthetics and beauty concepts only to stress even more strongly issues of the consumerist demands of today’s societies.

Whether direct documentation or metaphoric canvases, the biennial proves the new dimension of today’s photography and its strong link to the events taking place in each African country; whether they are expressing political or social struggles, whether they are shedding light on poverty or injustice, it is also photography that continues to push the revolutions forward.

On an international level, the biennial goes beyond its Malian borders. Parts of previous editions of the Bamako “Encounters” were hosted in museums and galleries in France, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Tunisia, Egypt, and South Africa among others. Between 10 and

13 November 2011, the 15th edition of Paris Photo (2011) invited a number of artists presenting during the 9th Biennial to showcase their works in Paris.

Whether in Mali or reaching to other countries on the continent, or in Europe, the “Encounters” have established themselves as an important source of inspiration for artists and their audiences. It is also a crucial wake-up call and an invitation to reflect on the present situation of much of the African continent. With no doubt, the 9th edition of the African Photography Biennial incited many questions and though it leaves the audience to find their won answers or has left the debates open, their presence per se is strongly relevant in today’s world.

Winners of the 9th edition of the African Photography Biennial

Pieter Hugo from South Africa: The Prize of Seydou Keïta, Grand Prize of the Bamako Encounters awarded by the Malian Ministry of Culture (value: EUR 3,000)

Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso and Nyani Quarmyne from Ghana: Prize for the best photographic work for press or reportage awarded by the European Union (value: EUR 3,000)

Khalil Nemmaoui from Morocco: Prize for the best photography from the francophone region, awarded by the International Francophone Organization (value: EUR 1,500)

Élise Fitte-Duval from Martinique: Prize of Casa Africa (value: publication of the monographic work and exhibition in Las Palmas, Canary Islands)

Khaled Hafez from Egypt: for his video work The A77a Project: On Presidents and Superheroes. Prize of the Fondation Blachère, a French corporate foundation aiming to promote art in Africa (value: EUR 1,500 in addition to two weeks residency in Apt, France, in July 2012. Moreover, Hafez’s work will be displayed at a group exhibition in Arles during July 2012, the city’s photography month.)