

Constructing artworks. Issues of Authorship and Articulation around Seydou Keïta's Photographs.

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Seydou Keïta's work, and on the way in which this work has been received and conceptualized within both the African and the Western context. These photographs have a long history of geographical and cultural displacement that has deeply influenced their status, as well as the status of the people who engaged with them. The essay follows the development of this history, dealing with the processes of construction of Seydou Keïta as an author and of his photographs as international acclaimed pieces of art.

Keywords: Seydou Keita, African photography, African Contemporary Art, Authorship

INTRODUCTION

This essay focuses on Seydou Keïta's work, and on the way in which the work of this Malian photographer has been received and conceptualized within both the African and the Western context. Keïta's photographs have a long history of geographical and cultural displacement that has deeply influenced their status, as well as the status of the people who engaged with them. From a photographic studio in Bamako in the 1950's, these portraits moved to the houses of their purchasers. At least thirty years later, some negatives moved from Keïta's personal archive to an exhibition in the Centre for African Art of New York. Attracted by the aesthetical beauty of these portraits, André Magnin bought some negatives for the biggest collection of Contemporary African Art, the Pigozzi Collection. Finally, only few years ago, the Pigozzi Collection donated some of the photographs it owns to the National Museum of Bamako.

As Edwards and Hart pointed out, "a photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image [...] Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience" (2004: 1). Consequently this analysis follows both the aesthetic and the social trajectories of Keïta's portraits to draw their story and to follow the changes of their social and aesthetic status.

The following text is divided in three parts. The first section presents a short story of Seydou Keïta's life, from the beginning of his carrier as a studio photographer in the 1940's in Bamako to the last ten years of his life as an

internationally awarded artist. The second section shows the way in which his position as author as well as the interpretation of his photographs changed according to the space/time setting of their production and of their reception. Finally, the third section analyses the way in which the photographs' journey around the world might be seen as an expression of the way in which political hegemony articulates itself through aesthetics.

1. SEYDOU KEÏTA. FROM THE STUDIO TO THE MUSEUM.¹

Initially trained by his father to be a carpenter, Seydou Keïta received his first camera, a Kodak Brownie Flash, in 1935 from his uncle, coming back to Bamako after a trip to Dakar. He opened his photographic studio in 1948, in downtown Bamako, across from the city's prison and down the street from the train station, a quite active area of the city, in which Keïta became quickly an important personality. He was one of the first people to open a photographic studio in Bamako,² in a period in which owning a portrait photograph came to symbolize modernity for Bamako's growing middle class (Diawara 1999).

Seydou Keïta learned the basic technical aspects of his new job from his "mentor" Mountaga Kouyaté (Magnin 1997: 9), but in what concerns his own style, he might be considered, and he defined himself, as a self-taught artist. The production of his studio was essentially commercial and it was successful. In almost fifteen years of commercial activity he built up an archive of around 10.000 – 20.000 negatives.³ His success attracted the attention of the new president of the independent Republic of Mali, and in 1962 Keïta was required to become the official government photographer. He continued to run his studio for another year, until he was asked to shut it down. He worked for the government until his retirement, in 1977, and all his negatives remained under the care of his family members.

At this point, a new life began for his work. As Birgham described in her interesting article (1999), during the 1970's, Susan Vogel was travelling around West-Africa with her husband, searching for new artworks for her collection. In Bamako, she collected a small number of negatives from Keïta's archive, thanks to authorization permitted by the photographer's family. More than ten years later, in 1991 she decided to enlarge some of these negatives for the exhibition she was organizing at the New York Centre for African Art, "Africa Explores:

¹ The information about Keïta's life and work comes from Magnin (1997) and Birgham (1999).

² The first photographic studio in Bamako was the "Photo-Hall Soudanais" opened by a French photographer, Pierre Garnier, in 1935. Keïta acquired his studio equipments from another Malian photographer, Mountaga Kouyaté, in 1948 (Birgham 1999: 61).

³ The exact numbers of negatives in Keïta's archive is not known. Different sources contained vastly different data (from a minimum of 7.000 negatives to a maximum of 30.000), probably depending from the different interviews Keïta gave during the growth of his success.

20th Century African Art”. In the exhibition, the photographs’ author was designated as “unknown”. Susan Vogel claimed she had lost her travel notes with the author’s name (Birgham 1999: 62). One of Keïta’s portraits was used on the cover of the exhibition catalogue (Vogel 1991).

André Magnin fell in love with Keïta’s photographs and decided to organize a trip to Bamako to find the author of the photographs. At that time Magnin was already a well known curator,⁴ particularly interested in African Contemporary Art as agent of the French-Italian collector Jean Pigozzi and of his Contemporary African Art Collection.⁵ Magnin went to Bamako with the catalogue in his hand, asking people if they were able to recognize the style of those portraits (Magnin 1997: 7). Malik Sidibé, another photographer, and Keïta’s former apprentice, provided his old teacher’s address. Magnin gained Keïta’s confidence quite rapidly, and together they analyzed the archive. He selected a large number of negatives and brought them to Paris to enlarge them for their debut on the art market.⁶ The first monographic exhibition was made in Paris in 1994, at the Cartier Foundation. At the same time Keïta’s photographs animated the first edition of *Les Rencontres Photographique de Bamako*, the first continental biennale on African photography, organized and financed by the francophone cultural cooperation. From this year, the international reputation of Keïta’s work grew exponentially, transforming Seydou Keïta in the one of the best known African contemporary artists in the world.

Just a few months before his death, in 2001, Keïta broke his partnership with Magnin, and signed an exclusive contract with another French collector, Jean-Marc Patras. The “Seydou Keïta association”, founded by Keïta’s family after his death with the juridical help of Patras, brought legal action against André Magnin to obtain the restitution of 921 negatives, the most famous ones and the ones having the most interesting commercial value, still in Magnin’s and Pigozzi’s hands. This trial created an interesting international debate around the relationship between the Western market (collectors, exhibitors, buyers and

⁴ For instance, he was one of the curators of the very well known exhibition “Magiciens de la Terre”, in the *Centre Pompidou* (Paris), in 1989.

⁵ The CAAC is the biggest contemporary African art collection, based in Geneva, and founded by Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin in 1989. Pigozzi, a very rich French-Italian business man and a passionate collector, decided to found the collection after seeing the exhibition “Le Magicien de la Terre” in Paris, that, he said, revealed to him the richness of the non-Western contemporary art. Information from the official web site: www.caac.com

⁶ The precise number of the negatives Magnin bought is almost impossible to know, and it is at the base of a very complicated court case between Magnin and the Keïta’s family. I will expound on this in greater detail later in this text. Magnin writes that he bought almost 200 negatives, while Keïta’s family says that 921 negatives are still in Magnin’s hands, after the death of Seydou Keïta. Birgham (1999: 63), quite prudently, speaks about “hundreds” of negatives. The price Magnin has paid is also a heated argument, considering the present asking price for the photographs.

sellers) and African artists,⁷ putting both the Pigozzi Collection and the Patras Gallery in an embarrassing position.

Keïta's photographs social existence found a metaphoric ending point a few years ago. After exposing African contemporary artists' work around the world, the Pigozzi Collection recently began to donate some pieces to museums located in the cities from which the artists come. Thus Seydou Keïta is today exhibited in the Malian National Museum in Bamako. His photographs, after a trip around the world, are finally back home with a Malian audience.

However the work has a completely different status than it did before international acclaim, as does the author of this work. And the way Malian people look at these photographs today has changed as well. These changes are what will be analysed in the following sections.

2. CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING THE AUTHORSHIP OF SEYDOU KEÏTA'S PORTRAITS

Authorship within the history of African arts is a very complex issue.⁸ Some scholars maintain that "traditional arts"⁹ have no recognizable authors, because they are usually produced by collective atelier. As a result, individual authorship does not become canonized. For these scholars it is Western scholarship that has informed and influenced the emphasis on individual authorship in the field of African art (Vogel 1999). Other scholars, on the contrary, consider the invisibility of the African author as the Western scholars' fault. It has been the result of the inaccuracy of Western studies and their tendency to exotize the "other", looking at general dynamics in spite of looking at the very local phenomena. As Lagamma pointed out, "in contrast to the relatively well-defined parameters observed by Western art historians, the emphasis in the study of non-Western art has for several generations been placed on studying entire cultures" (1998: 19).

Also out of the African context, the author occupies a very problematic position, especially in light of new postmodernist criticism. Following Barthes, for instance, the author's position might be seen as a modern invention, improved by positivist thought (1994a: 491). The author's name has an ordering function in Western classificatory knowledge. It is, in Foucault's words, "an ideological product" that "marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation

⁷ Many articles are available on line, each of them presenting a quite different perspective, but the ones worth reading are Gbadamassi (2006), and Rips (2006).

⁸ Two numbers of *African Arts* [no. 31 (4) and 32 (1)] are concentrated exclusively on this argument.

⁹ The label of "traditional" is a very problematic one. Some criticisms underline the complex articulation of African arts in the space between tradition and modernity (Barber 1987 and 1997; Mudimbe 1994). Ranger's work (1983) is an illuminating approach to this theoretical problem.

of meanings” (1984: 119). Through the identification of the author, the description of his life and his work, through their inscription in a coherent canon, expressed within social institutions as museums, universities and schools,¹⁰ the hegemonic power expresses itself within the field of knowledge. This point will be better analysed in the 3rd section of this text, by examining Laclau’s and Mouffe’s conception of hegemony and articulation. Now, to advance this analysis, it is important to consider that in the African context Western colonial and postcolonial power has been deeply exerted through the canonization of knowledge.¹¹ The power of canonization of contemporary African arts is still in Western hands, the hands of Western curators, collectors, buyers, and scholars.¹² This point makes the debate on authorship in Africa more complex.

In the already quoted criticism of the author’s position made by Barthes, the French philosopher states that the multiplicity of text’s meanings finds a place of unification in the reader. The author is a creation, its existence is granted by the existence of the text and by the audience’s readings (1994b: 1215). Following this point of view, the reading of a text (in this case of a photograph) influences the own status of the work, and the very existence of an author. In the specific case of a photograph, the situation is, if possible, more complex. Before joining a possible reader, a photograph, as Barthes pointed out, is already the result of an intricate negotiation between the photographer and his subject. “In front of the lens – Barthes writes – I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art” (2000: 13).

¹⁰ The Althusserian concept of Ideological State Apparatuses seems useful in this theoretical context (Althusser 1971).

¹¹ In this sense, Mudimbe’s statement seems very appropriate: “we must interrogate ourselves on the signification of canonization” (1994: 67).

¹² In Keita’s story the western character, as signalled above, are Susan Vogel, André Magnin, Jean Pigozzi and Jean-Marc Patras.



No.1 Seydou Keïta, 'Untitled', 1952



No. 2 Seydou Keïta, 'Untitled', 1952

Following these ideas, the position of the author, of the reader, as well as the interpretation of the artwork, are always the results of a complex process of negotiation, in which the social, the cultural, and the personal dimensions intercept in a specific space/time setting. The journey Keïta's portraits embarked upon travelling all over the world from Bamako and back, determined many transformations related to the different ways in which the characters of this negotiation articulate themselves.

As Manthia Diawara pointed out, it is important “to understand that at the time they were taking people's pictures in Bamako, neither Malick Sidibé nor Seydou Keïta considered himself an artist” (2003: 10). The types of photos Keïta took and the perfection he achieved in his work were a condition of the demand that existed in Bamako at that time (Diawara 2003: 10). The studio was a commercial activity and Keïta's portraits were the result of a commercial negotiation between Keïta and his clients. Birgham (1999: 57) underlines the very important role of Keïta's clients in the portrait's genesis as well as in deciding the portrait's setting. The clients participated in the process: they chose the background, the gadget to be photographed with, as well as the way of dressing. And Keïta was able to find the best way to put all these elements together in a representation satisfying the client's desire for a beautiful and meaningful self-representation.

As his studio became more successful, Keïta created an archive of all his portraits' negatives. This archive had above all a commercial function. Often his clients came back asking for a new copy of their portraits. Keïta ordered his archive through a progressive numeric system, because he often did not know his clients personally. By putting the negatives in a personal archive, and ordering them by numbers, Keïta removed his clients' identity, progressively objectifying their image and assuming an individual position as author of their portraits (Birgham 1999: 57).

The negatives remained almost forgotten in Keïta's family house for a long time. When some of these negatives were enlarged and exhibited for the first time in New York, in 1991, this process of gradual transformation was completed. For the first time those portraits were observed as art objects. Their author was labelled as "unknown", their status was an expression of the exhibition curator, in this case Susan Vogel. Organizing "Africa Explore" in the New York Centre for African Art she was following a personal objective, to show Western audiences contemporary expression of urban Africa. The absence of the portraits' author's name in this context functioned to give a general overview that seemed objective and seemed to represent the whole continent.

It is probably at this step of the process that something interesting happened: Black and white studio portraits started to become a paradigmatic expression of African contemporary art for the Western audiences.¹³ Magnin's trip to Bamako, to "discover" the author of the portraits, and the consequent exhibition in the Cartier Foundation in Paris, opened a new field for Western studies of African Art and, above all, for the business of collectors and exhibitors. The construction of African photography as an object of interest, as Werner (2001) underlines, started just after Magnin's trip, at the beginning of the 90's, thanks to the work of a number of Western experts and collectors as Magnin himself, Jean-François Werner, Françoise Huguier, Bernard Deshamps, and Susan Vogel.¹⁴

A new interest in the authorship began in the field of African photography. As Appiah pointed out, "in the age of mechanical reproduction aesthetic individualism and the absorption of the artist's life into the conception of the work can be seen precisely as a mode of identifying objects for the market" (1999: 143). A new life started for the old Malian man, Seydou Keïta, retired from 1977 and living with his family a peaceful life in Bamako. The construction of Keïta as author was a commercial initiative, functioning to enlarge the potential market of his portraits. The charismatic image of this old black man, a self-taught artist, as all the Western critics have defined him,¹⁵ able to produce an art that many critics have compared to western modern paintings'

¹³ Mercier (2006: 97) underlines that it might depend from the Western exotic gaze that likes to see only a black and white modernity for urban Africa. At the same time, it is possible to say that Western audience try to understand contemporary African urban reality using the reference it has in his mind, a black and white modernity associated with the stereotypic image of the black diaspora of the Southern United States, portrayed by Hollywood films on Mississippi blues. See for example pictures n. 1 and 2, page above.

¹⁴ It is interesting to see as the anglophone and the francophone worlds have engaged a competition for the merit of the discover of African photographers, a sign of the paternalistic attitude implicit in the collectors, exhibitors and scholars discourse. Surfing on internet, I remarked that in the anglophone world Susan Vogel is considered as the first Western "discoverer" of Keïta, while in the francophone world the name quoted is that of Françoise Huguier. Magnin is universally considered as the person who gave Keïta the present success.

¹⁵ As Salah Hassan underlines, "the Art of the untrained is thought to possess originality and an untrained African beauty (1999: 218) and for this reason Western critics, always in search of an exotic originality, usually underline, and sometimes invent, this attribute.

aesthetic (Birgham 1999: 65), was a perfect product to be sold on the global market of arts.

Seydou Keïta participates in the process of reconstructing his authorship, being well aware of the economic gain international recognition has given to him. As Birgham underlines through some specific examples, the Malian photograph “has seemed at times to retrospectively reframe his status as an author” (1999: 66). In the latest interviews, for instance, he reformulated some biographical episodes, underlining his responsibility in making some specific aesthetic choices during the setting of his studio portraits, progressively cancelling the role he had formally accorded his clients. He became progressively aware of the potential value of his work, transforming his personal narrative in a way that catered to the desires of a Western audience/market.

Keïta’s work and his position as author changed in Africa as well, coinciding with the escalation of the global interest in African photography. The Pigozzi Collection made a donation of some photographs to the Malian National Museum in Bamako. This brought Keïta’s work back home, but under a completely different light. No more a personal souvenir of the 1950’s in some Malian house, the portraits are now extremely valuable art pieces exhibited in the National museum.

After Keïta’s death in 2001, a final episode influenced this complex process of construction and deconstruction of his authorship. As mentioned in the first section, a few months before dying, Keïta signed an exclusive contract with Jean-Marc Patras, the main rival of the duo Pigozzi-Magnin and one of the most important contemporary African art exhibitors in Europe. After Keïta’s death, Patras joined with the association representing Keïta’s family to sue Magnin, accusing him of still reproducing prints from 921 of Keïta’s negatives without permission.

This episode brings the analysis of Keïta’s authorship to an interesting point. “To whom does the photograph belong?” The question provocatively posed by Barthes (2000: 13) is a very central one, especially in Keïta’s story. As Walter Benjamin (1973) first pointed out, the age of mechanical reproduction puts definitively in crisis the concept of authenticity as well as the concept of ownership. Printed photographs are always copies. It is possible to say that there does not exist any authentic printed photograph. Every photograph is a copy, enlarged from the original negative. The first clients in Bamako owned only a copy of their portrait; they did not own the original. A copy was exposed in New York in 1991, as well as in Paris three years later and in Bamako at the beginning of 2000’s. The commercial value was given by a personal signature of Keïta (Birgham 1999), a witness of his existence as an author.¹⁶

¹⁶ Keïta started to sign the printed copies of the photographs at the beginning of the 90’s, when his work started to be known in the Western art market and his position as an author became influential. As Birgham explains, “the ability to identify authorship depends on the work’s literal connection to a signature or on its new viewers’ knowledge of the author’s style. Unlike his vintage prints, Keita’s negatives are not stamped with the name of his studio, and the prints made from them bear no literal signature” (1999: 62).

As Michel Rips articulately stated, the problem in this case, between Patras, Magnin, Pigozzi and Keïta's family, is not about who owns the negatives but about "who owns Keïta" (Rips 2006). Who has the right to sell him, his signature, and his story? Who built this story up and why? Was it Keïta himself and his family? Was it the people who made his name internationally recognized¹⁷? What kind of match is played around these photographs and which effects could it have? As Amselle (2005: 130) points out African contemporary art can be seen as a construction, and the next section will analyse Seydou Keïta's story as part of this construction process.

3. THE CANONIZATION OF KEÏTA'S WORK. AROUND THE ARTICULATION OF WESTERN HEGEMONY.

To consider, with Amselle, African contemporary art only as a construction could be seen as simplistic. The authors and their work are the actual expression of a creative will, the negotiation of individual sensibilities within the contradictions composing the contemporary world. Thus their art is not a construction. What is a construction is the canonization of both works and artists in an organized corpus of knowledge that works within a hegemonic system of relationships.

To use the concept of hegemony in the contemporary theoretical debate can be problematic. It is an overused term, with a long and complex history that goes from Gramsci's definition up to the present re-conceptualization. Here this term is used following the definition formulated in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). They look at this term as something indicating a process, not a fixed social reality. "Hegemony – they write – is a political type of relation, a form of politics; but not a determinable location within a topography of the social" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 137). Hegemony is a practice; the openness of the social is its precondition. This practice and the formation of this political type of relationship "cannot be referred to a specific logic of a single social force" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 142) but it has to be traced following its articulation through "a variety of hegemonic nodal points" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 137).

The history of African art is inextricably connected with the history of colonialism. The power exerted by the colony required the knowledge of local cultures, local histories and local ways of thinking. Western anthropologists started to collect objects, both art objects and everyday life tools, ordering them in a complex net of artificial definitions. As Mudimbe pointed out, "ethnology and colonialism articulated themselves in ethnographic museums" (1994: 60). In ethnographic museums the representation of the "other" was functionally

¹⁷ Rips (2006) states in his article that Jean Pigozzi tried to boycott an exhibition of Keïta's photographs in New York, because it was organized without Pigozzi Collection's permission. To justify his action, Pigozzi said: "I own Seydou Keïta!".

connected with the colonial exercise of power. These museums informed European surrealism, making the aesthetic of African art part of the Western canon. But during this displacement the objects were transformed, following the ordering criteria of what Mudimbe has defined as the “ethnological reason”.¹⁸ As Baudrillard pointed out, “for ethnology to live, its object must die” (1983: 12). Brought out from its original context the object loses its semantic mobility connected with its social existence in a specific symbolic context, and it is transplanted in a fixed order of academic history, science and museums (Baudrillard 1983: 21).

As Keïta’s photographs’ story shows, the de-contextualization of the object from its social origin opens the possibility of a number of new social constructions. For example, the displacement of Keïta’s photographs from their context determined the construction of Seydou Keïta as an author and the interpretation of his work as a social witness of the modernization process in urban Africa. As Salah Hassan underlined, “African art remains largely a Western discipline, the product of Western sensibility and an expression of Western aesthetic responses to African visual culture. This partially explains the disparity between African art as it is presented in written texts and African art in reality” (1999: 216).

As I have written above, and Keïta’s story illustrates, museums are important nodal points in the hegemonic process of knowledge canonization. Keïta’s work arrived in Bamako’s museum only after a journey around the world and after being recognized as artwork by Western critics and the Western market. The academic debate on African popular cultures and arts (Barber 1987; Mudimbe 1994; Appiah 1999; Haynes 2000) is a useful entry point into a new approach to the study of African art. But Keïta’s story also shows that the interest in what is called “popular” is often driven by the interest of some external agents, such as following the example of Keïta’s story, Susan Vogel, André Magnin, Jean Pigozzi, and Jean-Marc Patras.

The canonization of the “popular” could be seen as the new frontier of the contemporary art market. The process of commodification of African art in a Western centred market (Appiah, 1999: 138) results in controlling African intellectual autonomy. Following this perspective, art is not the place through which the “other” finds a space for a free expression or a space that can hold a counter-narrative that expresses a challenge to the politics of representation. On the contrary, the commodification of this art tends to create a new exoticism through which the practice of hegemony finds important nodal points. “What we are witnessing – Salah Hassan underlined – is not the ultimate recognition of the plurality of history, but a return of Western grand narratives in the guise of

¹⁸ Mudimbe (1994: 59 – 60) described the “ethnological reason” as the process through which the West has built up fictional objects, has analyzed them, has classified them, has assigned them a label, a definition, and finally has transformed their status through their aesthetization.

asserting “cultural difference”, evidenced in the ideology of neo-conservatism and reactionary Western practice” (1999: 217)

As underlined above, hegemony “cannot be conceived as an irradiation of effects from a privileged point” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 141). It is a practice inscribed in specific socio-political contexts. As Laclau and Mouffe underlined, the effects of hegemony “always emerge from a surplus of meaning which results from an operation of displacement” (1985: 141). During their journey around the world Keïta’s photographs have transformed their social, cultural and political meaning, according to the explicit and implicit intentions of some Western agents. Keïta’s photographs have been transformed into market products and their symbolic value changed encountering new audiences. “Without a contextualized understanding” – Birgham has suggested – “it is all too easy for Keita's images to become more permanently re-authored by their new viewers and in their new contexts” (1999: 66). Thus a re-contextualization of Keita's work is required. This re-contextualization could be seen not as an attempt to fixate Keïta’s photographs’ meaning, but instead as a kind of relocation of these photographs into the openness that characterized Seydou Keïta’s original work.

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