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HE pictures by Sedou Keita and Malik Sidibe in the Fruitmarket Gallery stem from a commercial contract between photographer and subject. Both photographers have been in business in Bamako, Mali, for many years doing portraiture and commercial ‘reportage.’ The photographs however, have been bought and curated by the French organisation, Foundation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, and ‘exported’ for the benefit of a European audience. We find ourselves in a fine art context looking at pictures from the Other, colonised world.

One could superficially compare these photographs with some of Sebastiao Salgado’s Latin American work in the sense that Salgado, Keita and Sidibe were all locals photographing within their own cultures. There are obviously great differences between Salgado and these two African portrait photographers but it is in the subtle shifts that one finds the real schism. Above all Sidibe’s and Keita’s pictures are the result of creative collaboration between themselves and their subjects. Looking at these pictures we find something which is intended, not for us, but rather for those people who are represented. Because of this, we have a quite different relationship to the subjects than we do when we look at, say, a portrait taken in Brazil by Salgado. In front of a picture by Malik Sidibe we are not in our accustomed position as spectators anymore. We have been moved out of the grandstand. The presence of these pictures in a gallery acts against notions of boundaries, both within and without the confines of the art world, and instead challenges the process of marginalisation. Of central importance in this is the position of the anonymous viewer as a witness to a dialogue between photographer and subject.
Sedou Keita, Untitled, 1952-55
When photographers define themselves as cultural protagonists addressing their adversaries in the establishment then they are naturally bound to the subsuming nature of that establishment.

Some European and North American photographers in recent times, would seem for their different reasons, to have retreated somewhat from the theoretical and ethical difficulties surrounding the relationship between photographers and subjects, by confining their practice to more intimate groups of people. In a new critical climate, informed by the writing of people like Michel Foucault and Edward Said, grand narratives seem impossibly unwieldy and absurd, and some photographers look for arenas of manageable proportions. This does not let us escape the fundamental issues of representation as the argument over Sally Mann’s pictures of her family has underlined.

The debates about representation have been incidental to the portraiture of Sidibe and Keita who have worked isolated from this and other discussions in photography since the beginning of their careers. Their role has been primarily a social one without a political agenda. Making portraits which satisfied their clients’ social needs did, however, heighten their awareness of the cultural changes occurring in their country. Speaking about the Fifties, Keita says:

‘In these days the culture of our ancestors was beginning to disintegrate; city-dwellers began to doss European-style; they were influenced by France. But not everyone could afford to dress, like that. In the studio I had three different European suits, with tie, shirt, shoes and hat... the lot! And some props: biros, plastic flowers, a radio set and a telephone. Clients could use them to pose with. 2

Brought together the works of Keita and Sidibe chart the colonial and neo-colonial experience in and upon the lives of the people they photographed. The pictures accumulate to give one the sense of a sea change which is only manifested in each picture in the smallest of ways. Because of the nature of the ‘contract’ between the photographers and the photographed we do not see this in simplistic terms: we are aware of both invasion and assimilation. Particularly in Keita’s portraits we often find a delicate and poignant balance which is lived and represented by the subjects. Meanwhile, Sidibe’s own early career as described in his biographical statement is suggestive of the same kind of compromises:

“One day, the head Teacher, having noticed I was good at drawing, asked me to do three drawings, because the Colonial Governor was coming to inspect the school. He was the one who helped me enrol at Bamako National Art School in 1952, and I left in 1955 with a craft diploma in Jewellery. Being a Peul, I was not very happy with this, as members of this ethnic group do not work with their hands. At the end of the 1955 academic year Gerard Guillard, nicknamed Gege in Pelicolle the film came to the art school to look for a student who could decorate his shop and studio, Photo Service. I was the one who was chosen. Once I had finished the project, Gege suggested that I should continue to work for him. So I became his apprentice and started doing little jobs around the studio: nailing, mounting, processing and delivering finished prints.”

For those of us who address our photography firstly to our subjects, and not to an anonymous third party envis-
Malik Sidibe, Untitled, April 1970
Malik Sidibe, Untitled, April 1970
aged as our audience, the works of Keita and Sidibe have the
capacity to both affirm and question our practice. Above all,
their work reveals a collaboration and in this sense it can be
compared with some of the radical practice in British photogra-
phy today. Theoretically informed and with a politically sophis-
ticated agenda of representation photographers like David
Hevey have collaborated with and addressed their work to their
subjects. Whether it is part of a political/cultural strategy or a
simple commercial negotiation, the effect on the viewer is
similar. We witness a dialogue of representation using a visual
language that is the creation of both photographer and subject.
In the process that element of secrecy slips through the
photographer’s fingers but in return one finds a more specific
and rigorous language. This dialogue draws the subjects into
the discourse at the expense of any third party, for the keys of
interpretation rest with the subjects and not with our cultural
agents.

The principal of the subject as audience cannot be neatly
delineated along political lines. One can find the practice
across the cultural/political spectrum. Much of Nicholas Nixon’s
work which emerged from the modernist and humanitarian
ethos is made using the same reflective techniques of represen-
tation though with a more conservative cultural agenda.

Conversely, there is also a strand of radical thinking that
dismisses the idea of the subject/audience as a ‘guilt-tripping
rhetorical question’. For some artists it is more important to
know who or what one is speaking against. This however,
seems a limiting and idealistic attitude that implies a fixed and
impermeable barrier between what one is for and what one is
against. When photographers define themselves as cultural
protagonists addressing their adversaries in the establishment
then they are naturally bound to the subsuming nature of that
establishment. Some arguments take this into account and call
for the continual abandonment of strategies and forms of
representation as each inevitably becomes consumed and worn
out. This is an easier theoretical than practical position. The
normal and continual theoretical revision of artistic experience
is not in any essential way a subtractive process on the part of
the artist. To make a call for a kind of continual revolution in
methods of representation one takes the position of a cultural
agent rather than an artist. Meanwhile for the artist this does not
signify a process of continual change, only a process of
wastage which is dictated by the dominant culture. Nor can
playing a dominant culture at its own game guarantee any
meaningful shifts in attitude. Playing that game can be one way
that another class of artists who represent a different vision enter
the arts stage. Nevertheless the status quo between the art world
and that Other world beyond will remain the same as long as
artists, whoever they are, aim their work at that all consuming
and anonymous third party.

The pictures by Keita and Sidibe document the minor
manifestations of the colonial and neo-colonial process in the
lives of some ordinary and not so ordinary people. In this sense
the people photographed are relatively passive actors, and of
course that is only half the story. Neo-colonialism is not only a
system of appropriation, it is only a system of cultural and
economic betrayal. This missing aspect highlights the con-
straints of the photographers’ contracts and also reveals an
unusual and challenging parallel to the limitations of some of
our own ideas. If we draw a line between those we represent
and those we challenge we are inevitably creating an artificial
boundary which takes no account of the dynamics of human
behaviour. We risk being impossibly idealistic or smugly
politically correct. If, on the other hand, we address our subject
as our audience are we acting simply as an empowering mirror
or can we engage in more complex and critical dialogues with
our subjects? To do this the voices of those we represent have
to be heard more clearly and take a more central role in our
arenas. Perhaps then artists can start to deal more fully with the
contradictions that underline not only all constructions but also
all of our lives. GR

Notes
1. Pierre Bourdieu, Photography, the middle brow art.
2. Sedou Keita, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh
3. Malik Sidibe, Fruitmarket Gallery
5. Stuart Hall, David A. Bailey, Ten.8 - Critical Decade.