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Beyond the biennial: Bamako at 15 years

Jennifer Bajorek, Goldsmiths' College, University of London

Erin Haney, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

The *Rencontres de Bamako*, or African photography biennial, which ran 7 November -7 December 2009, in Mali's capital city, provokes fervent conversation among visiting artists and spectators. Now in its eighth edition, the festival has picked up impressive momentum over the years. Yet there remains little consensus as to its bright spots or its shortcomings. Both call for more sustained critical exploration: what can the biennial provide artists and audiences beyond a passive venue for display? Can it instigate novel spaces, or offer artists new ways of rethinking their work in a larger, post-pan-African world?

This year's exhibitions testified to the sophistication and range of a rising generation of photographers, many of whose careers have benefited from opportunities connected with the event. But lost opportunities were equally in evidence – and sometimes glaring. In conversations with photographers, we heard, not surprisingly, that their demands and desires were not always best served by the Paris-based remote-planning apparatus. The expectations and agendas of distant patrons and markets, usually but not exclusively in Europe, and local Malian actors are pulling the festival in opposite directions. Issues of sustainability have plagued the event from its inception and, in some instances, have become only starker. Overall, we were left with the impression that sponsors' approach to organization and oversight of the *Rencontres* has not always kept pace with developments on the continent. Despite these many challenges, and the complexities of the cultural policies – and politics – behind them, we were encouraged by a number of promising new initiatives sprouting up.

The broad inclusion of artists from across Africa worked against any depth of display in the international exhibition. The mix of mature and new artists, cheek-by-jowl, was, for some, a strength of the event, and new artists provided some of the most compelling work. 'Borders' was the theme chosen by the event's principal sponsor, Culturesfrance, an agency of the French ministries of Foreign Affairs, Culture, and Communication. Some have begun to ask whether a curatorial theme is still needed or relevant. Perhaps the real question should be: whose interest does it serve? This one emphasized the organization's official goal: featuring African talent unknown in European exhibition circles. This aim responded to earlier biennials, which were populated by established, often expatriate African photographers.

This year's creative directors and the Malian organizers faced, we learned, inordinate time pressure in the processes of selection and production. The main sponsors (Culturesfrance) dragged their feet in naming the creative directors (Michket Krifa and Laura Serani) – until January 2009, an unthinkable 10 months in advance of the event. The delay undoubtedly

accounts for the unevenness of many selections. It may also explain the reliance on pat and predictable interpretations in conceptual decisions about many of the groupings. This was particularly the case in the so-called international or pan-African exhibition: portraits of refugees and asylum-seekers were clustered in one or two galleries, the architecture of war-torn cities in another. In discussions of the reasons for the delay, and in the approach to the obstacles it inevitably threw up, what came through was the clunkiness of a top-down, institution-heavy approach.

Whether this approach is typical of 'northern' funding remains an open question in Bamako. Samuel Sidibé, director of the National Museum and the head of the biennial's administration on the Malian side, cited pressure on the part of Culturesfrance to move management from the Malian Ministry of Culture to private associations – which have yet to be devised or, according to many in Bamako, are still precarious where they do exist – as a major factor contributing to this year's delay and resultant organisational problems: 'I myself was not in favour of this. Because I thought – I knew – that the [private] structures in Mali are not yet strong enough to manage an event like this'. In the end, this year's event was not handed over to the non-state structures envisaged in France, and there was little indication that a hybrid public-private organizing body could, or should, be invented in the near future, as some had wished it might this year.

Those structures that have been established by virtue of the biennial's influence have been conceived largely as development projects focused on stepping up the inclusion of Malian actors and institutions. The fate of these efforts remains wildly uncertain. There is growing criticism (voiced by scholars such as Achille Mbembe among others) of projects funding arts as a means of development and cultural diplomacy. Investment in schools, technical training, and infrastructure has not been able to address the gargantuan divides in access to resources across the continent, nor have these kinds of projects been converted to income-generators for Mali.

Take, for example, the production of the exhibition objects. Thanks to the biennial's presence, Bamako now has a state-of-the-art photo lab able to produce large-format exhibition prints: the Swiss-funded CFP (Cadre de promotion pour la formation en photographie). The CFP has produced prints for past editions, on a limited basis. This year, however, no prints were made in Bamako. All were made in Paris – and shipped, at exorbitant expense, framed and glazed, to Mali. It was explained that the job prices quoted to the festival's direction by the CFP were 2-3 times higher than those given by the Parisian lab, Picto, that ultimately did the printing. Without a local market for large-format prints, no lab can offer 'competitive' pricing. It is worth noting that shipping and associated costs such as insurance take up a large proportion of any festival's budget, and clearing customs in ports around the world remains a monumental hassle. The decision to ship heavy, expensive, and fragile frames from Paris, together with complaints about the DVD players (year after year, videos are not working or not reset after routine power outages long familiar to residents of Bamako and other southern cities whose grids are overtaxed), has become emblematic of a near total disregard for site-specificity and contributes to the sense that the organizers are out of touch.

Renewed, with some success, were the French organisers' commitments to bring all of the artists to Bamako, to hype them via invited African and European media outlets, and to host

big parties where deal-making could unfold. Puma Creative and its spin-off, Creative Africa Network, deserve special mention for their mobility grant programme, which funded travel to Bamako for all exhibiting photographers. This and other efforts to broaden inclusion are only at the beginning stages and will be crucial to the *Rencontres'* future. A deeper analysis must ask whether the artists need or want the hype and the deal-making as much as longer-term professional investments and access to other kinds of resources.

A notable exception to this mentality, which sees display as a direct line to the market, accompanied this year's effort: a portfolio review sponsored by the Goethe Institut SudAfrika. This private forum featured five curators and ten artists, many whom had participated in earlier Bamako exhibitions. The event was decidedly off-programme, timed to overlap by a day with the biennial's trading-week, so that many participants showed up only as the biennial's creative direction and other visitors were departing. Peter Anders, the Head of Cultural Programmes for sub-Saharan Africa, inaugurated the first such workshop last year at Maputo. For him and others – Simon Njami worked closely with Anders in elaborating the initiative – the Goethe-sponsored portfolio reviews attempt to redress the biennial's appearance as a 'decoration or representation of national interests'. In contrast to the biennial's professional-week programmes, Goethe's forum was directed at artists in early and mid-career, and attended to the conceptual dimensions of each artist's project.

Anders describes the programme as a direct response to the 'lack of criticism on the continent'. The event's organizers (including Cara Snyman, Cultural Programmes Officer) are keenly aware of the impact of the lack of fora for substantive critical discourse on the experiences and careers of contemporary artists. Says Anders of the sessions: 'I'm not sure if it is an original or a new concept, but it is a very concentrated concept...not at all addressed to the public. [...] For us at the Goethe Institut, this is a very valid format. To invest in individuals, and not to go ahead directly with realizing exhibitions, but really to support their career: their ongoing career'. Anders and his colleagues are not blind to the fact that this approach, i.e., investment in individual artists, and intensifying forms of critique, represents a marked difference from approaches and agendas that characterized the main event: 'Our clients are our artists, and not a politician, so that's the point'.

In a similar spirit to Goethe, but articulated from their own unique positions, many enterprising photographers had their own ideas of the biennial's usefulness. They formed new alliances, and wondered about staging smaller shows connecting institutions 'south to south'. In hotel gardens and at nightclub tables, they wondered about dependence on European funding, made claims to access, or doubted them. If the biennial's organizers continue to maintain their tight grip on production and planning and to devote little to platforms for critical discourse, the artists – and a new generation of activist curators – have their own ideas about what the alternatives will look like.

It was not unusual for discussion of the future to begin with an explicit, often enraged, critique of centralized directives identified with the status quo. In the words of Ananías Léki Dago, a photographer from Côte d'Ivoire who has exhibited in Bamako from the early days, and who has also mounted a pioneering festival in Abidjan: 'The problem is that the French cultural politics 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'. Another artist, who is not Malian but who has lived in Bamako for several years, recounted the story of how,

when he was invited to propose a project for inclusion in this year's biennial, he was given an appointment at a Paris address.

Small acts of resistance were made with gritted teeth and not a little good humor. Several photographers endured protracted layovers and multi-day treks to and from Bamako – refusing to fly to Harare or Maputo via Paris. But still they flew, to discuss their own and one another's projects, other festivals, new initiatives and new prospects with independent curators and corporate collectors in Nigeria and South Africa – and to engage in broader expressions of solidarity. As Léki Dago also said: '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'.