

T

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

Sedou Keita



Malian Snaps at the

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 Sebastio Salgado's Latin American work in the sense that Salgado, Keita and Sidibe were all

Owen
Logan



Fruitmarket Gallery

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.

Malik Sidibe





Sedou Keita, *Untitled*, 1956-57

With the crisis of representation that photography (along with many other fields) has experienced we have seen the development of new strategies as well as the modification of old practices. Throughout the last decade in Britain there has been a current of new documentary photography, often using colour, which has examined what might be called the underbelly of the mainstream. In attempting to close the gap between the audience and the subject a number of photographers have looked at things which they felt were closer to the lives of their imagined - gallery going - book buying - public. A generation of photographers like Martin Parr and later Anna Fox or Paul Reas seem to have attempted a new kind of engagement with the audience. Of this audience photographers envisage a certain amount of sophistication in regarding the ways of the medium and also a certain naivety. In the gallery context even the most literal work shows unusual ways of seeing the world which are part of the 'strangeness' of photography. The incongruous nature of much photography, relies on an element of secrecy on the part of the photographer. We see the signs of unfamiliar lives or, in the case of this genre, the signs of our own lives made somehow unfamiliar. Much of the 'new' colour documentary of the Eighties which has since become established used this idea of looking askance at its subject, sometimes in an effort to make us look at ourselves as we look at the Other. Unfortunately the quasi-satirical approach actually succeeds in reinforcing, rather than questioning the notion of the Other. Looking at the reportage of Malik Sidibe, even in the difficult context of this exhibition, we are not nearly as conscious of the presence of anthropological specimens as we are in much of the recent British documentary. Given the cultural and geographical distance between here and Mali, this must attest to the ease with which British documentary photographers have unwittingly placed their audiences out of the frame.

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 more 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 those days the culture of our ancestors was beginning to disintegrate; city-dwellers began to dress 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; birros, plastic flowers, a radio set and a telephone. Clients could use them to pose with.'

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: matting, 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 photography today. Theoretically informed and with a politically sophisticated 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 representation 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'.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 constraints 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
4. Kobena Mercer, Ten. 8 - Critical Decade.
5. Stuart Hall, David A. Bailey, Ten.8 - Critical Decade.



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