

The New York Times

African Biennale of Photography Returns to Mali Amid Unrest

Two decades ago, two French photographers envisioned the event as a way to shine a light on two Bamako studio artists, Malick Sidibe and Seydou Keïta, who then became widely known internationally. In 1994, the opening of the first edition coincided with a foreign effort to help Mali's democratic transition. After dark years of dictatorship, the event carried a political message, just as this year's comeback signaled cultural resurgence to many fairgoers.

In her essay "Studio Photography in Mali," the [art historian Candace Keller](#) explained how photo studios have always been places of expression for local residents. "Significant personal events such as weddings and baptisms as well as the Muslim holidays of Ramadan and Tabaski occasioned portrait commissions," Dr. Keller wrote. "Clients donned new outfits, hairstyles and accessories, and arrived at the studio ready to immortalize their idealized depictions."

Today, photo studios are still legion on Bamako streets. Most of them offer parallel services such as mobile phone repairs, photocopy services and billboard printing to stay afloat financially. Pro-Photo Chez Baby has been a key location on Nelson Mandela Boulevard for decades. Abdoulaye Baby hasn't closed shop despite facing the fierce competition of cheap cellphone cameras. "Instead of visiting the photographer, now everyone wants to be a photographer," Mr. Baby said, adding that he made only a quarter of what used to earn. "But photography still feeds a lot of families in Bamako. We have a role as the guardians of people's images."

At the Blabla, a bar in the Hippodrome neighborhood, the photographers Yo-Yo Gonthier and François Xavier Gbré had plastered every available wall with their prints. Inside, Mr. Gonthier's black-and-white trees towered above the art-scene crowds. Outside, Mr. Gbré's cutouts of derelict statues cast shadows on the walls of the surrounding wasteland.

The day after the opening, the Memorial Modibou Keïta, another of the official exhibition spaces, was empty, except for three security guards, a lonesome tourist and two young Malian women, there to sell refreshments.

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/arts/design/african-biennale-of-photography-returns-to-mali-amid-unrest.html?_r=0