H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Vogel. *Malick Sidibé Portrait of the Artist as a Portraitist.* Produced in Association with the Musée National du Mali. Coproduced with Catherine de Clippel, Jean-Paul Colleyn, and Samuel Sidibe. DVD. Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2006. 8 minutes.

Reviewed by Erika Nimis (UQAM)
Published on H-AfrArts (October, 2009)
Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti

Bringing Images To Life

In this film, Susan Vogel invites us to listen in on a discussion with Malian photographer Malick Sidibé in his studio in Bamako. Her goal is to present, in very little time (eight minutes), a photographer and his approach to his work. After a short text that summarizes the career of the artist and a title page based on the graphic design of the sign for Studio Malick, the film opens with the artist's query: "Without this work, what would I have done?" *Portrait of the Artist as a Portraitist* then proceeds to create a filmed self-portrait of the photographer, subtly punctuated by three self-portraits, at different stages of his career. Beyond its playful nature, the film's title also refers to the place that Sidibé occupies on the international art scene, which has added him to the canon of world art history. After this initial intimate contact with the artist, the camera pans out to reveal his context with similar attention to detail: we are in Bamako in the heart of the working-class neighborhood of Bagadadji. For almost half a century Studio Malick has been a lively workspace, where both local and foreign visitors have been welcomed without pretension.

It was just fifteen years ago that the work of Sidibé was revealed to the art world by the Jean Pigozzi Collection.[1] Since then, this retired photographer from Bamako has become the most celebrated African photographer, to the extent of receiving one of the most prominent awards for lifetime achievement in the arts, the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Biennial in 2007. Thus, in the mid-1990s, Sidibé, who had been retired from his profession as photographer since the mid-1970s and who was content to repair cameras and provide advice to younger photographers, began a second career that would see him travel the world over. Very quickly he gained recognition for his bold and brilliant images of the festive spirit that animated Bamako in the decade following Mali's independence. Today, his work is appreciated by galleries in the metropolitan centers of the art world as well as in Bamako, where he has recently come back in style. Through his images, today's youth have discovered the antics of their parents' generation and have even begun to reappropriate his work on the Internet.[2]

Since the 1970s, Vogel, the film's director, has traveled across the African continent as an African art specialist, curator (she founded the Museum of African Art in New York), and researcher and professor (presently at Columbia University). She was the first to present the work of another great figure of African photography, Seydou Keita, in the exhibition Africa Explores, which she curated in 1991 for the Museum of African Art. Over the past decade, she has, much like Sidibé, adopted a new career path. As a filmmaker, she has created a series of landmark productions, including *Fang: An Epic Journey* (2001) and *Living Memory: Six Sketches of Mali Today* (2003). These films share a desire to educate the public to view the African continent from a different perspective, avoiding as much as possible the traps of Western ethnocentrism. She does this by selecting powerful images and adeptly assembling them to represent a contemporary Africa in the process of change but one also solidly anchored in its own culture and traditions.

The first part of the interview is centered on Sidibé's beginnings in the field of photography. He succinctly evokes the period where he worked as a cashier in a photo shop. He presents himself as a self-taught photographer who began practicing his art with recreational cameras. The sequence that follows leads us through the interior of his studio. We observe shelves stocked with boxes of negatives and hundreds of cameras, all of which Sidibé has likely used and repaired, and cherishes as precious objects.

The interview then turns to what makes a photographer successful: his talent for "putting sitters at ease"

and "flattering" them to capture them at their best. Since Sidibé does not like sadness, he always tries to make his sitters smile. This is demonstrated by the series of photographs that follow, all taken in his studio, where Sidibé abandons his *boubou* for more relaxed attire.

Sidibé then evokes the clientele that assured his success as a professional and as an artist: the youth growing up in Bamako in the 1960s and 1970s. These images, he asserts, differentiate him from Keita who mostly photographed prominent civil servants and respected businessmen. It is interesting to see how Sidibé perceives his elder's work and compares it to his own. Only a decade separates the careers of Keita and Sidibé. However, it was a decade of profound change, since Mali gained its independence during that time. Their difference as photographers can be explained in part by their respective tools–a box camera used with natural light versus a 6x6 camera in a studio–and in part by their respective social contexts.

Skillfully, the film works up to a discussion of Sidibé's photographs of the atmospheric parties in Bamako during the "ye-ye" period. The character of these photographs is explained by the simple statement: "I wanted to give life to the image." When his work (as well as that of Keita) was first exhibited in a contemporary art gallery fifteen years ago, it seemed that the Western world had only just realized that Africa was part of the modern world and could construct history from an African perspective. In his work documenting the euphoria of Malian youth, Sidibé acted as a veritable social sponge invested with the spirit of the period. He created an uncensored visual history of contemporary Mali.

Let us return to the strengths of this film that addresses so succinctly the photographer's point of view. In addition to its powerful ability to represent, photography has, according to Sidibé, the function of allowing man to become "eternal as Pharaohs." Further, he notes the irony of how Mali's "Holy men" (who condemn photography) go on pilgrimage to Mecca, immortalizing it with a photograph on their return. According to him, the photographer is the keeper of memory, and thus, photographers work "for posterity." Sidibé pursues this train of thought by comparing photography to a book, demonstrating his awareness of the audience for this film. Throughout the interview, he reveals his talent to communicate empathetically with all visitors to his studio, whether they are from the neighborhood of Bagadadji or from abroad.

Another key aspect of Vogel's film is the primacy given to Sidibé's photographs, judiciously chosen to illustrate his ideas. The strategy of creating a montage timed to the film's soundtrack (by John Billingsley) lends this film a great deal of dynamism and seamlessly ties together disparate parts of the interview. In the last part of the film, the music literally brings the photographs to life as it recreates the party atmosphere of the work for which Sidibé is most famous.

The only question that one would like to put to Vogel concerns the film's format. Why such a short production? No doubt we should do as much as possible to encourage a broader interest in the work of Sidibé, but the goal of this film is not to comment on or revisit the way in which his work has been promoted, nor to lapse into exoticism by evoking the rural origins of the photographer or his polygamous lifestyle.[3] Its goal is to give voice to the photographer, thereby allowing him to represent himself as well as his work. A longer format might have given this film a different direction. For example, it could have explored the way in which Sidibé's work has been promoted in the West, as did Paul Cohen and Martijn Van Haalen in *Photo Souvenir* (Holland, 2006, 54 minutes) by presenting Philippe Koudjina, a photographer from Niger who is a contemporary of Sidibé but who has been overshadowed by his success). A longer film could also have ventured beyond the studio to reveal the lifestyle of the photographer. However, this might also have resulted in content that would have been less meaningful, as in Cosima Spender and Emiliano Battista's *Dolce Vita Africana* (United Kingdom, ARTE/ZDF, 2007, 59 minutes) where the filmmakers include awkward interviews with several of his subjects from the 1960s and 1970s.

The brevity of this documentary has undeniable advantages. Its efficiency in content and form make it just as appropriate for the promotion of tourism to Mali as for an introduction to contemporary African photography. A comparison of this film to others made about Sidibé only reinforces its strengths. In less than ten minutes and through impeccable editing, Vogel has successfully grasped the essence of Sidibé's photographic output and the charm of meeting with an artist so attentive to others. Her testimony to this photographer's personality, skill, and artistry is one for posterity, much like Sidibé's photographs themselves.

Notes

[1]. For more information on the Pigozzi Collection, see its Web site, http://www.caacart.com/ (accessed September 8, 2009).

[2]. A slide show, "Hommage à Malick Sidibé par Boubacar Koné," is presently available on the Internet, http://www.slideshare.net/sergeyaooo/hommage-malick-sidibe-presentation (accessed September 8, 2009).

To get a sense of how Malian youth draw from Western sources (particularly with respect to fashion, music, and cinema), I suggest you read the short comments made about his slide show (in French).

[3]. The question of the Western appropriation of Sidibé's work, while not explicitly addressed is nonetheless not totally absent from this film since among its first images is one in which a guest to Sidibé's studio handles a glass plate while in discussion with the artist. In fact, this figure is Svend Erik Sokkelund, a Danish collector, http://www.african-collection.dk/english/kontakt.htm (accessed September 8, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Erika Nimis. Review of Susan Vogel, *Malick Sidibé Portrait of the Artist as a Portraitist.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25437

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.