

Fast forward

Louisa Babari in conversation with Olivia Anani

Photos: Olivia Anani



How did you come to the idea of this project in Beijing?

I was always fascinated by the quest for knowledge and the deciphering of signs, the process of journeying towards understanding. Understanding of what? That's a question I cannot respond to myself, but the process seemed appealing, also linked to how I felt a connection to ancient cultures and languages from an early age. I remember trying to learn hieroglyphs in junior high school, and starting writing Japanese Kanji at 7, learning the language at 11, before eventually moving to Mandarin as a university student... Within this subject matter of amassing extensive, ancient knowledge, the idea of lacking knowledge was also intriguing to me,

as a crucial step on the way to understanding... It's two sides of the same coin, and coming to the realization of lacking knowledge means I'm already on the journey. I see African languages and dialects in the same way as I see Asian languages, as I have a firsthand experience of how both areas have a deep connection with signs, coded knowledge and the strong belief in mysticism that extends into contemporary life today. So when I was devising a way of presenting a project involving contemporary African artists, I spontaneously chose to address the inherent lack of knowledge about the continent, the misunderstandings about its art that one finds there. You see all these caricatures at "cultural festivals", the surprising questions asked by taxi drivers over and

over again... Art was a way to reply to these questions, using a language that would raise even more questions, all while giving enough visual, auditive and mental stimulation to motivate these new "initiation candidates" to move forth after the exhibition was over. One of the main texts that has been at the back of my mind all these years, is the book by Amadou Hampâté Bâ, the tale of a Peulh initiatic journey to meet the deity "Kaïdara", whose name means "Here you must stop" (for this is a place beyond which knowledge is given, and to which access is limited to those with knowledge only). You can say that in this regard, FAST FORWARD was conceived as a sort of 21st century "voyage initiatique", from me to the Asian audience it was conceived for. A game that

I played with them, since even as I am writing these words, I cannot tell you what "Africa" or "Art" is... Lerato's piece, "Selogilwe" was a perfect illustration of this narrative. In the video, the subject is only present through her hands, and sings in a quiet voice two Setswana folktales, all while breaking a slice of cake into pieces. There's an idea of transformation, and allegory for the journey each individual goes through regardless of their place of origin, but also the one cities, cultures and great civilizations go through at the hands of time. And it's also a very good allegory of the exhibition itself, where the videos, shown in a loop, end how they started, in a city. You start in Lagos, and you end in Johannesburg before going back to Lagos where it starts all over again...

Fast Forward. Why this title?

At the heart of FAST FORWARD you have the idea of speed, the issue of pace, that is inherent to the telling of a journey, and that's what inspired the name. The pace at which people move within a specific environment, and the pace at which they move through the "initiatic" journey that is life. The exhibition itself revolves and operates according to pace or a change of pace, that can be a "sign" in itself, as it indicates a change from one step of the journey to the next. It's also an allusion to the need we have in modern society to reach our destination faster, faster, and I'm wondering, how fast can we go? Can we go from 2x to 4x to xx?

You have selected African artists and artists working in Africa. Do they

have a common artistic heritage in your opinion? Can we talk about a generation that transcends contextualization?

I think it's not so much about where the artists come from, than it is about who they are as a result of the environments they experienced, and how the work they produce allows us to address specific concerns, in relation to the topics and places that are in question in this project. You pick, in art as in life, works and personalities that appeal to you and that you find relevant in a specific context. You draw parallels, you find a way to make things resonate with each other. When you look at important milestones and key events of the century, if I take for example the Cultural Revolution, or the Chinese Economic Reform (Gaiige Kaifang), you see they actually happened after we gained our independence in countries like Benin or Côte d'Ivoire. It's interesting to think about those things, and draw parallels between the different periods marking the recent history of our respective continents, and about our respective conditions today.

One of the obvious starting points in this would be cities and the pace at which they develop, with urbanization being an important part of the landscape that I wanted to address. In Beijing as in Abidjan, Lagos or Johannesburg, cities grow, buildings are sprouting up like mushrooms, old buildings destroyed, and we see the way people react to these changing environments. I wanted to bring the viewers to experience those

changes, in a sort of updated portrait seen from the point of view of the individual, which is by definition subjective and limited. In this aspect, video was a medium of choice for providing the kind of experience I was looking for, beyond budget constraints that were also part of the equation.

I find that recalling memories from one's past sometimes seems very much akin to watching a film, as if these moments were staged, excerpts of a story that one sees unfolding before their eyes. I can take the example of my hometown, Abidjan, which I saw turning from a relatively safe bubble of prosperity nested in the middle of West Africa into a warzone, and then progressively back again, the ongoing "restoration" happening mostly at a time when I was not there anymore. Later on, moving to Asia was like going through the other side of the screen of movies that I might have watched as a child: I'm thinking about being in Hong Kong and thinking about these flicks from the 80s... It's a sort of movie that never stops playing, a tale with no end. And for me, this was a way for the Chinese public to experience what I wanted to say, in a manner that would be different from what they're used to when it comes to be introduced to the continent. I just wanted to put them in the "movie", right from the start. If I take the example of those kung-fu films, we did not receive any introduction to them, the movie would just play on TV, and we would be entering it directly, with no prior speech about the environment, the economics, the local customs, the regional history etc. This



was all information that we would pick up along the way and decipher ourselves, as we were watching. We would see what the rural areas, what the cities looked like. We would learn on the spot what the country was and what people looked like in that country, we would see different types of faces, of bodies, we would see the relation between people, rich and poor, elders and youngsters, with all the power struggles and romantic relationships, friendships, how people interacted with each other. The hero, the landlord, the mob boss, the little peasant, the girl working at the tea shop, the kid from the street. All these characters and their stories gave you information, biased, staged, partial information, but information still.

I think it was much more efficient than posing the clichés like “You know there are cities in Africa too!” and then debating them. I do not need to explain to them that there are cities in Africa, I just

put a piece by Emeka Ogbob and not only do they get the message, they also get to see what it looks like, they get the “movie” of it. They will see the number of cars, which will tell them that a car is not an extraordinary thing, a “metal horse” appearing in a village and that the people are yet to get acquainted to... which is what some of them still think. Yes, this is true in some remote areas, but this is not what I was exposed to growing up. I was exposed to having cars everywhere, to this loud public transportation with the minicars and their young boys shouting for clients. In Abidjan we call these minicars “gbaka”, and Emeka Ogbob made an incredible project in New York this September, involving those “danfo” buses, as they’re called in Lagos. The street vendors, hordes of students going to school, trying to be fancy etc. With videos, you don’t need to explain that, because it’s all on the screen. This is what I find fascinating. It’s such a wealth of infor-

mation, that video and sound allow you to present within a short time, in a way that anyone can receive it.

Something else I wanted to explore with this project was the representation of emotions and social dynamics, as they hold another “sign” to be deciphered. This is especially true with the pieces by Michèle Magema “The Kiss of Narcisse” and Donna Kukama “The Swing”. What I love in these pieces, is how, by displaying a range of contradictory emotions and positions, of the subject in relation to self, and of the subject in relation to the other, they contribute to its humanization. The question of self, the opposition between, “desired self”, “projected self” and “real self” could not be more on point in our societies where image and social representation are so crucial. And yet, what Michele’s piece does, is asking questions, without responding to them. We are left with the task of interpreting and finding our



own way of dealing with that other, the self, which remains an enigma. We can’t just walk away, like her subject does... By positioning the artist as a mysterious character in a white dress, swinging above a crowd to which she dispels banknotes, Donna’s piece touched on a global topic, particularly sensitive to Chinese society today. When the swing breaks, you can’t help but draw a parallel with our cracked economic system, a “game” of monetary transactions, and the inequalities it produces. We can reference the tragic events of 2010, where elementary school children were murdered in several Chinese cities, by isolated criminals claiming that their actions were motivated by their resentment towards China’s social inequalities. And yet, beyond the ideological “class struggle” so dear to communism, beyond the serious implications of the scene, what you see is the excitement of the crowd as they rush to get their hands on a bill.

So by addressing such difficult and contemporary issues, we are able to shatter the idea of the postcard, which I find tragically static. One anecdote explains that very well: On the first day of the exhibition, one of the visitors told me that she’d heard about the event on a popular “What to do this weekend” app. When I went to check the app, I saw that the event was illustrated with pictures of giraffes and a classic African sunset landscape... No sign of the original poster or images. Because that’s what people have in their minds, a static image “Africa looks like this”. So I wanted to show movement, to show things in motion. Because people look different seen from one angle or the other, and because the points of view, the attitude, are constantly shifting. What is their state of mind, how do they go from excited to hesitant, from loud to silent? This now, is what you see in Pascale’s film, “Deambulation Carnavalesque”, all these people going to celebrate in the

streets of Port-of-Spain for the Jouvert festival, dressing up, dancing, painting themselves up, showing off... And right next to these flamboyant characters, you will see some people that are more calm, dressed in almost everyday wear staring, peeking, gaping, cheering. There is vanity and an exacerbated sensuality, especially towards the last minute of the piece, and I wanted to take the audience out of this comfortable position of distanced onlookers, of “voyeurs”, because as they’re watching, they can see the crowd watching too. So we all become viewers, we’re all “voyeurs”. As an African woman, I’m a voyeur too. It was also important to bring them to that. This is not a postcard, this is real life, even if it looks like a fantastic, surreal “rite de passage”. I think that thanks to this direct, intimate approach, we were able to establish a real contact with the public. Limits of control resonated quite strongly with the audience, as they were very recep-



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tive to this visual tale of breaking free, which is one of the things I see in the video. As Sean described himself, “The line turns from a frontier, into a landscape”, as you see the body altering the aspect of this imposed, apparently fragile but hypnotically commanding force, that is this simple line running across the screen. Maybe they saw in it a representation of the social and parental pressure that brings some of those golden, “little emperors” Asian children to attempt suicide because of the high expectations bestowed upon them at birth. “The child must become a dragon.” What I find interesting is the fact that while the line is altered, the struggle has no end, and the body never leaves the wall it’s placed against... One does not erase his past, and for most people, the struggle is still played out in the very spot it started from. I’m thinking about the question of hukous, or regional

identity cards, that are used in China to contain the exodus to big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, about the strong idea of Chinese diaspora “huaren”. In China, you’re considered a “huaren” as long as you have Chinese roots, even with an Indonesian nationality like collector Budi Tek, who fully embraces this “huaren” tag. You can see references to this idea of maintaining the link, or re-claiming the link to your initial village, sometimes dating back several generations, in the work of Wang Haiyan “The Memory Project”, which was also shown at Zajia Lab. Zajia Lab, the art space I collaborated with in hosting Fast Forward, is itself located in an old Taoist temple near Gulou, the old Drum tower. Rumors are that the building, along with surrounding neighbourhood, will be destroyed by the city government to be rebuilt. Again, a hint at this initiatic tale that keeps repeating itself.

What is in your opinion, the place of African artists in China?

There’s a potential to create a dialogue. As far as creating a market and a base for collecting is concerned, it needs to go through the way of educating the public and art institutions first, which will take many years... But that’s also a project that I have in mind, to find a way to create a favorable environment for that. On the short term, what I would love for FAST FORWARD, would be to take it to other Asian cities. I think the project was the start of a discussion that I want to pursue, and maybe extend the dialogue to other artistic mediums as well.

FAST FORWARD, exhibition at Zajia Lab
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