

**THE IN-BETWEEN:  
PHOTOGRAPHY, THE CITY, AND BOUNA MEDOUNE SEYE'S *JOE'S YARD***

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## ABSTRACT

Jennie K. Carlisle: The In-Between:  
Photography, the City, and Bouna Medoune Seye's *Joe's Yard*  
(Under the direction of Carol Magee)

In 1995 Senegalese artist Bouna Medoune Seye produced his *Joe's Yard* photographic series in the courtyard of Issa Samb, also known as Joe Ouakam, a multimedia artist involved in the improvisational artistic laboratory, Laboratoire Agit-Art. By conveying a sense of everyday urban creativity, these images simultaneously participate in a dialogue about daily life in the city of Dakar and position Seye in relationship to the aesthetic and political interests of Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art. Though the images record Joe's yard in a literal manner, they are not merely documentary. In this essay, I argue that their function is more complex than a simple inventory of space and that they convey an interest in promoting Seye's photographic practice as an art form, even as his images take advantage of documentary photography's affinity for recording the visible world by turning our attention towards the details of urban life.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: A YARD FULL OF CLUTTER

Peering through the gap left by an ambiguous sculptural form and a weathered wooden board, there is a dingy looking table piled high with dust covered bottles (Figure 1). No finger prints mar the dust, and thus there are no clues other than the collection of things presented to the viewer to suggest the person who left this scene behind. What is the scene depicted? Could it be a kind of shrine? Is it the workshop of a weekend tinkerer? Or is it perhaps a kind of chemist's workbench? The bottles, all carefully capped, are of various shapes and sizes, and in front of them is a small bundle of twigs. This collection has been placed on a table that is covered with what looks to be a flag and that is situated in the corner by a brick wall covered in a lattice of sticks. Despite the bright sunlight that illuminates the scene, dissolving the details of the sculptural form in the foreground and causing the bottles on the table to glow, the image has an air of quiet abandonment.

The image I have just described is one of eight photographs that make up Bouna Medoune Seye's 1995 *Joe's Yard* series, which has been reproduced twice, for *Revue Noir's* 1998-99 editions of *The Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* and for the exhibition catalogue of the 2001 Bamako Biennial.<sup>1</sup> Like the other photographs in the series, which are densely cluttered with things, it remains

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<sup>1</sup> Bouna Medoune Seye was born in Dakar in 1956; after studying in Marseille, France, he returned to Dakar and became associated with the Villages des Arts and the Laboratoire Agit-Art, organizations which fostered alternative artistic environments to the state sponsored "École des Arts." In addition to photography the artist has worked in a range of media, from painting, to cinema to performance. As of 2002, he was living in Paris, France.

intriguingly enigmatic. The title of the series, *Joe's Yard* is likewise enigmatic. "Joe" might indicate a general category of person- a no one or an Everyman- or it may name a specific person, while "Yard" only designates that the space depicted is within Joe's domain and that it is outdoors. Described in the exhibition catalogue for the Bamako biennial as an "homage to Joe Ouakam"<sup>2</sup> we might begin to ground these images; for now it becomes apparent that "Joe" is "Joe Ouakam," otherwise known as Issa Samb, and that this yard is both the work space for his artistic practice and an occasional meeting place for the experimental art group, Laboratoire Agit-Art. Nevertheless because of the vague sounding title, "Joe's Yard," and the meager textual frame that accompanies these images in their published presentation, the viewer may be hard pressed to make sense of the images presented in this series. The photographs present odd assemblages of objects: a collection of refuse loosely contained by a metal grate, a pile of building debris, a porch cluttered with various art objects, a table strewn with dusty bottles, a kind of mobile tethered to the base of a tree. What kind of space is this? What does a depiction of such varied clutter suggest? How might this constitute homage? In the course of a broader analysis of this series, I will answer these questions.

Thus far the photographs of Bouna Seye have been little considered by art critics or historians. This oversight is surprising given the interest shown in Seye's Laboratoire Agit-Art colleagues, particularly Issa Samb and El Sy, who along with Seye are

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<sup>2</sup> The entire passage reads: "Through the photographs presented in this volume he wanted to pay homage to Joe Ouakam, a figure emblematic of Dakar's intellectual and artistic groups. [Seye] gives us a view of Joe's courtyard, where there is the vestiges of an aborted dream." This is a translation of : "Il a voulu, a travers les photographies presentee á cette edition, rendre un hommage a Jo Ouakam , figure emblematic du Dakar intellectuel et artistique. Dans le cour de Jo ce sont le vestiges eloquents d'un reve avorte qu' il nous est donne de voir." *Recontres de la Photographie Africaine de Bamako* (Paris: Eric Kohler: 2001), 74. All translations in the text that follows are my own except where otherwise noted.

frequently mentioned as foundational members of the group.<sup>3</sup> This situation may reflect a larger issue in art historical scholarship and art exhibition. In both of these realms photography is often considered separately from other types of artistic expression. This is perhaps due to the relative young age of the media, its technical aspects, and its popular use. The basis for photography's separate treatment is compounded in an African context, where the medium has historically been linked to colonial ethnographic practices and, in more recent times, to commercial studio portraiture. In 2006 Okwui Enwezor noted in his introduction to the exhibition catalog *Snap Judgments* that until recently works of African photographers have not been examined, either as belonging to the history of photography or in the context of contemporary African Art.<sup>4</sup> Taking Enwezor's statement of the larger problem as my cue, I situate the photographic series *Joe's Yard* at the intersection of two traditions: the history of photography and the development of contemporary art in Senegal. Both views are necessary in order to explore the range of significance captured by this series. By focusing my attention on the *Joe's Yard* photographic series in this essay, I hope to begin a conversation on the way that photography in Senegal can be put into dialogue with other arts.

As with the work of other artists of Seye's generation, *Joe's Yard* can be seen as a reaction to the artistic practices of Senegal's first generation of modern artists, whose work often reflects the optimism of independence era Senegal. In the 1980s and 1990s, when Seye was working on the photography projects considered in this essay, artists

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<sup>3</sup> Over the course of Laboratoire Agit-Art's history there have been more than 80 members. For a partial list of those involved with the group, see Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Duke University Press: Durham 2004), 271.

<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (New York: International Center for Photography, 2006), 24.

were renegotiating what it meant to be an artist and exploring the expressive possibilities for art more broadly within a Senegalese social and political climate fraught with dissatisfaction. *Joe's Yard* can be seen as a measure of Seye's participation in this undertaking. It can be read as a response to the constraints of commercial portraiture and as an exploration of photography's expressive potential. The series can also be read in terms of its representation of and response to local urban issues.

On one level, *Joe's Yard* is a spatial investigation of an artist's place of work. A simple gesture of homage is connoted in Seye's act of commemorating a space by photographing it. In the mid 1990s, when the photographs were taken, Issa Samb's courtyard functioned as a gallery, a stage, a semi-public living room, and conference site for artists, intellectuals and community members that gathered in this space. Perhaps more important for our discussion here, "Joe's Yard" was also the space from which Issa Samb created his own work. Samb is a sculptor, painter, performance artist, writer, critic, and philosopher. Throughout the early 1990s his large oil and acrylic paintings could be found hung against the dirty courtyard walls, "collecting the fine red dust of Dakar's breezes and fading [from] intense sunlight and rains."<sup>5</sup> In these largely figurative images Samb frequently referenced social issues, such as the plight of refugees flooding into Dakar as a result of drought and a lack of economic opportunities in rural communities. As a vehicle to question and critique what he saw as the restrictive nature of the state-sponsored modern arts program, which limited an artist's ability to engage directly with Senegalese social life, Samb and the artists who met in his courtyard used material found on the streets of Dakar to develop an aesthetic in direct conversation with audiences in the city. Samb's courtyard was a venue of artistic

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<sup>5</sup> Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 120.

transformation, where everyday objects cast off of by city dwellers were reframed and given additional layers of meaning as art objects. Seye's visual strategies in *Joe's Yard* underscore the way that the yard functions as a place in between the realities of Dakar and the representational space of artistic practice. In this way these images offer insight into the political moment in which they were created by pointing to the urban engagement which so characterizes the work of Laboratoire Agit-Art, and Issa Samb.

While the photographs taken of Joe's Yard literally record this space, they are not meant to function as a record of events having taken place there, or as a catalogue of the space itself. Rather than "painting" the space in broad brush strokes, these images attend to the tiny intersecting lines that make up the whole. They appear as abstracted fragments, formal explorations, wherein the contents of the image are often recognizable but somehow changed by their translation into photographs. For instance, in Figure 2, an image of a rope coiled on a sun dappled bag, the elements being photographed (rope and bag) are easily recognizable even though the context for understanding these elements has been altered by the photographic framing of this space. Because it is not clear from the image how these elements fit into the larger context of the yard or to the art practices taking place there, the original context for these objects is somewhat lost. In this way, the image can be seen as evoking the artistic strategies of *assemblage* and the use of found objects. This image, like the others in the series, explores photography's expressive potential and the way that a medium's specificity shapes the formal quality and conceptual boundaries of an art work. Thus Seye's photographs extend Samb's conceptual and aesthetic project. They promote Seye's photographic practice as an art form capable of participating in the formal and

conceptual explorations associated with Laboratoire members, though within terms specific to photography.

In the following chapters of this essay, I focus on the urban issues to which the images in *Joe's Yard* can be said to respond. I draw out the ways that elements of documentary photography being used in this series speak to issues of urbanity. Finally, I address how these images engage in avant-gardist practices that seek to connect art to everyday life. Before turning to that however, it is necessary to explore the context in which these images were produced: urban Africa in general and the city of Dakar in particular.

### **Dakar in the 1990s**

Urban areas in Africa grew rapidly throughout the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> In the countries that make up the Federation of French West Africa, urban populations rose from an estimated 1,168,000 in 1950 to 3,979,000 in 1970, largely in response to the intensified exploitation of agriculture and mineral resources by the French in the wake of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> A major drought in the Sahel region of West Africa forced many rural inhabitants to flee to the city for their livelihood, despite the fact that the city could offer them limited housing and job opportunities. As James Genova has explained in his discussion of the African Francophone novel in the late colonial period, during this time novels provided a forum for the exploration of African identity in relation both

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<sup>6</sup> A number of texts speak to this and its effects. See in particular: AbdouMaliq Simone, "Critical Dimensions of Urban Life in Africa." In *Globalization and Urbanization in Africa*, eds. Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press Inc., 2004) 11-48.

<sup>7</sup>Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 267.



to the rapid urbanization, and to the legacy of colonialism.<sup>8</sup> For instance, novels produced in the region in the 1950s, the decade preceding independence, hail the city as an important feature of African life in general. Likewise, photographers used their media to reflect the hopes and anxieties that attended the mass urbanization of societies that had been predominantly rural-based.

Photography was introduced in French West Africa primarily as a tool for colonial recordkeeping. In its colonial manifestations, photography reinforced the colonial project by functioning as ethnographic documentation, missionary propaganda and personal memorabilia for European officers in Africa and middle-class consumers in Europe.<sup>9</sup> In Senegal, photography entered an African controlled system of visual economy in the 1920s, through the establishment of Senegalese owned urban portrait studios. The “golden age” of Senegalese commercial photographic portraiture dates to the 1950s, when portraitists such as Mama Casset, Meissa Gaye, and Mix Gueye were to Dakar and St. Louis, what the more famous Seydou Keita was to Bamako, Mali. The prevailing sentiment among scholars is that the most enduring feature of portrait studios in West Africa was their role as sites for the negotiation of identity and social changes brought about by the forces of modernity and urbanization. As Hudita Nura

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<sup>8</sup>James E. Genova, “Africanité and Urbanité: The Place of the Urban in Imaginings of African Identity during the late colonial period in French West Africa,” in *African Urban Spaces in Historical Perspective*, eds. Steven J. Salm and Toyin Falola (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 266-285.

<sup>9</sup>A glimpse at the number of post-cards produced by French photographers based in Saint-Louis and Dakar suggests just how strong the affinity was between colonialism and photography to imperialist efforts. The total estimate of postcards produced during the colonial period is 8,740 for West Africa; 7,210 were made between 1901 and 1918. As cited in Hudita Nura Mustafa, “Portraits of Modernity: Fashioning Selves in Dakarais Popular Photography” *Politique Africaine* 100 (December 2005-January 2006): 234. The dates associated with the area’s period of colonization vary. The French first settled in St. Louis in 1659 but the area did not become part of French West Africa until 1859. 1960 is the year of Senegal’s independence.

Mustafa notes, the making of portrait photographs has historically allowed for the strategic reframing of a sitter's body. By displacing the indexical body of ethnic types associated with colonial photography, portrait photographs bring attention to the agency and individuality of the sitter who self-consciously "plays with body surface to weave truth and masking as self-mastery."<sup>10</sup> The photographs of Casset, Gaye, and Gueye demonstrate this strategic reframing, as portrait subjects are often depicted in fashionable urban dress and with props that speak to their urban sophistication.

Just as early studio portrait photographs and novels can be seen as responding to the increasing importance of urban life in West Africa, along with its new problems and complexities, so too can the art of Bouna Seye. This is particularly true of Seye's photographic work in Dakar in the 1980s and 1990s. This period coincides with a surge in various artistic expressions of urban identification among the Dakarais that alternately criticized and exalted the culture of the city.<sup>11</sup> Seye's series *Les Trottoirs* and *Joe's Yard* participate in this. By 1994, when Seye published *Les Trottoirs*, Dakar and its largest suburb, Pikine, had grown to become a densely populated metropolis, containing 19 percent of the total population of Senegal.<sup>12</sup> I will discuss this series shortly. In the meantime, it is important to note that the 1980s and early 1990s were turbulent times of political and social unrest in Dakar. Abdou Diouf became president in

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<sup>10</sup> Mustafa, "Portraits of Modernity," 242.

<sup>11</sup>For more on this see Fiona McLaughlin, "Dakar Wolof and the Configuration of an Urban Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (December 2001): 153- 172. Laughlin interestingly points out the role of comics and music in inspiring (and reflecting) a surge in urban identification among youth of the time.

<sup>12</sup>Mamadou Diouf, "Urban Youth and Senegalese Politics: Dakar 1988- 1994" *Public Culture* 8, no.2 (1996): 225. Cited from OECD/ADB 1994, "L'Emergence de la competition: Transformations et desequilibres dans les societees oust-africaines." Manuscript.

1981 and Senegal entered World Bank structural adjustment programs that encouraged the state to disengage from the provision of health, education, culture, and sanitation, forcing ill-equipped local authorities to manage these areas for the public. In 1988, riots broke out during the presidential elections as followers of the opposition party contested rigged voting and government corruption.<sup>13</sup> Then in the following year unprecedented ethnic violence erupted in the streets of Dakar as the city's natives rioted against Mauritanian merchants. Out of these events arose the citywide youth campaign known as Set Setal, perhaps the most obvious manifestation of a visual arts response to what has been called a general "climate of disenchantment."<sup>14</sup> The short lived (1990-1993) movement Set Setal was in part inspired by Mbalax musician Youssou N'Dour, who encouraged his fellow citizens to keep a clean environment and thus a clean heart in his song "Set."<sup>15</sup> Participants in Set Setal took as their main goal the literal cleaning of Dakar's neighborhoods and they encouraged residents to clean up the debris that had accumulated in their streets and neighborhoods. In addition to their sanitation efforts, Set Setal became known for its appropriation of city surfaces. By painting murals over its walls, sidewalks, manhole covers, street posts, doors, bus stops, benches, and tree trunks, Set Setal sought to reclaim and recreate the city of Dakar.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Presidential elections failed to produce a change in regime from that of the incumbent President Diouf in both 1988 and 1993. Only in 2000, during the second round of Presidential elections was Aboudalye Wade, able to win election through democratic procedure.

<sup>14</sup>McLaughlin, "Dakar Wolof and the Configuration of an Urban Identity," 154.

<sup>15</sup>Mamadou Diouf, "Urban Youth and Senegalese Politics," 225-249. Also see Mamadou Diouf, "Fresques Murales et Écriture de l'histoire: Le Set/Setal à Senegal" *Politique Africaine* 46 (1992): 41- 54.

<sup>16</sup>The Set Setal murals are notoriously eclectic, for a discussion of their diverse forms see *SET SETAL: Des Murs qui parlent; Nouvelle culture urbaine à Dakar* (Dakar: ENDA, 1991), 69.

Seye may have been influenced by the very same political currents that effected the organizing of the Set Setal youth movement.<sup>17</sup> Though stylistically the hand drawn murals of Set Setal might seem to be at the opposite extreme from Seye's photographic work, and they are of course quite different, they both stake a direct relationship with urban everyday life, and both represent a "certain play within a system of defined places."<sup>18</sup> The murals often address themselves to the histories of particular *quartiers*, and feature portraits of important figures within these *quartiers*. Thus, they can be seen as points around which the Dakarois may construct maps of their communities, and through which they may understand their daily experiences and collective histories.

*Joe's Yard* also allows one to visualize movement through a city. Because these photographs depict the semi-private space of a courtyard, and are less overtly political, Seye's photographs share a subtle affinity with the work of Set Setal. In these images, it is the mounds of collected items, reminiscent of the litter piled on the streets of Dakar that perhaps refer to social conditions in the city and connect *Joe's Yard* with the concerns of Set Setal. In the years following Set Setal's clean-up efforts, a number of artists have commented that they found inspiration in the group's work for their interest in quotidian materials.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Jean-Marie Bruce, when interviewed by Joanna Grabski, mentions that he found himself more interested in the accumulation of objects from the clean up campaign than in either the murals or sculptures attributed to the

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<sup>17</sup>Along with other members of Laboratoire Agit-Art, Bouna Seye has claimed affiliation with Set Setal. Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 206.

<sup>18</sup>De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, [Arts de faire.English] (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 116.

<sup>19</sup> Joanna Grabski, *The Historical Invention and Contemporary Practice of Modern Senegalese Art: Three Generations of Artists in Dakar* (PhD Diss., Indiana University, 2001), 168.

group.<sup>20</sup> As photographs, Seye's images of accumulated objects speak poignantly to general urban conditions and the collecting of refuse in the city by Set Setal, Samb, and others. Because photographic representation is necessarily bound to the depiction of reality, Seye's photographs seem to function as a kind of document of the yard and of social conditions in the city of Dakar.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 175.

## CHAPTER II. A DIFFERENT KIND OF DOCUMENT

In Senegal, despite the introduction of commercial color photography labs and the increasing availability of photography equipment and materials in the 1980s, professional photography remained closely tied to the making of formal portraits in studio environments. As Hudita Nura Mustafa notes, the practice of posed studio portraiture, rather than the taking of candid shots and the depiction of everyday life, was the predominant form by which the Dakarois document their lives and picture themselves.<sup>21</sup> Given the dominance of studio-based photography, Seye's work can be seen as a reaction to the staged presentation and commercial nature of portraiture. To demonstrate this, I turn to his series *Les Trottoirs de Dakar*, published in 1994, which represents homeless people set against the backdrop of Dakar's urban landscape. In contrast to portrait photography, his subjects are usually found in outdoor, urban spaces, the photographs have a more candid quality to them, and they are focused on the character of the urban environment as much as on individuals. Portrait photographs, from the past and present, are highly constructed pictures of reality, manipulated to fit the desires and imaginative projections of the portrait sitter; the work of Bouna Seye captures the city space as it is at a given moment in time, with little authorial arrangement of the objects and space that are found there. This is not to say that in Seye's work, there is no longer a sense that the photographer manipulates the image to meet a desired outcome, but that the strategies of manipulation have changed. Framing, rather than staging, becomes the primary tool by which his images are made.

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<sup>21</sup>Mustafa, "Portraits of Modernity," 237.

Because of the anti-studio, un-staged quality of his work, it seems that documentary photography is the genre of photography that Seye's work is closest to.

The use of black and white film in *Les Trottoirs* is worth remarking on, for while this appears in keeping with the tradition of portraiture in Senegal, its use in this series signals a change in its signification. Senegalese studio portraiture, until recently, used black and white film almost exclusively, for economic rather than aesthetic reasons.

The monochromatic images produced in studio portrait photography have an abstract quality, where they project a reality both like and unlike that of the subject. The sitters are still recognizably themselves yet the absence of color abstracts them from an everyday social context. The use of black and white in *Les Trottoirs*, however, has the opposite effect. It evokes a sense of gritty reality.

In *Joe's Yard*, Seye's second series, begun just one year after the publication of *Les Trottoirs*, the photographer focuses his camera lens on the refuse collected in a yard. This series, which makes use of color film, is primarily concerned with the depiction of a place; "Joe" appears only once, obscured behind a screen of unrecognizable objects (Figure 3). In this image, as in all images from the series, there is a clear sense of background and foreground, which leads the viewer's eye through the space. The yard is full of clutter, and this is captured perfectly by the screen one must peer through in the foreground. Composed of out of focus and unrecognizable elements, this screen obstructs one's view and lends to the image a sense of the chaos one might experience if walking through the yard. The use of color film in this series further contributes to a sense of the setting as filled with a lively hodgepodge of colorful art

works and found objects. This series appears to be documentary in style, like his first, in that Seye is not staging his photographs. Rather he takes advantage of chance and circumstance. As he does with *Les Trottoirs*, Seye selects scenes from the environment around him to photograph. Because the photographs represent the yard in fragments, the series has an archeological quality. The details within the photographs appear as fractured artifacts. Like potshards uncovered during an archeological dig, the images are a literal trace of a material and historical reality- in this case, the yard and the activities having taken place there. Like potshards, they are evidence, surviving in fragments that ask the viewer to reconstruct the whole from their parts.

To begin thinking about what it means for Seye's work to be documentary in style, I offer a brief discussion of international documentary photography. This context can help us to understand the way that he is specifically employing the documentary genre to speak to issues of urbanity and the way that photographic art can engage with everyday life.

### **Walking and Waiting**

In describing Seye's practice I have already referred to several characteristics associated with documentary work, such as its association with candidness and the effort of the photographer not to alter the scene before the camera. Here I offer a more general discussion of the history of the genre and the way that Seye's work can be said to fit into it.

Most basically, documentary photographs have been termed such because they appear as "records of facts." This classification relies in part on an assumption about what makes a photograph different from all other kinds of visual representation, in part



on the visual tropes associated with a certain type of image making, and in part on the way in which images of this category engage with social themes.

In her 1984 essay, “Who is speaking thus?” Abigail Solomon-Godeau examines how the words “documentary” and “photography” came to be linked together. She argues that photographs made in a style that is now identified as documentary, long preceded the term. By pointing to the late arrival of the category of documentary into photographic discourse- it was not a term used regularly to describe photographs until the 1920s, a century after the invention of photography- Solomon-Godeau suggests that until the formulation of a separate documentary category that all photography was understood to be intrinsically documentary.<sup>22</sup> The sense that a photograph has a privileged relationship to the “real” world, that by its very ontology it cannot escape representing the way things are before the camera, continues to confuse the distinction between a documentary class of pictures and other types of photographic depiction (advertising or art-photography for instance).<sup>23</sup> To the extent that a photograph provides an unmediated transcription of a physical thing put before a camera, it can be thought to function as a document.<sup>24</sup> However, as a class of pictures, documentary photography

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<sup>22</sup>According to Solomon-Godeau the first use of “documentary” as an image making practice can be found in John Grierson’s 1926 review of a film by Robert Flaherty about Polynesian youth. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press), 299-300. For more on the historical formation of documentary photography see Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1994). For more on the way that documentary photography has been theorized see Joel Snyder “Documentary without Ontology,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 10, no. 1 (1984): 78-95.

<sup>23</sup>We can see this thinking in the dominance of the Barthian notion of indexicality in photography studies.

<sup>24</sup>Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock*, 169.

follows its own conventions. This is perhaps nowhere as true as with the sub-set of documentary: “street-photography.”

Taking as its twin themes, walking and waiting, this type of imagery focuses on the movement of pedestrians, as they course through city streets visually recreating the city from moment to moment with their movement.<sup>25</sup> In these images, pavement functions as a kind of gallery for the display of various social types, who are most often shown with blank facial expression striding along the sidewalk or resting at bus stops or under the eaves of buildings. In the early 1990s a number of photographers in West Africa, including Bouna Seye, worked in this idiom, making pictures that spoke to the hardship faced by homeless people in African cities.<sup>26</sup>

For the series, *Les Trottoirs*, Seye photographed homeless Dakarais over a period of ten years. In an interview he acknowledges his interest in framing his project in particularly Senegalese terms, in order to show that the homeless men in his pictures, whose madness accords them a privileged relationship with the divine, had the freedom to live among society despite their mental illnesses. According to Seye, “You can’t lock up the djinns.”<sup>27</sup> Seye’s success in showing the homeless and mentally ill to be an integral part of Dakar’s social fabric can be noted in curator Simon Njami’s response to them. For Njami, the photographs depict a particularly African value of openness and

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<sup>25</sup>For a more nuanced treatment of the role of the pedestrian in street photography, see Meir Wigoder, “Some Thoughts about Street Photography and the Everyday,” *History of Photography* 25, No. 4, (Winter 2001): 368-378.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that around the time that Seye was working on *Les Trottoirs* Boubacar Toure Mondemory was also working on a project documenting the lives of homeless men in Dakar. In the Ivorian city, Abidjan, Dorris Haron Kasco worked on a similar project.

<sup>27</sup> Bouna Medoune Seye interviewed by Gerard Matt, “You can’t lock up the djinns” in *Flash Afrique!*, eds. Thomas Mießgang, Barbara Schröder (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, 2001), 84.

interest in all forms of humanity.<sup>28</sup> Yet because images such as these cannot account for the complex personal, social, and political circumstances that result in the situations being depicted, a more universal reading of these images is possible.

By employing the visual strategies associated with street photography for this series, the photographs in *Les Trottoirs* allegorize city life; they capture a social tension and daily struggle that may be true of not only Dakar but of many other cities as well. Furthermore, though one observes in this series visual features that are specific to Dakar – a barber’s sign, a logo on a bus, license plates on cars – most images have a look common to urban centers around the world. Seye’s images follow a vocabulary of street photography, connected with photographers such as Robert Frank, Daido Moriyama, Gary Winogrand, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia.<sup>29</sup> Like these photographers, Seye takes the ephemeral rhythm of city life – walking and waiting – as his theme. As in other images that fall within the genre of street photography, Seye’s images of the city in *Les Trottoirs* suggest that the city can be read as a kind of palimpsest of complex social and political realities- specific to a place (in this case Dakar) and related to city life in general.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the homeless men Seye photographs are passersby and sometimes, like the very architectural spaces in which they rest, they appear quite simply passed by. According to de Certeau, pedestrians in movement and in moments

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<sup>28</sup>Simon Njami, “The reign of the intractable” in *Flash Afrique!*, eds. Thomas Mießgang, Barbara Schröder (Vienna: Kunsthalle wien, 2001), 25.

<sup>29</sup>Each photographer makes use of what I am calling a visual vocabulary of street photography, for purposes specific to their projects. My point in bringing this group together here is to illustrate that despite the diverse messages communicated through their images, they share an interest in the journeys of anonymous pedestrians and the way that cityscapes function as backdrops against which diverse social types interact.

<sup>30</sup>The “city as palimpsest” as a common motif in street photography has been described by David Company. See David Company, *Art and Photography* (New York, Phaidon Press, 2003), 110.

of interlude write the urban “text:” their mostly invisible movement (and motives) brings the city into being, just as speaking brings language into being.<sup>31</sup> As in speaking, walking and waiting are processes of choosing what to enunciate from an ensemble of predetermined choices. One photograph from *Les Trottoirs*, for example, shows a man walking along a sidewalk between a wall of storefronts and a row of people (Figure 4). The viewer can tell that his movement will be guided by the wall on one side. The photograph shows the man’s choice in this instance to continue moving forward. In another photograph, a group of men collect around a concrete bench, both using this place as it was conceived of, as a place to wait, and inventing a new use for it, as a place to sleep (Figure 5). By making visible the ephemeral movement of the homeless Dakarais, Seye points to the invisible workings of the city which is in a sense “nothing but a sidewalk.”<sup>32</sup>

The rhythm, of living captured in these images (from walking to waiting, to working, to eating), signals the creative appropriations that define the everyday practices of individuals that transform stable, visible places into unstable, invisible spaces.<sup>33</sup> By excerpting visual clips from the cityscape of Dakar, Seye’s photographs transform the space of the city into a place of representation.<sup>34</sup> Treating the city as a

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<sup>31</sup>De Certeau writes that walkers “weave places together”; their movements form “real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.” De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

<sup>32</sup>“Le ville n’est qu’un trottoir sans autre dedans, sans autre pouvoir, sans autre autre fermeture” says Jean Loup Pivin in his introduction to *Bouna Medoune Seye: Les Trottoirs de Dakar* (Paris: Editions Revue Noire, 1994), 8.

<sup>33</sup>Here, I continue to work through de Certeau’s notion that “space is a practiced place.” De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

<sup>34</sup>Carol Magee writes, “Photographing a city transforms its space into a place....a photograph to be read.” Carol Magee, “Spatial Stories: Photographic Practices and Urban Belonging,” *Africa Today* 54, No. 2, (Winter 2007): 113.

kind of readymade composition, which constantly forms new patterns and endlessly generates a trove of picture taking opportunities out of the stuff of daily life, Seye's photographs capture the movement of a city as it is used by a particular type of pedestrian.

### **From *Les Trottoirs* to *Joe's Yard***

Though lacking the formal qualities of street photography found in *Les Trottoirs* Seye's photographs of Issa Samb's courtyard continue to engage the themes explored in his earlier work. Joe's Yard, like its larger urban context (Dakar as photographed in *Les Trottoirs*) is a space in flux. That is to say, the yard, like the city of Dakar itself, can be considered a changing landscape defined by movement and use.

As in *Les Trottoirs*, the *Joe's Yard* series makes use of "walking and waiting." In the various framings of collected objects, the viewer is encouraged to construct imagined histories – narratives of how the objects came to be where they are. The theme of walking becomes visible through these "histories," because one can imagine the lines of travel, which brought these objects to the yard. Consider Figure 2, which depicts a rope coiled on a jute sack.<sup>35</sup> The photograph abstracts this composition from the space of the yard such that it appears as a kind of monochrome sculptural assemblage. One may associate this rope with a boat tether and imagine that before being used in the art activities of Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art, it may have been used at the shipyards along the coast of the city. The jute sack on which the rope lies similarly references lines of travel; jute sacks are everyday objects found in the homes of most Senegalese

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<sup>35</sup>The rope may also be referring to a noose used in a variety of Laboratoire performance used to "hang" various constructions. For an example of this use see Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag: Senegalese Cultural Ideology and the 'École de Dakar'" in *Africa Explores: 20<sup>th</sup> Century African Art*, eds. Susan Vogel and Ima Ebong (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 198- 209.

families and associated with the holding and transport of rice. Thus, the sack is not only the literal resting place of a rope, but also refers to life outside the immediate confines of the yard as well.<sup>36</sup>

In another photograph, Figure 6, depicting a mass of found objects loosely contained by a metal grate, one can imagine a multitude of stories that resulted in this collection. Keeping the theme of movement in play, these objects, which were collected by Samb and which now sit waiting further reuse, suggest the accumulation of potential- a kind of state in process – linking the objects’ use in everyday life in the city to their reuse in the art making practices of Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art. By capturing these spaces “in-between” on film, the photographs comment on the space of the everyday, which, according to de Certeau, is between places and as such is mostly invisible. In *Les Trottoirs* the mostly invisible movements of pedestrians coursing through the streets of Dakar are made visible. By making visible these lines of travel, the images of *Les Trottoirs* are a kind of map; thus they can be connected to the effect of Set Setal’s murals. *Joe’s Yard* too brings invisible spaces into focus by allowing the viewer to contemplate movement between places and the potential for turning the detritus of the city into art.

Yet *Joe’s Yard* speaks not only to mostly invisible movement through a city, but also to the aesthetics and politics associated with Issa Samb. In his assemblage works, composed of found objects and scattered throughout the yard, Samb expresses his criticism of the fine art practices associated with the École de Dakar and his interest in

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<sup>36</sup> In the 1980s, El Sy was also making use of rice sacks to speak to daily life in Dakar. See Joanna Grabski, *The Historical Invention and Contemporary Practice of Modern Senegalese Art: Three Generations of Artists in Dakar*, 94.

socially engaged forms of art.<sup>37</sup> Often half finished and partially buried by fallen leaves, the work is fundamentally process-oriented. Seye pays homage to Samb in his photographs of his yard, which echo Samb's aesthetics of creative (re)appropriation. Take for example, Seye's image of a tree trunk braced by a scaffolding of bare branches and rusty cans, Figure 7; the photograph appears to document this art installation, while also claiming for photography an aesthetic of assemblage and re-use. One can see how Seye's photographs of *Joe's Yard* diverge from straight documentary photography when one compares them with photographs taken by art historian Elizabeth Harney for her discussion of Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art.<sup>38</sup> Harney's images are reproduced in order to illustrate the artistic objects created and used in Samb's yard and are meant to function as documents in the context of her book. Whereas Seye rarely allows the viewer to see in their entirety the sculptural objects he photographs, Harney almost always does (Figures 8 and 9). Seye's tightly composed photographic abstractions disassociate the objects from their original context, while Harney is careful to keep both the sculptural assemblages in the foreground and the background wall in focus. Thus Seye complicates his documentary handling of the camera in *Joe's Yard*; in his translations from yard to photograph, the yard installation becomes a formal study of a process of art making.

Through the selection of subjects represented - from the collection of materials waiting re-use to the details of mixed media installations- this series emphasizes the

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<sup>37</sup>Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 121.

<sup>38</sup>It should be noted that images of Issa Samb's courtyard, which document the space in a fashion similar to Harney's images, can also be found in the exhibition catalog for The White Chapel gallery's exhibition, *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

ephemeral materials used in the art of Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art. The reframing of these materials in Seye's photographs connects these photographs to the experimental practices of this group. In this way, one reads in these images the spatial practices associated with the city, and also an allegiance to a politics of recuperation.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Recuperation as I am using it here is meant to function as a broad, "umbrella term," that implies the re-use of objects not intended for art practice in art works. The use of salvaged material in African art has been written about extensively. To consider the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings of recuperation, see Joanna Grabski, "Recuperation: Much More than Making Do, A Technique in the service of Ideas", in *The Historical Invention and Contemporary Practice of Modern Senegalese Art: Three Generations of Artists in Dakar*, 166- 184; Also see Corinne A. Kratz, "Rethinking Recyclia," *African Arts* (Summer 1995): 1-12 and Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Reciclado la modernidad: el desecho y la antropológica del artefacto en el arte africano contemporáneo," *Atlántica internacional : revista de las artes*, No. 13 (Spring 1996): 32-39.



### CHAPTER III. AN AVANT-GARDE RESPONSE

Like other artists of his generation whose work can be characterized by an experimental approach and a critical sensibility, Seye emphasizes process over finished product in his work.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly true of *Joe's Yard* which takes on "process" as its leitmotif. Rather than relaying a narrative about a linear process of production- from raw materials to finished artistic product- the series takes on the theme of process and its oscillation between construction and deconstruction. The theme of process can be found not only on the level of the series, but also within the subject matter of individual images, which point to de/construction. The objects, because they are found and reused, are neither raw material nor finished product, but are both at the same time. Similarly the yard is a space of transformation, where the waste of a city is reconstructed into something new. The functioning of the yard as a space of construction is suggested by the photograph of the laboratory-like setting with which I began this paper (Figure 1). In this image, an idea of construction is conveyed through the inclusion of the capped bottles which signify a laboratory setting and thus creativity

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<sup>40</sup> Seye can be considered a second generation artist. According to Joanna Grabski, Dakar based artists frequently associate their artistic practices with a particular artistic "generation" - a term that accounts for both a shared temporal identification and a shared ideological (and sometimes formal) concern. First generation artists are those associated with the École de Dakar, and were among the first to graduate from the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in Dakar in the 1960s. The Second generation, who began their art practices in the 1970s and 1980s, are known for their experimentation with new media and their critical sensibility. The third generation graduated from the École Nationale des Beaux Arts in the last decade and have only recently begun to exhibit their work. For a discussion of the changes in Dakar's art world in the past four decades that are driven by local and global forces see Joanna Grabski, "Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City," *African Arts* (Winter 2003): 28- 39.

via experimentation. Alternatively, by attending to the surface of the bottles covered with a thick layer of dust, which also blankets the other items on the table, an idea of deconstruction, as in the slow process of decay, is conveyed.

In Figure 10, an image that juxtaposes a pile of building debris and a wall in the background, against which one of Samb's paintings hangs, a similar dialectic between construction and deconstruction is kept in play. Between the two pictorial registers, which have been sharply delineated from one another by the photograph's relatively shallow depth of field, the tension between construction and deconstruction is strong. In the foreground, the pile of debris signifies deconstruction – of a building or some structure – whereas the painting on the wall in the background signifies artistic construction. There is also a dialectical movement of de/construction within each pictorial register, which further complicates the image. It is unclear whether this pile of debris was brought into this yard or whether it represents a building that once stood in its place. At least the black pipe-like objects which rest on this pile appear to have been carefully collected here. Keeping in mind that Samb collected material from the streets of Dakar to use in his sculptural assemblages, one can read this pile of building materials as referencing construction or its potential. The wall and painting in the background of the photograph also suggest a similar play. For though the painting might reference the product of Samb's artistic practice, his act of construction, in another way its inclusion in this image points to the idea of deconstruction or decay. Notice its location: on the wall of an open air courtyard. Recall the description of Samb's work hanging on the courtyard's walls from the first pages of this essay: "collecting the fine

red dust of Dakar’s breezes and fading [from] intense sunlight and rains.”<sup>41</sup> The polyvalence of these pictorial elements, the way that they simultaneously signify construction and deconstruction, suggests that these elements are to be read as sites of becoming—in a movement and in a process that is neither predetermined nor unidirectional. It is in this way that Seye conveys that, like the city streets of his first series, this yard too is a space in flux.

The process-orientation of these images as well as their experimental quality links them to the work of other artists of his generation, particularly participants in Laboratoire Agit-Art, like El Sy and Issa Samb. As with these artists, Seye’s series of *Joe’s Yard* photographs can be seen as oppositional to the artists of the École de Dakar, who exemplify Senegal’s first generation of modern artists and whose work was linked to the government sponsored patronage system associated with Leopold Senghor. These painters had work that was chosen by the state for the First World Festival of Black Arts in 1966. They were among the first to attend the École des Arts du Senegal which was established by President Senghor in 1960, and their work has been tied to Senghor’s ideas about culture and politics. Over a period of several decades, Senghor spoke and wrote about his vision of a pan-African aesthetic based in his philosophy of negritude that called for glorifying Africa’s pre-colonial past and aligning Africanité with emotive, rhythmical, and decorative qualities.<sup>42</sup> École de Dakar artists are known for their role in translating this vision into visual form, by reinterpreting “traditional”

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<sup>41</sup> Recall that this is a quotation of Elizabeth Harney’s writing. Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow*, 120.

<sup>42</sup> See Leopold Sedar Senghor, “Ce que je Crois” in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 218. Senghor’s ideas on Negritude are complex and were developed over several decades. The limited scope of this paper does not allow me to elaborate on them here. For a more in depth treatment of the synergy between the poetic and visual arts that emerged in tandem with Senghor’s formulation and politics of negritude, see Harney, “Defining an African Essence and an Esthétique Africaine: Senghor’s Brand of Negritude” in *In Senghor’s Shadow*, 38-48.

African art forms such as masks and sculptures into semi-abstract painterly compositions.

Refusing to represent distinctly African subjects in a stylized, decorative manner in their works, artists of the self-defined second generation have been critical of the precedent set for the role of modern art by Senghor. For instance, Issa Samb, writing against the *École de Dakar* in 1989 for what he saw as their commitment to purely formal concerns and their economic dependence on the state asserts:

The *École de Dakar*, in the fringe that calls itself apolitical, has shown no participatory or courageous action in social matters. On the contrary; the school deceitfully tries to work both sides. This is dangerous because it convokes Negritude but allows itself to be used by the reigning political current.

These painters are actually absent from the places where things are decided upon. They are no longer involved in an intellectual struggle along side the novelists, the poets, and the scientists. Formerly the state's pampered children, most of them are simply floating in the wake of a political idea. They are torn between the image the public has of them and the call of the spirit of painting....This ambiguous situation is the symptom, as painful as it is obvious, of the contempt for every effort of investigation, and for any type of art independent of the state.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>As quoted in Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag," 205. For a slightly different variation of this translation and to view the original comment in its context, see Issa Samb, "The Social and Economic situation of the Artists of the 'École de Dakar,'" in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, eds. Martin Pascal Sainte Leon, N. Fall and Frederique Chapuis. (Paris: Revue Noir, 1999), 117-119.

Samb's critique of the *École de Dakar* and the Senegalese government which initially sustained these artists is woven throughout his work of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>44</sup> And to the extent that Seye captures elements of this critique in his photographs, his series functions as a kind of "homage to Joe." In opposition to the celebratory tenor and elitism associated with the *École de Dakar*, Samb has said about his work that his subjects are taken from "everyday life, social reality, and death."<sup>45</sup> This approach is illustrated well in *Works on Presidents Bokassa and Giscard d'Estaing*, a mixed media piece completed by Samb in 1993 ( Figure 11). To address the unsavory political alliance between the two men, which involved the smuggling of diamonds, a war in the Central African Republic and the eventual removal of Bokassa from his office ("social reality" and "death"), Samb covers a worn wooden plank with a collage of newspaper clippings and paint ("everyday life"). While my simplistic correlation of Samb's statement with aspects of this work, limits a complex understanding of this work on its own terms, this correlation does suggest the way that Samb creates a web of linkages between his conceptual interests. It is this web of linkages that Seye's images of Joe's yard skillfully portray.

Fitting for the subtle operations at work in the series as a whole, Samb's self-proclaimed subjects are dealt with by Seye obliquely.<sup>46</sup> The debris pile (Figure 10), for

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<sup>44</sup>Samb is still active as an artist, but since he exhibits rarely and no scholarly treatment of his current work is available, I am reluctant to generalize about his recent artistic concerns. It seems likely, that as the field of art production in Senegal has changed dramatically in the last four decades that Samb's practice would reflect this shift. Due to the scarcity of images that depict Samb's work I have relied on descriptions of his work offered by Elizabeth Harney in support of my argument here.

<sup>45</sup>Sainte Leon, ed., *Anthology of Contemporary Fine Arts in Senegal*, 238.

<sup>46</sup>The one image that seems to deviate from this is the image of the rope coiled on the rice sack, which address the theme of death explicitly.

instance, can be said to speak to all three themes. The “everyday” is addressed in the humbleness and familiarity of the pile of building material, “social reality” in that piles of debris were a common feature of Dakar’s urban landscape at this time due to citywide restrictions on social services, and, as mentioned earlier, decay, and therefore demise, are eluded to in this rubble of a former building.

Samb’s critique of the École de Dakar in his work, extended from matters of content to formal considerations, to choice of material, and even to issues of display. In keeping with an anti-art aesthetic, Samb’s half worked sculptural assemblages situated in the courtyard, speak to his valorization of process over the finished product, a theme deftly explored in Seye’s photographs. According to Harney, many of Samb’s works are, “in fact, ‘props’”<sup>47</sup> from Laboratoire performances and workshops, which are now partially buried by piles of fallen leaves or left half finished scattered about the yard. His use of objects with diverse histories and the turning of a small patch of yard into art through its designation as such by the artist seem to relate directly to what Hal Foster had in mind when he identified anti-aestheticism as signaling “a practice that is cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic or rooted in a vernacular—that is, to forms that deny a privileged aesthetic realm.”<sup>48</sup> As a challenge to the privileged aesthetic realm, aligned with the Senghorian concept of art- African

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<sup>47</sup>Elizabeth Harney, *The Legacy of Negritude: A History of the Visual Arts in Post- Independence Senegal*, (PhD Diss., University of London, 1996), 84.

<sup>48</sup>Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface” in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. H. Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), xv. Foster is writing specifically of an anti-aestheticism related to European avant-gardist practices. It is useful in a Senegalese context for several reasons: members of Laboratoire Agit-Art were versed in the theoretical arguments that informed European avant-gardism, the artistic strategies used in Laboratoire Agit-Art performances often resonated with those developed in a European context, and the term is defined broadly enough that it can be applied to artistic strategies that resist and question dominant modes of art practice generally.

themed paintings and tapestries, hung in galleries and marketed towards elite Senegalese and international audiences- Samb rarely exhibits his work formally and does little to protect it from the elements. Instead, the works make up the visual environment of a semi-public courtyard that is less a gallery than it is an artistic laboratory and community gathering place.

Seye's photographs of Samb's courtyard can be read as expanding the anti-aestheticism of Samb's work in several ways. Besides isolating aspects of the yard, in order to fix these non-art spaces as art objects, the *Joe's Yard* photographs challenge Senghor's ideas about a Senegalese national style linked with "a sense of decoration and refinement"<sup>49</sup> *Joe's Yard* is full of clutter, as well as, elusive vision obstructing objects, and refuse- all of which counter Senghor's conception of art and the qualities associated with the École de Dakar. Additionally, because the *Joe's Yard* photographs are of an outdoor environment mostly devoid of people and because these photographs are exceptionally uneventful (indeed, they are particularly banal) they do not partake in the conventions of Senegalese portrait photography. Hence, they can be seen as making use of anti-aestheticism to counter dominant modes of photographic expression as well. As a strategy of resistance to entrenched standards for "high art" (first generation modernist painting) and for photography (commercial studio portraiture), the anti-aestheticism displayed in the photographic work of Bouna Seye can be put into conversation with that of Laboratoire Agit-Art.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Leopold Senghor, "For a Senegalese Tapestry," from a speech made in Thies December, 1966 on the occasion of the inauguration of the national tapestry manufacture, reprinted in *Dak'Art 96: Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain*, (Paris: Cimaïse, 1996), 58.

<sup>50</sup> As a member of the experimental performance group Laboratoire Agit- Art, Seye was connected to artists interested in "deblocking" creativity on multiple levels in Senegalese society from the artistic, to

If this strategy can be understood as signaling the questioning of the nature of the aesthetic- i.e. what is the nature of art?, where can art be located? – then perhaps these photographs of an artist’s workspace and his art objects, challenge dominant ideas about art in their very ontology. Photography has not generally been considered an art on par with other “high arts,” as judged by its lack of consideration by Senghor in his speeches on the arts (which focus on painting and tapestry), its small role in large scale exhibitions dedicated to the art of Africa, and its limited presence in Senegalese art curriculum.<sup>51</sup> Thus, by using the medium of photography to participate in a dialogue with other artists of his generation about art practice in Senegal, Seye’s images can be read as promoting the idea that photography can be considered as an art.

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the political, to the social. The group is known for its experimental and improvisational work and its efforts to renegotiate art’s relationship to society. Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow*, 109.

<sup>51</sup>In recent times, interest in photographs as art, evidenced by their inclusion in a number of exhibitions, books and articles, dedicated to the subject, has risen sharply. Still, as is the case with photographic arts more generally, the integration of African photography into exhibits that showcase works in a variety of media has been limited.

Personal communication with art historian Joanna Grabski indicates that training in photography is a nominal part of art education at the École Nationale des Beaux Arts, Senegal’s premier art training venue. A number of factors may contribute to this lack, not the least of which is the prohibitive cost of photographic equipment and materials.



#### CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSION: THE IN-BETWEEN

In this essay, I have drawn out the subtle significance of Bouna Medoune Seye's images of seemingly banal piles of debris and enigmatic details of a yard. Grounding my analysis in both a social and political context, as well as close formal study of the photographs themselves, I have highlighted the multidimensional nature of this seemingly straightforward body of work, exploring four dimensions in detail: the way that *Joe's Yard* can be read as a break from the constraints of conventional commercial portraiture, its engagement with urban life and conditions, its extension of Samb's artistic practice, and its connection to avant-gardist practices of the 1990s. By concretizing the ephemeral aspects of the yard in photographic form, the *Joe's Yard* series brings attention to aspects of urban life and artistic creativity, movement and invisibility,<sup>52</sup> which might otherwise be overlooked. These images suggest the traffic of objects as they might circulate through the city and the collecting and reframing of objects by Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art. As formal studies, Seye's photographs continue the movement of these objects into a new representational frame. Because the photographs in *Joe's Yard* tend the juncture between the visible and the invisible- bringing invisible movement into view and simultaneously revealing and hiding aspects of the yard- they can be understood as photographs "in-between."

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<sup>52</sup> Simone, "Critical Dimensions of Urban Life in Africa."

They are photographs “in-between” in additional ways as well. Besides referring to in-between states- the movement of objects and artistic process - they can also be considered as “in-between” representational modes. *Joe’s Yard* embodies a particular moment in the history of photography in West Africa, when photographers interested in expanding photography’s artistic range began to align themselves with image making traditions other than portraiture. Reacting to the legacy of commercial portrait photography, Seye’s work reflects a trend towards a different handling of the camera. As an “homage to Joe” this photographic series exists in a place in-between documentation, by commemorating the site where Samb produced his work, and artistic appropriation of Samb’s artistic practice. While *Joe’s Yard* can be read as making use of the conventions of documentary photography that speak to photography’s ability to transcribe the scene before the camera, these images are not merely documentary. They are also a translation of Samb’s aesthetic and political interests.

The *Joe’s Yard* photographs are also in-between in a different sense. Made by a second-generation artist and reflecting the concerns associated with this generation, these images can be read as a response to the aesthetics and politics aligned with first generation artists. They are also future oriented in that they share an engagement with urban themes that frequently appear in the work of third generation artists. In this way, *Joe’s Yard* can be read as marking the place between earlier artistic engagement with urbanity and more recent developments in Senegalese fine art production. Joanna Grabski writes of the trend among third generation artists: “Whether they allude to the city walls as community resources, to the pervasive reach of consumer society, or to the complexities of urban identity, their artistic production speaks of everyday reality in

Dakar.”<sup>53</sup> The work of this generation shares a stylistic affinity in that their compositions appropriate the look of city surfaces, as Grabski has said, the compositions often “appear as visual clips excerpted from the cityscape.”<sup>54</sup> One reads in this comment an invocation of a photographic manner of representation. Seye’s “Joe’s Yard” is also about city surfaces, as I have argued. Considering this series in relation to a broader range of photographic discourse – beyond the limits of portraiture – points the way toward a more general integration of Senegalese photography into our picture of contemporary art in Senegal.

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<sup>53</sup> Joanna Grabski, “Dakar’s Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City,” *African Arts* (Winter 2003): 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



Figure 1: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995



Figure 2: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995



Figure 3: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995





Figure 4: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from *Les Trottoirs de Dakar*, 1994

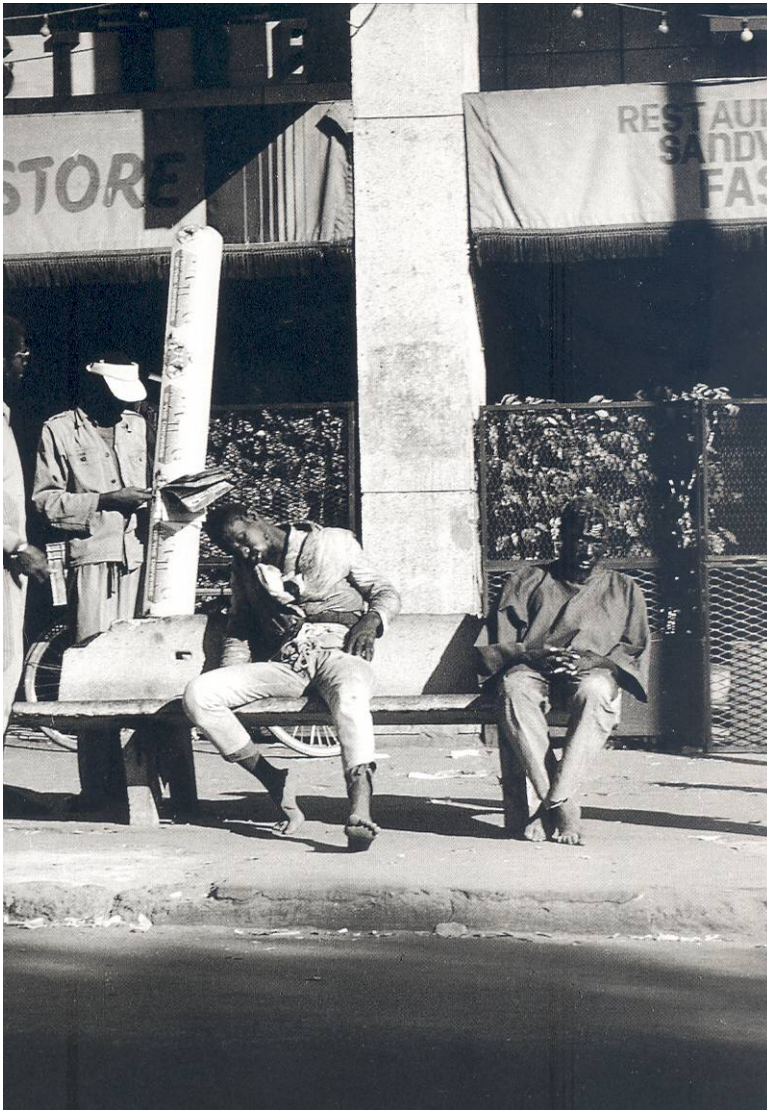


Figure 5: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from *Les Trottoirs de Dakar*, 1994





Figure 6: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995



Figure 7: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995



Figure 8: Elizabeth Harney, *Issa Samb's Dakar Courtyard*, 1994





Figure 9: Elizabeth Harney, *Issa Samb's Dakar Courtyard*, 1994



Figure 10: Bouna Medoune Seye, Photograph from the series *Joe's Yard*, 1995



Figure 11: Issa Samb and Laboratoire Agit-Art, *Works on Presidents Bokassa and Giscard d'Estaing*, Mixed Media, 1993

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