

APERTURE MAGAZINE. — “Platform Africa”

, 227. New York, Aperture Foundation, 2017, 144 p.

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RÉFÉRENCE

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- 1 A new generation of African photographers and photography curators are on the rise. From Nigeria to South Africa to Sudan to Morocco, new photographic training centers and exhibition venues are opening. Photographers based all over Africa are not unaffected by migration and displacement. In spite of this, many choose to prioritize their search for valuable photographic experiences over efforts to redress Western audiences’ impressions of the state of photography in Africa. Digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter influence the photographs that they see, and these interfaces also determine the formats through which they conceive of and circulate their photographs. For these highly mobile and inquisitive image makers, photography is a tool that allows them to express themselves in defying and untraditional terms.
- 2 In 2016, Ethiopia’s capital hosted Addis Foto Fest while Nigeria was the site of LagosPhoto. In places like Khartoum and across North Africa, photographers have created the Sudanese Photographers Group and Collective 220 respectively. These venues and organizations may be unfamiliar to readers of commercial arts publications printed in the Western hemisphere. Nonetheless, international interest in photography in Africa dates back to 1994 with formal efforts like the first “Bamako Encounters: African Biennale of Photography” held in Mali and the curatorial efforts of figures like Okwui Enwezor, Simon Njami, André Magnin, and Susan Vogel, among others.
- 3 To map these various creative and contemporary art networks and their historical trajectories, the quarterly arts publication Aperture convened a group of experienced

special editors. These editors included John Fleetwood, who previously directed the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, South Africa and who now is the director of the organization Photo; Bisi Silva, the founder and artistic director of the Center of Contemporary Art in Lagos; and Aïcha Diallo, the associate editor of the Berlin-based arts publication C& (ContemporaryAnd). The result of their efforts was the issue titled “Platform Africa” published in Summer 2017.

- 4 Photographers and photography enthusiasts have traditionally constituted Aperture’s readership. Until this issue, Aperture’s readers have had limited contact with articles about photography in Africa; the issue is the first to focus solely on contemporary photography in Africa. It attempts to highlight and mainstream undervalued institutions, practices, and photographers.
- 5 The organizing concept for the issue is “the platform.” With regards to photography, a platform can be a physical space that allows photographers to exhibit their pictures and that serves as a site of recognition. However, as the issue emphasizes, platforms are also the material formats and contexts through which audiences view photographs and the geographical paths that photographers, writers, images, and text travel. Part of thinking about platforms involves addressing traditional geographies that have disaggregated the continent into North and South, or more specifically “Sub-Saharan.” Even within the geographical frame of Sub-Saharan Africa, there are regional divides according to West, East, and South along with the prioritization of photographic practices in West Africa and South Africa. At first glance, the issue’s editors, writers, and featured photographers appear disinterested with debates over resources, archives, and documentary practices that have come to frame the amorphous and ill-defined commercial and scholarly field frequently referred to as “African photography.” Instead, their concerns involve issues of historical inquiry and self-definition. In their attempts to represent the everyday, photographers have produced colorful pictures of uncertainty, impermanence, migration, and disorientation.
- 6 “Platform Africa” consists of a print edition and online exclusives developed in conjunction with C&. *Aperture*’s editorial format gives equal standing to written text and photographs, to such a point, that it divides the publication into two sections appropriately called: “Words” and “Pictures.” The “Words” section contains excerpts from an interview with the Central African portrait photographer Samuel Fosso who, in 2017, had a solo show at London’s National Portrait Gallery and, in 2018, at the the International Center of Photography where he was honored with its Infinity Award. Fosso reflected on the experience of viewing for the first time at Bamako Encounters the photographs of the legendary studio photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé. He expressed his own amazement at learning how the two photographers knew of his work. The artistic director of Bamako’s 10th edition, Bisi Silva, addresses, in another essay, the significance of Bamako to her own curatorial endeavors and reflects on her own team’s attempts to increase the event’s engagement with local communities. Silva reveals that there was a point where Bamako Encounters featured more international than local photographers, one aspect of the misalignment between international and local interests. As a counterpoint to this overshadowing, Franziska Jenni documents how Malian photographers practice in the backdrop of a global exhibition like Bamako Encounters. The art critic Sean O’Toole provides an illuminating history on the development and operation of the Market Photo Workshop, which has trained a new generation of photographers. Researcher and publisher Morad

Montazami provocatively interrogates undesignated spaces of photographic activity and contestatory formulations of documentary practice in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. With the “Words” section, are the photographs of Sabelo Mlangeni, Malala Andrialavidrazana, Mimi Cherono Ng’ok, Nico Krijno, Jody Brand, Ashley Walters, Abdo Shanan, Délio Jasse, Eric Gyamfi, and François-Xavier Gbré. There is a short introduction to each photographer’s body of work. In addition, the online exclusives present interviews with the writer Emmanuel Iduma and selected photographers as well as with exhibition curators featured in the print issue. There are additional profiles on South Africa’s new media artists, the British-Nigerian photographer Akinbode Akinbiyi, and Algerian Zineb Sedira. The site also has a podcast about Yaoundé Photo Network, a creative collaboration intended for lens-based artists.

- 7 The issue substantively charts and frames a history of photographic training beyond the usual internationally-sponsored master classes and art critiques. South Africa is home to the Market Photo Workshop, whose formal activities date to 1989 but whose origins date to 1976 when the documentary photographer David Goldblatt organized an exhibition in conjunction with the opening of the Market Theatre. The training center initially received an overwhelming response from white students, leading organizers to realize quickly that members of non-white communities could not afford the fees associated with such educational training. Today, the Market Photo Workshop instructs students on the techniques of photojournalism and wedding portraiture and also the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by the medium and profession. The visual activist Zanele Muholi leads a long list of graduates that also includes the late Thabiso Sekgala and Lebohlang Kganye. Many of the trained photographers have achieved international recognition and have redefined the ways in which people see South Africa’s (post-) apartheid histories.
- 8 Space and context are as instrumental to a photographer’s technical education as institutionalized modes of training and practice. Ghanaian Eric Gyamfi photographs from within a space where his subjects sometimes find themselves having to live two lives, one as straight and one as queer. As readers, we are privileged to see scenes that Gyamfi’s subjects are not always able to see and even publicly show. Heteronormative notions of sexuality render invisible the scenes of kinships and self-representation that Gyamfi photographed. Mlangeni recalled his own unfamiliarity with the rhythms and language of a city like Johannesburg. Similarly, Brand, disenchanted with her own studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), realized that unidentified forces enact themselves on the movements of color bodies. Mlangeni, Brand, Walters, and Gbré attend to the ways in which their subjects occupy the very physical spaces they inhabit. They slow down the photographic process and compose their scenes by taking a step back or to the side. Also, they position their cameras from above or below a specific scene. In the process, their pictures seek to depict the multitude of ways that their subjects acknowledge the presence of both the photographer and the camera. After the social protests that came to define the “Arab Spring,” photographers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco have been more willing to disobey societal norms that previously prohibited photographing in public and heavily surveilled spaces, such as a phosphate processing site in Tunisia or points of border crossings from Africa into Europe.
- 9 “Platform Africa” inspires a rethinking of photography’s inherent but misunderstood internationalism. Photographers of African descent are returning to the continent, to live and work, and those based in Africa are moving in directions that challenge widely-

accepted regional divides. For example, Shanan was born in Oran, Algeria but his family fled the civil war in 1991. After living in Libya, he returned to Oran in 2009. Similarly, Jasse left Angola in his young adult years for Portugal, has since interrogated this personal history of exile and return through a set of postcards of colonial Mozambique that he purchased in Lisbon at a flea market. Cheron Ng’ok, like Walters, studied in South Africa at UCT’s Michaelis School of Fine Art. She has participated in many of the exhibitions and collectives discussed in Aperture. It is common for photographers to meet at biennales and workshops, to accompany their peers on photo shoots. Collective 220 developed during a train ride to a photography festival in Algeria. Its members, which include Shanan, aspire for greater recognition, not from Europe, but from other parts of Africa. Regarding the importance of such platforms like Collective 220 and the support of his peers, Shanan stated, “We can share our work and get honest feedback. We don’t have really good art critics. We have to be critics for each other” (p. 110).

- 10 The issue’s contents also attend to its physical format as a magazine and photobook. According to writer Rita Potenza, magazines like *Drum* were instrumental to the circulation of photographs across Africa and in cultivating a socio-economically diverse readership. Although headquartered in South Africa, by 1958, *Drum* was circulating in eight African nations. Many of the magazine’s photographers photographed scenes of social protests and acts of civil disobedience in South Africa using black-and-white films. *Drum* published these images alongside color images of musical performances. Photographers worked hand-in-hand with some of the nation’s most talented literary and non-fiction writers. At present, the Bailey’s African History Archive holds what remains of *Drum* magazine and has used these archival materials to produce books and a film.
- 11 Only recently, with the political transformations of 2011, have news agencies been interested in the images of photographers based in North Africa and inclusive of their experiments with documentary photography. Curators and photographers alike attribute the opening across the Maghreb of galleries and cultural arts institutions, such as Kulte Gallery & Editions in Rabat and Galerie 127 in Marrakech, to the independent French media publication *Revue Noire* (1991-2001) (p. 106). Kulte Gallery & Editions also launched in 2014 the publication *New Africa*, which tracked the continent’s “impulses for photography and video” (p. 103).
- 12 No detail is too small for Aperture’s editorial team. The choice was made to print photographs on either matted or glossy-finished paper in order to highlight the texture of images, their haptic qualities, and the creative choices photographers made. This approach to the printing of images also reflected photographers’ own attentiveness to their roles as historians, anthropologists, and archivists. Andrialavidrazana’s digitally-created photo collages consisting of illustrative images extracted from atlases, currencies, and other archived images of animals, leaders of African nations, and maps. Such an interrogation and treatment of the visual gives the viewer a sense of the nationalistic impulses and geographical imaginaries that incentivized Europe’s colonization of Africa and that informed the violence registered by and inflicted through photography.
- 13 Jasse brings to the surface the stamps that frequently appeared on the backsides of photographs and that colonial administrators used in lieu of actual photographs to classify and trace the movements of populations, some of whom appear on the reproduced postcards. Gbré experiments with the materiality of the photographic

medium by installing small images or printing images on wallpaper. These creative choices involving the materiality of the image also play out in Gbré’s selection of subjects, ranging from the portrait that hangs on the wall to the tile on the floors or to the points within landscapes where man-made structures meet nature. Then, there is Nico Krijno who takes one photographic series over a period of six years. Since the extended series “Synonym Study” and, depending on the platform, he publishes or uploads photographs on a yearly or daily basis. Krijno also creates sculptures out of edible flowers and other discarded objects. For Krijno, who seeks to explore the meaning that “casted off objects” acquire when placed together, images and not written words are the text.

- 14 “Platform Africa” is experimental, reflective, and forward-looking. Its printed version introduces and showcases a range of photographers and art institutions from across Africa. The printed photographs are beautiful in their presentation and visual content. The online features offer opportunities to hear directly from photographers with respect to how they understand their respective photographic processes and how they interpret their images. *Aperture’s* readers were long overdue for such an insight into contemporary photography in Africa. Art historians, historians, museums curators, and art critics alike also serve to benefit from the issue.
- 15 While art institutions and initiatives come and go, Africa-based photographers continue to attend to their practice and images in ways that exceed genre classifications and challenge existing modes of thinking. In the last few years, let alone months, nations on the continent have experienced great social and political transformations as their leaders have either resigned or lost in democratic elections. One eagerly awaits to see how the photographers, curators, and writers profiled in *Aperture* respond to the present moment we are living and the types of textual and visual images that they offer up for interpretation and aesthetic enjoyment.