

Monsieur ANDRÉ MAGNIN

Interview by LISA ROVNER

When André Magnin, curator, publisher and co-founder of C.A.A.C. (Contemporary African Art Collection), met Malick Sidibé he uncovered a staggering archive of photographs capturing the unique vitality of Malian youth partying in Bamako in the 1960s and 1970s. Independence from France had given Mali a newfound sense of liberty expressed among the youth in the form of a vibrant club and party culture.

Lisa Rovner speaks to André Magnin about the significance of his discovery.



Photographs from the personal scrapbook of Malick Sidibé.

Lisa Rovere: How did you come to discover Malick Sidibé? Let's start at the beginning of your explorations of contemporary African art...

André Magnin: In the fall of 1986, our very small team of curators occupied a tiny office in Paris, which stood as the *Magiciens de la Terre* headquarters, an exhibition held at Centre Pompidou in 1989. We had a world map pinned to the wall, and it was from there that we prepared our first trips to the countries, cultures and people that we knew next to nothing about. We were familiar with European and American art. Our research, however, focused on the geographical regions that were little known, unexplored and globally absent from the "official" art scene: Asia, Oceania, Central America, the Arctic regions and Africa. Africa chose me. I travelled to about 20 African countries between 1986 and 1989 searching for artists. Of course, it is known that in some parts of the world people hold different notions of art, than say Westerners such as ourselves. Very often in Africa there was no museum, no gallery and no structure for art. If there was anything, there was very little.

Lisa: Your exhibition at Centre Pompidou was the first truly international exhibition. The selection was made of 100 artists from around the world, 50 from the so-called centers of the world.

André: The exhibition was born from that which we did not know, that which we had ignored. Among the 100 artists chosen, 50 of the non-Western artists were showing for the first time in Paris. For artists such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Bodeys Isok Kingeleh, Cheri Samba, Seni Camara, Efembele, Kane Kwei, Esther Mahlangu, Cyprien Tokoudagba, to name just a few of the African artists, it was the first time their work had ever been exhibited in the West. These artists have completely shaken our definition of contemporary art. While visiting *Magiciens de la Terre*, the collector Jean Pigozzi discovered artists that he had never seen in any gallery or museum in New York, Paris or London. It's at that moment that he had the idea to initiate a collection which he asked me to put together. *La planète toute entière, enfin...*

(The planet all together at last) proclaimed by Pierre Gaudibert, began to take on real meaning. In 1991 Jean Pigozzi and I visited the exhibition *Africa Explores* which mixed traditional arts, popular arts, contemporary art and also some photography dating from the beginning of the 20th century up to the 1970s. Four exceptional photographs that were credited "Unknown photographer, Bamako, Mali, 1950" grabbed Jean Pigozzi's attention. With the experience I had in Africa, I told myself I could identify this "unknown photographer" by going to Bamako, Mali. If the photographer was alive, I would find him. In 1991, I got to Bamako with photocopies of the photographs published in the catalogue. As I exited the airport men were waving signs with hotel names. I was naturally drawn to the Tennessee sign, in memory of *Memphis Tennessee* by the great Chuck Berry. The next day, outside of the hotel, I chose Tallrou and his blue Renault 12. Tallrou became my faithful chauffeur and friend. He did not know the author of the photographs that I was showing him, but like all of Bamako, he did know of a photographer living in the Bagadadij who was said to always be "busy repairing old cameras" in front of his studio. I showed this man the photographs. He instantly recognised them and said "Ga c'est pour Keita" (That's for Keita), which meant that the portraits were taken by his elder, Seydou Keita. Malick Sidibé then accompanied me to Seydou Keita's "parcel", located behind the central prison. Seydou Keita, I believe, reinvented the art of portraiture. His photographs reflect beauty and elegance. He was

extremely precise, innovative and modern! I had been working for a year and a half, maybe two, looking through all of Keita's negatives, one by one, when one day Keita says to me, "The guy who brought you here, he's 'mon cader' (my junior). You must see his photographs." So Seydou accompanies me back to Studio Malick.

Lisa: And it was there and then that you discovered 20 years of reportage photography chronicling Bamako's social and cultural life?

André: I discovered a man loved by all of Bamako, and hundreds of thousands of negatives. Malick had photographed all of the happenings and ceremonies: weddings, surprise parties, even Christmas celebrations. At the end of the 1950s, Mali was at the brink of its independence from France. There was a newfound sense of liberty, enormous hope for the future. The whites were still living in West Africa and the rock, blues and jazz albums that were coming out in Europe were arriving in Bamako around the same time, via the whites but also via the Africans.

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—André Magnin

I have collected correspondences between Africans studying in Europe and America and their friends still in Africa. The music they were listening to, stuff like Jimi Hendrix, Grateful Dead, Chuck Berry, The Platters, James Brown, is written about in these letters. rock'n'roll changed everything for both the Europeans and the Africans. What people don't realize is that at the same moment in time, we were both wearing the same clothes, listening to the same music and dancing the same twist. Dancing with a woman did not exist in Mali before rock'n'roll. Mali's traditional music did not call for holding hands and slow dancing. It was the first time, thanks to le twist, le jerk, le hula-hoop that the youth could touch each other!

Lisa: At that time, the young Malian men were coming together, creating clubs named after western things and throwing surprise parties. In your book on Malick Sidibé, you have catalogued all the names of these clubs: Al Capone, Les Beatles, Les Dragons-Sans Soucis, The Las Vegas Club, The Supremes, The Vespa Club, The Stones. The name of the club was like an identity.

André: When we first met, Malick would always be talking to me about "the clubs" and I had no idea what he was referring to until I started looking through a pile of more than 2,000 folders stacked on the floor in a dark room. Each party had its own

folder. The folders were marked with the name of the club and a date. It turns out, the parties happened on mostly Fridays and Saturdays. Inside these folders were small pictures of party goers, showing their moves, their style, dancing with girls. The members of those clubs could easily be identified by the way they wore their hat, the way they held their coats, the way they smoked a cigarette. For example, you mentioned the Al Capone club. Its members would dress like Al Capone, smoke like Al Capone. And there was a real competition between these clubs. You had to outshine your rivals with the best parties.

Lisa: What were they competing for?

André: Girls! The beautiful girls wanted to be where the boys were the best dressed, the most hip, and playing the newest music. Malick would receive invitations to all the parties. Friday and Saturday nights, he'd travel from one party to the next, on his bicycle, from 9pm to midnight. When he'd arrive, they'd have a table reserved for him. And it was only once he had arrived that the party really started. They all wanted to be photographed having fun, dancing with girls. Malick would never dance, he was on the lookout at all times. He was actually very shy, he has a lazy eye, strabismus.

Lisa: He must have been so inspired by what he was witnessing, the spiritedness.

André: Yes, of course, but you have to remember it was also his job. It was how he made his living. At each of these parties he took hundreds of photos that he'd then develop the same night. He'd print 9x13s, and in the morning the Malian youth would come to his studio to choose a picture and place an order. This of course was just another way for the boys to see the girls again. But for Malick, photography was a business. He revels in his reputation of a man with a photographic oeuvre, but remember, the notion of art photography did not exist in Africa until very recently. Like Keita, he worked to satisfy the needs of the local clientele. It was not possible to think about photography in those terms in Africa, it was much too expensive.

Lisa: Malick Sidibé often photographed Malian youth with their records.

André: Well, that's where my persona comes in. Rock music changed my life too. It was amazing for me to discover that we shared the same culture. There's a photograph I love where this guy is posing with his motorcycle and he has all these records placed in a row on his motorcycle. Hard to ignore. In the beginning Malick could not understand why I chose the photos I did. In his mind, a good photo was one that was in focus because that's what his customers wanted. Later, he began to understand my choices. He understood his photographs represented something bigger. My project was to show that the African continent is not just sick and torn by war. Malick is participation, a desire for sharing, the joy of communication, enormous exchange. You can see that in his photos. They are so generous.

Lisa: What happened to these clubs, why did he stop his reportage? Did he start focusing more on his studio work? In your book on Malick Sidibé, you say having your portrait taken was like going to a party, that it was a real event.

André: Malick has always been a studio photographer. He stopped his reporting work in 1976 when the clubs started to break up. At the same time, cameras became much more affordable and automatic labs sprang up everywhere. Colour became less expensive and quicker. People have turned their back on black and white. But he stayed with it. It was what he liked best. Colour was too difficult for Malick to print. He really enjoyed doing his black and white prints himself. They don't move, whereas colour ends up vanishing with the light. You can still find him to this day at Studio Malick making ID photos and repairing cameras, at Porte 632, rue 508 Bajaj, Bamako, Mali.