Who Owns Seydou Keïta?

By MICHAEL RIPS

EVEN by the elevated standard of the New York art world, the rumor was exceptional: a tin of negatives buried in Africa for three decades that, when opened, revealed the work of a photographer who was neither "outsider" nor "indigenous" but spectacularly modern. And so the bejeweled and bohemian showed up at the Gagosian Gallery the evening of Oct. 18, 1997, wearing Fulani bracelets beneath their Charvet cuffs, blouses referencing Matisse referencing North African fabrics, Xhosa men in dinner jackets.

As accustomed as they were to art-world rumors, as familiar as they had become with exaggerations in the photo market, they could not help but be impressed. They saw mural-size black-and-white portraits in which the intricate designs of tribal costumes were set against backdrops of arabesque and floral cloths, the subjects disappearing into dense patterning that suggested Vuillard. A number of the photographs sold immediately, at prices of up to $16,000, and by the end of the evening, many in the crowd stood childlike in front of their limousines, waiting to catch sight of the photographer whose images they would never forget.

He finally appeared, old and regal.

The show was uniformly well received. Margarett Loke, writing in The New York Times, described Seydou Keïta as "the man who brought renewed vitality to the art of photographic portraiture." An article in Artforum praised the show, noting that the photographs "were very successful with sophisticated New Yorkers."

Not long after the exhibition, I received a phone call from a man I knew as Ibrahim. He had something to show me. A trader from Mali, Ibrahim would frequently appear at my door with garbage bags of fetish figures that he had brought back from his trips to Africa. The objects that I did not buy he took to others, and at the end of the day, to a mini-storage facility in Chelsea where West African traders do business, play music and entertain their relatives.

That day Ibrahim carried no bags. After a few minutes of conversation, he reached into his pocket and extracted a small piece of paper. On the front was the image of a young African woman. The contrast and density of the blacks and whites were minimal, the light modest, and the patterns on the costumes barely visible.

I turned the photograph over. "Keïta Seydou, Photographe Bamako - Contra en face prison civile Bamako (Sudan Français)". And then a date: "3 Avr 1959."

I was confused. This photograph was nothing like the colossal high-contrast portraits that I had seen at the gallery. But this, Ibrahim explained, was an original. This was what Mr. Keïta's modest photography studio made. I was later told that there were only a handful of such prints. (I bought it for several hundred dollars and went on to buy other prints; they are no longer a part of my collection.)

The story of this discrepancy - how a pocket-size print, sold for a few dollars in a neighborhood shop in West Africa, became a wall-size photograph that sold for $16,000 in an upscale SoHo gallery - begins in colonial Mali in the 1930's and continues into the future: a new show of Mr. Keïta's work opens at the Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea on Friday.

It is a story that includes screaming fights, a lawsuit and charges of theft, forgery and perjury. It survives the photographer himself, who died in 2001. And it touches on the broadest channels of human history, from colonialism to capitalism to revolution to race. But it also involves a conflict of the most rarefied sort - a philosophical disagreement over the nature of photography and the concept of authenticity.

IN the 1930's, Seydou Keïta, who was then young, uneducated and working in his father's carpentry shop, received a Brownie camera (producing a 6-by-9-centimeter negative) from his uncle. In 1948, Mr. Keïta (pronounced kay-EE-tah) set up a commercial studio in downtown Bamako, across from the city's prison and down the street from the train station. He was poor, so he made prints, using a 5-by-7-inch view camera, by placing the negative directly against the photographic paper, used his bed sheet as a backdrop, and photographed outdoors using available light.

Despite this, his portraits were a success.

Unlike his predecessors, who had photographed Africans to encourage missionary work or justify colonization, or as erotica, Mr. Keïta made photographs of Africans for their own personal use, and he revealed them as they had not been seen before: wearing Western suits and bow ties (his own), sitting on motorbikes or holding radios, or cradling a single flower, a reference to the Symbolists taught in Mali's French schools. For the others, it was a mixture of Western dress and African poses, African dress and Western poses - people defining themselves at
the uneven edge of modernity.

Okwui Enwezor, a scholar of photography and curator of a 1996 exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum that included Mr. Keïta's work, maintained that in the amount of information he conveys about his middle-class subjects, in the controlled complexity of the portraits and the high level of quality maintained over a great volume, his work is "comparable to the portraiture of Rembrandt." What makes this all the more astounding, he added, is that Mr. Keïta was "working outside any aesthetic discourse" - that is, he was uneducated in the history of art and photography. Mr. Keïta claimed that when he set up his studio, there were only four other studio photographers in Mali.

Following that nation's independence in 1960, he was told to close his studio and work for the government. When he resisted, he once recounted, a general visited his studio. Mr. Keïta closed up shop, locking his roughly 7,000 negatives in a tin and burying them in his yard. Fifteen years later, near the day when he retired from government, someone broke into his studio and stole his photography equipment. To support himself, he began to fix mopeds, converting his studio into a repair shop.

It was there, in 1990, that he met Françoise Huguier, a French photojournalist. Ms. Huguier arranged for a small number of Mr. Keïta's photographs to be exhibited outside of Africa, where they came to the attention of Jean Pigozzi, heir to the Simca car fortune and one of the world's pre-eminent collectors of contemporary African art. In 1992 Mr. Pigozzi sent André Magnin, the curator of Mr. Pigozzi's African collection, to Bamako to find the photographer, and Mr. Magnin returned with 921 negatives.

He made prints from those negatives, which appeared a couple of years later at an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris at the Paris Opera and at "First Sense," a show at a small gallery in Paris. Walter Keller, curator of the Scalo show and editor of the book, said the prints at both those shows were 20 by 24 inches - bigger than the originals (5 by 7 inches) but not yet enormous. By the time the new prints reached the Gagosian exhibition four months later, some had grown to 48 by 60 inches.

Mr. Magnin sold the prints he made to Mr. Piggozzi and to other collectors, galleries and museums. Mr. Enwezor credits him with bringing Mr. Keïta to the attention of the world.

Mr. Keîta, however, was not pleased. Jean-Marc Patras, a well-known agent for African artists and musicians, said that Mr. Keïta believed that Mr. Magnin was making unauthorized prints and signing them. "I absolutely deny these accusations," Mr. Magnin said. "Seydou Keïta was involved in every decision, was aware of every print made, and signed every print that has his signature. We were also very careful about giving him an accounting of the money that we received for the prints."

Mr. Pigozzi said on Tuesday that without André Magnin's and his efforts, Mr. Keïta "would have been totally forgotten." They published an important book, he continued, and got his work into the collections of major museums. "Also with our help, Keïta was able to finally make a lot of money by selling his prints in a very orderly way," Mr. Pigozzi said, adding that Mr. Patras, however, had managed to make a mess of things.

At the time of the Gagosian show, Mr. Keïta met with Sean Kelly of the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. "Keïta," he said, "was not pleased with what Piggozzi and Magnin were doing with his photographs, which is why Keïta approached me." But it wasn't until 2001 that the photographer severed his ties with them.

A relative of Mr. Keïta, Kader Keïta, a former diplomat who was present for a meeting between Mr. Keïta and Mr. Magnin, said: "Seydou was furious about the possibility that Magnin was forging Seydou's signature. Seydou also wanted the negatives back." He assigned the exclusive rights to sell his photographs to Mr. Patras. The negatives were not returned. Mr. Patras went to work on an exhibition of Mr. Keïta's photographs at the Sean Kelly Gallery. Weeks before the exhibition was scheduled to open in 2001, Mr. Keïta flew to Paris to confront Mr. Magnin. Mr. Patras says. But within days of his arrival, Mr. Keïta was dead at around 80.

TWO weeks later, Mr. Keïta's work went up at Sean Kelly. Just before the opening, Mr. Kelly says, Mr. Pigozzi, a large man, charged through the gallery. "What do you think you're doing!," Mr. Kelly recalls him shouting, albeit it in more pungent language. "I own Seydou Keïta."

After bringing in a third party to witness the outburst, Mr. Kelly, a large-chested former rugby player, who said he "was not about to be intimidated by Pigozzi," threw him out.

A month earlier, Mr. Patras and others had set up the Association Seydou Keïta in Bamako to preserve the negatives that were still in Mr. Keïta's possession and to oversee and approve the printing of all future photographs. Mr. Keïta and the association, working with Mr. Kelly, decided that all new prints would be made in limited editions, with no edition greater than 15 and some as small as 3. These prints, certified by the association, are the basis for the new show.

As for the 921 other negatives, Mr. Magnin says they are no longer in his possession. He said he gave the negatives to Lancina Keïta, one of Mr. Keïta's brothers, at the photographer's funeral. Lancina Keïta has refused to comment.

In July 2004, the association filed a lawsuit in Paris against Mr. Pigozzi and Mr. Magnin. That litigation is in the discovery phase. Julie Jacob, the French lawyer who is representing the association, contends that "Magnin and Pigozzi are causing the negatives to be moved between individuals, some of whom are members of Keïta's family, so as to avoid having to turn them over to the association." Mr. Kelly said he feared that the negatives might be lost altogether.
The controversy presents a difficulty for those who buy and sell prints made from Mr. Keïta's negatives. Barbara Wilhelm at the Gagosian Gallery said that "because it is difficult to tell which of Keïta's prints were signed by Keïta or signed by someone else with or without Keïta's authorization, each print must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis."

"From the fact that Keïta attended the show at Gagosian and voiced no complaints about the prints," she said, she is "satisfied that the signatures on the prints that were exhibited that evening were legitimate."

Mr. Keller, who organized the 1997 show in Switzerland, recommends that "signatures on Keïta's prints should be checked against those signatures that are known to be authentic."

As for Mr. Kelly, he said he "would never buy a Keïta photograph that was produced by Magnin and Pigozzi." He added, "You don't know how many are out there, you don't know if Keïta authorized the prints and you can't be sure of the signature."

At the coming exhibition, the largest photographs (60 by 48 inches) will be offered in limited editions of three for $18,000 to $22,000, not much above the price at Gagosian eight years ago. Over the same period, some other celebrated photographers' work has quadrupled in price.

But for all the controversy that now surrounds Mr. Keïta, Mr. Kelly seems surprised that there hasn't been more. "If you take this story and substitute the name of Bresson for Keïta, the world would be in an uproar," he said. "So far few have paid attention."

There are many reasons why posterity might regard Cartier-Bresson and Mr. Keïta differently: Cartier-Bresson was white, French and received important European commissions early in his career, whereas Mr. Keïta was a self-taught black African of modest ambitions for whom photography was, most of all, a job. Still, Brian Wallis, the director of exhibitions and chief curator of the International Center of Photography, describes the issue of what to do with new prints from the negatives of any deceased photographer as "one of the most vexing in photography."

Sandra Phillips, senior curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, pointed out that earlier photographers barely noticed how their work was printed. "It was the image, not the print, that was all important," she said. "Photographers would literally drop their negatives off at magazines or museums and let the editors and curators decide how the photographs were to be developed."

Julia Scully, the former editor of Modern Photography, said that "the idea that the vintage or limited-edition print is of special value has been promoted by collectors and gallery owners, who, having witnessed the recent increase in the market value of photography, seek to protect their investments. When it comes to photography, authenticity is artificial."

As a photograph (or any other work of art) is separated in time from the cultural context in which it originated, the work becomes open to new meanings. This idea, perhaps first articulated in Walter Benjamin's landmark 1931 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has been embraced by many curators in recent years, leading them away from what Mr. Wallis refers to as the "fetish for the vintage." Instead curators are more open to the new meanings that may emerge from manipulating the originals, even if those meanings are different from - or in direct contrast to - anything the artist had in mind.

The result is ripe with possibilities, but also with contradictions. It is now not uncommon for galleries to put on shows that reflect this postmodern approach but at the same time to charge higher prices for original works.

In the case of Mr. Keïta, the original photographs were taken at a significant moment in West African history, amid a great migration from rural to urban areas. His customers, said Mr. Enwezor, were part of that shift: newly arrived in the city, they would mail photographs to relatives who were still in the countryside. The prints were a type of private correspondence. As the formal elements of the photograph - its dimensions, its contrasts and densities - are manipulated, this history of the image, as contained within the photograph, begins to evaporate.

There is, though, another argument, based in the technology of photography, that undermines the concept of photographic authenticity. Charles Griffin, who prints the photographs of Cindy Sherman and Hiroshi Sugimoto, observes that the resolution of photographic negatives is far greater than that of the prints made from them. The negatives, you might say, contain a far greater amount of information than can be shown, placing those who make prints in the position of having to select and suppress the information that will ultimately appear.

And the printer's responsibility in this regard, Mr. Griffin added, has been heightened by the decision of paper companies to reduce the silver content in, and therefore the sensitivity of, photographic papers.

As a result, artists, museums and galleries treat printers in the same way that writers treat good editors, trusting them to add and subtract material from a manuscript to achieve the best result. It was to Mr. Griffin that Mr. Kelly turned when he took over the representation of Seydou Keïta. Because of the respect that the dealer and the association have for Mr. Griffin's work, they have given him great license over the way in which Mr. Keïta's photographs are printed.

Mr. Griffin said that when he attended the 1997 exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, he was immediately disturbed by a number of factors, especially the extent of the contrast between the blacks and the whites. "Too often," he says, "printers are influenced by the preference wealthy collectors have for highly graphic images." When he was asked later to make prints from Mr. Keïta's negatives, he made a number of important changes, including the decision to "give more emphasis to the ground between the blacks and whites." He has yet to see a vintage photograph of Mr. Keïta's.

Mr. Griffin's observation about the influence of collectors contains a paradox: however much scholars talk about alternative modes of interpretation, the dominant force in the current market is one which makes many re-interpretations look a great deal like the cover of
Cosmopolitan - a result that is probably not what Walter Benjamin had in mind.

In the end, the debate over how to make prints from Mr. Keïta's negatives may soon be academic. As a result of the litigation to recover the 921 negatives from Mr. Magnin and Mr. Pigozzi, the association has little money left to preserve those negatives that are in its possession - negatives which, according to Mr. Griffin, are quickly deteriorating. In the end, the controversial prints may be all that is left of Seydou Keïta. And at that point, the postmodern will have become the authentic.

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