

ADJI DIEYE APHASIA

As part of Photographic Encounters 2022–2023
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In the video installation *Aphasia*, the loss of language is the conceptual starting point for the Italian-Senegalese artist Adjie Dieye (*1991). In her visual and linguistic encounter with the city of Dakar, the capital of Senegal, Dieye explores themes such as identity, the historical formation of nation states as well as the role of archives from an Afro-diasporic perspective.

The work shows Dieye inscribing herself into Dakar's urban space by reading from presidential speeches written in French, which are kept in the National Archive, and that have been delivered to the public since Senegal's independence in 1960 in French – the official language imposed by the former colonial power that only parts of the population can actually understand in its institutional form. Of key concern here is the question of how a country that once lived under colonial rule – and whose archives are still influenced by it in terms of their structure and language – can develop a post-colonial identity.

Drawing from voices of Afro-diasporic and Senegalese communities, institutional narratives are being juxtaposed with contemporary perspectives of Black identities and spiritualities – while pointing to the gaps in institutional archives and highlighting the importance of oral storytelling as an alternative knowledge system.

In the two-channel video installation *Aphasia* (2022), we join Adjie Dieye as she enters various sites inside and outside of Dakar, in which she sits on a rooftop, a stack of pipes or a huge mound of building sand, taking no notice of the camera directly in front of her. Since the Republic of Seneg-

al gained independence from colonial power France in 1960, the metropolis Dakar underwent fast urban developments due to the rapid growth of the city's population. Oscillating between uninhabited buildings and crude facades, empty windows and balconies, we see the artist leafing through a manuscript, mumbling sentences in broken French, surrounded by towering cranes and large fences. She reads from excerpts of presidential speeches, written in French, that have been delivered to the public since Senegal's independence in 1960 and which Dieye has arduously researched in the National Archives of Senegal.

In citing these addresses, the artist finds herself confronted with a certain speechlessness: she attempts to express herself in the official language imposed by a former colonial power that only parts of the population can actually understand in its institutional form. A seemingly neutral language, French continues to operate as a language of business, politics and education in Senegal – even after the country's decolonisation –, holding on to the space on the country's history shelves that it gained by gradually replacing vernacular tongues throughout the last century.

As the urban settings in *Aphasia* continue to change, so does the sound of the artist's voice, whose tone audibly changes several times until it is no longer the artist's own voice reading the sentences out loud but rather multiple voices of friends and people with a similar background that Dieye added during post-production. In this way, *Aphasia* engages with the artist's biographical background, making use of language as a polyphonic tool to

uncover submerged Afro-diasporan and Senegalese voices while reimagining the country's eclectic cultural identity since its independence in the 1960s. *Aphasia* therefore unearths larger cultural and political structures in Senegal's 'post'-colonial identity and the heterogeneous use of languages in the country. In doing so, the work also highlights the importance of oral storytelling as an alternative knowledge system while pointing to the gaps in institutional archives.

The sites, mostly characterised by buildings wrapped in fabric or covered in scaffolding, have not been chosen randomly by the artist: some of them represent the former territories of various Indigenous ethnicities who have, since the 15th century, been repeatedly displaced and forced by Europeans to leave their ancestral lands – located where the city centre is today. This process was most pronounced when France started to establish its colonial rule over French West Africa and founded the rapidly growing city of Dakar in 1857.

Centuries have passed, but now it is the Senegalese government that is selling massive tracts of land, continuously privatising and appropriating it in response to the rising demand for housing. In light of the ongoing challenges Dakar is facing in the form of ecological destruction and pollution caused by urban growth, *Aphasia* not only examines the political and economic dynamics of the landscape, but also reconsiders it as a sociopolitical concept that defines a territory as the basis of cultural identity – that of the now displaced communities, deprived of their livelihood.

Dieye's artistic study of Dakar's rapidly expanding urban environment also invites us to actively listen to the deeper truths and subjectivities of the diasporic and native community the artist is closely connected to because of her own background. Although *Aphasia* takes the loss of language as its conceptual starting point, it unfolds into a soundscape that gives agency and voice to both the Afro-diasporic community and the artist's Senegalese kin, whom we see chanting in Wolof, one of the languages spoken in Senegal, ultimately emerging as a polyphonic canon and therefore allowing Black identities and spiritualities to express themselves as living archives.

Adji Dieye

Adji Dieye was born in Milan, Italy, in 1991 and now lives between Dakar (Senegal), Milan and Zurich (Switzerland). She studied New Technologies for Art at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan and completed her Master in Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts. By moving between performance, sculpture and video-based installations in her practice, she pushes the boundaries of the photographic medium.

Her contemporary and critical interventions into the National Iconographic Archives of Senegal are a recurring theme in her practice, through which she examines the post-independent state of the country. Dieye has realised works based on taxonomised archival material several times, using it as a vehicle to unearth the continuity of our colonial past and present.

Her work has been included in international group exhibitions at the 14th Dak'Art Biennial, the Fondazione Sandretto (2021), at FOAM Amsterdam and Kunsthalles Wien (2020) as well as the African Photo Biennale in Bamako, Mali (2019) and the Lagos Photo Festival (2017). She is the winner of the C/O Berlin Talent Award 2021 and first recipient of *Photographic Encounters*. With this, Fotomuseum Winterthur presents the first solo exhibition of Adji Dieye in Switzerland.

Photographic Encounters

With the biennial format *Photographic Encounters*, Fotomuseum Winterthur and Christoph Merian Verlag accompany a photographer or artist in the realisation of an exhibition and a publication. Its aim is to support photographers from Switzerland or based in Switzerland to produce and exhibit a long-term photographic project. The format was initiated by the Christoph Merian Stiftung and enabled by the Geissmann Scholarship for Photography.

The key criteria for the *Photographic Encounters* format are the project's artistic and conceptual approach, its contemporary relevance and the quality of the photographic imagery. The title *Photographic Encounters* draws on the ideas of theorist Ariella Azoulay, who regards photography as a practice composed of a multitude of encounters. As such, it should be viewed as an event. The encounters she refers to are not just between the photographer and their subject but also between the photograph and the viewers. The agency of an image only unfolds when it is brought into the present and contextualised from a variety of perspectives.



Fotomuseum Winterthur
Grüzenstrasse 44+45, 8400 Winterthur
+41 52 234 10 60, info@fotomuseum.ch, www.fotomuseum.ch,

Opening hours:
Tue–Sun 11:00–18:00, Wed 11:00–20:00, Mon closed

Curated by Katrin Bauer, with support from Yulia Fisch.
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