

Issa Samb:
From the Ethics of
Acting to the Empire
Without Signs



Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire Without Signs

Curated by Koyo Kouoh, Raw Material Company

Contents

04 Introduction — Grant Watson

07 From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire Without Signs — Koyo Kouoh

15 Acknowledgements

Cover:
Issa Samb, *Untitled*
Drawing with text,
year unknown

Right:
Issa Samb, 2014
Christa Holka



Introduction

Since the early 1970s Issa Samb has developed an experimental and radical practice rooted in contemporary art and theatre, including writing, painting, sculpture and performance. This practice has its centre of gravity in the constantly changing installation that can be found at his atelier in Dakar, Senegal; the challenge for any curator of Samb's work is to translate the particularity of this space as well as the fluidity of the artist's approach and his unique presence. For the exhibition *Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire without Signs* the curator Koyo Kouoh, who has worked closely with the artist on several exhibition and book projects, proposes a focus on Samb's collaboration with artist Jean Michel Bruyère. This extends from the two artists' friendship which has continued over several years both in Europe and Africa. Through the work of Bruyère, Issa Samb's presence becomes apparent in the exhibition in the many different performances that have been captured on film. These are screened in the gallery alongside texts, sculptural works and costumes from performances. *Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire without Signs* provides a unique opportunity to

experience Samb's sculptural and graphic works brought together in one exhibition, but in particular to consider these in relation to his live actions with which they are intimately linked. We are extremely grateful to the artists and the curator of the exhibition for making this material available in such a thoughtful and imaginative way. *Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire without Signs* is presented as part of 'Practice International' a collaboration between Iaspis (Stockholm) Casco-Office for Art, Design and Theory (Utrecht) and Iniva that explores the term 'international' through the work of contemporary artists and in relation to the politics of globalisation. This exhibition follows a research trip to Dakar in September 2013 and builds on the conversations that took place with the artist and curator at that time.

Grant Watson
Senior Curator, Iniva

Installation view *Issa Samb's home studio*,
2013, Asle Olsen



Koyo Kouoh: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire Without Signs

It is now close to ten years that Issa Samb has been distinguishing himself from the collaborative process of collective work and moving towards a more individual practice. *Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire without Signs*, his second solo exhibition in Europe is the continuation of a curatorial process between the artist and myself that began in 2010, and which aims to showcase his practice apart, but not detached from, the context of the seminal artist collective Laboratoire Agit'Art, which he co-founded in the early 1970s.

The exhibition presents various elements of Samb's multifaceted work, which includes writing, drawing, collage, assemblage, installation, video and performance. Recurrent objects of his installations such as the *corps*, the red flag, used shoes, collages, clothing, dolls, x-rays, drawings, paintings and various props from his work in film and theatre form a display that attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the permanent, ever evolving 500m² installation in his home studio in Dakar. Particularly important in the exhibition is the artist's collaboration with French artist Jean Michel Bruyère.

Bruyère has been producing works in which Samb plays a pivotal role for twenty years, and this is the first time that a selection of these works are presented in a context other than Bruyère's own durational performances. The focus is placed on a series of films and videos from Bruyère's productions that include *Suuf Fi*, a short film in black and white made in 2006 as a free adaptation of *The Earth* by the Russian director Alexandre Dovjenko, *Orche Patendi Merchit*, *L'Insulte faite au Paysage*, *Life and Death of a Stray Dog*, *Si Poteris Narrare*, *Licet*, *Element of a Naked Chase* and *Le Préau d'un Seul*.

Samb considers himself an enabler of creative processes, a mediator of artistic energy and of exhibition practice. His mythical courtyard home studio, generally referred to as La Cour (the courtyard), in Dakar's rue Jules Ferry is not only the site of his own creative outputs but also the headquarters of what remains of the original form of Agit'Art. La Cour further serves as an art centre open to the public as well as a working and thinking place for a diverse range of artists, students, curators, actors, musicians, writers, politicians and intellectuals. It is in this sense that Samb puts himself at the service of progressive and radical ideas such as Bruyère's in theatre and performance.



One is seriously challenged to grasp an artistic practice that fundamentally escapes categorization and pigeon holing, and blurs the boundaries of disciplines and artistic traditions. Even though Samb's practice has taken many forms over the past fifty years, a steady continuum running through his career is the notion of sharing at its most generous, essential and uncompromising; sharing and enabling as artistic and living form. Samb never sought to be exhibited or recognized by the art system. He does not keep a biographical record of his work. On the contrary, the timeline of his practice is characterized by voluntary cracks, loops and holes. As evidence of this he hardly ever shows up at his openings, nor does he interfere in the curator's choices, claiming that his job is to make the works available and not to arrange them or contextualise them.

While he performs the history of political and artistic thought in Senegal in the manner of a custodian, he makes a clear semantic differentiation between history and the past by privileging the present moment. 'Le passé n'a aucune importance dans mon travail' (the past has no importance in my work) as he said in a recent interview that I conducted with him in July

2013. This is hard to understand in the light of the recurrent references to the past that he makes in his speeches and the important role that memory plays in the construction of his universe.

Born in Dakar in 1945, Issa Samb grew up in an affluent traditional family of landowners in the urban village Ouakam north of Dakar's downtown. Determining his upbringing and later artistic and political engagement was his early exposure to the tactics of resistance to colonial rule and the liberation movements of the late 1950s. In 1958, during General De Gaulle's tour of French colonies in Africa, in an operation designed to discourage any attempt at self-determination, Samb, then only thirteen years of age, participated in his first political demonstration and action of opposition to power when he tagged the streets and walls of Dakar with independence slogans. His reading Marxist philosophy at Université de Dakar and participation in the student and workers movement in the late 1960s further forged his character towards a position in which, he, theoretically and artistically, denounced the instrumentalisation and commodification of the arts for political gain; such as applied to the late President Senghor's cultural policies in post independence Senegal.

Jean Michel Bruyère is known to be a complex, assertive and sharp contemporary artist. His working process aims at escaping classification and codification by using and mixing multiple forms of expressions. He circulates a fake biography presenting himself as an early 20th century creative who underwent a sex change to become Jana Tesarova. This reflects his desire to keep attention away from his persona and immerse his creative energy in the pool of collaboration. His productions have been shown at numerous prestigious festivals and institutions such as the Festival d'Avignon and ZKM, Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, among many others. He founded the Marseille based artists' collective lafabriks/LFKs in 1992. This group is an international creative forum that includes twenty five artists and related professionals representing eleven nationalities and multiple disciplines such as cinema, theatre, music, philosophy, new media, visual arts, graphic design and medicine. His practice is inspired by the mythologies of contemporary culture, and is strongly influenced by the revolutionary political philosophy of the Black Panthers, Malcolm X and the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde.



If the group constantly crosses all disciplines, this is not in search of a 'total performance', but rather the translation of an urge to remain independent and enjoy a freedom of action and creation. Freedom to treat the subject matter it addresses without any other contingencies than those imposed by the topics selected: minority struggles, illegal immigration, unemployment, the image of the animal in Western civilization, Pan-Africanism, the critique of desecration as the basis for contemporaneity. Every member is thus the initiator of poly-form (long-term) productions (films, performances, publications, music) whose intellectual and artistic freedom is protected *by any means necessary*.

It is thus not surprising that Bruyère met Samb in the early 1990s after Bruyère's move to Dakar to run an artistic humanitarian project training street children in the practice of art. Both artists embarked on a fruitful philosophical and artistic

collaboration that to date has resulted in the production of numerous films, performances, installations and publications. *Issa Samb: From the Ethics of Acting to the Empire without Signs* borrows its title from the eponymous manifesto written by Issa Samb and fellow Agit'Art member and playwright Youssoupha Dione in the 1980s. The manifesto was inspired by the Buddhist teachings of the Mahamudra and included guidelines for radical acting, which concentrated on gesture and the body while completely eliminating speech. The central idea was to use the body and mimicry as the sole means to convey the expression and content of a written text. These guidelines were experimented with in the scenic adaptation of one of Senghor's most combative poems, *Chaka* (Ethiopiennes, 1951). This manifesto was also the basis for the teaching that took place in Agit'Art's short-lived drama school, established in the 1980s. Issa Samb himself however continues to embody and enact this philosophy to the present day.

Page 9 and Right:
Installation view *Issa Samb's home studio*,
2013, Asle Olsen





Jean Michel Bruyère, 2002,
video stills from *Si Poteris
Narrare, Licet*



Practice International:

This exhibition is part of Practice International an initiative of Casco — Office for Art, Design and Theory (Utrecht), Iaspis (Stockholm), and Iniva — the Institute of International Visual Arts (London); three European arts organisations that are concerned with internationalism, collaborating with non-European institutions such as the Raw Material Company (Dakar). The project aims to reflect on our positions as artists, curators and institutions, to think how we can embody and meet new forms of practice involving agents of social change, introduce new terms into the discourse, and question institutional habits. Practice International is supported by the European Union Culture Fund.

Issa Samb, *Untitled*,
Drawing

Acknowledgements:

Iniva would like to thank the artist Issa Samb for accepting the invitation to exhibit at Rivington Place, we are very proud to present such unique work as part of our programme. We would also like to thank Jean Michel Bruyère for his important role in the exhibition and Koyo Kouoh for her insightful and intelligent curating of the exhibition and for hosting us at Raw Material Company in Dakar.

Koyo Kouoh would like to thank the artists for their adhesion to this project. Special mention goes to Delphine Varas and Nadine Febvre at lafabriks in Marseille, and Marie Héléne Pereira and Marie Cissé at Raw Material Company in Dakar for their careful assistance throughout the production of the exhibition.

Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts)

Iniva is a centre for global art and artists. Focusing upon artistic practice we explore key issues in society and politics through exhibitions, educational projects, digital initiatives, research and publishing. We offer a space for artistic experiment, cultural debate and the exchange of ideas, reflecting the diversity of contemporary society. To accompany this exhibition there is a programme of talks and events, for further information please visit www.iniva.org.

Stuart Hall Library

The Stuart Hall Library provides an extensive bibliography of reference materials and resources relating to this exhibition. The bibliography is available in print as well as through the Library website, and a display of these materials will be available in the Library throughout the exhibition. The Stuart Hall Library is open: Tues to Fri, 10am–1pm, 2–5pm. To make an appointment, phone +44 (0)20 7749 1255 or email: library@iniva.org. You can also plan your visit by accessing the Library catalogue online at www.iniva.org

Rivington Place, London EC2A 3BA
T: +44 (0)20 7729 9616
www.iniva.org
www.rivingtonplace.org

Iniva is a registered charity (no. 1031721)

**Rivington
Place — Home of Iniva &
Autograph ABP**

