

Identity and Performance in the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Samuel Fosso

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M A PHOTOGRAPHY

Unit 1.2

10th January 2008

‘...my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own.’ (Butler, 2004:21)¹

This paper aims to look at and explore how the notion of performativity of Identity and its consequent freezing on silver of that performance deconstructs essentialist aspects of binary classifications of race and sexuality in the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. It also seeks to explore as to how this notion expands the concept of identity making it malleable, multiple and fantastical while transcending the superficial binaries of traditional/modern in the work of Samuel Fosso. This would be done through the medium of theoretical texts by Judith Butler exploring the constructions of the essentialist notion of gender (Butler, 1990, 1999, 2004), Homi K Bhabha exploring the concepts of postcolonial and postmodern (1993, 1994, 1999), Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy who explore black identity (2001), Kobena Mercer (1996) on Rotimi Fani-Kayode .

The first chapter introduces the work of Rotimi Fani Kayode and the world he lived in and worked. It explores his work in the context of the themes of race and sexuality that he worked with. The second chapter explores the work of Samuel Fosso through the notions of fantasy and self portraiture. The third chapter seeks to understand as to how normative discourses of identity are deconstructed or fissured through the methods of photographic practice with both their work. I would like to further open up the debate by looking at how images are constructed differently for both of them and yet they arrive at the same post constructed image readings, or new spaces that they have created for themselves.

Chapter One: Rotimi Fani - Kayode (1955-1989)

‘On three counts I am an outsider: in matters of sexuality; in terms of geographical and cultural dislocation; and in the sense of not having become the sort of respectably married professional my parents might have hoped for’ (Fani-Kayode, 1992)²

Born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1955, Rotimi Fani-Kayode with his family fled Nigeria during the military coup of 1966. His family held the title of Akire, ‘keepers of the shrine of Ifa, the Yoruba oracle.’ (Guggenheim Museum, 1996)³ The family fled to England and Rotimi Fani-kayode studied there and then moved on to America to complete his MFA. He then returned to England where he started work as a photographer. His work spanned a brief period of less than a decade, cut short by his death in 1989, yet he was able to become one of the key figures in the British art scene of the 1980’s. Much of his work was created in collaboration with his partner Alex Hirst.

The 1980’s saw a change in the political scene in England with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. The decade was ‘ a period of rapid and turbulent change which encom-

¹ Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, London. Routledge.

² Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. (1992). *Traces of Ecstasy*. In: *Ten 8, vol 2 n^o 3*. pp 64-71. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

³ Guggenheim Museum. (1996). *In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to the present*. The Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation.

passed several major paradigm shifts in both theory and practice, and was marked by a powerful synergy between race, politics and representation.’⁴ Rotimi Fani Kayode belonged to the group of artists who during the 80’s worked towards visibility of the marginal, questioning essentialist notions that tried to keep them in the margins. He became a founding member of Autograph which was an association made up of black photographers who would explore the boundaries of black photography in London.

‘Black...is a politically, historically and culturally constructed category; a contested idea’ (Hall and Sealy, 2001)⁵ The task these artists set before themselves was to explore the whole range of the experience of being black and through representing that opening up the concept of ‘black’. Race and Sexuality are the primary concepts that Rotimi works through in his photographs. As he says in his essay, it is ‘an imaginative investigation of Blackness, maleness and sexuality....’ (Fani-Kayode 1992)⁶ He seeks to find new images construct them and by creating them, by making it a presence deconstruct earlier images of black masculinity and sexuality just by its mere presence. Images that existed of black people in the public arena helped to or underlined stereotypes that kept the balance of power the way it was in favour of the white man. Images of black masculinity fell into ‘types-the supersexual stud and the sexual savage on the one hand or the delicate, fragile and exotic oriental on the other’ (Mercer and Julien. 1992)⁷ Rotimi presents to us images of black men that bypass both these types and opens up the possibilities for existence in the public space for shades of grey. The men in his work, sometimes self representations and sometimes he shoots other black men, make visible the existence of bodies that do not conform to the binary stereotyped classifications of gender. This will be explored in much further detail in the third chapter.

Rotimi also incorporates elements from the Yoruba culture. An incorporation of the spiritual elements from the land he had to leave behind, an Africa that he carries within him which seeks a new visual, a new repositioning, a new language which makes inclusive its displaced citizens.

‘It is now time for us to reappropriate such images and to transform them ritualistically into images of our own creation.’ (Fani-Kayode 1992)⁸

⁴ (1992). *Ten 8*, vol 2 n^o 3. p4. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

⁵ Hall, Stuart and Sealy, Mark. (2001). *Different. A Historical Context*. Phaidon.

⁶ Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. (1992). Traces of Ecstasy. In: *Ten 8*, vol 2 n^o 3. pp 64-71. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

⁷ Mercer, Kobena and Julien, Isaac. (1992). True Confessions. In: *Ten 8*, vol 2 n^o 3. pp 40-49. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

⁸ Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. (1992). Traces of Ecstasy. In: *Ten 8*, vol 2 n^o 3. pp 64-71. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

Chapter Two: Samuel Fosso (1962-)

Samuel Fosso was born in a village in Cameroon on the border of Nigeria. The Biafran war in 1967 saw his village burnt and Samuel and his family flee. They returned to rebuild and start over although the hope for a better life took Samuel to Bangui in the Central African Republic which till date remains his home. At the age of 13 Samuel set up his passport photography studio. In 1976 he started creating a series of self portraits for himself which discovered in 1994 by Bernard Descamps, a french photographer, launched him to international fame.

Running his studio he shot portraits for people of CAR. 'The way I take photographs and the way that i use backdrops in order to pose people for their pictures is all about transporting them, taking them to places where they don't go.' (Taylor, 2002) ⁹ He decided to explore this for himself.

Samuel started taking these photos as a documentary evidence of his growing up which he would send to his grandmother so she knew he was alive and well. It then turned into making pictures so that he could remember how he looked.

He uses simple available props, painted backdrops and costumes and lets his reading of the western ideal take him to fantastical places that inhabit neither /or. This is done very simply by copying poses from glamour/fashion magazines. He says

'When I look at myself in the mirror, I am not looking to find out if what I see is an Ibo, a Central African or even a black American. The only thing I can see is Samuel Fosso, who is trying to make himself as handsome as possible before taking a self-portrait.' (Taylor, 2002)¹⁰

Even though the end result that is wanted is a very basic desire to see oneself, Fosso manages to catch the attention of the contemporary art world because he explores the element of the fantastical with regard to Identity. He can be whoever he wants to be. And if Identities are played then it points to a very basic fact that it is not essence but it is constructed.

'Fosso became a professional photographer by the age of thirteen. Since that time, his work has been a true search for identity, but it also traces, without his knowing it, an artistic itinerary that falls naturally into the current trends in photography today. - Bernard Descamps' (Guggenheim Museum, 1996) ¹¹

The third chapter looks at the construction of Identity in Fosso as a reflection of a post-modern context that he lives in.

⁹ Taylor, Jessica. (2002). Here's looking at me. *The Guardian*, 27 June, 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4449235,00.html>

¹⁰ Taylor, Jessica. (2002). Here's looking at me. *The Guardian*, 27 June, 2002. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4449235,00.html>

¹¹ Guggenheim Museum. (1996). *In/Sight: African Photographers 1940 to the present*. The Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation.

Chapter Three : Performance of Identity

‘One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.’ (Butler, 2004: 19)¹²

‘...a range of contemporary critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history - subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement - that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.’ (Bhabha 1994: 246)¹³

Samuel Fosso and Rotimi Fani-Kayode are both connected by their displacement from their land, their home and their use of photography to explore their sense of what constitutes them and their experiences. Bhabha (1994:14) refers to Freud’s use of the word *unheimlich* translating to unhomeliness that describes the space of migration, displacement. ‘...the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world- the unhomeliness- that is the condition of extra - territorial and cross-cultural initiations.’ (Bhabha 1994:13)¹⁴ This sense is made visible in the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode in his use /reappropriation of the spiritual elements of Yoruba culture. The incorporation of elements such as masks, colours, fruits, flowers, artifacts in his portraits, the playing out of these elements to create new meaning reflects the temporality of the meanings of objects. For example in his image *Bronze Head, 1987* (Sealy and Pivin 1997:33)¹⁵ it is an Ife bronze that Rotimi seems to be giving birth to. The head Ori represents a god in the Yoruba world and here the act of sitting on it naked transforms its meaning from that which is to be revered to that which is used to provoke. ‘The image contains the idea of the head as a ‘higher phallus’, penetrating and fecundating the artist’ (Sealy and Pivin 1997:33)¹⁶

Faces are masked in his images, through actual masks, lighting, paint or other objects such as leaves. His bodies seem fractured, incomplete, in the process of becoming. What does this masking or the making visible of the existence of a mask do to his reading of black male gay sexuality? His body *Black Male and Gay* makes its presence felt through this play with objects. He lays claim to his own body, to his own unique experiences and understanding of his own world and by translating such into the visual he makes visible a presence, a being in the here and now. He expands the terms of Black gay masculinity, each term individually, to coexist, to just be without the inherent conflicts that these terms bring with them. ‘By depolarizing the ego’s boundaries of Self and Other, the mask seeks not to conceal an identity but to liberate heterogeneous elements from the psyche and al-

¹² Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, London. Routledge.

¹³ Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. New York. Routledge.

¹⁴ Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. New York. Routledge.

¹⁵ Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph.

¹⁶ Hirst, Alex. 1991. Acts of God. In: Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph.

low them to communicate with each other as the self plunges through the limit....' (Mercer 1997) ¹⁷

'To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality...I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality....something other than a simple assimilation.....takes place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to re-signification.' (Butler, 2004:27-28) ¹⁸

In the work of Samuel Fosso the sense of 'unhomeliness' presents itself differently. Here is a passport studio photographer who has grown up seeing violence around him, been witness to the destruction of his home and yet he seems to not venture there in his photographic practice. The fact that fantastical self portraits of Samuel Fosso exist bear testimony to the existence of this unhomeliness. This sense takes him to the world of fantasy as do the people he photographs. He helps them go to places and be who they want to be in his studio. The photographic space becomes for him a starting point from which to explore whoever he can be.

'...fantasy is part of the articulation of the possible; it moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable... The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality.' (Butler 2004:28-29) ¹⁹

As with Rotimi Fani-Kayode he too uses props, costumes in the sense of what you want to become and yet unlike Rotimi's work they seem to stay in the place they were meant to be as external objects. For example the pirate's costume in Fig 4.

This play/performance, becoming someone else embodies the viewpoint that photography or portraiture is a space to be better than you really are. It underlines the popular notion of photographs where one is supposed to look good. Unlike portraiture in the western world, the view behind photographic portraiture in countries like India and Africa is that the soul can never be captured by the image so what really matters is the external. Since the external is not really a reflection of who you are then a space is created for whoever you want to be. (Pinney. 1997: 178-179)²⁰ This ties in with the idea of gender as performance. Gender is not who you are but a series of performative acts that constitutes the gender you live. (Butler. 1990,1999)²¹

¹⁷ Mercer, Kobena. (1997) Eros and Diaspora. In: Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph.

¹⁸ Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, London. Routledge.

¹⁹ Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, London. Routledge.

²⁰ Pinney, Christopher. (1997) *Camera Indica*. London. Reaktion Books.

²¹ Butler, Judith. (1990,1999). *Gender Trouble*. New York, London. Routledge.

The performance in these artists' work involves the use of masquerade.

'...masquerade serves a critical function. It calls attention to such fundamental issues as the nature of identity, the truth of identity, the stability of identity categories and the relationship between the supposed identity and its outward manifestations (or essence and appearance)' (Tseelon 2001 :3)²²

The understanding of Identity in postmodernist thought is that of Identity as being free floating, not fixed and not singular. Judith Butler deconstructs the concept of gender and breaks down the gendered sex to its performance. (Butler. 1990, 1999)²³ This aspect of performativity of what was earlier thought of as essentialist concepts is present in the work of the artists being discussed. In the process of disrupting understandings of essentialist forms of identity new identities are created in representation. This playing out of identities happens with these artists with the use of their own bodies.

'The body is at one and the same time the 'container' of identity and subjectivity, the overdetermined point where differences collide, the epidermal surface on which racism etches its mark, and a ground of resistance from which alternative counter-narratives can be produced.' (Hall and Sealy, 2001)²⁴

In the work of Rotimi, the men - their bodies are not offered up as objects to be consumed. They breathe, they play, are nude and sensual. He says in *Traces of Ecstasy* (Fani-Kayode 1992) ²⁵ that what is infused into his images is his rage and desire. 'To be ecstatic means, literally, to be outside oneself... to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief.' (Butler 2004: 20) ²⁶ His pictures reveal a 'heightened encounter with the emotional reality of the flesh in which it is precisely the ego's ecstatic loss of identity that his pictures celebrate and bear witness to.' (Mercer 1997)²⁷ Whereas the play, the masquerade in Rotimi's work seems to get under the skin, or emanate from the skin, Samuel Fosso's earlier work seems to stay on the surface, the surface of the objects that he wears. It mirrors the spiritual understanding of the body as a receptacle of the soul to be discarded in death and a new one inhabited in rebirth.

One of the interesting differences between these two artists is the fact that these images were constructed for different reasons. Rotimi made his work for an audience whereas Samuel Fosso's early work spanning two decades was made only for himself. This I think brings to front an interesting aspect of the way the images are constructed. Rotimi's images are much more political and layered.

²² Tseelon, Efrat (ed.) (2001). *Masquerade and Identities*. Routledge

²³ Butler, Judith. (1990,1999). *Gender Trouble*. New York, London. Routledge.

²⁴ Hall, Stuart and Sealy, Mark. (2001). *Different. A Historical Context*. Phaidon.

²⁵ Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. (1992). *Traces of Ecstasy*. In: *Ten 8, vol 2 n^o 3*. pp 64-71. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

²⁶ Butler, Judith. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, London. Routledge.

²⁷ Mercer, Kobena. (1997) *Eros and Diaspora*. In: Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph

'Alex Hirst writes that Rotimi's approach to his work was political, but it had no manifesto beyond an anarchic desire to create something that would shake the established view of the world, his own included...' (Mercer 1997:113)²⁸

On the other hand Samuel's work created for himself and his family bear no political overtones, there is a freedom about the play that he indulges in which is seen in his earlier work. After being 'discovered' his work starts taking on layers of meanings. It seems like the understanding that he now has an audience gives him the space to bring a language into his work, a language that he uses to talk about his experiences and his opinions about his country. His travels for his exhibition introduces him to the black experience in a racialized world and a post colonial understanding of his own place as a creator of photographic work that pushes the boundaries of his fantastical play to incorporate elements of the reality that he has been through or his country has been through. For example his self portrait as the *Le Chief*. (2003) This image depicts an African chief who would have been bribed by the Europeans with shoes on their quest to colonize Africa. (Fig 5)²⁹ In his latest work he creates images that talk about the murder of his neighbour due to political violence in his homeland.

'For these images (all dated 2000), he strikes haunted, sometimes terrorized poses - crouching naked in a cardboard box among rusty paint cans, reclining like a spooked Olympia under grim mosquito nets in a room resembling a prison cell. As existentially harrowing as these expressions appear, a playful narcissism and a sovereign will to fiction persist.' (Kelsey 2003)³⁰

It seems that the concepts one encounters in critical theory is reflective of a larger framework of lived experience. This seems to explain the differences in approach of both these photographers and their meeting point with regard to the work that they create. What has been looked at in this paper is the postmodern concept of self and its manifestation as multiple, fragmented, fissured identities. Photography has been used as an instrument, a method to explore freedom in the margins in the work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode and reality itself in the work of Samuel Fosso.

' Photography is the tool by which I feel most confident in expressing myself. It is photography, therefore - Black, African, homosexual photography - which I must use not just as an instrument, but as a weapon if I am to resist attacks on my integrity and indeed, my existence on my own terms.' (Fani-Kayode 1992:8)³¹

²⁸ Mercer, Kobena. (1997) Eros and Diaspora. In: Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph

²⁹ *The Many Faces of Samuel Fosso*. (2004) BBC4 14 February 2004

³⁰ Kelsey, John. (2003) Samuel Fosso. In: *Art Forum International*. December 2003

³¹ Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. (1992). Traces of Ecstasy. In: *Ten 8, vol 2 n^o 3*. pp 64-71. Birmingham, England. Ten.8 Ltd.

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The Many Faces of Samuel Fosso. (2004) BBC4 14 February 2004



Fig 1. Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. 1987. *Waist Beads*. Sealy Mark and Pivin, Jean Loup (ed) (1997). *Rotimi Fani-Kayode & Alex Hirst Photographs*. Paris. Editions Revue Noire. London. Autograph.



Fig 2. Fani-Kayode, Rotimi. 1987. *Sonponnoi*. Gelatine silver black and white with hand tinting. 16 x 12 inches.



Fig 3. Rotimi Fani-Kayode. 1989. *Nothing to Loose XII. Bodies of Experience*. Dye destruction print 49.5 x 49.5cm



Fig 4. Fosso, Samuel. (1997) From the series: Series TATI
.Le Pirate. Digital C-print 124,5 x 139,7 cm Edition de 3 (+ 2 AP)
<http://www.jeanmarcpatras.com/>



Fig 5. Fosso, Samuel. (2003) *Le Chief*



Fig 6. Fosso, Samuel. (1997) From the series: Series TATI. *La Bourgeoise*. Digital C-print 124,5 x 139,7 cm Edition de 3 (+ 2 AP)