Joe Ouakam and the Anti-Aesthetic Avant-Garde

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In a film by Ican Ramangelissa entitled *Sans Rien* (2015), we hear a voiceover and a man moves into the middle of the screen. His beret and glasses make him rather a caricature and his thin face is framed by trimmed hair, a white beard, and his eternal pipe. He stands in the autumnal courtyard of the arcaded house, which doubles up as his studio and is overshadowed by an immense baobab tree. The character shown in this scene is the standard-bearer of an artistic avant-garde in Senegal. His name is Issa Ramangelissa Samb, although he is also known as Joe Ouakam (Fig. 1).[1] Throughout his life, his body has haunted different places. His iconic silhouette formed part of the décor and represented a chapter in the history of art in Senegal. This article presents a portrait of Joe Ouakam's art through his relationship with the body, understood as a living performance. It seeks to explore the relationship between his art and life, analysing the ways in which he helped forge new connections between art and society.

Fig. 1. Issa Samb, December 2015 at the Laboratoire Agit'Art, *ZAT : Zone Temporairement Autonome (Temporarily Autonomous Area)*, exhibition in defense of the courtyard threatened with destruction. Photo: ICAN Ramageli.

As a painter, performer, sculptor, actor, critic and writer, Joe Ouakam was a contemporary art icon. Born in 1945, he attended the National School of Arts and at

1 The name 'Ouakam' comes from the name of the Lébou neighborhood in Dakar where the artist comes? from.

Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, where he studied Law and Philosophy. Both politically and artistically, he was motivated by revolutionary ideas at a very early stage in his life. His work was an overt performance, combining art and life, one overflowing into the halting flow of the other. The image of Joe Ouakam was made popular by the Laboratoire Agit'Art, which was a collective of intellectuals and multidisciplinary artists that emerged in an unsettled political context during the post-independence period. The collective was founded in the wake of May 1968, at a time when subversive activity had shaken up Senegalese politics. It was co-founded in 1974 with actor and poet Youssouf John and was made up of painters, filmmakers, musicians and writers. In practice, the collective was led by two artists: Joe Ouakam and El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy (known as El Sy).[2]

The Laboratoire Agit'Art emerged at a time when new conceptual practices were arising in Africa. In the mid-1970s, the local political powers replacing the colonial authorities were in crisis. The process of reconstructing or establishing new systems for governing independent countries was overshadowed by the arrival of a series of dictatorships and repressive regimes. According to Okwui Enwezor, most of the practices that could be labelled "conceptual" emerged during this tumultuous postcolonial period. It is clear that rejection of Senghor's formalism in favour of new experiments could only result in a prioritisation of the production process over the product, the ephemeral over the permanent and political ideas over aesthetic concerns (Enwezor 1999: 111).

The Laboratoire Agit'Art declared itself to be against the Dakar School's modernism and Senghor's ideology of Négritude. The upheaval it advocated took the form of performances organised by the collective that rejected Senghor's pictorial policy and adopted new multidisciplinary techniques (combining sculpture, painting, installation and performance), encouraging significant audience participation. It involved subverting ideas, practices, frameworks and artistic codes. In the approach taken by Agit'Art, orality and performance enabled modes of action that spoke to the Senegalese context, the history of the continent and the multiple ways in which art exists in the community. In the context of this collective project, a postcolonial modernism (Okeke 2015) emerged alongside a political uprising and an anti-aesthetic stance (understood as action taken against artistic institutions underpinned by a Western modernity embodied by Senghor). This stance prompted the artists to set up what is commonly referred to as the first arts village at Camp Lat Dior. They were driven out on the night of 23 September 1983 by President Abdou Diouf's regime, which took power in 1981.

Issa Samb's practice found meaning in this pivotal period for Senegalese art. The manner in which he expressed his art changed. His painting became performative, evoking the trace of something that his body in the present left in its wake. The expression of the body in Joe Ouakam's work was a way of reminding us of the present. What it left behind was less important, as the past did not play a major role in his work. Indeed, given the strength of the performative body and of the moment itself, he claimed that his work was situated solely in the present:

2 Djibril Diop Mambety, El Hadji Sy, Amadou Sow and Bouna Médoune Seye were among the artists to have participated in the collective.

> I live in the present. If I move out of the present, it's to look ahead and very rarely to return to the past. The past has very little, if any place in my work. My work focuses on things in the present and that's what lends it its transient dimension. It's also why I stopped producing photography: to avoid pinning things down and coming back to them. I've always been careful about that. As soon as I realised it was making me want to historicise, I stopped. The past doesn't play a key part in what I do" (Kouoh 2013: 18-19).

Issa's declaration regarding the "presentism" (Hartog 2012) of his artistic practice is echoed by two aspects of his work: his performance and his relationship with objects. His stance on the past underpins the idea of permanence, focusing on the "living" body of the performance in a movement that evokes each instant before relegating it to the past. The transient nature of his work contrasts with the omnipresence of the objects peopling his studio. As much as the avant-gardes prized the ephemeral, rejecting fetishism of objects, Issa's installations are magically able to bring out the soul in everyday objects. In this regard, Elizabeth Harney observes that in the many workshops held by the Laboratoire Agit'Art, objects often functioned as an accessory and became secondary to the conceptual dimension of the performance. While the use of recycled materials, installation, accumulation and assemblage represents a way of countering the modernist hierarchies between high and low culture or between elitist and popular art that are inherent in Senghor's discourse, this mode of production is part of an overt quest to promote a new kind of art amid a political context that adapts to reflect its environment and adopts the codes of an international market (Harney 2004: 112).

Issa Samb works with everyday objects. The resulting associations are made unique by the places, situations, and contexts that lend an aura of strangeness to the pieces. Through recycling, the artist explores capitalist society and the waste it produces. As a result, interpretations of this recycling in terms of poverty and lack of materials must be nuanced. Recycling is a choice dictated by a vision of society and art whereby the language, modes of narration and grammar must be reviewed and corrected. Poverty cannot explain the adoption of recycling practices because the drive to question the materiality of objects prompted artists to gradually abandon the techniques that they had learned at art school in this historical context. In Joe Ouakam's individual practice and rational universe, his performance "digests" the objects. The artist himself absorbs the people who enter his space, which is transformed into a studio, a living space, and a permanent exhibition. Joe Ouakam resembles a collector whose obsession, as described by Susan Pearce, appears pathological in his relationship with objects (Pearce 1994). Collectors are not artists. They possess an object but they do not transform it; instead, they store and preserve it for posterity. Artists, meanwhile, enter into a conflict with the object, which is purely material and whose integrity and meaning are very often disrespected and transformed.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that Issa Samb's installations echo the spirituality of the *Xàmbs*, which are a set of objects traditionally placed in an area of the family home as a place of worship. Often positioned in a backyard, they serve as a retreat for the spirits. These sacred places remain alive in the yards of the Lébou community in Dakar, representing a space for preserving a living intangible heritage and a

mystical part of the house where offerings are made to the spirits of the ancestors. *Xàmbs* are altars that speak of the present in that they reincarnate the living spaces of ancestors who have died but not left. The "presentism" that can be seen in Joe Ouakam's artistic practice appears to be literally attached to death and to a body that is no more.

Xàmbs are altars that speak of the present. They bring the sacred installation closer to a profane performative act and transform life and traditions into a scenic device. Joe Ouakam re-enchants this device in a contemporaneity that frees it from "distinction". He plays the role of a broker or a catalyst when he blurs the aesthetic boundaries between the spiritual and material, the sacred and the profane. In Issa's studio, objects act as subjects rather than objects. They are more than just accessories; they are actors who participate in the abolition of the frontier between art and life, between animate and inanimate, between body and mind.

Joe Ouakam's work is entirely subversive and fundamentally political, rather like the themes that he focused on in the 1990s: Gandhi, Mandela, Lenin, colonial France, Soweto, the Senegalese flag, etc. (Ibong 1991: 206), which develop a narrative between art and the state. In the same vein, Issa burned all the paintings selected by Senghor for the exhibition *L'art sénégalais d'aujourd'hui* [Senegalese Art of Today], which was held at the Grand Palais from April 26 to June 24, 1974. He refused to allow his art to be used to justify an instrumentalization or an illustration of *Négritude* under the Dakar School label (Kouoh 2013: 13). The political dimension of his visual vocabulary echoes the iconography of the socio-plastic movement *Set/Setal*,[3] which emerged in the late 1980s and was characterised by citizen engagement among young people who decided to clean and decorate their neighbourhoods themselves. Drawing on socio-political concerns, *Set/Setal* was backed by Joe Ouakam. The artist described the grassroots energy of the movement:

> Beyond its political nature, *Set/Setal* raises the issue of elementary visual expression. In the neighbourhoods, many of the people who painted the walls are neither professional painters nor decorators. They are children and teenagers who started to use colour on the walls. Among these idle young people sipping from the teacup of the unemployed, slumbering talents that were waiting to be discovered suddenly brought the walls and tarmac to life. It is a grassroots expression; the professional decorators and artists come much later, sometimes called upon by the municipal authorities (Enda 1991: 21).

This rupture occurred amid a quest for a new model of society, as political and aesthetic benchmarks were overturned. This was explored in depth in a series of performances entitled *Plekhanov*, one of which was dedicated to Pierre Lods, to whom Issa Samb paid tribute in an essay entitled *Poto-poto Blues*. Another of Issa's political performances was in *Omar Blondin, Ré-ouverture du procès* (2016). In this film by Ican, Joe Ouakam sets out to reopen the case of Senegalese student and anti-colonial activist Omar Blondin Diop, who was found dead in his cell in 1973.

Omar Blondin was a prominent figure in the May 1968 student protests in Paris and served as an assistant to Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He played an active part in the

3 Expression in Wolof that means "clean" or "to clean".

electoral campaign for Trotskyist Alain Krivine, who was head of the Communist League. He was expelled from the École Normale Supérieure de Saint-Cloud and deported from France in 1969 for "subversive activities." Omar Blondin Diop was arrested in November 1971 in Bamako. He was accused of freeing his imprisoned comrades by burning down the French Cultural Centre and the Ministry of Public Works in protest against the exorbitant works taking place prior to President Georges Pompidou's visit to Dakar in 1971, also attacking his cortège with Molotov cocktails (Cherel 2020: 90). On March 23, 1972, he was sentenced to three years in prison for "undermining state security" (Cissokho 2022).

In Ican's film, Joe Ouakam continues in a monotone: "On May 11, 1973, Omar Blondin Diop, born on 18 September 1946, a former student at the ENS in Saint Cloud, was found hanging in the prison cell at Gorée where he was being held for political reasons." On May 10, 2013, a gathering was held at Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar entitled "Omar Blondin Diop: 40 Years Later." It was attended by various left-wing figures in Senegal and by the family of Omar Blondin Diop, who are calling for the case to be reopened.

The circumstances of Omar Blondin Diop's death remain a mystery to this day. However, unlike the newspaper *Le Soleil*, which reported the official verdict of suicide, Roland Colin, chief of staff to Council President Mamadou Dia (1957-62), explains in an essay entitled "Sénégal notre pirogue" (*Présence Africaine*, 2007) that Omar Blondin Diop had received a visit in prison from Interior Minister Jean Collin, with whom he had had an altercation: "The minister, it was eventually revealed, had ordered the guard to punish him. The next day, he was found hanging in his cell" (Cissokho 2022). In Ican's film, Joe Ouakam wonders in a deep, calm voice: "Did he kill himself by hanging or was he hung after he died?" Wearing a lawyer's robes, he turns towards a mannequin dressed all in black and placed in front of a white wall, where he writes: "my brother Oumar Blondin Diop." This performance positions Issa in a specific period of the Senegalese Left.

Joe Ouakam attempts to abolish the frontiers between art and politics, the body and mind, to forge a body that thinks, a body that itself is discourse and is expressed through performance. However, he does not strive for a performance that structures a space and assigns commonplaces as part of a protocol involving experts and an audience, anticipated and converted into a temporality that presents art in its sacred spaces. Here, performance merges with everyday life. It expresses an art that destroys the temporality of art venues and escapes its intended framework. It blurs locations by inventing a new dimension in which art welcomes and inhabits us. It is no surprise that monologue and soliloquy are inextricably intertwined here.

Joe Ouakam stood at the crossroads and acted as a catalyst between spheres. His multiform practice diverged from the codes governing art at a time when the narrative of artistic modernism in Senegal was dominated by the critical thought of president and poet Léopold Sédar Senghor. With a vision that encompassed art, politics, and epistemology, he played with the magic of objects in unusual assemblages and installations, lending them a performative dimension that disrupted the formalism embodied by the Dakar School of painting. Like his studio, which was a space for reflection and production, his multiform discourse was given new magic

by a fragmented aesthetic. Rather like the trees and waste materials in his courtyard, which he included in his art as part of a whole, he remained an enigmatic figure who was well-known among Dakar's residents, especially those in the Dakar--Plateau district at the heart of the city.

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