

# ENIGMA #59: ROMAN A RETROSPECTION BY BILI BIDJOCKA

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ON SHOW 17.09. – 31.10.2021 Thursday-Sunday 14:00–19:00

Presented as part of BERLIN ART WEEK

This exhibition takes place in the framework of VULNERABLE ARCHIVES. ON SILENCED ARCHIVES AND DISSENTING VIEWS. Funded by Allianz Kulturstiftung and in cooperation with the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (House of World Cultures) in the framework of The Whole Life: An Archive Project, supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media due to a ruling of the German Bundestag. With gratitude to our neighbours at Callie's for their wonderful collaboration on Bili Bidjocka's residency in Berlin.

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# PAGE 55

## BY BILLY FOWO

# ENIGMA #59: ROMAN

... the time had finally come; unannounced & unexpected  
tiptoeing pass the verge of what one would define as fear  
*it's now or never*  
had lost anything idiomatic  
english could afford.  
*it's now or never?*  
ain't no more gibberish  
*kiss me my darling*

elvis! ... or the rapper-ish  
*now or never mary! ...*

... a couple of months had crawled by  
maybe more, surely not less,  
mellow notes from uncountable moments  
of cowardness,

surfaced up.  
the lifelong turmoil surrounding his being,  
had finally crumbled under the weight of a never felt  
sugar coated but puzzling force,

and,  
what he now knew was fear had blossomed into tiny bits of joy  
hazardously drizzling,  
as the dawn of a new being  
unapologetically sprouted from within

was it what others commonly called courage?  
was it just a spontaneous act of  
unconsciousness and non-reflection?  
maybe?

maybe an unconscious act from that enigmatic space of  
"inner necessity"?! ...

Like the river in the rainy season, "flooding" its way through space in its process of remembering, Bili Bidjocka calls for a retrospection. Not a retrospective, but a possibility of revisiting his practice as an artist stretching over decades and geographies. The call, hardly ever fully articulated, is to look back, to remember, to unpack, to navigate those spaces in the rear-end of the subconscious, and if anything is found, to then re-member. The call is to go beyond the deliberations of the archive as something situated in the past, to cogitate and imagine the archive as the stone in the river that records every caress of the water that passes by, to consider the archive as the river that rises in an effort to remember where it used to be, claiming every centimetre of land on and through which it flowed once upon a time.

The call is to be. Being in absence and in presence.  
Being as archive itself.

And like the river in dry season, Bili Bidjocka disappeared, retreated. But the drier the river the more we remember how present it was/is. The sound of the lashes of the river on the stones reduced. The frogs too migrate. The mosquitoes and other insects populate the low standing waters. Everything around longs for, screams of the better days. The memory of these days is even more present in these moments of dearth. So is the retreat in search of some sanctuary? Let that space be the space from which care is tapped, a space of deep spiritual reckoning and ritual bearing. Let it be the space in which that is renegotiated which is sometimes consciously or unconsciously forgotten for the sake of survival, in which one's presence in absence is reassured, from which impetus is tapped. Maybe it is in disappearing that we exist.

Upon reappearance, when Bili Bidjocka answered "Present!", he brought with him an exhibition as game,

poem and choreography. Filling and feeling the space, the artist opens up questions of memory and necessary amnesia, being and playing, presences and absences, through works created or recreated during his one-month-long residency with us in Berlin.

Plastic, wood, organic materials, found objects, texts and videos are covering and occupying the ground floor and the souterrain of SAVVY Contemporary, and inviting the visitors to take part in the artist's enigma-games.

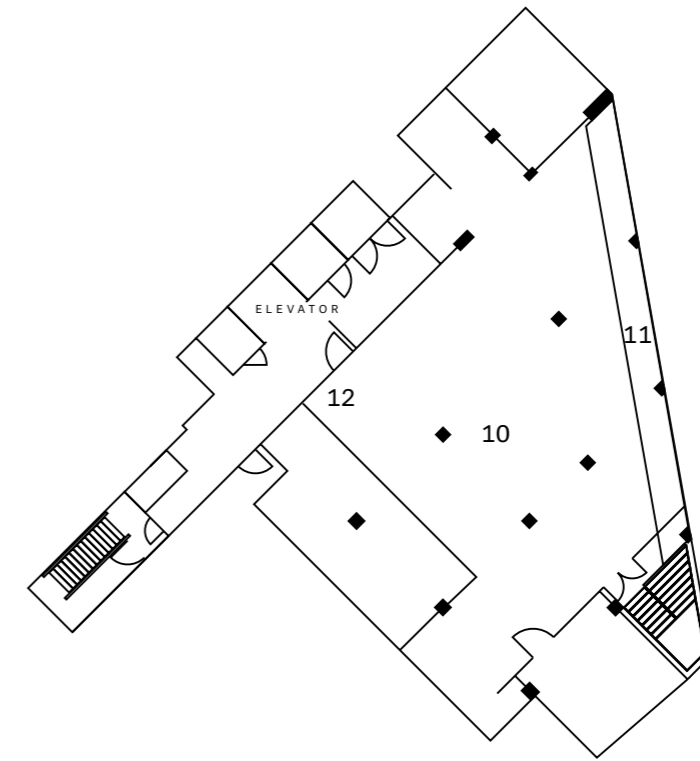
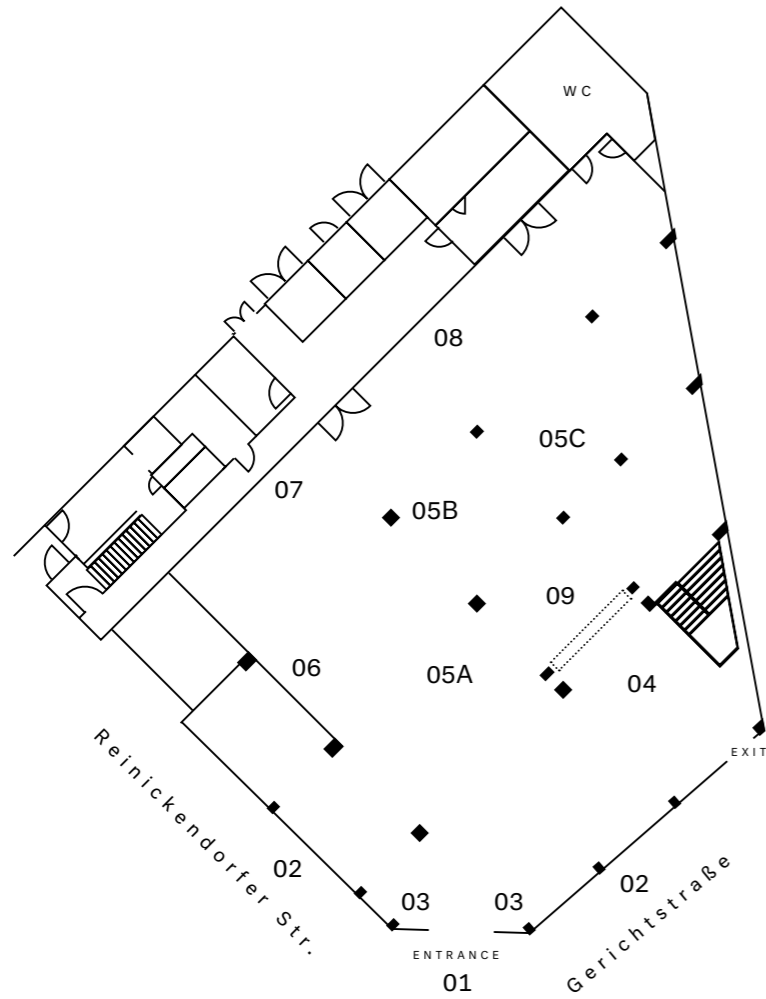
BILI BIDJOCKA was born in 1962 in Douala/Cameroon and has been living in Paris since 1974 where, after dance and theater, he enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The answers brought to him by his teachers there, those certainties etched in the minds of students, have long been revealed as inadequate. His confrontation with market laws, history and his own African identity forced him to see with new eyes the notion of art. After painting, he turned to installation and theatrical staging. His pieces begin to function as puzzles, riddles through which he continues the essential examination of the meaning and purpose of creation.

This solo exhibition presents itself also as a wordplay connecting the beginning to the end, one corner with its opposite in SAVVY Contemporary's space. For the artist, it represents even more: It functions as a Proustian madeleine, evoking pleasant melancholic memories from his childhood in Cameroon. In the same way that Bili Bidjocka expresses his inside memories in external and concrete artworks, he brings the outside into the inside using soil and videos, creating a connection and exchange between the inside and the outside. Bili Bidjocka's retrospection is an enigma constraining to question, to think, and to add irony and games to the human will of life.

Bili Bidjocka participated in many international exhibitions: the Biennales of Johannesburg (1997), Havana (1997), Dakar (2000, 2016), Taipei (2004) and Venice (2007). He presented his work in various museums and art galleries: New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York; ARC Museum of Modern Art of Paris; Palace of Fine Arts in Brussels; Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg & Cape Town; and on the occasion of the exhibitions *Africa Remix* and *The Divine Comedy* by Simon Njami. He is the founder of the creative platform Matrix Art Project (MAP) in Paris, Brussels and New York.

In 2014, he participated in the S A V V Y Contemporary exhibition and Invocations of *Wir Sind Alle Berliner 1884-2014. A Commemoration of the Berlin-Congo Conference*. In 2017, he was commissioned by the Curator at Large of documenta14, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, that took place in Athens and Kassel, to participate with his installation *The Chess Society*, which was simultaneously a digital project and an exhibition in Athens. *Enigma #59: Roman* is his first solo exhibition in Berlin

# FLOORPLAN



01  
*You have no chance grab it*  
 Installation, Wood, 2021  
 Outside

02  
*Roman*  
 Writing on the window, Soil, 2021  
 Outside

03  
*Pose/Tempo*  
 Video, on loop, 2021  
 On outside view

04  
*Christophe*  
 Installation, Found object, Concrete, Plaster, 2021

05 A  
*Parcour*  
 Installation, Soil, Wood, Shoe, 2021

*Tanka's Tale*  
 Sound, 2021

05 B  
*Roman II*  
 Video, on loop, 2021

05 C  
*Ballet*  
 Video, on loop, 2021

06  
*Pieta*  
 Drawing, rope, 2021

07  
*L'indifférent*  
 Video, on loop, 2021

08  
*Deux mummies faisant le cour à une disparue*  
 Installation, Wood, Textile, LED light, 2021

09  
*Enigma #55*  
 Painting, paint, soil, chalk, 2021

10  
*Ludo*  
 Installation, Wood, Soil, Glass, 2021

11  
*Banquet*  
 Installation, Found object, Soil, 2021

12  
*Le joueur généreux II*  
 Video, on loop, 2021

# ON THE POETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE AS A METHOD OF MEMORY BY BONAVENTURE SOH BEJENG NDIKUNG

I  
There are no sanctuaries  
except in purposeful action;  
I could say to my child,  
There are wounds deeper  
than flesh. Deeper and more  
concrete than belief in some god  
who would imprison your eye  
in the sterile sky instead of  
thrusting it on the piece of earth  
you walk everyday and say,  
Reclaim it.

But I let it pass since  
it is really about knowing today and how.  
This is what it has come to. Daughters  
and sons are born now and could ask,  
you know: Knowing your impotence why  
did you bring me here?

I could say:  
Life is the unarguable referent.  
What you know is merely a point  
of departure. So let's move.

Excerpt from *Notes from No Sanctuary*  
by Keorapetse Kgositsile

## ANECDOTE 1: TO FORGET IS TO SURVIVE? / AMNESIA AS SURVIVAL?

On the day he was born, something of record was set. Upon birth, with his head already a few centimetres out, the midwives had noticed a drastic drop in his heartbeat. Because the maternity ward, though in a city like Berlin, was not equipped with the necessary devices to see that his umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. So, the more she pushed, the more the cord tightened around his neck. Not only was the bluish head halfway out a call for concern, but the dwindling heart rate prompted the midwives to push back the head inside, call for an emergency transport to bring her to the hospital for an emergency caesarean section. It was a battle against time, and the doctors said a few minutes more would have caused an irreversible damage. When he was pulled out of the womb after the operation, and held up high, he straightened his right fist, tight closed, up high before uttering his first scream. It wasn't a roar, but sounded like being brought into this world was a major disruption from the comfort of the mother's womb.

The trauma of almost losing a child was omnipresent. Tangible. Palpable in every nightmare before the sudden wake bathed in sweat. For the father, all conversations, activities, plans were framed by this near-loss experience. In the night, until this day, he would pass by his son's bed late in the night to verify he was still breathing. It was a shock for the mother too, at least in the beginning, but soon enough, the trauma had slowly migrated to the breaches of the subconscious. At least

if that is where things drift to in the process of amnesia. The pain of birth, the fear of losing a baby and possibly her life had dwindled away almost with the first scream of the baby and the first sight of his large brown eyes. And a few months later, she was thinking of the next child. It is surely this ability to forget, this programmed amnesia, this necessary effacing that has permitted the human race to survive for so long. Imagine if every birth pain was relived and remembered over and over again, if every trauma upon delivery of a child lingered in the memories of the mothers. Just imagine.

## ANECDOTE 2: PRESENCE IN AND AS ABSENCE

It was a madding crowd per excellence. Women, men and non-binary folks of all racial denominations, young and old, people from all demographic groups and all walks of life had gathered in the streets of Rio de Janeiro to protest the cold blooded murder of Afro-Brazilian activist Marielle Francisco da Silva aka Marielle Franco. As a fearless and an outspoken councillor, advocate for the rights of gays and women, as a defender of the rights of single mothers, as well as the socially, economically, politically disenfranchised peoples of the favelas, Franco had become an open target for Brazil's right wing conservative population. Her openly critical stance against the corrupt and racist Brazilian police that notoriously conducted deadly raids in the favelas, and her blunt denunciation of paramilitary militias that were set up and run often by former and/or off-duty police didn't make her many friends in these ranks. But Franco was also the hope and light of many a Brazilian that saw in her an opening from the cul de sac in which Brazil had manoeuvred itself. When she was murdered at age 38, people took to the streets chanting, mourning and cursing. And whenever her name was screamed out loud, the crowd of several hundreds of thousands of people responded: "Presente!" In her absence, in her moment of transitioning, her presence was most felt. In the years after, to commemorate her killing, thousands of people poured into the streets chanting her name and convoking her presence in absence with even louder and more astute and consequent "Presente!"

## ANECDOTE 3: THE MIRRORING EFFECT. LANDSCAPE AS MEMORY

We stood on the hills of Salvador de Bahia looking at the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. We were both from West Africa and felt an extreme and immediate sense of familiarity. It wasn't the presence of many people of African origin in the city. It wasn't the language either, for we all barely spoke Portuguese. It must have been something else. Then it dawned on us that the landscape looked so much like that of the West African coast. It wasn't us remembering, it was the landscape re-membering in our minds what had been separated

upon the continental drift some 200 million years ago. The landscape itself was the memory of Pangaea, it was the memory of Gondwana.

## ANECDOTE 4: WATA WAKA LEF STONE

More than twenty years had passed by. I had come back to Bamenda only sporadically and hardly did I find the time to walk to the small river, more like a stream, that flowed with majesty not too far from our home. Yes, the flow was majestic, but often times in the rainy season, the stream would show that it too had a temper and would overflow, while in the dry season it showed its most gentle facets. Despite its gentility, our parents cautioned us never to spend too much time there, and never to dare swim. Swimming was for those who came from the coast. So, rarely did anyone swim in it. But people went in as deep as they could to find appropriate stones on which they rubbed their laundry with a cube of soap, and beat or rubbed the laundry over and over again on the stones in what was the most effective way of washing laundry. Twenty years down the line, the stones were still there. They had been witness to millions of litres of water flowing past them. Indeed they had enjoyed the privilege of an intimate relation of water caressing as it passed the stones. If anything, the stones had become even more polished by the friction of contact with the passing water and they lay there, still, in all lustrousness. But as witness, and an intimate one for that matter, the stone was the bearer of news and the carrier of histories that the water brought with it. But the water too, though in motion, had its own memory. Speaking of the memory of water, the river, Toni Morrison says that: "You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, that valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'." <sup>1</sup> Which brings us to Bili Bidjocka.

## ANECDOTE 5: BILI BIDJOCKA AND THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF DISAPPEARANCE AND MEMORY

Like the river in the rainy season, "flooding" its way through space in its process of remembering, Bili Bidjocka answers: "present!" The call is for a retrospection. Not a retrospective, but a possibility of revisiting his practice as an artist stretching over decades and geographies. The call, hardly ever fully articulated, was to look back, to remember, to unpack, to navigate those spaces in the rear-end of the subconscious, and if anything is found, to then re-member. The call was to go beyond the deliberations

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison. "The Site of Memory", in William Zinsser (ed.) *Inventing the Truth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).

of the archive as something situated in the past, to cogitate and imagine the archive as the stone in the river that records every caress of the water that passes by, to consider the archive as the river that rises in an effort to remember where it used to be, claiming every centimetre of land on and through which it flowed once upon a time. The call was to be. Being in absence and in presence. Being as archive itself. And like the river in dry season, Bili Bidjocka disappeared. But the drier the river the more we remember how present it was/is. The sound of the lashes of the river on the stones reduce. The frogs too migrate. The mosquitoes and other insects populate the low standing waters. Everything around longs for, screams of the better days. The memory of these days are even more present in these moments of dearth. So is the retreat in search of some sanctuary? Or is there no sanctuary as Bra Willie Keorapetse Kgositsile claims in his “Notes from No Sanctuary”? But the notes are written from somewhere. Let that space be the space from which care is tapped, and if we read sanctuary from its etymology from Old French sanctuaire, from Latin sanctuarium, as sanctus “holy”, then it might be a space of deep spiritual reckoning and ritual bearing, let it be the space in which that is renegotiated which is sometimes consciously or unconsciously forgotten for the sake of survival, in which one’s presence in absence is reassured, from which impetus is tapped. Maybe it is in disappearing that we exist. The poetics of disappearing is the practice of the palm wine tapper who wakes up in the wee hours of the morning before the break of dawn, climbs on the palm tree only to come back with the freshest juice of the palm tree. If there were ever anything holy, then it must be in and of palm wine. It comes as no surprise then that in Amos Tutuola’s novel “The Palm-Wine Drinkard”, published in 1952, the main character goes through the land of the dead in order to find his palm-wine tapper for he so desperately needs that juice of life.

Upon reappearance, that is when Bili Bidjocka answered “Present!”, he brought with him the following:

01 You have no chance grab it  
There is hardly anything that prepares us or predicts our being here today. The odds of coming from where we come and doing what we do in the arts is actually very low. Maybe. So the crux might just be that it is not about the chances you have but the chances you don’t have. But how do you grab what you don’t have? At any rate this wooden text sculpture overtowering SAVVY Contemporary reads “You have no chance grab it”. It does not come with punctuation. Neither an exclamation sign, nor a full stop nor a question mark. It allows for the reader to finish it in their minds. For Bidjocka it is also a notion or an expression of melancholia – a melancholia inherent in what it means to be a human being, what it means to live and to follow a “volonté de vivre” – a will to live. This, for Bidjocka, is essentially a philosophical question that goes beyond

the essentiality of what we believe and places emphasis more on form. The materialisation of ideas. The word as being. Maybe in the beginning was really the word.

02 Roman

And here there is word a plenty. *Roman* is another text based work written with soil on the windows of S A V V Y Contemporary on both Reinickendorferstraße and Gerichtstraße. *Roman* plays with the notion of the roman as novel, and a character called Roman in a story. Bidjocka imagined a character locked in the gallery for a certain period of time trying to write a book in a context of “contrainte”/ constraint. The space of constraint evokes the idea of “camisole de force” – a kind of a trap, a straitjacket – that engulfs the body, limits the body, but also forms the body. So while trapped in this space, *Roman* still finds the way to write a roman/novel. The importance of the novel in history writing has no insignificant space. As Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*:

“The appropriation of history, the historicization of the past, the narrativization of society, all of which give the novel its force, include the accumulation and differentiation of social space, space to be used for social purposes.”<sup>2</sup>

So with *Roman* and the roman/novel, Bidjocka participates in that re/claiming and shaping of a social space, even though tangentially, it still participates in the practice or at least points at the process of history making, archive construction, historicisation, identity and subject building as narrative processes. These narratives flow through time and inform not only what is considered the past but as well the present and future. As Edward Said further points out:

“No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. The force of these comments is directed equally, I think, at poets who think critically and at critics whose work aims at a close appreciation of the poetic process. The main idea is that even as we must fully comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present. Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, in the totally ideal sense intended by Eliot, each co-exists with the other.”<sup>3</sup>

03 Pose/Tempo

Le Boxeur is the brand of the most famous matchsticks in Cameroon. On the matchbox is the image of a black man in red, yellow or green shorts with corresponding boxing gloves and with his hands ready to give an upper cut. This iconic image has a particular space in the imaginary, say in the intangible visual archive of every Cameroonian. *Pose/Tempo* – a double video on monitors at the entrance of S A V V Y Contemporary – takes its cue from a coincidental encounter Bili Bidjocka had in Dakar. Walking down the corniche, he saw a

man, a boxer training at the beach. Le Boxeur from the matchbox covers might just have jumped off the box. The elegance, lightness and beauty with which the boxer carried himself and the way he punched each molecule in the air caught Bidjocka’s attention and instigated him to start filming the boxer as the sun hurriedly set on the horizon of Dakar. After filming, Bidjocka switched sides from behind the camera to in front of the camera and let himself to be filmed as he tried to emulate, to reproduce the grace, the lightness and at the same time the grandeur of Le Boxeur. One could say to bring to live, to multiply in living the archive, which is Le Boxeur. *Pose/Tempo* becomes a dialogue between two characters: one is a real boxer, and the other an impersonator. But *Pose/Tempo* is also a triologue between a real boxer, an impersonator and the memory of Le Boxeur, who, though absent, is uberpresent. Memory as a spectrum of or sediments of appropriation.

04 Christophe

It is said “uneasy lies the head that carries the crown,” but imagine the (un)ease that comes with (not) knowing that above the crown floats a sword. In a world in which the strive for more and even more power is the order of the day, in a world in which muscles are flexed at random and the power gradients that exist between classes, genders, races and other social constructs are becoming even steeper, in a world in which presidents, managers, directors hardly preside, manage or direct but are presided, managed and directed, one must get granular on the notion of power.

The parable of the sword of Damocles is essentially a revelation of stretched time. Which is to say the concerns of Cicero in “Tusculan Disputations” on Dionysius II’s abuse of power, distrust, fear and other shenanigans in the fourth and fifth centuries B.C. were the concerns of Aimé Césaire in “La Tragédie du roi Christophe” in 1963 and are seemingly still our concerns of today. It is also a commentary on the fragility of power, as well as power as a game in which the sword might constantly be dangling above one’s head. And it might just be that the people are/make the sword.

05 Parcour

According to the NASA, the sand of the Sahara Desert on the African continent feeds the Amazon’s plants on the Southern American continent. Strong winds blowing across the Sahara carry the sand across the Atlantic from the desert to the forest. This journey made by many humans hundreds of years ago in the

Middle Passage is done by sand today – again as resource. Embedded in the sand is phosphorus, an important nutrient for plant proteins and growth, and a remnant of the Sahara Desert’s history as a huge body of water – the Bodélé Depression in Chad, which was a lake bed. The remains of the fish and other animals and microorganisms that perished when the rich lake dried out have formed phosphorus-rich dust over the centuries. In a 2015 published paper<sup>4</sup>, Yu et al. not only give scientific proof of this phenomenon, but also calculate the amount of phosphorus transported from the Sahara to the Amazon.

“Nutrients – the same ones found in commercial fertilizers – are in short supply in Amazonian soils. Instead they are locked up in the plants themselves. Fallen, decomposing leaves and organic matter provide the majority of nutrients, which are rapidly absorbed by plants and trees after entering the soil. But some nutrients, including phosphorus, are washed away by rainfall into streams and rivers, draining from the Amazon basin like a slowly leaking bathtub. The phosphorus that reaches Amazon soils from Saharan dust, an estimated 22,000 tons per year, is about the same amount as that lost from rain and flooding, Yu said. The finding is part of a bigger research effort to understand the role of dust and aerosols in the environment and on local and global climate.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the extermination of animals in the lake, despite the disappearance of the lake itself, the soil still archives the existence of the beings that were there once upon a time. The soil is the archive. The memory. The soil and landscape as a whole are the living banks of what was and is. The is-ness is accentuated by the fact that even though the fish might no longer exist, its remnants still participate in the sustenance of other life, those of trees, in the Amazon. As Targulian et al, propose, soil is an information system, soil has its own behaviour articulated in time and space, and soil is a recording system. They discuss the soil’s memory and “mechanisms of recording, accumulation, and storage of this information, its particular carriers”.<sup>6</sup>

It is within this framework of the soil and landscape as memory and carrier of that which is forgotten, that Bidjocka conceived the piece *Parcour*. Soil fills and feels the space of S A V V Y Contemporary. Bidjocka has created a landscape that doesn’t mimic anything we know, but that conjures itself from that space of amnesia. But it is a matter of displacement too. Displacement of soil into the space. It is also a matter of crafting a mountain, and evoking a territory.

Locked into or framing the landscape, *Parcour* – depending on your vantage point – is a game of words, a kind of “mots croisés” (crossword puzzle). The idea of games is fundamental in the practice of Bili Bidjocka. Be it the evoking of the chess game in “The chess society” for documenta 14 or the Ludo game in the current

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), 78.  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Yu, H., et al. “The fertilizing role of African dust in the Amazon rainforest: A first multiyear assessment based on data from Cloud-Aerosol Lidar and Infrared Pathfinder Satellite Observations”, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 42/6, March 2015,1984–1991, doi:10.1002/2015GL063040.  
<sup>5</sup> Ellen Gray, “NASA Satellite Reveals How Much Saharan Dust Feeds Amazon’s Plants”, www.nasa.gov, August 7, 2017 (accessed 01.09.2021): <https://www.nasa.gov/content/goddard/nasa-satellite-reveals-how-much-saharan-dust-feeds-amazon-s-plants>  
<sup>6</sup> Targulian, V.O., Bronnikova, M.A. Soil Memory: “Theoretical Basics of the Concept, Its Current State, and Prospects for Development”, *Eurasian Soil Sc.*, 52, 229–243, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1134/S1064229319030116>.

exhibition at S A V V Y Contemporary, games are implemented in Bidjocka's work as material, as tools, as method, as metaphor. "L'art, c'est pas un jeu d'enfant" which is to say art must be a serious game. At any rate a game. The square wooden tiles that make up the game intermingle with the soil to create a kind of organic life.

The *Parcour* is covered by a sonic blanket dubbed *Tanka's Tale*. If Jacques Attali was right that "for twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible"<sup>7</sup> then Tanka Fonta has employed tools within Nguemba cosmogonies to dig up a subterranean sonic landscape - inhabited by the beings and flows of that world. One can't help but feel a connection and at the same time an abstraction from the intro and outro of Sathima Bea Benjamin's *African Songbird*, which seems to be emanating from a similar world.

*Roman II* is an audio visual piece that prolongs the reflections on writing and on the novel. Writing is an externalisation of knowledge, that which is memorised in the mind is given over to another vessel – the written word. At the same time, it is the keeping of knowledge in the form of a book. Writing thus occupies the space between disappearance of memory, forgetting, and preservation of memory, the book. Though Bidjocka says he has no ambition of becoming a writer, writing has played a very important role in his practice for a longer period of time. Influenced by the work of symbolists like poet Stéphane Mallarmé and his 1897 poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard" (A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance), the experimental nature of writing, the playing with words on the page, the play of words or an effort of words trying to escape a page or find space within a page and the architecture of poetry in book form, Bidjocka has been drawn to writing as a form. Besides structure, Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard" also catches Bidjocka's attention because of the relation to games and gaming.

Projected on the soil is a video titled *Ballet*. In the video, two workers are captured sweeping a museum in South Africa. Bidjocka set a camera and filmed their feet while they were engaged in their daily work of cleaning. Cleaning like every activity of the body is or can be seen as some kind of choreography. The way the legs move, the beauty of the movements of the body and the cleaning tools form a kind of ballet. But "ballet" here is also a "jeu de mots" as it both invokes the notion of dance and also the notion of sweeping in French *balayer* and therefore balais which is the broom. With the projection of the *Ballet* video on the soil *Parcour* which is a cleaning of something that never gets cleaned, one might be tempted to see this as a metaphor of a process of amnesia through which memory doesn't really disappear or only seemingly disappears, but is still present. *Ballet* has accompanied Bidjocka all through

his life, especially as someone who performed dancing before becoming a visual artist. The lightness, the grace with which ballet dancers carry themselves, the way they challenge gravity and disseminate the feeling of weightlessness draw Bidjocka's attention to ballet.

#### 06 Pieta

There is a cord that binds us to our mothers upon birth, and though the umbilical cord is cut at that moment of getting into the world, it doesn't separate, but seems to strengthen the bond. This conundrum of cutting a bond to strengthen it is the epitome of forgetting to remember. But the Pieta is also a story of passion and compassion. And inherently a tragedy. An end that is the mark of a beginning of what is said to be an everlasting life.

#### 07 L'indifférent

Hanging in the Louvre is a small 1717 oil painting of 25 x 19 cm by Antoine Watteau titled *L'Indifférent*. The rococo painting that depicts a young androgenic person came into the Louvre via the collection of Louis La Caze and it is also known as *The Casual Lover*. It is said that Watteau had an affinity to the initial moments of an action, and therefore painting this person that challenges gender categorisations in a pose of the first step of a dance. A frozen dance so to say. It is not really the articulately painted glittering silk of the protagonist that catches Bidjocka's attention, nor the faintly gold backdrop to which *The Casual Lover* is placed, but the delicacy of this movement that seems like a levitation. A ballet of levitation. If one is in that space of the sanctuary or no sanctuary, one might consider this a depiction of a miracle. A queer Christ? Despite the eroticism in the painting, one can't help but think of the crucifixion. A gay, as in joyful and otherwise, crucifixion? At any rate, *The Casual Lover* is a kind of a funambulus walking a tightrope between identities, between life and death, between memory and forgetting. Bidjocka is inspired by this idea of the levitation and makes a video of a bare-chested character jumping a cord. On the floor is a mirror, a reflection of the levitation.

#### 08

Deux mummies faisant la cour à une disparue  
Two paintings by Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez form the conceptual backbone of the sculpture by Bidjocka titled *Deux mummies faisant la cour a une disparue*. The first is a painting called *The Geographer* from ca. 1625/29 in which Velazquez painted a man in a Baroque outfit, looking at the painter as well as the viewer and wearing a half-smile cached behind his overflowing moustache. The character gestures his left hand above a globe, not really pointing at anything but it seems to be a frozen moment after or just before spinning the globe. Needless to interpret why. In the second painting "Man with a wine glass", Velazquez places the same individual, almost same outfit, same

posture, same smile, same moustache and the left hand stretched out, but this time in a glove and holding an almost full glass of wine. Here too, it is needless to interpret why. But Bidjocka mirrors one of the paintings such that they face each other. Both characters are cut out and their silhouettes left over and in their hands, Bidjocka places a flower. One can say these men have been freed from the tight corset of Velazquez' canvas, but this gesture can also be seen as a gesture of mummification. The figures in both paintings that seem to be one are hereby reunited, re-membered in the form of a mummy. Maybe a possible way of dealing with the superfluosity of white bodies in the Louvre and other institutions of the kind is to employ the processes of mummification. Again, we find ourselves at the ends of the pendulum of absence of live and presence of memory and being. In ancient Egypt, moisture was removed from the body to avoid further decay of the body to preserve in the afterlife. Mummification as a technology of archiving the body has afforded us the possibility of witnessing bodies mummified 3,000 years ago in Egypt.

#### 09

Enigma 55 (Je suis la seule femme dans ma vie)  
Since he left art school, Bidjocka has worked on a body of work that take the form of dresses with the enigmatic title "Enigma 55 (Je suis la seule femme de ma vie)". Growing up in Paris and studying in the École des Beaux Arts, the Louvre was an important part of Bidjocka's becoming. The Louvre is flooded with images of human bodies, mostly white, but bodies all the same, that students are encouraged to emulate in their paintings. Considering himself an artist of the Louvre but who is not interested in or doesn't have an affinity to paint the flesh like the great masters of the 17th and 18th centuries, Bidjocka decided to erase the flesh from his paintings, and focus on that which covers the flesh. So to say focus on the secondary skin rather than the primary skin. Thus the paintings of dresses. Though the Louvre is flooded with images of women, especially naked, Bidjocka noticed that there was not only a dearth of black painters but also a deep lack of female painters in the Louvre. So in an effort to balance this disparity he decided to become a female artist and produced this body of work with the title "Je suis la seule femme dans ma vie".

#### 10 Ludo

The central piece in the souterrain of S A V V Y Contemporary is an extrapolation or a citation of a game of Ludo. Games obviously represent more than just their face values. Ludo is no different. Games are stand ins for historical events. Mnemonic tools of sorts. Ludo is no different. If alone because from its current history, it stands as a symbol of appropriation and the colonial enterprise. In 1891, Alfred Collier applied for a patent in

England for a game he claimed he had invented and had dubbed Royal Ludo. Soon after, Collier was granted the patent for Ludo with the patent number 14636 making the sole benefactor and profiteer of all the commercial benefits of the game.<sup>8</sup> But it is also an open secret that Ludo is the abducted offspring of the famous Indian game of the Mughal emperor Akbar known as Pachisi founded in the 6th century – the game of Mahabharata. Besides the history of Ludo, it is the idea of the game, the throwing of the dice, the chances, the poetry of probability and the geometry of the game itself in which Bidjocka is interested.

#### 11 Banquet

The banquet is a recurring subject in Bidjocka's practice. Be it the last supper or some other form of banquet. The banquet as a space of communion. That space in which the body becomes bread and blood becomes wine. But the banquet is also a space of betrayal. This banquet at S A V V Y Contemporary is a voodoo banquet. The plates and cutlery are set and assigned to different Voodoo Gods like Adya Hount'tò, Azaka-Tonnerre, Baron Cimitière, Baron Kriminel, Diable Tonnerre, Joseph Danger whose creole names per se reveal the histories of the meetings of the African and American worlds, and many other names in pidgin of figures from West African mythologies.

#### 12 Le Joueur généreux

*Le Joueur généreux* is the final piece in the exhibition at the very rare end of the souterrain. It takes its title from the eponymous 1869 poem by Charles Baudelaire from the "Spleen de Paris" series. With this video, Bidjocka brings what is happening outside around S A V V Y, on the Nettelbeckplatz, into the space. A kind of outside-in. As S A V V Y is situated in a predominantly migrant neighbourhood with a good ratio of people of migrant origin, the piece commentarylessly captures this multiplicity, the polychromatic Berlin into the space. The video *Le Joueur généreux* is in so far related to entry piece of the exhibition, as that work is geared towards the outside, while *Le Joueur généreux* is geared towards the inside as a kind of reversal of architecture. Like many of the pieces in this exhibition, Bidjocka plays the game of inverting and of irony. There is always a twist in the tail. In the poem "Le Joueur généreux", Baudelaire plays with the figure of the good devil. The devil makes a promise to cure the poet of boredom, indeed "that bizarre affection of Boredom." A boredom that is existentialist and melancholic and if taken away would cure the poet of all interior torments. Eventually it boils down to a game of pleasure versus happiness, of trust and doubt, and ultimately of paradoxes that summarise themselves in this prayer that bridges the gap between Baudelaire's "Le Joueur généreux" to Keorapetse Kgositsile's "Notes from No Sanctuary": "Mon Dieu! Seigneur, mon Dieu! faites que le diable me tienne sa parole!"

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Attali. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, translated by Brian Massumi, (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Editor's Pick, "How Pachisi, an Indian board game, became Ludo", *Madras Courier*, September 11, 2018, <https://madrascourier.com/insight/how-pachisi-an-indian-board-game-became-ludo>.



# TO LOSE ONE'S SOUL WITH LIGHTNESS BY SIMON NJAMI

“Cependant le jeu, ce plaisir surhumain, avait coupé à divers intervalles nos fréquentes libations, et je dois dire que j’avais joué et perdu mon âme, en partie liée, avec une insouciance et une légèreté héroïques.”

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“But gaming, that superhuman pleasure, had interrupted, at divers intervals, our frequent libations, and I should also say that with perfect nonchalance and heroic heedlessness, I had played and lost my soul in a binding pact.”  
from: Charles Baudelaire, “The Generous Gambler”, in *Paris Spleen* (translated by Louise Varèse)

To lose one's soul with lightness. Playing heads or tails with one's destiny... Dostoyevsky and Zweig, among others, have written on the subject. But in his prose poem, Baudelaire addresses the ultimate game: the one where the stake, as in Goethe's *Faust*, inspired by Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, is one's soul. Contrary to what superficial minds might think, a game is a serious matter that one must, as the French poet invites us, take lightly.

Every seasoned player must carry within them the acceptance of lack, that is to say, the awareness of defeat. For one does not play to win. The essence of the game is in the game itself, and in the quality of the partner – not the opponent – one is facing. The game and the crossword puzzle are a metaphorical illustration of this, always containing a part of mystery, like an enigma to be solved, a labyrinth from which we must get out.

Words, like a dark forest, become trompe-l'oeil, falsehoods meant to lead us astray. But isn't it the very spirit of artistic creation not to signify in a literal way the secret spirit of things? It is to the resolution of this enigma, this essential enigma that Bili Bidjocka's proposal invites us.

(Translated by Lia Milanesio)

# ENIGMA #59: ROMAN BY PHILIPPE PIROTTE

Is Bili Bidjocka a visual artist? He clearly has writers' envy. Or maybe he does something writers can't do? Words in art are things, not units of meaning. The writing on the wall becomes image, and functions differently from, let's say, the semantic apparatus of a novel. However, Bidjocka flirts with the idea that the (subliminal) meaning in those images convey an enigma: *On est dans l'espace de la peinture ou on ne l'est pas, or Je suis la seule femme de ma vie, ...*

According to Vilém Flusser's *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, history is characterized by the fight between text and image, revealing a struggle between historical consciousness and magic. Flusser claims that texts do not represent the world; they represent images. To decipher texts thus means to discover the images they represent. The aim of the written word is to explain and interpret images and to retrieve the meaning of notions, terms or concepts in order to understand visions. Flusser believes that the relationship between texts and images is a central question in history, manifesting itself in a dialectical struggle. The image might be elucidated by text, but the text depends on visuals to be imagined. Likewise, conceptual thinking analyzes magical thought in order to get rid of it, but magical thinking slips back into conceptual thought to invest it with meaning.

Of course, Bidjocka called the fictional protagonist for this exhibition “Roman”, French for “novel”. Clearly Roman is an emmerdeur when it comes to discussing our received notions of visual art, literature, poetry, politics, geography, strategy, play, friendship, love and death, all these ways to supposedly come to terms with the enigma of the world. Roman guides us through a space that informs us about ourselves – unawares. This space fails to provide solace because things here do not necessarily reveal themselves as truths. It is the space

of the mistake, a place where things are allowed to go astray. Roman points to an artistic consciousness – the one of Bili Bidjocka? – without answering our desire for elucidation as he is aware of that desire being artificially invoked. Contrary to celebrating their exhibition-value, Roman travels with images that are materially compulsory in the present – though suffused with historic resonance and in parley with the development of attention-as-currency. Moreover, such images redefine questions pertaining to the physical exhibition space. The exhibition holds the promise of sovereign indifference to instrumental (practical, functional, political and economic) reason. As a consequence, the exhibition directs its opposition against the exhausting demand for “meaning” and the incessant flow of communicative action and exuberant performativity, towards a *via negativa* of discomfort and loss, creating a recalcitrant space of subjective and fictional symbolic acts.

# CONTEMPORANEITY AND THE NOTION OF JET LAG AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY BY HAJRA HAIDER KARRAR

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

It is the negotiations with and around majority culture that indicate the absence of those present on the peripheries of the mainstream – a consistent mediation through various means of communication to engender decipherment and recognition of linear and non-linear temporalities. In the midst of this cacophony resides an in-between condition, known as the notion of jet lag. Jet lag denotes the disoriented aftermath resulting from a quick transfer between two time zones that does not allow the time and space of transition for circadian rhythms. In this condition, the body is physically present in the new zone, yet functions and is aligned to its former reality. It is a space of unease where the body in question and those around it reside in the same frame but perform across planes communicating in disparate languages, inevitably creating the space of misunderstanding meanwhile, facing the dilemma of shedding the familiar to align with the new dominant. A peripheral condition, where one continues to feel like an outsider, present yet not fully present.

Bili Bidjocka is invested in this notion of jet lag. Finding resonance in the condition, he utilizes it to make-meaning and define the social experience. According to Bili Bidjocka, “painting is an esoteric language for the contemporary museum. Hence, to be a painter is to be in a jetlag experiment.”<sup>2</sup> In this experiment, Bidjocka seeks to devise a space of encounter and interaction through which the space of misunderstanding, consequential of this experiment, could be managed.

José Esteban Muñoz has defined navigation and negotiation of such a realm as disidentification, an alternative approach that lies between the binary of identification and counter-identification with the mainstream ideology.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Bidjocka has devised his own language to weave into the mainstream where he is able to establish a structure and direction for a conversation that unfolds organically minimizing the space of misunderstanding and spectacle. He shuns the representational tropes while reconfiguring and realigning familiar traces, directing a new path that unfolds through interaction and exchange. This is where the notion of game becomes a central aspect of Bidjocka’s oeuvre.

Defining the premise of game, Bernard Suits elaborates, “to play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].”<sup>4</sup> Bidjocka sets the stage for interaction through readily recognizable games yet each one with an altered set of rules established by him. As emphasized by Suits as well, there is no game until there is an agreement to play.<sup>5</sup> Thus, on Bidjocka’s stage as well, there is no option but to interact and engage. In doing so, he shifts the position of the viewer from spectator to participant activating exchange and conversation, enabling the latter to discover the

essential hidden behind the banal. Bidjocka is on a quest for beauty and his motivation lies in the facilitation of beauty. Before the interaction begins, it is the point of encounter that is the onset of beauty. Here he recalls, “Beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie” (Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table) – a quote from Comte de Lautréamont’s poetic novel *Les Chants de Maldoror* that was also foundational to the surrealist doctrine.<sup>6</sup> The co-existence of parallel realities set on a stage that is not linked to either one of them, even remotely, portrayed by this quote poetically encapsulates the space of jet lag that Bidjocka is utilizing to challenge and disrupt mainstream perceptions of reality. Furthermore, he indicates the margin of possibility and promise that lies within this space.

The goals of the game are not geared towards victory or defeat, as Bidjocka quotes Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem, “Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance).<sup>7</sup> The proficiency of the player is irrelevant as the idea of play is based on the notion of elegance in *courtoisie*. A manner that enables the creation of beauty in playing with, rather than playing against. This poem becomes further significant due to its structuring and writing. Mallarmé broke and disrupted the conventions of space and typography, abstracting form and content, experimenting with the texture of the paper while remaining within the set dimensions of the page. Similarly, Bidjocka works within the set dimensions of the game rupturing it from within.

Perhaps, Bidjocka constructs his stage with the “structures of feeling” as coined by Raymond Williams. The structures that constitute “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity”<sup>8</sup> that enables different ways of thinking and connecting that lie in that space of jetlag between the official and popular narrative and requires to be felt, thought, and perceived against the grain.

Here, the aim is not resolution, rather it is to continue enabling encounters and conversations.

1 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publications, 1997), 324. Cited in Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2018), 11.2 Ibid, 24.  
2 Bili Bidjocka, conversation with the artist, August 30, 2021.  
3 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.  
4 Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 41.  
5 Suits, 67-68.

6 Bili Bidjocka, Conversation with the artist, August 30, 2021.  
7 Bili Bidjocka, Conversation with the artist, August 30, 2021.  
8 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

## MORE INFORMATION

[savvy-contemporary.com](http://savvy-contemporary.com)

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S A V V Y Contemporary–The laboratory of form-ideas is an art space, discursive platform, place for good talks, foods and drinks–a space for conviviality. S A V V Y Contemporary situates itself at the threshold of notions of the West and non-West, to understand and deconstruct them. S A V V Y Contemporary has realized a kaleidoscope of art exhibitions, performances, film screenings, lectures, concerts, readings, talks, dances. S A V V Y Contemporary has established a participatory archive on German colonial history, a performance arts documentation centre, a library, a residency program, as well as educational projects with schools. The art space engages in its neighborhood's history and socio-political realities which are entangled with the reflections and discourses of the project.

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