Jean Prouvé. Maison Tropicale. 1951.
As installed on the waterfront in Queens, NY, May 2007.
Photograph by Don Emmert/AFP/Getty Images.

Maison Tropicale: A Conversation with Manthia Diawara

JUDITH RODENBECK

The "biggest trophy" in New York's Summer 2007 design auctions could be found on Vernon Boulevard, under the Queensboro Bridge in Long Island City, just a stone's throw from Scandals, the local topless bar.[1] One of three prototype prefabricated houses sent to French colonial Africa by the designer Jean Prouvé in the years immediately after World War II, this structure had spent the previous half-century in Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo. It was sold by the New York branch of Christie's, the auction house, in June 2007 for just under $5 million, to the hotel magnate André Balazs.[2] The pointed journalistic characterization of Prouvé's prototype indicates the peculiar commodity status that has accrued to architecture in the contemporary market as well as the salutary salability of such large-scale objects of design as (in this case) portable buildings. More poetically, in its very excess as an exhibitionary token, Prouvé's Brazzaville house, the larger of the two projects, like several centuries' worth of big-game trophies, serves as a complex materialized allegory in the melancholy history of Africa's relations with European modernity. For what is a trophy if not the sumptuary register of sign-exchange value?

Prouvé is among a number of modernist architects and designers who experimented with industrial metal production in the years after World War I. The potential ease and speed of assembly of mass-produced parts seemed apt for a mass society, and the structural vocabulary afforded by steel, whether tubular or in rolled sheet, was a crucial complement to innovative housing design. As with the earlier history of prefabricated housing, Prouvé's prototype Maisons Tropicales were a design response to absent colonial infrastructure, in this case in French colonial Africa; his prototypes also took advantage of the excess production capacity in the

1. Alice Rawsthorn, "Jean Prouvé's Maison Tropicale at Design Auction," *New York Times,* May 20, 2007, style section, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/18/style/18iht-design21.1.5772551.html (accessed March 8, 2010).
2. A stop-motion video of it being erected in 2008 in front of the old pump station that houses the Tate can be viewed at www.lamaisontropicale.com. The other Brazzaville house is on long-term loan to the Pompidou Center; the third house, from Niamey, is being restored.

OCTOBER 133, Summer 2010, pp. 106–132. © 2010 October Magazine, Ltd. and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

French aluminum industry after World War II (raw materials for which came from French West Africa). Fabricated out of sheet goods, chiefly aluminum panel and welded and folded steel sheet components, the building elements were designed so that they could be easily lifted, packed, and then assembled on site by a minimal crew using relatively simple tools; they were flown by cargo plane from Nancy, in France, to their destinations (Niamey, Niger, and Brazzaville), and raised in about two weeks.

The Niamey house, erected on site in 1949 (it had been displayed on the Port des Champs Élysées in 1946), contained two units of 108 square meters under a 26 x 10 meter roof; these served as housing and an office for the principal of a junior high school. The two structures in Brazzaville, which went up two years later, served as the information office and staff bungalow of the commercial director of the African subsidiary of Aluminium Français. The brief was to be ventilated, lightweight, sturdy, and provide shade. Climactic conditions dictated the specificity of the prototype designs, particularly the plans for air circulation and passive cooling: Niamey, for instance, is in a semi-arid Sahelian climate and temperatures rarely drop below 90 degrees Fahrenheit, so the house was built on a concrete slab faced with cooling vitrified tiles, whereas in Brazzaville, which has a long wet season, Prouvé's buildings rested on a beam-bearing structure mounted on piers; the use of vertical and horizontal elements, louvers, vents, and screens also responded to local conditions. But in the breach, Prouvé's experiment turned out to be too costly, and his innovative designs too aesthetically challenging to relatively conservative French tastes, and further production was abandoned.[3] Both Niger and the Republic of Congo achieved full independence in 1960 and the French left. But Prouvé's houses stayed, functionally weathering rain and heat and bullets in semi-obscurity, until a Parisian furniture dealer named Eric Touchaleaume touched down in Africa, negotiated the purchase of all three buildings, and had them dismantled and shipped north, restored, and rendered into *objets*.

Icons of modernist and industrial design, the Maisons Tropicales are also, in their jaunty colonialism, their failure as models, and their fin-de-siècle neocolonial "repatriation," complex signs for the uneasy geography of the postcolony. As such they present a fitting subject for the Portuguese artist Ângela Ferreira. Ferreira has over the last decade been assembling a body of work that probes the geo-temporal switchings of modernism and its neo-avant-garde reanimations, its nomadic peripheries and in-between spaces. Ferreira has long been investigating the underbelly of modernist architecture's utopian claims—the ground, as it were, from which and on which its particular efficiencies were constructed, and in particular its colonial peripateia. Ferreira's *Maison Tropicale* (2007), for the

3. Other African proposals from Prouvé's studio included designs for the Niamey Palais de Justice, Palais du Conseil General and Great Mosque (1948–49), and competition designs for various government buildings in Ouagadougou (1949).

Prouvé. Brazzaville Maison Tropicale. 1951. Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resource, NY © ARS, NY.

Portuguese pavilion in Venice in 2007, was generated by just such a project of cultural and historical excavation. A quasi-architectural aluminum armature housed components replicating the panels and supports of Prouvé's prototypes stacked and assembled as if in their flat-pack transportation mode; these parts of the not-yet-built formed a narrow corridor, a ghost channel through which the viewer passed, as across a narrow bridge, to reach a display of Ferreira's documentary photographs of the now-empty African sites of these now-disarticulated prototype houses.

Manthia Diawara's 2008 film, *Maison Tropicale* (running time fifty-eight minutes), was commissioned as an extension of Ferreira's Portuguese pavilion project, and like Ferreira's piece it was co-financed by the Portuguese Ministry of Culture/Institute of the Arts. The film premiered at the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, in March of 2008 before traveling to its African premiere at the Dak'Art Biennale in Dakar, Senegal, two months later. *Maison Tropicale* documents with understated precision the journey taken by these two diasporic Africans (Diawara, born in Mali, lives and works in New York; Ferreira, born in Maputo, Mozambique, lives and works in Lisbon), as they trace the passage of Prouvé's houses from the metalworks in Nancy to Niamey and Brazzaville and then to the auction block. Searches

This page and next: Ângela Ferreira. Maison Tropicale. *2007. Partial views of the installation, Portuguese Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale. Photograph by Roger Meintjes.*

for the original sites of the houses, interviews conducted in and across multiple languages with subjects in these two very different cities, and the careful self-interrogation of the two protagonists in terms of their relation to colonial and contemporary Africa, to modernism, and to each other, yields a remarkably reflexive work. I spoke with Diawara about his film in November of 2008.

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Manthia Diawara: I'm not an architect. I do comparative literature, film, and I write about art when I can, but more from the perspective of aesthetics, narratives—the ways in which art is in communication and discussion with literature, with film, and with the other arts—that's really my approach. But the Prouvé project was eye-opening.

I was in Paris and Ângela Ferreira and I were in a show together. I showed *Rouch in Reverse* (1995). She was very interested in *Rouch in Reverse* because of the complexities of her own formation. She's Jewish; she was born in colonial Mozambique, raised and went to college in South Africa, and is of Portuguese origins. When her African world entered into the turmoil of postcolonial struggle, it was basically safer for her to migrate to Portugal and be Portuguese.

Now, as an artist, to me the frustration was—how come we can't talk about each other? You know, if you are an African artist, you are just the African artist from Mozambique, that's it. And in the exhibitions in different places from MoMA on down, they would say, "Manthia Diawara, Mali, da-da-da, born in . . . . " On the one hand, that locational imperative is very important because it was the main tenet of multiculturalism to make visible all these different places. But on the other hand, it closes you in a box and you can't get out of that box. Somebody like Ângela Ferreira, who has a rich history biologically but complicates that with her interest in modernism—

because all her work is a kind of revision of modernists, whether painters, architects, and so on—poses a wonderful challenge. She said, “They have approached me to represent Portugal at the Venice Biennale. Would you want to work with me?” Because she too believes in opening that box; but at the same time she’s worried, and she’s very careful. So I said, “Let’s do it.” We met in Paris and talked about the project and decided to go to Africa.

It was really then that I went to research Prouvé’s work on the Maison Tropicale, and to study the catalogue of his work. But it was only after we went to Niger that I became really immersed in the project; and by then I didn’t know how to pull out.

When we got to Niamey, after reading everything, we went looking for where the house had been. We started asking people in Niamey, people who had lived in Niamey all their lives, and they didn’t know where the house was. Finally we saw a guy who said, “Oh yeah, I saw it on television, TV5.” These are people who lived in Niamey and who are the intellectuals of Niamey—it was the French cultural center that told us to go and see them. Niamey is a city of maybe 800,000 people; it’s not that big. And the neighborhoods are such that you should have heard about a house that was all in

Ferreira. Maison Tropicale (Niamey) #2. *2007.*

aluminum, even though there were other houses in aluminum, two of them belonging to Air France.

Judith Rodenbeck: These aluminum houses were designed by different people?

Diawara: Well, to the people in Niamey, they were all designed by the same person. But research showed that this was the only Prouvé prototype in Niamey. Those other houses have also been dismantled and taken out of Niger. But we were only interested in Prouvé.

Rodenbeck: You had to locate the site by using plans dating from the 1940s to identify it topographically.

Diawara: Niamey was so scary. We went to the place and there was a wall around it and you go in, but the house is not there. Instead you have this empty terrace where the building once stood; it looked like a ghost. Tuareg women have built tents around the perimeter—like Charlotte Perriand's tent in the desert. So it was a terrace, elevated, and around it you have the Tuareg tents in what was the yard; they were squatting there.

Rodenbeck: The idea of *maisons démontables* departs from one line of thinking in

Western architectural theory which understands architecture, Western architecture, to be based on the funerary monument, drawing on things that were made to be solid and lasting and eternal as models. According to this alternative focus residential architecture is based on the tent—and associated, via the link with weaving and textiles, with the feminine. So there's a split between the permanent, eternal and ideal, the monumental, and the fungible, the reweavable, the *démontable*, which has always been secondary. The Tuareg are essentially nomadic, and live there only part of the year.

Diawara: Yes. And the symbolism of that—because I didn't know how to read it—on the one hand, here is this space, why don't they build something on top of that? On the other hand, this nomadic house has left and the real nomads have occupied the space. I was seeing Africa; it was so symbolic of Africa to me. I became jealous of Ângela at that moment. I said, "How come Ângela found out about this, why didn't I?" We outsiders are going to Africa all the time but we're kind of blind. This whole insider/outsider dynamic, and Jean Rouch's notion of reverse anthropology, became very important right away.

Rodenbeck: Rouch, who invented the term *cinema verité*, went to Niger when he was twenty-four, nominally as a civil engineer. But he had studied with Marcel Griaule, and it was in Niger on this trip that he really began his ethnographic work, though he didn't complete his first film until about 1946, just three years before Prouvé's prototypes were sent to Africa. He died in a car accident in Niger in 2004 and is actually buried in Niamey.

Diawara: Yes. So for me, this trip was a way of retracing Jean Rouch's places; but it was also like Jean Rouch and Prouvé meeting in Niamey. It was quite exciting. At that point I really began to challenge many of the foundations of my own work.

Rodenbeck: How so?

Diawara: In many ways, there are things I'm interested in that Africans are not interested in; nobody knew where this house was. But on the other hand there is all this Africa hidden that I just can't see, this whole phantomatic Africa, as Michel Leiris would say. One really has to readjust one's preoccupations, one's research, one's way of seeing things. For a long, long time, I have been trying to be part of the discourse in the West. You want to be known, you want to write in the magazines that are important. You want to be in the groups that are "in," and so on. But every time you do that, you're forgetting Africa. The more you discover about here, the more you forget about Africa. I'm supposed to be this African intellectual based in New York and Paris, and I'm becoming blinded to Africa. The Maison Prouvé really revealed that to me.

Rodenbeck: In terms of filmic practice, this dislocation of your own representative status comes through very clearly in *Maison Tropicale*. The word "diaspora" is

so exhausted and inadequate; we are all far more enmeshed than it allows. Diaspora seems too much shaped like a fan with a singular pivot point; the complexity of those nominal originary points is always drastically simplified. This is especially evident in your film linguistically: Ângela speaking multiple languages and often translating for you, the relationship that you have with her where you're in a sense speaking through her, other places where you're translating for her, and still others where you both are decentered by languages you don't understand.

Diawara: At first it was a challenge for me to meet another artist on the grounds of being artists. Both Ângela and I are trying to remove roadblocks that we think are not good for art. But both she and I also benefit from being African artists. I was shown in things as an African artist; she was shown in things as an African artist and as a woman. But both of us also see the limitations of these nominal benefits. We began to know each other and began to know the kind of things we have in common in terms of being homeless, in a way—in terms of our connection to Africa—this diaspora, as you said. But also really in terms of our desire to be part of that African community which has been removed from us and that we know we'll never get and to which we can never return. We have that in common and it brought us closer. Recognizing this, we went from professional self-interest to really building complicity, becoming very good friends and even planning things together. Because when we first met, she's meeting me as this guy who's in America, so I come with a kind of privilege, but at the same time it's Bush's America, you know—multiculturalism, identity politics, and conservatism. And I saw her as a white woman, European, with certain privileges. We had these prejudices; we used these prejudices to respect each other for a long time. Until the walls began to break, to fall down, and we realized we were actually very close, and that was quite exciting.

The same thing happened to me with Jean Rouch—and I'm still paying for it. I really loved Jean Rouch. But many groups that I hang out with could not understand and still cannot understand, how it is that an artist and an intellectual, a filmmaker like myself, would like Jean Rouch, who represents colonialism, exploitation, and all these things. African artists and filmmakers only have one discourse towards Jean Rouch: he came, he treated us like insects; he was an anthropologist; he had power, we didn't have power.

Rodenbeck: He was a white French colonial anthropologist.

Diawara: Exactly. And then in France, Rouch also occupied a position of power because of his associations with the Musée de l'homme and the Cinémathèque Française. He even was at some point president at Cannes. So the French were tired of him and they said—and this is especially true of the

Jean Rouch. Moi, un noir. *1958.*

Left—"It's time finally that an African from the Left will come and tell him what a racist and imperialist he was." In the U.S., the attitude towards him was even more Left-bound, especially that of the anthropologists; film studies didn't care one way or another. They just said, "Oh, he's lying."

Rodenbeck: Yet that rigorous practice of what he called "ethno-fiction" is his great gift, I think—both to anthropology and to filmmaking.

Diawara: I was caught between those three audiences for *Rouch in Reverse*, and they were all dissatisfied. The Africans hated it, the Europeans didn't like it, and the Americans didn't like it. So it is a reference film, but all these three groups have serious problems with the film. The problem is based on ideology . . . .

Rodenbeck: . . . and an identitarian predication of who you are and who Rouch is and what Rouch's project was.

Diawara: That's right. And we're not supposed to talk. When I started working with Ângela I was already fifty years old, I was freer. Many of the master thinkers were dead. It was easier to get closer to Ângela, to say, "I don't care about what other people think." I had tried to do this working with Silvia Kolbowski, too. ["Homeboy Cosmopolitan," *October* 83 (Winter 1998), pp. 51–70.] But I think I was freest with Ângela because by then I just realized I have to be me, I have to do what I want to do, and Ângela has something serious to offer. She's intellectually very challenging, and that's what I wanted.

But I suffered for a long time from the Rouch experience, because I didn't want to apologize to anybody for liking Rouch but I wanted to be clear that I also have the right to be critical of Rouch. Also, I was dealing with things that people didn't think were relevant, that is, the whole idea of

anthropologie à rebours, reverse anthropology, where Africans come to France and do the anthropology of French people. Rouch and Marcel Griaule started that, and nobody took them seriously.

Rodenbeck: So where do you go if reverse anthropology, performed through film by you as a New York-based African intellectual, is your project?

Diawara: Well, that's the point, because the African filmmakers, first of all, have only made African films. And it's even better if you just make it on your tribe. You make it on your tribe and you come and people look at it, and they begin to explain the way your tribe works. So the audience is already defined ahead of time. The aesthetics are defined ahead of time. And the African filmmaker becomes a kind of multicultural filmmaker: "Here is the African point of view," "here is the woman's point of view," "here is the gay point of view."

The French people—who were the biggest producers of African films; ninety percent of the films were produced by France—in that sense were actually achieving multiculturalism and diversity through world cinema rather than with French culture itself. The French people deployed the greatest effort in producing some of the best Brazilian films, Iranian films, films from Eastern Europe, films from Africa, and they put these films in the Cannes Film Festival whether they were good or not, and they really forced Cannes to open to these films. But if you look at culture in France itself, for the French of Arab, African, and Caribbean origin, there is no effort at all to look at their identity, their citizenship. The French just tell them, "You are French *tout court*, you're not black French." Which you and I will understand has its positive points, particularly for refugees and in terms of the notions of *liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité*. But it gets challenging when you know that these people are invisible and voiceless in France.

So when I made the Rouch film, I wanted the camera turned to those invisible and voiceless people, to see them. And that was not interesting to anybody. People were just saying, "What is he talking about? He's been in America too long. We don't care about this racism; this is an American discourse." In terms of the reception of the film, that, too, was disappointing. It was only after Paris burned, after 2005, that people in Paris began to look at my film with new eyes.

Rodenbeck: So there was an historical displacement of that project, which was completed in 1995, just as there has been with Rouch's project.

Diawara: Rouch honestly believed in one thing I believe in—and I don't know if you believe in this—that the inside eye is not enough for really defining something. You have to have the inside and outside. So the anthropologist is important and the native voice is also important. Then, as an anthropologist and filmmaker, you reach the level where you want to make your subjects individuals.

Rodenbeck: In Rouch's working method, he's no longer dealing with informants or . . . .

Diawara: . . . hierarchies . . . .

Rodenbeck: He's got collaborators.

Diawara: Yeah, he had collaborators, they had a laboratory, and they would say, "Okay, it's time for somebody from Africa or New Guinea to look at French people." But we're still not doing that! You know, the biggest problem with America is that we think we know everything. The biggest problem with France is that it has all these great theories about equality, but it doesn't pay attention to what other people think about France. So Rouch's project of reverse anthropology was abandoned and it was not picked up in any other country that I can think of.

Rodenbeck: I think most people only know Rouch, if they know his work at all, through *Les Maîtres fous* (1955), which is a fascinating, difficult, and obviously for some even scandalous film.

Diawara: I was just curating a series in Berlin and *Les Maîtres fous* was one of the films I showed. Berlin was difficult. They said some great things about it, but they have a historical burden they need to negotiate. Some things can be presented in Africa, in other parts of Europe and the U.S., but when you bring them to Berlin, then you suddenly remind them of their past.

For example, I was discussing Léopold Sédar Senghor, and talking about his relation to identification. In the West we isolate objects in Renaissance perspective; so you isolate the object, and even if you take into account the different perspectives from which you can see the object, the end result will objectify the object, will identify it. Senghor proposed that the eye is not the most important part of looking, but rather the relationship between you and what you're looking at. He uses the French word "*connaître*," which is "to know" but also, if you put a dash between "*co*" and "*naître"* it's "being born with." So to look at somebody, to identify with somebody, is to become the other, to be born in that person, to change places with that person, and to exchange energy with that person. And because we can do that, this exchange can happen not only with the eyes but also with emotions, with smell and with taste.

Rodenbeck: A very intense phenomenological entwining.

Diawara: Yes, exactly. In the process of developing his theory he began to call this "the African way." So I'm explaining this in Berlin and the Germans were getting very nervous and they said, "Well, you know, wasn't Senghor's theory very related to Goethe and Leo Frobenius, and isn't that what brought us racial purity?"

Rodenbeck: Yet that is itself an idealist reduction of a theory that is emphatically articulated by history and geopolitics. I'm a pragmatist. I think it's perfectly reasonable to take what's useful in a theory providing you understand and acknowledge the parts that are problematic. If something is theoretically

Manthia Diawara. Maison Tropicale. *2008. Video still courtesy of Maumaus, Lisbon.*

productive and forward looking—and maybe it's only productive now, not in the future, not in the past—then why not use it. Senghor's *négritude*, for example, was an extremely useful proposition.

Diawara: *Négritude* was very useful at that time.

Rodenbeck: Try that in Germany today!

Diawara: Yeah! They were very politically correct toward *Les Maîtres fous*—or maybe they just didn't understand it. Because Jean Rouch said "*les gens dans les maîtres sont fous*"; his film is not about African madness, it's about the madness of colonialism and the African attempt to exorcise that, which to me engages in that Senghorian conception of knowledge. But in Berlin they took it very differently. They said, "No, no, this is really an example of how the West showed that Africa is savage, Africa is cannibalistic."

Rodenbeck: The worst thing you can do in film is kill the puppy—isn't that the Hollywood prohibition? And in Rouch's film they did that. I find it a deeply, darkly funny film—perhaps that's the Surrealist influence, or some perversity of my own training—but it's not tame: it's a wild film. It always makes people uncomfortable, but this is or can be a very productive discomfort. In that respect, *Les Maîtres fous* is very different from his other, perhaps more obviously collaborative films, like *Jaguar* (1967).

Diawara: Yes, *Jaguar* or *Moi, un noir* (1958), which flesh out what was Rouch's preoccupation, his notion of change wrought by people going to the city and returning to the village. And these projects occupy important places in visual anthropology: how to make films on people like that. Many of the tools of cinema were perfected in making those films. But I would bet that at least technically *Les Maîtres fous* was the same in that Rouch didn't have good sound equipment so he went and wrote a poem more or less to provide the soundtrack.

Rodenbeck: During the course of your film you speak with a number of different interlocutors in Portugal, Italy, Niger, the Congo, and the U.S. But while the film is tracing the story of these *maisons démontables* and of Ângela's project

Ferreira. Maison Tropicale (Brazzaville) #1. *2007.*

for the Venice Biennale, the woman you encounter in Brazzaville, Mireille Ngatsé, is really the core of the film. She had gone to Paris for her education but had come back to Brazzaville when her father, who lived in the Prouvé house, fell ill; after he died she stayed on, living there without electricity throughout the civil war.

Diawara: I didn't like her at all! Ângela was concerned because she drew me into this project but she didn't want me just to do things on her; rather she wanted me to do something that would complement her project. So when she felt that I was not too happy about Mireille she basically said, "Whatever you want to do, it's your film." But Mireille was so powerful. Mireille initially didn't want to meet with us. She said, "Well, are you going to pay me? I don't want to waste my time. What are you going to pay me?" So I had that kind of resentment at first. And then when I talked to her I realized . . . . Well, of course, she's a slum landlord, but she really rebuilt that place.

Rodenbeck: Yes, exactly. She has really built this neighborhood out of a place that was a jungle. Using the proceeds from the sale of the Prouvé buildings and

Ferreira. Maison Tropicale (Niamey) #1. *2007.*

the spaces they left she has constructed an apartment block; she is a shop owner; her *petit coin* has a rather lively local life. Whereas the *maisons démontables*, architecturally speaking, were designed as pavilions, freestanding buildings on an open plot, so they never actually produced whole neighborhoods. And she has done that.

Diawara: Right. The Prouvé house in Niger was on a platform and when it was originally erected, it was facing the river and there was nothing between the house but trees and the river.

Rodenbeck: Beautiful, a version of the modernist Corbusian suburban ideal.

Diawara: It was really nice. But now there is a wall around the space, which makes it look like a tomb, like a grave. Because it's in an enclosure, that idea of pavilions floating in free space and defining their environment . . . well, now the environment has been sectioned off and claimed and there are many houses between the Maison Tropicale and the Niger River.

It's an amazing place. Ângela had read a lot about it, more than the rest of us, so she was completely able to get into it; I was feeling dread and

resentment. And then the silence of the nomads around the place. And to know that something was there that I had not seen—because I only had seen the house in pictures; I had not seen the Queensboro house yet. I said to myself, Oh my God. It's like—well, this is a cliché but I think it's important—it's like going to Berlin and seeing the Holocaust there, in the architecture. That's how I felt, really. I said, "Oh, my God."

Rodenbeck: The space of the that-has-been. In that scene, when you come upon Prouvé's platform, Ângela squats down and puts her fingers into the empty post-holes; it's a shockingly tactile moment. It's like seeing not just with the eyes, but with an entire corporeal repertoire—that phenomenological imbrication.

Diawara: Exactly.

Rodenbeck: What's the relation between the Tuareg population in Niger and the local people? That presents a very complicated dynamic. The nomadic Tuareg call themselves "the free people" and have been agitating with various governments for autonomy. At the same time, the infamous "yellowcake" uranium Saddam Hussein was alleged to have tried to purchase from Niger is mined in Tuareg territory, and they are still in conflict with the government over control of these very profitable lands.

Diawara: The Tuaregs are in Mali and Niger, but also all over the Sudan—the Tuaregs are the Janjaweed, you know.

Rodenbeck: The woman in Niamey is speaking Arabic.

Diawara: Yes, they use a lot of Arabic there. They have been minorities inhabiting the desert of Mali, Niger, Chad, but they're closer to Arabic towards Sudan and Libya. Recently, Qaddafi tried to unite all of them as one country, and they have created rebellions against Mali, against Niger, and against Chad. In the Chad area, it's really the Janjaweed. It's different politically. But in our area—and our area would be Mali and Niger and a little bit south of Algeria . . . .

Rodenbeck: . . . Libya . . . .

Diawara: . . . they constitute a minority that the nation-state has either abused or refused to develop. They don't have schools; they don't have anything. In this region people are very dependent on rain and if the rains don't come to the arable lands, there is even less rain in the desert. So these people have famine and they come to the city. There is terrorism of the Berbers, but the majority are not terrorists at all, and they all suffer; they come as beggars, as squatters. They come to the big cities where everybody is very dark—you know, black people—and they're light-skinned. And people consider them dirty, they consider them—you know, whatever prejudice is. They have different kinds of occupations. Some of them are jewelers, some of them are domestics; in this particular case, the woman and her husband had been housekeepers for the different Europeans who had lived there. Then when the Prouvé house was removed, they just became squatters.

Rodenbeck: They squat in tents around the platform that was left behind; but they have also left that platform empty.

Diawara: Yes, and they just go on top of it sometimes to pray, which makes it a cemetery. In fact, in one of the scenes the woman is finished praying and the animals come on top of it also. This is like the use of the cemetery in Africa as a space where you go pray but understanding it also as part of nature and the environment.

Rodenbeck: Her unwillingness to speak at any length is also remarkable, especially in contrast to your friend in Brazzaville. And the relation between capital and nomadism, the racial tensions, the linguistic breakdown—because this conversation with the Tuareg woman is the moment when neither you nor Ângela can speak the language—that's very interesting.

Diawara: That's why I almost break a cinematic rule, because at some point I had her speak to the lens and had the translator translate to the lens and had Ângela ask the questions. People said, "Well, cut this, just summarize her." But I knew that she was so powerful that even if people can't speak her language, it is important to hear her articulate it. Especially because she was commenting on language—some of the things you don't get in the translation—she's saying, "Look, this is not my house. And I don't speak the language." French is the language. "I don't speak the language. And if you don't speak the language, you have no power." That's what she is saying. She said, "I was sad, and I just decided to go away. And then come back after they removed the house." But if you don't have language . . . . So she was doing a serious critique, and people don't expect that to come from a person like that.

Rodenbeck: The language of power for her is also French but it's Africanized French, which she doesn't have access to.

Diawara: Yes. We didn't put this in the film, but her daughter and her daughter's daughter—the daughter was maybe thirty-four, and she had a little girl of maybe five who was running after us asking us for candies, bonbons, "Monsieur, Monsieur, bonbons!" The thirty-four-year-old woman lives in Abidjan, which is a much bigger city, and just came to visit; she spoke French, so she was kind of intermediary. When we were doing the film, I just wanted the Tuareg woman to speak for herself. But her daughter speaks French. And her situation was interesting, too, because you really don't know what she is doing in Abidjan; she had a cell telephone, she's sophisticated, she speaks the language of power.

Rodenbeck: She is technologized, in contrast to her nomadic, goatherding parents. That double figuration repeats the *dispositif* of the Maison Tropicale itself, with its awkward colonial fantasy of industrial development, its two loca-

Diawara. Maison Tropicale. *2008. Video still courtesy of Maumaus, Lisbon.*

tions, and so on. And this doubled slippage is a strong motif in your film, because you aren't really the protagonist of your film at all, and it's not clear if the house is, or if Ângela is, or if the Tuareg woman or Mireille Ngatsé is. There is a discursive gap in the film where that coalescing figure of the protagonist nominally would be, and it becomes very interesting instead to confront all of these intertwined narratives, metaphors, languages, and characters, from Rouch and Prouvé, to you and Ângela, to Ângela and the Tuareg woman, and you and Mireille, and so on.

Diawara: Well, Mireille Ngatsé is the antithesis of myself in a way. She's an intellectual too, very articulate, speaks very good French. But she had decided that Africa is not…she's not sentimental about Africa at all. She wanted to develop that place, make money and make more money. But she's also very religious and very spiritual, a fundamentalist, born-again Pentecostal and charismatic. They see everything; God shows everything to them first, before it happens. Everything that happens to her she sees in a dream first. She saw a white man in her dream with a suitcase full of money, and a week later a white man showed up with that. She saw the war coming. I said, "Did you see me coming too?" As a rational New Yorker I didn't know whether I should take that as scamming. I was not able to make the Senghorian move of identification, meeting her where she is; instead I just dismissed her and said, "No, I can't take this." So there was that. Then she has transformed this place as the slum landlord. More fundamentally, her nephew, who is manager of the place, was afraid to introduce us to her. Everybody fears her. He said, "Look, I don't want to lose my job because you guys just come one day and give me some money. I don't want to introduce Mireille, because I know her character and I don't know what will happen after you come." People were afraid of her. It was only when we were ready to leave that she finally

decided to show up. I was really upset. I had seen the space and then she started telling me about all this religion . . . So in the film, I finally redeemed myself by bringing the film to the narrative, to her level, as opposed to having a meta-narrative over her. I just said, "Look, let's create this space for narrative." But that's really the antithesis of myself. She had upset me. She was just the opposite of the Africans who are not rational, who are not realistic, and who therefore enable everybody to come and colonize us. But by editing her the way I did, I was basically saying, "She's no more guilty than I am. We're all in this, and our voices—there is no hierarchy. Mine is not superior to hers." I had fallen in love with the Tuareg woman right away, and with her family, and so on—it was paternalist on my part. But I see this woman who threatens me and I say, "Oh no, this is not good!" So in a way it was a lesson in filmmaking: to leave the proper space. People may even think I like her when they see the film. But no—she drove me crazy.

Rodenbeck: That's wonderful. Because she's very dominant, it's clear. Very dominant.

Diawara: Oh, yeah. I was feeling that if I want this film to be better, this woman has to have her story and it doesn't have to be my kind of story.

Rodenbeck: Because she's the one who actually really presses you to make an argument for bringing this building back and repatriating the Maison Tropicale to Brazzaville as part of Congolese heritage—and she is not very invested in the idea. Of course you do pique her interest when she learns how much her house sold for at Christie's!

The Niamey site is tremendously sad and mournful in a way the Brazzaville site, because this woman has filled it so much with herself, is not.

Diawara: Ângela already had conceived the sculptural elements of the Venice installation by looking at the Prouvé catalogue, but I said, "If I'm going to write about it, we have to go to Africa." So we went to Niger, and we were so moved. Then Ângela asked the Portuguese Minister of Culture to give us money to go to Brazzaville. After Niamey we felt we had to go to Brazzaville, but it was anticlimactic; it was so different. And that, too, said different things, not only about the two spaces—one place is empty, ghost-like, and you can feel it; the other Maison has also disappeared and is also a ghost but they built something else in its place. It's like modern industrialization, it's like Rod Stewart says (in "Love Lives Here"), you don't know what was here before but a shopping center is here now. Suddenly we were in a different universe. Brazzaville is where Conrad had gone in the Congo. It's that river, you see, the river between the two Congos, Kinshasa [the Democratic Republic of Congo, ex-Zaire] and Brazzaville [the Republic of Congo]. And the Prouvé site is the heart of that and has been transformed into these sub-

urban slums on both sides of the river. We had to develop a different relationship to our project in Brazzaville. Niamey was very poetic. It was very silent. It was very scary. It was odd. But in Brazzaville what we found was Afro-pessimism.

Rodenbeck: This is addressed very directly by Mireille, but also by the young poet, the musician that you talk to on the street.

Diawara: Oh, yeah, all those guys. I'll tell you, I didn't like Congo. In Niamey I didn't like the ignorance: why didn't they know where they were? But in Congo, people just wanted money. "Give me money." Whatever you want, "If you want to take my picture, give me money." And they were all in denial. The president of La Cour Constitutionelle, who is the number four person in Congo after the president and the prime minister, is thanked in the Jean Prouvé catalogue, and we were doing our usual rational Western methodology of research, which suggests that you go see those people first. So we went to see him and he entered into complete denial. "I don't know. When I was young, I saw this house. But I don't know how the house left." Whereas they thank him in the catalogue! So we were listening to him, both Ângela and I, we were really shocked. We had already been to Niger and we wanted to know what this man knew, and we had thought we could use Brazzaville to really reveal all the hypocrisy of the people who took the house. Then we got there and only the woman was fairly honest; everybody else was so dishonest. Then of course the young Afro-pessimist poet, you know, who doesn't know actual history but who is historically authentic on the level of existential reaction.

Rodenbeck: The site in Niamey is funereal, but it also makes me think of Ousmane Sembène and how he structures scenes, his *mise-en-scène*.

Diawara: The space speaks.

Rodenbeck: The space speaks, and Sembène's camera is relatively static. There's an interest in deep space, shallow space, and a rather hieratic arrangement of speakers who articulate positions or declaim with an almost Brechtian distance.

Diawara: In constructing that scene, more than Sembène I was thinking a lot of African cinema and all those contemporaries, like Djibril Diop Mambéty, who believe in the poetry of the space, the space as a character in African cinema, the openness of it. Usually that's not my kind of cinema; usually I try to let the story define the pace—which is kind of American PBS documentary, boom-boom-boom-boom. Even Rouch told me that in *Rouch in Reverse*, he said, "Look, I love this film but I would have just left the camera and not played with it." But you can't say that I did that at all in the Niamey scene.

Ousmane Sembène. Moolaadé. *2004.*

The Niamey scene was so compelling that you had to let it speak, more so than any other place. It wouldn't have worked the same way in Brazzaville. But in Niamey, with that empty terrace, just a bird coming every once in awhile, with those Tuareg women, with that light—you know, it's so hot there—we were there in May and you can't go out between 2:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m., it's too hot, too hot, hotter than anything you've seen in India or anywhere else—it's really hot. The camera can't take the sun; well, you can't take it yourself. So definitely, space in that scene was important. And the long takes.

Rodenbeck: The slow accumulation of sensibility.

Diawara: Because honestly in the past I haven't done much of that. I knew it and I had ambivalence toward it, but when you get in that situation, then you can't help it.

Rodenbeck: This Berber woman also speaks in a way that is quite like some of the characters in *Moolaadé* (2004), Sembène's last major film. Sembène's consistently interested in very strong women, and often they have a rather prophetic, distanced way of speaking.

Diawara: He was the first African artist who understood that we need to show an

Djibril Diop Mambéty. Hyenas. *1992.*

African example of democracy and development, but if we are going to do it we have to look at the most oppressed people. And women are the most oppressed people in Africa, so until Africa changes that, there is no change happening. Sembène was one of the first artists to have really understood that and to make that a major statement in every book, in every film. I don't think he was attempting to be a feminist. I think he just understood that "you guys are in trouble, and this is what you need to change." See, if you look at that whole Senghorian approach and apply it to Mambéty, suddenly you see his films in a completely different light.

Rodenbeck: I've just seen Mambéty's *Hyenas* (1992). It's a powerful, riveting film, but also in this context interesting inasmuch as he takes Friedrich Dürrenmatt's play *The Visit* and transposes it beautifully.

Diawara: Yes, that's exactly what we were talking about, you know, the African going out and looking at this whole reverse anthropology. But that film's a very interesting example, of course. Because he's not enslaved to the play at all—you see a completely new story. That's incredible. Then, of course, it's a very good film.

Rodenbeck: Strong and difficult. Difficult.

Diawara: I like it. And when that woman, Linguere Ramatou, comes to the town, Colobane, and says, "Well, you have to kill Dramaan Drameh and I will be like the World Bank—I'll give you anything you want," the reaction of the townspeople is . . . parody is not what I have in mind, but it's the kind of instantaneous reaction of Africans who think that they're more human being than the Westerners: they say, "Oh, well, we don't do that in Africa! Kill our own people? No! For money? Take your money, we don't need your money." Then the woman just sits down and waits.

Rodenbeck: She waits them out.

Diawara: You know, I said: now, this is a new discourse here. That was brilliant. And it happens slowly, she doesn't get into the criticism of anybody, but look! They literally ate the guy! He disappeared!

Rodenbeck: Ate the guy! And with her money comes the terrible accumulation of goods and commodities that displace Dramaan Drameh—who is only a *petit commerçant* at the outset anyway.

Diawara: Djibril was open, he was very creative on the spot, he was going with it. It was not an attempt to say, "I want to do this the African way." No, he was mixing all kinds of ways. And I think that hybrid notion where he received ideas from everybody is what contributes to his originality—I usually call it the copy of the copy, and it's the most original really.

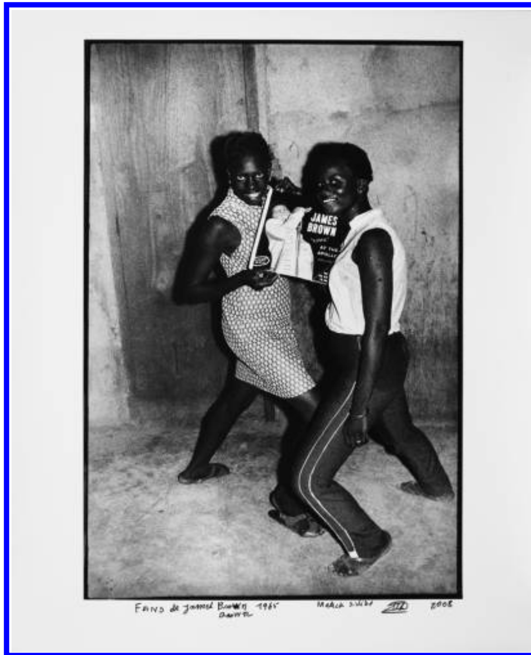
Rodenbeck: The copy of the copy is the most original.

Diawara: Yeah.

Rodenbeck: The language of cinema is about copying and appropriation.

Diawara: That's right. I came up with this in thinking about Malik Sidibé's photography. Malik Sidibé in a way became a photographer through this process, taking pictures of the youth that picks up album covers and reads *Life Magazine* and French newspapers and a magazine called *Salut les Copains*, looking at how people dress. These young people went and bought cloth, and went to the tailor and said, "I want my shirt to look exactly like this. I want my jacket to look exactly like this," and the tailor did that. And then they'd go to parties and they'd start dancing and they'd say to Malik Sidibé, "I want you to take my photograph just like Jimi Hendrix," or like so-and-so, The Beatles on *Abbey Road*. Then he shoots them like that. So he was copying the copy, and by copying the copy, he was actually copying Avedon, Andy Warhol, all these people who could take photographs. So it was the copy of the copy but it was very African. So I said to people, "Why are you so afraid of copying? Why do you want to be always so authentic?" Malik Sidibé won the Lion d'Or in Venice, the Hasselblad, and then the ICA in New York. So come on.

The French philosopher, the Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant, has this notion that "*Je peux changer en m'échangeant avec l'autre sans me détruire ni*



Malik Sidibé. Fans de James Brown. *1965/2008. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.*

me dénaturer": I can change by exchanging with the other without destroying or alienating myself. That's basically what Malik is doing, and that's basically what the youth in Bamako were doing by exchanging these album covers with the West. They were creating new identities but they were not destroying themselves. Sembène would say, "But that's neo-colonialism, that's alienation!" And Fanon would say the same thing. That's really why post-colonialism is a very hard discussion in the Francophone worlds: because we know the whole discourse of alienation and of neo-colonialism, but when you come to "*je peux changer en m'échangeant avec l'autre*," then that's a form of active assimilation, as Senghor would say. You take some that you can use but you interact with the rest, as opposed to an assimilation where you are simply like a sponge.

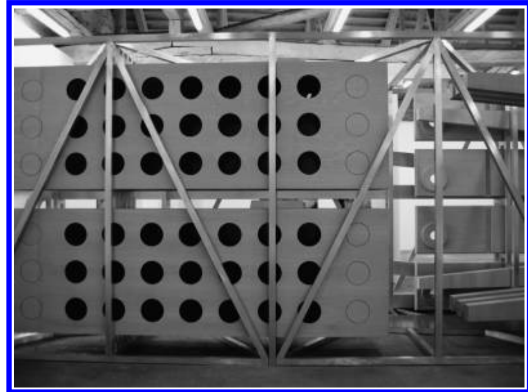
Rodenbeck: Agency is crucial.

Diawara: Exactly. We have to free ourselves from Francophonie, but it's not entirely in the interests of the artists.

Rodenbeck: Because Francophonie provides at least a common language.

Diawara: A common language, a common support. People would never be authors in their own country or in the Anglophone country. Francophonie created that space for them.

Rodenbeck: And a certain infrastructure for better or worse.



Ferreira. Maison Tropicale. *2007. Partial view of the installation, Portuguese Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale. Photograph by Mário Valente.*

Diawara: Infrastructure, yes. It's an interesting moment because I think people are finally beginning to understand thinkers like Édouard Glissant and his notion of *poétique de la relation*, which was born out of his notion of *créolité* and Antillean discourse. Glissant would say, "I don't believe any more in hierarchies"—who came first, who came last, who was enslaved, who was the master, all these things—"it's the relation that takes place between us today that can change me; but it won't destroy me."

Rodenbeck: What kind of reception does Glissant have in Francophone Africa?

Diawara: Here is the main problem. He was against Césaire, and because of that people don't like him. He explained to me, he said, "Here is the problem. *Négritude* was *incontournable*. It was necessary discourse. But *négritude* ended up creating a situation in the Caribbean whereby Caribbeans thought that only Africa was authentic." To the point that one year he was in Martinique and his mother has a neighbor, so he brought an African mask as a present to this neighbor. The neighbor looked at the mask and said, "*Eux, ils sont incréé, ils sont raciné, ils son vraiment authentique*." They are not like us. We know what that is. At that point Glissant said, "I felt that I have to have a theory that will let these people know that it was absolutely okay to be Caribbean." *Le discours antillais* (1981) came out of that preoccupation to give a counter-discourse to *négritude*, because *négritude* was too tilted toward only African personality, toward African this, African that. Césaire at some point said of the *créolité* people, "Well, the only problem is that they don't like Africa." So many of the people who follow Césaire—and that's the majority of Africans and Caribbeans—are suspicious of Glissant. They think that his whole project is an anti-*négritude* project. But his project was rather different. On the one hand he was against binary opposition, polarization; on the other hand, he actually believed that people who were uprooted were

Prouvé. Maison Tropicale. 1951. Interior view, as installed on the waterfront in Queens, NY, May 2007. Photograph by Chris Hondros/Getty Images.

more up for democratic changes than people who were anchored in their roots and their history and didn't want to move. So he believed that Caribbeans, African Americans could lead us to a democratic moment of equality. They were ready to make that move; and he really believed that in the encounters in the Caribbean between black, white, Indian, that move was ready.

Rodenbeck: Paul Gilroy's work on the black Atlantic opened up a very productive way of studying the transmigration of culture. Now there are younger scholars of African art who are looking at the routes between Goa, Madascar, and continental Africa, for example, and looking at the maritime connections and cultural fluidity rather than the landmass.

Diawara: Yes, which is Édouard Glissant, by the way.

Rodenbeck: I was in Venice for the Biennale in 2007 and at the Portuguese Pavillion the day you were filming. I only realized this when I saw the film and recognized the clip of Ângela Ferreira speaking to you while walking through the installation as something I had witnessed live, but perpendicular to your lens. One of the really poetic, if accidental, aspects of this installation in its

Portuguese Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2007.

small Venetian palazzo was that as hard as it was to find, there it was, right on the Grand Canal—like the Prouvé prototypes. And all those buildings on the canal are . . . .

Diawara: . . . like ships . . . .

Rodenbeck: . . . like ships, yes. Venice is a tiny city but it was also a vast, fluid empire. And all those buildings on the canal have little filigreed portholes, so visually, optically, and functionally like the pierced aluminum cladding and blue glass windows of the *maisons démontables*.

Diawara: Yes, they are floating. Unstable, not permanent, not rooted.