

Cooperative Images

Raphaël Grisey in conversation with Pascal Beausse, Berlin, 30 April 2009

Pascal Beausse: The exhibition *Cooperative* has come about through your relationship with Bouba Touré. For this project, you've based your work on this man's life: his itinerary as a migrant to France, his return to Mali, and his decision to become involved with reality by founding an agricultural cooperative and an irrigation system, helping them to rediscover self-sufficiency in food.

Raphaël Grisey: I met Bouba Touré when I was still a child. He's a friend of my mother. He came to our house several times, after his annual visit to Mali, with loads of slides which he showed us. I saw my first pictures of Africa through his lens. I already had that depiction of Africa through the way he saw it and that particular way of presenting things in the form of slide shows with a commentary. He was already talking about that cooperative experience. He also told us about the problem of illegal immigrants, which he had been involved in for a long time.

It's possibly trivial but it was he who gave me my first camera, a Nikon FM2. I was sixteen.

Over the years I've seen part of his picture collection, without really grasping all the ins and outs, and the reasons why he worked, and the way his pictures were produced. Later on, when I was a student at the School of Fine Arts, I became aware of the size of his archive, and Bouba's place in West African immigrant circles in Paris.

So I wanted to invite him to a seminar so that he could show his work. But it didn't work out, perhaps because I was still having trouble formulating my reasons for inviting him into the art scene. And he had trouble answering me, incidentally.

More recently, three years ago, I wanted to make a portrait of Bouba Touré as an image maker. It was almost like an offbeat self-portrait, through him. And during that first project, he took his leading role very much to heart. He's been the projectionist at the L'Entrepôt cinema. So he's got a relationship with film. In no time, as we filmed, a complicity spring up between us. As I spent time at his house, talking about things, he gradually brought out his albums, his negatives and slides. So I was able to gauge the real dimension of his archive.

Then I made my first trip to Mali, to the cooperative he founded in 1976 with fourteen other people.

PB: So you went off to Africa on the basis of a kind of prior knowledge, by way of Bouba Touré's photographs, which were like a reference bank. The pictures you were going to make had an origin in other images, which lay at the root of the project, and the need for it.

RG: At the outset, in fact, I really questioned the need to make pictures over there or not. If I did, I wanted them to be in tune with Bouba Touré's. In his photographs you could find a certain number of recurrent things, all loaded with meaning in the cooperative's history. The water pump, for example, that collective object if ever there was, shared by one and all. I was obsessed with filming that pump and recording the sound it made. Things like that drew me over there. Once on the spot, I realized that that history had been shared by fourteen people, that the women arrived later, and so on. It's a complex history, told in the same way by the men, who are very concerned about how their experience is portrayed, especially orally, very alike from one to the next. I was struck by that to begin with: it was proof that they were all very conscious of the significance of that experience for the region, and for immigrant circles. Their political commitment helped them to formulate a shared narrative...

During that first stay I did in the end produce lots of pictures, with a certain remove. I wondered about my position in that place, where there was already a powerful representation. I worked with another image maker and with the people who founded the cooperative, who already had a pretty clear idea about what should and should not be said about its history.

PB: An initial desire to make pictures based on a remote narrative was replaced by the discovery of a tangible reality... Your project became a description and analysis of a given human situation, grouping a community around a collective project.

RG: I didn't choose to make a linear narrative of the cooperative experience. I didn't take up a historian's stance, precisely because I was working with people who could do that better than I could. What interested me was differing intensities in the way people spoke, for example. The way things are stated is important, but so are silences, the things that aren't said...

PB: You open the film with a narrative that has to do with territorial privacy, a nighttime moment—we don't see the person speaking, who you're in cahoots with. And this puts us, viewers, in a state where our ears are peeled, by making us directly part of this kind of relation to place. In these opening lines there's a list of dates, there are personal and group decisions, declarations of intent to do taking fate into one's own hands... It really is a film that is for listening to.

RG: There are landscapes that are at once visual and acoustic, and it seemed obvious to me that they had to be worked with. It was a task split equally between image and sound. On that first trip, I worked with Elise Florenty, who was in charge of the sound. And each time I went back, I gave sound an important role. In this scene, the story told by Bathily Bakhoré, of the cooperative foundation, is accompanied by acoustic landscapes, which shift us from the African night to a water crossing. This scene ends with a shot of an anchor. Then we get to the cooperative.

PB: Your choice to make a video diptych, with these two articulated, synchronous images, is very decisive for your ability to depict that complexity.

RG: To start with, I was struck by those different spaces, very defined and separate, as well as by different time-frames: the village, with the lives of the women and their families; the fields, nearby; the town of Kayes, outlet for the cooperative's production; the colonial ruins on the other side of the river Senegal; Paris, Bouba's apartment, the centres and Africans workers housing (*foyers*); the moment when the cooperative was founded, the colonial past, and daily life in 2008.

Based on that, I had the idea of making a double projection to bring in the interplay of those spaces and those time-frames. I didn't go looking for effects of simultaneity, but rather wanted to increase the off-screen shots and the between-shots shots. There are juxtapositions, and parallel narratives which dovetail, modulated repetitions, contrasts, and stepping stones. Sometimes there's a powerful incorporation in the territories through landscapes, as well as close ups and no image, which leaves room for the acoustic territory. At others there's just a screen that's activated, which permits another kind of attention.

PB: As far as the image production is concerned, you work with a repertory of documentary forms. You set up a possibility of understanding the reality of this situation, its history and its current situation. Political intentions and the theoretical aspect appear in a sequence where books are brought out of a blue plastic barrel, their titles read, and their covers displayed.

RG: To begin with I had a somewhat remote position. I did lots of interviews. Then, as trip followed trip, I developed systems of cooperative logic in the shooting with people from the community. For that scene with the books, I worked with some village girls. It was Bouba Touré who sent those three barrels from Paris to Mali, with the idea of creating a village library. What mattered to me in that scene, as in others, was the challenges of translation. The girl who shows the books to the camera is learning French at school, but she may well not understand everything she reads... I wanted to see that whole issue of transmission, both of a political and theoretical heritage through the books, but also, in a general way, of the parents' experience, which passes by way of language. The fourteen founder members met in workers housing in France, talking mainly in French, a language which enabled them to communicate, because they came from different regions and countries in Africa. There are Senegalese, Malians, a guy from Burkina Faso... Today, in the village, people tend to talk Bambara, Pular and Soninké; French is less present. Very few women speak it. A certain number of details in handing down the cooperative's history and experience are altered as a result.

PB: Over and above the problem of losing a language coming from somewhere else through colonization, we nevertheless see the emergence of this amazing library in a barrel, which explains for us a linkage between you, the artist, and Bouba, the activist, the militant, the crucial person in the project. For you two, as with the people who'll be reading those books in the village, there's a vital need to acquire knowledge, and find ways to knowledge through theory and political and militant writings. What's expressed here is the idea of art as a place where knowledge is produced, based on this need for the human being to understand the world he lives in, so he can act on it.

RG: In the editing process, I didn't want to straitjacket the representation in what might have been militant discourse, or propaganda, which Bouba does very well—and he's right to do so. What mattered to me was making conflicts

perceptible. The transmission of this political heritage proceeds by way of a shift through languages. As well as through cultural, political, and religious transfers: all these factors co-exist. You don't find much gender confusion, but there are disputes between men and women about their place in the cooperative and in the production economy. Which leads to representational conflicts.

PB: Needless to say, it was necessary for you to get away from the gilded legend of that history in order to transcribe it and reinstate it, from your distance and your function, in all its conflicting aspects.

RG: I see that in a constructive way. It's a very complex history, made up of both the history of immigration, a political history, and the local consequences of this experience. In my way of filming, something to do with events can happen. During a narrative, events come about in the utterance of words, in a landscape. Underground events also happen. I'm interested in these particular tensions. The issue of my place in relation to that group is a recurrent one. I've experienced my displacement as a European in this precise context as an experience of "Creolization". Bouba is the Creole of Creoles, as it were. With, on one side, his Africanness, his political experience within decolonization movements, and on the other his life in France.

I recently saw a very edifying interview he gave to France 3 television ten years or so ago. In it he tells how he was arrested by policemen who were twenty years old in 1995, when he was already 45, and they asked him: "Are you French?", and he answered: "Yes, I've been living in France for 30 years; so I'm possibly more French than you because I've been living here longer."

I think we find this crossover both in his political culture, in his praxis, and in his relation to the imagery.

PB: Which brings us to one of your major decisions, which is give him a real place, not just as a subject. Beyond the portrait, he's active in this project. At one moment you re-enact a dispute which happened between you about a termite mound. In that scene, you're there in the image and you are being ticked off by Bouba, who teaches you a little lesson...

RG: During my first stay, I'd heard lots of stories about termite mounds. For example, the first irrigation channel dug by the cooperative was made with earth from termite mounds--a very special material because termites secrete a product

that makes the earth more compact and waterproof. After filming some termite mounds, I started to destroy one of them, asking permission from the owner of the banana plantation where it stood. Then Bouba arrived and told me I mustn't destroy it. I explained to him that I was doing it for reasons to do with the film. He came up with ecological reasons, as well as traditional ones: you can destroy a termite mound up to a certain level, but you mustn't kill the Queen. Immediately after that discussion, I asked Bouba if he would agree to reshoot that scene. Our close working relationship made that possible. The interest of that scene lies in its burlesque aspect but also, although the bar is very low, in what it reveals about a link to a territory. In the end he invited me to film in a certain way, thus including himself in the production of my film.

PB: At the core of the film, you highlight the way a situation experienced in reality tells you about ways of depicting it.

In the exhibition at Chelles, you create a device where two images are jointly there in the exhibition venue, each one with its given space, which tallies with a source from which the conversation comes.

You're two image makers. And you work side by side in this project. Bouba Touré made this video film as a response to the whole process that you implemented. He gave it to you and you very soberly re-edited it, and then incorporated it in the arrangement of your show. It's a monologue and an address, a kind of video testament, where he says some very important things, which lie at the root of his life through commitment and struggle. And in them he expresses a desire to construct a recollection of his life.

RG: In his video, he says: "I've got clocks and watches everywhere, not because I'm in film, but because I'm living with time." In answer to Sarkozy's speech in Dakar, when he said that Africans aren't part of History, Bouba Touré brings in an awareness of the historicity of his career. I wanted to shoot a certain number of scenes with him, which we partly managed to do. And in the course of that process, after a year's work, he bought himself a camera. He wanted to film the illegal immigrant movement in France. And one morning, he produced this one-hour sequence shot, which he then offered to me. I made just two cuts; it was important to me to keep that tension, the ins and outs and the nodes of a line of thought in the making, of words where repetition and modulations had something musical about them. This particular form of utterance enables thought

to move and go towards other objects. These are his photographs and his posters, pinned to the walls of the apartment he's been living in for thirty years, triggering words. He refers to it at a given moment: he shows "posters that talk, that want to say something". There's a difference in our stances in relation to imagery. I think images are mute to start with, and that they can talk later. For Bouba, his images have a meaning as soon as they're made. They've been produced with a precise, militant purpose. Needless to say, I don't leave the images mute, but there's still a difference all the same. I wonder about the moment when I can load the images of a narrative or not. I'm fascinated by his ability to pass from his personal history to a militant discourse, through that interpenetration where one enriches the other in a total interdependence. From my viewpoint about the depiction of Politics, this verbal complexity is very important; not just in the discourse, but also in the articulation of different chords.

In making his self-portrait, he produced this unexpected shift in the course of our work together. It really was a gift.

I've decided to show my film in a black box, a closed space. I wanted an intense listening and viewing experience to create another space. And I wanted Bouba's voice to be part of it—you can hear it from the entrance, then you go towards the monitor where the image was broadcast, and it interweaves with the device where I show my film. This space of *Les Eglises* gives onto the town of Chelles. It made sense to put the pictures of Bouba's apartment in parallel, with the façades of a Paris suburb.

PB: And if one makes an instant montage as a viewer in the way round the exhibition venue, one can join up the image of his film, entirely shot in this private place of the home, made up of a whole personal cosmogony attached to a collective history, to a scene from your film where we see Bouba Touré leaving his house and going to an immigrants worker hostel where he'll tell his story with a slide show.

RG: In it, he talks about the cooperative experience and he defends it as a possible model for immigrants to go back home.

PB: Visually speaking, by the status of the images you're working with, various solutions are offered to you. For example, the display of photographic

documents, not through an index finger, a hand pointing to an image, but with a rostrum camera, a kind of slide show incorporated in the film.

RG: In fact, for the two moments when I show Bouba's pictures, I replay the slide show form. These sequences are in tune with the slide projection scene in the hostel, where you see the audience, but without seeing the images this time around.

PB: This complementarity is, needless to say, offered by those already existing photographs, which do not impose themselves on you, but which you can include in your work, while constructing your own capacity to represent this history by giving the imagery a degree of tension. It's a dialogue between the form of the original archive, made up of an accumulation of documents, and the construction of another possible narrative of this collective history.

RG: Yes, this form of tension is indeed a fact. I work from existing documents, but I also produce documents—and this works in tandem.

Distribution is crucial for me. This project has been funded by art institutions, as it happens the Ile-de-France Regional Department of Cultural Affairs [DRAC], and an art centre in the suburbs of Paris called *Les Eglises*, where it's been shown. But then comes the challenge of its accessibility outside art circles. Even if it may seem a tad pretentious, I regard my work as public property, as I do the work archive and the video of Bouba Touré.

PB: It must be said that this is something rarely considered these days in the way artistic activity functions, including in cases involving documentary strategies. Of course, it's not a matter of imposing it—every artist is free to make his/her own decisions about the status of their work—but this way you have of seeing the showing and the possible efficiency of your work in places which aren't just art venues, and as far as the possibility of showing it in the very place where it was made, really does correspond to a line of thinking about the artist's role in society. It's a question of an artistic activity *in situ* and *in vivo*. *In situ* because it consists in working within a specific territorial and human context, with particular coordinates which have to be discovered, familiarized and understood. And *in vivo*—in relation to other human beings, arrangements of specific things forming multitudes, with which it's possible to engage in dialogue as an artist, and to which you can offer an opportunity for exchange, collaboration and

reconstruction of an image produced together. To the point of co-production, as with Bouba.

So, do you imagine showing this film in the cooperative?

RG: Of course. But I'm not aggressively inclined to do so. In the past, I possibly was a bit more so, but nowadays I don't want to impose, from the outset, the reconstruction of images in the community where they were made. It's a possibility. Its cropping up now precisely because forms of cooperation are possible. Jacques Rancière talks very nicely about this in his latest book, *Le spectateur émancipé*. At times, with an artist, there can be a desire to go too fast, and as a result take up an authoritarian stance in the act of representation. It is now, after the film's production, that I can see opportunities opening up to show it in hostels and in Mali.

PB: The presence of cinema is very powerful in this project. Bouba Touré has this professional projectionist's experience. What's more you can see his tactile approach to film and the projector. And you yourself work in a dialogue with a certain idea of cinema, documentary, political, militant, which has its place within an artistic activity where you have to find ways towards a possible explanation of living conditions as part of a shared history.

RG: Our two films are very different. This is what struck Ines Schaber the first time she saw Bouba's work. She said to me on that occasion: "It's incredible, it's a direct cinema film, it's obvious!" And Bouba really does come from there. He's got this political culture of imagery of '68. He's in that particular tradition: the old immigrant worker at Renault in 1965 produces a direct cinema film in 2008.

I'm demanding when it comes to realism, but I work with different tools. The job of editing, synchronization, and de-synchronization is very important for me. It would take too long to discuss my baggage about the notion of document, which comes both from Conceptual artists, who re-questioned the place of the document, and, obviously enough, from a certain history of film. Talking about African cinema, I recently saw a movie by Djibril Diop Mambéty, *Badou Boy*, which is absolutely unbelievable. I was also very taken with Ousmane Sembene's films. In each one of them, words, discussions, palavers and negotiations are very important, and represent a form *per se*. I find that really interesting.

I think Bouba is closer to the legacy of Jean Rouch than I am. The liaisons are so complex!...

Even though I'm no expert, anthropology is very important for me, and in particular all the questions being raised these days in the new anthropology about the definition of the author's—and auteur's—place, as well as translation, sources, and authority in the representational process.

PB: The type of discourse you produce in *Cooperative* as well as the way you broach Bouba Touré's work and the possibility of working with him, describe your effective stance as an artist within this situation, for which you propose an updated representation.

This makes me think of the way Michael Taussig is active within realities which he handles in his books—for which he is occasionally reproached by classical, academic anthropologists. In *My Cocaine Museum*, for example, he constructs his discourse based on a narrative of encounters. There's no wish to make a scientific survey, but, on the contrary, in a contact to do with his involvement and the intricacy of human relations, Taussig starts out from his own experience, from his meetings with territories and people which whom he has shared something.

Your presence in the film, discreet but at the same time evident, states the place from which you're talking, thinking and working.

RG: I define my stance in differing degrees. For example, at one moment in the film I use a passage from Michel Leiris's *L'Afrique fantôme*. He was not an anthropologist, but he dealt with this problem very closely by taking part in the Dakar-Djibouti mission. I quote a passage where he deciphers and interprets graffiti he saw at Médine, an old colonial fort near the town of Kayes. I align my own observation of graffiti and my own wanderings in other colonial ruins, just opposite the cooperative.

The I is present everywhere in *L'Afrique fantôme*. And all the manifestations and petty little things which don't usually appear in the transcript of an anthropological work can be read in it...

To get back to Taussig, you can read an amazing passage in *Walter Benjamin's Grave* where he just happens to question the status of a report and its transmission. In chapter two, which deals with Benjamin's text *Der Erzähler [The Narrator]*, he takes the example of an Indian in Colombia talking in verse to tell the tale of his region. Those words were recorded by a European who was

a bit lost in Central America, and didn't know quite to do with them. He'd really like to translate those words into a clearer language, i.e. his own. Taussig invents a fictitious character who's in charge of some archives in which all the documents gathered together by that white man are to be deposited. He invents his encounter with that director. He finds fictional forms for talking about the complexity of translation, displacement, authority, and the validity of one narrative as compared with another. And all these questions apply to me.

Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods