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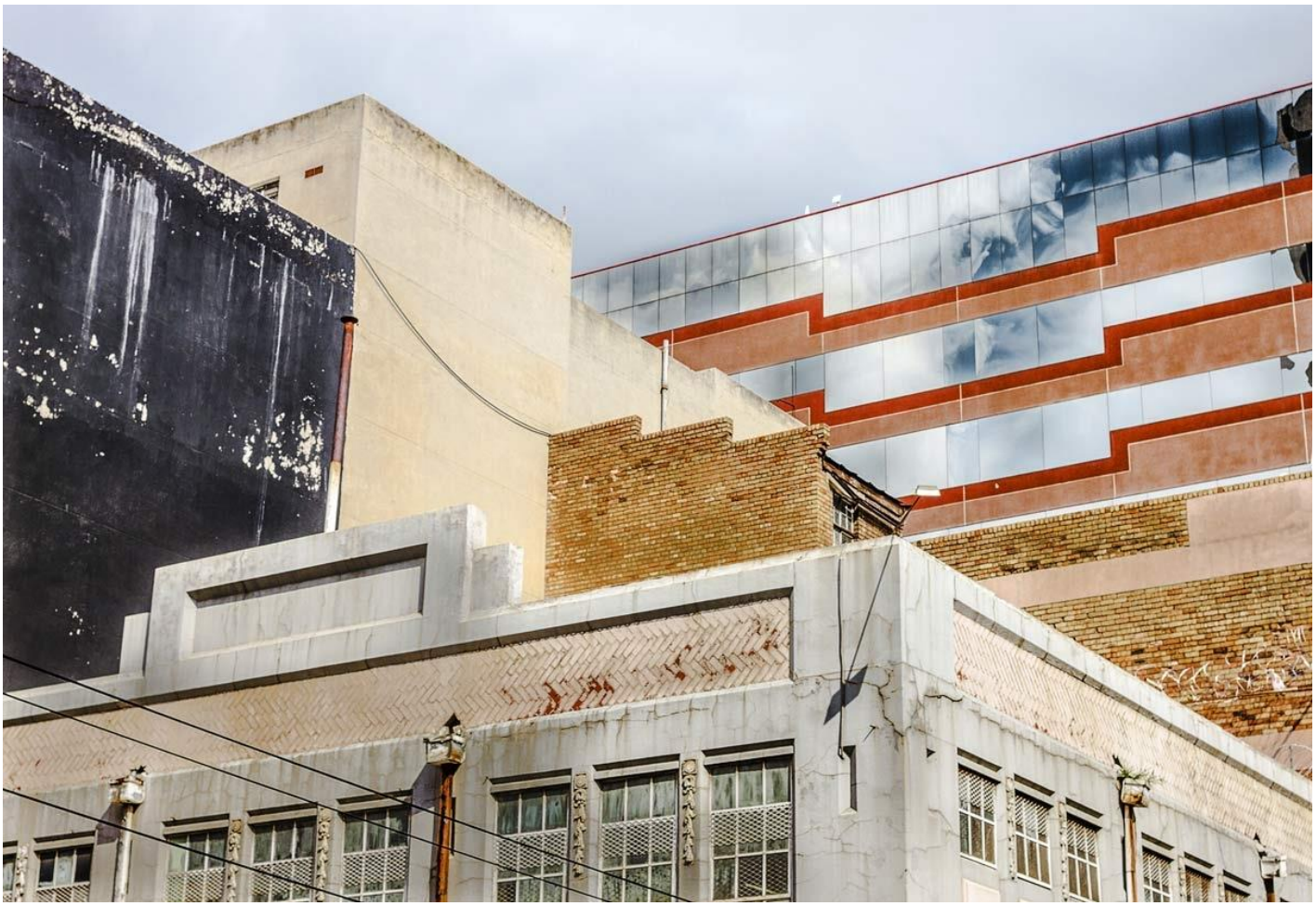
# Along the Constant Horizon: The Territories of Mame-Diarra Niang

Written by Oluremi Onabanjo on Sep 07, 2015

*In questioning the landscape, I am questioning myself on the landscape. I try to find myself on it. What makes me, and where I come from. This means I don't see structures as you see the structures. I don't see the landscape as you see the landscape. Through my vision, it's never the same. In fact, with the plasticity of territory, I'm talking about my territory. Not yours, not the territory of the others, it's my territory. In all of this I find myself; I find my own presence. My own story, and history.*

***— Mame-Diarra Niang***



© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Glitch 1*, from *Metropolis*, 2015. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Introduction by Oluremi C. Onabanjo**

Rhythmic geometric patterns and vibrant colours are often the first elements one notices in Mame-Diarra Niang's photographs. Her sustained attention to the horizon line gives a sense of continuity from one frame to the next, drawing together the disparate urban landscapes in her most recent studies of Dakar and Johannesburg. Forms and patterns seem to blend and merge as Niang roams through urban African spaces with a panoramic vision and an acute sensitivity to idiosyncratic details and bold swathes of colour. Appropriately, wandering figures are likewise a recurring presence within her meticulous compositions—a resting horse aside a crumbling façade on the outskirts of Dakar; the top of a head just legible on a building rooftop in the Johannesburg skyline; three men strolling on a city street, neatly interrupting a band of horizontal yellow, orange and red lines painted on a wall, rhythmically echoing a pair of traffic cones.

These human forms serve multiple conceptual purposes. They illustrate Niang's reliance on movement and circumstance—she shoots quickly, often from a car. (She completed an entire series, *Sahel Gris*, in an hour.) Yet, rather than merely populating her images, these wandering figures seem to haunt them—calling attention to her idea of the plasticity of territory, which is not concerned with the identity of the subject on the landscape, but the landscape as the subject itself. Niang uses the cityscape as a material for her compositions, attuning her lens to different angles in order to convey a personal experience of constructed spaces. As a result, her images can be read as a philosophical claim over a territory, but also an invitation for the viewer to traverse these expanses alongside her.

Spanning the outer edges and inner cross-sections of Dakar, as well as the central business district of Johannesburg, Niang's works since 2013 present a contemporary view of these distinct African cityscapes—starting from beyond the limits in *Sahel Gris,* encountering the concrete borders in *At the Wall,* and revelling in the highly concentrated architectural forms of *Metropolis.* Instead of establishing an urban cartography, Niang frames these three series through the concept of the citadel—in which the focus is trained upon the urban imaginary. She is amongst a generation of contemporary artists who are employing unique conceptual photographic strategies to grapple with the characteristics of their built environments.

In her debut exhibition in the United States, Niang is featured alongside François-Xavier Gbré and Edson Chagas in The Walther Collection's exhibition *The Lay of the Land: New Photography from Africa*. Leading up to the exhibition, Niang spoke to collector Artur Walther about the role of the plasticity of territory and the citadel in her photographic process, as well as the personal events that spurred their conception.

© Mame-Diarra Niang, Untitled, from *Sahel Gris*, 2013. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Artur Walther | A key concept you often use to describe your photographic projects is the "plasticity of territory." Does this notion come from your upbringing, from your background?**

**Mame-Diarra Niang** | Territories mean a lot for me. I was born in Lyon, France. When I was one year old, my mother was really sick and she sent me to my grandfather's house in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. I had infantile amnesia: I forgot my mother and my father because they couldn't visit me for one and a half years. I began to speak and to walk in Ivory Coast. When my mother came to take us back to France, I didn't recognise her. From the instant where she first presented herself to me, the strongest and sole thought I had is that I had forgotten where I came from. So, the *sense* of territory is not about origins, it's about memories. You are what you have as memories—the places you recollect, the places that change you. In my work, I look for a new form of the homeland—that is the plasticity.

**I can see that. You returned to France, but that was a different environment, I assume, because you had been living in your grandfather's house in Ivory Coast, and now you were living in Lyon with your mother. With all of this moving, the question becomes, what is your territory?**

At that moment, I didn't know what my territory was. I'm a mixed-race person, but in my middle-class French school, I was "the black kid." While there, I was taught to believe that "Africa is a vacant land"—the story of African people that began when the French and other white colonialists came to the continent. They would say that before they arrived, the land was empty, vacant. I was told that I didn't have history. These kinds of things make you silent—not invisible, because of your blackness you are never invisible—but you are still, like an object. You cannot speak because the teacher tells you at the beginning, "We have nothing to say about you. *I* will tell you where you came from …" I grew up in the French and Ivorian culture. Before I was eleven years old, I had never been to Senegal. One summer, my father decided to

send us on holidays to Dakar; it was a horrible experience! The city was very different from Abidjan and Lyon. There was so much sand, and there was another language that I couldn't comprehend. At that moment, I decided that Senegal was not my country. I wanted nothing to do with that ugly place with too much concrete, bad roads, and all those things that are in my photographs now.

**Concrete plays a very prominent figurative role throughout your photography, particularly in your series *Sahel Gris* and *At the Wall* in Dakar.**

Yes, concrete is a kind of an obsession for me. I have observed in Dakar that they use the sands of the country for construction. It's still the territory, the land, but it's transformed. It's a new form of the land, a new narrative, a way to speak about the land and citizens and that's why I'm really focused on it. This new plasticity of territory observes the anthropomorphism of identity through the landscape. In *Sahel Gris*, I tell this story. It's also a cold and distant memory from that summer, when my father brought us to our new Dakar suburban house at Thiaroye Azur, where there were all new houses of the same model, houses that were meant to be modified by the owners. But, from that moment in 1993 until now, our house never changed. All the houses around ours changed: they would be developed up to two or three levels. Yet, our house was always the same size, with the same concrete. *Sahel Gris* shows that it's not anymore about houses. The identity through this landscape has moved on singularly due to the massive construction of a commuter town. That first experience I had is named "*The Wall*." It was a good beginning to think about transforming the land.

© Mame-Diarra Niang, Untitled, from *Sahel Gris*, 2013. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**In *Sahel Gris*, it's just all construction, it's distant, and the landscape is impacted by man. The pictures are very barren, with little colour and few plants.**

They cut down all the baobabs to clear the land and throughout these exposed stumps and roots look like ghosts on the landscape. I began to think about the frame. How we are framed: we have this structure of home and family, but with adopted Western habits–like the single apartments for you or for your nuclear family. And on the outside of our neighbourhoods, you can see the concrete, the construction of everything. People believe this structure elevates us much more. It's this structure that sparked my movement to "*The Wall*."

**How did you make the series? What is the connection between this idea of the wall and the citadel?**

I made *Sahel Gris* in one hour. It's a "wandering" across these territories; I tried to keep this constant line of a horizon. Then you come to the last image, this concrete wall. My feeling was to go where the concrete grows from the ground on the horizon. So this series, *Sahel Gris*, goes *to* the wall. And at the end of the series, I'm *at* the wall. It reflects the beginning of my intuition: that I should draw a map of my thoughts, and also a structured, and utopic landscape. The citadel is the never-ending wall, framed by my series *At the Wall*, so what I'm doing is mapping. In *Sahel Gris*, we are looking at an old territory out of the citadel. In *At the Wall*, we are in front, not inside yet. The citadel is a way to explain how to see *At the Wall* as a boundary that contains a people, a city that we haven't discovered yet—*Metropolis.*

**With *Sahel Gris*, you approach the wall, and then you go *at* the wall. Do you have some place that you're getting to, or in *At the Wall* are you "at the wall" the entire time?**

When I was making *At the Wall*, I didn't know I was taking these pictures. It was something unconscious. The whole series was taken from a taxi. I took the photographs during the Dakar Biennale in 2014. I was there for about month and my taxi-man friend drove me through the city.

© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Le peuple du mur #2*, from *At the Wall*, 2014. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Would you tell the driver to stop at certain locations?**

We never stopped. We kept driving. That's why you have this sensation of flatness, and of form. I tried to find another structure in the city. After I took the photographs, I understood that *At the Wall* was a continuation of *Sahel Gris*; all the images can be connected together. It's not Dakar. I'm not making documentation. It's my territory. *At the Wall* is a frame, as a body of work, a perception of a territory—but it's not a territory itself, it's just a frame for *Metropolis*.

**So there is the landscape as a physical construct—the landscape as we can see it—but then there's another layer. At The Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm, we looked at this idea in the group exhibition *Appropriated Landscapes*. Santu Mofokeng, whose works were part of the exhibition, regards landscape as something much broader in its relation to memory, markings, and history. So, is that what you mean by the plasticity of the territory?**


© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Le peuple du mur #*1, from *At the Wall*, 2014. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

I try to draw a new territory, *my* territory, what I've recorded, and how I've organised my thoughts, memories, understanding of all my images, and how I try to put them together and embrace them as a monumental body. My own appropriation of these landscapes is a continuous metamorphosis of myself, of what I am. I try to feel the landscape as my body. Like a body that we have produced together, a material for producing many selves. It's a lot like a memory.

**You look at the landscape in a similar way as you look at humans. Not only as we normally do, as in an outer physical appearance, but also by the inner side, where there is a lot of history and memory that only comes out in certain interactions.**

In questioning the landscape, I am questioning myself on the landscape. I try to find myself on it. What makes me, and where I come from. This means I don't see structures as you see the structures. I don't see the landscape as you see the landscape. Through my vision, it's never the same. In fact, with the plasticity of territory, I'm talking about *my* territory. Not yours, not the territory of others. In all of this I find myself; I find my own presence. My own story, and history.

© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Le peuple du mur #6*, from *At the Wall*, 2014. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Did you have a strong memory of the landscape in Dakar?**

Yes, when I was fifteen, my father decided to send me to school in Dakar, and we stayed for three long years. I felt so trapped. I went to a Senegalese school and it was there that I learnt about Africa, and of the pre-colonial kingdoms, the reign of kings. It was good for me to learn all of these things, because finally I was able to learn about Africa beyond the narrative of "the vacant land." When I was eighteen—an adult for French citizens—my father allowed me to go back.

**At that point, did you return to France?**

Yes, to Lyon. I was so free during this period. I was a young person who just wanted to party. I didn't ask myself too many questions. But, I never felt that I was Senegalese. I never put another foot back in Dakar until 2007, until the death of my father. After he passed, I brought his body back to Senegal—his land. I told you that I left Senegal when I was eighteen, but at this same moment the country had transitioned to a new president. So when I came back seven years later, I could not recognise the country that I had so hated before. They had constructed a highway, many modern buildings, all using concrete.

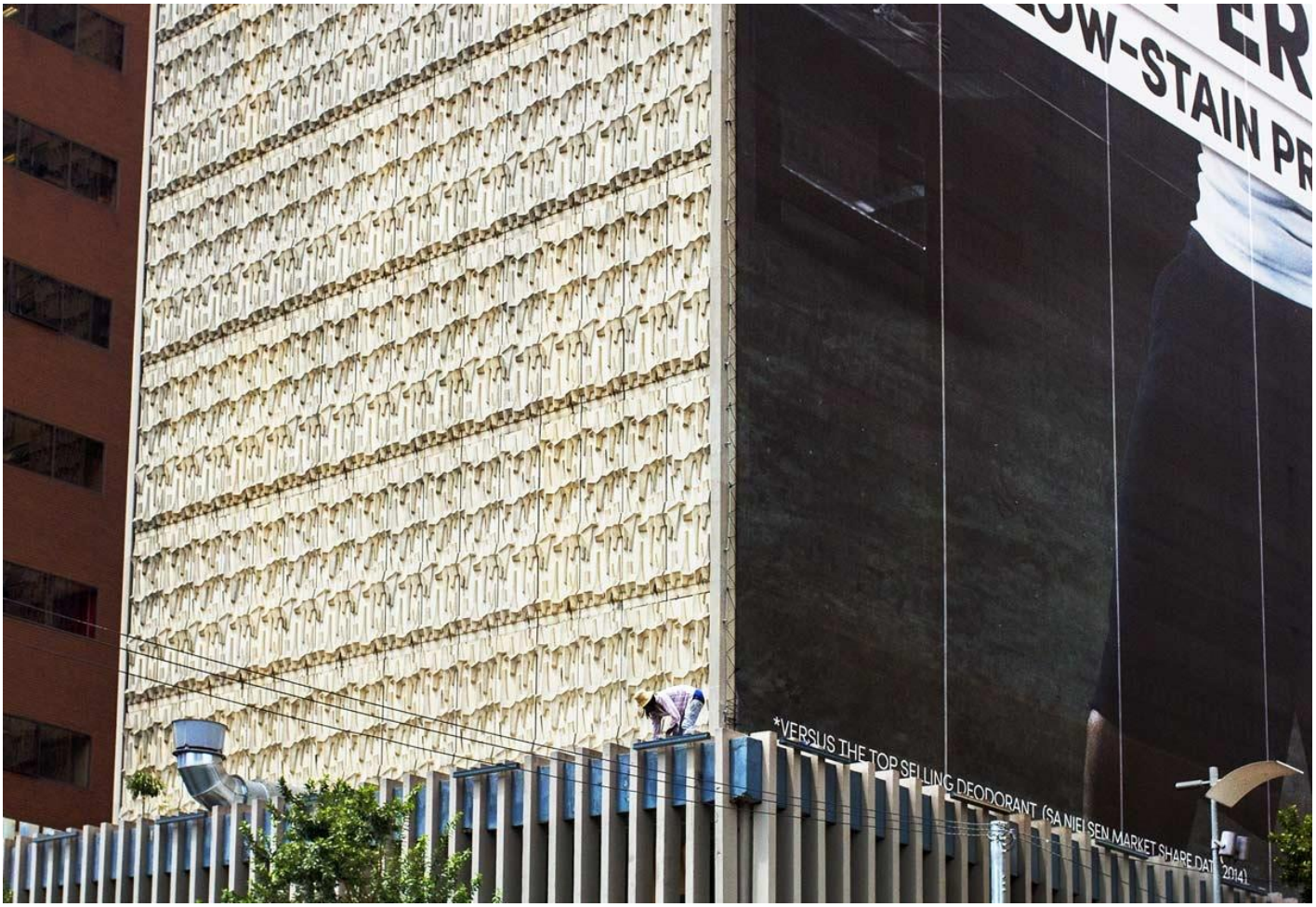
**It was the reconnection to the land, to the environment.**

My father left us a huge house and a lot of things attached to the property, but I was the only one who took care of it. I was obliged to go to the bank, to stay in Dakar for two months and organise all these issues of inheritance. At first it was kind of torture, but in fact I found peace because I made *Western Africa* and I made *Thiaroye Obscura*. With these earlier works, with this lens, I reconnected to this landscape, because it was the pictures of what my father had left me, a sort of inventory. That was the moment when

I decided to *be*, when I found myself on the landscape, when I found my presence, my memory. I was re-born, finally re-born there. I really mean that. It was my country, no longer only my father's country. Because I decided to engage myself on it and I decided to change myself through this experience.

**What did these pictures show you?**

They showed that where I had hate before there was now love. This land is imperfect, this land is always in progress, it's truly ephemeral.




© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Sentinelle*, from *Metropolis*, 2015. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**You made *Metropolis* on your third trip to Johannesburg. What was this experience like for you?**

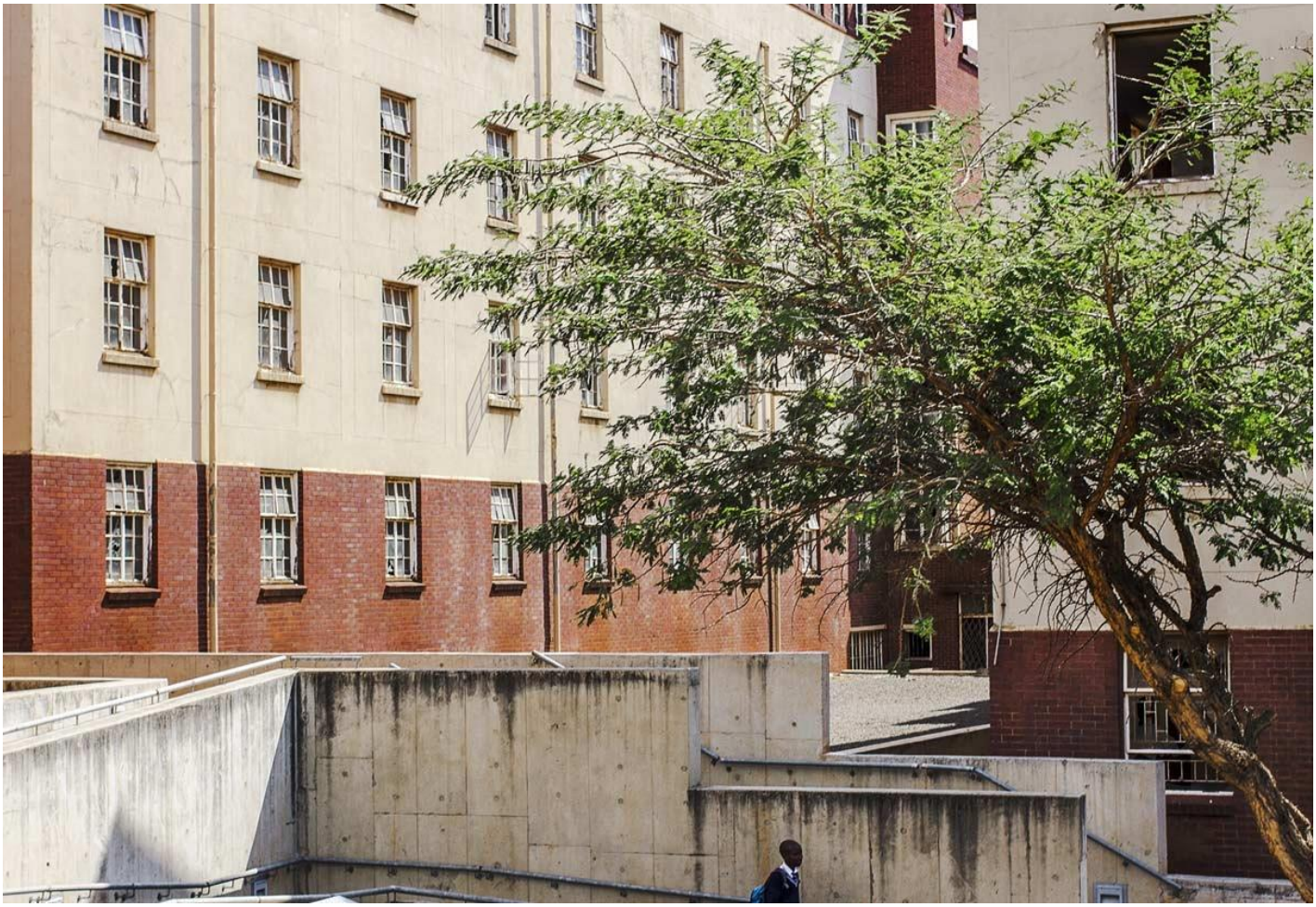
I was really impressed by this city. It didn't look like Abidjan or Dakar. It really looked like I wasn't in Africa—the architecture is more like New York in the 1970s—and it was an issue for me. I was obsessed with the idea that I wasn't in Africa. This landscape spoke a lot to my Western side, so I had to interrogate myself there and spend some time trying to understand why I have these clichés about Africa. I stayed for two months. At first, I was fairly lost. It was really difficult to find my sense in this territory. Everybody was paranoid about the issue of violence in the city. I didn't know what I would take, what I would capture, and because I wasn't really interested in producing another series about post-apartheid archives (I've never taken a historical approach to my works), the question ended up being "how do I find *me* on the landscape?" Through interrogating myself, I began to see the landscape as a structure, a kind of narrative where people are framed by walls. After some time, I finally found the form for *Metropolis*. I knew that it

would take a certain frame, because the series is all about the perception or the illusion of another city. I was in the MOTHER CITY—in the Matrix. This series not only gave an entire body to my three previous works, but it also gave a story that I can tell about my territories, and about me.


© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Satellite 1*, from *Metropolis*, 2015. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Are all of the images in *Metropolis* also taken from a vehicle? Is this characteristic of all your work? You're always moving?**

One or two were made on the street. Some were made in places where it's not safe to walk and take pictures. I never stayed more than thirty seconds or a minute. Otherwise, I took a lot of images from a tourist bus. This experimentation with perspective, moving high speed, gave me other possibilities to abstract the landscape and bring walls together. Other images were taken from a little car, and very low to the ground. When you experiment with these possibilities in movement, taking something fast and registering the sensation, it creates an illusion of something real. It becomes another way to see, compose, construct or deconstruct a landscape—and make it yours as well. I never stay. When you see something really fast—like a form—you just want to keep that first sensation. If you take too much time, it becomes too real. What is interesting for me is when a site begins to become something else, something surreal. When I found my eyes, I found myself. I found something that didn't look like Johannesburg, but was in fact a new way to see Johannesburg. It's only when you're driving at certain speeds through the city that you see some kind of deformation of landscapes, and the loss of reality. It's an unanchored territory. I made it anonymous—meaning, that it was virgin for my eyes. It was not Johannesburg, anymore; it was *Metropolis*. It was now about me. It meant I found myself on the landscape—a new composition of me.



© Mame-Diarra Niang, *Daniel 4.10*, from *Metropolis*, 2015. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

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**Mame Diarra Niang**, a self-taught artist and photographer, was raised between Ivory Coast, Senegal and France. Niang's work has been featured in solo shows at the Institut Français of Dakar (2013) and *At the Wall*, Stevenson, Johannesburg (2014) and group shows including *Nine Artists,* Stevenson, Cape Town (2015); Cosmos Arles Books, *Rencontres d'Arles,* Arles, France (2015); *Dakar Biennale Off* (2014); and *Le Piéton de Dakar* at the Institut Français of Dakar (2013).

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**Oluremi C. Onabanjo** is a Nigerian-born curator and scholar. She holds an undergraduate degree in African Studies from Columbia University, and is pursuing an MPhil in Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology at Oxford University. She has assisted with exhibitions at the Museum of African Design, Johannesburg; No Longer Empty, New York; The Walther Collection, New York and Neu-Ulm, Germany; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

**Artur Walther** has been devoted to supporting global photography programs and scholarship for nearly twenty years. In 2010 he opened The Walther Collection, a non-profit foundation dedicated to researching, collecting, exhibiting, and publishing photography and video art, which has become one of the most important holdings of contemporary African and Asian photography and video art. The Walther Collection presents exhibitions and public programs at a three-gallery museum campus in Neu-Ulm, Germany, and a

Project Space in New York City, and has a co-publishing program for exhibition catalogues and monographs with Steidl. *The Lay of the Land*, in which Mame-Diarra Niang's works are featured, marks the beginning of The Walther Collection's new multi-year exhibition series on contemporary photography and video art from Africa and the African Diaspora. Presented thematically from 2015 to 2017, and surveying a diverse range of new and commissioned work, the series provides for an in-depth engagement with emerging artists by building upon the collection's longstanding focus on African photography.