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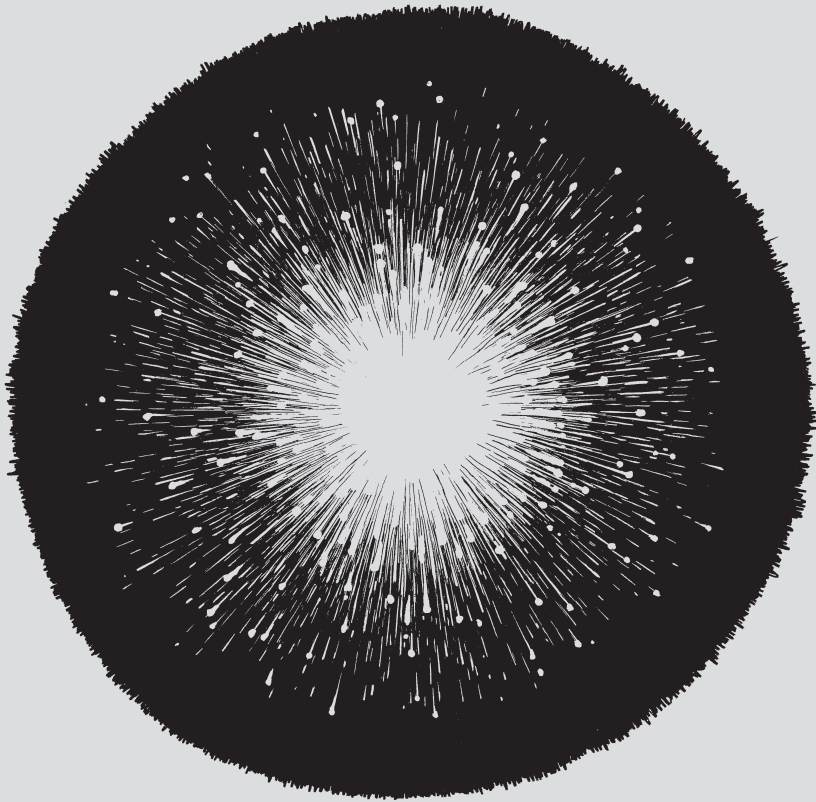
Mame-Diarra Niang

The matter of self

Black Hole was the title of Mame-Diarra Niang's August 2017 residency at Stevenson Johannesburg's fifth-floor space. For those who know the artist mainly as a photographer, this was an unexpected step – the key materials were sound, light, texture and smell. For a month, Niang created and sustained a sensory interstice in a city of relentless pacing.

Her previous bodies of work are titled *Dolorosa*, *Ethéré*, *Sahel Gris*, *At the Wall* and *Metropolis*. While the first is drawing and the second is largely performative, the last three are chapters in a photographic trilogy. *Sahel Gris* captures a parched and rural landscape – the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines the Sahel as a 'transitional zone'. *At the Wall* traces the boundaries and thresholds of urbanised living, and in *Metropolis*, a hyper-industrialised city is abstracted into bracing turrets of line and colour. Niang's treatment of terrain is in the service of what she terms the 'plasticity of territory'. Her works treat place as something personal and intimate. According to John Szarkowski's dichotomy between 'mirrors and windows' (mentioned in this book's conversation with Guy Tillim), Niang would be a 'mirror' artist. The locations the images are taken in have little to do with their import; entire geographic features are repurposed as reflections of the artist's psyche. Niang states: 'My duty as a human and as a woman is to tell my story. When I started with my photography I was so embarrassed when people told me it was about Dakar or Johannesburg, because that was not what I was trying to do with it. It's about what I am.'

Since Niang is French-speaking and based in Paris, the following conversation has three voices and takes place over the internet. In the background is the work of two transcribers and two sessions of translation – the initial recordings included even



the movements of Niang's cat. The conversation is multifarious and haphazard, the appropriate form for an artist who cuts through essentialist delineations of thought. In her statement for *Recent Histories: Contemporary African Photography and Video Art*, she reiterates, 'As any territory possesses borders, the act of framing becomes a fundamental gesture. As a result, notions of language and representation begin to collapse. In my practice, the visible is not enough, in looking beyond the obvious, my process concentrates strictly on observing and engaging with the matter of self.'

Niang chooses the descriptor of artist, not photographer, because her choice of medium is tangential, not definitive. Whether she uses moving images, soil or soundscapes, her position is from a commodious solipsism – introspection made communal. Her 'mirror' resembles not glass but a stream. She states: 'I wanted to paint a picture for everyone, including myself, in which I would feel at ease. An open-ended picture, in which the viewer would have an idea of what is happening without my saying, "That's the way it is."'

In *Since Time Is Distance in Space*, the ongoing video installation of which *Black Hole* is a chapter, Niang fabricated satellite imagery using soap-foam drying on concrete – among other elements – to communicate a process of simultaneously going outward and inward. She exercises agency through a transposition of self onto the cosmos – further description is imposition. And so, in her own words ...

Sinazo Chiya & Federica Angelucci:

Last year you spent a few weeks on a residency at Stevenson's fifth-floor space in Johannesburg. How do you look back on that period? From the outside, your video installation – envisaged as a chapter in a larger project titled *Since Time Is Distance in Space* – seemed like quite a radical shift.

Mame-Diarra Niang:

I try to find the correct language to say what I want to say at any given time. I had been focused on my photography recently, in particular the trilogy of *Sahel Gris*, *At the Wall* and *Metropolis*, but before that I was doing installation and performance. You know I used to make drawings? Maybe the shift was for me to accept that my practice is all these things. For a while that was photography because of the distance it allows. I lost my father, and I went back to Senegal with only my camera. It allowed me to have a conversation between myself and what had happened in my life. It was a protective shell.

With the *Black Hole* residency, you brought together multiple video screens, sound and scent in an immersive environment. Had you worked with sound before?

I always had a hunger for music, but had never used it in my work. I wasn't sure how I would do it, using an iPad and music controller, but I had a feeling I could. My work is like a collage of myself. As I work through my past, I come to understand more about myself. That was what I was trying to do with this installation.

During the residency, you described your work as your 'compass', a way to mediate between your internal

universe and the external world. It is paradoxical as, in *Since Time Is Distance in Space*, the viewer loses all points of reference, while you try to come to terms with your past, to build a map.

Yes, it's true. It is a topographical work but instead of mapping landscapes or places I try to map archetypes, with the aim of placing myself within my own history and narrative. *Since Time Is Distance in Space* does not exist without *Metropolis*. *Metropolis* does not exist without *At the Wall*. *At the Wall* does not exist without *Sahel Gris*. The extremes almost touch each other.

The space of *Metropolis* seems to me less intimate than the space one experiences in the video installation, which feels deeper inside your head.

What if the *Black Hole* 'chapter' was an escape from *Metropolis*, a way out instead of a way in? Sometimes I am not sure whether we have moved outward or deeper inward.

I was under the impression that we had moved deeper inside; it is an integration of the photographic series on the territory as identity, and plunges fully into abstraction.

I am interested in your idea because it belongs to you, really. It is your impression, what you experienced. I think I set something in motion and then relinquished control over it; in fact, I might not have set it in motion consciously. My first studies were in theatre, and I wanted to do scenography. I want to build, to put a territory back together – my territory. What would be the doings of this territory, the sound or scent of this territory? I wanted to paint a picture for everyone, including myself, in which I would feel at ease. An open-ended picture,

in which the viewer would have an idea of what is happening without my saying, 'That's the way it is.'

How do you see the audience relating to the 'collage of yourself', to your territory?

I think we all share a reality. Sometimes we are on our own and sometimes we have to share something; it is a conversation between frames. What is interesting for me is that you add your experience to that moment in my space. You get something from me, and you also add something that I don't know. For example, when you came, Sinazo, together with Milisuthando Bongela, Kwanele Sosibo and Zaza Hlaethwa from the *Mail & Guardian*, you were the first visitors I had in that space – we had an interesting conversation, the kind of moment where we let go of things and find ourselves vulnerable. A moment of truth, a moment that allows us to shift something in our minds, our energy. If you remember, I was feeling so low, alone in Johannesburg ... but your visit made me understand the importance of what I was doing. It gave me the energy to make the right change, the right move.

I find your notion of territory as opposed to identity very interesting. Territory suggests something that is meant to be walked on or through; there isn't a singular perspective – you move and change and everything changes around you.

That's it! The very idea of identity sets one in a single space and does not allow one to renew oneself; it's as if having an identity and naming it denies you the possibility of changing. Territory, on the other hand, allows for fluidity: you constantly discover who you are. A territory provides paths, whereas

an identity fixes you in one place, contains you and provides limits ... When you move, both physically and metaphorically, you end up being much more than the set of assumptions inherited at the beginning of your journey. What are you? What is your shape? What is this territory?

Would you describe the way you work as intuitive?

Yes, it's always intuitive and has always been like that. I don't force myself, ever. When I think too much about what I'm doing, it becomes more about my ego. I start wanting to become the queen of the world and it doesn't make sense because I am the queen of *my* world. That's why I just need to go with my own creation and not build something in opposition to something else, for example.

I'm curious about how the body has shifted in your work. Previously, in your photographic work, there would be a small figure and a big environmental context. Now we are seeing an absence of figures or just the environment transformed – it's very abstract – and then we see close-ups of faces moving, the body and motion, taking up the whole frame.

You know, when I made *Since Time Is Distance in Space*, I understood something in relation to those small characters from *At the Wall* and *Metropolis*. For a long time I'd been telling myself, 'Those characters hold the wall and are framed by the wall.' Now I'm thinking that in fact I wanted to be seen by those characters. It's me they are looking at, not the wall; they are asking for my attention. During the shooting of the videos for the installation, I was working on my terrace and there were people doing construction work around; some of them would

see me naked, and I realised that I didn't care, that I wanted to be seen in this territory, in this continent.

Could we say that for a time you were trying to hide and at some point you came back, you stopped hiding?

Yes, that's it. I stopped hiding when it became unbearable for me. But I still had the need to be discreet. How to reveal everything about myself and still keep a part secret?

Can you talk about what you had been hiding from?

There was a point where I no longer felt connected with my work ... I was in Dakar and I felt so depressed. It was the time of the Dakar biennale in 2016, and the whole art world was in my city. All these people I didn't want to see or be with were in my space, in my town where I grew up. So I didn't want to go out, and I started making this work from my rooftop. I just wanted to do something with my body and my anger. I was angry with all these people; you know when you want to go somewhere and rest, and then all these people that you ran away from in Paris and elsewhere in the world start to show up. Right at the end of the world, and you are just like, 'No, no, no. I need space to rest, I need a space where I can be true and where there's no question of power or the art market.' It was like these people were acting on my ego and this was my defence mechanism.

It wasn't a healthy space to be in.

No. I was living in the house that my father left me, a huge unfinished house with not too much furniture inside. It's a life that I really love and no one knows that I live like that, with nothing. I was on my rooftop and I started playing with this thing that my

father left me, a lampshade. I started playing with my shadow and that started something. I started feeling like myself.

It's like your territory, this place that was so intimate to you, was invaded. So you made a new territory inside yourself or inside this environment of yours?

Yeah. There was so much anger because at the previous biennale when I did my performance ... I don't know if you followed the story of what happened with all the homosexual artists who exhibited their works during the biennale in 2014?

Is that when the exhibition on homosexuality at the Raw Material Company got shut down?

Yes. I had some fear about staying in Dakar after that, and moved back to France. I didn't go back for about two years. When I returned to Dakar for the first time after this, at the time of the 2016 biennale, it was like I came back at the same moment as when I left, with all this insecurity. For the first time I was scared of people. I don't know ... I just needed to find a new space and present my body like a statement to say that this is my territory. There was a sort of healing I had to go through in my home and within my own personal temple, my body. And indeed this was the last character I needed to bring to the work. It was as if those characters that were there were reminding me that I had to look at myself, that I had to let it out, that I had to take a risk and erase the walls. The walls came down ... it was like I was taking shape.

What role do aesthetics play in your work when so much of it is based on healing and your own personal journey? Where does beauty come in?

My Parisian style! Hahaha. I don't know ... I really love brutalist architecture, images from NASA – a 'cold' aesthetic.

Can you elaborate on your attraction towards images of space, the moon?

There is a documentary called *Universe* that was made before the lunar landing; its aim was to make the public understand that something could exist without anyone having been there. How do we recreate an environment through collected data, using images to illustrate a place where no one has ever been? When the lunar landing happened, the public believed that the moon had to look like it did in the documentary – it was what they expected. I do something similar when I include images from satellites and NASA; I try to prepare the viewer to imagine something not really accessible visually. How can we think about memory, the territory as identity? I offer clues to try to understand, visualise something that is inherently abstract.

I researched satellites and GPS systems and I realised that there is no such a thing as a full picture of Earth: the images of the globe that we have are the result of stitching together square or rectangular images from satellites. When we search for 'planet Earth' on Google images, what we get are 3D reconstructions, but we don't question the specifics of the visual we are looking at. These are examples of how it is possible to suggest that something exists without having real proof of it. The classic image we see of the planet Jupiter has the same clouds and atmospheric conglomerates in the usual spots – at some point I started questioning whether what we were shown was true or a fabrication. I also questioned what I think I know about historical colonisation and space colonisation: what do I know by direct experience, and what do I know is true because it has been presented to me as such? First-hand, I have only

experienced Earth as flat, while I have been told and shown it is a sphere. How much can I trust what has been shown to me? I started questioning everything and building an archive of my own inner knowledge.

The conquest of space is something spectacular; my personal conquest is the conquest of my inner world, which shapes my external reality very deeply. When I was a child I was attracted to astronomy; I have always been fascinated by the stars and other phenomena in space that were either unknown or mysterious. I have always related them to myself; the link I see between my inner world and faraway space is that they are both impalpable. The starlight that we see burned millions of years ago and we only perceive it now. When we look at the sky we look at the past; in the same way our inner world is made of our ancestral memory. Our cellular memory projects the past into our present.

Has political work ever appealed to you?

I'm talking about myself and that is political. I'm a statement – I'm mixed, I'm lesbian. My duty as a human and as a woman is to tell my story. When I started with my photography I was so embarrassed when people told me it was about Dakar or Johannesburg, because that was not what I was trying to do with it. It's about what I am. Someone who was raised by a woman, my mother. I'm much darker than my mother, who is mixed. My grandmother is white. My aunt is Korean and my father is Black. My family made peace and I am making peace. So this is political, to be all these things and try to collage your life and say, 'I'm okay with what I am'. Sometimes I'm the oppressor, sometimes I'm the victim, sometimes both. I'm one with what I am.

It is a bit of a paradox – the fact that you are a mixed child does not protect you. You are outside; you are a stranger, a foreigner who comes and takes photograph of things that have no historical memory for you but a lot for someone else. How do you explain that you are using this as part of a bigger composition that has nothing to do with actual history?

You know, it is like when you taste a fruit, hmm, this fruit reminds me of an apple, whereas it was actually a kiwi or a kaki. It is like a taste of *déjà vu*. I experiment with these kinds of *déjà vu*. You said it: I come from outside, I am mixed; when I am here I am not part of France, and when I am there I don't belong either. The only place where I can find myself is within myself. That is what I look for in landscapes. When I find my vision, something that puts me at ease, that's it – I am back on my path. I am not trying to look for someone's history, I am trying to find my own shape in a space where I will never be welcomed as home.

So when someone says I have to bring a historical point of view, I say: but who said that? It interests you but not me; it is not the purpose of my work. At the same time that person's point of view is very important in relation to their own journey. And this is what interests me today, to see what the viewer brings to my work. I am interested in what I don't know, what belongs to you, to your memory and your experience. It is as if I were an architect building the structure and people entering the building will each create their own apartment with their own story in it. I can't know what they will bring inside.

In your series *Dolorosa* you worked with digital collages of 19th-century anatomical drawings.

I worked on this piece while I was sick; the illness manifested subsequent to a loss and I felt overwhelmed. I was terrified and angry as my body seemed to be rebelling against me. The sequence starts with a digital collage, an anatomical drawing of the heart, which then morphs into other organs. All the drawings I used describe a kind of fear ... I needed to face my monsters but they were inaccessible, so I made them somehow visible. The collages are portraits of monsters brought to the surface, in the guise of a map. Another territory, I guess.

There is a word you use, ‘radicant’, that seems very important in understanding your work.

It refers to a plant that is at home wherever it is; it can take root anywhere. It doesn’t have a designated space, a specific land or physical territory like a country or a city. It is a nomadic plant that finds its form in wandering, like herbs that grow in the concrete. For me the work needs to be ‘radicant’ like this.

In this sense, in your work, you travel between Africa and something else. You say there is a part of you that has a European perspective and another part that is African – and Africa is in any case part of the world, one cannot isolate it.

Exactly. When you speak of ‘radicant’, it makes me think of myself when I was little and left France to live in Ivory Coast, without my mother, and then I came back and left again. Really, I can’t forget that originally I was born in France. When I arrived on the African photographic scene, people would ask me to position myself in terms of identity. Often I am called Senegalese, but I am not Senegalese! Or at least not *only* Senegalese. This is why my work is nomadic. I always

try to find my form. One day I will say that I am Senegalese and another day I will say no, I am not that at all. Suddenly I am South African. Because South Africa gave me my shape, because you made me travel to South Africa, and this brought me a new memory that I would identify with. How can I say I come from one space if, for me, being here is always present in what I am?

With all your works, it’s feels like you’re grafting yourself into the environment because there’s something that you want to figure out or explore. *Metropolis* was about being in Joburg, but changed from how it appears into something very personal.

Yes, because the work is about my experience of Joburg. I’m so in love with Joburg. Every time I’m in that city I take all these forms, these colours ... It makes me angry about a lot of things. I never experienced what you experienced. It broke my heart and that’s why *Metropolis* has beautiful colours, but feels a bit suffocating. That was my experience, with these huge walls in Johannesburg. I did the work inside cars or buildings because I could not work in the streets.

We have spoken a lot about territory. Which place do you connect with the most?

Where I am. I don’t try to find a space or population or history inside the city. I try to find myself in these territories. So when I did *Metropolis*, I looked with my own eyes. It’s not a project about fear or apartheid. While I was making the work I was with a friend who was my driver and she was always trying to explain the histories of this building or that, and I always said, ‘Oh no, don’t speak to me about that.’ I had to find my look, my eyes,

how I feel. I started taking some photographs and they were not at all interesting. For a while I was stuck in Braamfontein. I was scared, you know, and then one day things shifted. That day I took these pictures on Juta Street. And when I saw them I knew from the language of the work that it was my eyes, it was my look, it was my way to see the world, the colours, the angles. It was not about the history, the violence; it was how I see the world and how I see myself inside the city, the country. I could finally be myself in Johannesburg. Indeed, it is always like that. It is a 'space odyssey', but through setting out to discover another territory I am able to discover myself.