

GOETHE MEDAL 2016
LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR
AKINBODE AKINBIYI
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“To outsiders, the city is full of stories of suffering and fear,” Akin Akinbiyi writes in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition he curated, *Lagos – Stadtansichten* (Lagos – Cityscapes). He continues, “Lagos is a city that, due to its inability to produce cohesion, is imploding, accompanied by the constant hubbub of the noisy generators used against the inevitable power failures [...] Everywhere prevails naked fear of armed robberies, of men who act brutally because they themselves are brutalized.”

“For us, this city is our home,” he observes, “the place where we live, the streets we cross to go to work, to school, to the market.”

In this powerful text, several aspects already shine out that seem important to me in connection with the work of this year’s awardee and its recognition. Photographing in this city was a challenge, he continues. It seems as if the city itself were depriving itself of the right to be photographed. *Why*, they constantly seem to ask, *what for*?

Akinbode Akinbiyi is describing, on the one hand, contradictory experiences in and with the world in which we live, and on the other hand the difficulty grasping these contradictions in photographs.

We face the lack of cohesion, the instability not only in Lagos; they increasingly characterize our world and its representation.

Around the clock images are transmitted to us, migrating images, often without context, seemingly without creators, floating amidst countless numbers of pictorial representations. Images are produced, distributed on multiple channels, consumed by “users,” exploited for the purpose of shaping opinions.

Akinbiyi contrasts this development with a radical approach: he slows his pace. He moves through time and space without haste, with an open gaze. For forty years he has moved slowly and gently, without penetrating the personal space of others, while at the same making pictures. In an interview he describes his approach as a kind of dance, a negotiation.

Understanding photographing as a process of negotiation, of exchange – beyond “shooting” or “taking” pictures – characterises Akinbiyi’s work and makes it a pioneering and radical project based on a highly expanded concept of photography. His interest in his subjects is not content to create wonderfully cryptic compositions and to suggest complex contexts. Reduced to the essential, his black and white photography not only continues the classic photographic tradition of Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander, but today becomes a quiet act of resistance, a reduction of the world around us, to the reserved tones of the grey scale,

to symbols and structures. In this way, this photographer gives us a more powerful alternative to the colours of today's news coverage, which promises us every minute anew that it is very close to reality.

His working process does not submit to the production and distribution structures of a maximum-profit image industry. Akinbode Akinbiyi's insistence on making analogue pictures, on old-fashioned exposure on film, takes its time: a roll of film must be inserted in the camera and allows for a very limited number of shots. This technical limitation requires great focus on what the photographer perceives and on the way he shoots it. In his seemingly casual but carefully composed images it is striking that the voids and gaps, the backgrounds and blurred elements contribute just as meaningfully to possible interpretations of Akinbiyi's photographs as the central motifs themselves.

The shape of an advertising display is reflected in the posture of a random passer-by in a photo taken in Johannesburg in 2012. A boy, who carries the spoons and ladles he sells like a huge amulet on a band around his neck, moves seemingly sleepwalking through traffic blurred by dust and exhaust fumes in a photograph from Dantokpa market in Cotonou, Benin in the 1990s.

Once the film roll is full, it must be unwound, developed and fixed. The negatives must be viewed and exposed in a darkroom. Today, this process is almost a provocation, a performative act if you will. That all takes time, and this picture-maker takes that time. He describes himself as a "wondering wanderer" between worlds.

His pictures are both a gift and a challenge; an invitation to take the time to look, not only to consume images, not to have to be there live. His pictures are generous; they allow us to gain some distance to reflect over what they show.

Akinbiyi's photos from a wide variety of big cities do not serve any expectations. Far from clichés and exoticism, the photographer moves elegantly between different cultural contexts, conveys to us an impression of the most varied of urban lifestyles, opens horizons without judging what he's seen or exaggerating his own views.

Akinbiyi is sensitive to the power gap between the one who sees and who is seen, between the person taking a picture and the one shown on the picture and thus, ultimately, also for the inequality between the audience that appreciates the pictures and the subjects of these very pictures. The question of who or what lifestyle appears exotic to who can be asked us, too, in an unusual way through his work. Perhaps we, with our more or less privileged lifestyles, our cultural arrogance, are exotic and foreign to many people in Lagos, Cairo or even Berlin.

Akinbode Akinbiyi is a gentle bridge-builder, a tireless communicator, a picture-making curator and teacher who passes on his experience and knowledge to a new generation of picture-makers, sometimes in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg or a school in Bayreuth.

In his essay published in the mid-1990s in the magazine DU, "Sterben vor kalten Objektiven. Fotografie in, aus und über Afrika," starting with the enslavement and colonization of African cultures, Akinbiyi describes the distortion of perceptions of Africa as a dark continent populated by primitive cannibals or, at best, noble savages. Variations on this

narrative – each in more contemporary guise – still thread today through the centuries of pictorial representations of complex African cultures.

There is a tradition of privileged, non-native photographers who show us foreign cultures that they may not understand, yet nevertheless want to explain and make understandable to us. Their often heavily prejudiced viewpoint is found not only in dusty coffee table books, but still also runs through the work of young, dedicated and well-meaning picture-makers today.

In the past two or three decades, however, interest in indigenous voices has also grown, say, in photographers like Samuel Fosso, David Goldblatt, Jo Ractliffe or the exhibition African Remix curated by Simon Njami in 2004.

Alongside his own photographic work, encouraging these voices is a central concern of today's awardee. For a long time he has been conveying his extensive knowledge to young African photographers and helping many yet-unknown talents find a unique perspective on their respective life worlds and more international visibility. With his commitment, Akinbiyi makes enormous contributions to the "migration of cultures" and in his work complexly reflects the "cultures of migration."

"I think humankind in itself is an open, generous being," he was quoted in a 2009 Berlin city newspaper.

Because of this openness and his work, with which Akin Akinbiyi has made outstanding contributions to intercultural exchange for decades, he is a more than deserving awardee of this year's Goethe Medal.