



François-Xavier Gbré  
The Past is a Foreign Country



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# The Past is a Foreign Country

Brendan Wattenberg

In the summer of 2010, François-Xavier Gbré was sent to assist an eminent American photographer on a fashion shoot. After four years of living in Milan, where he had worked primarily in commercial and editorial photography contracted through the Italian agency Exit, Gbré was leaving Europe to resettle in West Africa. The assignment was a parting gift. To prepare, Gbré quickly glossed the photographer's images online. On location outside of Milan, in a village originally built for factory workers, Gbré was charged with managing digital memory cards and processing images for a spread entitled "Un Racconto" ("A Tale"), which appeared in October 2010 in the fashion magazine *Amica*. Only much later, when he picked up a copy of the photographer's classic monograph *Uncommon Places*, did Gbré realize the significance of having worked with Stephen Shore.

Gbré was born in 1978 in Lille, France, to a French-Ivorian family. Once a thriving industrial center, in the 1970s and '80s, like many European cities formerly dependent on coal mining or factory production, Lille was in decline. As a teenager, Gbré remembers friends who took jobs at a Unilever plant. But by the time he began to photograph in Lille, on visits home during the years he lived in Milan, the building was slated for destruction. The thresholds of nearly erased architecture occupy his early photographs from this period: buildings that were once somewhere appear at the edge of being nowhere. In the interlude between decay and collapse, such buildings have a brief second life as purely aesthetic objects. Like Shore, whose pioneering images of city streets, hotel rooms, and vernacular architecture are intimately connected with the transformation of landscape and color photography in the late twentieth century, Gbré finds in the surfaces of the built environment complex narratives about economy and history, geography and memory.

*The Past is a Foreign Country* marks Gbré's first solo show in North America. Commissioned as a site-specific installation for the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, the exhibition includes selections of photographs from series Gbré created between 2009 and 2015 in West Africa and France, whose disparate subjects are united by a methodical, often distanced perspective on architecture and landscape as forms of documentary evidence. Building upon an exhibition style he has pursued in biennials, group shows, and solo projects since 2011, Gbré poses a dialogue on scale by juxtaposing immersive wallpaper prints with an installation of what he calls "constellations" — more than fifty small-scale studies that open up explorations into his larger, single images. He resists strict chronological or geographical categories, instead allowing images to flow together through associative and structural impressions. In addition to his works from the ongoing series *Tracks* — comprising photographic essays on industries in France; the Olympic Pool at the Modibo Keita Stadium in Bamako, Mali; the national printing factory in Porto-Novo, Bénin; and various West African and Middle Eastern sites — *The Past is a Foreign Country* features photographs from Gbré's most recent





Stephen Shore, *Natural Bridge*, New York, July 31, 1974

exploration of urban development in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, the city he now calls home.

The past in Gbré's work is foreign and unfinished. Heroic military statues in Bamako claim victories for a nation badgered by intermittent violence and uprising. Modernist architecture, once the imposing signature of former colonial powers, falls in ruin. A new house under construction in a suburb of Abidjan seeks to erase the squalor of an urban slum. The wreckage of a once-prosperous French factory embodies the indifference of an industry in thrall to the flow of capital toward ever-cheaper labor. Unlike the historian, however, Gbré doesn't propose a comprehensive history of French colonialism in West Africa or of the turbulent growth of post-independence African cities. His images instead summon the personal experience of the built environment, the memories and aspirations encoded in concrete, rebar, clay, and dust. In architecture, as Shore has said, "there are parameters of expectation, and of meaning, of how people are supposed to respond to a building, of the tradition it comes from ... all of which has gone through exposure to time and the elements."<sup>1</sup> Being most accessible through and vividly illustrated by photography, architecture must pass through the exposure of the camera and, as Gbré's work intimates, the perspective of the artist. The exposure of the built environment — the radiant moment when the present is fixed in the past — is the subject of this exhibition.

### Landscape and Real Estate

As the medium of photography emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, architecture became the ideal subject for a chemical process that required long exposure times. Docile and durable, buildings in photographs encompassed a catalogue of historical and aesthetic references, from the temples of the ancient world

1. Stephen Shore in conversation with Lynne Tillman in Stephen Shore, *Uncommon Places: The Complete Works* (New York: Aperture, 2004), 183.



Stephen Shore, *Room 509, Dnipro Hotel*, Kiev, Ukraine, July 18, 2012

to the cast-off streets of Eugène Atget's Paris.<sup>2</sup> Architectural photography was always in conversation with itself: European governments commissioned official studies of cities and regions so as to improve the "image" of the nation, while architects amassed photographic archives for their own future reference. From the beginning, although photography was touted as an objective science, photographs of buildings were carefully edited, either by seeking the most ideal and flattering perspective during the shoot, or by omitting unsightly details in the printing process. Still, there is a clear difference between documenting structures from bygone centuries and depicting a new building in the contemporary landscape. "Architects have long understood the power of photography as a promotional tool," Elias Redstone writes. The genre of architectural photography was perfected by magazines, architects, and realtors who sought "to present buildings in the best possible light, in a similar manner to professional portrait photography."<sup>3</sup> The architectural photograph is an interpretive record and an insurance policy — a souvenir, an aide-mémoire, an illusion of permanent stability. There is only one chance for the last best representation of a new building; just when it's finished, it immediately begins to age.

Landscape, like architecture, was also one of the enduring protagonists for the first generation of photographers. As the genre has coursed through multiple forms and grown to embrace critical subcategories concerned with the changes to an environment or the effects of industrialization, the fascination with the ostensibly pure, untouched, awe-inspiring vista has never diminished. In Gbré's photography, however, the physical landscape is inextricable from the social context. Although he rarely includes people in his images, even in otherwise densely populated cities, the effects of human intervention upon the landscape are constantly on view.

2. See Gordon Baldwin, "Points of View: Photographers and Architecture," *Architecture in Photographs* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013).

3. Elias Redstone, *Shooting Space: Architecture in Contemporary Photography* (London: Phaidon, 2014), 6.



François-Xavier Gbré, Unilever II, Haubourdin, France, 2010

In merging the techniques of landscape and architectural photography — and thereby establishing a method for social critique — Gbré’s work is best compared to that of the artists associated with the “New Topographics” of the 1970s, in which houses, industrial buildings, suburban developments, and natural landscapes were transformed, though photographs, into the semiotics of late capitalism. In the varying approaches of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Stephen Shore, Robert Adams, and Lewis Baltz, among others included in the 1975 landmark — but, at the time, underappreciated — exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of the Man-Altered Landscape*, physical structures are envisioned as representational systems defining a society and its values. A house wasn’t simply a private building, but also a symbol or symptom. A once-sublime landscape was fertile territory for development. Drawing from the imagery and philosophies at that juncture in history — a time when photography was becoming absorbed by movements in contemporary art and more actively collected by museums — Gbré, in his considered and rooted profile of West Africa, has made his own topographics.

From 2009 to 2010, Gbré traveled to France, Israel, and Mali, where he photographed an array of contemporary architectural ruins. These bodies of work, which were later collected in *Tracks*, reveal Gbré’s ongoing preoccupation with buildings as sculptural elements in the landscape, as well as the influence of his commercial training as a photographer of interiors. No fashionable design magazine would run an image such as Gbré’s absorbing study of the deteriorating Unilever factory in Haubourdin, France (plate 4), but in the service of describing the fate of a particular structure, Gbré marshals the straightforward framing, precise lighting balance, and acute sensitivity to color requisite to any glossy promotional picture of a well-appointed apartment. Absent of workers, the factory nonetheless appears marginally inhabited; traces of graffiti denote the building’s passage through the purgatory of obsolescence. As Joel Smith writes in *The Life and Death*

François-Xavier Gbré, Swimming Pool III, Bamako, 2009



*of Buildings*, his study of photography and time, buildings contain multiple sensations of time simultaneously:

The past, which in conventional language lies “behind” us, in reality surrounds us. History confers language, myth, and customs, and with them a durable past made of stone, wood, and glass. The history we inhabit in buildings is no comprehensive archive; it is a patchwork of survivals, a discontinuous and evolving collage. Still, the building, of all varieties of artifact, represents continuity of an important kind: that of location. Civilization grows around the building like coral around an island. A new-laid foundation expresses hope in the future of a plot of land; an abandoned building signifies a surrender.<sup>4</sup>

“Surrender,” perhaps, is a harsh word. The Unilever factory may have fallen victim to the economic imperatives of post-industrial France, but in the disused buildings Gbré finds in West Africa, many of which were constructed under European colonialism or in the immediate post-independence era, the questions of survival and surrender are far more ambivalent.

Gbré’s iconic photograph of the Olympic Pool at the Modibo Keita Stadium in Bamako illuminates the vexing tension between the aspirations of nationalism and the lived politics of urban planning (plate 21). Built in 1967 by the U.S.S.R. and named for the first president of Mali, the pool was meant to become a showcase for the 1969 All-Africa Games. However, following a military coup, it was never used as intended.<sup>5</sup> The multi-tiered diving board at the far end of the empty pool, which Gbré photographed from various points of view, appears as a startling, minimalist sculpture, a delicate gouache cutout, or a cenotaph for a lost time. The view is vertiginous. In his video “La Piscine,” from 2011, Malian immigrants seeing pictures of the pool say, “Where is this? Is this in Africa?” Soon they recall the stadium, the neighborhood, and the former president himself, of whose legacy the namesake buildings should, they say, be “worthy.” Instead, after

4. Joel Smith, *The Life and Death of Buildings: On Photography and Time* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 13.

5. Caroline Bagenal, “Vital Voices,” *Afterimage* 40 (November/December 2012): 32–33.





Robert Polidori, Samir Geagea Headquarters, Rue de Damas, Beirut, Lebanon, 1994

years of decline, the pool was closed in 2005 and later treated to a Chinese-sponsored renovation. An emblem, to borrow Smith's words, of the "discontinuous and evolving collage" of Bamako, the pool is a trophy and a ruin, a geopolitical investment and a nostalgic relic of an event that never occurred.

Through his photographic archaeology of building sites long ago rendered useless by age or neglect — the afterimage, or the negative image, of a magazine spread — Gbré's work invites comparison to the work of three photographers who have extensively chronicled changes to the urban landscape. Robert Polidori's series on renovations to Versailles and the fading interiors of Havana's grand homes exhibit the sumptuous clarity of the best architectural photography; in his exploration of Samir Geagea's headquarters in Beirut, abandoned buildings in Chernobyl, and New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina, Polidori maintains an unrelenting gaze upon the surfaces of crumbling or destroyed structures that would seem to border on aesthetic voyeurism. Indeed, John Updike discerned a disturbing "opulence" in *After the Flood*, Polidori's exhibition catalogue of photographs from New Orleans, although he also acknowledged "an abstract beauty in Polidori's close-focus studies of patterns of mold and paint distress."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Gbré — whose images from the factories outside of Lille and an abandoned governor's palace in Lomé, Togo, share Polidori's expressive color palette and rigorous appearance of objectivity — actively poses nuanced, sometimes deeply embedded questions about the political histories that control both construction and destruction.

Guy Tillim's series on modernist architecture in Africa, *Avenue Patrice Lumumba*, is an analogue to Gbré's study of buildings and infrastructure in West African capitals. During the 1980s and '90s, Tillim traveled throughout Africa as a photo-journalist for Reuters and Agence France-Presse. In 2007, upon

6. John Updike, "After Katrina," *The New York Review of Books*, November 30, 2006.



Robert Polidori, 2732 Orleans Avenue, New Orleans, La., September 2005

the invitation of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, he began a new body of work in which he returned to the countries he once covered — Madagascar, Mozambique, Congo — to examine the legacy of colonial-era buildings, many of which were abandoned or moldering. Tillim described his project not simply as a record of mid-twentieth-century design, but also as a "walk through avenues of dreams." As he noted in a recent interview:

There was this awkward and complex embrace of the symbols of colonial power. However, in photographing these places, there was a danger of being some sort of connoisseur of decay, creating what could be perceived as a metaphor for the African condition. I tried to overcome that by immersing myself in my notions of what it would be like to live there, a fantastical place carrying so obviously the marks of history and where the future can be reinvented, a place of possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Gbré's photographs from Sotuba, Bamako (plates 26–29), in which monumental architecture haltingly emerges across the landscape, contain similar dissonances between site and structure as Tillim evokes in *Avenue Patrice Lumumba*. What kinds of buildings "belong" in Africa? Whose version of the national story is told through architecture? How should design be renovated or remembered? These questions, implicitly posed by Tillim, find new resonance in Gbré's work, which often zooms in from the formal architectural view to the geometrical surfaces of a building, the rust and paint, the inlaid tile, the exposed ceiling, the tin roof (pp. TK–TK).

Gbré's ongoing examination of the changes to Abidjan — one of his current subjects — shows the transformation of urban space. Under French colonialism, Abidjan was the economic capital of Francophone West Africa. Following the independence

7. Guy Tillim, "Guy Tillim and Arthur Walter: In Conversation," in *O Futuro Certo* (Göttingen: Steidl; and New York: The Walther Collection, 2015), 242–44.



Guy Tillim, New town square with wrapped statue of Agostinho Neto, Sumba, Angola, from *Avenue Patrice Lumumba*, 2008

of Côte d'Ivoire from France in 1960, Abidjan burnished its cosmopolitan reputation as the "Paris of Africa." Gleaming hotels and modern skyscrapers characterized the skyline of Le Plateau, and upper-class residents settled in the attractive Cocody district. After a prolonged decline in the 1980s, civil conflicts in the early 2000s, and an election crisis from 2010 to 2011, contemporary Abidjan is again experiencing surges of growth and development. The landscape is primed for change. Within this atmosphere of political willpower and economic incentive, Gbré has tracked down the anonymous ruins of homes and buildings felled in the effort to clear sections of the city for new housing and highways (plates 16,31). In her discussion of architecture and photography, Kate Bush writes, "Architecture embodies the tension between the enduring and the transitory, development and decay, negation and renewal."<sup>8</sup> The photographs of Abidjan that Gbré has made since 2013, including his images of humble structures and soaring towers, provide a circumspect appraisal. Insofar as "renewal" is a polite term for gentrification, Gbré suggests that the markers of progress evident in the landscape, so easily heralded by local government, are underscored by population displacement and expedient design.

With its austere geometry, Gbré's photograph of a new house in "Cité Espérance #2" shows the thematic and conceptual influence of the American photographer Lewis Baltz, an artist he has long admired. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Baltz photographed tract houses in California: new homes for the postwar middle class. "In the high-contrast 'Tract Houses' series," Jeff Rian writes of the incisive imagery, "Baltz revealed conceptually — and critically — the skeletal framework of late capitalism's assembly-line neighbourhoods."<sup>9</sup> Baltz didn't have to picture the complete homes or the families who would live there; "they were implied." *The Tract Houses*, and Baltz's later series *Park City*, represent the decline of American individualism and a utilitarian, indifferent approach to suburban planning. The streets and the

8. Kate Bush, "The Two-Way Street: The Photography of Architecture," in Redstone, *Shooting Space*, 8.

Jeff Rian, Lewis Baltz (London: Phaidon, 2001), 8.



Guy Tillim, Apartment building, Beira, Mozambique, from *Avenue Patrice Lumumba*, 2008

homes acted to standardize and contain the American family at a time when that very thing was a crumbling myth.

The new housing developments of contemporary Abidjan, however, represent the ascent of an emerging economy in a city that less than a decade ago was the theater of a violent conflict (plates 31–32). Appropriately, and consistent with all of his work on architecture, Gbré has rendered the house in color, a more empathic choice than Baltz's black-and-white tonality in *The Tract Houses*. Nonetheless, the slow-moving wave of red mud in this uncanny photograph, as Gbré notes, is "the only element that says you are in West Africa." This house could be anywhere. Like in Baltz's series, the future residents of Cité Espérance are not only "implied," but also, somehow, incidental. Are we meant to commend the builders of these homes and the many other housing developments Gbré photographed, for delivering the "Ivorian Dream"? Or instead should we challenge the conformity, the environmental degradation, the slum clearance, and the apparent lack of concern for vernacular design and climate-appropriate amenities? In an interview about a later series on the American West, Baltz claimed that he would like his work to be "neutral and free from ideological posturing." But, of course, there's no such thing as neutrality. The spaces most often deemed as neutral or objective are the very sites in which ideological mechanics are most deeply entrenched. Every photograph — produced from a security camera, a tourist's point-and-shoot, or an artist's high-definition lens — has a perspective. Baltz continued:

One of the most common views our society has of nature is among the most rigorously secular and least appealing: landscape-as-real-estate. ... This attitude holds all non-productive land as marginal; nature is what is left over after every other demand has been satisfied. The fact that the land offers our society such an excellent arena for its venality should tell us much about what is distinctly "modern" in landscape.<sup>10</sup>

10. Toby Jurovics, "Same as it Ever Was: Re-reading *New Topographics*," in Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, eds., *Reframing the New Topographics* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2010), 7.





Lewis Baltz, Tract House no. 4, 1969–71

Gbré's photographic profile of contemporary Abidjan adroitly provokes similar and enduring questions about the destiny of West African landscapes and the contingency of this destiny on the visual articulations of space. Here, in the structure of the house in "Cité Espérance #2," is an avatar for middle-class Ivorian social identity. It's a vision at once futuristic and old-fashioned. What could have been an advertisement in a real estate office, or an escapist fantasy in a decor magazine, is instead an unsparing portrait of society as a work-in-progress.

### Signs Taken for Wonders

If a sonnet is a moment's monument, a photograph is a monument's poem. The monuments that Gbré photographed in Bamako, Mali, beginning in 2010, rise from the urban landscape as figures in a royal drama. Authoritative and unyielding, even the statues undergoing construction command a type of attention that should induce respect (plates 28–29). Given the recent upheaval in Mali, however, and the failures of the state, these memorials exist as objects in an ersatz open-air museum. (Susanna D. Wing discusses the contemporary politics of Bamako in her essay on pages 70–75.) The monuments of Bamako are coterminous with the broader post-independence African project of throwing off the yoke of European rule, writ large in the avenues of modernist architecture such as those Tillim photographed throughout the continent. Once considered the "laboratory" for colonial power — and a pipeline of raw materials to the European metropole — the ostensibly independent African city was faced with what Garth Myers has called the "daunting task" of "decolonizing urban space" from the 1960s onward. It hasn't been easy. "Postcolonial regimes," Myers argues, "have often improved upon the strategies of colonial administrators, becoming more exclusivist, authoritarian, and segmented."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Gbré's series *Mali Militari* appears to be the work of a surveyor, a citizen journalist quietly asking: Who are these monuments for?

11. Garth Myers, *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 54–56.



François-Xavier Gbré, Cité Espérance #2, Route de Bingerville, 2013

From the mid-1990s to 2002, the government of Mali, then under the leadership of Alpha Oumar Konaré, constructed some forty monuments for Bamako. According to Mary Jo Arnoldi, these commemorative statues were meant to transform the city into "national *lieux de mémoire*" (places of memory); a subsequent media campaign promoted "official interpretations" of the monuments and their place in the urban imagination. Two categories were identified by government cultural advisors: The first "would memorialize individuals and groups who contributed to the fight for independence and liberty in Mali and Africa at large; the second would draw upon symbols that encode nationalist ideals more abstractly."<sup>12</sup> Many of these structures were integrated into the street grid and became landmarks — in the perhaps unmonumental sense that they stood to identify certain intersections, guiding commuters through the city. As Arnoldi explains, these transformed urban spaces have become, in theory, "a site for the performance of national citizenship," allowing Malians "to share in a sentiment of national belonging" — even though that sentiment, in practice, would more likely be governed by a stable political system.<sup>13</sup>

Upon this extant network of monuments, like new codes on a palimpsest, Amadou Toumani Touré commissioned a second group of memorials in 2011, out of an aspiration to glorify the army. Gbré photographed these new monuments, forged in concrete but painted to appear bronze, creating time-based series tracking their process of construction. The glory was short lived. Within a year, there was a coup d'état in Mali, consigning the project to the conditional tense and leaving behind a collection of structures that might have been the pride of the nation.

Gbré was living between Mali and France before and after the coup. Eventually, as the situation became too precarious, he and his family decided to settle in Abidjan. There, since 2013, he has discovered the varied surfaces — construction sites, university

12. Mary Jo Arnoldi, "Bamako, Mali: Monuments and Modernity in the Urban Imagination," *Africa Today* 54.2 (Winter 2007): 4, 11.

13. Ibid., 13–14.



François-Xavier Gbré, *Voiture #1*, Attoban, Cocody, Abidjan, 2014

buildings, stained-glass windows, road works — which comprise a continuous photographic essay on a city he has known since his first visit at the age of seventeen. In *The City: Becoming and Decaying*, Marcus Jauer writes:

[The city] is where the fate of humanity will be decided. What happens to the city also happens to us. In the city people who would avoid each other in the country or never even meet confront one another. The city attracts a great concentration of poverty, while at the same time it is often the only way to escape impoverishment. The city shows the power of planning and also how planning can become utterly meaningless. It gives everyone the feeling that they belong to something, but then shows them that the parts have nothing to do with one another. It provides closeness and creates anonymity. The city is everything and its opposite, all at once, in the same place.<sup>14</sup>

The car in “*Voiture #1*,” which Gbré photographed in Cocody, is the shining, intimate prize at the center of Abidjan’s transformation (plate 33). A beguiling masterwork of composition, this car is delicately held at the center of the image by the curved and straight borders of the parking lot curb and set against the emerald shadow of a cropped hedge, itself fringed with two pen lines of light. The vehicle withholds its identity, yet with the sleek curves of its tarp wrapper (Gbré has referred to it as a “gift”), it draws a magnetic and insatiable curiosity.

Like the unfinished green house in “*Cité Espérance #2*,” this photograph — tantalizingly similar yet completely unlike an advertisement — represents Gbré’s synthesis of both the bold transparency of Baltz and the language of deadpan photography exemplified by Shore. But Gbré’s photograph isn’t deadpan for its own sake: within the subtle details of the scene — the flaking sidewalk, the piece of thrown-away paper, and particularly the

14. Marcus Jauer and Felix Hoffmann, *The City: Becoming and Decaying* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 7.



François-Xavier Gbré, *Pont HKB #1*, Abidjan, 2014

unseen, but implicit, gesture of wrapping the car as an act of protection — the machinery of urban politics continues to vibrate. “The aspiration of any Ivorian is to get a car,” Gbré says. Everyone wants to avoid the tangled commute on public transportation. A car of one’s own, therefore, is both an expedient escape from the burgeoning city and that city’s brightest symbol of nouveau privilege. Yet, what good is a new car if there’s nowhere to go?

The architecture of movement is always directed by urban design, by the flow of a city’s roads or the congestion of its traffic, by the infrastructure meant to be at once practical and symbolic. In 2014, Gbré photographed a massive pylon of the Henri Konan Bédié Bridge emerging as a monument from the lagoon surrounding Abidjan (plate 34). Pont HKB frees up two older bridges and provides an express route from the northern suburbs to the port. Named for the former Ivorian president, the new bridge was the first major public works project to be completed since the country’s civil war in the early 2000s, displaying a sense of normalcy after the military conflict in 2011. Together with “*Voiture #1*,” the bridge in “*Pont HKB #1*” enacts a new reading of the famous opening sentence of L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between*, from which the title of this exhibition is borrowed: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” In other West African capitals, Gbré found ruins and tributes, the things of the past; in Abidjan, he found the symbols — the ready-made sculptures — that claim to dispense with history like rocket boosters falling back to earth. Gbré’s photograph of Pont HKB reveals the city as immanent: the place to belong, the place to become. It’s so easy to imagine being the first driver across its great span, to have the music turned up, to have no one and nothing ahead of you except the shimmering skyline and an abstract dream about the future.



# Plates





2 / Porte #2, Église Harriste, Bingerville, 2013



3 / Cité Universitaire Jean Mermoz #1, Cocody, Abidjan, 2014









5/ Poyaud I, Surgères, France, 2010



6/ Unilever IV, Haubourdin, France, 2010





7/ Renault 12, Imprimerie Nationale, Porto-Novo, 2012



8/ Thomas Boni Yayi, Président de la République du Bénin, Imprimerie Nationale, Porto-Novo, 2012









10 / Archives I, Imprimerie Nationale, Porto-Novo, 2012



11 / Salle d'attente, Imprimerie Nationale, Porto-Novo, 2012









13 / Néon #1, Yopougon, Abidjan, 2014



14 / Répartition par école, Bingerville, 2014













17 / Hall de l'Imprimerie Nationale, Imprimerie Nationale, Porto-Novo, 2012



18 / Palais du Gouverneur, Lomé, 2012





19 / Poyaud X, Surgères, France, 2011



20 / Poyaud XIII, Surgères, France, 2012

























26 / Pont de l'amitié sino-malienne #1, Sotuba, Bamako, 2013



27 / Avenue des armées #4, Sotuba, Bamako, 2011































# Monument City

Susanna D. Wing

Bamako is a city of contradictions. Ostentatious wealth and the effects of malnutrition are visible in nearly every neighborhood of Mali's capital city. Omnipresent 4x4s with passengers in crisply starched and immaculate *boubous* roll through streets of red dust and potholes. Air conditioning blasts inside the vehicles, while the street is lined with women and children selling food, clothing, or water in daytime heat that regularly climbs to well over one hundred degrees. Makeshift tables and UNHCR tarps, laid on the ground and covered with merchandise, encroach on the roadway until the police decide to make a sweep and "return order" to the thoroughfare.

Bamako's open spaces are rapidly being filled with concrete. ACI 2000 is a neighborhood of expensive villas and embassies. It didn't exist twenty years ago. Instead, there was an old airfield in its place. Incomplete construction is everywhere. Half-built concrete homes often tell a story of lean times for a breadwinner. Bamako has only a few high-rise buildings; at times, some neighborhoods feel sleepy. Cows are still herded along streets in Hippodrome, and goats graze grass in Badalabougou, two of the city's oldest residential neighborhoods. Rush hour in the heart of the city, however, is bedlam. Sotramas, the ubiquitous green vans packed with commuters, and Jakartas, cheap motorbikes, jockey for space on the streets with Land Rovers and Mercedes. Ancient Peugeots, painted yellow and serving as taxis, might have doors attached with wire. Traffic rules and traffic lights were once nonexistent. Today, overpasses, exit ramps, and even blinking pedestrian crossing lights can be found. Policemen blow whistles and stop cars for no apparent reason. They demand to see car registration papers and then let drivers leave after receiving their "*prix du thé*" — a bribe meaning the "price of tea."

I visited Bamako in 1994 as a young graduate student traveling to Mali and Africa for the first of many subsequent trips. Only three years had passed since Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré led the military coup that overthrew General Moussa Traoré. Touré, commonly referred to as ATT, had defended protestors, led by students and women, who had taken to the streets to demand democracy. When ATT stepped aside so that a president could be elected, he became a hero who was known around the world as a "soldier of democracy." The optimism was palpable. The country was embarking on a path that all hoped would lead to economic renewal and political freedom. Alpha Oumar Konaré, elected president in 1992, believed in the power of monuments to celebrate the country's rich history and to unite Mali's diverse peoples. For the ten years that Konaré was in power, memorials appeared across the capital and throughout the country's regions. The monument of the crocodiles celebrates Bamako (in Bambara, *bama* is crocodile and *ko* is river). The giant hippopotamus statue celebrates Mali (the Bambara word for hippo is *mali*).

In 1957, a bridge connecting downtown Bamako to neighborhoods on the other side of the vast Niger River opened. It was





République du Mali, Sotuba, Bamako, 2012

named the “Pont des Martyrs” in 1961, a year after Mali gained independence. It is also called the “Ancien Pont” or “Old Bridge.” Mothers marched across this bridge from Badalabougou in support of their children who protested against or were killed by soldiers of the Traoré regime during the 1991 revolution. In 1992, a new bridge, still referred to today as the “Nouveau Pont,” was built. There was a rapid expansion of infrastructure and monuments to adorn the new, expanded roadways in the city, which had only a handful of paved roads in 1994. The monuments that dominated intersections inevitably became waypoints for explaining directions when few road signs existed and most inhabitants could not read or write. They also came in handy while riding in a taxi and explaining where one wanted to go: for example, “take me to the intersection with the hippo” seemed the best way to get to Boulevard de l’Indépendance.

The hilltop district of Koulouba (which means “mountain” in Bambara) overlooks the city of Bamako. The presidential residence is at its summit and can be seen from along the riverbanks and throughout the city. The murals found at Koulouba represent colonial administrators, African soldiers who fought for the French, and Samory Touré, the founder of the Wassoulou Empire. They evoke roughly 150 years, only a brief period in the deep history of the region, a period linked to the administration and defense of the modern state. ATT, who was elected President in 2002, was overthrown just one month prior to the presidential elections in March 2012. Soldiers mounted Koulouba, and shots were fired into the presidential palace. ATT fled from Koulouba on foot, taking a steep path through the brush to a vehicle waiting at the base of the hill to whisk him away to safety. Months later, young Malians scaled the walls of the palace and brutally attacked Interim President and former President of the National Assembly Dioncounda Traoré. Traoré had taken control after the coup leader Amadou Sanogo was forced to relinquish power. Unfortunately, Traoré represented the continued domination of the same old political elite. The palace and its resident president

Almani Samory Toure, Koulouba, Bamako, 2013



Colonel Borgnis Desbordes, Koulouba, Bamako, 2013



Général Faidherbe, Koulouba, Bamako, 2013







Le Voile, Avenue des Armées,  
Bamako, 2012.

became the object of growing anger and frustration for elites who lived lavish lives and who spoke publicly about fighting poverty and corruption, while most Malians struggled to get by. The putsch that led to the overthrow of ATT was widely supported by Malians who were tired of the political class and its disregard for the law. Malians still celebrate democracy, but it is a democracy constructed on the ideals of the 1991 revolution, not the democratic house without a foundation that was built in the subsequent years.

The statue *Group of Fighters Attacking*, which François-Xavier Gbré photographed in 2011 as part of a series on monuments in Bamako, embodies many contradictions. This celebration of Malian soldiers came at a complicated moment in the country's history. Conflict is ongoing in northern Mali between multiple armed groups and the Malian military, while United Nations peacekeepers are participating in the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). A recent peace agreement — signed with great fanfare in May 2015 — was distinctly one-sided with the state and pro-state militias being the only signatories. Violence ensued, and separatists continue to demand recognition of Azawad as an independent territory in northern Mali. Unity is precarious, although territorial integrity and the secularity of the Malian state are inviolable aspects of any peace agreement according to the Malian government. Despite a perennial conflict that has roots extending prior to independence, the state failed to provide adequate support for Malian soldiers in the north. In February 2012, women from the garrison town in Kati led a protest march to demand that their husbands and brothers get the support that they need and that the state be honest about the number of military casualties following an attack by Tuareg separatists in Aghuedok in January. This tension contributed to the March 2012 mutiny that ultimately resulted in the overthrow of ATT. When *Group of Fighters Attacking* was commissioned, soldiers were continuing without pay. They had very little food and insufficient weapons and ammunition to defend themselves.



Groupe de combattants à l'assaut,  
Sotuba, Bamako, Avenue des Armées,  
16 janvier 2012

As Ansar Dine and other Islamist extremist groups — including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) — claimed territory, soldiers fled, and still others simply changed sides.

The monument *République du Mali* depicts soldiers marching in formation with the Malian flag both in front of them and behind them as a backdrop, and is shocking in its display of unity and strength. The stark quality of the location reinforces the flimsiness of the state whose armed forces crumbled under attack. ATT, a former paratrooper, chose to celebrate soldiers, unity, and allegiance at a time when the state and its armed forces were little more than a façade.

Sotuba, where the memorials *Group of Fighters Attacking* and *République du Mali* are located, is the neighborhood on Bamako's Rive Gauche where the Troisième Pont (Third Bridge) was recently built. The Troisième Pont overshadows Bamako's original bridge, the Submersible Bridge, a simple, one-lane, stone roadway with intermittent pull-off spaces to allow the two-way traffic flow. The Submersible Bridge disappears underwater during the rainy season, making it impractical for a city that now spans both sides of the Niger. That a route across the Troisième Pont into the city is used to celebrate soldiers and the state through *The Assault* and *République du Mali* is no accident; the new, expansive roadways funnel captive onlookers past symbols of the state that betrayed them.

Gbré's images capture the contradictions of Bamako and its memorials. Their stark, austere quality is vastly different from the vibrancy of the city's popular neighborhoods. Depicting subjects from aging murals in Koulouba to new monuments in Sotuba, these photographs bring to mind the disparity between the state's audacious celebration of itself and the daily lives of so many Malians.



## In Conversation with François-Xavier Gbré

Emmanuel Iduma  
and Brendan Wattenberg

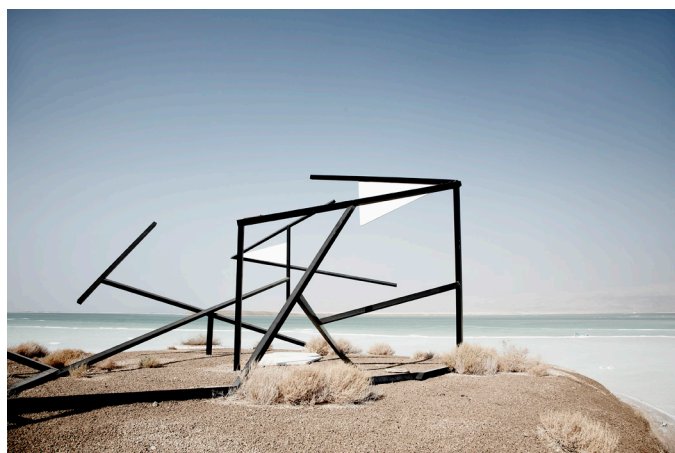
At the heart of a conversation about photographs is the reference to place and time. The work of François-Xavier Gbré, depicting the outer and inner life of landscape, particularly engages the history of places as they are made and remade. Sometimes the landscapes appear to contain only a *simulacre*, yet they suggest something more than the imitation of the passage of time — a memorial to the objects and the subjects who enact their personalities in front of monuments, incomplete buildings, dilapidated paper factories, and surfaces. The dialogue below is an instructive document on the work of Gbré. “Everything is connected,” he says in one response. The connections, indeed, can be made between the experiences prompting his work in African cities, his training in European cities, his relocation to Abidjan, and even his peculiar narrative of an urban culture being calibrated with alacrity speed. Such connections allow for a truly idiosyncratic reading of his work in Bamako, Abidjan, Dakar, Porto-Novo, France, and Israel. We read idiosyncratically to discover what is characteristic, what sets things apart. For Gbré, a convenient starting point would be to see his work as visionary. By this I do not only suggest his work is “ahead of its time,” but, also, that it sees the timely, the imminently profound.

— Emmanuel Iduma





The assault, Avenue des Armées, Sotuba, Bamako, 2011



Untitled, Dead Sea, Israel, 2009

**Brendan Wattenberg:** When we first met, you were speaking on a panel at Autograph ABP in London about an exhibition called *Uprooting the Gaze*. This was in the fall of 2010. How did you become involved with that project?

François-Xavier Gbré: Fondation Blachère, a French organization, invited a group of artists for a residency in Lyon. We were nominees of the foundation's prize at the Bamako Biennale in 2009. I spent two weeks with Zanele Muholi, Uche Okpa-Iroha, Nestor Da, Baudouin Mouanda, and the video artist Breeze Yoko. Afterward, we had an exhibition at the foundation and during the Brighton Photo Biennial.

**Wattenberg:** You were still living in Europe then, but were you already planning a move to West Africa?

Gbré: Originally, my plan was to go to Côte d'Ivoire. But, with the post-electoral crisis in 2010 and 2011, the situation there was very complicated. It wasn't safe. So, I decided to move to Mali. I had a great experience in Bamako during my first visit in 2009. I loved that city from the first minute. Bamako is a big village. The elements we usually find in a city are not really all there. You can find a mountain of tires on the street. You can see people working outside. The buildings are very low. When I arrived, I thought of Rome, which is another city surrounded by hills with a river crossing the center.

**Wattenberg:** How long did you stay?

Gbré: The first stay was more than six months. Then we went for a holiday in France. My partner was pregnant. A few days after we arrived, my father called me and said, "There is a coup in your country, in Mali." I switched on the TV, and there was the story. We decided to wait one month, two months. We spoke with our friends in Bamako. There was nothing to do, they said; the country's boring. It wasn't easy to move around. Our daughter was born in September, and in November we were back. We stayed until February the following year, one month after the French military arrived to "save" the people of Mali.

**Emmanuel Iduma:** I find this movement fascinating, dictated by the unpredictable influence of elections and politics. Have you thought about these

forms of instability in relation to the work you've made since moving back to West Africa?

Gbré: Everything is connected. My daily life in Bamako pushed me to focus on the military while working on landscapes. War is a problem in many countries, including Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. Even when I moved to Abidjan, I wanted to focus on the traces left in the architecture by the war.

**Wattenberg:** In Bamako, you were photographing monuments in the process of being built. Was this part of a public campaign? What did people think of these monuments?

Gbré: I remember that it was a new thing, so people were happy. But, because of the military coup, the work seemed absurd: monuments that glorify the army when the army is not there to keep the country safe. I used to take tea with a guy who had a shop in front of a monument. I asked him to take care of my motorcycle while I went around to photograph. It was funny to me, even though I realized that to build a monument was really not the priority at that moment.

**Iduma:** I was in Bamako last summer and on every corner of the city you have these monuments. There's even a monument of the elephant. In a way, they're kind of beautiful. But, you get the sense that they're taking up such a lot of space. I knew they were new, but I didn't know the historical context. What needed to be monumentalized?

Gbré: From 1992 until 2002, the President Alpha Oumar Konaré ordered the construction of many monuments. The aim was to create a national identity and unity. They should have a memorializing and educational function as well. At the beginning, people complained about the cost and the foreign inspiration. In 2011, President Amadou Toumani Touré required monuments to glorify the army. Being a general, I guess he wanted the Army Corps to be present in the public space too. These statues are made of cement. You have the leg, the body, the head, and they put the three pieces together. Then they're painted with a bronze color. So they look real, but these are real fakes.

**Iduma:** And the materials will not necessarily live for long. **Wattenberg:** Like most of your recent





Misi, Ségou, Mali, 2012



Hotel Elizabeth I, Tiberias, 2009

**work, the series on monuments in Bamako is concerned with the structure and surfaces of public space. Did this interest begin when you were a student?**

Gbré: I studied biochemistry in Lille, in the rainy country in the north of France. Then, in 2000, I decided to move to the sunny south to study photography. In Montpellier I studied at École Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques. I didn't have a background in art, so the school was more about techniques: you study to become a technician. Very few students from the school become photographers. After the first year I started working as an assistant. I finished my degree, and later I moved to Milan.

**Iduma: Who were the photographers you assisted?**

Gbré: In fashion and portraiture, it was Rankin, Michel Comte, Marino Parisotto, Fabrizio Ferri, and Lorenzo Vitturi, for example. In still life or architecture and design, I had a great experience with Tommaso Sartori and Michel Bousquet. I used to work on editorial for *Elle Decor*, *Casa Vogue*, and *D Casa*. I think I developed these methods in my later work — how to photograph interior space — from that experience. When you build a set to make a photograph for an advertisement, you have to think about all these elements, the lighting of a big scene. It's very precise work.

**Iduma: Were you also making photographs for yourself?**

Gbré: In Milan, I was dedicated to commercial photography. I assisted well-established photographers, and I rented a studio with three other photographers. I was working almost every day, doing commissioned still lifes, look books, fashion editorial, tests for modeling agencies, retouching, with no time to think about what I really wanted to do.

**Wattenberg: When you moved to Cote d'Ivoire, in 2013, what was your impression of Abidjan, a city that would become your home?**

Gbré: I think I need to be in a place for a long time to understand it. This is especially true for Abidjan. I would travel to Côte d'Ivoire for holidays to visit my father's family. My father moved to France in 1962. Going there every year or two years, I would see how

the city changed. I still remember some things that don't exist anymore. I was beginning to make my own series, but I didn't have enough time to build a consistent body of work. My most recent work comes from this experience of observation over time, the way I have looked at the city for many years.

**Iduma: Now that you've been living permanently in Abidjan, and you know more about the photography that's happening on the continent, or that has happened in West Africa, I wonder if you consider yourself part of any tradition of architectural photography or landscape photography?**

Gbré: Nowadays, everybody is connecting to everybody. My first influence was in Europe, so of course I looked to European photographers. I didn't even know about the Bamako Biennale. Maybe if I had known that in 2004, when I did my first work in Côte d'Ivoire, *Nouvelle Ivoirienne*, the Biennale could have helped me to receive feedback from curators. I didn't get this feedback on my personal work. And that's also why I focused on commercial work. Today, I feel like I'm part of the continent. We are all moving now. That's why Christine Eyene's exhibition *Uprooting the Gaze*, the one at the Brighton Biennial, really got the point.

**Wattenberg: Do you mean it was important to uproot your own gaze, since you had been looking to and working within European photography for so many years?**

Gbré: It's important to find what you really want to speak about. Then you focus on it, keeping an open mind, not forgetting where you come from or where you mainly built your gaze.

**Iduma: What are some of the more remarkable landscapes you've seen and would like to repeatedly photograph?**

Gbré: Here and there I have seen amazing landscapes that I have not necessarily photographed. But others, which are less naturally beautiful, can contain an element that disturbs, surprises, or makes no sense, which then brings you somewhere else. You know that you are looking at something remarkable and that you have to make a photograph. It is a rare feeling. These photographs are often excluded from any "series" because they're different or unexpected.





Swimming pool VII, Bamako, 2009



Palais de Justice, Dakar, 2014

These photos can stand alone, existing for themselves, out of any story. They make you look for this feeling again.

**Iduma: In Abidjan, Bamako, Porto-Novo, Lomé, and Dakar, as well as in France, you have taken photographs of interiors and surfaces. This distinguishes you from many landscape photographers. Why is interiority important to you, even though you photograph mainly landscapes?**

Gbré: The exteriors tell you about the architect, the “sponsor,” the period, the environment, or the region where the building is. The interiors tell you more about who is living inside. In a way, you are more in the present even if you are taking photographs of things that look old. Interiority is more personal, more intimate. Interiors are secret boxes.

**Wattenberg: Throughout your ongoing series *Tracks* there is a dialogue between interior and exterior. You’ve said *Tracks* is concerned with memory and identity, particularly in relation to the social and the built environment. What unites *Tracks*? How are all the geographies related?**

Gbré: On a CD or vinyl record, you have different tracks, different songs. The tracks can be the roads, the railway, the traces left by imprints. Each track is a chapter telling a different story. The first group in *Tracks* is of the Elizabeth Hotel in Tiberias. Then Bamako gave me a beautiful gift, which was the Olympic swimming pool. I photographed factories when I was in Europe. Before, I said I didn’t start personal work when I was in Milan. Actually, when I went to visit my family in France, I used to photograph the factories, especially the Unilever factory, which was being destroyed at that time. When I grew up, every day I could see the smoke coming out from this factory. My friends went to work there when they were eighteen years old. The north of France was an industrial region like Liverpool or Manchester. With the disintegration of the textile industry, factories were closed and abandoned. My friends and I used to spend time inside those vacant buildings. The first photographs I took in school were of my friends skateboarding, the graffiti in Lille, the urban culture. The factories chapter in *Tracks* is a mix of photographs of two distinct factories: Unilever in Haubourdin and Poyaud in Surgères (plates 4–6, 19–20). I mixed both because they

looked similar — and I could add more images from other industrial places because they all share the same end of European industrial history. Then came Bénin with the national printing shop and the palace of the governor in Lomé in 2012 (plates 7–12, 18). The last “track,” in 2014, is the Palais de Justice in Dakar (plates 24–25).

**Wattenberg: How did you come to make the pictures at the printing factory in Bénin?**

Gbré: In 2012 I was invited to participate in the show *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today* in Manchester, where I exhibited my work on the Olympic swimming pool and Hotel Elizabeth, and one picture from Lyon, of La Duchère. I met Stephan Köhler, the agent of the Béninese artist Georges Adéagbo. He suggested I come to Bénin to photograph a printing factory. Stephan organized a residency because he knew that the building would soon be cleaned.

**Wattenberg: What had they printed there?**

Gbré: The official newspaper that includes decrees, geographic borders, the boundaries of the country, and things from the ministries. The Bauhaus-style factory was built by Germans and inaugurated in 1924. The country’s name was changed over the four important political periods: the French Dahomey during the colonial time; the Republic of Dahomey after independence; the People’s Republic of Bénin during the revolution era, with strict Marxist-Leninist principles; and the Republic of Bénin starting in 1992. Three months after I photographed it, the factory building became an exhibition space for the Biennale Regard Bénin. During the Biennale, people from other countries could visit this building for the first time and discover it. To be able to clean the space, and to invite people to visit in a certain way, was very important. After the exhibition, Stephan told me that they changed a few things. For example, in the green room, the apartment of the director, they took off the door made of wood, and they put on one with aluminum and tinted glass (plate 12). They added a big air conditioner and big tiles from Lebanon or China. The soul of the factory that I photographed is gone now. They wanted to do a good thing, but they killed what was beautiful.





Maquis #1, Sotuba, Bamako, 2010



Installation view, Rencontres de Bamako, Blabla Bar, Bamako, 2011

**Iduma:** What was beautiful for you was the fact that this building was in this state of ruin, of disrepair. This is a visual theme running through many of your recent series. When you exhibit works from Tracks that mix up the series, you could have pictures from different countries and different periods of time on view together. How do you make the installations? What kinds of associations are you trying to create?

Gbré: Until 2014, I exhibited the strongest photographs from different chapters, without exploring one in depth. It was kind of an overview of the series, and the curators had to deal with the limited space and costs of the large prints. It was not easy to make coherent installations. We made decisions regarding the association of images with a common aesthetic. For example, in the Bamako Biennale in 2011, the curators chose three pictures from Bamako and two from Israel. But last year, at Art Twenty One in Lagos, was my first solo exhibition where I showed different chapters in the same space.

**Wattenberg:** When you make installations of numerous small pictures, or what you have called “constellations,” how do you organize these works?

Gbré: The first constellation was an experiment. I created it in May 2013 for the *Surfaces* exhibition at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury in Abidjan. It was a map made of photographs from Israel, Senegal, Mali, Bénin, and Togo. Here is the process: I print many photographs, and I create groups regarding the stories, shapes, and colors. I give a structure to each group, and then I try to link the groups in order to make sense of the series. These collections open new doors and windows to the viewer, who can go further in reading the artwork. I wish the viewer could have a deeper experience, one that is more like dreaming.

**Iduma:** In these constellations, and in your series, you’re not making a statement about African cities in general — that’s not your project. You’re doing something more conceptual.

Gbré: Yes. In *Mali Militari*, I have a few landscapes, but I try to speak about other things through them. I want my photos to have different readings, and also to be metaphorical. With time, I can see the link between my works from different cities because I’ve seen this situation or that social issue before in other

places. So I am able to produce similar photos in Dakar, Bamako, or Abidjan.

Now, what I find more interesting are photos with a “second degree.” For example, in one photo I made in Bamako, you can see a small table with two chairs in the foreground. Here, anybody with 500 CFA (approximately one US dollar) can have a seat and order a soda or a beer. In the background, there’s an amazing, expensive white house. Of course, we can see the social gap between the two. But I have also found one more reason to include it in the series. A few months after I made this photograph, the Azawad from the north declared independence and wanted Mali to be divided. People from the south and Bamako didn’t want to recognize this new state. The question in this photograph is also: why don’t they sit at the table to speak to each other — to resolve this conflict, to find a solution?

**Iduma:** Your work speaks about the character of a place. A critic might say that because you don’t make portraits of people, you’re not commenting on what it means to live in Bamako, or what it means to live in Abidjan. But you’re consciously thinking about how these spaces work — how they create and influence everyday life.

Gbré: I don’t often photograph humans, but I photograph what human beings do — the environments we make. I am interested in how, after being in a new place for a few years, it will remake you, and you will start thinking in a certain way. If you build a ghetto, don’t expect to get many brilliant students from it. Spaces reflect a society. Architecture is a social language.

**Iduma:** Are you also interested in photographing this illusion — how we might assume we alter space, whereas the space makes or even alters us?

Gbré: I show the man-altered landscape, wondering what impacts those alterations will have on us. I am interested in the effect of the place. I try to ask questions with my photographs. Nobody knows about the future.

**Iduma:** In relation to the building projects you photograph in Dakar, just traveling through the continent you see that these buildings are going up at the same time in almost every city. People say





Installation view, Biennale Regard Bénin, Cotonou, 2012



Installation view, Biennale Regard Bénin, Cotonou, 2012

that's evidence of "Africa Rising" — evidence that something new is happening on this continent. But the sense I get from looking at your images is that you're not really saying that this is something good. In the context of your other images of ruined or decaying buildings, you might also be projecting that these buildings will suffer the same fate as other structures that were also constructed in a spirit of optimism.

Gbré: It's nice to see all these recent buildings, and the impulse is great — but sometimes you can also see bad things in the good things. For example, in Dakar, I mainly work on the seafront. You have this road, and you can see the water everywhere from it. But now, the sea is disappearing behind these new buildings (plate 23). It's like the waterfront is becoming a private place for a little group of people who can get access to those buildings. One landscape is moving ahead, but there's also one that's disappearing.

**Iduma:** In your works, you describe this contradiction especially when a building is in the early stages of construction. You don't know what kind of building will emerge from this thing, this foundation. There is a tension in the subject. You don't necessarily see this shining vision; it's aspiring toward the future as much as it's aspiring toward the past.

Gbré: I seek the state between construction and destruction. This brings the viewer to a place of uncertainty and confusion.

**Wattenberg:** Do you see a similar tension in Abidjan?

Gbré: In Abidjan, we are building many things, but at the same time the authorities are cleaning the place using bulldozers. Recently, they destroyed more than fifty slums. I live very near to one. Gobélé was created in the early 1970s and was the biggest slum you could find in Cocody, 2 Plateaux — a very rich area. I spent weeks going there to photograph the walls and objects left in the middle of the rubble (plate 16).

**Wattenberg:** Are these areas cleared for new housing?

Gbré: Not always. It could be for roads or something else. The phenomenon of exclusion has existed in

Africa since the colonial period. The demolition of slums seeks to make public space "clean." On the other hand, the social housing program does not fit the demographic growth. Thousands of excluded people shift to other places, to the peripheries, to build new slums. So, the problem is displaced but not resolved. For sure, the people moving from the slum into social housing would be happy with this transition — it's a different life. I'm building a collection to preserve the memory of that place. Maybe the social housing built in this way will become the ghetto of tomorrow.

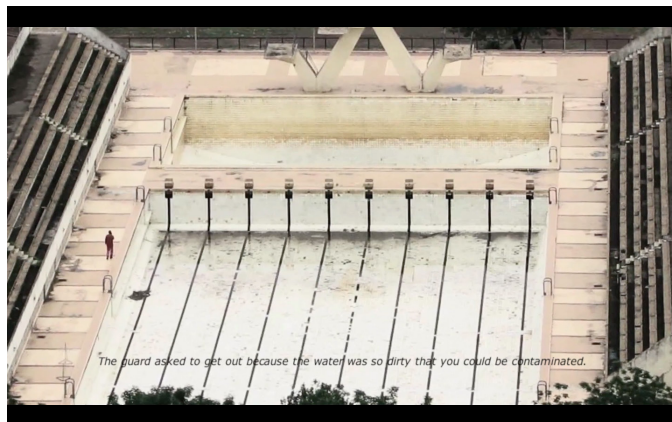
**Iduma:** How does the formal elegance or beauty of a photograph interest you? You have mentioned Lewis Baltz as an influence. His series on tract houses in 1960s America is both rigorously composed and socially critical.

Gbré: I am attracted to photographs that are not only elegant, but also strongly meaningful. I have deep respect for Lewis Baltz and for Allan Sekula for their social engagement. Think about this green house I found in Bingerville (plate 32). The red mud is the only element that says you are in West Africa, in Abidjan. If you don't look at the ground, just at the house, it could be a suburb in Germany or the U.K. When you build a house, you must save energy; your house must create the energy for itself. But, in a very hot and rainy country, we keep using cement for the walls and steel for the roof, which offer no thermal or acoustic insulation. It's hot inside, so you switch on the air conditioning; you have very small windows, so you switch on the neon lights. You waste energy, and then you pay the bill. I don't understand why the governments aren't thinking about this. You could see it as an opportunity: we still have free space in African cities, even if they are growing very fast. You can experiment with these kinds of things. Instead, we copy and paste an inappropriate model. Look at the high-rise social housing in France from the '70s, now called *banlieues*. Does it look successful after forty years?

**Wattenberg:** When was the first time you made a site-specific installation with wallpaper prints?

Gbré: The first was in Bamako, at the Blabla Bar, and was installed during the Bamako Biennale in 2011. The idea was to bring back the photographs I had taken of the swimming pool in Bamako two years





Video still from “La Piscine,” 2011



Video still from “La Piscine,” 2011

before, to share them with more people beyond the previous exhibition.

**Wattenberg:** What was the reaction of the people who came to the bar? Did they recognize the structure?

Gbré: A few people, yes — people from Mali. It was very funny. For example, people had different reactions to the one with the blue scale and the removed tiles. One night, people were sitting and eating. At the end of the dinner, one guy stood up, and he touched the wall and he realized that it was a photograph. So I got that kind of reaction. For the image of the swimming pool, people came to pose for photographs as though they were “jumping” in front of the diving board. It was very playful.

**Wattenberg:** Where were your works installed during Regard Bénin Biennale?

Gbré: Stephan Köhler invited me to make an installation at Georges Adéagbo’s studio outside of Cotonou. The idea there was to make the printing press “travel” — to show it in the same country, but in another place. Stephan’s house was perfect. In that building, the roof had fallen down, like in the printing factory. The two buildings were linked; they shared a similar story. There were different rooms, with leftover features like a bath or a chair. The idea of the wallpaper came first, and the small elements came next.

**Iduma:** It’s intriguing that you use wallpaper to depict buildings that are already in a form of collapse. Paper doesn’t last for long — it degrades very quickly — and you’re using it to depict buildings that are also degraded.

Gbré: During the rainy season, the water was destroying the wallpaper in Cotonou. I took a few pictures in Bénin a few months after the Biennale. You can see the white from the glue through the paper. Through this process, it was as though the paper was “living” when it was outside, in the same way as the buildings. I like to see the effect of time.

**Iduma:** Landscape photography in the documentary mode can sometimes be difficult to look at, especially if the subject is one that people would rather not be reminded of. In your pictures, for instance,

there’s the portent of ruin, of something other than just beauty. But in your short film “La Piscine,” that centers on your Bamako photographs, you capture the complexity of built structures and memory. Is this an attempt to make the photographs comprehensible and accessible?

Gbré: Definitely. Some photographs tell their own stories as single images. A group of photographs makes a collective narrative with a context and a more precise message. If you add a chronology, sound, and voices, you can tell much more about your subject. The time lapse between the moment I made the photographs in Bamako and the final cut of the short film allowed me to be more critical.

**Wattenberg:** In your most recent work in Abidjan, you’re exploring seemingly futuristic forms of architecture. There is new infrastructure under construction, like the bridge or the social housing. In contrast to your photographs from Bamako, which are preoccupied with the past as embodied in former structures, in Abidjan, it’s really about the immediacy of today and tomorrow. The surfaces are much more polished.

Gbré: Of course, I look at the future. These new structures are part of the present, but part of the future, too. The bridge is a very positive addition to the city. We suffered so much while waiting for this bridge and with traffic jams, but now everybody is very happy with it. It has solved many problems. And I’m very happy that I got this photograph of the pillar of the bridge standing as a monument in the middle of the water (plate 34).

**Wattenberg:** The picture of the wrapped-up car in Cocody is also a futuristic image.

Gbré: The aspiration of any Ivorian is to get a car, because he can’t stand the public bus and the collective taxi. I think in the best pictures there is a mystery, an illusion. You can see it with this car in my photograph “Voiture #1, Attoban, Cocody, Abidjan” — this kind of dream (plate 33). You don’t know what car it is, so what is inside, under the wrapping, is a gift — a spaceship.

**Wattenberg:** What is it about Abidjan today that makes for these futuristic images? Or perhaps the





Boutique #1, Riviera 2, Abidjan, 2014



Installation view, *Sphères 7*, Galleria Continua, Les Moulins, France, 2014

futurism of Abidjan is just of a different order than other West African cities where you've worked.

Gbré: As I said, I have known Abidjan for a long time. I used to look at these changes in a fragmented or incremental way, before I lived there, but they have happened so quickly. You have beautiful projects, you can do beautiful things, but you can also make mistakes. I try to understand this, to ask questions, and to keep in mind the uncertainty of whether a place is being built or being destroyed. I also try to show contrasts. For example, I photographed a makeshift shop, close to the road, where there are women selling bananas and eggs and there's an umbrella with lights. In a big, quickly growing city, this is the kind of thing the government dreams to cancel from the map. I like this picture, because there is a contrast between this woman working in front of her home and the car and the new housing — the elements that are supposed to be good.

Wattenberg: Many of your pictures are composed with a formal structure of internal framing. In your study of industries in France, where you have doorways that lead toward windows, you create a complex geometrical pattern (plate 4). Does this quality reflect your experience as a photographer of design?

Gbré: Yes, I think it comes from the studio shoots I used to assist on and make. But I'm also interested in creating a visual experience. Looking at this wallpaper pasted on the wall of an office, it's when you face it directly that you enter into the forest (plate 6). It's a trompe l'oeil.

Wattenberg: You also create this experience with a different method in your studies of surfaces, in which you have very close-up images of architectural features, building details, or floor tiles. Often, these images verge on abstraction.

Gbré: The layers are flattened: I cancel the depth of field in a certain way. I was looking for "paintings." You don't really see the buildings. The story is more about the feelings I have when I walk around those places. Maybe it's more personal, less descriptive, I think, and more abstract.

Iduma: You're taking out the details from the buildings and focusing on how the buildings can be seen in new ways.

Gbré: I think I always move between the micro and the macro. I try to look for something supernatural or with a mystery. Like the school blackboard with the written sign "Display by School" (p. TK). The blackboard shows several layers of paper that have been ripped down. In the remnants, you can read students' names, lists, and exam results — there are many years of stories.

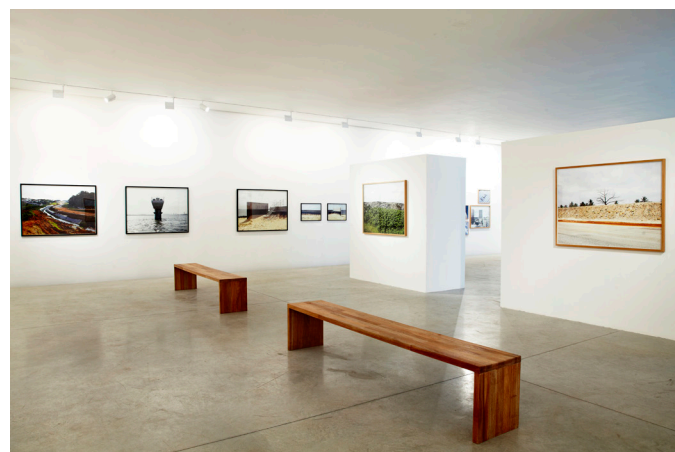
Wattenberg: You have participated in numerous exhibitions in Africa, such as biennials in Dakar, Bamako, and Lubumbashi, as well as your solo show at Art Twenty One in Lagos. You're really part of the art scene of Abidjan, at a moment when things are happening in both commercial and nonprofit venues there. You've been building your work in the context of African spaces. This represents a major change in how contemporary art is experienced in Africa. What does it mean for you to be participating in a community that's being assembled as we speak — and to exchange ideas regularly with African artists and audiences?

Gbré: This is not an easy question. At the moment, I'm very happy to be part of this dynamic and about the way things are moving. I'm very enthusiastic about it and about the work I'm doing here. I showed my early work in Lille because I was already connected with people from the African diaspora. At that time, I was not working full-time on the continent. It was difficult to build the bridge — to get the tickets, to make the work, and to come back and print the photographs. Until you reach a certain level, after many years of work, it's very, very hard. But now we are living in very exciting times because we can have an exchange. To go to Nigeria for the Art Twenty One exhibition, for example, was an amazing experience. When I was there, I thought I could start a new series in Lagos, connected to the others, to Abidjan, which would be a chapter of all these stories about African cities growing. I know in South Africa they have many amazing exhibition spaces. But we need those opportunities in West Africa, too. We need a structure that can support exchange, artistic residencies, and exhibitions. Galerie Cécile Fakhoury and Fondation Donwahi in Abidjan play an important role.





Installation view, *Fragments*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, 2014



Installation view, *Fragments*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, 2014

Iduma: At this point, I think what we need are also institutions that are more medium- or discipline-specific. For example, we need a center for photography in Lagos. If we had an institution that focused mainly on photography, there would be enormous potential for photography to grow in Lagos and in the region at large. There are small initiatives for photography and video art, workshops and pop-up spaces, often created by people who are returning from the West. But it's hard — there's little funding. You have to pull your teeth each time to make something new happen.

Gbré: Yes, but Lagos is really a leader for photography in the region. Now, new project spaces are also rising. Two or three weeks ago, the Ghanaian photographer Nii Obodai opened an exhibition in his own workshop. He worked for several months with photographers who wanted to learn more about photography. Unfortunately, we can't wait for anything from our governments, so private initiatives are key. Morocco is doing a lot, too. I was part of a photography exhibition last year called *New Africa*, organized by Kulte Editions in Casablanca. Some people in North Africa don't consider themselves African — maybe they're more part of the Arabic world — but you can find others who are so open, who want to come visit other parts of the continent and who want to learn more. We are building new bridges.



**François-Xavier Gbré** was born in 1978 in Lille, France. After studying photography at the École Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques in Montpellier, he worked in fashion and design photography in Milan for four years. This experience led him to explore African stories through landscape and architecture. Gbré's work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions including *The Lay of the Land*, The Walther Collection, New York (2015); *Abroad*, Art Twenty One, Lagos, Nigeria (2014); *Surfaces and Fragments*, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (2013, 2014); DAK'ART: The 11th Dakar Biennale, Dakar, Senegal (2014); *FLOW*, Kyoto City University of Arts Gallery, Japan (2014); *New Africa*, Kulte Editions, Casablanca, Morocco (2014); Rencontres Picha de Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo (2013); Biennale Regard Bénin, Cotonou, Bénin (2012); *We Face Forward: Art from West Africa Today*, Manchester Art Gallery, (2012); *Synchronicity II*, Tiwani Contemporary, London (2012); Rencontres de Bamako—The Biennale of African Photography (2009, 2011); and *Uprooting the Gaze*, Brighton Photo Fringe, U.K. (2010). Gbré lives and works in Abidjan.

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— François-Xavier Gbré and Brendan Wattenberg



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