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Photographs

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Wandering is a conscious movement, the awareness of one's surroundings, of birdsong, the rustle of the wind, and the powerful presence of solidly rooted trees. In the urban space, fellow wanderers, pedestrians about their business, schoolchildren with their multi-coloured school bags, the incessant rush of motorized wheels, of accelerated engines.

In all this and much more, trying to intuit Anton Wilhelm Amo, what he would feel, perceive, and take with him on his daily wanderings, passageways. A different time, well embedded in the past, but still intuitively accessible, trying, striving to wander as he did then.

The pathways etched into the landscape, the cobbled roads and streets, the lanes and byways that all define a certain geography, a certain location. Wolfenbüttel, Braunschweig, Halle, Wittenberg, Jena, small time towns and places of residence and eking out an existence. The everyday of coming to a kind of acceptance of difficult neighbours, of familial tensions, of sensing the gradual wear and tear of one's body.



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As the years pass, certain constants gradually lose their well-defined contours, become outmoded, and morph into a new dispensation, a challenge of ever-present technology. The fundamental human needs, though, stay very much the same, thus allowing for this reach back into the past to intuit the feelings and thoughts of those long gone. This is my attempt to understand and perceive as Anton Wilhelm Amo might have.

Looking out daily from his probably small chambers, the window framing the immediate neighbourhood, the weather, the play of sunlight and shadows. Being very aware of his otherness in a region where there were very few, if any, other Africans. Being very much aware too of the status and role of Africans in the larger picture of commerce and trade, of not being accepted as equal and human.

The photographs are an attempt to record this empathy, this attempt in understanding the where and the how and the why of him then. We all leave traces, some so interminably faint and almost invisible but still there somewhere. Singing his name is one way of trying to re-energize the faint traces. Thinking of him, too. It is the intuition, though, that needs to be finely attuned. Listening in to the inner voice, the inner urges that from time to time surface and call for, push towards taking, making an image.



Taking the image implies an acknowledgment of the constant weaving still going on from then to now. The traces, the threads, reverberating, resonating subliminally, and occasionally come together in a visible serendipitous moment. Almost as if he reappears in the glare of the sunlight, shimmering and blindingly radiant, only to disappear in the nanosecond of gradual recognition. Such fleeting moments are hard to take in or, to use another somewhat unfortunate term, hard to capture.

The key is to be prepared and, even more, to give. To give in an inward, whole-hearted way, intuitively, all the while wandering and waiting for these serendipitous moments.



Making the image is somewhat similar. Again, the need, the awareness of giving to the surroundings, to the vibrations of the moment. Sensing the so delicate threads constantly weaving forward, onward. Suddenly, seeing the weaved form, the edge of a building, the immediacy of a billboard, engaging with the form until the image appears, comes into view. There were no billboards some three or four hundred years ago. There were no cameras and no attention-demanding photographs, but there were eyes and insistent, consistent gazes. The extreme other in their midst, well-educated and accomplished but still somehow suspect. Something untoward said, a remark in passing, and the sharp delineation of difference, of being made acutely aware that you are not of this region.

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It's still there today: xenophobic fears, the comfort of the like-minded, like-looking. An almost worldwide phenomenon, provincialism that rejects the bigger whole, the multiplicity of views. The almost obsessive need for the scapegoat, the person or persons who don't quite fit in, are not from this area, strangers, foreign bodies

How acutely did Amo feel this? How acutely do I feel it today? This fundamental rejection, fundamental intolerance. He eventually returned to his homeland, knew from where he had once set out, as a child, and then, realized the very different ways of being and living in the everyday that would now envelope him.



It was this especially, the acuteness of being here, but not quite, of being elsewhere, but not quite, that intrigued me. Today, it is a matter of hours between

the aviation hubs of Europe and West Africa. Sitting ensconced in an airtight cabin, listening to music, or watching a film, distance is merely displayed on the on-board screen. In Amo's time, the weeks spent on the high seas, the creaking of the sails, the swaying of the wooden vessel, a solitary passenger amongst roughened seafarers and cunning merchants. Already, there was a regular trade in human cargo—enslaved Africans transported in inhumane conditions. What were his thoughts, those of the ship's crew, too?

Looking back at his immediate past, the years spent reading, writing, disputing certain theses, certain bodies of knowledge. And now, the uncertainty of the future, a world dominated by proto-capitalist trade and the urge for high profit margins.



I wander the streets of Braunschweig with these and many other thoughts, all the while listening in, trying to intuit the man then. Despite the intervening centuries, not much has really changed. Should I, too, eventually return, no longer willing to constantly engage with the disrespectful gazes, the body language that shouts rejection and abhorrence? Is it different now from what it was then? Do the photographs resonate with this painful undertone of not completely belonging, of not being truly welcome at the well-laid-out table?

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The images are essentially narratives, embedded layers of stories beneath the surface of the exhibited print. Stories that are open-ended and that reach back into a distant past but at the same time reference narratives very much of the present. The subtle traces of his daily routine echo down into the present meanderings of the observing wanderer.



An image taken, made, in a cemetery, looking out at gravestones, and at the finely sculptured furrows of majestic tree trunks. Amo, in his time, wandering such cemeteries, passing by, passing through, fully aware of the implications of the soul and the physical body, immersed in the academic discourses of the day. Yet another form of narration, of trying to overcome a certain story-line with another, disputes and dissertations, hand-written treatises that end up on library shelves, slowly gathering dust.

Today's photographs look in and on these layered narratives, adding yet another layer, subversive, questioning the traditional storylines, the once acknowledged perceptions. Black and white images negate colour and, at the same time, evoke the vast range of the colour spectrum, calling out to the viewer to look deeply in, to listen in to the resonances and discords coming through, the songs Amo sang quietly to himself, his thoughts, his intuitions.

Biography

Akinbode Akinbiyi is born in Oxford, studied at university in Ibadan, Nigeria, in the 1960s, and in Heidelberg, Germany in the 1970s to do a PhD in literature. While an avid reader of fiction and poetry, Akinbode is a photographer who has documented cities such as Lagos and Kano (Nigeria), Dakar (Senegal), Bamako (Mali) and Khartoum (Sudan) and human life and movements with his camera. In 1993, Akinbiyi co-founded the UMZANZSI, a cultural center in Clermont Township in Durban, South Africa, and has taught and mentored emerging photographers in the continent Africa and beyond.