

WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION

An Exhibition by Jean-Pierre Bekolo

During Berlinale 2016

February 10–25, 2016

Opening: February 10, 6pm

A DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program and SAVVY Contemporary Collaboration

Curated by Katharina Narbutovic and Bonaventure Ndikung

Curatorial Assistants: Lema Sikod, Lauren Moffatt

One has to choose between engaging in stylistic research or the mere recording of facts. I feel that a filmmaker must go beyond the recording of facts. Moreover, I believe that Africans, in particular, must reinvent cinema. It will be a difficult task because our viewing audience is used to a specific film language, but a choice has to be made: either one is very popular and one talks to people in a simple and plain manner, or else one searches for an African film language that would exclude chattering and focus more on how to make use of visuals and sounds.
(Djibril Diop Mambéty)¹

With WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION, the filmmaker, writer and critic Jean-Pierre Bekolo radically questions and deconstructs the notions, processes and perceptions of filmmaking. By dissecting, unpacking or dismantling the concepts of cinema and exhibition into their singular units and display them, Bekolo engages in a pathological inquest and one might even say an autopsy of the arts of film- and exhibition-making. Inherent to this diagnostic process is etymological *logia* (to account of/for) and *pathos* (experience or suffering) that might help understand what film- and exhibition-making mean in our contemporary.

It is in to this end that Bekolo asks “Can we call this an exhibition? A film exhibition? Is this really about showing films? Viewing film, reading film or living cinema? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to say we are *View-ding*? A crossing from viewing, reading and living? *Viewding*, a practice imposed on us by what the moving image has become in the new medias far from the big screen in the dark room...we have to read images as we read books. This obliges us filmmakers

to write films in a way one can read... I mean *viewd* them... Away from the formulae-films, the recipes that have hijacked humanity’s storytelling experiences and imaginaries.”

Like many critical voices before him, Bekolo neither takes cinema at face value nor takes it for granted, as he questions the essence of cinema, that is to say he rummages in the being of cinema, which one could also superlatively call the quintessence of cinema. “If cinema is made of things and of people, it is important that we revisit what we make cinema with; the tools, the language and the process through which we capture and organize this second life we call cinema that we can see outside of ourselves like radiologists and that is a narrative speculation on our lives,” says Bekolo. In this process of revisiting, uncovering, turning the pot up-side-down to see what is underneath the pot, but also giving room for the pot to be used as something else other than the pot—say as a drum—Bekolo carves out a couple of theoretical concepts, bodies or questions that will each materialize in the exhibition WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION as the installations: *Motion Thinking*, *Filmmaker Without a Camera*, *Return to Sender*, *Cinema with Everything*, *Cinema in Everything*, *Cinema of Everything*, *Film Brain—The Memory*, *Mining for Minds*, *Auteur Learning*, *The Miracle Room*.

With *Motion Thinking*, Bekolo gets granular on the gaze and the narrative. The issue at stake being: through whose prism do we see the world or is the world presented to us, but also how—that is to say through which notion, language and form is it served to us? Bekolo thus enforces a twist in the tail, by unfolding the ‘motion telling’ timeline, rather than the ‘motion picture timeline,’ wherein the already non-static state of thought is set in motion. The

'motion telling' timeline of thought corresponds or juxtaposes with the wheel of one's life cycle, which is so to say 'the film of our lives' and thereby making cinema a reality comparative study. The *Filmmaker Without a Camera* purports that the process, the act of filmmaking, like a stream, would find other beds and mediums to flow through, especially if one were hindered. Faced with political hurdles and not being able to make films at some point, Bekolo sought to express himself through publishing in the daily papers in Cameroon. The newspaper becomes the screen, the words and subjects become the actors that facilitate what Bekolo calls 'viewding'.

On the other hand, as Bekolo questions, "if technology has been a medium of our utopias won't it be the role of the filmmaker to invent with fiction the reality that we will live in tomorrow? Cinema as Applied Fiction will be that new science we need to master so that machines don't take over our existence; Applied Fiction as a space for tomorrow's activism and citizenship with *Filmmakers Without a Camera*?"

The proverbial vantage point regains grounds with *Return to Sender*: Take for example the industry around friperie, the collection of second hand thrash clothes from the West to the non-West which are sold for very low prices. On which vantage points do the winners and losers stand? That of course depends on who tells the story and from where, thus Bekolo questions if the place of storytelling is more important than who, even what and to whom? Are we in an age wherein of 'making a movie from a place' rather than making a movie for an audience? The holy trinity in Bekolo's cogitation on cinema revolves around the *Cinema of Everything*, which thematizes the omnipotence and omnipresence of everything as cinema in an age of social media, youtube and youporn wherein everybody is or can be both a cineaste and a film hero; *Cinema with Everything*, which puts a spotlight on the technology that defines filmmaking in an era of increasing high-tech gears, and questions if the best technology makes the best narratives, while touching on low-tech, by need or by lack; and the *Cinema in Everything*, which is a culmination of stories by individuals, especially migrants in Germany that shed light on their existential challenges, as well as other smaller and bigger narratives. Questions of archiving, the power gradients eminent in the archive, just as much as the who, what and why of archiving, are central in the life and afterlife of the film, as will be reflected upon in *Film Brain—The Memory*. After the trash, the draft? As one wise fellow once said, filmmaking is all about the Benjamins. In *Mining for Minds*, Bekolo tickles a discussion on the need of alternative funding platforms, as he puts salt and pepper in the open wound of the practice and industry when he asks, "would a German actor accept to be paid with gold and diamond we have in Cameroon instead of being paid with a cash we don't have? And accept through

the concept of *Mining for Minds* to shift the paradox of Africa being poor while it's rich?" *Auteur Learning* is an imagination of a learning-editing station, one of those futuristic machines that feed themselves in the process of usage. It is a learning-by-doing materialization wherein the act of construction is in itself the act of instruction. When Djibril Diop Mambéty talked of cinema as magic in the service of dreams, he might have envisioned something like the *The Miracle Room*—A space that makes dreams metamorphose into miracles. But also a space in which the demise of cinema can be reflected upon, especially in the context of Africa where cinemas are transformed into churches, supermarkets, warehouses etc. Or is Africa just once more faster than the rest of the world by showing us that the future of cinema is churches, supermarkets, warehouses?

At this juncture it seems appropriate to ruminate on the 'application' of 'applied' in the context of WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION. What is 'applied' in the age of apps (applications)—these technological achievements meant to facilitate or even perform our beings, as they coordinate our activities, functions and thoughts? The app as a second spinal cord of the human being, to shorten or reduce the use of the brain, as reflexes now are either coordinated through the nervous system of the spinal cord or through the computational system of the app. So 'applied fiction' as facilitated, accessible fiction? But if the 'applied' in Applied Mathematics is about the practicality or the implementation of mathematics to study the biological, physical, economic and sociological world, then 'applied fiction' might also be the implementation of fiction to understand these the biological, physical, economic and sociological worlds and beyond.

As Kacke Gotick proposes, any definition of drama, based on mimesis only, proves invalid. In reference to Keir Elam's conclusion in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* that "the founding principle of dramatic representation, then, is the fiction of the presence of a world known to be hypothetical", Gotick points out that this is not true of traditional African drama. He proposes that a new definition is needed, which includes enactments that are at the same time presentational and representational, that are efficacious, and that are conceived of as a duality by the appropriate spectators, comprising reality and fiction simultaneously.²

If one were to translate Gotick into cinema and exhibition-making, then Bekolo's exhibition could be understood as an enactment of the presentational and representational in real-time, which includes both reality and its fictions, and in which both the maker and the spectator are appropriated into the process on filmmaking, and in which real life is the cinema and its fiction.

So, one could situate Bekolo's thoughts on 'applied fiction' with regards to its presentation and representation of time and image somewhere around Rouch and Perrault as referenced by Gilles Deleuze when he writes:

On the contrary, it is necessary to move towards a limit, to make the limit of before the film and after it pass into the film and to grasp in the character the limit that he himself steps over in order to enter the film and leave it, to enter into the fiction as into a present which is inseparable from its before and after (Rouch, Perrault)³.

With regards to the veracity of fiction around Deleuze's proposal:

What Nietzsche had shown, that the ideal of the true was the most profound fiction, at the heart of the real, had not yet been discovered by the cinema. The veracity of the story continued to be grounded in fiction. When the ideal or model of the true was applied to the real, it began to change many things, since the camera was being directed to a pre-existing real, but, in another sense, nothing had changed in the conditions of the story: the objective and the subjective were displaced, not transformed; identities were defined in a different way, but remained defined; the story remained truthful, really-truthful instead of fictionally- truthful. But the veracity of the story had not stopped being a fiction⁴.

And with regards to the falsification of fiction around Kodwo Eshun, when he writes:

To be more precise, science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian. Rather, in William Gibson's phrase, science fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present [...] Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows.⁵

But no matter in which or at what point of a genealogy it might be situated, WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION is a welcome endeavor to understand cinema as reality itself or at least as an extension of reality.

Text by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

BIOGRAPHY

Jean-Pierre Bekolo is a film maker, writer and critic from Cameroon. His debut film *Quartier Mozart* received the *Prix Afrique en Création* at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival. His second film, *Aristotle's Plot*, was commissioned by the British Film Institute to celebrate the 100th anniversary of cinema, and was the first African film selected at Sundance. His 2005 released film *Les Saignantes* won the Silver Stallion and Best Actress Awards at FESPACO. Bekolo's video installation *An African Woman in Space* was on display at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2008. Banned in Cameroon in 2013, Jean-Pierre Bekolo's controversial film *Le Président* questions the phenomenon of Africa's "perpetual governments". His 4-hour documentary *Les Choses et Les Mots de Mudimbe* was part of the official selection of the 2015 Berlinale. In 2009 he published *Africa for the Future – Sortir un Nouveau Monde du Cinéma*. Bekolo has also taught at UNC Chapel Hill, Duke University, and the University of Yaoundé. Since 2006, Bekolo has served as the Secretary General of the Guild of African Filmmakers, and is the founding member of the World Cinema Alliance. In 2015 he received the Prince Claus Award. Since the summer of 2015 he is a fellow of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program.

1 N. Frank Ukadike. "The Hyena's Last Laugh [interview with Djibril Diop Mambety]," *Transition* 78 (vol.8, no. 2 1999), pp. 136-53. Copyright 1999, W.E.B. Dubois Institute and Indiana University Press. Posted with Permission. View at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903181>.

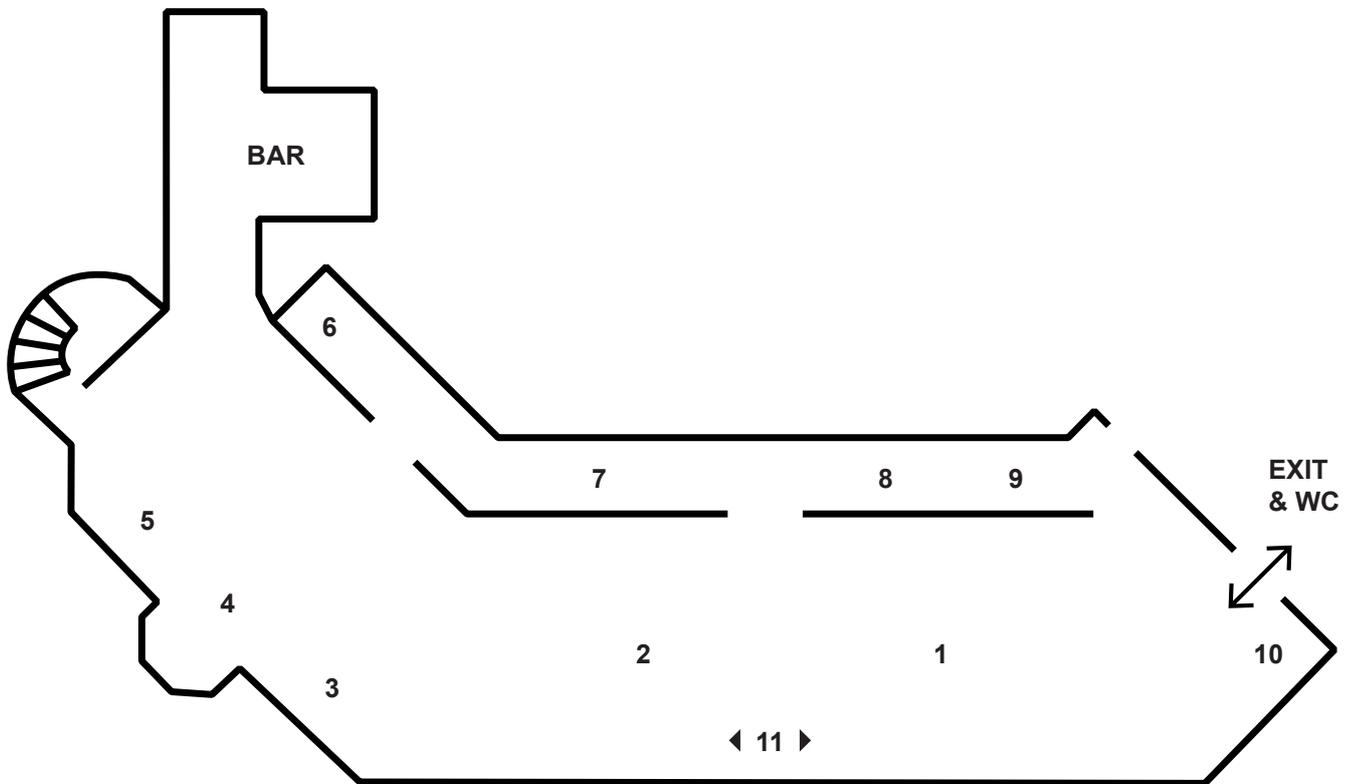
2 Kacke Gotrick, *Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984), 127.

3 Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2 The time-image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Caleta. University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis. 1997

4 *ibid* 2

5 Kodwo Eshun. *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism*. CR: *The New Centennial Review*, Volume 3, Number 2, Summer 2003, pp. 287-302 (Article) Published by Michigan State University Press. DOI: 10.1353/ncr.2003.0021

FLOORPLAN



- 1 Le Film de la vie
(Life cycle)
- 2 Cinema with Everything
(Old dolly versus selfie stick)
- 3 Cinema in Everything
(Online live feed – reality inspiring cinema)
- 4 Cinema of the future
(Collaborative writing and editing –
with Heather Moore and David Bovill)
- 5 Cinema in Everything
(Ideas materialising)
- 6 The Miracle Room
Beyond cinema's boundaries; Le President in/and
Virtual Reality – with Lauren Moffatt)
- 7 Film Without a Camera
(Other mediums of cinema)
- 8 Return to Sender
(The vantage point – friperie in North-South
relations)
- 9 Mining for Minds
(Audition and get paid in African raw material –
with Mónica Rikić)
- 10 Le devoir de memoire
(What is documented and what is left out)
- 11 Timeline
(film plots, recipes, semiotics, structures put
in question)

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WELCOME TO APPLIED FICTION is a coproduction
by the Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD and
SAVVY Contemporary – The laboratory of form-ideas,
funded by Auswärtiges Amtes (AA)

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With kind support by:

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