Samuel Fosso: Affirmative Acts
November 19, 2022 – January 29, 2023
The Nigerian-Cameroonian artist Samuel Fosso (born 1962) is one of the most compelling photographers working in self-portraiture today. *Samuel Fosso: Affirmative Acts* surveys the artist’s work since 1975, when he established his first photographic studio in Bangui, Central African Republic. In his early career, Fosso took portraits of clients while also producing self-portraits that used dress, makeup, and performance to invoke 1970s highlife, rock and roll, and yé-yé music as well as pop culture. In the 1990s he began to assume multiple identities and gender roles to highlight the connections between subjectivity, capitalist consumption, and global commerce. Through makeup, dress, and gesture, he transforms into iconic nationalist and civil rights figures from Africa and the Diaspora; reflects on Africa’s complicated encounters with European colonialism, Christianity, and a resurgent China; and engages in vigorous self-analysis.

Fosso explores Pan-African identities and the relationship of the self to imagined community, individual fantasies, and collective aspirations. For Fosso, self-portraiture becomes at once a form of masking, revelation, and self-affirmation; a theatrical event; and a performance of social commentary.

### 70’S LIFESTYLE, 1975–78

At the start of his career, Fosso adopted the style of other West African photographers and in the daytime made portraits of elaborately dressed sitters in front of curtained or painted backdrops. At night, using leftover film, he produced theatrical self-portraits that had no precedent in modern West African photography.
In these portraits, Fosso struck alluring and unrestrained poses wearing fitted shirts, white tank tops, bell-bottoms, platform shoes, and dark glasses. Despite the sociopolitical turmoil in the Central African Republic at the time, the studio became a safe space for Fosso to play with and transgress codes of representation and societal expectations. By adopting the fashions of contemporary music stars, he connected to a Pan-African popular culture and lifestyle.

These photographs were originally motivated by Fosso’s desire to send upbeat pictures of himself to his grandmother in Nigeria and to connect to his family and homeland despite the isolation of exile. Having survived war and ill health, and with no childhood photographs in his possession, Fosso created images in which he appears healthy, strong, and fashionable, as if in celebration of his blooming youth.
TATI, 1997

In 1997 the French discount retailer Tati commissioned Fosso to create self-portraits wearing their clothing and accessories. The resulting suite of color photographs departed from Fosso’s previous black-and-white images.

The Tati photographs represent Fosso’s first exploration of multiple subjectivities through self-portraiture—he is a golfer, a pirate, a lifeguard, a bourgeois woman, a chief, and more. Working with his own body as if it were a blank canvas, he assumes personas from diverse economic, social, historical, and political backgrounds, including Black denizens of global consumer culture, a fictional character from Africa’s colonial past, and figures of popular fantasy. In this theatrical role-play, Fosso never abandons his identity but adapts it to others. The series suggests that what we desire to be is limited only by the scope of our imaginations.

Tati—Le Chef qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons (The Chief Who Sold Africa to the Colonists), 1997
Chromogenic print, 50.8 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm
In African Spirits, Fosso presents himself in the guise of fourteen illustrious twentieth-century African and African Diaspora personalities, including the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie; Senegal’s first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor; and the Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba, as well as leading civil rights figures in the United States such as Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Tommie Smith, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. By emulating the characteristic features, iconic attire, and distinctive poses of his subjects, Fosso celebrates and pays homage to their powerful work toward African decolonization, anti-racism, and Black liberation.

In these acts of striking impersonation, Fosso’s body becomes the tool for mapping histories of African-descended peoples through the lives of their greatest leaders. Inspired by the spectacular Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC ’77) in Lagos, African Spirits was Fosso’s affirmation of the Black world’s “oneness” and his recognition of a Pan-African pantheon of transformative individuals.

While Fosso has focused on affirmative representations of his individuality and positive narratives of the African and Black world, in the series ALLONZENFANS, Emperor of Africa, and Black Pope, he examines themes in Africa’s colonial and postcolonial history. ALLONZENFANS, a play on the French phrase “Let’s go, children,” comments on the history of Europe’s fraught relationship with its former African colonies. Using paired images of Senegalese riflemen from the first and second world wars, Fosso acknowledges colonized Africans who fought and died for France’s imperial ventures, even as Europeans denigrated African people as childlike and incapable of self-determination.

In Emperor of Africa, Fosso reenacts the iconic political portraits of the Chinese leader Chairman Mao Zedong, who transformed China into a modern state. In one

ALLONZENFANS, 2013, printed 2022
Exhibition copies: inkjet prints, 200 × 150 cm (each)
Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris
image, the artist replaces the star in the Chinese Communist Party flag in the back-
ground with the map of Africa to highlight China’s rising economic presence and 
political influence in African countries.

In *Black Pope*, Fosso is dressed in papal regalia made by the pope’s official tailor. In 
one image, he holds the pontifical staff, one foot resting on a meteorite boulder. In 
this comment on race and religion, the artist alludes to the fact that there has never 
been a Black pope and invites the viewer to imagine a Black man in that position.

**SIXSIXSIX, 2015**

In 2013 the Central African Republic was engulfed in civil strife and widespread 
violence. Fosso’s studio in Bangui was destroyed. For Fosso, that personal loss—
as well as pervasive terrorist attacks, weather disasters, wars, and other global 
crises—represented the prevalence of evil in contemporary society. These misfor-
tunes compelled Fosso to undertake his most searching autoanalysis to date in a 
suite of six hundred and sixty-six self-portraits—named after the number identi-
fied with the apocalyptic Antichrist in the biblical Book of Revelation.

Over two months in 2015, Fosso sat on a police mugshot chair and, with the same 
lighting and background in all the portraits, captured his image using an instant 
Polaroid camera. Changes in Fosso’s expression and gestures disrupt the con-
straints imposed by his framing tactics. The resulting low-contrast sepia images 
convey a dark, somber mood—a change from the light and affirmative air character-
istic of his other works. Originally presented as photographs, in this exhibition, 
SIXSIXSIX is shown as looped digital images on a flat-screen monitor.
**Samuel Fosso: Affirmative Acts** is organized by the Princeton University Art Museum in collaboration with The Walther Collection. The exhibition is curated by Princeton University Professor Chika Okeke-Agulu with Princeton students Silma Berrada, Class of 2022; Lawrence Chamunorwa, doctoral student; Maia Julis, Class of 2023; and Iheanyi Onwuegbucha, doctoral student.

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70’s Lifestyle, 1976–77, printed 2022
Gelatin silver print, 46.7 × 46.7 cm (image)

70’s Lifestyle, 1975–78, printed 2022
Gelatin silver print, 46.7 × 46.7 cm (image)

70’s Lifestyle, 1976
Gelatin silver print, 54.3 × 50.5 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

70’s Lifestyle, 1976
Gelatin silver print, 54.3 × 50.5 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

70’s Lifestyle, 1977
Gelatin silver print, 50.8 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

70’s Lifestyle, 1977–78
Gelatin silver print, 54.3 × 50.5 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

Tati—La femme américaine libérée des années 70 (The Liberated American Woman of the 1970s), 1997
Chromogenic print, 50.8 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm
Tati—*Le Chef qui a vendu l’Afrique aux colons* (The Chief Who Sold Africa to the Colonists), 1997
Chromogenic print, 50.8 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

Tati—*Le Rocker* (The Rocker), 1997, printed 2022
Inkjet print, 61 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

Tati—*L’Homme d’affaires* (The Businessman), 1997, printed 2022
Inkjet print, 61 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

Tati—*La Bourgeoise* (The Bourgeoisie), 1997, printed 2022
Inkjet print, 61 × 50.8 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

African Spirits—*Haile Selassie*, 2008
Gelatin silver print, 101.6 × 76 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

African Spirits—*Martin Luther King Jr.*, 2008
Gelatin silver print, 101.6 × 76 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

African Spirits—*Tommie Smith*, 2008
Gelatin silver print, 101.6 × 76 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

African Spirits—*Angela Davis*, 2008, printed 2022
Gelatin silver print, 100.6 × 75.1 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm
**African Spirits—Muhammad Ali, 2008, printed 2022**
Gelatin silver print, 100.6 × 75.1 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

**African Spirits—Patrice Lumumba, 2008, printed 2022**
Gelatin silver print, 100.6 × 75.1 cm
The Walther Collection, New York / Neu-Ulm

**ALLONZENFANS, 2013, printed 2022**
Exhibition copies: inkjet prints, 200 × 150 cm (each)
Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris

**Emperor of Africa, 2013, printed 2022**
Exhibition copy: inkjet print, 166 × 124.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris

**SIXSIXSIX, 2015–16**
Single-channel video installation showing the 666 Polaroid prints that comprise the work SIXSIXSIX, now in the collection of the Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, Paris
Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris

**Black Pope, 2017, printed 2022**
Exhibition copy: inkjet print, 239 × 180 cm
Private collection, courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris

**Vintage studio portraits, printed 2022**
Exhibition copies: inkjet prints, 30.5 × 30.5 cm (each)
Courtesy of the artist and Jean Marc Patras, Paris
SELMITED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Samuel Fosso

2022
Samuel Fosso: African Spirits, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX, USA
Samuel Fosso: The Man with a Thousand Faces, The Walther Collection, Neu-Ulm, Germany

2018
Samuel Fosso. An African Odyssey, PHotoESPAÑA, Fernán Gómez Centro Cultural de la Villa, Madrid, Spain

2017
Samuel Fosso: Self-Portraits, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK

2014
Samuel Fosso, The Walther Collection Project Space, New York, NY, USA

2013
Samuel Fosso: African Spirits, The Emperor of Africa, Fourth LagosPhoto Festival, Nigeria

2010
Samuel Fosso, autoportraits 1970–2008, Institut Français, Dakar, Senegal
2007
Samuel Fosso. Monographie, Seventh Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako, Mali

2004
Samuel Fosso, Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome, Italy

2003
Autoretratos, PHotoESPAÑA, NosOtros, Madrid, Spain

1995
Samuel Fosso, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris, France

1994
Autoportraits, First Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako, Mali
SELECTED INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTIONS

Akron Museum of Art, Akron, OH, USA
Baltimore Museum of Art, MD, USA
Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris, France
Deutsche Bank, Frankfurt/Main, Germany
Fondation Zinsou, Cotonou, Benin
FRAC Réunion, France
Gordon Schachat Collection, Johannesburg, South Africa
International Center of Photography, New York, NY, USA
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, USA
Minneapolis Institute of Art, MN, USA
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montréal, Canada
Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris, France
Musée National d’Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris, France
Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA, USA
Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ, USA
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, USA
Tate, London, UK
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA
The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, MO, USA
The Newark Museum of Art, NJ, USA
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, USA
AWARDS

2018
International Center of Photography Infinity Award, art category, New York, NY, USA
PHotoESPAÑA Award, Madrid, Spain

2001
Prince Claus Fund Award, The Hague, The Netherlands

2000
Dak’Art, First prize for photography, Dakar, Senegal

1994
First Prize, African Photography Encounters (Rencontres de la Photographie), Bamako, Mali

MONOGRAPHS

Christine Barthe, Samuel Fosso (London: Thames and Hudson, 2022)


Samuel Fosso: SIXSIXSIX (New York: Steidl & The Walther Collection, 2020)

Maria Francesca Bonetti and Guido Schlinkert, Samuel Fosso (Milan: 5 Continents, 2004)
Art on Hulfish, our photo-forward gallery and programs space in Palmer Square, is open daily. Please also visit Art@Bainbridge, our contemporary gallery space in historic Bainbridge House. Our main building is under construction as we build a bold new Museum, designed by the architect Sir David Adjaye and anticipated to open in late 2024. Visit our website for online exhibitions, videos, live programs, and more.

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