

Artist Profile: Kamissa Ma Koïta

Didier Morelli

Volume 47, Number 2, 2022

salt. For the preservation of Black diasporic visual histories
salt. Pour la préservation des récits historiques visuels des diasporas
noires

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094913ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094913ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Morelli, D. (2022). Artist Profile: Kamissa Ma Koïta. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 47(2), 106–116.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1094913ar>

Artist Profile: Kamissa Ma Koïta

Didier Morelli

“Straight ahead
her mother whispered
before the wind turns
you are my child
child among the grasses
you are my gazelle
in the world of lions”¹

The black and white photographic scene that documents Kamissa Ma Koïta’s performance project *Reenactment, Nous serons universel.le.s* (2018) has a palpable restlessness | **fig. 1** |. First presented as an immersive experience at the Galerie de l’UQAM during the exhibition *Refus Contraire* and subsequently acquired by the university gallery as a single photograph, the image captures ten young Black individuals posing in a salon-like space. Abstract-expressionist-like paintings of various dimensions hang on the back wall of the room and a fabric curtain frames the sitters on both sides while a patterned rectangular carpet covers the floor. Many of the actors stare directly at the camera, while a few others look out to different viewpoints. Ma Koïta, seated center-left and elevated slightly on the armrest of a couch, is stoic and calm in his pose, gazing back at the viewer.

Didier Morelli is a curator, independent researcher, and visual artist, and an FRQSC Postdoctoral Fellow in the department of Art History at Concordia University. He is also associate editor at *Espace art actuel*.
—didier.f.morelli@gmail.com

1. Stéphane Martelly, *Little girl gazelle*, trans. Katia Grubisic (Montreal: Ruelle, 2020).

2. Interview with the artist, September 24, 2021.

3. Félix Chartré-Lefebvre, "Kamissa Ma Koïta—Transformer les représentations sociales," *Vies des arts* 255 (Summer 2019).

4. For more on Février's use of performance to denounce racism in Québécois contemporary art and its institutions see: Didier Morelli, "Stanley Février: Performing the Invisible," *Canadian Theatre Review* 190 (Spring 2022): 69–72.

5. Chris Dart, "These are the 2022 Sobey Art Award longlist nominees," *CBC Arts*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/these-are-the-2022-sobey-art-award-nominees-1.6439639>.

6. Winner of the 2020 Prix de la danse de Montréal, *Désir's BOW/ TRAIL* is a multi-part outdoor performance which includes a most recent iteration dedicated to the colonial and slave trade history of Tio'Tia:Ke (Montreal).

7. Alexandre Graton, "Kama La Mackerel, l'artiste trans et anticoloniale aux multiples talents," *Radio-Canada*, July 9, 2022, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1807812/kama-la-mackerel-artiste-trans-anticoloniale-prix-conseil-des-arts-queer>.

8. Didier Morelli, "MOMENTA 2021 Centres Indigenous and Nonhumanist Notions of Nature," *Frieze*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/momenta-sensing-nature-2021-review>.

9. Interview with the artist, September 24, 2021.

10. See, for example Jose Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003); Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

11. Mechtild Widrich, "Is the 'Re' in Re-enactment the 'Re' in Re-performance," in *Performing the Sentence: Research and Teaching in Performative Fine Arts*, eds. Carola Dertnig and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 141.

12. For more on the dynamic relationships between performance, the archive, and documentation see: Iain McCalman and P. Pickering, *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains:*

Born in Quebec City, Ma Koïta grew up in Montreal where he still currently resides. Of Malian origins, his practice often reflects on the insecurities and dangers of Black Canadian and Québécois existence in a homogenous cultural milieu that has violently erased difference through a white, colonial paradigm. Tackling issues of systemic racism, slavery, and reparations in the arts milieu and broader society, Ma Koïta acknowledges that for him, like many others affected by structures of exploitation, these questions are ones of survival and not theoretical exercises or aesthetic postures.² In doing so, he joins a dynamic group of emergent Black Caribbean and Afro-descendent Québécois artists in the Montreal region who have, over the past five years, become increasingly visible on the local and regional contemporary art scene by employing hybrid models of institutional critique, performance art and public intervention with success and aplomb.³ Notable examples include 2022 longlisted Sobey Art Award visual artists Stanley Février⁴ and Michaëlle Sergile,⁵ choreographer and dancer Rhodnie Désir,⁶ as well as the poet and performance artist Kama La Mackerel whose work also reflects on issues of race, colonialism, and trans-identities.⁷ One of Montreal's largest contemporary art festivals, the MOMENTA Biennale de l'image, reflected these cultural shift in its most recent iteration focusing on the broad themes of dismantling gender dichotomies and colonial histories.⁸ *Sensing Nature* (2021) included a solo project at gallery Diagonale by Léuli Eshrāghi reflecting on the erasure of fa'afafine-fa'atane people, while the *Worldmaking Tentacles* group exhibition at the Darling Foundry displayed bodily experiences that aimed to transcend race, gender, and sexuality. Firmly involved in the local scenes of both queer and artist-run-centre culture, Ma Koïta's practice evolves in both fringe and institutional settings, from the communally oriented centre des arts actuels Skol and the socially engaged, now-defunct Centre Never Apart, to the major stages of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

For Ma Koïta, the stakes and risks of exposure are high. He is often labeled as radical, or even sometimes confronted by those whom he unsettles with judgement, uncertainty, and doubt.⁹ Re-enactment, the art of tilting the prism on a historical event in order to see it anew, serves as an entry point into a practice that is conceptually grounded in deep art historical research. Drawing on the theorization of re-enactment in performance studies as a powerful tool for minoritarian subjects to enact agency upon the signs, symbols, and embodied structures of a dominant and/or oppressive society,¹⁰ it is imperative to read Ma Koïta's work through the lens of a conscious demystifying of Québécois cultural history or, more precisely, a challenge to the monumentalization and "fixation of a possibly fictional interpretation of history through physical reconstruction in the present."¹¹ To cite the art historian Mechtild Widrich on the power of re-enactment to reframe past events, specifically ones that have been "flattened" through the canonizing of documentation¹² like photographs or videos: "far from erasing all differences between an event and its later instances, [re-enactment] is a marker that allows us to see this difference more clearly, often creating new

Figure 1. Kamissa Ma Koïta, *Reenactment, Nous serons universel. le.s*, 2018. In the context of the *Refus contraire* exhibition at Galerie de l'UQAM, Montreal. Photo: Camille Richard.



Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012); Gundhild Borggreen and Rune Gade, *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Megan Carrigy, *The Reenactment in Contemporary Screen Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

13. Widrich, 145.

14. Interview with the artist, September 24, 2021.

15. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 15, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

16. Since the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis at the hands of police officers in the spring of 2020 and the global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, conversations about systemic racism in Quebec have been reignited. This was exacerbated by the Premier of Quebec and leader of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), François Legault, who flatly denied the existence of systemic racism in the province's institutions. In denouncing such public denials with his work, Ma Koïta rejoins the voices of activists, scholars, and other artists who have laboured to elucidate Quebec's past and present of slavery, colonialism, and racism. See, for example: David Austin, "Narratives of Power: Historical Mythologies in Contemporary Québec and Canada," *Race & Class* 52, no. 1 (2010): 19–32.

meaning, formally and contextually, which can only be understood in the light of the distance to the reference work or event."¹³ Following this logic, Ma Koïta frames re-enactment as a form of "reparations,"¹⁴ which echoes Ta-Nehisi Coates' argument in "The Case for Reparations" (2014) that, in addition to recognizing and addressing the economic and moral debts of slavery and Jim Crow, reparations requires "the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences."¹⁵ By extending the concept of reparations into contemporary art, performance, and re-enactment discourse, the artist highlights how any true challenge to systemic racism in the Quebecois and Canadian cultural context requires not only the overhaul of institutions but also an acknowledgment of past aggressions and inequalities.¹⁶

Les Automatistes were a group of dissident Montreal artists who were influenced by Surrealism and its aesthetic theory of automatism. The movement began in the early 1940s and was widely recognized locally and abroad. Commemorating the 70th anniversary of the *Refus global*, the exhibition *Refus contraire* looked to reactivate the principles of commitment, interdisciplinarity and community that brought together the signatories of one of the most significant 20th century cultural manifestos in the province of Quebec. Reviewing the ambitious retrospective project for RACAR, which included several exhibitions throughout the province and in Toronto as well as a series of lectures by the writer Gilles Lapointe, Ray Ellenwood underscores the contemporary importance of the movement in Quebec: "I have no doubt that an important energizing force behind all this was the continuing relevance of the history of Automatism for Montrealers. I only wish there were a similar élan in Toronto."¹⁷ Active during one of the most widely written-about and revered periods of Quebecois art, the group has been the subject of countless exhibitions, catalogues, and books, produced locally and abroad.¹⁸ Les Automatistes were revolutionary in their time for their overt politicization of aesthetics,¹⁹ specifically traditional Quebecois society's

attachments to the Catholic faith and the upholding of rural ancestral values. Revisiting a formative cultural monument that has been reflected upon ad infinitum, with more attention given recently to the strength of its women contributors,²⁰ Ma Koïta's *Reenactment, Nous serons universel.le.s* recreated one of the seminal group portraits of Les Automatistes from their second official exhibition presented in 1947 at Claude Gauvreau's home, 75 rue Sherbrooke West. In the original photograph from the vernissage, nine members of the group sit casually on couches and across the carpeted floor. The men wear party suits and the women are in cocktail dresses. They are: Claude Gauvreau, Julienne Gauvreau, Pierre Gauvreau, Marcel Barbeau, Madeleine Arbour, Paul-Émile Borduas, Madeline Lalonde, Bruno Cormier, and Jean-Paul Mousseau. Taken one year prior to the creation of the Refus Global, an anti-establishment and anti-religious manifesto, this black-and-white photograph has become emblematic of both the Automatistes' movement and manifesto, even though it does not capture all of its members or signatories. As Rose Marie Arbour notes, neither of the two major Automatistes exhibitions, in 1946 or 1947, included women painters in them. This, she argues, suggests that, were it not for their signing of the Refus Global, the women of the group would not have been identified as part of it, nor would they have been historically recognized as contributors to the Quebecois avant-garde.²¹

In a conversation, Ma Koïta admits to being inspired by the Automatistes as a young creator, especially the paintings of Borduas, whose works he regularly contemplated at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.²² At the same time, he recognizes that the progressive values espoused by the group lacked acknowledgments of sexism, colonialism, or racism within its own ranks or the broader art world. These juxtapositions and contradictions are what inspired him to rethink this quintessential scene with a powerful difference. In his re-enactment, Ma Koïta and his collaborators exude an unmistakable vitality in their substitution of the historical figures with Montreal's contemporary Black community.²³ Amongst those present are Magatte Cheikhovitch Wade, Anaïs Dampousse-Joly, Dimani Mathieu Cassendo, Marilou Craft, Shaina, Po B. K. Lomami, Valérie Bah, and Miriam Gabrielle Archin. Peers and friends of Ma Koïta, these individuals represent a new, more pluralistic generation of queer and Black creatives and cultural workers: Dampousse-Joly is a prominent television, film, and stage actress, Mathieu Cassendo is an illustrator and comic book author, Craft is an important literary figure and writer, Lomami is an accomplished trans-disciplinary artist, and Bah is a self-described "Black Queer Storyteller" |fig. 2|. Bold and beautiful, breaking the stillness of documentary photography, the tableau speaks volumes about the urgency of addressing the overwhelming whiteness of local patrimonial Quebecois cultural myths like the fabled avant-garde group of the 1940s.

Just a few years earlier, shortly after finishing a fine arts degree at l'UQAM, Ma Koïta employed a similar re-enactment technique at La Centrale galerie Powerhouse. Having integrated the artist-run-center as a member in 2015

17. Ray Ellenwood, "Exhibitions, Manifestos, and the Seventieth Anniversary of Refus global," *RACAR* 44, no. 1 (2019): 99–105.

18. See, for example: Lise Lamarche, "La sculpture des Automatistes," *Espace Sculpture* 25 (Autumn 1993); Gilles Lapointe and François-Marc Gagnon, *Saint-Hilaire et les automatistes*, exh. cat. (Mont-Saint-Hilaire: Musée d'art du Mont-Saint-Hilaire, 1997); Gilles Lapointe, *La comète automatiste* (Anjou, QC: Fides, 2008); Lise Gauvin, *Les Automatistes à Paris: actes d'un colloque* (Montreal: Les 400 Coups, 2000); J. R. Mureika and R. P. Taylor, "The Abstract Expressionists and Les Automatistes: a shared multi-fractal depth?" *Signal Processing* 93, no. 3 (2013); Sophie Dubois, *Refus global: Histoire d'une réception partielle* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2017).

19. Lucille Beaudry, "Art et politique au Québec: depuis les Automatistes, un héritage modifié," *Bulletin d'histoire politique* 9, no. 3 (2001): 7–12.

20. Rose Marie Arbour, "Le cercle des automatistes et la différence des femmes," *Études française* 34, n. 2–3 (1998): 157–173.

21. Rose Marie Arbour, "Identification de l'avant-garde et identité de l'artiste: les femmes et le group automatiste au Québec (1941–1948)," *RACAR* 21, no. 1–2 (1994): 16.

22. Interview with the artist, September 24, 2021.

23. While each of the actors in this re-enactment of the original 1947 photograph by Maurice Perron has a clear corresponding historical figure, confirmed by the pose and position that they have in the image, Ma Koïta stands out as a tenth, anachronistic personage. This insertion of the artist into the group further contributes to the distortion of the photograph, creating a new embodied presence that challenges the original image's veracity and historicity.

Figure 2. Kamissa Ma Koita, *Reenactment, Nous serons universel. le.s*, 2018. In the context of the *Refus contraire* exhibition at Galerie de l'UQAM, Montreal. Photo: Camille Richard.

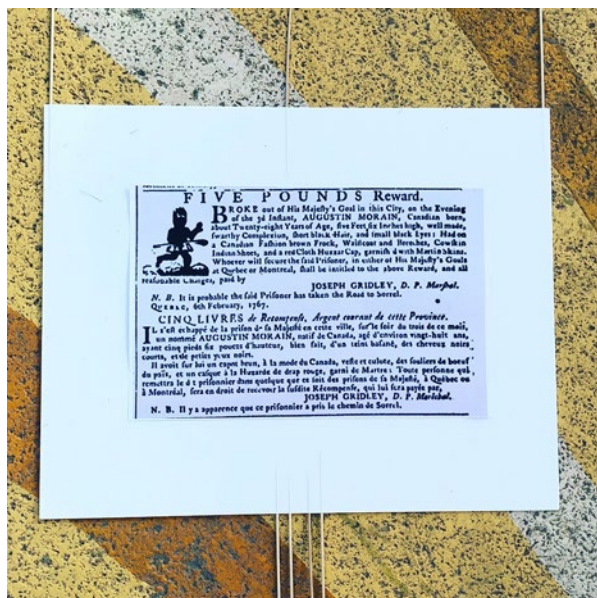


Figure 3. Kamissa Ma Koita, *N*gre d'Amérique: Affichage et rectifications*, 2018. Installation on l'Avenue du Musée at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. Photo: Camille Richard.

and participated in a residency shortly thereafter, he restaged a 1978 photograph showing the founding membership of the feminist art centre. This historical document functioned similarly to that of the Automatistes. With its black-and-white archival patina. This time, a group of white women sit on an assortment of chairs and the hardwood floor, papers are scattered about, and a slide projector is visible in the background—the scene embodies a quintessential moment of feminist organizing in Quebecois arts history. In his rendition, Ma Koïta includes two vintage cases of local beer (Labatt 50 and Molson Export) that mirror the original photograph, but each actor is now replaced by a member of his contemporary entourage: the artist and radio host Keithy Antoine and the filmmaker Amandine Gay, amongst others. With these two photographic projects, revisiting the 1940s Automatistes and the 1970s founders of La Centrale galerie Powerhouse, both of which created single, iconic images of local Black community members literally stepping into the void of his native province’s whitened art history, Ma Koïta shows an acumen for visually reimagining originating identarian myths. With a keen performative sense of short-circuiting the racist and colonial paradigms that govern contemporary art and its various institutions, the works aligns with an increased mainstream consciousness within Quebec about promoting greater diversity and inclusion.²⁴ It does so with a careful consideration for the past, refusing to let disappear the reiterative pillars upon which today’s exclusionary culture is set.²⁵ *Reenactment, Nous serons universel.le.s* deploys photographic representations of Black artists, creatives, and cultural workers reperforming an entirely white historical scene in a manner that highlights “not the black body exhibited for others but a black body that has chosen to perform itself as an exhibit for itself.”²⁶ As Harvey Young describes the African-American boxer Jack Johnson’s empowered performances for white sporting audiences at the height of the Jim Crow era, “the body gains agency by replaying the conventions of the boxing spectacle differently. Entering the ring, Johnson guaranteed that the ensuing fight would be witnessed on his terms.”²⁷ Ma Koïta’s remixes present life-affirming and physically persuasive tactics similar to the world heavyweight boxing champion by recasting local iconography with certain differences that challenge the nostalgic mystique of archival black-and-white photographs and the memories they evoke.

*N*gre d’Amérique: Affichage et rectifications* (2018) is a series of reprinted archival news clippings presented on l’Avenue du Musée, which belongs to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts [fig. 3]. In line with Ma Koïta’s previous pieces, the work subverts the institutional space of mostly apolitical, and often aesthetically dull, public art into a critical reflection on the erasure of 18th and 19th century slave narratives in Quebec. Bareboned and direct, the installation speaks with an urgency that recalls traditions of direct action in both activist and artistic circles. This emphasis on liveness and embodied engagement is confirmed by the artist’s website where the work is framed first and foremost as a performance, with documentation of the event clearly offering a perspective that bears witness to the audience’s interaction with

24. See, for example “L’art contemporain: accès limité pour la diversité” (April 19, 2019) by Marissa Grogulé in *La Presse*, which documented these slow, laborious, and uneven changes in contemporary art on questions of visibility, Black Empowerment, and equity in the workplace.

25. For more on the foundations of present-day ethno-nationalism in 1970s Quebecois history, see Bruno Cormellier’s essay on the legacy of notable writer and cultural hero Pierre Vallières, “The Struggle of Others: Pierre Vallières, Quebecois Settler Nationalism, and the N-Word Today,” *Discourse* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 31–66.

26. Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 91.

27. Young, 91.

the panels. Looking down at reproductions of newspapers, fugitive posters, and other materials attesting to the presence of local slavery, viewers are confronted with realities of slavery all too often ascribed primarily to the United States. Similar to the *Stolperstein*, or “stumbling stones,” installed outside Berlin apartments and houses documenting the names and details about the death of people who once lived there, but were forcibly removed during the Nazi holocaust, *N*gre d’Amérique: Affichage* et rectifications marks the ground and monumentalizes slavery as a transgression that is part and parcel of Canadian and Quebecois heritage.

This assemblage of reprinted archival objects, scattered along the street next to one of Canada’s foremost important cultural institutions, shows figures that are “likewise transitory, perceived through glimpses and furtive glances, by fictive traces and fugitive moves.”²⁸ In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), C. Riley Snorton reads the “archive for gender as an always racial and racializing construction—as a strategy for living and dying—that in this instance provides a way for thinking about what forms of redress are possible in/as flesh.”²⁹ Ma Koïta similarly employs the archive as a space to illustrate how the direct involvement of Quebecois and Canadian citizens in Trans-Atlantic slavery at the behest of the government included enforcing gender dichotomies and ascribing Black sexuality and flesh as something to be owned, feared, and/or suppressed. Conjuring this question of fluid sexuality in the digital collage series *TransFormation* (2019), the artist poses in surrealist, queer, decolonial landscapes that are bright and iconographically rich. They give life to what Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley opens up in “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage” (2007) when she asks: “What new geography [...] of sexual, gendered, trans-national, and racial identities might emerge through reading for black queer history and theory in the traumatic dislocation of the Middle Passage?”³⁰ Or again, what Saidiya Hartman describes in “Venus in Two Acts” (2008) when she cites her writing about the presence of the Venus in the archive of Atlantic slavery: “By throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’ and by exploiting the ‘transparency of sources’ as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history) [...].”³¹ Created during a period where he contemplated publicly sharing his trans-identity, Ma Koïta’s prints juxtapose his transforming likeness in various colourful contexts that draw from various vernaculars that “dislocate” the Middle Passage and “throw into crisis” fictions of history. These prints juxtapose canonical Western art historical references with Black (African) bodies and cultural artifacts that have often been fetishized, appropriated, and/or represented as exotic, primitive others.

Citing the heroic, white, masculine, and heteronormative figures of Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, Casper David Friedrich, and Vincent Van Gogh, amongst many others, in *TransFormation* Ma Koïta constructs a queer universe that recovers and gives place to trans Black figures in the archive. Adopting and morphing traditional physical poses from Western paintings,

28. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 7.

29. Snorton, 66.

30. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2–3 (2008): 193.

31. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11.

Figure 4. Kamissa Ma Koita, *Picasso No. 2*, from the series *TransFormation*, 2018. Digital collage. Courtesy of the artist.

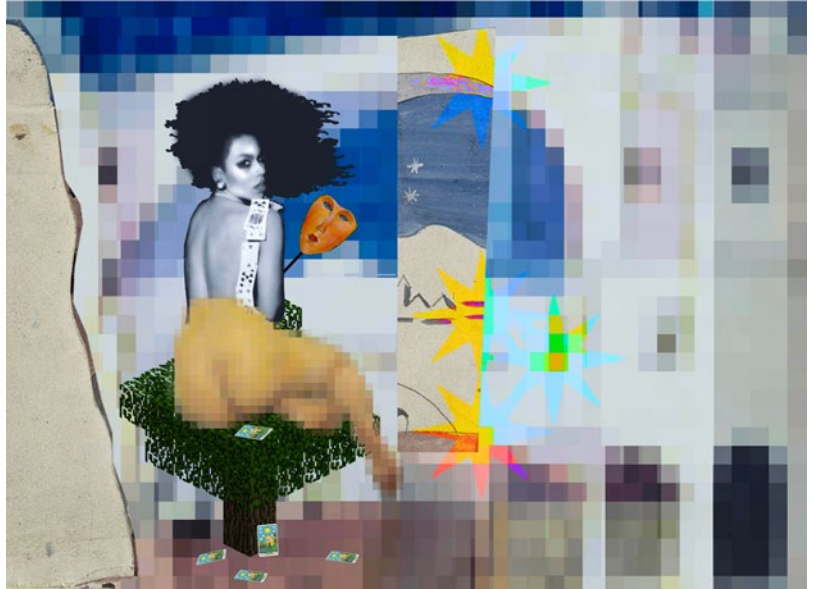


Figure 5. Kamissa Ma Koita, *Trans 2.1*, 2018. Digital collage. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Kamissa Ma Koita, *TransFormation No. 5*, 2018. Digital collage. Courtesy of the artist.



cutting and pasting recognizable masterpieces with blank spaces, pixelating images in order to blur the original provenance of the oeuvres, casting the scenes in a pinkish hue, and inserting wooden masks and vibrant patterns, the artist assembles environments that give life to new fluid, decolonising forms |fig. 4|. The trope of the “mad-genius artist,” typically associated with the lone white male phenom, is rethought to address the weight, embodied trauma, and mental strain of legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, anti-blackness, and systemic racism. To cite Snorton on racial histories of trans identities, Ma Koïta’s un-gendering of Blackness becomes “a site of fugitive maneuvers wherein the dichotomized and collapsed designations of male-man-masculine and female-woman-feminine remain[s] open—that is fungible—and the black’s figurative capacity to change form as a commoditized being engender[s] flow.”³² Exploring the historical treatment of neurodiversity in Western art history and its intersections with the pathologizing of Blackness in contemporary anti-black culture, Ma Koïta generates incisive self-portraits that unsettle conventional identarian, racial, and ethnic binaries |fig. 5|.

Questioning social domination by denouncing racist paradigms and exploitation because it is necessary to do so in order to survive comes at certain personal, social, and professional costs. Ma Koïta’s public exposure engenders vulnerability, emotional labour, as well as physical and intellectual demands that are rarely accounted for, adequately financially remunerated, or acknowledged. One of the most striking images in the *TransFormation* series is of Ma Koïta, a black formal gown hanging off his shoulders, next to a suit-and-tie character wearing an African mask |fig. 6|. The artist proudly wears a rainbow flag pin around his neck, held on an elaborate and pixelated necklace. In interviews about these works, the artist discussed the practice and process of collage as an important part of shaping his craft and identity.³³ Beyond the critical tactics that Ma Koïta employs in his process which are often read as overtly confrontational, these pieces can also be seen as deeply spiritual and personal statements. As Kobena Mercer has argued, the recurring presence of the mask is also a marker of protection, self-identification, and diasporic imagination: “To the extent that the inner face of the mask concerns its protective function, I would suggest that masking is a cultural form of central importance to the psychic life of the black diaspora because it seeks to hide and protect an inward relationship to Africa. What it protects is a contemplative or meditative space that allows spiritual and emotional reflection on the time and place left behind by the trauma and rupture that inaugurated diaspora.”³⁴

More reflections on inward diasporic relationships are critical to rethinking Ma Koïta’s intersectional approach to art, performance, cultural work, curation, and trans-activism. Instead of solely positioning the artist as a beacon of conflict or a bulwark for progress and change, they allow us to imagine him as his own agent, celebrating queer Black life and communities in a spiritually grounded way. With aesthetic prowess, conceptual richness, and clear understanding of power relations as they manifest themselves

32. Snorton, 59.

33. Interview with the artist, August 9, 2021.

34. Kobena Mercer, “Diasporic Aesthetics and Visual Culture,” in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 157.

inside and outside of the artworld, his practice consciously moves away from institutional discourses of utilitarianism and of the neoliberal “greater good.” Striving towards a more sustainable ecosystem, Ma Koïta shifts the prism of history while imagining new universes for himself and his peers to thrive. ¶