“Visual Griots,” Opens at the National Museum of Natural History Oct. 2

“Visual Griots,” an exhibition of 49 black-and-white photographs, highlights the work of 22 students ages 10 through 16, involved in a workshop that the Academy for Education Development, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, conducted in January 2005 in Tominian, Mali. The Visual Griot workshop enabled Malian and American photographers to instruct students in Mali to capture their lives on film while portraying their value systems through images produced to evoke the honor they feel for the traditions of their villages. (In West Africa, the word “griot” (gree-OH) means “storyteller who perpetuates the oral traditions of a family or village.”) The result was the creation of compelling images that illustrate contemporary rural life in Mali. The exhibit runs through April 29, 2007.

The photography medium allowed students to produce messages that transcend language barriers and cultures, inspiring confidence, self-esteem and critical thinking skills necessary to provoke self-exploration and expression. Their work is strikingly honest and aesthetically powerful. Their subjects are elements of their lives that are important to them, such as their friends, families and places they live. The object labels include each individual student photographer’s commentary about their images, allowing ample opportunity for the artists to speak out about their world.

“Training young people in visual literacy through the concrete process of taking photographs, and providing them the mechanism to document their own lives represents an important and innovative development strategy for youth empowerment,” said Mary Jo Arnoldi, curator of African ethnology at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

Mali today is both a traditional and modern country. Almost half of the Malian population of 11 million are younger than 14. A majority of the people live in rural communities, where they farm, fish and herd livestock for subsistence, however, Mali also has large cities that are expanding quickly. Although the majority of the Malian people are Muslim (approximately 90 percent), the Bwa people,
whose youth were involved in the Visual Griots program, are mostly Christian or subscribe to local religions. The children involved come from the Damy and Kouara villages, where there is no running water or electricity. Each community has one school where classes extend up to the 6th grade. After completing their elementary education, the students attend a middle school in a larger town nearby.

The photographs will tour schools, museums and communities in the United States their premiere at the National Museum of Natural History. The photos were a part of the 2005 Biennale of African Photography, which is a festival held biannually in Bamako, Mali. They were integrated into the city’s Seydou Keita Association Gallery as a part of the gallery’s permanent collection. The U.S. State Department acquired several of the “Visual Griots” images on long term loan and will hang them on the walls of the new U.S. embassy. After the exhibition closes at the Smithsonian in spring 2007, it will travel to several other venues throughout the United States, including U.S. schools. Currently, the AED is planning Visual Griots programs in different countries.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, located at 10 Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 5.5 million visitors in 2005. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free. For further information, call (202) 633-1000, TTY (202) 357-1729 or visit the museum’s Web site at www.mnh.si.edu.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Images available upon request. Please contact Kelly Carnes at carnesk@si.edu.