



PROJECT MUSE®

Dak'Art 11th Biennale of Contemporary African Art (review)

Beth Buggenhagen

African Arts, Volume 49, Number 1, Spring 2016, pp. 82-85 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/615117>

Dak'Art 11th Biennale of Contemporary African Art

May 5–June 8, 2014
Dakar, Senegal

reviewed by Beth Bugenhagen

What does it mean to produce, circulate, and display art in a global context from the viewpoint of Africa's westernmost city, Dakar? One of the ten major biennales in the world, the Dak'Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art, is an international exhibition featuring contemporary art produced by artists based on the continent and in the Diaspora. Curators Elise Atangana, Abdelkader Damani, and Ugochukwu Smooth Nzewi organized the eleventh edition of Dak'Art under the theme of "Producing the Common." This theme took the notion of "Tout monde" from Martinican writer and poet Edouard Glissant, which promotes a vision of a world of flourishing cultural diversity in unanticipated directions underscoring perhaps the global relevance of the experience of precarity and improvisation.

The exhibition took place at Village de la Biennale (a collection of warehouses that served as three exhibition spaces on the Route de Rufisque in the industrial zone of Dakar) and the Musée de l'IFAN and was accompanied by more than two hundred Off exhibitions in Dakar and Saint-Louis, Senegal, showing more than five hundred artists. The curators selected sixty-one artists to present their work in the international exposition. In a landmark departure from previous editions, the curators invited thirty additional artists who had not previously shown at Dak'Art. Also on display were a salon of African sculpture at Musée de l'IFAN showing the work of seventeen artists under the theme of "Cultural Diversity" curated by Massamba Mbaye, events on the campus of Université Cheikh Anta Diop under the theme of "Green Art" showing seven works from recycled materials, and tributes to three renowned Senegalese artists: Mbaye Diop, Mamadou Diakhaté, and Moustapha Dimé (Fig. 1). The latter is well-known for working in the tradition of *récupération* that has come to be synonymous with Dak'Art, in which discarded objects from the urban environment are drawn upon to produce three-dimensional works of sculpture.

The curators successfully confronted one



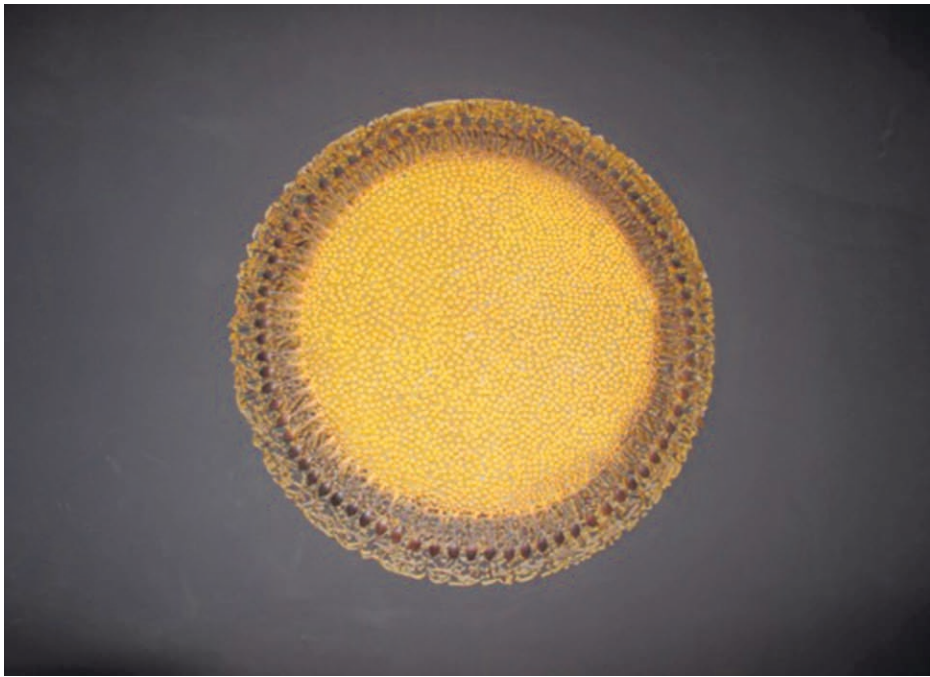
1 Moustapha Dimé Retrospective

all photos by Beth Bugenhagen except where otherwise noted

of the outstanding debates surrounding the Dak'Art biennales since the 1966 World Festival of Black Arts (which did not specialize in visual arts) first held in Dakar and the inception of Dak'Art as a biennale of contemporary fine art by the 1990s, namely, is this an exhibition of contemporary art on the African continent or an exhibition of African art for a global audience? And how might one define the experience of the contemporary among artists working in such diverse locations? Perhaps one answer to this long-standing question could be found in the curators' decision to display the works with only the artist's name and the work's title, leaving information about their national origin, birthplace, or current residence for the official catalogue and website. In addition, the curators invited each of the sixty-one artists to produce a second, small-scale piece to place in a self-curated space

referred to as a "curiosity cabinet," without title, artist's name, or geographical identifiers. The absence of such geographical descriptors for the artists and their work raised questions about what is African in the Biennale of Contemporary African Art. It also raises questions about the place of locality in the experience of the contemporary moment.

Unlike other major biennale exhibitions around the globe, the eleventh iteration of Dak'Art continued to bring artists, gallerists, art historians, curators, museum directors, critics, and collectors from across the world



2 Olu Amoda
Sunflower (2012)
Steel, nails, and metal spoons;
205 cm diameter

3 Assane Ndoye
Barak City (2013)
Papier mache, recuperated
materials; 120 cm x 80 cm

together in intimate spaces offering unusual access to the participating artists. Perhaps this is due to the relatively modest size of Dakar in comparison to mega cities like Lagos, though certainly the recent rapid growth and congestion of Dakar could confound even those well acquainted with the city and make finding some of the newer venues for the OFF exhibitions tricky. This growth, rather than making the city look distinctive, has rendered neighborhoods uniform in their appearance. As Mame-Diarra Niang's photographic essay *Sahel Gris* (grey Sahel) (2012) remarks, "the new face of Dakar," forged from the ubiquitous sand that creeps into every crevice of this coastal city and the concrete formed from it, is an omnipresent grey landscape (Niang n.d.). It is a built environment composed of new architectures of enclosure of cement brick framing individual consumption.

The use of the materials that saturate the visual landscape of everyday life was prevalent among the works and positioned the artists to speak to the politics of the present. The emerging conversation during this edition reflected the theme, "Producing the Common," through which the curators sought "to link politics and aesthetics in a vigorous and sustained way" (Atangana, Nzewi, and Damani 2014:21) and to push the relevance of Dak'Art in new directions.

Through the theme of the common the curators sought to create the experience of participating in a world historical moment. It was, highly successful perhaps revealing of how "old margins are becoming new frontiers" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012:13) in the world of art.

If the second world festival of black art known as FESTAC '77 in Lagos married "cultural tradition and fast capitalism" (Apter 2005), did the world historical moment of Dak'Art 14 portend an unhinging of art and its commodity form, allowing Dak'Art 14 to emerge not as a global marketplace for African art, but as a space in which the artists could "speak presently" to historical experience through their work? For example, works such as Wangachi Mutu's *The End of Eating Everything* (2013) commented on gender, consumption, and excess. It depicted a grotesque swollen female form riddled with boils and machine wheels ravenous for a flock of fleeing birds and included images picked from a multitude of sources originating in mass media, pornography, botany, and anthropology, among others. Mutu's work speaks to the commodification of culture, women's bodies, and a host of other disorders of the present eating away at the value of the human subject.

Though the curators' selection and aesthetic preferences played into the resulting show, other themes emerged from the exhibition of the collectivity, perhaps intentionally, perhaps unexpected. Many of the works spoke to the experience of living and producing meaningful work that reflected the highly variable and changing experience of artists across the continent and abroad from addressing new urban formations, including the informalization of employment and housing, to altered experi-

ences of work and value, as reflected in the inventive use of available materials, to commentary on new religious formations. Indeed, this edition of Dak'Art uniquely showcased the shared experience of the global as a state of precarity that could at once be the result of exclusion as well as intensive exploitation.

As much as Dak'Art 14 created a public space for a discussion of art and the artistic process, it also created a space for engagement with the lived realities of African artists who are inspired by the themes of movement, dislocation, construction, and dilapidation. As Mame-Diarra Niang commented in *Sahel Gris*, across the landscape of Dakar one could barely distinguish between piles of sand, gravel, and rebar meant for building, or rendered so through dereliction. The experience of viewing the show led one to reflect on innovation and material constraint. The installation of the works and the experience of the show itself also reflected these themes of an uneven globalization, infrastructural obstacles, and the prevalence of extemporization. There remains something quite particular about Dak'Art as the privileged space to express and understand what might be termed African experience, if not on the part of the artist themselves then perhaps on the part of the show's attendees. Dak'Art is a relevant venue for not only displaying contemporary art produced on and off the continent by artists with a shared historical and political consciousness, it is also the authoritative space from which African artists speak about Africa.

The Grand Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor was awarded to Driss Ouadah for painting and Olu Amoda for sculpture. Amoda's *Sunflower* (2012) (Fig. 2) comments on urbanization and the pas-



4 Amary Sobel Diop
Portrait Aline Sitoe Diatta (2013), *Apologie pour la paix* series
Aluminum, copper wire, and deodorant boxes; 80 cm x 106 cm
Photo: Amary Sobel Diop

5 Henri Sagna
Temoins de notre temps (2013)
Wood installation; dimensions variable

sion for consumption that keeps material constraints and thus politics in the background. The materials for this sculpture consist of nails collected from shipping containers in which consumer goods are imported to Lagos. This raises the question of how artists work with media available to them and which visually informs their daily experience of moving about the space that inspires their work.

If Mame-Diarra Niang's vision of Dakar draws from the materiality of sand and concrete, Assane Ndoye's work *Barack City* (2013) (Fig. 3) asks to its viewers to confront the prospects for those for whom concrete is unobtainable. To create his richly textured work on paper, Assane Ndoye appropriates the material of self-built dwellings. In the use of materials also lies the implicit social commentary about the environment. The themes of constraint, precarity, and the self-built nature of homes along Dakar's newly paved Autoroute come out in Assane Ndoye's work.

Continuing the theme of found objects and material constraints is Amary Sobel Diop's mixed media portraits of leading female figures, *Apologie pour la paix* (2013) (Fig. 4). Diop is also an artist who makes work from and about his environment. His materials, drawn from discarded or collected perfume packaging; engage with "assemblage, couture,

toile, sculpture, peinture"² and successfully "return[s] to the craft in the art."³ The meticulous stitching and use of copper wire in Diop's work are reminiscent of El Anatsui's installations. Amary Sobel Diop was awarded the Prix Oumar Ndao offert par Vives Voix.

In another striking example of portraiture, Andrew Eisbo's *Who We Are* (2010), addresses African self-imaging and the experience and discourse surrounding LGBT identity across the continent. These are intimate views of young men in domestic spaces filled with meaningful personal objects that at once make visible the unique and mundane quality of their lives. Of note, Eisbo's portraits were also part of an Off show at the well-regarded Raw Material Company exhibition co-organized by Koyo Kouoh and Ato Malinda called "Precarious Imaging: Visibility and Media Surrounding African Queerness" exploring homosexuality in Africa. "Precarious Imaging" was subsequently shut down by some members of the Muslim clergy in Senegal.

Normusa Makhumu recuperates Africa's place in history and the place of history in the present in *Self-Portrait* (2011–2013). This work won the Prix du Studio national des arts contemporains, Le Fresnoy, France. With great technical proficiency, Makhumu imposes her own image on that of black middle-class



portraits from apartheid era South Africa to interrogate practices of self-imagining, notions of gender, race, class and the nature of post-apartheid South Africa.

To commemorate and project onto a new space of value, this eleventh iteration of Dak'Art, Omar Victor Diop, created the *Studio of Vanities* in which he captured images of the participating artists and reinvigorated the practice of studio portraiture widely admired by the art world since the circulation of the portraits of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe. Interestingly, in 1992 during the first edition of Dak'Art, *Revue Noire* showcased the work of renowned Senegalese photographers Mama Casset and Bouna Medoune Seye (Delisse 1993). Like many of the artists showing at Dak'Art, Diop also commented on Africa and African's place in the history of the global.

As much as the artist at Dak'Art engaged with themes specific to the surroundings in which they work, they also engaged with their particular experience of the global, including new religious formations and local histories of these global religions. In his work shown in the sculpture exhibition, *Témoins de notre temps* (2013) (Fig. 5), Henri Sagna addressed the complex interplay of Muslim and Christian congregations in locations across the continent turning to painting, sculpture, and architecture. His burnt wooden containers displaying religious symbols spoke to Islam, Christianity, tolerance, and the contemporary moment.

BETH BUGGENHAGEN is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and a Faculty Curator at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University. She is currently working on a book on the histories of African self-imagining and contemporary reinventions of the portraiture tradition in West Africa. babuggen@indiana.edu

Notes

- 1 Nzewi personal communication, 15 May 2014.
- 2 Diop, personal communication, 16 May 2014.
- 3 Nzewi personal communication, 15 May 2014.

References cited

- Apter, Andrew. 2005. *The Pan African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Atangana, Elise, Ugochukwu Smooth Nzewi, and Abdelkader Damani. 2014. *Dak'Art 2014* [exhibition catalogue]. Dakar, Senegal.
- Jean and John Comaroff. 2012. *Theory from the South: Or, How Europe Is Evolving toward Africa*. New York: Routledge.
- Delisse, Clementine. 1993. "Dak'Art 92: Where Internationalism Falls Apart." *African Arts* 26 (3):18, 20, 23, 84–85.
- Niang, Mame-Diarra. "Dak'Art 14. These Landscapes are Extremely Contemporary." *Contemporary And*. <http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/these-landscapes-are-extremely-contemporary/>. Accessed December 11, 2014.

exhibition review

William Kentridge: Tapestries— A Collaboration with Stephens Tapestry Studio

Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg

November 18, 2015–December 15, 2015

reviewed by Joseph Leo Koerner

During the last two months of 2014, the galleries of the Wits Art museum were hung with remarkable tapestries after William Kentridge's designs. These weavings looked custom-made for this space. Displaying twenty weavings along with preparatory and related objects—raw materials, mock-ups, cartoons, motifs cast in bronze, etc.—curator Fiona Rankin-Smith took visitors deep inside the artist's studio (Figs. 1–2). To anyone who knew Kentridge's work well, that studio was already a familiar place, because in drawings, films, flipbooks, lectures, performances, and installations, the artist has frequently portrayed himself pacing his workspace in Johannesburg.

But it is also a special property of tapestries to seem everywhere at home. Among the earliest human artifacts, weavings connect us to our nomadic past. The Bible states that Adam and Eve tied leaves together to cover them-

selves; early theorists of architecture, puzzling over Adam's house in paradise, speculated that human dwelling started with textiles hung between upright supports. Tapestries are also a portable home. Hanging them out makes any place domestic. Fittingly, in his works in this medium, Kentridge makes mobility the fundamental theme. Dark figures command the tapestries. Riders on horseback, marching compasses, forward-traveling noses, porters carrying great loads: all struggle to move from here to there. Monstrous and comical, these forms enact the human condition in accordance to physics' basic law that work equals force times distance. As the exhibition's accompanying material showed, these figures also travel backwards through the artist's oeuvre from Kentridge's 2014 collaboration on performances of Schubert's *Winterreise*, through his 2012 production of Shostakovich's *The Nose* for the Metropolitan Opera, back to *Shadow Play* of 1999.

Schubert's song cycle begins where Kentridge's weavings do: in motion from the start. With the piano sounding the wanderer-singer's footsteps in winter away as he departs from his fickle love, and with the singer locked in an shifting duet with nature, these Viennese *Lieder* proved an illuminating matrix for Kentridge's art, heightening its melancholy and embellishing with storylines its landscape of single trees, uncanny crows, windmills, and weathervanes. With each new project generally, Kentridge launches new messages and forms, expanding steadily his reach while

1 William Kentridge
Self Portrait as Coffee Pot III (2011)
Tapestry; 278 cm x 235 cm
Edition: 6 + 2 AP's
Photo: Anthea Pokroy

