

A Biennial for the Future

In Dakar, art arises from a sense of absolute necessity. That makes Dak'Art a biennial that holds together an entire continent.

By Louise Steiwer 15.06.22 Review Artikel på dansk



Installation view, Emmanuel Tussore, *De Cruce*, 2022. Photo: Johannes Sivertsen.

It begins with a long wait. Our guide, Omar, has taken us through the narrow streets of the old colonial quarter where there are no pavements, down along the waterfront where makeshift street kitchens send up plumes of smoke almost as dense as those emitted by the heavy traffic. Mopeds carrying young people zigzag between a chaotic jumble of pedestrians and battered cars honking furiously in a mostly vain effort to dissolve a steadily congesting traffic jam. We have walked for no more than a quarter of an hour when we arrive at the National Theatre, where the opening of this year's Dakar Biennale is to take place, but I am already soaked with sweat and covered in a thin layer of red dust that sticks to the mixture of sunscreen and mosquito spray filming my arms and legs.

14th edition of the Biennale of Contemporary African Art

**Dak'Art, Dakar
19 May — 21 June 2022**

Inside, the National Theatre's huge concert hall is cool – and half empty. Only a gaggle of international journalists who have also failed to grasp the concept of African time have taken up position in the designated red plush seats, while a band plays soft Senegalese rhythms in the background. Something like an hour and a half later, people begin to arrive: women in vast robes with matching turban-like headgear and large gold jewellery; men in heavily patterned djellabas and sunglasses are interspersed with long capes or eye-wateringly expensive suits. Clearly, I and the rest of the Western press have failed to appreciate not only the timing, but also the degree of solemnity of this ceremony.

As it happens, both aspects – the waiting and the pomp and circumstance – turn out to be prompted by the presence of the president himself. After a long series of speakers – including Minister of Culture Abdoulaye Diop and the biennale's artistic director and curator El Hadji Malick Ndiaye (art historian and curator at the Musée Théodore-Monod in Dakar) – the presentation of awards, and several musical interludes, Macky Sall, the fourth president to rule Senegal since the country's independence in 1960, takes the stage and delivers a quite impressive speech. For more than half an hour, he speaks about the power of art and its importance for the establishment of a cultural identity in regions that have lived through colonial trauma, and about how art can be used as an abstract and concrete lever for development on the African continent – and as a tool for entering into dialogue with the rest of the world.



Opening night of the 14th edition of the Dakar Biennale, May 2022. Work by Ngozi Ezema, *Think Tea*, *Think Cup III*, 2020. Photo: Louise Steiwer.

Macky Sall has clearly familiarised himself with the biennale's theme and programme, speaking about it with a level of empathy and commitment that is quite startling to a Dane; in Denmark, we are used to politicians having only relatively fitful and sporadic interest in and knowledge of the visual arts. But it also says something about the status enjoyed by this biennial in Dakar.

Let us illustrate this point with some figures: public funding to the Dakar Biennale comes to 750 million CFA Franc, or approximately EUR 1.2 million. To this we may add an almost endless list of private foundations, sponsors, and partners. In comparison, the Danish Arts Foundation's support for the U-Turn festival in Copenhagen came to EUR 780,000. So the amount is substantial, even in a European context. For a country like Senegal, whose GDP ranks 109th among the world's 179 countries, it's astronomical.

Another figure that can offer some sense of the project's scope is, of course, the number of visitors who attend. The previous instalment of the biennale, held in 2018, attracted 250,000 visitors, which is roughly the

same as the Venice Biennale. But whereas the Venice Biennale is open from April to November, the Dakar Biennale is over and done with in just one month, during which the entire city is in a frenzy of activity. All this makes the biennale the world's third-largest art event – and by far the most important on the African continent.



Yrneh Gabon, *King Salt*, 2020-2022. Photo: Johannes Sivertsen.

To understand why a relatively poor country expends these kinds of resources on contemporary art, we need to take a look back in time. The Dakar Biennale, or Dak'Art as it is also called, was first launched in 1989 as a combined art and literature festival. However, its roots extend all the way back to 1966, when the first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, established the *Festival Mondial des Arts Negres*, a pan-African celebration of Black culture in the countries that had just seceded from colonial ties.

Senghor, himself a poet, subscribed to the intellectual movement Negritude, which arose in Paris during the 1930s as a protest against the assimilationist policy of the French colonial regime. For Senghor, Negritude was about highlighting distinctly African traits, the values and aesthetics of the new democracies that emerged after independence, and about equating African and European thinking. This project was to be supported by comprehensive – and expensive – cultural policy efforts. “Senghor was great for African culture, but not great for Senegal’s economy,” our guide laconically explains in a brief aside lodged amidst tall tales about Malian bandits and a crash course on key phrases in the local language, Wolof.

Thematically, the 14th instalment of Dak'Art can be said to dovetail nicely with Senghor's ideas. Under the three-part title *I Ndaffa / forgerer / out of the fire* (in Serer, French, and English, respectively), the biennale focuses on giving shape to a new way of thinking grounded in African cultures, experiences, and stories, that can serve as an alternative to European universalism.

In a former courthouse

The main exhibition is set in the Ancien Palais de Justice located on the southern tip of the peninsula that forms the centre of Dakar, a place where everything is in some intermediate stage between total decay and reconstruction. Big eagles circle the air above the cranes busily transforming the coastline into luxury properties, while the old bus terminal seems on the brink of crumbling into rust and dust, disappearing into the sand. Until a few months ago, only birds lived in the palais, which was originally built as a museum under Senghor, but which served as a courthouse until 2005.

Fortunately, the abandoned building was not treated to a great deal of renovation before the biennale moved in. With its very special aura of photogenic decay, collapsed ceilings, and crackled mosaic floors, the Ancien Palais de Justice is by far the most beautiful biennial venue I have ever seen. The courtyard garden in the middle of the building is enclosed by a tall colonnade now accommodating large installation projects arrayed side by side all the way around. These are visually compelling works on a huge scale, all of which would be a more obvious fit for the flashy Venice Biennale than for the more dryly cerebral Documenta. In adjoining halls, we find installations that form an entire world unto themselves, while a succession of former office spaces play host to smaller works, primarily painting and video.



Dickson Kaloki Nyamai, *Kumavau Nginya Vaa (From There to Here)*, 2021. Acrylics and mixed

media collage on canvas, 218 x 223 cm. Photo:
Johannes Sivertsen.

The main exhibition brings together fifty-nine artists from thirty countries, primarily African. A few non-African countries with a colonial past are represented, as well as a handful of artists with roots in the African diaspora of the United States and Europe. The first thing I notice is the great emphasis placed on craftsmanship and tactility; these are works that braid, knit, sew, juxtapose, cut, and layer materials again and again. One example is Kenyan artist Dickson Kaloki Nyamai's huge painting of two women sat in front of a TV in a yellow living room, which on closer inspection turns out to comprise: several sewn-together layers of fabric with photographic prints, steel wires that determine the direction of brushstrokes, and cow dung used to ground the canvas. The work brings together stories from his grandmother's life, colonial historical events, and contemporary African life, all represented in materials that speak eloquently of traumas and communities while also focusing on the very act of creating something new from the pieces of the pre-existing. It clearly runs parallel to the idea of creating a community – a pan-African cultural identity – on a continent that has experienced so many traumas that it has not yet had time to heal.

There are also works which take the opposite tack, recreating something traditional by means of modern technology. For example, Senegalese artist Mbaye Diop, who won the main prize at this year's biennale, revives the idea of the traditional meeting place where village elders convened to discuss political issues. Through a network of mobile phones, a form of pre-democratic conversation re-emerges, this time with the art academies' group critiques as a starting point and his own work as the centre of the conversation.

Finally, there are those who position themselves somewhere in between. French artist Beya Gille Gacha's sculptural installation depicting a naked blue boy in a mysterious architectural space made of stones and plants is particularly enthralling. The boy is made out of blue pearls in a pattern characteristic of the Bamileke people in Cameroon, from whom Gacha's mother is descended. But when I spoke briefly with the artist, she told me that she learned the basics of the technique on Youtube and figured out the rest for herself – a true millennial.



Beya Gille Gacha, *L'Autre Royaume*, 2022. Photo: Johannes Sivertsen.

The very act of creating something new out of the old is also about sustainability and recycling, and this too is a major focus area at this year's biennale. Many African societies are quite literally drowning in waste, partly because they may not have sufficient infrastructure to handle their own waste, but also because they receive vast heaps from the West through, for example, the sale of waste quotas as part of cooperation agreements. In Ghana alone, 15 million pieces of second-hand clothing are received every week, while masses of e-waste – used computers, telephones, cars, etc. – arrive in giant containers in the naïve hope that Africa might be able to make use of what the West has discarded.

Collectif Tripe's six-metre-tall plastic work, cascading down from a skylight in a blue-green wave to hit the floor in front of us, shows us how waste can be used to create something tremendously beautiful. The strips of rubber and polyurethane, woven and knitted together into a kind of rug, originate from a single factory in Johannesburg and cannot be recycled for other purposes – apart from art production, that is. This is a characteristic trait of many of the biennale's works: they are more than simply representations or thematic musings on a given issue. Rather, as in the case of Collectif Tripe, they constitute very concrete takes on how to solve a real and very present crisis that is both African and global in scope.

The desert encroaches

The works that make the keenest impression on me are two installations, both of which address an impending ecological collapse. French artist Emmanuel Tussore's installation *De Cruce* (From Cruce, 2022) is located in a large hall illuminated only by the sunlight insinuating itself through the shutters of a giant window. Inside, the ceiling has partially collapsed,

leaving a huge crater of exposed concrete structures, while the floor is covered by heavy sand dunes. Up from the sandy subsoil rise thick metal poles, each carrying the dead roots of a tree like a kind of canopy. Several dead trees lie scattered around the sand. We quite obviously find ourselves in a post-apocalyptic landscape that speaks about losing touch not only with one's cultural and family roots, but also with nature.

Located in northern Senegal, Dakar is on the edge of the Sahel region, where the desert constantly threatens to spread. The struggle to stem the tides of the desert sands consists primarily in planting trees with large root systems, such as baobabs, which can hold on to fertile soil and water. However, escalating climate change is making the fight against the desert increasingly desperate, and walking around Dakar I see how car windows, palm trees, and my own skin are quickly covered by a sticky layer of red soil blowing away as it yields to the sand found in the unpaved streets in the Medina.



A sticky layer of red soil blows away as it yields to the sand found in the unpaved streets of Dakar.
Photo: Louise Steiwer.

A similarly post-apocalyptic mood permeates Senegalese artist Fally Sene Sow's installation *Rusty World* (2022), an urban environment inspired by the Colobane market in Dakar depicted after some unspecified disaster has struck. The room is plunged into partial darkness, while flimsy ruinous landscapes made of papier-mâché and dried plants tower around us in a dazzling array of detail. The road signs are bent, planes have crashed into the buildings, the sand has taken over the formerly vibrant street market, and there is not a human being to be seen anywhere. In Sow's installation, everything feels fragile, as if a single epidemic, a simple natural disaster, or a single person's ignorance might cause all of civilisation to come crashing down around our ears.

Between tradition and contemporaneity

In addition to the main exhibition at the Ancien Palais de Justice, the biennale's official programme extends across a handful of other venues, while the unofficial programme encompasses hundreds of smaller exhibitions presented in everything from backyard studios and hotel lobbies to white-cube galleries and embassies. Musée Théodore-Monod d'Art africain de l'IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop (Théodore-Monod) usually focuses on traditional Senegalese and African art objects: masks, ceremonial gear, and traditional costumes. During the biennale, these are joined by contemporary works of art under the common heading *Teg Bët Gëstu Gi*, which means something along the lines of "touching knowledge with the eye," in Wolof.

There are many excellent things about the Dakar Biennale that deserve praise, but the art dissemination efforts are not among them. At the Théodore-Monod, for example, no signs appear next to the works, giving rise to confusion that proves both fruitful and frustrating. The exhibition takes its point of departure in renewed interest in how we should understand the objects that make up the museum's collection. An interest that is partly based on new research into the objects themselves, but also on postcolonial discussions about how they are seen, read, and – especially – exhibited.

But there's a funkily amusing and interesting aspect to the missing signs, too. As it turns out, it takes quite a lot of effort to distinguish between older art objects and new contemporary artworks, many of which deliberately aim to blend into the collection. Therein lies a point in itself: contemporary art and the traditional art object are not considered essentially different.

The traditional artefacts were often used in rituals, for example, as vessels and media for medical treatment. But, according to curator El Hadji Malick Ndiaye's catalog essay, it is more accurate to say that they were perceived as agents or energies that could in themselves possess inherited knowledge, rather than dead tools used in ceremonies in which knowledge was passed on. African contemporary art, he believes, possesses a similar quality of being something in which one actively participates, and where the transmission of knowledge is intuitive rather than analytical. The European distinction made between the artistic and the cultural-historical underpins the problematic aspects of how we perceive works such as traditional masks, but also of how we generally perceive the experience and knowledge embedded in an African worldview.

Reflecting this, French artists Uriel Orlow and Ariane Leblanc have created in the museum garden a medicinal herb garden containing plants that are used as curatives in both traditional and modern medicine, while Hervé Youmbi's meta-objects, which could easily pass as part of the museum's collection, posit themselves right in the middle between contemporary and traditional categories and must be activated performatively.■

The highlight here is a humorous video by South African artist Francois Knoetze, who takes on the role of an "afronaut" scavenging for digital waste in the streets of Dakar and creating hybrids between robots and masks which were also physically present in the galleries. Another work which merits special mention is French artists Olive Martin and Patrick Bernier's *La rêve du Paquebot* (The ocean liner dream, 2020), a series of woven tapestries which revolve around traditional weaving techniques while also telling the story of a former ferry that used to sail between the French colonies until it was sold to a Chinese company. Now it is once again sailing the sea off Dakar, this time under Chinese flag, nicely conveying an anecdote about how some perceive the Chinese influence in West Africa as a new type of colonisation of production, raw materials, and the economy.

The spirit of the mask and the body of the dead officer

The discussion about the place of traditional objects and techniques in our present-day world is extensive and diverse at this year's biennale, finding expression in exhibition concepts, artworks, and in a very comprehensive programme of talks during the opening week.

At the Musée des civilisations noires, theatre director Dorcy Rugamba presents a four-part performative installation called *Les Restes Suprêmes* (The Supreme Remains, 2022). The main protagonist is an African museum visitor seeking out an art collection much like that of the Thèodore-Monod in order to find ways of resolving his sense of alienation from his own history. He meets the spirit of the African mask, which takes him on a long journey through the mask's history, beginning in a typical ethnological collection that takes him back in time: to the cabinet of curiosities of a European scientist; to the general who brought the mask home from an expedition in the Belgian Congo; and all the way back to the mask's point of origin, a half-burnt African village. "We must understand," concludes the spirit of the mask, "that the alienation from traditional African objects is rooted in the violent history it has undergone, not in the inability of the African spectator to connect with their own history." History is not embedded in the burned-down village,

nor in the dead object in the museum's collection. History resides in the ritual and in the connection between the people taking part in that encounter.



Les Restes Suprêmes, theater piece and performative installation directed by Dorcy Rugamba in collaboration with Nathalie Vairac, Malang Sonko, Francois Sauveur & Marc Soriano. Photo: Johannes Sivertsen.

At the Résidence de l'ambassade de l'Union européenne, curator Azu Nwagbogu has put together an exhibition on African archives that is not part of the official programme, but definitely worth a visit. Among several other powerful video works the exhibition includes *Balot NFT* (2022), a long film work by Renzo Martens and CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise).

CATPC is a group of workers on a palm-oil plantation in the Democratic Republic of Congo who, in 2017, set up a museum on the former plantation site in Lusanga. In the film, two plantation workers speak of their desire to exhibit a particular object: a figure depicting the Belgian officer Maximilien Balot, who was killed during a riot on the plantation. There's just one problem: today, the wooden figure is part of the collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in the United States. The video offers a slew of arguments for and against repatriation while also providing solid insight into the myriad issues surrounding the display of traditional African artefacts. CATPC has recently launched an NFT edition of the sculpture, and by purchasing it, buyers support the museum's programme and its workshops for local schools and plantation workers. It's simply brilliant.

A necessary biennial

The 14th edition of the Dakar Biennale contains an infinite number of angles on decolonial issues, ranging from the hip African feminism found in the backyard of Thèodore-Monod, where four young women curators have been invited to each create their own cool little exhibition, to lengthy conferences focusing on decolonising Eurocentric perceptions of knowledge or looking at Black Lives Matter in a pan-African context. But perhaps there are also points to be found in looking at what is *not* so heavily featured at this year's biennale.

In scant supply are projects addressing the massive slave trade that took place from the 1530s to the mid-19th century on the small island of Goree off Dakar. The only place I find works with that particular focus was at *Black Rock 40*, an exhibition of artists from Kehinde Wiley's residency programme in Dakar, which – despite boasting fine works – seems to be shored up by a rather Western point of view. The rest of the artists at the biennale focus on those parts of colonial history that are recent enough to still be palpable. For example, I see four different works about *les tirailleurs sénégalais*, the group of African soldiers who fought on the French side during the Second World War. In 1944, they were sent to a camp outside Dakar, where they were detained under rather dubious conditions. When they protested, every single soldier was killed.



Modou Dieng Yacine, *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe with the celebrated black troops*, 2020. Photo: Johannes Sivertsen.

Autobiographical works or projects based on individual issues of identity are similarly rare at the Dakar Biennale. I find exceptions among a few artists with roots in the African diaspora, such as American-Jamaican artist Yrneh Gabon, whose tremendously poignant project is based on a trip to Lac Retba, Dakar's famous pink lake. Here he observes the

production of salt on the shores of the lake, speaking of his sense of connectedness to these workers who spring from the same soil and the same salt as himself.

In a country like Senegal and a city like Dakar, where the contrasts are so stark and the history is so full of trauma, it is perhaps not so strange that all art is political. Even works that seem to deal only with aesthetic matters are made out of materials that point to colonial conditions, the extraction and exploitation of resources and people, or concrete or abstract solutions to local and global problems.

Perhaps this also answers my initial question as to why a relatively poor country such as Senegal devotes tremendous resources and effort to contemporary art. It's quite simply because, in Dakar, the art has not arisen out of idle curiosity, out of a surplus of creative energy and resources. Rather, it is a vital precondition for being able to move on. Art is necessary to hold together a continent whose history is a long series of upheavals, and necessary to create a unified cultural identity among peoples who have had to change language, territory, religion, and cultural affiliations many times.

Perhaps that's why being at the Dakar Biennale for the first time feels so right, so full of meaning. While I might have experienced similar works in the exhibitions of contemporary African art that fill European museums these days, the curation at Dak'Art is so keenly honed that it strikes me in a different way. While here, surrounded by the context addressed in the exhibition, it is easier to believe that art can change the world, that we can learn from each other, and that the future belongs to Africa.

***14th edition of the Biennale of
Contemporary African Art***

**Dak'Art, Dakar
19 May — 21 June 2022**
