

In Dakar, African Art Speaks in All Its Voices

In its first pandemic-era edition, the Dakar Biennale, Africa's biggest art gathering, is uneven, hectic — and full of possibility.



“De Cruce” by Emmanuel Tussore at the Dakar Biennale’s official exhibition at the former Palace of Justice in Senegal’s capital city. A room-size installation brought in sand from beaches, steel beams from construction sites and stumps from a development-threatened wetland. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

By Siddhartha Mitter

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DAKAR, Senegal — Despite the rise to prominence of African contemporary art, its terms are still largely influenced by foreign validators: the mainly Western museums, galleries, collectors and auction houses whose attention anoints stars and assigns value.

In African cities, state support for the arts can be anemic as a result of decades of budgetary pressure, notably from lenders like the International Monetary Fund. Foreign cultural agencies like the Institut Français or Goethe-Institut are often the major arts presenters, and thus gatekeepers.

But every two years, the tables turn. For the five hectic weeks of the Dakar Biennale of African Contemporary Art, cultural producers from the continent and its diaspora converge here for the largest, densest artistic gathering — and most enduring, now in its 14th edition — on Africa’s terrain and its own terms, funded principally by Senegal’s government.

This year’s Biennale, postponed from 2020 because of the pandemic, is titled “I Ndaffa,” a Serer expression that the artistic director, El Hadji Malick Ndiaye, an art historian, translated as “Out of the Fire,” alluding to a forge, where material is transformed and meanings are made. The city itself is its cauldron, with a sprawling program of some 500 satellite exhibitions and events — known as “Le Off” — throughout this busy capital, stretching to its outskirts and secondary towns.

“Dakar sets the tone and temperature of the African contemporary scene,” said the Cameroonian filmmaker Pascale Obolo, who is based in Paris. She traveled here to direct an art-book fair in a plaza on the seafront Route de la Corniche, featuring two dozen independent African presses and magazines.



Near the entrance to the African Art Book Fair on the seafront, part of “the Off,” as the Dakar Biennale’s off-site exhibitions are known. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

Elsewhere, at an art center in the Ouakam neighborhood, the Egyptian director Jihan El-Tahri convened a work session on African image and sound archives, then threw the doors open for public rooftop performances. In Popenguine, a coastal village, the Ghanaian curator Nana Oforiatta Ayim set up a “mobile museum” with local artists and residents.

This intellectual effervescence, the sense of myriad projects being hatched or advanced with a Pan-Africanist or Global South orientation, is a characteristic energy of the Dakar Biennale that resonates beyond its main curated events. Indeed, many regulars say they come mostly for the Off. (The main show ends June 21; many Off events continue.)

The Biennale’s approach is maximalist, borderline overwhelming, but favors discoveries. The flagship curated show, held in a Modernist former courthouse that is now maintained in an evocative state of decay, abounds in new names selected by an open call. And the Off spans a wild gamut of razor-sharp conceptual projects, retrospectives of Senegalese painters, gallery shows of emerging talent, design pop-ups, community projects, glorified tourist art.

But beyond the sheer energy and cornucopia, the stakes in the field have shifted in ways that challenge Dakar and other exhibitions to do more. In the four years since the last Biennale new horizons have opened for African art-making, and more deeply, African ideas in the world.

Restitution is the busiest front. After decades of inaction, the return of objects obtained through colonial plundering is on the agenda. A gathering stream of handovers — notably by France to Benin last November — is prompting investments in new venues to exhibit these objects, but also projects by contemporary artists reflecting on their return.



At the former Palace of Justice, the Dakar Biennale honors a respected master, the Malian textile artist Abdoulaye Konaté, with a mini-survey. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

At Dakar's Museum of Black Civilizations, which opened in 2018, the Black French actress Nathalie Vairac, face daubed in kaolin, performed as a Punu mask from Gabon — of a type that has fetched up to \$400,000 at auction — in "Supreme Remains," a play by the Rwandan writer and director Dorcy Rugamba. The story followed the mask's journey through colonial homes and collections, emphasizing the accumulating alienation from its roots and cultural harm.

On Gorée, Dakar's historic island neighborhood and a remembrance site of the Middle Passage, the Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula, accompanied by a trumpet player, gave a spare and affecting performance that examined the cultural and even spiritual stakes when a statue returns to its ancestral community, re-entering a changed world.

The Cameroonian artist Hervé Youmbi offers his own solution. At the Théodore Monod Museum of African Art, he flanks a traditional mask from Senegal's Diola people with ones of his making that mix forms from different regions and unconventional materials like denim. A video shows his new hybrid masks in ceremonial use in Cameroon and Senegal. A

shipping crate and two wall texts — one written in an ethnographic-museum style, the other contemporary — complete the installation.

“All is in the hands of those who make the objects,” Youmbi said. “Why be hostage to pieces that are outside Africa? We can produce new ones and move forward.”

The market remains a distorting lens. Foreign collectors of African contemporary art are currently obsessed with the current trend of figurative painting and Black portraiture, notably from Ghana, but for many here the work fails to impress. African contemporary art museums, whose acquisitions might send different value signals, are still desperately rare.

Seen from the continent, the United States and Europe these days seem out of ideas, stuck in social crises and democratic decline. Lectures on “good governance” have lost their force. For renewed African artistic visions of society, community and ecology, the field has rarely been this open. “We have to write our own histories of contemporary art,” Obolo said. “We can’t miss the boat this time.”



Visitors to the biennale run through Caroline Gueye's "Quantum Tunneling" exhibition, a trippy installation that evokes tunneling to extract resources in mines, but also space-time wormholes. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

In the atrium of the old courthouse, with slender columns around a garden, Ndiaye, the artistic director, said he built the main show's roster of 59 artists with a bias toward the open call. "You give a chance to those in early career," he said. "This Biennale is intended as democratic."

Highlights include work by the Cameroonian artist Jeanne Kamptchouang, who greeted visitors wearing a mirrored contraption on his head. His floor installation, which incorporates broken-down chairs, mirrors and plastic barrels employed in Dakar to deter sidewalk parking, read as beguiling urban poetry.

Louisa Marajo, a Paris-based artist with roots in Martinique, created a kind of shipwreck site from paint, photo collage, peeling paper and crates to evoke the natural and human disasters that shaped Caribbean migration. "The idea is permanent voyage and generative fire," she said.

One emerging Senegalese artist, Caroline Gueye, built a trippy walk-in installation, all mirrors and blue light and silver foil. It evokes tunneling to extract resources in mines, but also space-time wormholes, said Gueye, who trained as an astrophysicist.

Among other notable entries, the small, tightly coiled metal sculptures by Kokou Ferdinand Makouvia hold a gnomonic appeal. An installation of video and archival documents from Fluxus do Atlantico Sul, a collective in Bahia, Brazil, traces Afro-Brazilian connections. A large mixed-media work (including cow dung) by the Kenyan painter Kaloki Nyamai, on unstretched canvas that spills onto the floor, imbues a domestic scene with a sense of frayed history.

The Biennale honors a respected master, the Malian textile artist Abdoulaye Konaté, with a mini-survey, and it mixes in smart, compact shows by guest curators, all women, among its voices — notably the presentation by Greer Valley, a Johannesburg-based scholar, showing conceptual artists from the sharp South African scene. But does it meet the moment? Designed before the pandemic, with few intervening tweaks, the flagship show now lacks urgency.



Looking at “Culture Lost and Learned by Heart – part 2” by Adjii Dieye, a metal lattice that stretches cloth screenprinted with vintage photographs. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

The city picks up the slack, providing not just invigorating context for the Biennale but subject matter for some memorable entries. In the main exhibition, Adjii Dieye has built a fan-like metal lattice on which she stretches cloth screenprinted with vintage photographs from Senegal’s archives. A full room-size installation by Emmanuel Tussore brings in sand from Dakar’s beaches, steel beams from its construction sites and stumps from a development-threatened wetland.

And with an extraordinary walk-in installation in the main show, and a solo exhibition in the Off, at Vema Gallery, Fally Sène Sow, who draws inspiration from his home neighborhood of Colobane, a nonstop hub of commerce and traffic, turns intricate scale models into sound-and-sculpture hallucinations of a city under mounting ecological siege.

Dakar’s commercial gallery scene is very much alive: Cécile Fakhoury is showing a smart exhibition of prints by Binta Diaw; Selebe Yoon offers a retrospective of the painter El Hadj Sy; and OH Gallery, which Océane Harati founded in 2019 in the Maginot building downtown, displays an immense installation in the building’s ground-floor hall — separate works by Oumar Ball, Aliou Diack, and Patrick-Joël Tacheda Yonkeu — that combine into a kind of grand earthworks and bestiary.

The gallery sells works for up to \$100,000 abroad, Harati said, but most buyers are local. Her artists make small pieces aimed at new collectors — and small budgets. “There was no niche for new collectors,” she said. “We want to valorize small formats so people who buy them feel considered.”

Art-world glamour has alighted in Dakar with Black Rock, the posh seafront residency established by Kehinde Wiley. For the Biennale season, Wiley funded the renovation of a cultural center in the old Medina neighborhood and held an exhibition of Black Rock’s residents — 40 of them, since 2019 — and several Senegalese artists. The opening featured a concert by the

Nigerian singer Teni.



At RAW Material Company during Tuan Andrew Nguyen's "The Specter of Ancestors Becoming," a video installation that tells the stories of the children and grandchildren of the Senegalese Vietnamese community that formed in Africa after the Indochina War. Ricci Shryock for The New York Times

But some of the strongest work on view in Dakar this season stems from slow, deeper engagement. Several years ago, the Vietnamese American artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen began visiting members of the Senegalese Vietnamese community, the children and grandchildren of the Vietnamese women married to Senegalese soldiers who fought in the French army during the Indochina War.

These were byproducts of empire — men denied full pensions by France, women seeking their bearings in West African culture, children raised amid secrets and shame. In Vietnam they were forgotten; in Senegal taken for granted. Nguyen's four-channel video installation, "The Specter of Ancestors Becoming" tells their story poetically, and collaboratively.

The project had its homecoming at the Raw Material Company art space, accompanied by an exhibition of family photographs of Nguyen's interviewees. Several of them gathered with him for the show's emotional opening. "Our stories are little-known," said Marie Thiva Tran, who is featured, with understatement. "But they are not uninteresting."

In Dakar, Nguyen said, he had found rich exchanges with fellow artists on post-colonial experiences — and in the process, formed a commitment to the city. "Working here has expanded my thinking about multiple diasporas," he said. "Dakar feels like another home for me now."

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