

ARTFORUM

Dak'Art 2014

VARIOUS VENUES, DAKAR, SENEGAL

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John Akomfrah, *Peripeteia*, 2012, HD video, color, sound, 18 minutes 12 seconds.

THE ELEVENTH EDITION of the Dak'Art Biennial of Contemporary African Art, which took place this past summer, may well have been the most ambitious since the exhibition's inception in 1992. It was the largest and most diverse yet, not only showcasing emerging artists from across Africa but also including the work of many superstars from the established biennial circuit. This roster showed that the global art world must reckon with Dak'Art, which seems poised to take its place among the most established international art shows. Yet this year's iteration also suggested that the biennial is still in its infancy, sadly plagued by growing pains two decades on. No clear curatorial strategy united the often outstanding individual contributions, which were, at times, undermined by the chaotic execution of the show itself.

Despite its avowedly Pan-African claims, Dak'Art began as a largely Senegalese and francophone West African affair, with only token representations from other African countries and beyond. Its supposedly flagship section, devoted to international art, frequently competed with segments dedicated to Senegalese artists or to textiles and furniture design, sending confusing signals about the biennial's mission. But all this began to change with the seventh edition, in 2006. That year, in a bid to ease bureaucratic control of the biennial, the unwieldy selection committee previously responsible for the international section was replaced by a more streamlined curatorial team. This year, the appointment of three established figures in the international art world—Elise Atangana, Abdelkader Damani, and Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi—as cocurators set the stage for a genuinely global biennial. For the first time, the curators gave the international section a theme—"Producing the Common"—suggesting their intention to bring an unprecedented focus to the usually fragmented, noisy, and rambling exhibition. (The theme did not encompass the biennial's four other official, or "in," shows, nor the record 266 "off" exhibitions scattered around Dakar and neighboring cities.)

But it is one thing to select a theme and another to organize a coherent exhibition around it. Indeed, understanding the “common” is no easy task, particularly in relation to the diverse range of work by the sixty-one artists presented in the international section. In a recent interview, Nzewi (who is curator of African art at Dartmouth College’s Hood Museum of Art) provided a helpful explanation of the theme “as a unifying, edifying, unselfish process, actively generated in the context of cultural production but taking into account what one may refer to as the politics and the economics of sociability.” Such a broadly informed perspective is, he argues, particularly useful in thinking about the ways in which the local context of Senegal offers a unique space for producing an art biennial in the shadow of global neoliberalism.

Yet I cannot help but think that another notion of the common would have been more relevant here: that of ubuntu, the theory of communalism that philosophers such as Placide Tempels, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Maurice Tschiamalenga Ntumba, among others, have argued to be at the core of African ontology, using it to explain everything from traditional African religions to contemporary socioeconomic formations. Ubuntu is most famously encapsulated by the anti-Cartesian dictum “I am because we are”—individual subjectivity attains its fullest elaboration through collective solidarity. Had it derived some of its conceptual force from ubuntu, the biennial’s theme could have been a powerful, contemporary response to an idea that has more salience in an African setting than the sociopolitical and aesthetic theories of Michael Hardt and Jacques Rancière invoked by the curators. In fact, had “Anonymous”—the ancillary section of the international exhibition, featuring unattributed works by the artists in the international part—been the main show, the cocurators might have made a much more radical proposition. Such an arrangement might have offered a mutual reification of the self and community closer to what former Senegalese president Abdou Diouf seems to have had in mind when, in a 1989 statement establishing the biennial, he charged that Dak’Art aspire to the making of a “global African common.”

Indeed, it is ironic that a show ostensibly about collectivity highlighted individual authors—the continent’s best-known names in the international scene—even if there were also engaging contributions by less familiar but equally noteworthy voices working inside or outside Africa. Among the standouts of the international exhibition, held at the Village de la Biennale, a newly refitted former TV studio, was the London-based Ghanaian filmmaker John Akomfrah’s *Peripeteia*, 2012. This majestic HD video imagines episodes in the lives of the individuals represented in Albrecht Dürer’s charcoal drawings *Head of a Negro*, 1508, and *Portrait of Katharina*, 1521. By tracking this man and woman, whose real identities have been lost to history, as they make their separate ways through the rain-drenched, rolling landscape of the Low Countries, the work compellingly speaks to the displacement and scattering of African peoples in the age of slavery, but it also evokes the exile’s endless, perhaps even impossible, quest for a metaphysical home.

If Akomfrah’s work is about the recovery of a lost history through fictional narrative, New York-based artist Wangechi Mutu’s *The End of Eating Everything*, 2013, is a dystopian vision of a collective future imperiled by the rapacity of postindustrial capitalism. Featuring the musician Santigold as an attractive yet sinister figure with prehensile hair and a blotchy and distended queen-termites stomach, floating in a polluted sky and confronted by black birds, this film—first shown in Mutu’s 2013 retrospective at the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, North Carolina—gained a new resonance in Dakar. Here, Santigold’s voracious omnivore evoked present-day African rulers who fatten themselves by expropriating the commonwealth—the very antithesis of ubuntu.

There were particularly strong works by other US-based artists as well, such as Victor Ekpuk’s vibrant room-size drawing/installation *State of Beings (Totem)*, 2013. Marcia Kure’s sculptural installation *The Three Graces*, 2013, paid homage to iconic African women, while Simone Leigh and Chitra Ganesh’s surreal video projection *My dreams, my works, must wait till after hell . . .*, 2012, featured the bare back of a black woman, her head buried in a pile of stones, as she heaved quietly to the meditative music of Kaoru Watanabe. And Radcliffe Bailey’s *Storm at Sea*, 2007–, consisted of an open room, its floor covered with charcoal chunks; a life-size dark, glittering head bobbed up in the center, as if drowning in a sea of turbulent blackness.

The underlying sociopolitical commentary in these pieces is unmistakable, and the same could be said of many of the works in the exhibition. Take, for instance, Amina Menia's video projection *Un Album de famille bien particulier* (A Very Special Family Album), 2012, which is composed of archival footage of the 1950s urban-development projects commissioned from the French architect Fernand Pouillon by the colonial government in Algiers. The sympathetic contemporary documentation of this utopian urbanism, as Menia's reprise makes clear, completely ignored the terrors of Algeria's war of liberation, which in fact utterly ruptured the colonizer's designs for its prized North African territory. While Menia explored the colonial era's competing imaginaries, Nairobi-based Sam Hopkins used a Pop aesthetic to examine the Euro-African postcolonial condition. His *Logos of Non Profit Organisations working in Kenya (some of which are imaginary)*, 2010–, twenty-four framed small serigraphs, conflates the realities and fictions of NGO work, suggesting doubt about the humanistic claims of the usually Western-funded NGO industry and distrust of its effectiveness as an agent of change in contemporary Africa.

This political emphasis was perhaps one way of addressing the exhibition's theme, at least as the curators seemed to understand it: Nzewi described his interest in mobilizing "the common by seeking the connection between politics and aesthetics." Among the most articulate and complex mediation on this politicized notion of collectivity was an all-yellow congress room with ceramic toilet bowls for chairs—a cynically imagined space for confronting post-Arab Spring ennui by the Tunisian artist Faten Rouissi titled *La fantôme de la liberté (Malla Ghasra)* (The Phantom of Liberty [Malla Ghasra]), 2012. Algerian Kader Attia's *Indépendance Tchao*, 2014—an architectonic sculpture fabricated with metal lockers salvaged from an abandoned building in Algiers—added a historical dimension to such questions. This remarkable replica of the seventeen-story Hôtel de l'Indépendance—the decaying modernist architectural landmark in the city center built in the heyday of Senegal's postindependence euphoria—gestures toward the failure of both colonial and postcolonial urbanization, and to the disconnect between the rhetoric and realities of twentieth-century modernization projects in independent Africa.

Several artists engaged with other kinds of political subject matter, probing religious, social, and racial belonging. Attia's compatriot Massinissa Selmani explored collectivity of a more formal kind in his projection of quirky multiple drawings on a screen of translucent paper cubes (*Souvenirs du vide* [Remembrance of Emptiness], 2014). The Moroccan artist Mehdi-Georges Lahlou contributed an exhilarating installation of seventy-two flagpoles flying spotless white women's veils, *72 (virgins) on the sun*, 2014, which probed weighty issues of gender, religion, and ideology in the context of the postcolonial, post-9/11 world. Candice Breitz re-created a contemporary "African" living room around the centerpiece of her projected video *Extra*, 2011, in which she hilariously interjects herself or parts of her body into scenes from *Generations*, a popular black South African soap opera (in another room, her compatriot Nomusa Makhubu inserted herself into archival group portraits of black South Africans). The unpredictable interjection of a superfluous white body among an all-black cast seemed like an anomaly, yet its pervasive presence pointed to the aporias of the postapartheid "rainbow nation."

Without question, the curators successfully convened some of the most exciting African and black-diaspora artists working today. But unfortunately, the power of the individual pieces was all too often undermined by the execution of the biennial itself. The exhibition design and installation were uninspiring, even woeful. The poorly built curved screen onto which Akomfrah's *Peripeteia* was projected (to say nothing of the ambient light washing out the image) and the cacophony of multiple video and sound works in all the spaces did the artists an inexcusable disservice. Even worse, cavalier shipping arrangements resulted in the no-show of the work of New York-based Julie Mehretu. Radcliffe Bailey was forced to deploy charcoal in place of the never-arrived ebony/ivory piano keys he had used in his more conceptually subtle original work. To cap it all, at the time of writing, several works meant to be returned to participants were still stuck at the Dakar airport.

These problems, caused in part by the refusal of biennial officials to cede to the curators full control of the exhibition design and installation or to professionalize the production process, point to the fundamental problem with Dak'Art: It is organized by a secretariat that evidently does not see the need for experienced exhibition designers, fabricators, art handlers, and installers to deal with the serious art and artists it now attracts; a secretariat that is unsure of the role of invited

curators and overwhelmed by the biennial's unexpectedly rapid expansion. Given the dearth of reputable international exhibitions inside Africa, the Senegalese government's investment in this increasingly inevitable—if still underachieving—stopover in the global biennial circuit is commendable. But for Dak'Art to achieve its full potential, the bureaucrats in Dakar must take seriously the biennial's ambition to be *the* international show of African and African diaspora art.

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