The Dakar Biennale 92
Where Internationalism Falls Apart

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On Monday 14th December 1992, approximately three hundred critics, artists, gallery owners and collectors from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States arrived in Dakar, Senegal. This city of culture well remembered for its ‘Festival of Negro Arts’ in 1966 and for the successful Biennale des Lettres in 1990, was now to play host to what promised to be the most important and recent fair dedicated to contemporary African visual art. As the Air Afrique planes carrying the guests landed at Yoff Airport, an unexpected rainstorm, apparently caused by a fluke cold frontal system, raged over the city with little effect.

President Diouf, sheltered by a panoply of umbrellas and cameras, officially inaugurated the Biennale de Arts at the Theatre Daniel Sorano and opened the exhibition at the newly constructed pavilion in the grounds of the IFAN on the Place Soweto. Built by the Northern Koreans as a gift to the Biennale, this new, brash exhibition space replete with hundreds of spotlights and shiny white marble floors provided the necessary prestige to the Biennale’s official overview of painting and sculpture from Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, Canada, the US, Martinique, Bissau, the Gambia, Ghana, Ethiopia and Zaire.

It was an incongruous affair by all accounts. The expectations that art could provide a source for cultural dialogue were high in the minds of the Senegalese organisers. With a budget of 300 million CFA (approx. £780,000) from the Senegalese Ministry of Culture and various French governmental initiatives, and elections very close by, the Biennale could be nothing but complicity with official structures. If there was a political agenda behind the manifest dedication to art of Diouf’s socialist government, then it was to co-opt ‘international’ strategies with a view to establishing a more successful distribution and commercialisation of contemporary art in Africa. The economic imperative was embodied in the figure of the artist as someone who would not only need but also benefit from the authority, expertise and protection of critical as well as mercantile structures. A subjacent memory and legitimate apprehension of European aesthetic and economic exploitation would soon develop over the course of the Biennale into violent bursts of neo-colonial discord. Art was clearly the issue, but art was to be conceived as a powerful cultural commodity which needed to be properly initiated, presented, evaluated, invested in, purchased and preserved.

Control was at stake and bitter arguments

President Diouf at the opening of the Biennale.
between French and African art brokers constantly threatened to demolish the *entente cordiale* of internationalist collaboration. In a shadow play of Langian bombastic cultural policy, the actors behind the Biennale had never seriously considered the extraordinary potential of such an event to bring together African artists practising both at home and abroad to discuss the present surge of interest in new art from Africa. This made it one of the most interesting yet complex expressions of the interconnectedness of art and society in recent history.

The Dakar Biennale which lasted for seven days was divided into several forums of exchange and organised around the central exhibitions at the IFAN, the Galerie National d’Art Moderne, the satellite shows at various foreign cultural institutes and an exhibition of children’s work at the Lycée Blaise Senghor. During two days of conferences, an international panel of experts was asked to consider the reception and distribution of African art, the future form art criticism might take in Africa, modernity in contemporary African art and finally popular art and popular creativity. The workshops which followed brought patrons, gallery owners, dealers and curators together with artists in an effort to realise specific artistic projects.

Giving the whole event the flair of festivity were stalls of arts and crafts at the Village de la Biennale and the outdoor stage on the Place de l’Obélisque which offered the Dakarois the chance to see their favourite stars for free from Youssou N’Dour to Baba Maal, Omar Pène to Aicha Koné and the Zairean Soukous Stars. Thirty thousand people packed the streets at night, crushing forward to the central platform, to see Baba Maal perform his vibrant mix of mbalax and reggae, barely kept under control by a dozen young soldiers swinging their rubber truncheons like bull roarers over the crowds.

At the five star Hotel Téranga on the Place de l’Indépendence, the guests complained of the Biennale’s disorganisation, the insufficient hotel rooms, poor selection criteria, and the shoddy and cramped presentation of generally bad quality work. Gathered together in the restaurant or mulling around the lobby in between the snapshot salesmen, a strange mix of interested parties seemed unable to communicate with one another. Many artists felt betrayed by the organisers: works had been lost, badly stored, damaged or, more acutely, just neglected. Ery Camara, a Senegalese painter and museologist based in Mexico City, resorted to showing his work privately in his hotel room. Ousmane Sow, one of the leading Senegalese sculptors who recently took part in Documenta IX in Kassel, having withheld his participation in the Biennale for personal reasons, was made to witness the insensitive and debatably illegitimate lending of his work by a collector, Iba N’Diaye, the revered founder (together with Papa Ibra Tall and Pierre Lods of the Ecole de Dakar) and honourary artist of the Biennale, never received his airline ticket and was noticeably absent from the cast. A Belgian artist explained how he had received the official invitation to exhibit his works. His story rang depressingly true and centred more around personal connections than around the quality of his art.
If it were possible to draw an early appraisal of the Biennale, then it had to be the recognition of two essential flaws in its conception. Firstly, the misguided faith in the so-called international art circuit which had deterred the organizers from developing a pan-African approach, in line with a '90s focus on greater communication and familiarity within Africa between practising artists and writers. Such an arts festival might have succeeded in breaking down the isolation experienced by young artists and critics working at different ends of the African continent. It would have helped solidify stronger ties with colleagues from the diaspora and would undoubtedly have attracted substantial African American finance.

Moreover, a pan-Africanist Biennale would have acted like an aesthetic and cultural time bomb, exploding at the heart of current Euro-American interest and speculation in contemporary African arts. For this was overall consensus on the topicality and appropriateness of the conference themes which needed to be debated now before history ran the danger of repeating itself and 'contemporary' like earlier 'traditional' art was encapsulated by an external market. The resistance by a number of French art critics to releasing their hold on expertise in both specialist art historical subjects as well as more general domains, such as how to chair a session or preside over a jury, led to outright confrontations which would have been unimaginable in such a neo-colonial form had there been greater participation from within Africa itself.

The second oversight was perhaps more tragic yet clearly symptomatic of present conditions. It can best be described as a gaze diverted from its object, blind to the source of its interest. For where, in all the pomp and circumspection of the Biennale des Arts, were the artists? In what manner could one sense their presence, hear their concerns and witness the oblique precision of their visual and conceptual agendas? The main exhibition did provide an enormously diverse survey of contemporary art, but the uneven quality and jumbled presentation dismayed the artists and public alike. Through the organisational and conceptual confusion, the artists had been given short shrift on several accounts. Souleymane Keita's anger at having his large triptych Etude des Signes confined to a passageway in the entrance to the IFAN was publicly reported in the Dakar newspaper Sud-Hebdo. It indicated the total absence of the artists participation in the presentation of their works, an exacting and creative activity ideally negotiated between curator and artist. Zoulo Mbaye, another Senegalese artist now based (like many) in Paris, ferociously confronted a French art critic on her interpretation of African art, with the result that the session rapidly turned into a brawl and police were called in to restore the calm. No one, it seemed, was prepared to listen to the artists and give them a specific visionary authority within the Biennale and above the mob of critics and bureaucrats from Europe and Africa.

Not willing to accept the position of backbenchers, certain respected and ground-breaking Senegalese artists refused to take part, amongst them Joe Ouakam (Issa Samb) and El Sy (El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy). Working independently yet united in their activities around the Laboratoire Agit Art, both artists felt deeply ill at ease with the heavy handed attitude of the Ministry of Culture. Whilst Ouakam showed small works in independent spaces alongside other more mildly dissident artists, El Sy flatly refused to exhibit in the Biennale environment at all. Instead he participated with the magazine Revue Noire which produced by far the most exciting survey of current Senegalese art, including portraits of Mor Faye and Sérigne Mbaye Camara, Joe Ouakam and the outstanding photographers Mama Cassett and Bouna Médoune Seye. A CD with the latest Senegalese Jazz and Soul and featuring tracks by Abi N'Dour (Youssou's sister) and the Wolof rap duo Positive Black Soul, came free with the review. Transtel Television flew over from Germany to shoot a spotlight on the Biennale and a feature on El Sy's work. El Sy's one-man show in 1987 was the final exhibition to be housed in the late Musée Dynamique built in Dakar in the 1960's and had been the primary motivation for the retired statesman and poet Leopold Sédar Senghor to return to Senegal after ten years of absence. More recently, at the inaugural speech of the Biennale President Diouf regretted that the former president, who lives in France, could not be with them this time, and spoke of Senghor's heart "beating to the rhythm of the Biennale".

Senghor's influence is still strongly apparent in the unbelievable profusion of visual artists in Senegal today. No other neighbouring country bar Nigeria can boast quite so many painters, sculptors, and mixed media artists crossing over into film, music, theatre, dance and oratory. There were several distinguished Senegalese artists in the Biennale including Amadou Sow, Babacar Sédik Traoré, Fodé Camara and Viyé Diba. A magnificent
wall hanging of approximately six by twenty meters in length, sponsored by Fondation Afrique en Création, was painted by Bavbacar Lô, Cheikh Nissa, Fodé Camara and Ibou Diouf. Stretched across an entire corner of the Place de l’Indépendance, this spectacularly colourful backdrop, which recounted the legend of the spoken word, provided an instant reminder to passers-by of the artistic vivacity and continuity of Senegalese art today.

In the main exhibition hall, Senegalese artists outnumbered their colleagues from Southern, Central, Eastern and Northern Africa whose participation had been neglected by the organisers in favour of a western European and African American slant. With the sub heading of Arts et Regards Croisés sur l’Afrique, suggesting a cross-over of artistic perspectives on Africa, several French and Italian artists had delved freely into Africana with a greater or lesser measure of grace. Claudio Costa’s collage of bones, earth, patinated ‘tribal’ markings and musical instruments was an insult to the sophisticated mixed media expressions so characteristic of twentieth century African art from Senegal’s own Younousse Seye to Nigeria’s Jimoh Buraimo. A French artist initiated a happening in the Maison des Esclaves on the island of Gorée (‘where tears of granite are wept’) which involved slitting his wrists and the wrists of the elderly museum curator, mixing their blood with red pigment in a calabash and then using it to paint an inverted triangle on a white canvas.

As observers scurried to find plasters to bandage the men’s veins, the artist refused to answer the pertinent questions of a colleague Ery Camara, who sought to establish why the Frenchman in a location loaded with hundreds of years of human anguish, had disempowered the triangle, “the potent symbol of cosmological unity in Africa” (Camara). Whether or not the inversion had been a reference to the scourge of AIDS is a post-hoc interpretation which hardly excuses such a form of insensitive action. In an exhibition dedicated to the rights of man, the presupposition that art could transcend cultural differences was laid bare.

Of the African American participation, the young artist Leonardo Drew received the most attention. Short-listed for the Biennale’s Grand Prize, his softly-layered works made of rust and linen were a seductive material alternative to the more conventional paintings and sculpture on display. With an academic posse from Howard University including the founder of AFRICOBRA and current dean of the Visual Arts Department, Jeff Donaldson as well as Kwaku Ansah and the Nigerian Odita, the African American presence was prominent though strangely out on a limb given the meagre participation of continental African artists and the lack of central focus on Africa and the diaspora.

Nevertheless it was Moustapha Dimé from Senegal who, jointly with the Ethiopian Zerihum Yetmgeta, carried off the Grand Prize (FF100,000). Working with driftwood and tarnished metal, Dimé’s sea-washed women propped on rusty poles held perfect balance, gently swaying to the suggestion of African wood sculpture, whilst defying the polished idiom of modernist form. It was a congenial decision of the jury to award this promising sculptor joint prize with the Ethiopian, Yetmgeta. Yetmgeta’s parchment and bamboo paravants made of narrow strip looms and infused with Coptic and modernist iconography had been an immediate success at the opening of the exhibition. If this prize-winning work was so convincing then one of the reasons had to be the ability and elegance of both these artists to master their chosen medium to the point of its poetic dissolution. As the Senegalese artist Alioune Badiane, who works in appliquéd fabric, remarked at one of the workshops, African artists are still under the European dictatorship of painting (Wal Fadjri No. 344, 18-24 Dec. p 7).

This is one of the dilemmas currently at the core of contemporary African visual arts. It introduces a specific aesthetic and cultural complexity into the discursive yet ultimately superficial crisis surrounding the classification of stylistic diversity in Africa today. For beyond the curatorial disputes as to whether one can speak of ‘popular art’ or ‘international art’ lie the individual concerns of painters and sculptors in Africa whose histories are firmly rooted in European as well as African art, a dialogue which runs back five hundred years or more and extends beyond the questions of style and medium.

Underlying the negotiation at the Biennale of prospective international commercialisation and distribution was a much more pressing issue to do with the translation in art of the relationship between the artist, the work and the public. How to bring the creative curve back to Africa and instill in the work, in all its heterogeneity, a significance akin to the earlier status of ‘traditional’ art, but clearly for the present and without the habitual projection of nostalgia, is a text woven into the material of contemporary African art. To read signs of such engagement you have to glimpse between
the glare of spot-lit galleries where interaction is increasingly bankrupt and focus once again on the seams of art and society.

A wooden stretcher once used on the slave island of Gorée, rice sacks made of thick jute, blocks of wood in rounded shapes too bulky to discern, play into the hands of El Sy who rubs paint onto the surface of the sacking, moulding the canvas to suit his ideas. Neither tapestry nor painting, though reflective of these forms in Senegalese modern art, they hang from wooden poles reaching forwards into the room in an extension of volume, line and colour. A dusty turquoise blue and bright orange shine clearly against the tar-stained blacks, greys and browns. These works, with their anthropomorphic references and curvaceous symbols, stand in between walls where dimensions are recast and the fall-out of Modernist art history recycled into unforeseen shapes. And yet there is no incongruity in El Sy’s work, it carries no sense of displacement or clues of visible struggle. Each painting rests on another painting both in time and space. Shrinking the orthodox measure of distance between exhibits, El Sy ingeniously activates a vernissage in his studio, merging and overlapping one work with another, and calling into doubt the formal security of discerning white walls.

If the gallery space is showing increasing signs of incompatibility with the new more socially site-specific work produced by artists in Europe and America, then Africa could well be at the core of a transformation, one which begins to aggravate entrenched aesthetic and social concepts of visual history. Perhaps El Sy’s work is about returning the curve back to Africa and negotiating the role the artist can play today against the backdrop of Africa’s artistic heritage, both traditional and modernist. In a parallel sense, the organisers of the Biennale were not mistaken in emphasising the economic protection of African artists in the midst of growing speculation. The difference in their respective approaches is to be judged in context, as individual yet connected responses to the growing fragmentation of late twentieth century edifices of cultural value, of which the Biennale type exhibition is clearly one. For there may well be another Biennale in Africa in the near future, only next time national representation is likely to
Zerihun Yetmgeta with his work, the joint-winner of the Grand Prize.

El Sy in his studio hanging up one of his works.