DAK’ART 96

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Twenty years after Burning Spear laid down his inspirational *Marcus Garvey* album, young Senegalese hip hop duo Positive Black Soul sneak a horn snippet from this reggae classic, sampled alongside a Nelson Mandela speech, into the introduction to their hypnotic rap, *Président d’Afrique*. At DAK’ART 96, the search for a visual equivalent to this politically conscious, musical expression of African youth revealed something altogether different — and to some of us present, far less rewarding than the performances by young hopefuls aspiring to be the next Youssou N’Dour or Baaba Maal, at venues like the Hotel Tringa, watering hole for delegates to Senegal’s biennial of contemporary African art. Following last year’s ‘africa95’ in London and other British cities, it was a disappointment that the debates opened up by that season’s abundant exhibitions, seminars, workshops and publications were not taken up at DAK’ART, either curatorially or in the conference sessions.

It seems that there was no attempt to pursue a pan-African approach, or to give the artists a central role in shaping and participating in the event. The focus, four years on, on an all-African selection went only half way to addressing the first issue, with large areas of the continent hardly represented at all, and artists of the diaspora barely on the agenda. The idea of creating a space in which the voice of the artist could be heard also seems to have been limited to contributions from the floor at the conference, whilst hopes of creating dialogue between artists in a workshop environment were restricted to the independently organised Téné activities held some way out of town, which had virtually no impact on the Biennale’s main proceedings.

So what were the objectives set out by the DAK’ART organisers, and what role do international gatherings like this have in the developing framework of contemporary cultural discourse on the African continent itself? Reading through the DAK’ART catalogue, answers to these questions proved frustratingly elusive. President Diouf saw international recognition for his country’s artists and cited their exemplary role within Senegal to inspire the young, whilst the Mayor of Dakar reaffirmed the city’s commitment to artistic and cultural expansion for all of its citizens. Abdoulaye Elémane Kane, the Minister of Culture, valued the opportunity to exchange ideas with professionals from other countries, and clearly saw the broader economic importance attached to creating international dialogue. Beyond these official endorsements, Jacques Leenhardt, President of the International Association of Art Critics, forsaking any attempt to locate the event within a critical framework, in his essay opted instead for a loosely defined ‘new universality’ that unites African artists in the face of cultural uncertainties caused by increasing globalisation.

Absent from the catalogue, then, would the exhibitions and conference instead reveal a discursive focus and an engagement with the question of what constitutes contemporary critical art practice in Africa? Would we get to see and hear evidence of the formal strategies and theoretical underpinning adopted by artists engaged in loosening African art from the constraints of tradition and expectations of expressive and exotic naivety placed on it by the West? Despite a range of displays and a perceived desire amongst artists and others present to create dialogue, the fact was that, in comparison, the
event offered a significantly less fruitful interrogation of art practice — in all its diversity — on the African continent, than was to be found several months earlier during 'Africa95'.

Alongside smaller exhibitions showing current Senegalese art, and several stimulating displays of textiles, furniture and fashion, there was the International Exhibition of Contemporary African Art held at the Musée d'Art Africain de l'Ifan Cheikh Anta Diop. Comprising 41 artists from 17 African nations, there was no apparent curatorial logic to the selection, except a preponderance of artists from Francophone countries. South Africa was just one of the more noticeable omissions. Displayed in a single large room, the works jostled for space — a radical rethink is surely needed if selections of this kind are to provide any kind of meaningful survey. The deserved winner of the Grand Prize was Abdoulaye Konate from Mali with an impressive wall hanging installation, made in response to the massacres in Rwanda. Ironically entitled Homage to the Mandé Hunters, it comprised a large, earthen coloured fabric, hung with rows of threads, tied to which, on closer inspection, were small pouches, talismans to ward off evil. The ubiquitous cowrie shell, symbolic in

Abdoulaye Konate with his prize-winning work, Hommage aux chausseurs du Mandé, 1994, mixed media installation, 175 x 312 x 50 cm.
African art through time and across cultures, was arranged in motifs and scattered loosely in trays of sand beneath the hanging. An equally contemplative work was Juginder Lamba’s minimal Pod 3 Phase II, a seedlike object carved in lime, whose quiet simplicity stood out amidst the rest of the sculpture. Representing Kenya, his country of origin, though born into the Indian community in Nairobi, moving to England via India at an early age (and making work thus enriched by different cultural influences), Lamba’s presence in this company threw up some awkward questions for the organisers about definitions of ‘Africanity’, and the Biennale’s rigid eligibility criteria. The reasons for not including more diasporic artists may be economic, however their contribution would undoubtedly bring a significant new dimension to the event.

Downstairs at the Musée d’Art Africain were displays by two of the five artists from different geographical areas of the continent, invited by the Biennale to make individual shows, a welcome contrast to the mixed bag upstairs. In one room Mohamed Kacimi from Morocco installed a continuous drawing on unstretched canvas. More like a work in progress compared to his earlier, heavily worked expressionistic paintings, it comprised freely drawn figures, silhouetted, acrobatic, drifting through some unknown narrative in which an earthbound Icarus hurtled towards city rooftops and a toy aeroplane dangled on a piece of string. Whether allegorical — addressing human folly, or the fragility of existence — or else concealing some hidden meaning, this ambitious work was one of the few examples in the entire Biennale of an artist being given the opportunity to make constructive use of a space.

Adjacent to Kacimi’s room, a series of bronzes by Ezrom Leqae represented his continuing engagement with the politics of daily life in South Africa. Suggesting animal rather than human forms, his subjects — scarred, corroded, deformed — reveal the effects of violence and torture, borne out of the experience of apartheid. Curiously reminiscent of sculptures produced in Britain in the 1950s by the likes of Butler, Armitage and Chadwick, these works begged the question of how, at the end of the 20th century, to create politically meaningful art that not only reflects an oppressive reality, but also transcends it to articulate the hopes of a society in transition. In contrast to the gravity of Legae’s bronzes, Moustapha Dime, Senegalese prizewinner at the 1992 Biennale, presented a selection of playfully inventive sculptures both indoors and in the grounds of the French Cultural Centre. In addition to a circle of dancing figures, simply constructed from slender tree branches, driftwood objects inscribed with text, represented an interesting new direction in his work.

Fiercely resisting ‘cultural and technological western invasion’, Zerihun Yetmgeta sets out to safeguard the traditional cultural heritage of his native Ethiopia, producing intricate mixed media paintings on narrow vertical panels, a sizeable selection of which were shown together in a separate gallery in the centre of Dakar. Decoding these highly decorative works demands a
knowledge of their iconographic and calligraphic symbolism, and the concerns that such a requirement bring up — about audience access, appropriateness of visual language — were another area of investigation that could have been more fully addressed during the conference sessions.

Staged over three days in the formal surroundings of the Economic & Social Council government building, the conference agenda centred on three areas: firstly, presentations by guest curators from Senegal, Belgium, USA, Morocco and Japan, on the work of the five artists invited to make solo shows. Secondly, a discussion on the identity of African art, taking in ‘creativity, aesthetic tendencies and criticism’. Thirdly, a forum on opportunities for the African artist in the international marketplace. There was a large gathering of private gallery owners, museum curators, collectors, artists and critics, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, Europe and North America. Throughout, however, the prospect of real dialogue was hampered by the bureaucratic structure of the conference format, and a shortage of informed critical perspectives from the panels.

Japanese curator Kawaguchi Yukiya of Tokyo’s Setagaya Art Museum, introducing Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou’s work, somewhat set the cat amongst the pigeons by announcing that all art is ideology. The audience’s hostile reaction meant that an opportunity to bring a critical dimension to the proceedings was lost. Which was a shame as Yukiya’s was one of the few attempts — however unfocussed — to identify in a younger generation of artists a determination not to ‘drown in the question of Africanitude in their works’, but to forge new visual languages appropriate to their lived experience of the modern world with all its contradictions. Unfortunately Tayou’s art was not perhaps the best example to use. His somewhat mannered assemblages — constructed in a style stretching back to Dada — of doll parts, plastic bottles, bin liners, condoms and other urban detritus, were a crude attempt to deal with the issue of Aids, which was the subject of another exhibition held outdoors at the Biennale Village. Here it was a surprise to find the Benin artist Georges Adeagbo (represented in the ‘africa95’ exhibition Big City: Artists from Africa at London’s Serpentine Gallery), laying out one of his floor pieces in the dirt, surrounded by throngs of eager children. It was not only bizarre that an artist of his calibre was excluded from the main gallery spaces, where he could have made such a vital intervention, but also disappointing that the interaction between art and public, generated by the subject matter and physical context of this fringe exhibition, was not allowed to permeate further the week’s proceedings.

For the Biennale to occupy the meaningful position it promises within the map of contemporary African art, it could do well to look at Johannesburg’s decision to invite a guest curator for its Biennale next year, Okwui Enwezor, editor of the New York based NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art. More than anything else it desperately needs to broaden its perspectives and to introduce a critical curatorial approach into its programming. Here the European Union, which already provides support for the Biennale and appears to have a stake in its future, could assist with travel, research and exchange funding for the selectors, administrators, critics and artists responsible for shaping the next event. Without access to the resources that are available both within and beyond the continent — documentary, academic, as well as exposure to the work itself — the Biennale enterprise is in danger of repeating itself within an increasingly narrowly defined framework, whilst initiatives elsewhere more cogently reveal the complexities and the processes at work within contemporary African visual arts practice.

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DAK’ART 96 was the second Biennale of contemporary African art held in Dakar, Senegal, from 9th to 15th May, 1996.

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