DAK'ART 98

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This obsessed Heart, which does not correspond to my language and my clothing, And upon which bite, like a clamp, Borrowed emotions and customs From Europe — do you feel the suffering And the despair, equal to none other, Of taming, with words from France, This Heart which came to me from Senegal?

Leon Laleau, Haiti

Sentimental, perhaps, but Laleau’s verses have the virtue of charting the three co-ordinates of a triangle which map any discussion around African culture — the continent, the diaspora and the West — as well as pin-pointing some of its most vital issues: who has the voice and which, if any, model should its cultural infrastructure and aesthetic be following?

A recent remake of the Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, filmed in Brazil, casts an ironic eye upon the same issue. Local black star Grande Otelo subverts Defoe’s colonialist classic by playing a Friday who refuses to accept the coloniser’s power to name, telling the Englishman: “Me Crusoe, you Friday.”

It is precisely with these questions in mind that I approached DAK’ART 98, the only pan-African biennial in the continent, now in its third edition. Dakar has distinguished credentials for this venture, as soon after independence Senegal presented the first World Festival of Black Art (1966), under the guidance of President Léopold Sédar Senghor, famed theorist of négritude and African cultural unity. From Miriam Makeba to Louis Armstrong, from Brazilian samba to modern ballet, as well as exhibitions of Picasso and Chagall, to name but a few modern masters, the festival dreamt of the ‘Civilisation de l’Universel’ and encompassed ancient to contemporary Black art from across the globe, including the diaspora. However intoxicating the festival’s spirit must have been, the spectre of colonialism cast a sombre shadow. The voice, as well as aesthetic values, continued to reside within a dominant western centre — Leo Frobenius would have been reassured. Whilst multiculturalism has to some extent challenged such attitudes, markets and values are still predominantly western-run, and with the global village effect expanding it is doubly important for parallel centres within African culture to engage in the decisive construction of their own momentum, whichever form that may take. A challenge, however, given that the continent consists of over 45 diverse countries and

Viyé Diba (Senegal), Echappement, 1966, 173 x 142 cm
winner of the Grand Prize
has the biggest diaspora community in the world. Yet it must build voices from within and this is what the Biennial for Contemporary African Art, DAK'ART, could do to prevent the continent from remaining, as Cuban critic/curator Gerardo Mosquera has stated, one of "the curated cultures".

However, did DAK'ART 98 rise to the challenge and discuss central issues to Africa such as postcolonialism, the diaspora, postmodernity, popular culture, territory, nationality and citizenship, economic migration, art markets, ethnic warfare or urban/village dichotomies? None of these were mentioned in President Abdou Diouf's inaugural words in the biennial catalogue, which stated: "No economy can be considered healthy if its culture is unhealthy," perhaps not so surprising given that Senegal's economy has been getting nowhere for the last decade. Indeed, the European Union put its weight behind DAK'ART 98 to the tune of 250 million CFA (U$500,000) — biennials have proved useful aids in raising international profiles which in turn can help to bring in much needed investment. However, Achille Bonito Oliva's (president of the selection committee) introductory text did at least touch on the problems faced by Third World nations reproducing western cultural models and erasing in consequence their local culture.

This year's edition of DAK'ART was, nevertheless, much improved by the appointment of an international selection committee. The main biennial exhibition at the Museum for African Art Ifan Cheikh Anta Diop presented more works by fewer artists, and in a more legible hanging. However, this meant that fewer countries were represented, diluting the impact of a so-called pan-African event. Furthermore some works, such as Fernando Alvim's (Angola) much awaited fantasy machines, never did materialise, and while famed Cyprien Tokoudagba's (Benin) highly encoded pictogram on canvas did, it was haphazardly propped up against a pillar in the exhibition space. Nevertheless, some of the continent's most renowned artists, Cheri Samba (Zaire), Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (Ivory Coast), Body Iseh Kinglez (Congo) or Tokoudagba (Benin) were represented by good examples of their practice. What emerged from the biennial is the continuing strength of narrative in African culture, particularly West Africa, often powerfully concerned with the community. Samba (who showed solo at the ICA in 1991) exhibited two paintings (a little dated, from 1994) which could be described as urban folklore. Translating the hopes of social, economic and political progress into his paintings, Samba offers populist ethical messages on everyday life usually delivered with cheerful satire. Samba, and the large number of followers who have now taken up his style, exhibit their latest works on the outside of their studios attracting crowds and provoking unending discussions.

In a similar vein, though less incisive, was the
suweer (sur verre or glass painting) work of Saidou Beyson Zoungrana (Burkina Fasso) which depicted quotidian scenes from urban life, such as cohabitation, or a street party. Imported into Tunisia from Europe in the 19th century, suweer spread to Mali, Ivory Coast and Senegal where it has become the epitome of popular art. Religious and political imagery, costume and coiffure portraits as well as scenes from the everyday (both village and city life) abound. A parallel exhibition in the French Cultural Centre was organised during the biennal, suweer’s role as art or decoration discussed within the conferences held at the time. This was a curiously timely proposition from a western point of view given that an emerging wave of young artists, particularly in the UK, are producing work which reflect upon the decorative.

Another parallel event was that of septuagenarian Bruly Bouabré who was paid a disappointingly small homage at the Salon d’Espace Citroën, as part of a group show of young Ivorian artists. Part prophet/artist Bruly Bouabré has a more philosophical approach to the community. He started drawing in 1948 and has since then created an invented language, a voice, for his bete people as well as over 1000 postcard-size ball-point and coloured crayon drawing. Sitting in front of his house Bruly Bouabré works in full view of the community with whom he reflects upon the myriad images of political figures, daily objects and symbolic shapes which form part of his personal stories and commentaries on the world. And if Bodys Kingelez does not display his colourful paper and card ’extrêmes maquettes’ to the first corner, his extravagant architectural worlds displayed at the Ifan Museum (though with very old works dating 1992/93) have the community in mind. Seemingly postmodern architecture offering the imaginary joy of Disney World as a creative escape from the harsh realities of urban life.

This year five South African artists were invited to participate, filling the gap which was so apparent in DAK’ART 96. Outstanding was Jane Alexander, one of the few women in the show, who is renowned for her absent human figures which communicate the contradictions of a post-apartheid society. In the show animal and human morphs, painted in the cold, pale blue of death and seemingly arrested in motion, heralded the fears of a new world characterised by disjunction and

El Hadje Mansour Ciss (Senegal), Cimetière de pêcheurs, 1997, installation (detail), Dakar Biennale, 1998
alienation. Also at the Ifan Museum was the bittersweet performance on the opening night of Toguo Barthelemy (Cameroon). Barthelemy fuses the daily experience of African emigrants abroad with their musical traditions. Apparently playing the kind of African drum we so often see with African street musicians on our city tubes, Barthelemy’s musical instrument also resembled an overgrown official immigration stamp on whose surface was boldly carved the infamous ‘Carte de Séjour’ (visitors card).

Disappointing were the photographs in the exhibition. With a majority of artists coming from Ivory Coast, works such as Edith Taho’s images of the ravages caused by the Liberian war unfortunately scarcely went further than the hundreds of images we have been bombarded with in the news broadcasts. British artist Oladéle Bamgboyé (Nigerian born) known for his insightful explorations into the hazy borders, or ‘slippage’ areas, of identity, was not however represented by his most interesting video work. One was left wondering where was the new power, such as that found in Seydou Keita’s (Mali) studio portraits of the 40/50s, or more recently in Samuel Fosso’s (Cameroon) playful fragmentation of self-portraits. Perhaps some of this will be on show at the forthcoming Bamako Photography Biennial, organised by Abdoulayé Konaté. Similar disappointment was brought by the winner of the biennial, Senegalese Viyé Diba whose large format matièrist canvas lacked the vivacity of other artists and seemed neither to make the best of contemporary international practice nor develop local forms and issues.

This year the Galerie Nationale showed a more promising exhibition than the packed and rather dry national group show of 45 artists presented in DAK’ART 96. The committee chose five solo shows: Carrie Mae Weems (USA), Antonio Ólé (Angola), Willi Bester (South Africa) and Ahmed Hajeri (Tunisia) at the Galerie, and Kcho (Cuba) on Gorée Island (15 minutes by ferry from Dakar). The diaspora was a subject barely represented in the last biennial, probably for financial reasons, yet one thankfully re-addressed this year. Furthermore, not only was the participants’ work displayed with sufficient breathing space but a brief introduction
for each in the catalogue offered at a deeper discussion of their work. Kcho’s poetry of escape took on great poignancy in the context of Gorée’s past as a major slave trade centre, though his rusty iron, vessel-like containers on the rocky shore seemed more like utensils of imprisonment than of liberty. It was a pity that Kcho was unable to attend the biennial in person as one could imagine evocative sketches of ephemeral rafts, that often accompany his work, inscribed on the dilapidated façades of the island. On the other hand, Bester in the Galerie Nationale displayed powerful ‘waste-accumulations’ which stood as reminders of the cruelty of apartheid. However, one was left wishing for a look away from the past and towards the present post-apartheid situation of his country. Overall this section of the biennial left me craving for greater reflection upon the urban reality of the African community, both diaspora and continental. With Nigerian street-walkers flooding the streets of Bologna, or the neon-filled windows of Antwerp’s red-light districts filled with Ghanaian women, the subject of ‘trafficking’, trading of women into sex and slavery, was not broached. Similarly the urban iconographic ghettoisation of black men was not discussed. Take as the example the work of Faisal Abdu’Allah (UK), which appropriates the imagery of media, religion and popular culture, to deconstruct and challenge stereotypical portrayal of black people.

Central to any biennial is a round table discussion. DAK’ART 98 staged it over five days in the format surroundings of the Maison de la Culture. This centred on presentations by guest curators from Germany, USA, Canada, Ivory Coast and Tunisia on the work of the five artists invited to make solo shows, as well as a forum on opportunities for African artists in the international market. However, the formality of these occasions stifled open discussions as did the seeming lack of critical rigour. Lacking was a discussion of the role of the African critic as a catalyst for self-construction, so as not to slide into reductive nativism and avoid being spoken for by the West. However, the latter is in itself a small industry, aided by the fact that African art criticism is generally not a flourishing one and that the continent has a frail infrastructure for contemporary art. Indeed, artists find it exceedingly difficult to exhibit their work, through the lack of infrastructure and interest of the public and government. In its present social, political and economic quagmire how should Africa proceed? Modern art and its infrastructure of museum and galleries have been perceived by some as the playthings of colonisers and perhaps one should consider alternative models for the continent. Some African critics vouch for grassroots activism with a greater emphasis on the community — however, one should avoid pigeon-holing as popular and anti-intellectual. Ola Ooiidi has discussed the use of criticism as a mediator between artistic production and a non-literate public. Reminiscent of Bruly Bouabré’s ‘bete language’, Ooiidi developed a glossary of art-descriptive terms in Yoruba which has the virtue of focusing on a local level yet lifting art criticism away from the trivial. The European Union should be asked to support long-term research projects and publishing facilities for African critics, as well as artist and curator informal workshops which elude the constrictions of format gatherings. Jan Hoet, in his search for African art for Documenta IX, described his experience as "looking for art beyond the infrastructure". Perhaps there are other ways to approach the subject — could the Internet help to create an infrastructure without walls, for example? DAK’ART has a unique opportunity to open the discussion and make a lasting contribution to African culture.


2 The concept of négritude was developed by a group of French-speaking black intellectuals studying in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s, amongst them President Léopold Sédar Senghor. It was an attempt to combat the racist view of African culture as a null quantity, and the ideology that French colonial rule was providing otherwise worthless, cultureless beings the opportunity to assimilate French
3 Senghor discussed black culture as being of a people "naturally gifted" in the art of "immediate" living, sensual experience and physical prowess. This was criticised later by African writers such as the acclaimed filmmaker Sembene Ousmane, amongst other things for strengthening the view of the continent as a passive entity in the face of a rational and technologically advanced West. For Sembene the path to independence took little note of négritude, developed far from the struggle on the ground. See John D H Downing, 'Film & Politics in the Third World', Autonomedia, New York, 1987, pp 52.


Kevin Brand (South Africa), (title not available), installation, Musée D’Art Africain L’Ifan Cheikh Anta Diop, 1998

5 Almost a century ago the celebrated anthropologist Leo Frobenius stood at the gates of western culture staring in horror at the abyss. Were the magnificent 'Hellenistic' heads in bronze and clay really created by the Yoruba? Were these people of merchants and farmers capable of such sophistication? Frobenius stepped firmly back into safety presuming — without, of course, being able to prove it — some western, 'central' influence, operating through time and space. To accept them as they are would mean admitting the possibility that another centre existed, autonomous, owing little to what Frobenius considered the central point of reference: classical Greece.

6 First blighted by severe droughts in the 1970s which ruined the precarious groundnut-based economy; then shaken by the breakdown of the Senegambian-Gambian confederation in 1989; and finally hit by a dramatic reduction in tourism in the early 1990s due to fighting in the southern region of the Casamance. IMF loans have gone some way to alleviate the problem.

7 With the exception of South Africa there are few, if any, museums or centres of contemporary art as such. The Ivory Coast with its National Museum and, above all, Nigeria, with a wealth of museums, display works of living artists, and more can be found among foundations, private galleries, cultural magazines and collectors, but these countries stand out in a sparse landscape.

DAK’ART 98: Biennale of Contemporary African Art was held in Dakar, Senegal, from 20th to 30th April, 1998.