like Matthew Higgs for the sake of publicity, no matter what they show? Given the local community’s accusations that there has been little acknowledgement of its Bengali residents, this is surely another embarrassment for the gallery’s compromised track record on race relations. Two years ago the gallery settled out of court after a job applicant accused the Whitechapel of race discrimination. Not much seems to have improved since, as the only black/Asian employees (except for a member of the ‘ethnic minorities’ in education – whatever that means) from the local community continue to be the cleaners. More significantly, the only show to exhibit Asian arts in the last couple of years, was hastily put together, lasted only three weeks and was curated by a couple of students. Surely this exhibition was a great opportunity to readdress such problems.

But at least this time the local community got a look-in at the lavish mostly-white (apart from the waiters), opening party which was rumoured to have cost in the region of £27,000, as local kids were allowed in for a Dickensian portion of strawberries and ice-cream.

Protest and Survive was at the Whitechapel, 15 September – 12 November 2000.

Dak’Art 2000
The Millennium Biennale?

Bisi Silva

The 5th of May 2000 witnessed the opening in Africa of the first biennal of the new millennium. With the demise of the short-lived Johannesburg Biennale expectations were high and the onus on Dak’Art 2000 to deliver was all the more acute. If the opening was anything to go by, the importance attached to the event resulted in no less than the presence of the newly elected President, Abdoulaye Wade, and other political heavyweights such as the Minister of Culture and Leader of the Senate gracing the ceremony. Following the warm reception for the Biennale’s General Secretary, Remi Sagna, the president’s speech seemed to be the climax of the event. Apart from the inevitable political diatribe, Wade’s speech was peppered with choice promises that included the building of an art academy and a gallery of international standing. This obviously received a standing ovation. Only time will tell.

Dak’Art 2000 was divided into three sections: A group exhibition, a design and textile exhibition and individual artists’ exhibition. The main exhibition at IFAN presented the work of 21 artists from ten countries. An international jury led by David Elliot, director of the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, made this selection from over 200 entries. South Africa was not only well represented through the works of Andries Botha and Tracey Rose, but it is Bernadette Searle’s imposing digital photographic installation that won the Revelation (Newcomer) Prize. Whilst

Fatma M’seddi Charfi, Installation Verticale, plastic, plexiglass, tissue paper, 220 x 38 x 14cm, 1999.
Searle uses naked portraits of herself covered in different coloured ‘exotic’ spices as a point of departure to explore gender, identity and racial classification, her compatriot Zwelethu Mthethwa takes vivid colour pictures of black people and the painstaking decoration of their home.

The winner of this year’s Leopold Senghor prize is Swiss-based Tunisian artist Fatma M’Seddi Charfi whose installation in plexiglass, plastic and silk paper makes a subtle commentary on the inhumanity of man. The theme of movement and displacement was well represented in the exhibition. The main exhibition reaches out not only to Africans living on the continent but also to those living abroad.

Germany based Ivorian, Koko Bi titles his burnt wood figures ‘Diaspora’; whilst Comorian artist Ali Mrovili’s imitation wood installation makes allusion to difficulties of cross border movement especially for those with the ‘wrong’ passport. Mounir Fatmi’s installation Liaison et Displacement on the other hand highlights the different experience and acquaintances one makes as a result of travel. The Senegalese participation features the work of four younger artists of which the most interesting work was by Ndary Lô. His installation using cloth, plastic, sand and iron advocates unity instead of the conflicts that characterise our existence.

In recognition of photography’s continuing

Joël Mpah Dooh, Global Program Cola, wooden box containing sculptures in mixed media, (earth, jute, etc), 1999.
contribution to the visual arts, a prize for the medium has been instigated. This went to the Camerounian artist Samuel Fosso for his self-portraits created in the mid 70s. However, Fosso’s work seemed out of sync with the intention indicated in the catalogue introduction by the selection committee ‘to focus primarily on work which had been produced over the past two years and in particular by younger artist’. The other photographers in the exhibition included US based Ghanaian Essien Mfon and Dutch-based Angele Etoudi Essamba. Considering the exciting developments in photography in Africa as highlighted by several recent exhibitions and publications this tentative inclusion was disappointing.

The other major exhibition, held at the National Gallery, was aimed at giving individual artists the opportunity to show a major body of work. Regional curators were given free rein to select an artist with whom they wanted to work. The result is an eclectic mix – of five supposedly separate exhibitions – confounded by the proximity of work due to lack of space. South African Kay Hassan had to improvise when his work did not arrive in time for the opening. Hoping to display used eyeglasses that he had collected in Johannesburg, he was fortunate enough to stumble upon and purchase the mobile glasses workshop of an old man in the streets of Dakar. Inadvertently, the installation however seemed to work more as a case study in the value system in which an ordinary functional object once bought into the art space because an object of high value. In his installation entitled Genocide, Ghanaian artist Kofi Setordji explores, through a diversity of media, the multifaceted dimension of war and its consequences, subtly inviting the viewer to confront their silent complicity in the atrocities being committed.

The works of Billi Bidjocka, curated by Simon Njami, are displaced outside the gallery. By
deciding to place flags in different parts of the city the artist invites us to move outside of our comfortable confine and take ownership of the city. This intervention would have been more beneficial had scheduled bus tours been provided to move people around the city. For most visitors to Senegal the visit to Gorée Island and specifically the Slave House is always the most emotional. Curator Orlando Jinorio invited the Martiniquian artist Marc Latame to create a new work in a historically loaded house. The use of sugar as his principal medium successfully evoked the history of slavery and its consequence, but on this occasion his work did not rise to the challenge of this overpowering location. The diversity of Dak'Art is manifest in its willingness to present other forms of art. Other noteworthy exhibitions included that of the Ghanaian artist Godfried Donkor. A prize winner at the last biennial, Donkor spent four months as a result in Senegal researching traditional African boxing. This culminated in a beautiful series of indigo coloured large size digitall photographic prints that explored the close relationship between the boxers, their marabou (spiritual advisers) and religion.

An important extension of the biennial is some of the peripheral activities and the people who benefitted the most were a group of African art journalists. This was a much needed project given the dire state of art criticism and journalism in Africa. The three week workshop allowed journalists from six countries and their Senegalese counterparts to work together and produce a daily newsletter on the biennial.

Dak'Art has all the prerequisite elements for a successful event: a welcoming city, adequate infrastructure, a dynamic local art scene and the kind of governmental support lacking in most African and even some European countries. However, the Dakar Biennale still needs to live up to expectations. Minor organisational and administrative lacunas, one or two disappointments for artists in the late or non-arrival of work and political incertitude do not justify the disappointment. These are the inevitable consequences of organising any large event.

The problem lies not so much in the organisation but in the artistic direction. Exhibitions picked, selected and put together by too many committees/juries/regional curators/individuals resulted in a curatorial cacophony. The lack of context around a particular idea or concept linking the work is also problematic. Whilst a rigid theme is not a fundamental requirement, an underlying curatorial underpinning would have been welcomed. This is emphasised all the more by the poor quality of debates and seminars, even the accompanying catalogue does little to enlighten us about the premise of the individual exhibitions or about the artists.

The fifth biennale should be going further than congratulating itself for having taken place and consolidating its position as one of the longest serving biennale after Cairo. Maybe it needs to find a happy ground between the Johannesburg Biennale and other biennales. But it cannot be all things to all people, it needs to concentrate on certain selected areas.

**10th East International**

**Ajamu's Tail – Bogus or Realistic?**

**Paul O’Kane**

It's a long time since I felt so displaced. Outside, a thin mist of Norwich rain barely falls, while inside, moralising, possibly pious baggage stops me celebrating East's 10th anniversary launch party and delivers me alone to this room laden with melancholic responsibility (what Baudelaire might have called a self-inflicted 'chimera').

This is a challenging time for anyone maintaining battered and embattled political ideals or haunted by a Benjamin-ian mission to art-criticise the world into surrendering some justice. Various proto-fascisms within Brit culture grow from the corpse of political-correction as proliferating lad's mags (in which William Hague courts a young Right) complement hip jingoism and the xenophobic cool-talk of mob minds.

When Viennese therapy-artists Christine and Irene Hohenbuchler visited Britain recently they explained how Haider's far-right party surreptitiously built seat-winning support in Austria's rural areas thus out-maneuvering urban liberals focused on their fashionable place-to-be. This warning might endorse recent 'regionalist' Arts Council initiatives and greatly encourage East 2000's organisers – not only because they'd like their annual show to be acknowledged as a prime example of effective regionalism but because this year's curation champions internationalism, multiculturalism and queer politics – issues now worryingly damned as 'worthy' by some cutting-edge metropolitans.