

Chapter 11

DAK'ART'S ECOSYSTEM: IN AND OUT OF SENEGAL

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Introduction

The Biennale of Dakar has been influencing the establishment of new events in Africa: it is a meeting point capable of triggering new ideas and collaborations and a platform that increases the reputation of artists and curators who participate in it. This essay observes the relationship between Dak'Art and SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala, a triennial event dedicated to public art, promoted since 2007 by the cultural association Doual'art founded in 1991 in Cameroon. This comparison allows to highlight some of the elements that characterize the two events, such as the different relationship with the city and the territory and the discordant strategy in the selection of the artists and in the production of the artworks.

In and Out of Senegal

I have always thought that the most effective way to represent the Biennale of Dakar is not the catalogue but a group photo: the image of all the people who meet every two years in Dakar or who come for the first time to set foot on a new continent, some of them with the expression of someone looking for Zion. For the professionals who exhibit, present and sell art, the exhibitions and the catalogue are simply a teaser to decide which artists to meet. And from this point of view the Biennale has worked very effectively, regardless of the quality of its exhibits and the consistency of its artist selections. Indeed, the very variety of proposals – exhibited both in the official programme (Dak'Art–In) and in the side programme (Dak'Art–Off) – offers something valuable to many different sectors of culture.

The Biennale has been most attractive for three main reasons: it is a biennial, it is an event dedicated specifically to contemporary African art, and it is a cultural institution that activates the cultural landscape of the city of Dakar in Senegal. From the point of view of the art world, the event can be framed in the broader debate about large-scale international events and, being the most resilient of the

African biennials, it is analysed in debates, it feeds them, and it is an excellent destination for curators and international experts.

The attention of Dak'Art to contemporary African art – triggered in particular by the European Commission in 1996 – has allowed the event to focus on African and African diaspora artists and to give them visibility inside an international network.¹ The African focus of the Biennale also addresses professionals who operate in the fields of cultural cooperation and cooperation for development. For artists from Africa taking part in the Biennale, it is a consecration; thanks to Dak'Art, they position themselves in an international network and their reputation grows in their home countries.² Besides, Dak'Art is also a perfect opportunity to visit Dakar and to explore the city through the activities and events offered in the Dak'Art–Off programme, which is independent of the Biennale's official ambit. Many foreigners describe the experience as their first opportunity to 'visit Africa'.

At Dak'Art there are artists, curators, critics, operators of international cooperation, journalists, students and tourists. The secretary general of Dak'Art (1993–2000), Rémi Sagna explained that the Biennale of Dakar has made hospitality its distinctive trait (Pensa and Federici 2006). The Biennale pays for both travel and accommodation of the invited artists, curators involved and scholars and professionals who take part in the conference programme. Those not officially invited cover their own cost. Some of the most important people in the art world have attended the Biennale, such as the artistic directors of the Biennale di Venezia and documenta, Kassel, museum directors and international gallery owners. Over the years, the presence of international art world actors and collaborators has steadily increased, engendered by a slew of professionals, such as international curator and cultural producer N'Goné Fall. Fall, for example, was central to the participation of the international programme of art residencies *res artis network* in 2004. This was hugely important in amplifying the presence of international institutions at Dak'Art and offered the possibility for participating artists to build their network and to enter the international system of artist residencies. Another example is the curator Olabisi Silva (1962–2019), who brought her roaming Asikò Art School to Dakar during the Biennale's edition of 2014. The late Silva had been a regular attendee since the 1990s, and under Yacouba Konaté's general curatorship of Dak'Art 2006, she was curator for West Africa.

Artistic direction Simon Njami (2016, 2018) has furthermore included a selection of independent initiatives within the official programme, such as the *AfroPixel* Festival organized by Kër Thiossane. In 2002 the Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr was selected for the *Exposition internationale* of Dak'Art. In fact, Moataz Nasr did not want to go to the Biennale of Dakar because he could not understand how a biennial in Africa could be relevant to his career,³ but Dakar proved to be an excellent platform. He then began exhibiting with Simon Njami and formally established in Cairo the art centre Darb 1718 in 2008. The initiatives of the centre were presented at Dak'Art 2018 within the programme *Carte Blanche*. Nasr himself confirms the decisive role that participating in the Biennale has played in his career. Furthermore, with his word of mouth, the artist and cultural producer has

been fundamental in expanding the network of the Biennale to Egypt and North Africa in general.

Doual'Art and Dak'Art

In this section, I want to focus attention on Doual'art, an independent initiative in Douala, Cameroon, and to explore it comparatively with Dak'Art. The two founders of Doual'art – the couple Marilyn Douala Manga Bell (president of Doual'art) and Didier Schaub (former artistic director) – have participated regularly in the Dakar Biennale within the official and Dak'Art–Off programmes.⁴ They have also supported the participation of Cameroonian artists in Dak'Art, helping them to prepare their applications and artists portfolios. In addition, Didier Schaub (1952–2014) was member of the selection committee of Dak'Art 2004. Dak'Art and Doual'art undoubtedly share at least this connection. One of the first distinctive features of both events is this territorial positioning by inserting the name of the city in their own name, but in reality, the two events have a very different relationship with their city and territory. Furthermore, the two events have a dissimilar strategy in the selection of the artists and in the production of the artworks.

In 1991, the art centre Doual'art was founded in Douala and it immediately began producing public art. Douala is one of those cities that does not know the number of its inhabitants – maybe 1.5 million or maybe 4 million, many of them concentrated in shabby and overcrowded neighbourhoods. Unlike Dakar, Douala is far from being a tourist destination: it is a chaotic and decadent city, where people live as if they were always passing through, even if they have lived there for twenty years (Simone 2008). For Doual'art, the idea of producing artworks in Douala has always been meant to transform the city, to participate in the construction of a shared identity, a sense of belonging (Babina and Douala Bell 2008, Pensa 2017a). For the founders of Doual'art – Marilyn Douala Manga Bell, trained in economics, and Didier Schaub, trained in art history – the intervention on space is a political and ideological statement, the starting point of their work and not a possible side effect (Nzewi 2015). Unlike the Biennale of Dakar, Doual'art's approach is profoundly urban, rather than national; the real focus is on a city, Douala, which historically represents the place of greatest political turmoil.

The Biennale of Dakar allows attendees to enlarge their network, to collaborate and discuss; its context stimulates ideas and it facilitates the creation of new projects, as it did with Doual'art and the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala. In 2007 Doual'art initiated the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala, a three-year public art event focused on urban transformations; numerous artists exhibited both within the Biennale and the SUD⁵ and several curators contributed to both.⁶ SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala was presented in Dakar, both in the Off programme in an exhibition in the art space Raw Material Company in 2012 and in the official programme *Carte Blanche* in 2016.

The Biennale of Dakar was established to promote the international visibility of contemporary African artists in general and Senegalese in particular, and their

success on the art market. The Senegalese government has a central role in supporting and maintaining the Biennale of Dakar while fundraising with sponsors, agencies of cultural cooperation, the European Commission and international partners. Further, it uses the Biennale to affirm its centrality for the cultural promotion of Africa. In addition, Dak'Art-Off encompasses a wide network of events, allowing local and international artists and curators to take part in the Biennale by being included in its time frame, by guiding its visitors to different locations and by animating an extensive territory. But the Dak'Art-Off programme has essentially a temporary nature and it is not meant to transform the city.

In contrast, the production of site-specific permanent works and urban transformation lies at the heart of the SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala. The SUD is deeply rooted in Douala and its focus is precisely Douala. The event is organized by an independent art centre and non-profit organization. The cultural institution SUD is largely financed by international agencies focused on cultural cooperation and cooperation for development (Pensa 2011, 2013). In 2003, Dutch funds supported in Cameroon the *Bessengue City* project promoted by the artist Goddy Leye (1965–2011). Leye was able to obtain this support thanks to the *RAIN Artists' Initiatives* that allowed students of the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam to access small grants to organize cultural initiatives in their countries of origin (Odijk and Flentge 2001).⁷ The support of The Netherlands for cultural projects in Douala increased with the creation in 2005 of the *iStrike* Foundation in Rotterdam, of which I am the promoter, an organization that operated as a Dutch interface to fundraise for the SUD. Following the closure of *iStrike*, the organization *ICU art projects* was created by the co-founder of the *iStrike* Foundation Kamiel Verschuren, who has continued to support the SUD and to contribute to its productions.

The collaboration and work offered by the Doual'art network both nationally and internationally is a central element to understand the sustainability of the event. One must keep in mind that the monetary budget – in the case of cultural initiatives in particular – does not represent all the activated resources. Doual'art has also involved the Cameroonian government in the SUD, both for the necessary authorizations and to guarantee the maintenance of the artworks, even if they have not been made with Cameroonian public funds. Doual'art offers the works it produces as a gift to the city, asking in exchange that the city takes care of them; the signing of these agreements has been a great success for Doual'art. Needless to say, the lack of direct support by the Cameroonian government for the artistic production also means freedom for artists and cultural operators.

Another element in which Dak'Art and Doual'art differ is the selection of artists and the production of artworks. With the aim of specifically promoting contemporary African art, the Biennale of Dakar has provided a much bigger venue to showcase contemporary African art, for new artists to be discovered, and has continued to expand its network because of its viability. This approach characterizes many other international exhibitions of contemporary African art between 1966 and 2005 which presented new artists instead of reinforcing the

presence and the selection of a curated group (Pensa and Federici 2006). The selection of artists for the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala has always been open, without any geographical restriction.

Despite the many connections between Doual'art and Dak'Art, the extremely small Senegalese presence within the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala and its related events is surprising. Doual'art involved the architect Jean-Charles Tall and the curator with an architectural background N'Goné Fall, but no Senegalese artist has ever been invited by Doual'art to produce works in Cameroon, as if the networks remained parallel with contact points, but separated, confirming that there is not a single art world (Pensa 2017b). The selection by Doual'art is meant to generate new views on the city and to nurture a dynamic and continuous dialogue and exchange. Within the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala, international artists are invited to produce artworks in the city of Douala after two residencies. The first residency is meant to explore the city, to identify a location and an approach; Doual'art then starts working with the community to prepare the production of the work and to negotiate its location. During the second residency the artists produce their work. Artists based in Douala are involved in longer projects, often in collaboration with schools or the specific neighbourhoods where the artists already live.

Doual'art has been producing public artworks since 1991, and the city embraces them through a process of construction and destruction that must continually be nourished by new energies, negotiations, resources, arguments and discussions. It is with these premises that the SUD–Salon Urbain de Douala was created, designed with a three-year period of production (which includes the creation of new site-specific artworks and maintenance of the current works) and a festive event which presents the artworks to local and international audiences and animates the city with *vernissages*, conferences, performances and concerts. I have participated in the planning of the project. There is, of course, the desire to gain visibility, to produce a large-scale event and to place Douala and Doual'art and its promoters on the map of the international art system. But there is also the profound will to intervene in the city and to use the festival as a production, management and maintenance tool for the artworks, a specific strategy that is different from the Biennale of Dakar, which is more closely focused on the event itself.

Conclusion

In 2002 the artist Fernando Alvim participated in the fifth edition of the Biennale of Dakar. I can see him moving across the large spaces of the CICES exhibition centre, while with his brilliant and conspiratorial way he meets artists, introduces himself to curators and plans the new world order: a presence of a network of art centres with the acronym CCASA, TACCA, CCAEA, CACAO in Dakar, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Luanda; an invasion of the continent showing the world how Africa produces African antennas capable of supporting cultural production and influencing it, in the same way foreign cultural centres settled in Africa.

Fernando Alvim's project would only develop partially, but Dak'Art 2002 offered an effective portrait of how the Biennale feeds debates, consciously and unconsciously through formal events, but also through meetings between colleagues and professionals, lively discussions in cafés and late-night chats. In fact, Dak'Art, in addition to inviting and welcoming a large number of art professionals, has a significant disorganization on its side, which turns out to be an effective social aggregator: artists without their artworks, technicians dispersed in the markets in search of hard-to-find materials, and people who simply cannot take a taxi lost, in search of advice and open to new encounters. Fernando Alvim is an appropriate point of reference for this galling disfunction. Previously, the artist participated in Dak'Art 1998 but without his artwork, which never arrived at the port of Dakar. 'They say that it should be off the coast of Saudi Arabia', the artist told me with resignation and humour, and in my mind that work became a legend. Even today, when I think of the impact of the Biennale of Dakar in the world, I think of Fernando Alvim's work, which wanders, infects oceans, fights against pirates, and brings with it what we try to define as the ecosystem of Dak'Art.

Acknowledgments

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