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Dak'Art 2004

by Iolanda Pensa

Post-colonial, post-modern, post-'Festival des Arts Nègres', postponed, post-mortem: among the numerous 'post' one can find itself in, this year Dak'Art enjoyed the post-Documenta XI fall-out. More than an exhibition, Documenta XI in Kassel directed by Okwui Enwezor, was a real magnet: it focused international attention on the whole world and it modified its strength points.

Compared with previous editions, in Dak'Art 2004 this was evident in the presence of a more heterogeneous public, in the wider commitment of the International Selection and Jury Committee's selection procedures, in the major interest of international curators in the artists and art works presented, and, in the bigger appetite for Africa.

Reviews, questionnaires, evaluation meetings, interviews: everybody complains about the general and historical disorganisation of Dak'Art, but at the same time everybody praises the Biennale as a precious gathering of artists, curators, critics and gallery owners. If you look at it closely, more than promoting "contemporary Africa art", Dak'Art - with its six editions, its twelve years of existence and its link to Senegalese cultural heritage - promotes the development of the "contemporary African art system".

The first Biennale, held in 1992, was a disaster. The event was open to participants from all over the world and the only positive appraisal it received from the international press sounded something like "well, at least now there is an art exhibition in Sub-Saharan Africa". The failure stimulated a reformation and in 1996 the Biennale inaugurated big changes.

Dak'Art devoted itself to contemporary African art and to development. The sponsors - among which the European Community stands out - played a major role in directing the new trend. They linked the promotion of art to economic development (backing the art market, the cultural industry and the professional training of the staff) and they made sure their grants were directed specifically to supporting artists from the South.

Dak'Art liquidates the controversial concept of "African artists" - the object of bi-annual debates, meetings, workshops, polemics and publications - and simply defines them as "artists who have the passport of an African country". Now, whoever satisfies this criterion can apply to Dak'Art. The Biennale bases its selection for the international and design exhibitions on applications sent directly by the artists.

The International Selection and Jury Committee, nominated by the Senegalese Scientific Committee, doesn't invite artists, but chooses them from amongst those who apply. The only exceptions are the individual exhibitions, which are organised quite freely by international curators invited to represent "Africa", "Diaspora" and "the World".

This unique system, almost unaltered since 1996, has advantages and disadvantages. In synthesis, the advantages are that it's cheap and it may produce unexpected and original results. The main disadvantage is that it doesn't work, for different reasons. Dak'Art is still unable to communicate its call for entry effectively enough; producing a professional application in Africa is more complicated and expensive than in a Western country; most participants mainly hear about the Biennale through word of mouth, which is not a system! Well, actually, if it's to be called a system, it's an unfair one, since it helps to create a logic of power.

The organisation of Dak'Art brings on a lively debate, this year increased and confused by the unexpected announcement made by Senegalese President Mr. Wade of the rebirth of the 'Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres'. But the discussion has been going on since 1996. Many international art critics and curators sustain the need to renovate the Biennale and nominate an artistic director. One of the active supporters of this change is the US curator (of Sudanese origin) Salah Hassan, co-founder of the art magazine *NKA*.

This year curator Cheryl Finley presented '3X3 - The Official United States participation in Dak'Art 2004', which was more than a parallel event. It was an event in competition with the Biennale. '3X3' presented three site-specific works by David Hammons, Pamela Z and Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons; it was a well financed and organised project and it brought the US official participation in a show where national official participation was not facilitated.

The uneven quality of 2004 Dak'Art exhibitions cannot be blamed entirely on the selection procedure. There are still several obstacles, such as the huge organisational weakness and the incapacity of the Technical Committee to give proper attention to the artists' needs and all the artworks (some of which do not even arrive in Dakar on time for the opening). This year's international and design exhibitions showed a more careful and wise selection compared with previous editions, with interesting artworks and the demonstration that videos and photos are the ideal techniques to be selected through applications.

So, why do people go to the Dakar Biennale? As reviews, questionnaires, evaluation meetings, interviews all agree, people go to Dakar because it is an excellent gathering of artists, curators, critics and gallery owners. From this point of view the Biennale performs an excellent and very professional job.

In particular this year there was a very interesting international seminar on art centres organised inside Dak'Art off programme by the network Artfactories and the multimedia centre K♦♦r Thiossane, and there were the positive consequences of post-Documenta

XI. The Biennale public was not only made of people dealing with contemporary African art.

Once closed and linked to its official places (such as galleries, institutions and magazines) and to its traditional protagonists (critics, curators and journalists who don't necessarily specialise in contemporary art), the African art system is now opening up more and more to a wider public, even though it has to fight against those - mainly in Western countries - who would like to maintain their power on the continent (this tendency can be seen in exhibitions such as 'Africa Remix', which will open in July in Dösselndorf, and the Luanda Triennial, planned for November-December 2005).

The so-called "African art experts" may be more harmful than salutary for the promotion of artists living in Africa: it's time for Dak'Art to call itself into question and reset its primary objective. Maybe Dakar's Biennale will discover that it doesn't need an artistic director and a focus on Africa and development, but a wider commitment to art and artists.

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