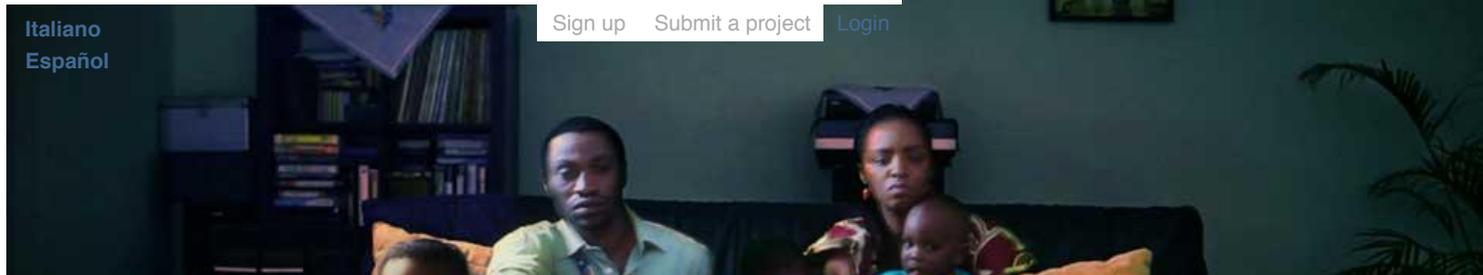


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Dak'Art: contemporary art and society —

Disorder creates social encounter and infiltrations at the lively Contemporary African Art Biennial in Dakar — its porosity offers space for new languages and tools, allowing a possibility to rethink the world, and the materialization of new, incisive questions. An art report from Dakar by Iolanda Pensa



For twenty years, habitués of [Dak'Art — the Contemporary African Art Biennial in Dakar](#) — have been questioning the utility and function of this event. Art, development, society, artists, Africa, world, market, public, jobs are topics that have always been included in the debates; this year they make their way into the event's title, *Contemporary Art and Society*.

In [Laura Nsengiyumva's](#) installation, a dilapidated and shabby couch welcomes the biennial audience; in front of it, a family looks out from a plasma TV screen. They watch TV; they look at the biennial; they look at us. But who are we? What does that family sitting in front of us see? And what are we looking for in that family parked in the TV set?

The family in question looks like one of this city's well-off families that — a bit bored and a bit distracted — visits this Dakar event which brings exhibitions and conferences to the city every two years, with a program distributed not only through the opening week but, in this edition, throughout an entire month. "I came to see the artworks," the lady next to me says; and perhaps this is the simple truth, difficult to recognize in an event which takes place in Sub-Saharan Africa. Dakar has its own local audience, interested in culture, and the biennial presents numerous high-quality works and initiatives.

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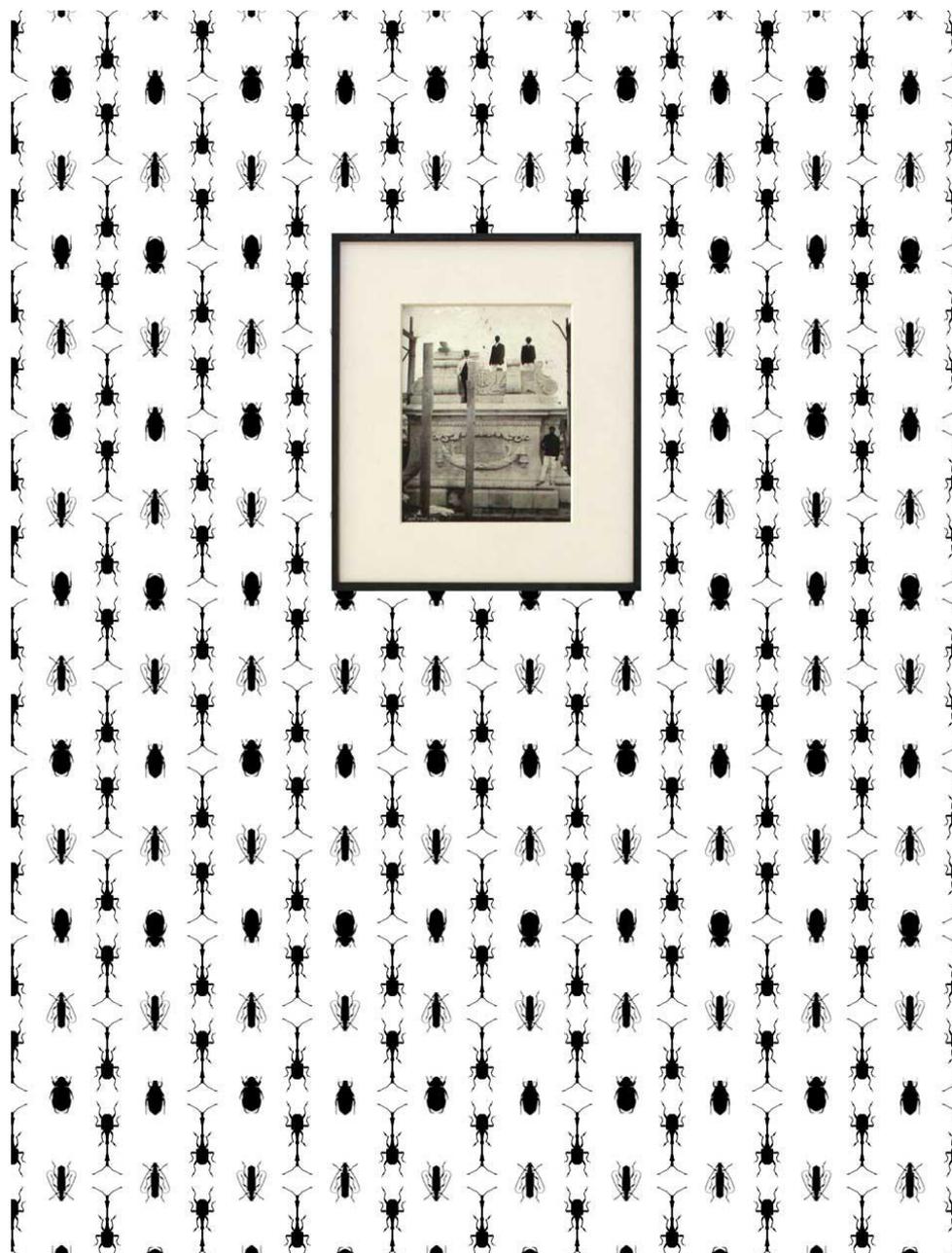
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↑ Top: Laura Nsengiyumva's installation, which welcomes visitors to the Biennale. Above: Lerato Shadi, *Tihogo*, performance, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Dak'Art 2012

In addition to the couch, a painterly video by Bakary Diallo stands out in the international exhibition, along with a delicate triptych of photo etchings by Nathalie Mba Bikoro and a family photo by [Amalia Ramanankirahina](#), hanging on wallpaper covered with insects instead of traditional flowers. In a performance, artist [Lerato Shadi](#) is encased in a red crocheted cocoon. [Serge Alain Nitegeka](#)'s piece at the [Le Manege](#) gallery — a large room filled with painted black beams pointing in all directions creating a labyrinthine and dramatically intimate space — is a highlight in the event's parallel program, packed with solo and group shows by Senegalese and international artists.



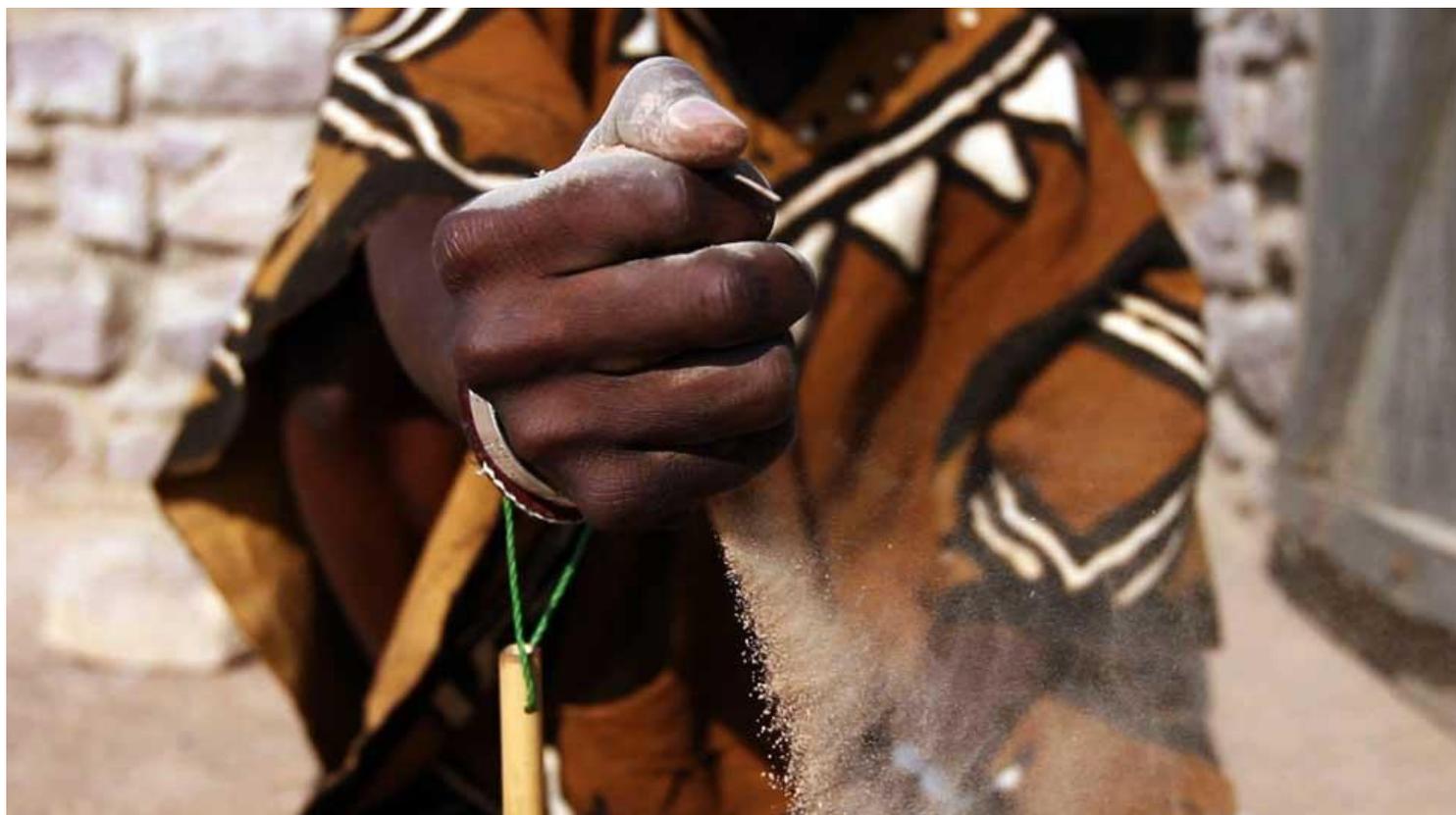
Amalia Ramanankirahina, *Monument*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Dak'Art 2012

The dense program of the [Afropixel Festival](#) also enriches the biennial; it is promoted by [Ker Thiossane medialab](#), which this year celebrates its tenth anniversary with a large mural by artists Muhsana Ali and Kan Sy, composed of mirrors and objects in the traditional Senegalese *sous-verres* technique. The traveling exhibit by [SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala](#) is on show at [Raw Material](#), an arts center that is also presenting *Chronique d'une Révolte* [Chronicle of a Revolt] at the Biscuiterie de Médina, with an exhibition and publication documenting the 2012 Senegalese elections.

But let's go back to the title, *Contemporary Art and Society*. At an event that takes place in Africa, the word "society" can take on an unmanageable number of multi-faceted meanings. One of the most fascinating, proposed by Kër Thiossane, focuses on the question of "common goods." The Dakar biennial invited a number of artists to think about this topic (among them [Yassine Balbzioui](#)), producing laboratories and organizing a lively conference to explore the concept. The idea of

"Disorder in Dakar was found in the missing captions, works of art that never reached their destination, Kafkaesque accreditation processes and an unknown program. In this condition of accidental and intentional encounters, dialogue nourishes thinking"

"common goods" was connected to the experience and vision of a group of intellectuals and activists: among them, Achille Mbembe, the rapper Thiat — member of the Y'en a marre collective, which has contributed to political change in Senegal —, writer Ken Bugul, artist Kan Sy, curator Simon Njami and writer and musician Felwine Sarr. The discussion offered the public a lens through which to look at art, culture, politics and society, regarding them as elements with a significant role within a single discourse.



↑ Bakary Diallo, *Ndankumba*, video, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Dak'Art 2012

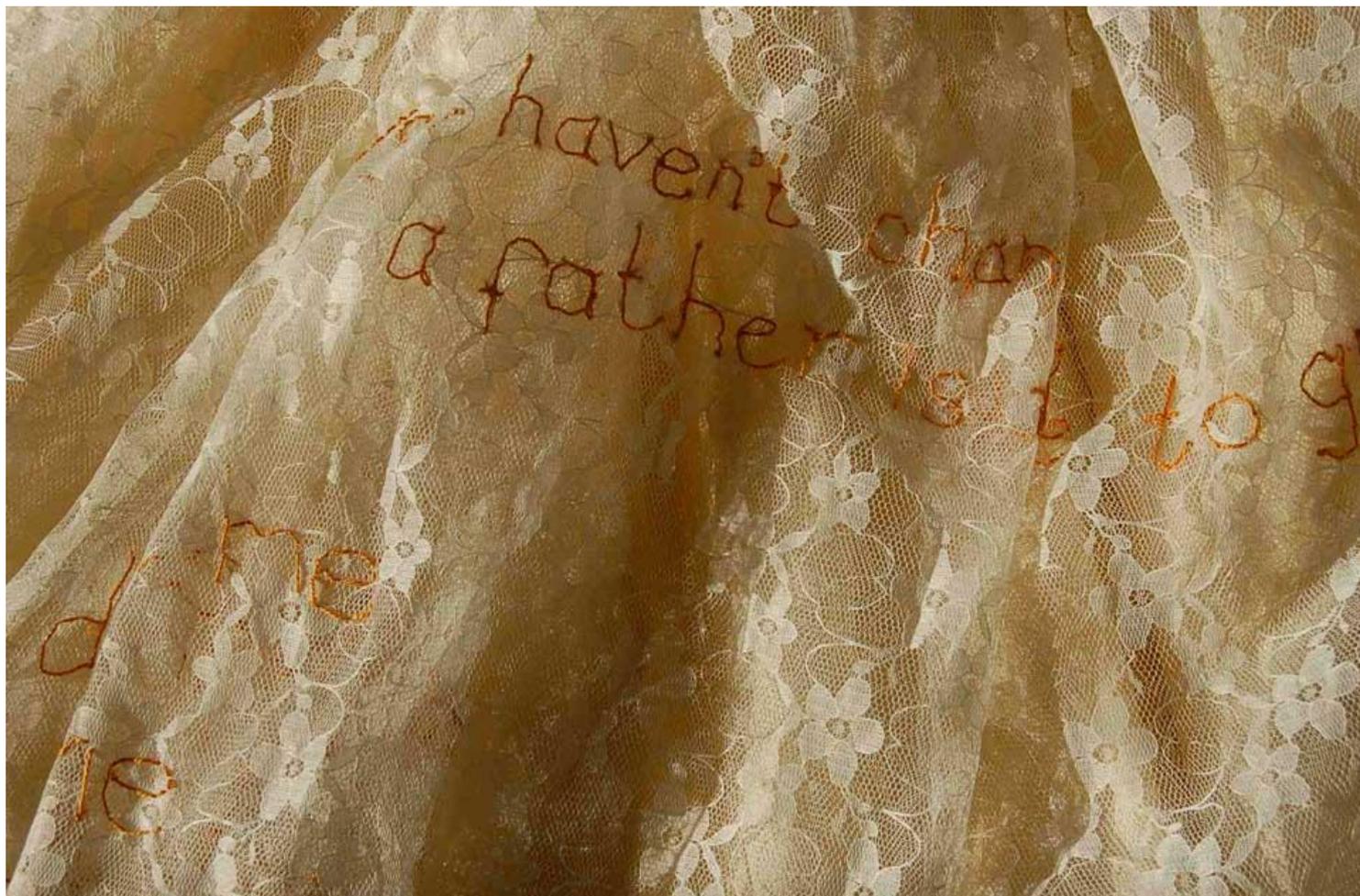
The biennial has, in its history, tested some strategies to ensure the event would not become elitist, such as bringing schools to the event, producing works in public spaces and forming mediators that can answer questions. But thinking about the relationship between art and society in numerical terms is the easiest way to declare an event's success and provide funders with clear metrics. For sponsors, this means knowing how many potential customers have been reached; for governments and administrators the numbers refer to voters; for international partners, they indicate how far-reaching the repercussions are for "development." But how to put a face on a quantitative assessment of an anonymous audience? To try to do so, I spoke to three important intellectuals.



↑ Nathalie Mba Bikoro, *The playground & from the sky (triptych)*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Dak'Art 2012

[Achille Mbembe](#) is one of the most famous African historians and contemporary thinkers, who today is increasingly interested in contemporary African art. In a series of four lectures in four consecutive days, Achille Mbembe told the Dakar audience how the world is living in an era dominated by the desire for apartheid and how it is, instead, necessary to abandon thinking that is tied to the concept of borders. In Mbembe's words, art seems to be part of a search for something more, something that is not narcissistically "just about me", but that goes beyond the self to allow translation from self to self by means of the other.

[Mamadou Jean Charles Tall](#) is an architect and co-founder and chairman of the board of directors of the [Collège Universitaire d'Architecture in Dakar](#). The school is currently studying public space, the image of the city, cultural heritage and urban disorder, referring to Ron Eglash's [fractal theory](#), nurtured by conversations with writer Lionel Manga and the Cameroon organization [dual'art](#). Looking at Tall's work, the biennial is not only an opportunity to enrich his international contacts, to give visibility to his efforts and to enhance his students' educations, but it is especially — as he indicates — "an occasion for reflection." The relationship with contemporary art has nurtured the work of a professional who is now gradually forming a new generation of Senegalese architects and urbanists.



↑ Wanjia Kimani, *You have not changed*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Dak'Art 2012

Oumar Ndao is Dakar's Director of Culture and Tourism. University professor, stage actor, writer and author of *Dakar, l'Ineffable* published by Senegalese editor [Vives Voix](#), Ndao is a leading figure in his city's artistic life and a promoter of Dakar's cultural strategy. His goal is to decentralize schools and initiatives throughout the urban fabric of the city's nineteen administrative subdivisions, reinforcing the existing social/cultural centers because "places unite the imaginary and encounter other imaginations."

It is as though over time the lively Dakar biennial has created "infiltrations." The encounter with contemporary art has created porosity, offering space for new languages and tools, allowing a possibility to rethink the world, and the materialization of new questions that help renew the way we view and analyse reality and intervene upon it.



↑ The Ker Thiossane medialab celebrates its tenth anniversary with a large mural by artists Muhsana Ali and Kan Sy, composed of mirrors and objects in the traditional Senegalese *sous-verres* technique. Photo by Susana Moliner

Paradoxically, the most curious thing is that it is all due to the event's chronic disorganization. It is precisely its malfunctioning that makes the biennial a unique platform for encounters because — as Berend van der Lans points out from his viewpoint as an observer of disorganization as applied to Amsterdam's station square, along with the [Collège Universitaire d'Architecture and Architecture African Matters](#) — disorder creates social encounter. Disorder in Dakar was found in the missing captions, works of art that never reached their destination, Kafkaesque accreditation processes and an unknown program. Amidst a cloud of complaints, everyone begins to talk to their neighbors, and what Malcolm Gladwell identifies as weak relations that are useful in reaching a critical point are consolidated. In this condition of accidental and intentional encounters, dialogue nourishes thinking.



↑ Muhsana Ali and Kan Sy's mural. Photo by Antoine Louisgrand

And the artworks? No, the biennial exhibits are not the accurate places to contemplate contemporary artworks in their best conditions. During the opening week, a theft amazed me. Along with projectors and computers, someone stole something extremely valuable. Who knows what became of Wanja Kimani's *You have not changed* piece? Maybe somewhere in Dakar, a child is wearing contemporary art: a lace dress whose embroidery narrates an awkward and fragile conversation between worlds, memories and imaginations that are not, in the end, so far apart. *Iolanda Pensa*

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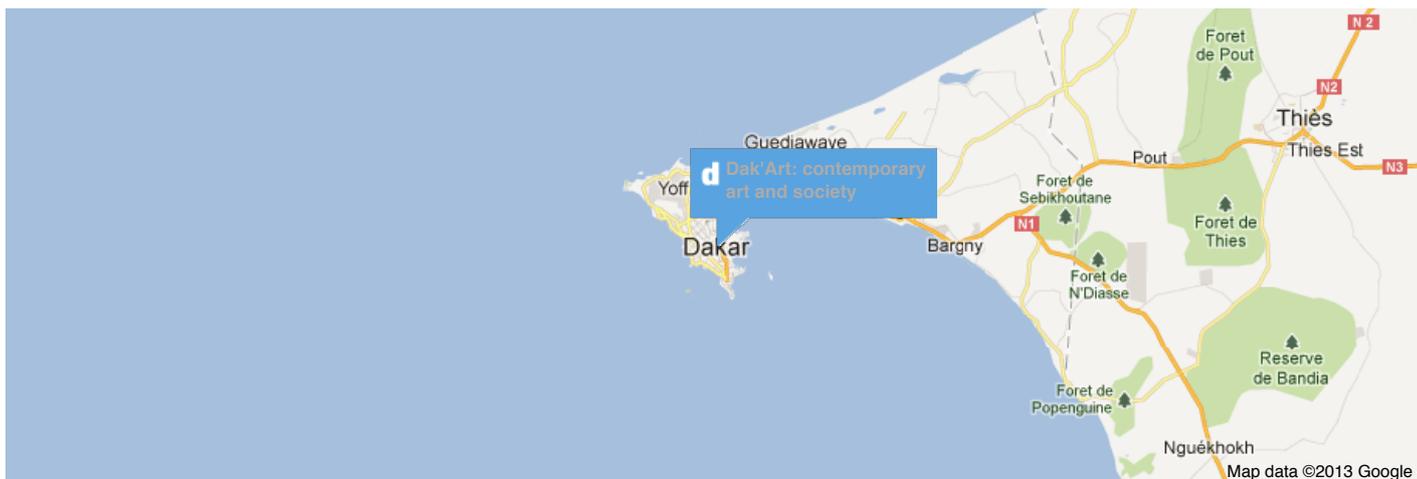
Berend van der Lans · Università tecnica di Eindhoven
am suddenly also on Domusweb, together with [Jean-Charles Tall](#) in an article of Iolanda Pensa.
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