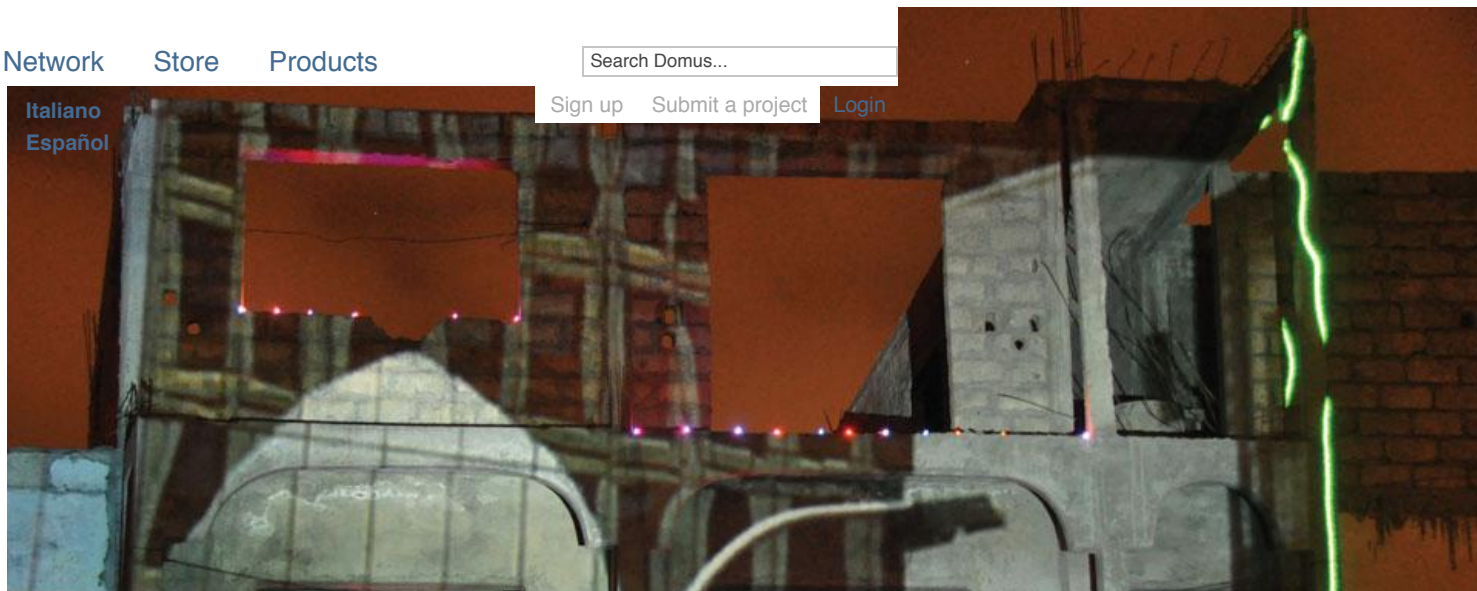


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Dak'Art 2010: Perspective and Retrospective —

2010 was a year of taking stock for the Dakar Biennial of Contemporary Art which celebrated its tenth edition and its twentieth anniversary. An art report from Dakar by [Iolanda Pensa](#)



It's funny how an event that has seemed to die repeatedly, has also managed to celebrate so many birthdays: its birth in 1990, its renaissance in 1992, followed by another in 1996. Since 2000, birthdays were joined by anniversaries: a 10th anniversary for its founding and followed by celebrations for its revivals. In 2006, with the appointment of a new artistic director, there is more to mark than just another decade; it is as if the Dakar Biennial is enjoying an entirely new debut!

Despite all the stops and starts, [Dak'Art](#) is the largest contemporary art biennial organised in Africa and the only one in the world dedicated to promoting contemporary African art. Its twentieth anniversary, complete with an international exhibition and a retrospective, offered an excellent opportunity to analyze the show and its prospects. However, the analysis must begin with its very decomposition.

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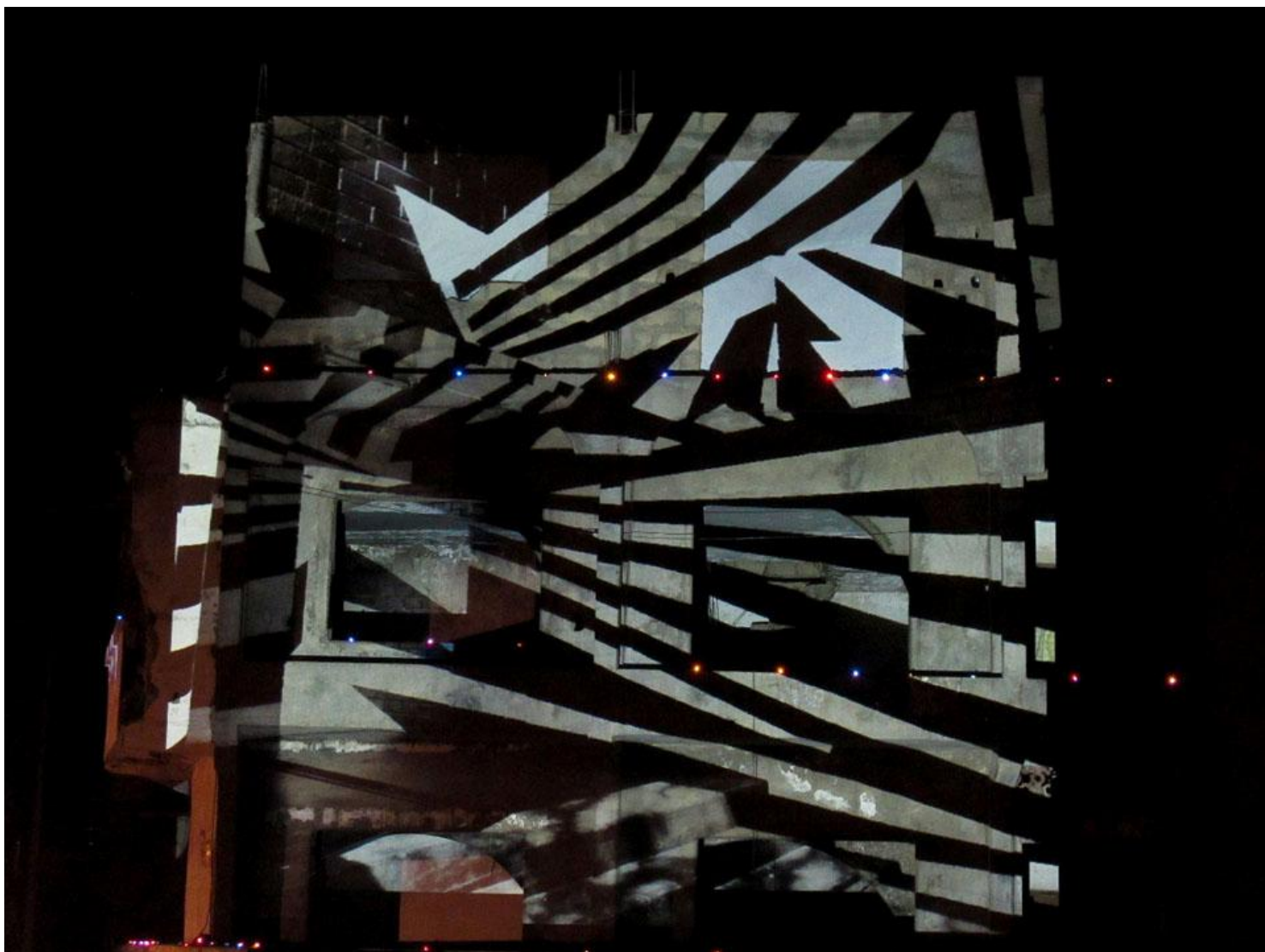
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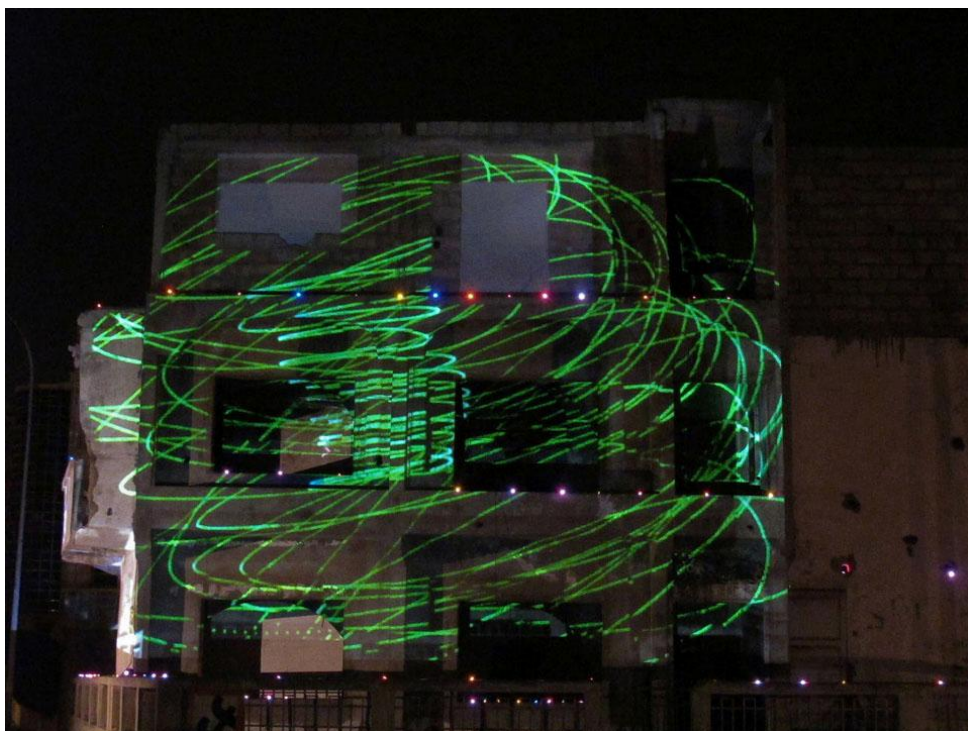


↑ "Entracte" is a performance piece by artists Hobbs/Neustetter of the South African collective Trinity Session in collaboration with students at the École de Beaux Arts in Dakar. Together, during the last edition of the Biennial, they conducted a series of screenings and performances regarding Maison 46 in Zone A of Dakar, a building abandoned for ten years and slated for demolition to make way for a new settlement. Theirs is a reflection on the crumbling building and the expectations related to new architecture.

Twenty years after serving as its first secretary general, Amadou Lamine Sall writes in last year's biennial catalogue: "Immediately, and without hesitation, we welcome the fact that this event has been kept alive since 1990. We owe this to the State of Senegal and the political will to preserve it – for better or for worse. I believe that even in its advanced state of decomposition, we should keep it going. It is already an incontestable accomplishment in Africa and in the eyes of the world."

Sall was responding to the fact that, at the very moment in which the Dakar Biennial was preparing for its twentieth birthday, the European Commission sent its best wishes – *of adieu*. For this was the year that the event's most important economic partner decided to deny the support that had covered more than half of its total budget in previous iterations through grant allocations and other support. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the 2010 Dakar Biennial is the fact that it was produced almost entirely through, as Sall mentions, Senegal's political will; the Senegalese government is now the biennial's sole major patron.

It remains the case that here, as almost everywhere else in the world, political will is at the heart of great cultural events. Biennials, festivals and universal expositions bring investment, infrastructure, new jobs, urban branding, visibility and international visitors. Senegal has a long history of supporting major cultural events, from the first edition of the [Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres](#) in 1966 to the the Dakar Biennial in 1990 and a revival of the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in 2010. In Senegal, the president is by constitutional mandate the main patron of arts and culture, which is why it tends to initiate more major events of this kind. If it was the Dakar Biennial for President Diouf (1980–2000), President Abdoulaye Wade (elected in 2000) needed another event to support. In 2004, the president chose to organize the third edition of the Festival Mondial des Arts Negres, cynically announcing his project at the opening of the Dakar Biennial of the same year. And indeed, after long delays and mishaps, the festival saw the light just a few weeks ago in December of 2010. But compared to the Dakar Biennial, the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres is entirely another matter.



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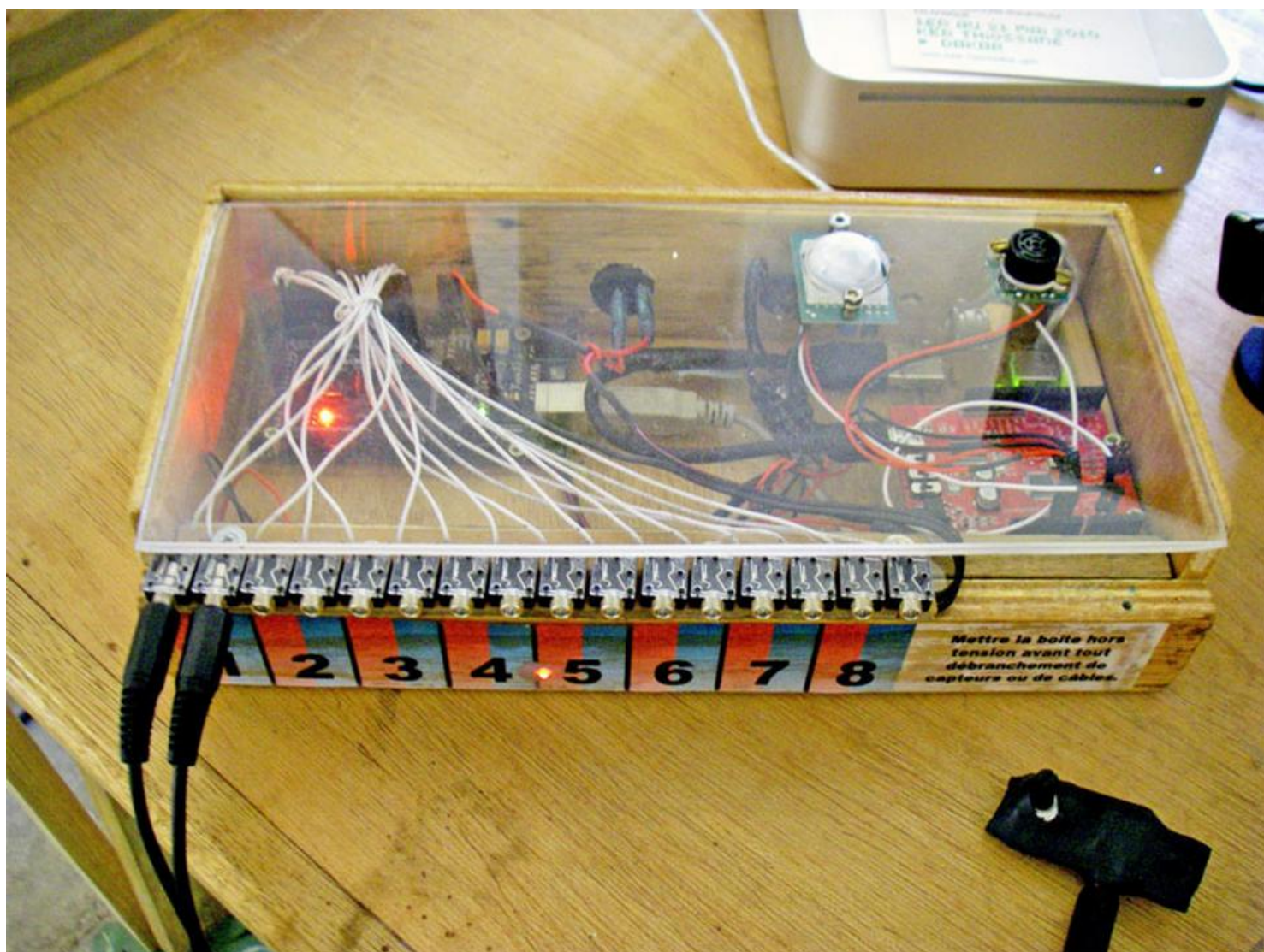
Laser images projected on Maison 46 in Zone A of Dakar. The building – abandoned for 10 years – is destined for demolition. The projections underline the decrepit state of the building and, with drawings and new images, prefigure its future.

Dak'Art is essentially an art exhibit involving museums, exhibition spaces, studios, galleries and some of the city's public space. The festival is a true mega-event; it is interdisciplinary and truly "festive," hosting numerous concerts and shows. Not only that, the festival forges a close link with the original 1966 festival and its primary patron, the legendary Leopold Sedar Senghor, Senegal's first president. It seeks to enhance creativity and a sense of African transnational identity that can unite both those who live on the mainland as well as the great diasporic community throughout the world. In fact, the Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres is to the Dakar Biennial what the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine is to the National Gallery in the city: the differences far outweigh them. Despite Abdoulaye Wade's clear preference for

"Though studied as the prime example of the African franchise of the Venice Biennale and appears on all maps that represent the world's biennials, Dak'Art has its peculiarities. The first is certainly its disorganization."

monumental work, the president confirmed his support for the Dakar Biennial in 2010. The event takes place with organizational and economic difficulties, and its title, "Perspectives and Retrospectives," says a lot about how Dak'Art feels about its fragile destiny, but also about how it feels having attained an undeniable role in Africa and in eyes of the world.

Sub-Saharan Africa hosts other major art events, of course. The Johannesburg Biennial – which is still remembered for being a visionary and wide-ranging exhibit – ended after only two editions; the first in 1995 was full of momentum towards a future anticipated by the end of apartheid, and the second in 1997, ended the event for good, but launched the career of its curator Okwui Enwezor (and many of the participating artists). Over the years, other art biennials, triennials and festivals were born (notably, [the Rencontres de Bamako](#), the Luanda Triennial in Angola and [SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala](#) in Cameroon), but none of these events ever succeeded to gain the visibility and pan-African/international role of the Dakar Biennial.



↑ Valise Pédagogique, prodotta da Kër Thiossane e da Rose des Vents Numérique, all'interno di Afropixel Festival/Mobile A2K, Dakar, 2010.

Though studied as the prime example of the African franchise of the

Venice Biennale and appears on all maps that represent the world's biennials, Dak'Art has its peculiarities. The first is certainly its disorganization. Even today – after twenty years of experience – the works are poorly assembled, and at times do not even reach their destinations! They have not been packed correctly and are shown in such a mediocre way that we cannot view them properly, nor take the full measure of the show's production. And here we come to Dak'Art's second defining characteristic.

The most effective way to describe the Dakar Biennial and its achievements in recent years might be a group photograph; no works, exhibitions and displays, but a group photo of many people, all standing in a stadium goofing around between shots or standing upright in poses with the embarrassed look of those who do not have much sympathy for their neighbours. Dak'Art has always been an extraordinary platform for encounters – as all the reviews have said this since its inception – especially for people with extremely diverse backgrounds. The heterogeneity of this network is one of the characteristics that distinguishes the event. Over the years, the biennial has shown over 450 artists in over 100 exhibitions, not to mention the creative people who have shown their works in the over 800 "off" shows. It is not just artists invited to attend the opening week events, or a general public interested in seeing the exhibition.

Developmental organizations, anthropologists, sociologists, architects, researchers and tourists all participate in the biennial. The biennial is attractive to very different kinds of people and everyone has their own expectations, agendas, and interests; aside from the obvious presentation of contemporary African art, the event generates buzzwords such as "Africa," "economy," "development," "urban transformation," "cultural diplomacy," and "partnership" that reveal the larger and more complex expectations. This biennial is incapable of *only* showing art; its constituents expect it also to do something else – something more – precisely because it is an African biennial. Indeed, in an important way, the expectations of the Venice Biennale are much lower. Yet repeatedly, participants are confronted with the reality that an exhibition, in the end, is just an exhibition. It can't do everything and certainly can't satisfy such a heterogeneous network of observers. Dak'Art's efforts to satisfy different requests and its attempts to accommodate a bit of everything by mediating and seeking compromise is the main reason for its fragility.



↑ Cameron Platter, My bm is bigger than yours, 2004, video stills.

From my point of view, the best biennial was Dak'Art 2004; it had verve and momentum, and through the intensive efforts of its organizers, Yacouba Konaté was appointed artistic director for 2006. The 2006 edition was packed with important artists and important works, but it was even more weighed down by the great expectations induced by the new funding that had been granted. Despite the commitment, Dak'Art 2006 failed to confer upon the show a specificity and direction that would guarantee a glorious result. The momentum was slowly extinguished and Dak'Art limped on until its 2008 iteration. The latest edition proposed an international selection of artists who had never shown before in the event (beautiful videos by Cameron Platter, the striking photographs by Hasan & Husain Essop and the strange fate of the neon sign by Claire & Rose) and a retrospective exhibition of new works of past winners that showed how Dak'Art is the result of intense negotiations and continuous search to meet the expectations of government, partners, donors and stakeholders rather than a show supporting artistic research and creativity.

The so-called "off program" – the independent and sideline program which has produced wonderful initiatives – is another story. The Dakar Biennial always added these events to its communications, supporting them and considering them an integral part of its program. Just to

mention a few: workshops like *Atelier Tenq* organised during Dak'Art 1996 which produced the first issue of *Metronome*; site-specific installations including the piece *Alimentation d'Art* in Dak'Art 2000 which mixed art and merchandise in a grocery store; projects by artists, like *Exit Tour* in 2006, a trip from Douala to Dakar on public transportation organised by Goddy Leye's Art Bakery to meet creative and cultural institutions in West Africa; partnerships like the one that the Res Artis network brought to Dakar from N'Goné Fall in 2006 to give awards and select artists for international residency programs. And more congresses and, during the last two editions, the festival [Afropixel](#) organized by Kër Thioossane which, in 2010, produced the *Pedagogical Suitcase* (an open-source kit for the production of digital art and interactive design) and the performance by Trinity Session (a spectacular projection on a building with music and performance).

I thought perhaps that I could also give a little present to Dak'Art for its twenty-year turning point. Precisely because the Dakar Biennial is an indisputable achievement in Africa as well as worldwide, [I contributed to its entry on Wikipedia](#), in the hope that the Dakar Biennial will continue to grow. Also on Wikipedia. *Iolanda Pensa*



↑ Hasan and Husain Essop, *Four Fathers*, 2009.

Born in Geneva in 1975, [Iolanda Pensa](#) is an art critic and researcher. Co-founder and manager of the [iStrike Foundation](#) (based in Rotterdam), she is scientific director of the [WikiAfrica](#) project promoted

by the [lettera27 Foundation](#) from Milan. She collaborates with the [Nuova Accademia Belle Arti](#) in Milan (Cultural economics with Simona Bodo 2007–08 and 2008–09, and fashion course during the 2008 Summer School).



↑ Rosenclaire (Claire Gavronsky & Rose Shakinovsky), Investissez dans l'immatériel, 2010. 250x322cm, neon.



↑ Hasan and Husain Essop, Night Before Eid 2009.

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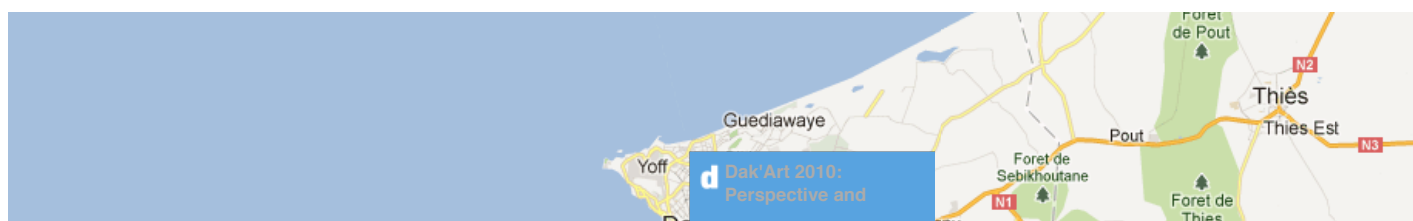
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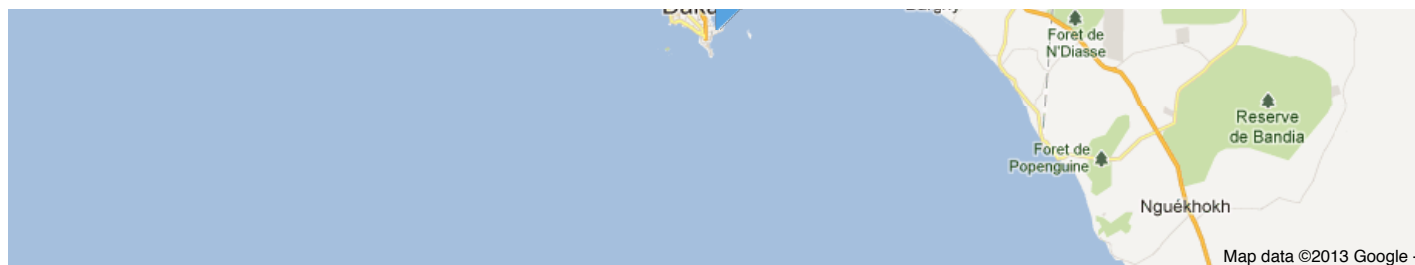
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