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Dak'art 2014

DIY remains the best strategy for producing art and culture at the Dakar Biennial of African contemporary art, representing the right place to see how Africa presents itself.

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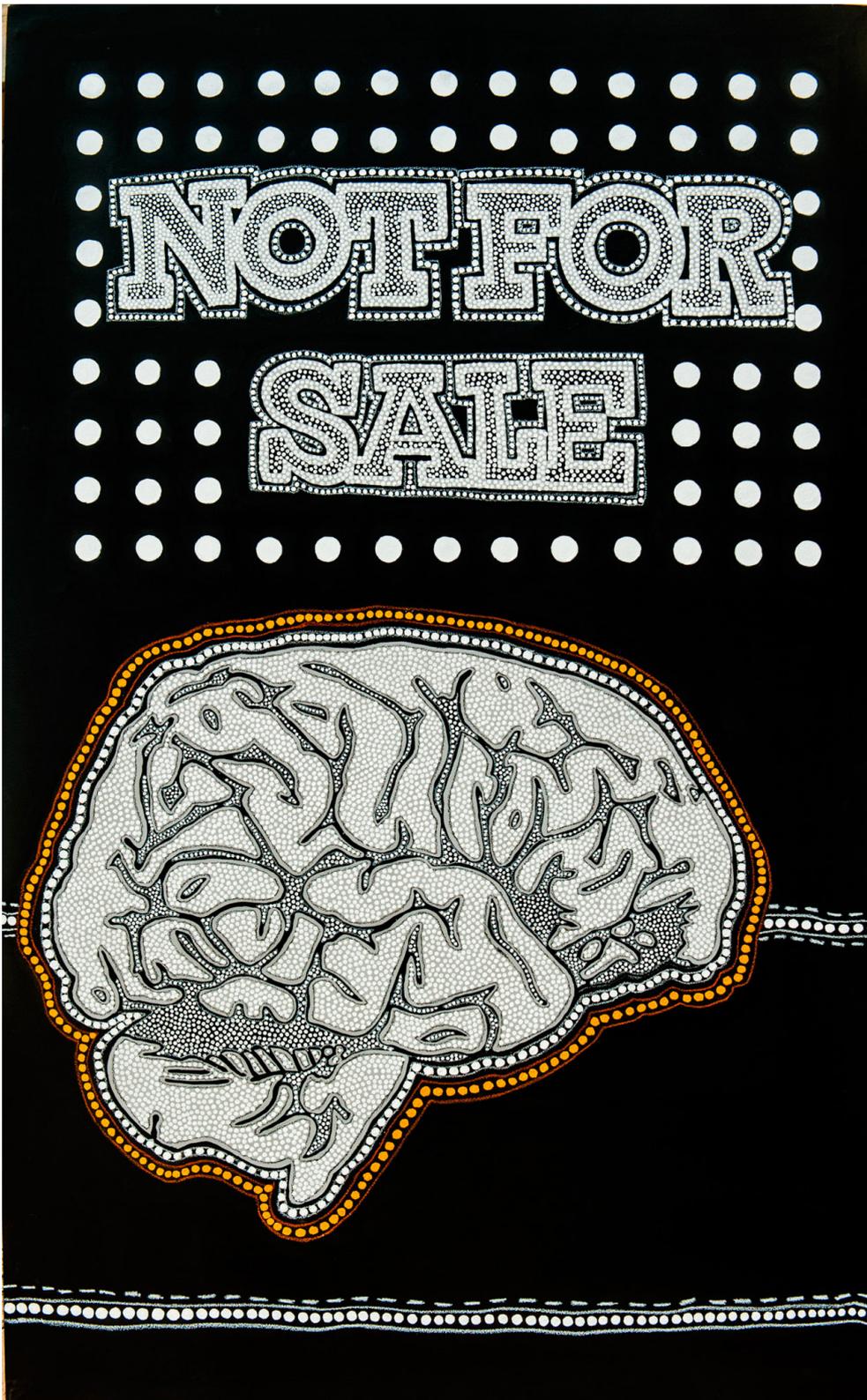
For the first time in its history, Dak'Art has begun to resemble a

real biennial. It must be due to the industrial building rented to house the international exhibition where a new rhythm dominates the scene: white flags by Mehdi-Georges Lahlou at the entrance, a video of dreamlike fragments by John Akomfrah on a large side screen in one space, animated creatures by Wangechi Mutu, Emeka Ogbob's sound city, a sunflower made from nails and spoons by Olu Amoda and Milumbe Haimbe's futuristic comic-strip world.



Top and above: *FabLab Defko Ak Niép*, Dakar, 2014. Courtesy Kër Thiossane

Resembling a biennial is a strange thing. Biennials are in effect, major displays of contemporary art that – whereas in the 1990s they were perhaps something new – today are simply a consolidated structure for culture and entertainment within which we expect to find a little group of enthusiasts who collect, like stickers, works of art and cities to visit. Each event is profoundly diverse but the word “biennial” and the desire to identify a global art phenomenon have over time has produced the conviction that “biennials around the world” are all somewhat similar.



Sidy Diallo, *Not for Sale*, 2013. Acrylic and pastel on canvas, 147 x 243 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Dakar Biennale

Dak'Art is no exception. Whether this is a matter for praise or condemnation, the event immediately entered the network of international biennials, representing to the eyes of the world the African version of the biennial franchise and the right place to see how Africa represents itself. Dedicated specifically to contemporary African art, Dak'Art is still today for

many visitors an opportunity to gain an idea about what the continent is producing. However Dak'Art only functions within this mode of interpreting and contextualising when the event is viewed from afar; the situation changes when seen up close.



FabLab Defko Ak Niép, Dakar, 2014. Courtesy Kër ThioSSane

The most crucial aspect of the international exhibition is the call-out to the candidates. After an initial attempt in 1992 to accept artists, selected to a greater or lesser degree, from all over the world, in 1996 the biennial created an open call to those of African origin or nationality. The aim was to take an open, democratic and transparent approach. In reality however, the method immediately clashed with the actual application and the situation of the continent: communicating the event, reaching artists effectively, producing a portfolio, convincing well-known artists to put themselves forward was anything but easy. Despite this, the call-out to candidates continued for years with a committee that met to choose what came, even if not necessarily photogenic. In 2006, the system changed: Yacouba Konaté was nominated artistic director of the biennial and the

selection was curated by him directly and a series of additional curators. Despite successfully rethinking the way the event functioned, the costs seemed unsustainable. In 2008, the call-out to candidates was relaunched and from that year on the curator of the biennial was also selected through a competition (applying by 31 May 2014) and the curators of this edition Elise Atangana, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi and Abdelkader Damani have had a mixed situation: some direct selection and some selection through portfolio. But what is the Africa they represent?



John Akomfrah, *Peripeteia*, 2012. HD video, color, sound, 18'13". Courtesy of the artist, Gallery Carroll Fletcher, Smoking Dogs Films and the Dakar Biennale

From what they say they seem well aware that a biennial – even in Africa – can certainly not represent a continent. They have avoided selecting artists that have already shown at Dak'Art, they have included in the exhibition African protagonists that live both in the continent and outside and have chosen – perhaps better and in a more coherent way with respect to all the previous international exhibitions – works and an exhibition design that gives a nod to entertainment, perhaps it is this more than anything else that makes this biennial resemble others. They declare that their selection aims to give space to artists “actively engaged” able to “produce the common”. The title of the international exhibition is “producing

the common” but rather than on common goods, community and collectivity, I think it could be interesting to concentrate on the other word: producing.



Candice Breitz, *Extra #1*, 2011. Chromogenic Print, 56 x 84cm. Ed. 5 + 2 A.P. Commissioned by the Standard Bank Gallery. Courtesy Goodman Gallery and the Dakar Biennale

The characteristic that certainly runs through all biennials is managing to at least produce an exhibition. Everywhere the enterprise presents challenges. There are those who know all too well what it's like to enjoy the gondolas and drinks and then find themselves in Venice transporting artworks, projectors and leaflets by boat at the world's longest-running and most iconic biennial. At Dakar managing to produce represents a true victory, often achieved despite the biennial. The (unofficial) award for production in this edition undoubtedly goes to the curator of “Dak'Art Campus” Ndeye Rokhaya Gueye, who enlisted students and managed to transform – with mops, brooms and a series of five site-specific works – the botanical garden at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Dakar into a small, poetic garden. Unlike the

marvellous space of the old and abandoned palace of justice (used by the biennial in 2002 and 2004 despite being erected on an unstable rock), perhaps this garden could be maintained (and documented on the Open Street Map in the map of Dakar's green spaces in the festival Afropixel "Jardins de Resistance" – gardens of resistance – at the same time as the biennial). There is also a beautiful homage to one of the continent's most important artists, Mustapha Dimé (1952-1998), that brings to Dakar the works owned by the family held since 2008 in France at the Fondation Blachère.



Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, *72 (virgins) on the sun*, 2014. Sculpture / installation, mixed media, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and the Dakar Biennale

DIY is in fact a significant strategy for production that paradoxically characterises both the official events at the biennial as well as the fringe ones (the so-called off-programme that this year includes 230 presentations – that can be viewed on an Android app made by DevEngineLabs and Aude Guyot). Among the many events, at Dakar, CCA Lagos organised the fourth edition of its education programme "Àsikò" that came about precisely to close a gap in the entourage of artists, curators and critics of the African continent. Raw Material Company presented in *Precarious Imaging* a series of

photographic portraits that, with delicacy and modesty, open up a space to think about violence and homophobic attitudes towards homosexuality in Africa. *FabLab Defko Ak Niép* (a room with a roller-shutter created by Kër Thiossane on a road where all the artisans have a room with a roller-shutter) housed workshops, producing key-rings with 3D printers constructed from waste material and woven scarves and bags made by integrating an Arduino board onto old machines.



Wangechi Mutu, *The End of eating Everything*, 2013. Animated video, 8'10", Edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery New York and of the Dakar Biennale

The Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University and the Institute of African American Affairs of New York University organised an intensive conference entitled “Global Black Consciousness” and exhibitions were presented by artists from Congo Brazzaville, Mali and Algeria. Royal Air Maroc made their presence felt, having signed an agreement with Dak'Art as technical sponsor until 2018 to supply 120 air tickets for each edition and contribute towards communication;

while the staff of the airline do an anti-racist course to learn to treat the new clientele with care. Dakar is covered in posters that proclaim the official transporter of the biennial, there is a proper RAM stage in the space of the international exhibition, the minister of Culture for Morocco was at the official opening and there is even a pavilion, not for Morocco but Royal Air Maroc (that presents the results of an international workshop organised in Morocco that also saw the participation of Pélégie Gbaguidi).



FabLab Defko Ak Niép, Dakar, 2014. Courtesy Kër Thiossane

Also at this edition the question is raised as to why the Dakar Biennial finds it so hard to guarantee an organisational quality and maturity that it should by now have already have acquired. Senegal has adequate political stability and levels of security and comfort for uniting around it all those initiatives and energies already making an active contribution to African contemporary art, of Africa and in Africa. It is a matter of taking full advantage of them and showing the world that Dak'Art does not resemble simply a biennial but is also a major event able to

produce – and facilitate – cultural production in Africa.

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Until 8 June 2014

Dak'art 2014

11. International Exhibition of African Contemporary Art

various locations, Dakar

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