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Art and Artists at Dak'Art 2004

Contemporary African art Biennial in Dakar. Art, artists, official exhibitions and parallel program.

By Iolanda Pensa | May 2004



Photos

The International Exhibition

Even though Dak'Art doesn't have a curatorial approach, this year's International Exhibition showed unintentional coherence. "I see so much suffering: artists seem concentrated on pain and loneliness" – noted Marilyn Douala Bell, co-founder of Doual'Art Centre in Cameroon.

In the video *Wahid* by Younès Rahmoun (* 1975, Morocco), two hands seem unable to pray, meditate or count, while a voice endlessly repeats "wahid", which in Arabic means "one", but also "God".

In the video installation and performance *The Room*, Amal El Kenawy and Abd El Ghany El Kenawy (* 1974 and 1965, Egypt) place pain inside a space – as cold as toilet tiles – where they observe its privacy, delicacy, and strength.

The Egyptian artist Maha Maamoon (* 1972 and winner of the Dak'Art photography prize) transforms in *CairoScapes* her huge city chaos into solitary quiet horizontal and flowering landscapes.

Train Train Médina by Mohamadou Ndoye Douts (* 1973, Senegal) recreates in an animation movie the chaotic liveliness of an old Dakar neighborhood, which grows to reduce itself to dust.

South African artist Thando Mama (* 1977, winner of the Belgian Community Prize) in *We are Afraid* shows and hides the face of a man in a video placed at the end of a dark tunnel, while some confused voices keep repeating "we are afraid".

Khaled Hafez's (* 1963 and winner of the Francophonie's prize) video projection *Idler's Logic* is like a set design filled with collages, gadgets, quotes, violence, colors, and images.

The prizewinner of the President's Prize, Michèle Magema (* 1977, France/Congo) marches in *Oye Oye* in front of historical images from the dictatorship of Zaire, when president Mobutu promoted the myth of "Authentic Africa".

Other official shows

Among the numerous Dak'Art official events, the exhibition focused on Africa was the most interesting. The curator, Yacouba Konaté, placed inside the National Gallery the works of three sculptors from different generations: Christian Lattier (1925-1978, Ivory Coast), Joseph Francis Sumégné (* 1951, Cameroon) and Tapfuma Gutsa (* 1959, Zimbabwe). This exhibition presented a new approach to contemporary African art, deeper and more reflected: it promoted sculpture (which has been underestimated in the last few years), singled out key protagonists, and deployed a historical perspective.

The curator Hans Ulrich Obrist represented "The World" in the fascinating but intrusive space of the former Palace of Justice, an abandoned – because unstable – building. Among chairs, tables, old documents, and dust, he created two island-spaces: a cinema and a TV room, both laid out with colorful cushions and carpets designed by the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. Thanks to very transportable DVD technology, the show presented videos by popular international artists focused on the relationship between art and space.

The Off

This year Dakar Biennial promoted 131 "off" events, far too many to guarantee quality. The most significant ones were:

3X3, the official United States participation in Dak'Art 2004

Organized by Salah Hassan and Cheryl Finley, far more than a parallel event, it was an event competing with Dak'Art: it had a lively calendar, a huge budget and a public of renowned collectors, art critics, and international curators. The show was presented as the official United States participation to a biennial that doesn't normally consider national participation. 3X3 showed three well financed and carefully installed site-specific works by David Hammons, Pamela Z. and Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons.

David Hammons organized a free raffle on a street corner. For one week, daily at 4 pm, some cheerful animators congratulated from a yellow and

red "Maggi" stage the winner of two sheep. The work was intended to give something to the people who normally don't get anything from art; it attempted to leave the conventional art world logic behind, ending up – probably without acknowledging so – inside the usual market logic: with few winners, many losers, the Maggi - Nestlé multinational sponsor and humanitarian dynamics.

Pamela Z did a performance in the Sorrano Theatre and installed her sound work Just Dust in the Maison des Esclaves on Gorée Island. Just Dust tells about the Afro-American artist's first trip to Africa, giving voice to trivial thoughts through a deeply evocative sonorous landscape. Ingenuous wonder and that terrible desire to shape souvenirs can be felt in the painful inability to possess a place.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons showed more than an interesting work: she had an amazingly beautiful and well-installed exhibition space in the new CACAO art centre, a fully restored former industrial building. It was nice to hear the enthusiasm of the Art Academy students who collaborated with the artist.

Gént

Presented by the artists' association Man-Keneen-Ki. Gént, which means dream, is an installation-exhibition in a courtyard. The itinerary follows a circular path along which art works produced by street children are placed: black and white and color photos, small installations, and videos. The itinerary leads to a central space padded in leaves, where a child sleeps on a bed.

Man-Keneen-Ki uses art and set-design to create something beautiful around misery and pain and also encourages creativity as a means of expression. The idea is fascinating but even though Gént is one of the most interesting Dak'Art off events, it can't compete with the amazingly subtle and elegant show Les Enfants de la Nuit, curated by the same organization in 2000.

Voces del noroeste

The exhibition of Canary Islands artists, organized by Orlando Britto Jinorio, was installed in an apartment, where, among others, José Ruiz covered a wall with pendulous condoms, one for each country of the world.

A seminar for emerging autonomous creative places on the African continent

Organized by the international network Artfactories and by the multimedia art centre Kër Thiossane.

Conclusion

... And while the International Selection and Jury Committee talked about art, gender issues, the artists' concern about the city and the world equilibrium, the importance of promoting new technologies, the remarkable new Egyptian participation... the rest of Dakar continued – as at every biennial – to discuss the terrible organization, the lack of art works and catalogues, the unexpected program changes, the doubts about Dak'Art future editions, the way artworks were selected...

By the way:

Would you like to show in the next Dakar Biennial? Apply!

You only need the passport of an African country to join the Dakar Biennial selection. Wait for the official call (www.dakart.org), send your application, and become a contemporary African artist too. Have you moved? Well, you can still be an artist of the Diaspora.

Iolanda Pensa

Freelance critic and author based in Milan, Italy. She has published amongst others in Flash Art, Tema Celeste, Nigrizia, Africa, Gulliver, Africa e Mediterraneo.



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