

ARTFORUM

Creative Representation

Dakar, Senegal

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Left: Dak' Art curators [Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi](#) and [Abdelkader Damani](#) with curator Nilva Luz. Right: Dak' Art curator [Elise Atangana](#) with artists [Simone Leigh](#) and David Lawson. (All photos: [Cathryn Drake](#))

GETTING FROM GENEVA to the eleventh edition of Dak' Art, the oldest biennial in Africa, was like an endurance rally of yore. From a confusing new visa policy to organizational tumult, the required skill was sheer determination, which would serve well on the ground too.

The central exhibition at the Village de la Biennale, former television studios in an industrial area north of the city center, was inaugurated a day late, the venue made available to the curators and artists only four days before the scheduled opening date, early last month. “I have never seen curators work so hard for any exhibition ever,” artist [Simone Leigh](#) said. By the time I arrived following the casual directions “Route de Rufisque near IPRES, facing CFAO,” there was the atmosphere of a jubilant festival, in the wake of gold stars having been sprinkled over attendees as part of Slimane Rais’s installation *Celebration*. Displayed in four raw cavernous buildings, the show ranged from genres such as bricolage—as in the luminous nail-and-spoon sunflower depicting a radiant African universe, by Nigerian artist [Olu Amoda](#) (who split the biennial grand prize with Algerian Driss Ouadahi)—to videos and installations expressing local social issues. Visitors to [Naziha Mestaoui](#)’s *Corps en résonance* were transfixed by luminous Tibetan glass bowls that gyrated and produced a hypnotic sound in response to their bodily movements. “I want to make visible the invisible and to heal the body

through technology that invokes the spiritual, bringing us back full circle to our ancestral roots,” Mestaoui said.



Left: Artist [Olu Amoda](#). Right: Artist [Joel Andrianomearisoa](#), curators [Storm Janse Van Rensburg](#) and Caroline Hancock, and artist [Naziha Mestaoui](#).

In fulfilling this biennial’s mandate of “Producing the Common,” drawing the universal from cultural diversity, cocurators [Elise Atangana](#), [Abdelkader Damani](#), and [Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi](#) brought a decisive curatorial vision and a compelling mix of artists from all over Africa and its diaspora—no small task. As if in response to critics of previous exhibitions, the broad-ranging selection included all areas of Pan-African production, with Atangana in charge of the diaspora, Damani of North Africa, and Nzewi of the sub-Saharan region. “It is an extremely rewarding experience for curators building collections of contemporary arts of Africa,” Newark Museum curator [Christa Clarke](#) noted. “A great mix of established and emerging talent, with some artists so new to the market that they have yet to edition their work.” In other words, if you want to see what’s going on in African art, Dak’Art was the place to be.

The opening party took place outdoors among the buildings, the crowd milling around large-scale installations like [Mehdi-Georges Lahlou’s 72 \(Virgins\)](#), a majestic assembly of fluttering white flags alluding to the misled martyrs of Islamic fanaticism, and officials from the Tate and the Smithsonian Museum of African Art were out in full force. By the time we returned from the space displaying the terrific “Anonymous,” a nicely curated ensemble of smaller works by exhibition artists without labels, the scramble for food at the buffet tables had come and gone, and only crumbs were left.

Live music is de rigueur for any event in Senegal, but before the big stage revved up we decided to catch the show of Malian artist [Abdoulaye Konaté’s](#) arresting quilted tapestries carrying political and religious messages, being fêted at the French Institute’s Galerie Le Manège. Next I joined photographers [Omar Victor Diop](#) and [Fabrice Monteiro](#), curators [Yves Chatap](#), [Storm Janse Van Rensburg](#), and [Elise Atangana](#), and artists [Joel Andrianomearisoa](#) and [Naziha Mestaoui](#) for the dash up the Corniche to the *Contemporary* & celebration, at Istanbul Dakar Restaurant. The crowd was exuberant, circle jamming to the music, and the breeze off the sea was fine as can be.



Left: Artist Abdoulaye Ndoye and actress-curator CCH Pounder. Right: Artist Julie Mehretu and curator Koyo Kouoh.

“There are too many shows to see, even if you stay for a month,” photographer [François-Xavier Gbré](#) said. “It’s all part of the game.” Navigating biennial events, whose dates sometimes changed, required constant engagement and communication, preferably in French—a dance of logistics and chance. Dakar addresses are often narrative instructions, like “near the house of [Abdoulaye Wade](#)” (the former Senegalese president), rather than precise coordinates. So trying to see as many of the estimated three hundred “OFF” exhibitions, often in hotels, restaurants, shops—even a private home on colonial Gorée Island, the now quaint embarkation point of slaves to the New World—was also an excellent way to get to know the place.

After dropping by Adamantios Kafetzis’s evocative site-specific installation “Chez Marie-Joe,” in the ancestral home of the Lebou chief who stopped the French from evicting the tribal settlers of the city, I headed around the corner to the downtown location of Institut Francais, the favored haven from the city’s dust and chaos during opening week. Fashion photographer [Omar Victor Diop](#), the flavor of the moment in Senegal, had set up a temporary studio there to immortalize biennial artists against vividly patterned fabric backdrops, a continuation of his “Studio of the Vanities” project documenting the young creative lights of Africa. Yet the biggest buzz among the artists, academics, and curators hanging out surrounded Cornell’s “Global Black Consciousness” conference at the Sokhamon Hotel, one of a slew of great initiatives around town (like the workshops of Bisi Silva’s roving *Àsikò* and the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies). Cocurator Nzewi, whose 2013 doctoral dissertation focused on Dak’Art, delivered a historical narrative of the biennial, while others explored the ramifications of its antecedents, particularly Nigeria’s FESTAC, in 1977. “Tsitsi Jaji’s discussion of how *Bingo* magazine inserted femininity into Pan-Africanist discourse was a highlight,” [Simone Leigh](#) told me. “I was also struck by [Salah Hassan](#)’s description of colorism in the Sudan, which has led to, among other things, his passport designating him as not black but ‘green.’”



Left: Photographer [Omar Victor Diop](#). Right: Artist Marcia Kure and Dak'Art's Korta Ousseynou.

Across town, queer identity and personal liberties in Africa were being treated in the group show “Precarious Imaging,” at Raw Materials Company, which has since been closed under threats of further violence and pressure from Islamic religious leaders. In it, portraits by Nigerian photographer [Andrew Esiebo](#), titled *Who We Are*, are an attempt to depict gays in quotidian domestic environments to stress their ultimate societal “normality.” The gallery’s building had been vandalized shortly after the opening, and the artist residents were moved to a safer, undisclosed location. Homosexuality is against the law in Senegal, punishable by imprisonment, whereas in precolonial tribal society it was commonly accepted. Artist [Mame-Diarra Niang](#), whose performance *Ethéré* memorialized a young Senegalese who was the victim of extreme homophobia, left the country with a one-way ticket.

A few nights on, after a soirée at the US Embassy in honor of a monumental commission by [Nick Cave](#), I joined some American curators going to the Musée Boribana, owned by American actress C. C. H. Pounder, to see a group show featuring Cheikh Diouf and Abdoulaye Ndoye. “The Boribana is the closest thing to a contemporary art museum in Senegal,” curator [Joanna Grabski](#) explained. For all the pomp and circumstance, Dakar’s ambition as an African cultural capital is marred by the lack of a publicly funded contemporary art museum, an issue that was brought up at the opening and prize-giving ceremony, officiated by President [Macky Sall](#), at the new Chinese-built Grand Theatre National. The elegant Musée Dynamique was constructed for the purpose in 1966, under president Senghor, but it was given over to the Supreme Court in 1990. Despite increasing international interest in African art, with auctions bringing record prices, new dedicated art fairs, and African artists winning prizes at the Venice Biennale and Art Basel, there is little local market and a dearth of resources directed to nourishing arts development in Africa.

By all accounts, this was the best Dak’Art exhibition yet, and may finally have fulfilled the goal of its spiritual father, poet and former president [Léopold Sédar Senghor](#), a cofounder of the Negritude movement, whose 1966 World Festival of Black Arts brought artists from around the world to Dakar to nurture the vision not just of Pan-Africanism but a common civilization drawn from multiple interdependent cultures. If not exactly an answer to [Jean-Hubert Martin](#)’s “*Magiciens de la terre*,” this year the biennial was diligently representative,

multicultural, current, and pioneering. Ultimately, however, the goals of cultural diversity and tolerance, indeed human rights, have been undermined by an intolerant society that bows to fundamentalist elements. A truly creative, internationally relevant artistic output can never thrive under such conditions.



Left: Culture Minister Abdoul Aziz Mbaye and US ambassador Lewis Lukens. Right: Artist Barkinado Bocum.

On Wednesday, we took the long, hot road trip north to the charming colonial capital Saint-Louis, home of the summer jazz festival. We were greeted by the scent of fish and architecture reminiscent of New Orleans. Our hostess was the doyenne of the art scene, Joëlle le Bussy, whose Galerie Arte displayed an impressive collection of art and design, including paintings by Tchif, [Dominique Zinkpè](#), and [Barkinado Bocoum](#). Farther along the waterfront, Comptoir de Fleuve showed prints and drawings by [Soly Cissé](#), whose splendid new sculptures of figures evoking sci-fi mythology had been unveiled at Dakar city hall that week. The paint was still wet when we arrived at the Musée du CRDS for “*L’Homme et l’oeuvre*,” an exhibition of luminous paintings and jazz-era portraits by Iba Ndiaye, one of the seminal figures in Senegalese art history who had homages, along with Ousmane Sow and Moustapha Dimé. On the north side of town, the French Institute proved once again to be the nexus of action: Senegalese artist [Henri Sagna](#)’s “*Air Libre*” highlighted commonalities, not necessarily flattering, among religions in striking installations of pitch-black tire rubber formed into the visages of religious leaders and symbols—evoking the mechanisms conveying the insidious menace of fundamentalism creeping into our societies.

That night, after drinking rum punch and eating from a huge communal platter of fish *yassa* with Jamaican-American photographer [Lauri Lyons](#) and a group of French street artists in the Institut Français garden, four Afro-French DJs from Lille served up fantastic renditions of African, reggae, and Motown hits bound together with a contagious beat. On an island under the full moon, it was apparent that music is the best carrier of a common language. Despite, or perhaps because of, the organizational difficulties, those who made it to the biennial were ecstatic to be there. One of our dancing companions, Cheikh, informed us that *Nangadef* in Wolof means “How are you?” And the answer invariably is, *Magnifique!* The word for yes is pronounced *wow*, and the haphazard yet miraculous synchronicity of Dak’Art made it the perfect refrain.— [Cathryn Drake](#)



Left: Artist Samson Kambalu. Right: Dakar deputy mayor Cheikh Guèye and singer Mahawa Kouyaté.



Left: Artist [Mame-Diarra Niang](#) and SUNU Street directors Khoudia Toure and Anne-Marie Van. Right: Artists Kamel Yahiaoui and Ali Essafi.



Left: Dealer Joëlle le Bussy and artist [Dominique Zinkpè](#). Right: Critic Yves Michaud and Dak'Art secretary general Babacar Mbaye Diop.



Left: Curator Aleth Lablanchy and musician Wasis Diop. Right: Fondation Blachère's Claude Agnel and artist Ousmane Sow.



Left: Collector Salimata Wade. Right: Artist Siaka Soppo Traore and dealer Aissa Dione.



Left: Curator Karen Milbourne, chief curator Christine Mullen Kreamer, and director Johnnetta Betsch of the Smithsonian Museum of African Art. Right: Artists Tchif and Jean Boniface.



Left: Artist Julien Grossmann. Right: Dak'Art's Hamidou Anne and Lucie Falque-Vert.



Left: Filmmakers John Akomfrah and Lina Gopaul with artist Candice Breitz. Right: Mercedes Vilardell of Tate's Africa acquisitions committee and Tate Modern curator Elvira Dyangani Ose.



Left: Sculptor Maissa Fall. Right: Curators Simon Njami and Jean-Loup Pivin.



Left: Artists Barthélémy Togo and Seydou Camara. Right: Aicha Diallo, Yvette Mutumba, and Julia Grosse of *Contemporary &* magazine.