

## REVIEWS

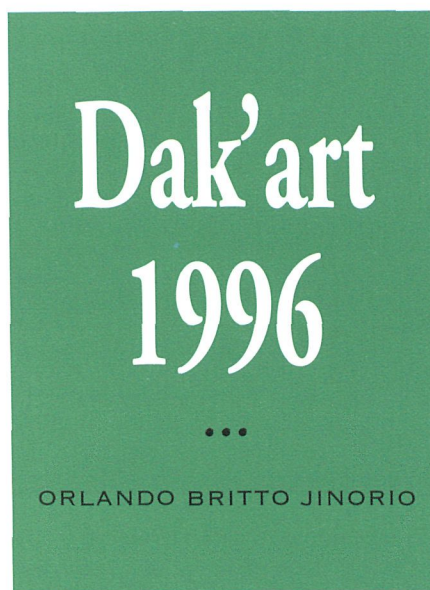
The second International Biennial of Contemporary African Art, DAK'ART 96, took place May 9 - 15 in Senegal.

The opportunity to attend this event interested us enormously: it offered not only a fine chance to see a panoramic view of contemporary African art but also a chance to observe the show's function as a meeting place.

Increasing our interest further was the fact that contemporary African art is central to our work at CAAM, the Atlantic Center for Modern Art, as can be attested to by anyone who scans our schedule or the pages of this magazine.

We would like to begin this series of reflections with the proviso that the critical analysis of the aims, expectations and results of a cultural show of this sort should be approached with full awareness that what is being dealt with is a young, recently-created endeavor, which bears greatly on its conception, definition and organization.

An event of this type demands the maturity and reflective capacities which come from experience and permits corrections and improvements in concept, choice and infrastructure. This is, of course, the case with any recently founded cultural show, regardless of its geographic location.



Biennial of Contemporary African Art,  
DAK'ART 96

It is clear that the enormous enthusiasm and the willingness to work that were evident in the event's organizers will lead to very positive results in the near future.

At the outset, it seems inevitable that we take for granted that we are dealing with two different attitudes or stances (different but reconcilable) on the matter of addressing contemporary African art. These two views can be summed up, allowing for a certain amount of license and generalization, as the Western and the African views of the

creative processes of the African continent.

We should remind ourselves that it seems clear and evident *a priori* that we come from totally different backgrounds: it is here that we think it necessary to avoid at all costs the habitual Manichean trap of exoticism-primitivism, looking on African art as something pure in comparison to Western art and its supposed legacy as the fruit of complex historical and cultural developments. We must get rid of these prejudices, given that Africa, like Europe or Asia, carries its own tremendously heavy cultural baggage, equally rooted in the depths of history. It is impossible and moreover absurd to try to set up comparative schemes based on qualitative or quantitative terms.

These statements may seem utterly obvious, yet we find it opportune to point out these issues: in our opinion, they lie at the source of many contradictions that arise with the analysis of art created outside those domains traditionally recognized as Western.

Africa today is a multiple reality, immense, plural and heterogeneous; its vast complexity is extremely difficult to grasp if we are unable to understand its cultural and historical co-existences, its ancestral and tribal past along with the

Mohamed Kacimi (Morocco).

Ankomah Owusu (Ghana).



assimilations, syntheses, changes, expropriations, violence and distortions brought first by colonization and then by the processes of decolonization.

A dose of humility and less presumptuousness on the part of the Western spectator will help him or her achieve a perspective better suited to the “education” of his or her understanding. Only if we are capable of trying to immerse ourselves in the comprehension of such an immense cultural space can we begin to grasp the parameters, the keys and the codes underlying the work of current African artists.

The research, critical analyses and interpretations of the true experts and connoisseurs of this world (who are, of course, themselves Africans) should inevitably aid in the promotion and projection of the rich creative currents and trends in their continent.

Western culture, all too often petulant and of a colonialist bent, continues trying to impose an exclusive vision and

analysis of the world. It always insists on its own unalterable and superior codes and patterns, and in so doing invalidates any other cultural product originating outside the orbits of its own understanding.

Fortunately, in these last moments of the century, other cultural voices — also Western — are echoing, reflecting and participating in the explication and defense of the rich cultural multiplicity of our world in terms of equality instead of tedious paternalism.

Thus we are witnesses to a globalizing phase in culture, in the sense that we have begun to admit that ours is a multi-cultural reality, a world where the particular and the singular can become the general and the universal, regardless of what happens in or to the historical centers of hegemonic power.

The Dakar Biennial posits itself as the “International Biennial of Contemporary African Art.” This kind of arrangement and goal evinces its desi-

re to show, both to Africa and to the rest of the world, the most current and representative works of contemporary African art. While this is initially entirely positive, it is also bound to its geographic, African logic, and this can create or lead to contradictions about whether one can define a specifically African art, with its own particular, singular grammar and essence. Here we slip once again into the debate regarding what is particular and what is general in the art produced in a given space or context. This type of argument is constantly recurring in different contexts and areas: basically, it reflects the enormous difficulty — given that on occasion one enters into the risky waters of bold conjecture — of trying to establish, from a positivistic perspective, certain very particular arguments and general axioms. Such would be required in order to save and liberate thought (perhaps mediocre) from confusion when everything does not appear perfectly labelled and under

control and it is unable to continue on its way.

Can we speak of a specifically European, Latin American, Asian or African art?

That is the question. What we are able to testify, having listened to and participated in the debates going on around the Biennial, is that African intellectuals and artists want to speak in terms of contemporary art and in terms of creative processes.

Primitivism, exoticism or artisanal craft-based discourses lead nowhere and they are wrong, simplistic and impossible to take seriously.

Now, one of the questions to pose about the Dakar Biennial concerns how we might discern whether what we were able to see in the show's pavilions really is the most representative of the art being made in Africa today, or, better said, of the art being made today by African artists.

In our view, the Dakar Biennial ought to strive to improve some aspects, such as the selection and presentation of the works, that apparently were not priority concerns for the Biennial's organizational apparatus. And with this we would like to say that in our judgement the selection of works itself should increase its representative values: more works by each artist should be included, and perhaps some changes made in the selection criteria.

Our existing acquaintance with a good number of African artists of the highest caliber, affirmed and corroborated

by the continent's own specialists,

leads us to think that what was shown in Dakar is not what we hoped to find, save of course for some interesting and important exceptions.

Perhaps now is an appropriate time to offer some constructive criticism of the Biennial, since the institution itself will be charged with the task of installing the mechanisms required to facilitate an exhaustive investigation into all that is taking place in the creative world of the African continent.

We are of the opinion that a more thorough research and selection process should be established through a good working team staffed by specialist African curators. Such a team ought to engage in direct fieldwork, visiting artists' spaces, chatting and entering into dialogue with the specialists of each country.

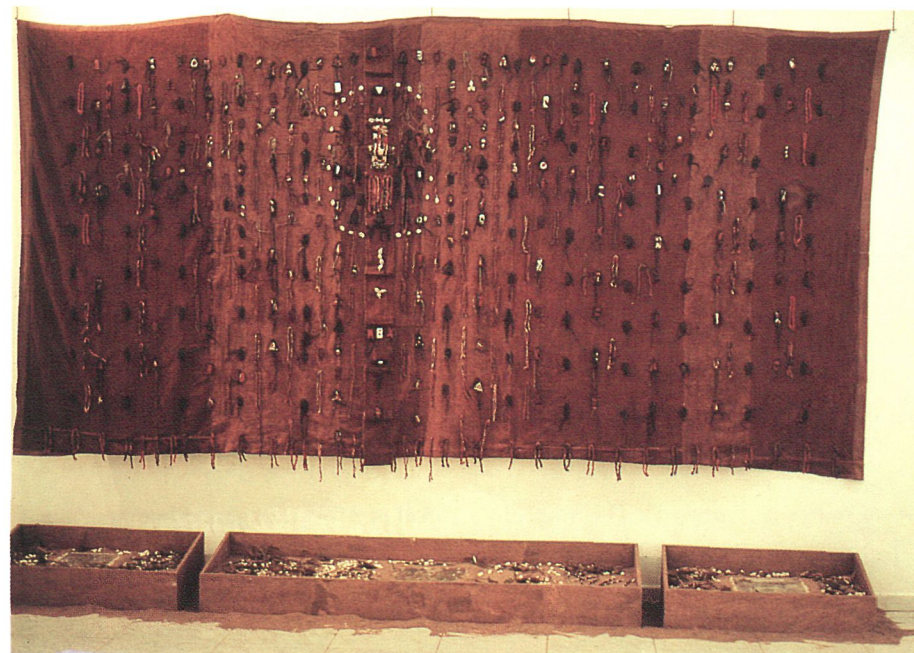
In this way, we are convinced, the results of the selection could be of high

quality and would not possess the seemingly neutral or confused tone that we could sense when looking at the works exhibited.

Along with the above, it would be good, insofar as possibility allows, to make a greater effort with the infrastructural aspects, above all increasing the Biennial's exhibition space. This would allow each artist selected the chance to represent his or her work with a larger number of pieces without interfering with the space itself.

We can nonetheless affirm that we saw works of high quality and interest: in our judgement, these included the works of Abdoulaye Konate from Mali (winner of the Grand Prize of the Biennial), Ankomah Owusu from Ghana, Gichuga Meek from Kenya, and Pascale Marthine Tayou, among others.

In general, both in the International Biennial of Contemporary



Abdoulaye Konaté (Mali).



African Art, which was located in the Ifan Cheikh Anta Diop Contemporary African Art Museum, and in the Exhibition of Contemporary Senegalese Art, shown in the National Gallery, we sensed a somewhat forced creative approach, one whose problematics, concerns and themes seemed determined by formal principles of the West. It seemed as if such formal language were a panacea, the only way possible to communicate or indeed to “succeed”. This was, in our opinion, to the detriment of its own formal liberties of creation.

Perhaps the Western image or myth of the “star” artist, associated with

success and riches, exercised a negative influence on some young creators. Nonetheless, we do think that programs running parallel to the Biennial, such as the exhibition of contemporary Senegalese art, are important; they enrich the context of the Biennial, and allow the observer to feel the enormous presence and role of art in the culture of Senegal today.

Warranting special mention is the Hall of African Design, where we were able to see the works of several high quality artists; their works displayed an interesting mix of formal elements from African traditions and the models and



Ezrom Kogobokanyo Legae. (South Africa)

Moustapha Dimé (Senegal).

typologies of Western styles. Worthy of mention in this regard were (to name just a few) Kossi Assou from Togo, Sawalo Cisse from Senegal, and Vincen Amian Niamen from the Ivory Coast.

We cannot omit mention of the individual exhibitions that accompanied this Biennial, outstanding among which were those of Mohamed Kacimi from Morocco and Moustapha Dime from Senegal.

Lastly, we would like to acknowledge the extraordinary opportunity that visiting this event offered us: being a meeting place for artists and specialists from all over Africa, and from many other countries in the rest of the world, only added to the interest of the Biennial itself.

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Photographs by Hans Herzog