

On Dak'Art 1992

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According to optimists, art biennials seem to have become the last refuge for national cultures in contrast with the ominous influence of Western cultural globalization, that threatens to dissolve cultural difference while it prepacks "exotic" and "tourist" products in the so-called Third World for the consumption of its hungry adolescents. Yet we should perhaps consider the underlying intentions of the organizers and think up to what extend biennials have favoured the decontextualization and integration of those cultures and manifestations of difference in the most ambitious interests of Western commercial agendas.

Last year alone five biennials were celebrated in so-called "peripheral" countries (an imperialist term used to describe art which "exists beyond and at a distance from the centre", or "only weakly connected with what is essential or important; merely incidental.") First of all it was La Habana (Cuba), then Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic), Istanbul (Turkey), and last December Cairo (Egypt), and Dakar (Senegal).

None of them received the Western media coverage granted to commercial fairs such as Basel, Madrid, Chicago or Cologne, taken up almost completely by the celebrities of the international art market and their exotic retinues. And though the Istanbul Biennial offered products far more relevant and provoking than prestigious megagatherings such as Documenta, it was only mentioned in a discriminatory manner to spice with "multicultural flavour" the new globalizing interests of contemporary discourse. The rest of the biennials were sweetly ignored.

Paradoxically, generalized amnesia (presently celebrated in our consumerist culture as a symptom of a cultivated spirit),

ascribes the presence of this recent "biennial fever", so grossly disregarded, to *Magiciens de la Terre*, that famous, controversial and conflictive exhibition held in Paris in 1993 which concerned the interests of "the others."

It is true, of course, that Santo Domingo, Istanbul and Cairo are really beginners (what a contradiction it is to define as beginners some of the oldest and most influential enclaves of world culture), in this business of biennials. La Habana, however, held its fourth celebration (the fifth will be in 1994), and *Dak'Art 92* was the artistic initiative of the Literary Biennial that took place in Dakar in 1990, and wanted to celebrate, if not to reenact, the legendary spirit of that Festival of Black Arts that was organized in 1966 under the leadership of the then president, Léopold Sedar Senghor.

Unfortunately, *Dak'Art 92* was fundamentally a political act, and a "prestige show", as non official Senegalese newspapers agreed, to promote president Abdou Diouf's reelection campaign, whose government (as opposed to that of Senghor, one of the pioneer promoters of *négritude* culture), has been distinguished by an almost absolute indifference towards cultural issues.

During the inaugural act of the Biennial at the Sorano Theatre in the capital, president Diouf praised the *École de Dakar* (that organized the famous meeting of 1966), and what he understood to be its legacy: "the synthesis of modern and traditional creations, the integration of forms and themes that imbue each brushstroke with the universality of art."

The president also dedicated *Dak'Art 92* to the Soweto martyrs and to all African democrats who have given up their



Bienal de Dakar. Senegal. Foto: Elba Capri. 1992.



Manuel Mendive (La Habana, 1944).

lives to the cause of freedom; after the inauguration of the Biennial he opened a commemorative monument to the victims of South African apartheid at the Soweto Square in Dakar, opposite the Musée de l'Ifan, in whose new pavilion the international contents of the Biennial were lodged, and given the title of the *Friendship Room*.

Independent of the intelligence and success, or the noble and sincere aspects of these political tributes and initiatives conducted by the president, many young Senegalese artists boycotted the exhibition. Although it could be established from different and contrasting stances that the choice of the 110 artists from Europe, Asia, America and Africa invited to the *Friendship Room* made up a mosaic of the "fraternity, racial integration and dialogue between cultures" which Abdou Diouf referred to, the show, together with the decentralized exhibitions of the Italian Cultural Institute, the École des Beaux Arts, the Franco-Senegalese Alliance, the UPIS Faycal Cultural Centre, was extremely academic, conservative and lacking in any kind of coherent context.

In general, the exhibitions that made up the Biennial (to the exception of some singular artists), resembled more the end of term selections of student work that Art Schools organize than a collection representative of contemporary African and international art. And not because among the invited



Bienal de Dakar. Senegal. Foto: Elba Capri. 1992.

artists weren't included (which was the case in Istanbul), some of the youngest and most controversial committed artists of international contemporary art. Neither because *Dak'Art 92* was unaware of some of the African celebrities featured in "Western multiculturalism".

On one hand, ranging from the representatives of China to Senegal, of Argentina to the United States, the exhibitions were literally a sample of the technical, formal and expressive abilities of the most formalist, academic painting and sculpture, as if the aesthetic and formalist tenets of the most commercial brand of Western art were still alive and kicking (from extreme bucolic realism to extreme mainstream expressionism and the most decorative abstract).

Then, the sheer absence of any socio-political content, considering the social, economic, corruption, health, post-colonial dependency problems that the African continent suffers, offered a panorama of contemporary African art singularly distant and ignorant of the concerns of many of the young artists and intellectuals (especially Senegalese), that we talked to during the debates and conferences between lifeless exhibitions. The craft painters of the Dakar central market, on the contrary, in their works which represented the socio-political dimensions of the country and were formally and technical rooted in popular culture, were considerably more relevant.



Gorée Island. Editions HOA-QUI. Paris. Photo: M. Renaudeau.

According to many, the cause of the dreadful organization of *Dak'Art 92*, of the clouds who surrounded its financial management and the lack of enthusiasm on behalf of many artists, stemmed from the election of Amadou Lamine Sall as General Secretary of the Biennial. It was obvious that Mr. Lamine Sall, a man of letters, who also presided the First Dakar Biennial in 1990, then devoted to literature, didn't have the necessary ability to direct an art biennial. And not only due to his failure in settling differences with the artists that set out to boycott the exhibition and to the mediocre selection of work and minimal international aid, or because his inexperience contributed to the frustration of the extraordinary chance provided for the promotion of African culture and art in terms of the national or African artistic interests.

As it really was a political venture financed by the government, Mr. Lamine Sall used the Biennial as pretext for organizing other kinds of simultaneous and parallel artistic events that made good, at popular level, the governmental investment: a programme of entertainment and recitals. We have to admit that thanks to it we had the memorable opportunity of listening to Aïcha Kone's and Salif Keita's music live, and Youssou N'Dour too, looking at plays and even fashion parades. Unfortunately, the announced showing of *Hyenas*, the film by Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambety, that has received recognition from Cannes all the way to the New York Film Festival (N. B. Christian Leigh's article in this issue), was cancelled; Mr. Lamine Sall's explanation put the cause down to the lack of "adequate material" at the city's leading national Sorano Theatre. "None of this stimulates debate on our social and artistic problems", commented a young Senegalese film director referring to the programme of events.

In spite of all, there were chances to think about Senegalese social and political reality, and to discuss the transformations besetting contemporary African art. The trip to the island of Gorée, organized by the Biennial, an enclave for the slave trade off the coast, was an unforgettable experience (we preferred to do the journey on our own and not as part of the official biennial crowd), that not only helped us to understand the horrors and character of slavery, but to become aware of the extent and nature of international colonialist policy in the African continent.

Furthermore, the conferences, discussions, debates and conversations that were organized simultaneously, enabled many of us who were making the first direct contact with representatives of contemporary African culture, to hear, without intermediaries or through the filters of the special interests pursued by Western ideological or commercial agendas, the history, the transformation, the problems, the disillusion and hope that many African artists, critics and intellectuals expressed to their international colleagues. Particularly revealing was Ery Camara's intervention (that we publish in the Territories section of this issue) and his opposition to the exhibitions programme of the French critic André Magnin (also interviewed in this issue) and other exhibitions organized in various Western countries.

Dak'Art 92 reoriented our route definitely. Sadly, the pretensions and political ambitions of the Biennial's organizers were not matched by their abilities or capacity. It may well have been better for the Senegalese to see the 330 million francs that the biennial cost put to good use, as commented a Dakar newspaper, "to finance the building of an art school worthy of its name".