The Dak’Art Dilemma –
Curating Vision Beyond Biennial Politics in the Dakarois Artistic Landscape

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Abstract:

The Dak’Art biennial is a state-sponsored contemporary and pan-African artistic event and exhibition held in Dakar, Senegal, that brings together international artists and curators from all continents to engage with and to promote African artists on a global platform. Contemporary African artists have been historically marginalized in the global art scene, as such Dak’Art offers itself as a corrective to this as the only major pan-African art biennial of its kind. Despite international and governmental support for Dak’Art, local and exhibitionary politics often hinder and challenge the vision, execution, and success of large-scale global art fairs. By examining this case study of the 2012 Dak’Art biennial through both a visual analysis of select IN and OFF exhibition sites and an ethnographic analysis of Senegalese artistic production and oral histories, I aimed at illuminating some of the greater issues and frameworks inscribed in the biennial format as applied and experienced within a Senegalese context. By looking directly at the author’s interactions at the 2012 Dak’Art biennial, and through interviews held with local artists, curators, critics, and government officials the author assesses whether this biennial model is an effective platform for artistic agency in the Dakarois artistic landscape. More than ever it is essential to remember that these international art biennials continue to be affixed to the local, and it is important not to neglect or diminish these local histories and contexts or the role that artists play in them, as the scholarship and proliferation of international art biennials continues as a popular medium of exhibiting contemporary artworks today.

(Fig. 1)
INTRODUCTION

“There is evidence that African art’s worst enemy can be Africa itself.”

- Holland Cotter, An Art Critic in Africa

“A model of nation building and the display of cultural patrimony undergird the biennial’s genealogy. The founding stories of individual biennials must be told because despite their emphatically global ambitions many biennials were made possible or even necessary and urgent, because of decisive “local” events and issues.”

- Elena Filipovic

“It would not be overstating things to suggest that what these biennials of the non-aligned, of the Third World, of the South, were trying to do was to give form to ‘cultural’ independence in the aftermath of ‘national’ independence – or, to be more precise, in that grey time between decolonization and absorption back into the tectonic undertow of North Atlantic modernity.”

- Anthony Gardner

The First World Festival of Negro Arts opened its doors on April 4th, 1966, to an international community in the farthest corner of West Africa, Dakar, Senegal. Around two thousand black artists participated in the unprecedented arts and cultural festival hosted by the visionary poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal’s first president after the country’s independence from France in 1960. As American journalist William Greaves first described, these artists;

“…came to get acquainted, to be inspired, to return to their origins, but mainly to help reveal the important contributions the black man has made, and is making, to world civilization.”

Senghor,

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2 Filipovic, Elena. 2010. The Biennial Reader. Bergen, Norway: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 18
4 Greaves, William. First World Festival of Negro Arts. The Crisis (New York, N.Y.) 73, no. 6 (June 01, 1966)
among other intellectuals, believed these artists to be arbiters of a new social and cultural black identity, carrying out a political agenda Négritude. Senghor’s own personal aesthetic was also in line with a political agenda, a calling on all Senegalese artists to reignite a cultural fervor and catalyze a new African identity. The formation of africanité in aesthetics was a part of Senghor’s vision to re-birth an African identity that divorced itself from a colonial mentality and history.

A little over twenty-five years later, Senghor’s sentiment would be echoed in the Senegalese government’s 1994 founding of the first international Pan-African contemporary arts fair. Known today as the Dak’Art biennial, this new art fair was created to serve as a critical site for artistic exchange amongst contemporary African artists, and to foster creative dialogue outside of the homogenized Western global art economy and schools of thought. Within a national context, the Dak’Art biennial continues to be structured by the framework of Senegalese cultural and political identities. These political underpinnings often unhinge and compete with the aesthetic visions and freedoms of participating artists, especially those Senegalese artists, who have in many ways always been producing artworks for, against, or in conjunction with Senegalese politics. Over the last fifty years, the relationship between artists and the Senegalese government has evolved, from a “golden-era” of Senghorian patronage to today’s mistrust of the Ministry of Culture, and suspicion towards governmental handiwork in the arts.

After speaking with Senegalese artists and other significant cultural players in Senegal over the course of seven months, I have come to understand the Dak’Art biennial and the complex themes it embodies through the artists’ own experiences and narratives, all of which are grounded in a specific locality of culture, national history, and geography. Through a case study of the 2012 Dak’Art biennial and its immediate history in Dakar over the last twenty years, I will

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analyze these shifting political and economic dynamics of the art fair and re-contextualize this contemporary “Biennial” phenomena within the Dakarois and adjacent artistic communities. In examining curatorial strategies employed at the 2012 Dak’Art, I hope to better understand and navigate the complexities of the relationships between participating Senegalese artists, their works of art, and the larger players and central figures influencing their agency within this network.

My thesis attempts to unpack and illuminate the implications and effects of a biennial format on the local Dakarois artistic landscape, to determine which factors are both negatively and positively impacting Senegalese artists participating in the government facilitated contemporary African art fair, Dak’Art. In taking an ethnographic approach and interviewing Senegalese artists about their experiences and hardships of exhibiting within Dakar, I heard stories about the tremendous influence and evolution of artistic patronage within Senegal; beginning with government sponsored patronage during a Senghorian administration, and a transition from public to private patronage of today, mainly foreign corporate investors who primarily financially support the biennial. In understanding the historical context of the Negritude movement and africannité aesthetic I can further examine how these forces evolved alongside contemporary art production and how they have manifested themselves in the works exhibited by Senegalese artists at the Dak’Art biennial. Additionally, it is important to look at this case-study and question the biennial format in order to better evaluate and maintain sustainable creative programs not only in Senegal but on the African continent. It is critical to scrutinize these balances of power between organizers, both foreign and Senegalese, and the artists working within these larger institutional frameworks because most of the scholarship, criticisms, and curatorial theories I have read include every voice and opinion except that of the
artist; so by honing in on the Dak’Art biennial, the exhibitions, and by beginning the conversation with Senegalese artists, those most directly impacted by the presence of this international art fair, I begin to get a much more holistic view of the lived reality for artists and an apprehension for how the Dak’Art biennial functions within their community. This aspect of my research is the most important to me because I believe it humanizes the existing scholarship on biennials and grounds the larger institutional frameworks and politics in the lives of these artists and the art works they create.

Step one of my analysis utilizes interviews with local artists and related professionals, art works, and current scholarship on biennial trends and Senegalese history, as well as criticisms by and interactions with partakers of the most recent 2012 Dak’Art biennial. This preliminary analysis explored in chapter one, was to help me first establish both a historical and later a contemporary context for the Dak’Art biennial. In my second course of analysis I was investigating exhibitions and reflecting on Dak’Art as an example of a government-sponsored and corporately financed global art fair by assessing in chapter two whether or not government organizers and the biennial format and program as an artistic platform are successfully giving Senegalese artists agency and freedom to express themselves. As the Dak’Art biennial is implicated as either subordinate or conditionally relegated as a responsibility of the Senegalese government, the final chapter of my thesis will scrutinize the connection between the Senegalese government, affiliated institutions, and the arts, as well as the implications that this relationship has for Senegalese artists working and living in the Dakarois art scene, and other international participants of this global art fair.6

6 Article 1 of the Dak’Art regulation document reads: “The African Contemporary Art Biennale, DAK’ART, placed under the care of the Ministry of Culture, and the Senegalese Republic, is an
CHAPTER 1

Avant Dak’Art – Setting the Stage for Dak’Art

LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR:

Modern and contemporary art production in Senegal has long been entrenched in politics and political philosophies since before Senegal’s independence from France in 1960. The role of the visual arts in Senegalese politics has always played a formative role in shaping the nation’s identity and expanding Senegal’s economy. Most artistic and cultural developments made during Senegal’s past four administrations have been strategic and implemented in-line with alternative agendas coming from outside of the Dakarois art world. In order to better understand Dak’Art’s contemporary manifestation as a state-run international art biennial, I felt it was important to outline influential historical interventions made by past Senegalese presidents with respect to the visual arts in Senegal. Of the literature available on Senegalese modern and contemporary art the name Leopold Sedar Senghor has become a metonymic device for the arts in Senegal. Art historian Elizabeth Harney even so far as to title her book on the study of modern art in post-independence Senegal (1965-1995), In Senghor’s Shadow; a title that evinces Senghor’s legacy as one that was greatly influential and entrenched in the artistic development of his country.

As a result of Senghor’s tremendous influence on the arts, almost all artistic happenings in Senegal fall within or in relation to Senghorian margins of arts patronage and historical legacy. In positing Dak’Art against this president’s authoritative “shadow” it is important to understand how in 20 years Senghor came to define and structure Senegal’s art world. To begin,
Leopold Sedar Senghor was born in Joal, Senegal in 1906. Later to become a prominent poet and intellectual, Senghor lived, worked, and studied French linguistics in France for close to sixteen years of his young adult life. It was in Paris during the 1940s and 1950s that an influential artistic circuit surrounded Senghor; which notably included intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, André Breton, André Gide, Albert Camus, Paul Rivet, Théodore Monod, Michel Leiris, and Georges Balandier. This choice posse “…supported the founding of La Société Africaine de Culture and its journal Présence Africaine, in whose pages Senghor developed his concept of Negritude into a new form of humanism.”

**NÉGRITUDE:**

Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Leopold Senghor were the three cultural pioneers of the concept of *Négritude*, and important intellectual movement that south to assert and to valorize what they believed to be distinctive African characteristics, values and aesthetics. Scholar Michelle M. Wright describes the notion of Negritude as a cultural response to racism that was very prevalent in France at that time; “It (Negritude) turned the racial slur *nègre* into a positively connoted celebration of African culture and character.” As a trained and skilled linguist Senghor used language, specifically the French language, as a mechanism to undermine and combat a dominating Francophone colonial mentality in Senegal. Senghor attempted to empower and uplift the Senegalese and African peoples through propagandizing his new Negritude ideology and its tenets through, politics, literature, and the arts. As cultural theorist Denis Epko writes:

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8 Ibid., also see *Mélanges*; Fiber, “Neo-colonialism and *Présence Africaine*”
“Senghor’s Negritude distinguished itself from other strands of cultural nationalist ideologies by being the only one that took Africa’s fate in the colonial opening to modernity as the centerpiece of political thought and manoeuvres. For others, the business of rethinking the African past or the black race was to rediscover and love it was something good in itself; for Senghor the black race and Africa’s past are beautiful and good and we need to so reaffirm; but the modernity which beckons us is a call of fate and it is even more urgent to answer that call.”

Only six years into independence, Senegal was still running off the utopian fumes and fervor from the hope and optimism being cultivated in new-nationhood. This climate provided Senghor the momentum and support from a bourgeoisie class in Dakar, most of whom were educated in Europe like himself. Harney states that, “He (Senghor) saw language and culture of the colonizer not as a threat but as an advantage that the African should appreciate. Similarly, the artists of the newly independent nation such as Iba N’Diaye and Papa Ibra Tall became strong advocates of Negritude and Senghor’s closest artistic allies. Senghor favored the incorporation and re-appropriation of European modernist vocabulary in not only linguistics but also artistic expressions.

As reaction to the widespread belief amongst the colonies that African cultures were somehow inferior to French or European cultures; therefore unable to thrive on their own, Senghor developed the notion of the universal civilization in which all could take part and thrive. Senghor considered Africa’s contribution to the civilisation de l’universel (universal civilization) to be in the arts, emphasizing an aesthetic that heralded African symbolism and tropes (masks, natural materials, “noble savage”, etc.) as authentic and indispensible to black identity and black expression. This l’esthétique négro-africaine (negro-African aesthetic), will later be known as africanité, an important and influential aesthetic movement throughout Senegalese modernism.

whose formal traits and compositional elements are mediated, either directly or indirectly, by the influence of European modernism, specifically the art historical movements of Cubism and Primitivism. 11 “This plea for reclaiming and revaluing Africa’s visual traditions was accompanied by a modernization agenda positing that Africa’s artists should and could appropriate materials and techniques from abroad. The Senghorian government’s patronage system thus resulted in the canonization of an aesthetic of africanté, one later labeled the École de Dakar (Senegal’s National Art School).”12

Although like many utopic social experiments, Negritude too had its limitations. Senghor had many opponents of his Negritude philosophy, who saw his humanist views on cultural assimilation (European and African) as the easy way out, a compromise that betrays the authenticity and intellectualism of Africans and African histories. Coming into the 1980s, the naïve optimism that threaded through the Dakarois art scene was fraying, and many artists rebelled against the strictures and aesthetic limitations of Negritude through very productive countercultural art production. Today, many of the Senegalese artists I interviewed while conducting my research have mixed feelings surrounding Senghor. His legacy and lasting impact on the arts in Senegal has been characterized as both a noxious canon trapping Senegalese artists forever in a historical oeuvre and as a mythic savior and patron of the arts. This range of opinions surrounding Senghor continues to color and complicate today’s contemporary artistic iterations, including perhaps the most significant of these the Dak’Art biennial.

11 Senghor, Leopold Senghor. L’Esthétique négro-africaine. Diogène (Edition française) no.16 (October 01, 1956)
Despite his critics, history has credited Senghor as spurring the African Renaissance, beginning with his hosting of the First World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar in 1966. Senghor saw this “re-birthing” of black identity and culture as the catalyst and crux of his cultural policies, a driving force behind a twenty-year legacy of unprecedented government arts patronage and a wave of arts and cultural institutionalization in Dakar. Senghor was dedicated to creating a sustainable arts infrastructure that would continue to promote Senegalese arts and culture from within its national borders. During the first decade of his presidency Senghor founded and sponsored le Musée Dynamique de Dakar (1966) Senegal’s first National Art Museum and collection, L’École des Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) Senegal’s first fine art academy which was modeled after the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (National Fine Arts Academy) in Paris, Théâtre Daniel Sorano (National Theatre), and Les Manufactures Sénégalaises des Arts Décoratifs (1964) (Tapestry and Textile Workshop and Factory) located outside of Dakar in Thies, Senegal.

FESMAN:

Dak’Art’s national predecessor, the aforementioned Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (FESMAN), also known as the First World Festival of Black Arts was a pan-African arts and cultural happening strategically installed by Senegal’s first president Leopold Sedar Senghor. FESMAN was posited against the backdrop of Negritude propaganda, a local bourgeoisie audience in Dakar, and a wider international audience of which the former colonizer France was the most central. As art historian Elizabeth Harney remarks, “…the rhetoric of this

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even stressed unity, potential, and richness of the “Negro” world.”\textsuperscript{14} The event brought together key sponsors, La Société Africaine de Culture (Society for African Culture), UNESCO, and the Senegalese government. Senghor needed the festival to be a spectacle of nationalism, to perform the role of a stable and strong cultured country, albeit a young one, that could not only cater to Western sensibilities, but also model their behaviors. After FESMAN in 1966, Senghor’s next move on his political agenda was to establish art institutions within his nation’s border and to extend and parade Senegal’s contemporary art outside of them; with the first traveling national art exhibition \textit{Art sénégalais d’aujourd’hui} (Senegalese Art Today) in 1974.\textsuperscript{15} Debuting first in Paris, the show continued on to twenty different venues, featuring over 140 works by thirty-three Senegalese artists and traveled for ten years after that.\textsuperscript{16} This was the first major example of an internationally shown contemporary African art exhibition, thereby exposing audiences of the mid-1970s and 1980s to African art that were not ancient, pirated artifacts, or organized by Europeans. Ultimately, this type of global exposure awakened audiences to vibrant Contemporary African artworks and artists.

\textbf{ADVENT OF DAK’ART:}

In 1989, the second president of Senegal, Abdou Diouf, took on the role as \textit{Protecteur des Arts et Lettres} (Protector of Arts and Letters), a position which instituted the organization of the biennial as an official form of national promotion of contemporary cultural production. In its first form the Dak’Art biennial was a literary and culture fair, \textit{la Biennale des Arts et Lettres}, organized by Diouf in 1990. It is important to stress the precarious economic climate of Senegal

\textsuperscript{14} Harney, Elizabeth, \textit{In Senghor’s Shadow}. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. Pg 70
\textsuperscript{15} needs citation
in the 1980s and into the early 1990s during which these first biennial initiatives took place. Since the 1970s, the advent of a tourism industry was becoming increasingly important to economic development in Senegal, especially so during the early structural readjustment periods of the 1980s which led to widespread financial crisis and inflation. President Abdou Diouf was forced by trying economic times and by the coming of this second structural readjustment period to drastically diminish the budget that Senghor has instated for the preservation of the arts and culture in Senegal. This was detrimental to artists who had until then heavily relied on government subsidies, art spaces, and imported supplies to produce their work.

With the closing of the Musée Dynamique in 1976, came also the end of an era of Senghorian artistic patronage. However, out of this time came the emergence of the Dak’Art biennial, a strategic endeavor that was used to both draw a diverse international crown, in turn stimulating the economy, while also striving to maintain and preserve the legacy of Senghor’s artistic patronage and devotion to the cultivation of the arts in Senegal. While this first exhibition did not include visual artists, it laid a foundation for Senegalese artists to begin to be promoted and recognized from within their own country borders and to be showcased on an international platform. In 1992, the biennial was Dak’Art and was dedicated to the promotion of contemporary visual art production but did not specifically prioritize contemporary African art per se. This changed in the 1996 Dak’Art biennial when the decision was made to solely promote contemporary African artists in an effort to, “…expand the possibilities of promoting African artists poorly represented in major international art events. It was then, for Africa to develop its

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17 need citation
18 The Musée Dynamique founded by Senghor in 1966, remained an arts museum until 1976. It then became a dance school until 1982 when president Abdou Diouf closed the school only to later resurrect the museum premises as the site of the State Supreme Court in 1990, of which it remains to this day. See article by Abdou Sylla, “La Tumultueuse Histoire du Musée Dynamique de Dakar”, Africultures – N.70
own discourse on aesthetics and participate in the conceptualization of theoretical tools of analysis and appreciation of artistic proposals.”

Today, the Dak’Art biennial is a Pan-African contemporary art biennial that has been hosted in Dakar, Senegal, since its debut in 1992. This month long international art exhibition features artists from around the African continent and from within the African Diaspora displaying a wide variety of artistic mediums and practices. The Dak’Art biennial was created to serve as a critical site for artistic exchange amongst contemporary African artists, to foster creative dialogue outside of the homogenized Western global art economy and schools of thought. The biennial was born from the desire of the Senegalese government, who assumes guardianship of the country’s artists, to regularly organize exhibitions of art that update the different phases of the evolution of contemporary artistic creation. Since independence in 1960, the Senegalese government has taken measures to both acknowledge and promote their culture through the advent of an official Ministry of Culture; thus the Dak’Art biennial’s vision continued in-line with Senghor’s, in being the first Pan-African contemporary art fair of its kind.

In many ways the Dak’Art biennial as a site of critical creative exchange parallels the logic of Négritude philosophy which was to ignite a critical discourse that was inclusive of Africans and Diasporic thought, out of which a new nexus of black identity and authenticity in art could begin to be forged. During the 1992 inaugural address at the Biennale Internationale des Arts de Dakar, Diouf channeled his predecessor Senghor in paying homage to his tremendous legacy in the arts:

“We want to tell him that the École de Dakar, this Dakar which gave birth to the famous Black encounter of 1966, carries his stamp at the end of the day. It is the synthesis of traditional and modern creativities, this mixing of forms and themes which makes each brushstroke a declaration of the universality of art…contemporary art has the same spiritual, moral, and aesthetic value as our traditional art. It deserves the same respect, the same admiration and also deserves to reach the same heights.”

Seen as a point of access for African artists to infiltrate the international art market, the Dak’Art biennial was also the first major leap towards shaping the idea of a “professional” African artist. In almost all of the official Dak’Art literature produced, artists are always referred to as professionals or portrayed in a professional light. This characterization of African artists stands in contrast to the oftentimes pejorative handling and misrepresentation by Western art critics and scholars, who in describing African art have a tendency to reduce artworks to the naïveté of primitivizing tropes or limiting their view to seeing contemporary art production as only an extension of traditional cultural practices. Dak’Art as a platform for contemporary African artists counters these dominating pedagogies, and enables living artists to be seen alongside and in market competition with their fellow international peers.

**CONTENTIONS WITH DAK’ART**

Rasheed Araeen used the 5th Dak’Art biennial in 2002 as a case study through which to analyze and critique issues facing academia and the state of contemporary African art. For Araeen Dak’Art is more than just a continuation of the Western global art trend of large contemporary art biennials and art fairs, but rather has a historical obligation and responsibility

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to the African context and colonial history. Africans must assert their rightful place within the white/Eurocentric legacy of modern art history in order to own and provide a historical context to situate the biennial within. Africa’s “achievement” as Araeen puts it, is having had successfully “crossed the barrier” of white Western exclusivity of modern art history. Now sites like the Dak’Art biennial need to take it upon themselves to leverage this historical dialogue to help liberate Africans from a colonial historical framework and honor the next generation of artistic avant-gardists from within an African context. This led me question just how Dak’Art is developing frameworks of contemporary cultural discourse on the African continent itself?

The 2002 Dak’Art biennial and ten year anniversary of the art biennial was lacking in equitable Pan-African representation with only thirteen of 40+ African countries being represented, and of those countries there was a dominating Francophone presence. Thus, Africa fails to embrace their own artists on a pan-continental scale and the notion of an inter-African creative alliance that would serve to unite their common struggles against the dominant center of modern discourse. While lamenting the absence of ‘inter-African links’ free from ‘colonial relationships’, David Elliot, President of the official Selection Committee and Jury of Dak’Art 2000, says that “…the masters had departed yet their structures remained.” This raised for me many interesting questions about the perpetuation and dynamics of continuing colonial relationships when thinking through my experiences of the 2012 Dak’Art biennial. What kind of independence are Africans (artists) really looking for? Would financial independence also mean neo-colonial independence? Could the financial struggles of today’s Senegalese artists in this new era of patronage, one increasingly dependent on ‘Northern’ (Western) exhibition spaces, infrastructures, promoters, collectors, and sponsors; be seen as a kind of neo-Avant-Gardism?

22 David Elliot 2000, 14 ** Find citation
How would the recognition of this history, a struggle of colonialism (both pre- and post-colonial), by international investors and institutions change the neo-colonial landscape of artistic patronage on the African continent or in Senegal today? How would this acknowledgement shape the politics of the Dak’Art biennial?

Araeen goes one step further to assert that beyond a physical independence from colonial institutions is the need for a new philosophical elimination of the idea of the ‘Other’, this term maintains the neo-colonial status quo and reinforces power structures of the West. Now it is Africa who needs to lay the groundwork for tackling equality on a philosophical level and eradicating ‘Otherness’. Araeen offers potential solutions to this, encouraging African intellectual and artists to take the reins and begin a healthy regime of self-criticism in order to help the biennial realize its true objectives.
CHAPTER 2

Y’en a Marre! “Enough is Enough!” – Artists and Society Fight Back

“Today manifestations of extreme artistry can be fostered, produced, and presented by official institutions; indeed, art is dependent upon such support if it is to be produced at all and to find its way to an audience. Yet, at the same time, art denounced everything institutional and official.”

- Theodor W. Adorno, Culture and Administration

“What the art actually is may be of little matter to those who fund it; what counts is the degree to which it commands the attention of the art world (curators, critics, dealers and collectors), leads to wider media attention, and appropriately signals cultural and, by implication, economic progress.”

- Bruce W. Ferguson, “Mapping International Exhibitions”

2012 ELECTIONS AND SENEGALESE SOCIAL MOBILTY:

A month before the 2012 Dak’Art biennial (May 11 – June 11, 2012) was to take place in Dakar the state of the country was in political upheaval. Senegal, as well as rest of the international community was holding their breath while they waited to see how the very contentious Presidential election race was going to play out. Historically, Senegal has always been praised for its strong and stable electoral democracy since it regained independence from the French in 1960, in the being only West African country never to have experienced a coup d’état.23 Senegalese citizens have always prided themselves on their country’s political stability and democratic system, therefore when former President Abdoulaye Wade had made it possible for himself to run for a third unconstitutional term there was public outcry and revolt. In the time

leading up to the election a youth culture movement called *Y’en a Marre* (Enough is enough!) formed in May 2011 as a response to political protests from popular Senegalese rappers and journalists.\(^{24}\)

The *Y’en a Marre*, otherwise known as the “Citizens’ Revolt” hoped to halt President Wade’s unconstitutional changes that would ultimately enable him to run for a third against his contender Macky Sall. While not exactly comparable, these vehement protests from the public evoked the impassioned spirit of the Arab Spring happening concurrently in nearby countries in Northern Africa. While Wade was far from being cast in a dictatorial light his national popularity dwindled during the last few years of his 12 year ruling and quickly diminished in the wake of his iron-fisted retaliation against public demonstrations. All of these political contentions fueled the civic unrest that was unfolding in the months preceding the biennial.\(^{25}\)

Ultimately on the Election Day, February 26\(^{th}\), 2012, Wade did not carry the vote and lost to current President Macky Sall. Many, including Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, acknowledged Wade’s graceful exit, and praised Senegal’s democracy that still remained intact.\(^{26}\) More than anything this peaceful transition of power had reenergized a patriotic spirit amongst citizens, an insurrectionist climate that would be reverberated in the exhibition halls of 2012 Dak’Art biennial. Germane to recent political events, the theme for the 10\(^{th}\) edition of Dak’Art was of Contemporary Creation and Social Dynamics: “…a quest for balances between crisis and stability.”\(^{27}\) As the Dak’Art biennial organizers scrambled to keep on schedule, the event’s fate ultimately was contingent upon the smooth transition of power from Wade to Sall, as foreign investors were ready to pull out if the election results had elicited political upheaval. This

\(^{25}\) “Two terms and maybe you’re out; Senegal’s election.” *The Economist* 4 Feb. 2012: 51(US)
\(^{26}\) Note: Secretary of State Clinton’s visit to Senegal
\(^{27}\) Cite Dak’Art website
conundrum of cultural funding and foreign investors often holds artists and events like Dak’Art hostage to the political mood swings of developing countries. In this chapter I will outline some of the ways in which Dak’Art and both foreign and domestic politics cannot be mutually exclusive and are interdependent on one another.

**POLITICAL REGALIA AND THE DAK’ART RED CARPET:**

In 2004, Olu Oguibe published an article “The Failure of Dak’Art”, in an effort to expose exhibitionary malfunctions by looking past the political agendas of those involved in the biennial. Without tiptoeing around any niceties Oguibe bluntly declared that:

> “The greatest problem with the Biennale is one of a crisis of purpose: its organisers no longer have any idea why it is there! They know that every other year a committee has to be assembled, artists selected, European art aficionados invited and lavishly hosted, and some art brought in at the last minute and installed, and that all the right government officials have to be alerted to prepare and give their elaborate speeches with dance troupes in special costumes forming a background, but they no longer remember why.”

I remember reading Oguibe’s article before I had a chance to experience the biennial myself. I was unable to attend the first week of opening ceremonies and parties for the 2012 Dak’Art biennial, instead arriving for the latter three weeks of the festival. While I at first thought this would disadvantage my research it actually became a defining factor in what intrigued me most about the event. I was amazed to see how empty and abandoned many of the Dak’Art exhibits had become after the opening week of official regalia. This fascinated me. Exhibition after exhibition I visited was desolate, neither tourists such as myself nor other local Senegalese visitors were present. I wondered how much of an impact the event was having (or not having) on the local community, as the hot pink exhibition posters began to blend in with the rest of the

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surrounding vibrant urban colors of Dakar. How much of the biennial was for them (the local Senegalese community) and how much of it was about us (Oguibe’s European art aficionados and other Westerners)?

Oguibe was not alone in his criticisms of Dak’Art, often illuminating the incongruities between the ritual decorum of Dak’Art’s biennial formalities and the immediate cultural and artistic impact on the Dakarois art circuit and larger contemporary African art world. In an analogous tenor to Oguibe, Rasheed Araeen describes the 2002 Dak’Art biennial opening ceremonies:

“After being received in such a festive atmosphere, which produced an optimistic mood in me, I proceeded to the hall where the actual opening ceremony was to take place. The hall was in fact packed with thousands of people, with a dozed or so TV cameras installed there to record the ceremony. And although I myself was an hour late, the podium was still empty. It took at least another hour before the whole entourage of government officials and Biennale organisers began to arrive. At least another hour was lost in listening to their unnecessarily long and vacuous speeches before the doors of the exhibition were officially opened. Compared with the festivities outside in the grounds of CICES and the great enthusiasm of the public around, who patiently and attentively listened to all the speeches of the high officials, the actual event turned out to be an anti-climax.”

Like most biennials the opening week of Dak’Art becomes a stage for award ceremonies, panel discussions, and press coverage, although I find that artistic recognition often stands in the shadow of sponsor recognition or political recognition. When I arrived, the red carpets had been rolled up, the European art aficionados had gone home, and I was left to navigate what can only be best described as the white wall ruins of the 2012 Dak’Art biennial. I would have to agree with Araeen in his choosing of the word “anti-climax” to describe the divergence between the “official” and “unofficial” natures of Dak’Art. I came to Dakar with this preconceived notion of

a wholly different active and dynamic international and African art exhibition. I had envisioned an environment that was activated by the artists, their works, the exhibition spaces, and the surrounding communities. I had discovered the opposite to be true.

**ALL EXHIBITS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL:**

The Dak’Art biennial is divided into two categories of exhibitions labeled as “IN”, the more official, centrally located and internationally juried sites, and “OFF”, the less official, more widely disseminated art exhibitions that are open to all African and Diasporic artists relying heavily upon independent sponsorship. Of the Senegalese artists who participated in the year’s tenth anniversary of the Dak’Art biennial IN site exhibitions, all were graduates of the École des Beaux-Arts. While it is not explicitly outlined in the eligibility requirements of the Dak’Art regulation, it is clear that alumni of the École des Beaux-Arts receive preferential consideration with the exhibition jury that work under the Ministry of Culture to choose participants for the IN exhibitions sites. Including both the IN and OFF exhibitions there were over 200 sites to visit in Dakar, N’gor, Goree Island, and Ile Saint-Louis. With Dak’Art map in hand I found it incredibly difficult to navigate the city, it was a bit of a scavenger hunt to locate the exhibitions, in particular the OFF exhibitions, as locations and quality of the exhibition sites were highly variable, ranging from the garages of homes to large corporate offices and public monuments. The variations amongst the exhibitions, between the IN and OFF sites, between the range of locations, and disparity of temperament between the artworks shown were emblematic of the larger symptoms effecting the overall health and success of Dak’Art. In this next section I will outline two separate exhibitions, one IN and one OFF, which called attention to some of the infrastructural neglect and political influences plaguing the Dak’Art biennial as well as
demonstrating some of the ways artists are reacting against the biennial and bureaucratic framework in place.

**PAPA IBRA TALL “IN” EXHIBIT:**

One of the first I visited in Dakar was the Papa Ibra Tall tribute exhibition that was held at the Place du Souvenir (Place of Remembrance) next door to a three story mega-shopping complex, Sea Plaza. Outside the large multi-function white and marbled showroom was a broken folding chair, a vacant security post, and a dilapidated Dak’Art exhibition poster. With the front door left ajar, and the noise of the bustling traffic from the nearby highway Route de la Corniche Ouest, I felt like I was breaking and entering an abandoned house. Once inside the space, I was amazed at the contrast between the silent white walls and the remarkably vibrant and colorful tapestries and drawings, highlights from Tall’s renowned artistic career. The darkened space was only illuminated by the reflected light that came in from large windows lining the second story of the building, leaving patches of dark corners and shadows streaming across the white room.

Papa Ibra Tall was a very important Senegalese artistic figure and arts administrator who helped in founding and shaping the ideological tenants of many of Senegal’s first arts institutions. Serving as co-director of the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts in heading the Atelier de Recherches Plastiques Negres (Workshop for Research in Black Visual Arts) from 1959 to 1967, later becoming the first director of the National Gallery and finally to become the Chief Executive Officer of the Manufacture Senegalaise des Arts Decoratifs (Senegalese Manufactures of Decorative Arts) in 1989. Tall’s artwork falls within the aesthetic oeuvre of a national artistic canon, a visual distillation of artistic nationalism propagated by Tall’s contemporary, the

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former poet and first President to Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor. Tapestries as a medium were rebranded by Senghor’s vision of Negritudian aesthetics, which can be described as the implementation of an inherently nationalistic style of art making, “…modernist movements of the mid-twentieth century, with flat colour shapes forming scenes such as landscapes, historical battles and abstracted images of people and spirits.”  

The imagery in Tall’s work has distilled ethnically based tapestry traditions into a condensed visual national aesthetic identity, one that was exported and operated as resolutely modernist and distinctively Senegalese, while being more broadly categorized as markedly African art. Tall’s tapestries were often given as state gifts for visiting dignitaries and were exported as a national product, thus his artistic and intellectual participation alongside Senghor helped to iconize Tall within Senegal’s political and artistic spheres.

In contrast to my interaction with the desolate and quiet space, the opening ceremony for the Tall exhibition was celebrated loudly and vibrantly, bringing out large troves of important government officials, Dak’Art administrators, and guests of honor; notably this included former Minister of Culture the world-renowned Senegalese musician Youssou N’Dour and the majority of Tall’s family, a name highly respected within Senegalese culture. Guests were impeccably dressed in billowing colorful boubous, and walked along the red carpet while members of the press photographed the scene. After a few speeches, two griots or West African storytellers on horseback approached the Tall family and through song praised Tall’s artistic accomplishments. The glamour and lively nature of the opening ceremony was a biennial spectacle, albeit one that was celebrated in a verifiably Senegalese fashion. The Tall tribute exhibition was not singular in

31 Ibid.
this nature in that almost all of the exhibitions I visited after the week of opening ceremonies were empty say for myself, and the artworks.

The “neutrality” of the white walled gallery space carried with it a tension when playing host to Tall’s visual cacophony. The tension I speak to though was not as much aesthetic as it was ideological and political. Scholar Elena Filipovic’s seminal text on the White Cube, and her more recent work The Global White Cube, outlines in short how the white gallery walls are anything but neutral. The tabula rasa gallery format is entrenched in politics, a Western idealism, of both for whom and how artwork should be looked at. Tall’s aesthetic tenants, a distillation of Negritudian idealism and a graphic formalism, brands these compositions as certifiably “Senegalese” art in a way that Senghor had envisioned. I found the exhibitions themselves to be full of political metaphors for greater issues embedded in the biennial format, Senegalese history, and contemporary art production.

When thinking about these particular “white cube” museal politics juxtaposed next to Tall’s work I found there to be a paradoxical relationship forming. Tall’s tapestries, part of a bygone artistic era, canonized by Senghor’s lasting artistic and political shadow, were echoing a social climate and aesthetic politics that no longer reverberated in the contemporary political landscape of Dakar in 2012. After speaking to a younger generation of artists such as Soly Cissé, Fally Sene Sow, Manel Ndoye, and Kiné Aw, exhibitions heralding the ‘old’ greats give the impression of being burdensome to their agency as contemporary artists who are being constantly reminded of a reinforced canon they can no longer relate to. Questions of authenticity and identity are hotly contested in contemporary African art scholarship, and here at Dak’Art these questions are negotiated by curatorial maneuvering and opportunism.
The sterility and stillness of the Tall tribute exhibition hall created an uncomfortable vacuum, so far removed from the bustling city life outside, almost fraudulent, this organization of Tall’s work radiated ethnographic sensibilities, holding it captive to Westernized aesthetic sensibilities and expectations. In a conversation on the Tall exhibition art historian Joanna Grabski remarked that even the tapestries themselves seemed “too clean and new.” These tapestries were as Grabski observed in mint condition, too mint to have survived the humidity and heat in such pristine condition after sixty or so years in a West African climate. Thus, these very obvious facsimiles, which we can reasonably infer were reproduced by the government-operated tapestry factory in Thies, are perfect examples of what can go wrong with these IN exhibitions. The Tall tribute was a nationalistic spectacle of biennial proportions, the exhibition itself and the artworks shown were both entrenched in restrictive institutional frameworks, frameworks held together by governmental politics and perpetuated by biennial models such as Dak’Art. What is most frustrating here is that none of the artists involved, including Tall himself, are benefitting from this art world play acting; the integrity, agency, and preservation of any kind of historical accuracy are at stake with these curatorial manipulations, oft carried out by government and foreign investors’ agendas.

This superficial execution of Dak’Art exhibition politics has not come without internal backlash, and over the years it has built up a silent wall of criticism and resentment; a subject many artists were anxious to talk with me about but did so most fervently, albeit off-the-record, for fear of the proverbial “biting the hand that feeds them.” Opportunities for artists in Senegal to be exhibited are scarce and often come with conditionalities that are unrealistic and extortionate. It became quickly apparent to me that there is much at stake for these younger artists who have little opportunity to criticize the Dak’Art modus operandi or the government’s role within that
system. Therefore, when it comes to being more active within their own artistic network, artists often choose to get “political” outside of the ‘white-cube’ cage. For many artists this meant exhibiting in an OFF site, which granted them the freedom to exhibit where they wanted and more or less on their own terms. As international art curator Bruce Ferguson notes, “Artists both use, misuse, and abuse situations of exhibiting to many ends, and the art of today is often categorized by its pronounced alienation from the very patronage that offers it a home.”

Chronicle of Revolt “OFF” Exhibit:

Many internationally funded arts and cultural centers in Dakar help to service these artists with more opportunities to exhibit and provide an artistic safe haven for more inflammatory forms of artistic expression. One of the most effective of these is the Raw Material Company in Dakar, a contemporary arts and cultural center primarily funded by the Danish Arts Council and directed by Cameroonian-born curator Koyo Kouoh. At the 2012 Dak’Art biennial, Raw Material Company curated an OFF exhibition at the Bisquiterie de Medina, a run-down abandoned cookie factory that left a skeleton of industrial-sized warehouses to the whims of artists and their sponsors. In contrast to the centrally located and historical prestige of the Place du Souvenir where the Tall tribute IN exhibition was held, this OFF exhibition location was lived in, dirty, abandoned but not forgotten, as part of the visual landscape of the Medina neighborhood. Even the journey by taxi was much more immersive, you were confronted with life in the neighborhood, each quartier with its own distinct set of sub-cultures, mixings of class and commerce, religious sects and ethnic groups. As Mauro Petroni, an Italian ceramicist and lead

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33 **note Koyo Kouoh’s comment at the ICP lecture on an upcoming exhibit on homosexuality? (maybe this should be explored in chapter 3)
agent of the French company Société Effage Sénégal, (Dak’Art’s largest foreign investor), says; “The spirit of the “OFF” is this: freedom of artistic expression and democracy of visibility for all.” It has been made possible by the interest of a single sponsor, the Société Effage Sénégal, which has made our work independent of any research budget. The success of OFF must not be complacent, but should be a reflection on how to go beyond what has been done, by asking itself about the changes and renewals that should follow in a new context after ten years.”34 The introduction of OFF exhibitions came in 2000 for the 4th edition of Dak’Art with 50 satellite exhibitions introduced in less centrally located neighborhoods of Dakar. Since then, there were over 200 OFF exhibitions sites in the 2012 Dak’Art biennial taking place in three different cities in Senegal including, Dakar, Ile Saint-Louis, and Goree Island. Polarized from their IN counterparts by both name and prestige of locations, OFF sites are alternative exhibition spaces that demand to be seen in a context that is very much alive and activated by its citizens.

In this spirit the Raw Material Company organized a photography installation entitled the “Chronicle of Revolt”, where the Y’en a Marre! youth movement was brought in from the streets and photo journalism became a visual tour de force and political rally both by and for the people. Walls of chaotic images documenting the events surrounding the 2012 contentious Presidential election were installed in a horizontal chronology under thematic headings chalked on the warehouse walls. Senegal’s rich tradition in aggressive journalism made for a particularly vocal and visual narrative. The sheer mass of images, thousands of 4 x 6 color photographs collaged against inflammatory newspaper clippings, each image a visceral vignette unraveling the raucous and grubby Presidential election campaign between current President Macky Sall and former President Abdoulaye Wade.

34 Mauro Petroni qtd. in the Dak’Art Regulation document.
Unlike Negritudian politics, the “Chronicle of Revolt” exhibition engaged a citizen’s aesthetic, a politically charged visual vernacular that was intelligible en masse and was egalitarian in a way that the bourgeois africannitë aesthetic never was. The installation itself was in a working-class neighborhood, installed in a now defunct factory whose former industrial life provided jobs and financial security to the surrounding communities, and whose very existence was woven into the fabric of quotidian life. Architecture of this kind communicates with a participating public and is inviting in such a way that a marbled institution or white cube space could never. The dirt floor and metal walls were intrinsic to the sanctity of the low-brow space; natural light streamed in from the large side door and through the cracks in the monumental tin armature of the structure, ready to step in when the fickle electrical currents frequently gave out. This OFF exhibition was able to give voice to millions of Senegalese peoples, whose very existence and participation in such a bourgeoisie, institutionalized, and government orchestrated art biennial helped to simultaneously subvert and divert the power away from exclusionary and elitist agendas, both foreign and domestic.

Despite the democratic and revolutionary nature of “Chronicle of Revolt,” it does not go unnoticed that such an exhibition was funded by European countries, in this case mostly Germany (Kulturstiftung des Bundes), Denmark (Statens Kunstrad of the Danish Arts Council), and France (Société Effage Sénégal).\textsuperscript{35} The implications of this financial reality complicate and color the exhibitionary politics of not only Dak’Art but also the entire Dakarois art scene. These internationally funded arts organizations that on one level appear to leverage and facilitate some of the more incendiary contemporary art production in Senegal today also, quite paradoxically,

continue to dictate and maintain an eerily neo-colonial dominant structure within the country, be it incarnate in the Dak’Art biennial format itself or in the less obvious corporate logos that seem glued to every major art project. In chapter three I will continue to unpack some of these greater issues as they manifest either symbolically, structurally, or are aesthetically exposed in the exhibitions themselves.
CHAPTER 3

Dismantling Dak’Art – Artists, Actors, and the Facilitation of Creative Agency in Dakar

“The frame around the artwork – geopolitical, institutional, discursive, and spatial – is never neutral, but instead administers readings and interpretations…the container, too, should not be assumed to be negligible, innocent or disinterested.”

- Elena Filipovic, Bienniolog

“The intersection of histories and zones of practice wherein those working under government patronage shared physical space and a cultural climate with those seeking to subvert the system’s premises.”

- Elizabeth Harney

After three weeks of visiting Dak’Art exhibitions, I began to see certain patterns emerging; problems of education and resources, financing and economic sustainability, and lastly, nuanced politics and power struggles behind the mechanics of exhibiting in Dakar. My conversations with artists, collectors, museum directors, financiers, and Dak’Art organizers provided me insight into some of these issues that permeated far beyond the exhibition walls of the Dak’Art biennial. These broader categories of Education, Finance, and Politics, are quasi-cornerstones of the Dak’Art biennial that need to be examined will help to determine the relative success and cultural relevancy of future biennials.

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36 Bienniolog pg 17
Pg 13
**Education: Serigne Ndiaye and the École des Beaux-Arts de Dakar**

* Sous-verre (reverse glass painting) artist Serigne Ndiaye has participated in Dak’Art since its inception in 1996. Exhibiting in both IN and OFF exhibitions over the years, Ndiaye’s aesthetic has been entrenched in Senegalese artistic identity politics since the advent of his formal artistic career during his time as an art student in the 1970s at the fine arts academy in Dakar, the École des Beaux-Arts. Sitting in the crowded space of Ndiaye’s dimly lit salon that also doubled as his studio space, I was surrounded by walls and stacks of Senegalese art, a TALL tapestry hung next to yellowing photographic portraits of family members, Coke bottles, paint brushes, and piles of painted glasses covered almost every surface area. An exhaustive history of Senegalese art was curated on these walls; the organized chaos followed some sort of museum logic that orbited Ndiaye’s artistic sensibilities. Now in his seventies, Serigne Ndiaye’s art production has spanned two generations. Ndiaye’s professors were Senghor’s contemporaries and in his formative years as an art student he was, like many artists of this time, ideologically indoctrinated into the corrosive identity politics of Negritude, while also participating in an aesthetic movement that revolted against it.

As the utopian fervor of Senghorian Negritude was beginning to fissure and dissipate, so too were the Senghorian subsidies that kept art institutions such as the École des Beaux-Arts in operation. Ndiaye recalled coming to class one day and there being no art supplies to be had. Empty shelves and government-regulated embargos on imported oil paints didn’t stifle the creative acuity of these artists, if anything this absence piloted their raison d’être and maneuvered an aesthetic mutiny of récupération, where artists took to the streets and their lived-in environments for supplies. This anti-establishment aesthetic revolution invigorated a creative
and political climate, not unlike the kind of visual tenor we saw exercised in the *Chronicle of Revolt* Dak’Art OFF exhibition in the previous chapter.

While the issues of art education in Senegal are too large and complex to present here, I do find it critical to briefly touch on some of these problems as they relate to the artists who have participated and exhibited within the Dak’Art biennial. The national arts academy in Dakar plays an integral role in the shaping the “professional” artist persona in Dakar and beyond. It is important to consider how an artist’s formal arts education and training expands their network beyond just a single nationalist identity and shapes determiners in jury selections and exhibitionary politics. Senghor for example received his higher education at the University of Paris and it was in France where he first began to develop the ideological tenets of Negritude. Then once back in Senegal, Senghor founded the first National Arts Academy, the École des Beaux-Arts à Dakar, which today is one of the remaining fixtures from Senghorian era institutionalization of the Negritude philosophy and movement.

Modeled after the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, the fine arts academy in Dakar had two distinctive aesthetic tracks for Senegalese artists to follow, one being traditional African art practices and music and the other track which looked to traditional mediums of painting and sculpture and the formal influences of European modernism. During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, the rigor of the different aesthetic disciplines carried out two very separate agendas, one western and one traditional. In conjunction with the École des Beaux-Arts, Senghorian dogma fertilized a creative climate that was very insular and did not allow for aesthetic freedom or identities outside of the prescriptions of Negritude.

When looking for artists to interview I sought out a generational variety, this way I could more accurately analyze the changing impacts and concerns for each generation of artists.
Having both artists who had and had not attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Dakar was also very important, because very strong opinions are formed around the kind of authenticity of education received at the institution that was aforementioned a Senghorian era achievement. Therefore, in having artists both formally trained at a government art institution and those who work outside of that framework can provide important insight to this research. Of the Senegalese artists I had spoken to; Kiné Aw, Amadou Dieng, Serigne Ndiaye, Soly Cissé, Fally Sene Sow, Bira Kassé, Manel Ndoye, Barkinado Bocoum, and Henri Sagna, most are fairly high-profile artists in the Dakarois art world and exhibit their work internationally. All of the artists I interviewed were graduates of École des Beaux-Arts de Dakar with the exception of one artist Fally Sene Sow, whose success defied the conventional channels of artistic fame within Senegal.\(^38\)

Of the Senegalese artists who were juried into the *Exposition Internationale IN* and national tribute *Hommage IN* exhibitions during the 2012 Dak’Art biennial, including Cheikhou Bâ, Mamady Seydy, Cheikh Ndiaye, Ibrahima Niang, Henri Sagna, as well as Joe Ouakam (Lebu name Issa Samb) and Papa Ibra Tall, all were graduates of École des Beaux-Arts de Dakar.\(^39\) Therefore the issue of arts education in Dakar is one that is closely tied to issues of institutionalization, legitimizing and authenticating the “professional” artists, networking and jury politics. There are clearly some partialities being demonstrated by the Dak’Art jury towards

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\(^{38}\) Explain more about why Fally Sene Sow was an exception.

\(^{39}\) Excluded from this list was Senegalese artist Mamadou Cissé who although not a graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts de Dakar has lived and worked in France since he was 18 years old. Often, dual nationality and issues of origin are raised during jury requirements such at Dak’Art and is certainly not an issue to be overlooked with respect to biennial exhibitionary politics at large. The names of these artists were included in the 2012 Dak’Art exhibition catalog. *Dak’art 2012*: 10ème biennale de l’art Africain contemporain. Dakar, Senegal: Dak’Art Secrétariat général de la biennale des arts, 2012
artists who have been branded by the national arts academy of Dakar, and the strictures and influences of such an institutionalized and historicized arts education is something that generations of Senegalese artists from the 1960s to today are contending with; particularly when the opportunity to exhibit within Senegal is so very limited and the importance of an international platform such as the Dak’Art biennial is truly invaluable and unique.

Serigne Ndiaye is an artist who throughout his entire artistic career has had to negotiate these institutional and governmental politics long before there was even a biennial framework in place. Dak’Art is entrenched in these same disputes and continues to contend with these bureaucratic blockages. The freedom that is seemingly attached to a biennial format, which includes mobility, contemporaneity, and transmutability of exhibitions and the works included in it, is undermined by these very politics. Arguably, the proliferation of biennials around the globe and interminable presence of the biennial since 1992 in the Dakarois art scene has inherently institutionalized biennial frameworks and behaviors, perpetuating and perhaps more dangerously ratifying the already corrupted and problematic bureaucracies and systems in place, systems that work to both fund and furnish the Dak’Art biennial.

Despite its institutional-critical pretensions, the biennial itself might have become one more bonafide institution of the art world just like any other. What mechanisms of “critique” need to be in place to keep the biennial model (Dak’Art) moving ‘forward’, or in others words relevant? Elena Filipovic argues that despite their critical ambitions, many biennials rely on an unspoken fidelity to some of the most doggedly traditional and Western display constructs- most notably the museal “white cube”. Again, I ask how does the perpetuation of this “Western” model work against (discriminate?) non-Western artists (Senegalese artists participating within the Dak’Art biennial)? The question of the biennial format matters. If not Dak’Art, what’s next
in shaping and repositioning the Dakarois artistic landscape on both local and global platforms? How do contemporary curators move beyond the biennial? In my concluding section will be revisiting the dialogue of how to (re)claim and resituate Dak’Art in a way that makes sense to the Dakarois community. More broadly,
CONCLUSION

Introducing the “Third World neo-neo-postmodernists”?

“The best-pavilion prize went to Angola for a sadly derivative installation in a little-seen palazzo—sheets of paper printed with photographs like Gabriel Orozco’s, stacked like ottomans, and free for the taking like a Felix Gonzalez-Torres work. The prize gives one the disturbing feeling that the powers that be are rewarding Third World artists for self-colonizing into good neo-neo-postmodernists.”

- Jerry Saltz, Art Critic

“The future of the contemporary biennial rests with its ability to navigate the politically charged nuances between inclusion and engagement, between cultural visibility and the reification of difference, between unmediated display and truly open dialogue. Only then will visitors—in whatever form visitation of or interaction with the future biennial may take—unearth the connective tissue between self-awareness and unnoticed histories: a “private discovery” irrefutably couched in social responsibility and cultural accountability.”

- Royce W. Smith

Perhaps the Biennial model has become too ritualized by the West to be relevant in a non-Western context. It’s (biennials’) ceremonies, practices, and conventions happen within the hallowed white walls of exhibition spaces, and their ability to evolve, challenge, and perhaps most importantly criticize the status quo of our contemporary context and the artworks and artists who produce in it, or the political and economic parameters within which they operate. Royce Smith’s article, "A Crisis of Super-Sized Proportions (or Why the Next Great Art Biennial Should Not Be Curated by an Über-Platinum Frequent Flyer)," was by far the most articulate and commanding I have read surrounding criticism of the contemporary art biennial model and non-Western art’s participation and exclusion within such models. Overtly criticizing Robert Storr’s

40 www.vulture.com “Saltz’s Postcards from the Venice Biennale”, slide 7/19 describing the Angola Pavilion.
41 Smith, Pg. 18
handling and curation of the 2007 Venice Biennale, Smith proposes that the biennial model can no longer be an extension of Modernism’s (Western Art) grand-narrative of art and instead must work against this Modernist schema to become more inclusive of non-Western art, while embracing the ideology of “glocality”42 “While Storr initially registers his understanding of such visibility as a function of the strategies and techniques employed almost exclusively by Western artists, he concludes by stating paradoxically that the volatility of social norms, cultural practices, political circumstances, and representational inequities that might ultimately influence the nature and extent of art’s visibility do not come into play within the contemporary biennial. Instead, he asserts that biennials are unequivocally liberal, discursive realms that can and do challenge the viability of “mainstream” contemporaneity and that do not estrange underrepresented artistic voices.”43

This is such an important and inflammatory statement with respect to my thesis, because it is essentially this claim that I am refuting against. Biennials are anything but, non-political entities. Dak’Art remains no exception to this, even as the sole “non-Western” biennial of its kind representing the contemporary pan-African artistic landscape. It is curious how Storr describes the biennial model as a free-territory, one less inhibited by institutionalization and commercial interests. With the case of Dak’Art, I cannot see how non-Western art biennials are any more “free” than their Western counterparts (forefathers) such as the Venice Biennial. Storr

42 Qtd. in Smith pg. 6, “As theorized by Roland Roberson in the 1990s, the “glocal” references this juncture between local histories, practices, and contexts and the resulting transformations, reinforcements, or dismantlings of meaning that result when the local is reconciled with global ideas and imperatives. For further discussion of this term and its sociological pedigree, see Roland Robertson Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture (London: Sage Publications, 1992).
43 Smith, Royce W. "A Crisis of Super-Sized Proportions (or Why the Next Great Art Biennial Should Not Be Curated by an Über-Platinum Frequent Flyer)." X-Tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly 13, no. 1 (Fall2010 2010): 5
by wishing to re-capture the ‘aura’ of artworks in the biennial is thereby perpetuating a Western model that inherently alienates (further marginalizes) the “…cultivation of the broader cultural sensitivities, ascribed to the contemporary biennial.”

Solutions? Smith gives some interesting examples of “post-biennial” and “anti-biennial,” the most interesting of which I considered to be the Roaming Biennial of Tehran which “…critiques the site-specific biennial as an outmoded colonialist apparatus that is ill-equipped to offer a voice to artists practicing in locales that either inhibit forthright artistic expression or that remain largely inhospitable to the notion of cultural tourism.”

These are all dynamics which I will continue to probe in thinking about moving past the Dak’Art model and in thinking of what economic and institutional implications a state-funded arts biennial on the African continent hold true today. There are no “quick fixes” but there is a way to negotiate, challenge and restructure these biennial frameworks so that artists, both Senegalese and other African and Diasporic artists have a more equitable hand in the creative process and agency when exhibiting at Dak’Art or other artistic platforms around the globe.

44 Ibid. Smith Pg. 6
45 Ibid. Smith Pg. 14
Appendix A: Images

(Fig. 2)

(Fig. 3)
Articles:


Smith, Royce W. "A Crisis of Super-Sized Proportions (or Why the Next Great Art Biennial Should Not Be Curated by an Über-Platinum Frequent Flyer)." *X-Tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (Fall2010 2010): 4-18.


**Books:**


**Catalogs:**


Interviews:

Aw, Kiné. Village des Arts Studio. 20 Nov. 2012. (1)
Aw, Kiné. Village des Arts Studio. 27 Nov. 2012. (2)
Dieng, Khalifa. Musée Boribana. 4 Dec. 2012.
Murray, Melanie. Home Meeting Corniche Mermoz. 11 Nov. 2012
Ndiaye, Serigne. Home Studio Castor. 29 Nov. 2012

Other: