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The Biennial of Dakar and South-South Circulations

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Abstract

The Biennale of Dakar is considered as a particular site for examining South-South circulations of artworks. Being the biennial of contemporary African art, only artists from Africa and its Diaspora are eligible for its central, international exhibition. Several factors, however, are strongly influencing these selections, among others the Biennale's specific selection procedures, as for instance the appointment of the members of the selection committee. Considering critical voices of local artists about the Biennale's performance will lead to discussing several problems that affect South-South circulations of artworks.

Résumé

La Biennale de Dakar sert ici d'exemple pour examiner une circulation Sud-Sud d'œuvres d'art. La Biennale ayant été définie à sa fondation comme une Biennale d'art africain contemporain, seuls les artistes africains et de la Diaspora africaine sont éligibles pour l'exposition centrale internationale. Néanmoins, plusieurs facteurs influencent la sélection des participants, notamment comme la nomination des membres des comités de sélection. En considérant certaines critiques émanant d'artistes locaux sur la Biennale, nous évoquerons plusieurs problèmes qui se posent d'une manière plus générale au niveau des circulations Sud-Sud.

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In the early 2000s, a vast vague of art biennials foundations around the world can be observed, similar ventures also occurring in Africa such as the foundation of the East Africa Art Biennale (EASTAFAB) in Dar-es-Salaam (founded in 2003), The Marrakesh Biennale (2005), the Triennial of Luanda (2005-07), SUD-Salon Urbain de Douala, the Triennial of Douala (2007), Rencontres PICHA, the Biennial of Lubumbashi (2008), or the Biennale of Benin in Cotonou (2010).¹

Two approaches seem relevant for investigating South-South artistic circulations in the context of biennials. Should one explore these biennials of the South as a single system? Or, should one rather analyze how a particular biennial produces these circulations and the local debates this entails? For sure, one can consider this worldly art biennial phenomenon as a present-day characteristic of contemporary art productions. Speaking of a 'system,' one nevertheless has to acknowledge that there is no central structuring of it. Any location may decide about the foundation of a biennial, the notion rather referring to a generic model of bringing in artworks from different regions, that is, works which had been created within specific art historical and socio-cultural contexts. The proliferation of biennials in Africa is no exception in this respects, each of them clearly is the result of local initiatives, as for instance: Belgic artist-curator Yves Gosciny was co-founder of EASTAFAB, artist-curator Fernando Alvim initiated with support of the Sindika Dokolo Foundation the Triennale of Luanda, and the Triennale of Douala is closely linked to the art institution Doual'art. More so, there is definitely no networking or collaboration between these biennials. There rather is an ongoing 'partage du sensible,'² as internationally renowned curator Simon Njami critically commented this absence of communication to me.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations from discussions are mine.

² The author would like to express his gratitude to the 'Biennale de l'art africain contemporain, Dak'Art' for enabling and supporting ethnographic researches during the 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 editions. He is grateful to the Biennale of Dakar of allowing the publishing of photographs on the basis of accreditation. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable critical comments. The article has gained in its focus as a result of their input.

³ A notion he borrowed from Rancière. See Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000).

My discussion of South-South artistic circulations therefore will follow the second approach, a close study of the Biennale of Dakar, Dak'Art. In this context, South-South artistic circulation refers foremost to the selection of artworks for the Biennale's 'international exhibition.' The invitation of the selected artists, a characteristic of the Biennale, is an important aspect which complements this circulation.

Dak'Art offers a good opportunity to examine the topic of South-South circulations in several regards. The Biennale's focus is contemporary African art: only artists from Africa and its Diaspora are eligible for its central, international exhibition. Specially appointed selection committees take care of selections on the basis of applications which have to be submitted in the form of an artist's portfolio. While selection committees are independent in their decision-making, the Biennale's office defines application procedures, and launches the call for each edition.

In my discussion of the Biennale's efforts of representing contemporary African art I adopt a situated gaze. I consider the various aspects within the local context of the Dakar art world while avoiding any considerations from a Euro-American perspective regarding art discourses, or articulating critiques of the Biennale's performance which omit constraints due to the cultural politics of the State. Given that there are multiple opinions among Dakar's art world members regarding selection committees and who should or should not be considered for selection, this situated gaze moreover requires to understanding critical voices as concrete perceptions of the Biennale's cultural activities. Each of them is actually articulated out of a specific vision of the Biennale's local role, and of the arts which should/should not be on display. In such a perspective, Dak'Art is not only the exhibition of artworks, but as much all these various voices that are at stake.

This situated gaze moreover is connected to the consideration of the Biennale within a specific art world, the one of Dakar. I connect it to Hans Belting's rejection of conceiving a single art world for the

contemporary art worlds-order and instead arguing for a plurality of art worlds in the present time: “The last remaining stronghold of the western art concept is the notion of a single and independent art world which is believed to survive even today as a global art world, again in the singular.”³ For one, Dakar’s art world is specific if one looks at the institutions and art world members that are constitutive for it. There are, for instance, no museum of modern or contemporary (African) art, only a small art market, restricted possibilities for information flows. But also contemporary art is embedded within local art discourses, the works of local artists need to be considered within the specific regional histories of modern African art, and cannot be integrated uniquely within an overall international art discourse.

In the subsequent discussion I shall, firstly, consider the foundation of Dak’Art. This part will elaborate on the frictions between the intentions of the local artists, and the State’s use of the institution for its international cultural politics. The second section focuses on selection committees, the importance of the Biennale’s invitation policy, and Dak’Art OFF, an informal exhibition space that grew out of local initiatives besides and partly in opposition to the official Biennale. Relying on selection statistics and critical considerations of artists and other art world actors, this section aims at demonstrating that selections, and thereafter South-South circulation of artworks, are dependent of several factors. One is the knowledge about modern and contemporary African art of the members of the selection committees, another one concerns their privileged art discourses. The Biennale also interferes in this endeavor, as it not only focuses on being the showcase of contemporary African art in Africa, but as much at positioning itself as outstanding biennial within the global biennials network. This section ends with taking up the various empirical considerations to emphasize the major lines of my argument.

³ Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, “From Art World to Art Worlds,” in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel. (Cambridge, Mass. and Karlsruhe: The MIT Press and ZKM/Center for Art and Media, 2013), 28.

The Foundation of the Biennale of Dakar

Early October 1989, the second President of the Republic of Senegal, Abdou Diouf, announced the foundation of the biennial of Dakar. It started in 1990 as an event both for authors, poets, and visual artists. The event, however, was not successful, as both groups of artists would not cooperate, and rather were reluctant against each other. Therefore, the first edition of Dak’Art, the biennial exclusively dedicated to visual arts, was launched in 1992, as ‘Biennale internationale des arts’ (International Biennial of Arts). Through contacts to embassies and other foreign cultural institutions, artists from Africa, Europe, the Americas and Asia were invited to participate, somehow following the Venice model. The concept, however, dramatically failed. In many cases, invited countries did not respond to the call for nominating artists.⁴ The assessment by the Senegalese State, the European Union, and French institutions agreed in the following year (1993) that the project should be continued, but as the ‘Biennale de l’art africain contemporain’ (Biennial of contemporary African art, first edition in 1996).

There is a large agreement that the idea for the Biennale came from visual artists. They had united in the early 1980s within the Senegalese association of visual artists ANAPS (Association Nationale des Artistes Plasticiens Sénégalais), and during the opening of their third yearly salon in 1986, the association’s president El Hadji Sy addressed that claim to the State’s President Diouf. In the following years, artists continued to lobby to this end. As several Senegalese artists told me: “We wanted a platform for visibility, for interaction with peers from the world, for an intensified discussion, and new challenges. With the 1992 venue, we expected a confrontation where our art expressions are, what we have achieved so far – within such an international field.” There is an exception to this perception. According to Lamine Sall, responsible for the Biennales of 1990 and 1992, the Minister of

⁴ Yacouba Konaté, *La Biennale de Dakar. Pour une esthétique de la création africaine contemporaine – tête à tête avec Adorno* (Paris: L’Harmattan, La Bibliothèque d’Africultures, 2009), 38.

Culture Moustapha Ka was at the origins of Dak'Art.⁵ According to Sall, "Dak'Art must be seen as part of a trajectory of grandiose cultural events initiated and executed by the government of Senegal since independence to promote the image of the country as a bastion of modern culture and democracy at the international level."⁶

The two stories are important in as far they show different visions and are at the forefront of tensions and conflicts between artists and State officials. Many of the artists still disagree with the African orientation of the Biennale. They consider that the State stole it from them, and forced them into an inter-African dialogue. Above all, these artists continue to question what is meant by contemporary African art. State officials instead refer at official events, such as the opening ceremonies, that the Biennale is in continuity to the Premier Festival des Arts Nègres, Dakar 1966, a project of first President Léopold Sédar Senghor. While artists, and other personalities of the Dakar art world, emphasize the artistic dimension of the Biennale, the institution remains until today narrowly State dependent, and is considered from that side as a "product of Senegal's long-standing state policy on cultural diplomacy, and a means to advance the international image of Senegal as a promoter of modern culture and a stable democracy."⁷

This moving history of Dak'Art actually presents several frameworks within which the Biennale may be considered. First, there are the regional and transcultural networks which are established with each edition, in particular but not exclusively the artistic ones. Second, it is a space within the global biennials network, within which Dak'Art is positioned from 1996 on as the showcase for contemporary art of Africa. These two frameworks clearly refer to its nature as art institution. Thirdly, more from the State's ideology, it is connected to the Premier Festival des Arts Nègres. Yacouba Konaté, Ivoirian art theorist, critique and general curator of

the 2006 edition, rejects this connection, in as far as the Biennale searches the international challenge, and has nothing to do anymore with old claims inscribed in the fights for independence. Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, Nigerian born and U.S. based art historian, artist, and member of the curatorial team of the 2014 edition, argues for this framework, including even the two mega-events which followed, the First Pan-African Festival in Algiers (1969), and the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts in Lagos (1977).⁸ Fourth, the decision for the biennial of contemporary African art in 1993 must be seen in relation to the distribution of mega-events for different art forms in the francophone sous-région, the festival for cinema and television in Ouagadougou (FESPACO), the biennial for photography in Bamako (Rencontres de Bamako), and the festival for dance and theatre in Abidjan (MASA). Finally, its present position may be considered within the framework of the growing number of art biennials in Africa mentioned above.

Until today, Dak'Art is an institution subordinated to the Ministry of Culture, and to the President of the Republic. Its Secretary General is a civil servant, and the Minister of Culture officially appoints for each edition the members of the committee of orientation (until 2004 conseil scientifique) upon proposal of the Secretary General. It includes gallery dealers, artists, sponsors, as well as other local art world personalities. Among others, it nominates together with the Secretary General the members of the selection committee. The latter then is responsible for the selection of artists, and for the awarding of the major prizes.

The Biennale of Dakar is fundamentally the international exhibition, the official space of the selected artists. 'Expositions Individuelles' (individual exhibitions) is another, specially curated space for a few international, non-African artists. By 2014, the Biennale expanded its exhibition practice in this domain. It further includes an influential forum for debates and discussions, 'Rencontres et échanges' (encounters and exchanges). Until 2008,

⁵ Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi. "The Dak'Art Biennial in the Making of Contemporary African Art, 1992-Present" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, 2013), 26.

⁶ Nzewi, "The Dak'Art Biennial," 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Konaté, "La Biennale de Dakar," 50; Nzewi, "The Dak'Art Biennial," 10.

Dak'Art moreover disposed of a special space for design, the 'salon du design.'

Since 2000, the official spaces of the Biennale are called Dak'Art IN, in as far as another platform developed, Dak'Art OFF. The latter is independent from the official Biennale, and developed out of exhibition initiatives of artists, and activities of galleries, cultural institutes like the Centre Culturel Français or the German Goethe Institut, corporations like Eiffage, the local village des arts (an assemblage of artists' studios donated by the State), independent art institutions like Kër Thiossane (a center for multimedia), or Raw Material Company (a center for art, curatorship, and art criticism). Exhibitions may be found in various places, such as private homes, restaurants, hotel lounges, or public places. Depending on the location or institution, exhibitions may be curated or left to the artists' own initiatives. In an overall view, there are neither centrally decided selection procedures nor any other mechanisms of exclusion – suffice to find a place for exhibiting!

Dak'Art as Center of South-South Circulations

The self-assertion of the Dakar Biennale as the cultural node for African artistic circulations needs to be examined in the context of several aspects. The Biennale was founded with a clear focus on the local art world, specifically to create a space of visibility and debate for Senegalese artists within an international environment. Since its 1996 edition, the Biennale however has been aiming as well at connecting itself to the global art biennials network while at the same time stimulating African regional art networks. South-south circulations of artworks and interaction and debate on the spot are thereafter subject to various strategies which have been adopted. In the following, I am specifically considering the composition of the respective selection committees, selection statistics, the rules for application for artists, and the Biennale's invitation policy.



Figure 1. 2012, Entrance to the Biennale's International Exhibition, photograph Fillitz

The major task of the selection committees is to assure an international quality of the artworks on display in the context of local and regional traditions of artistic practices. This further includes reflections about the representation of contemporary African art within the international exhibition—how to find a balance between artworks of Senegalese artists and those of artists from the various African art worlds and the Diaspora. The rules for application by and large should allow egalitarian conditions for all artists. Finally, the invitation policy clearly addresses the need for interaction between artists and international art world actors.

Until 2006, selection committees were large in numbers, for instance sixteen members for the editions of 1998 and 2000. Half of the committees' members were African, half of them from Europe and/or North America. To give an example: in 2000, the committee consisted of the president of the committee, then being the director of the Moderna Museet/Stockholm, a curator from Spain, two gallerists (from Cameroon and Germany), the director of the South African National Gallery, a designer from France/U.S.A., the director of the biennial of Seychelles, a curator-critic from Cameroon/France, three artists (from Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal), a German collector, a museum curator-critic from France, a collector-gallerist from Senegal, the president of the scientific council, and the Secretary General.

Several aspects are striking, the high number of non-African experts, and that for long presidents of the

committees were internationally renowned curators: in 1998 Achille Bonito Oliva/Italy, in 2000 David Elliott/ then Sweden based, in 2002 Éry Camara/Mexico based, and in 2004 Sara Diamond/Canada. The involvement of non-African art specialists, and in particular the nomination of internationally renowned curators as presidents of the committees was a strategy of the Biennale to ensure an international quality of the selected artworks. Above all, it was a conscious act for raising the visibility of Dak'Art within the global culture of biennials, as the second Secretary General Rémi Sagna (1996-2000) told me. Simon Njami, prominent curator and critic, also asserted that a renowned curator is a tool for attracting international interest, but he added "one needs to know whom to invite for such an important task."

These nominations caused problems and frictions. Artists and local specialists saw the risk that this would bring in dominant discourses from the European/North American art world onto contemporary African art. They moreover wondered about the knowledge these specialists have of the histories of modern and contemporary art in Africa. Ousmane Sow Huchard, former director of the Musée Dynamique, and president of the scientific council in 1998, reported to me such a situation:

One of these curators from Europe was a nice chap, but he was not easy going. When the selection for the 1998 venue was already decided, and he flew in for the exhibition design, he suddenly insisted that it should be re-evaluated, exclaiming: 'If we remain at that selection, it will ruin my international reputation.' So I took him for a nice Senegalese lunch, and gave him a quick course on modern and contemporary African art. At the end I had convinced him to leave things as they were.

Other artists I talked to were totally dissatisfied with these politics of the Biennale. As one expressed:

There were these people who flew in twice – twice, you imagine – they had no idea about art in Africa! Some of them took me apart, went for a coffee with me and asked me to explain them a bit about contemporary art in Africa ... And these people decide who shall be exhibited, who shall be rejected? They enjoy coming here, are the hosts of the Biennale,

everything is paid, they are travelling with large limousine and stay in the fancy hotels ... Better the state had left things in our hands!

The situation actually changed with the 2006 edition. Ivoirian specialist Yacouba Konaté was appointed as general curator and was free in selecting a team of five African experts for the various regions of Africa, and two from Germany and the U.S.A. for Africa's Diasporas in Europe and the Americas. It was the largest and until now the most successful Biennale. In 2008, the system returned to former structures. Only with the editions of 2010, 2012, and 2014, the selection committees became smaller, a maximum of four curators, and all of them had to be art specialists with an African citizenship – though they did not need to live in an African country.

Selection itself was regulated according to the application with a portfolio. As example, for the 2012 edition it had to include among others the artist's CV, several reproductions of recent works, copies of reviews or texts on the artists' work, and optionally one or two letters of recommendation from experts. Well into the early 2000s, local artists saw in this procedure an advantage for those living outside of Africa. "They had better access to new technologies like electronic pictures or a better quality of slides. They also may dispose of catalogues of their exhibitions, and they may have more texts about their works," as a local prominent artist commented. Being unaware of local conditions of art practices, of the difficulties in producing catalogues of shows, of a largely missing art criticism, non-African members of the selection committees could be influenced in their choice by attributing a higher value to the portfolios of artists from the Diaspora.

Furthermore, the majority of internationally prominent African artists would not surrender to such a procedure, a fact the Biennale's General Secretary was well aware of. Therefore, in 2006 the curatorial team could, within limits, invite artists of its choice. The same was true for the 2014 edition – but not all Senegalese artists were fond of this practice, as I could observe during a debate at Dakar's Goethe Institute in 2014. Given that from

around three to four hundred applications only forty to sixty artists could be selected, they critiqued that these invitations have a major impact on the rejection of artists who had followed the official procedure.

For the younger generation of local artists, however, both these critiques are no more a real topic. They have grown with the Biennale, and their interest is the challenge with the art forms on display in the international exhibition.



Figure 2. 2012, International Exhibition, photograph Fillitz

A view on selection statistics shows certain main features of the circulation of artworks at Dak'Art. In an overall perspective, artists from forty-one countries have been selected between 1996 and 2014. There nevertheless is a main emphasis on artists from Francophone countries, artists from Anglophone countries being mostly from South Africa and Nigeria, whereas those from East and Central Africa are but marginally considered. A closer look on these statistics unravels efforts of the Biennale for reformulating with each edition its scope on contemporary African art. If at the 1996 edition (Table 1), there was a small majority of Senegalese and Ivoirian artists, while artists from Anglophone countries and from the Diaspora were largely absent, artists from Ivory Coast and South Africa constitute the majority at the 1998 edition (Table 2). From 2000 on, the Biennale's selection committees are clearly strengthening their focus on artists from the Diaspora.

The largest Biennale, the one of 2006, shows a majority of Senegalese artists, and represented artists from a total of thirty African countries (Table 3). With the title "Africa: Agreements, Allusions and Misunderstandings," Yacouba Konaté took a wider perspective, combining renowned artists from the 1960s-1980s with contemporary art creations of younger artists. According to him, Dak'Art so far was successful as showcase of contemporary African art, but a history of modern and contemporary African art had still to be written. In some way, his display may be considered as an orientation in this latter direction.

These statistics, however, need to be carefully understood in various aspects. Firstly, the older generation of Senegalese artists considers the Biennale as their event for which they had been lobbying for years. Now, there are only few of them being selected, a procedure that raises criticism, notably among those who never were selected. Why giving preference to so many artists who actually are not living and working in an African country? These critiques consider that artists of the Diaspora are working within different contexts. Their practices are embedded within European/North American art discourses and exchanges, the international environment they experience largely influences their arts, they have access to present-day technologies, they have better possibilities for exhibiting, and for producing catalogues.

Second, connecting any artist in Dak'Art IN to an African citizenship does actually not inform in all cases where an artist is actually living, whether s/he has a double citizenship, or whether s/he feels as artist from the Diaspora. In 2000, some artists in fact refused to provide any information regarding citizenship, and at the editions of 2006, 2008, and 2014, several indicated Diaspora instead of a specific African citizenship. In this respect, an important shift occurred with the 2010 edition, when the selection committee changed the main criteria 'African artists and Diaspora' to the one of 'artists with citizenship from an African country where ever they are living currently.' In doing so, the curators intended to overcome long-lasting discussions about

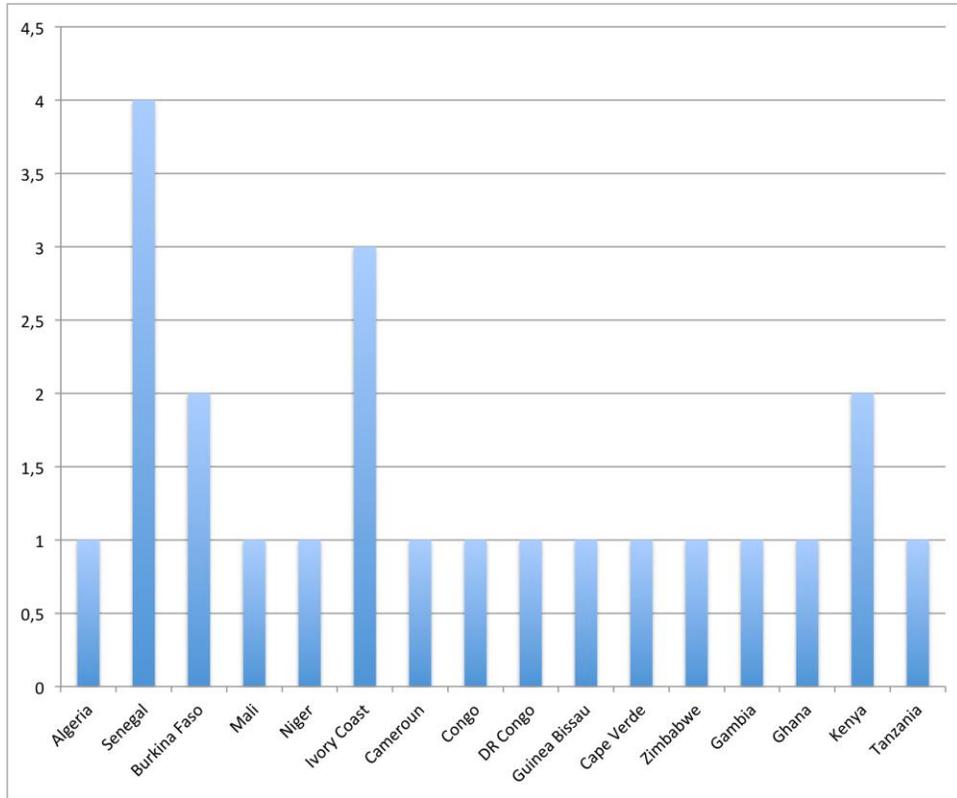


Table 1. Statistics Selection 1996, on the basis of the catalogue by Fillitz

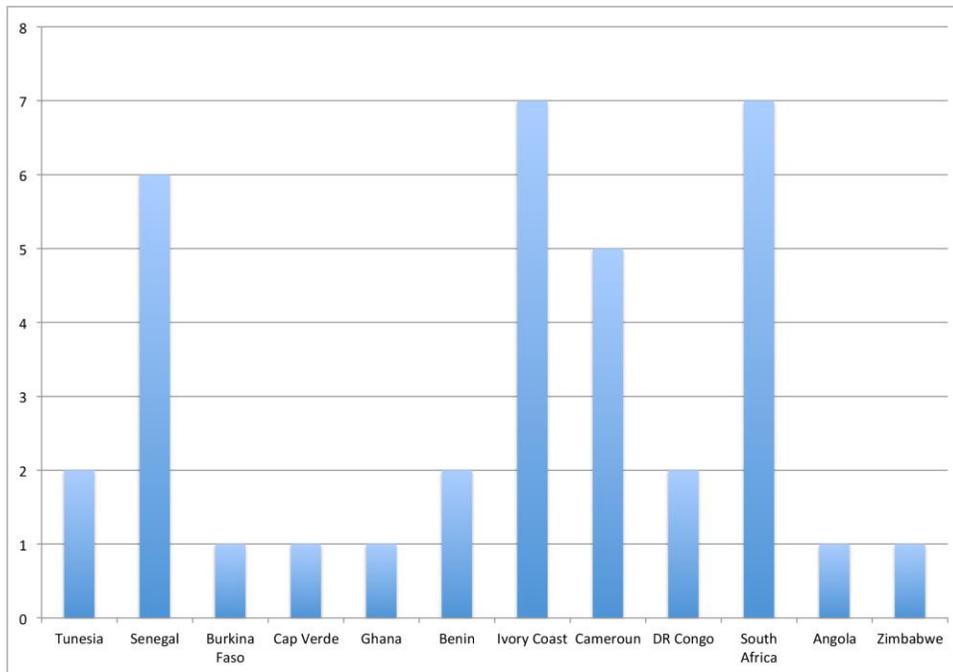


Table 2. Statistics Selection 1998, on the basis of the catalogue by Fillitz

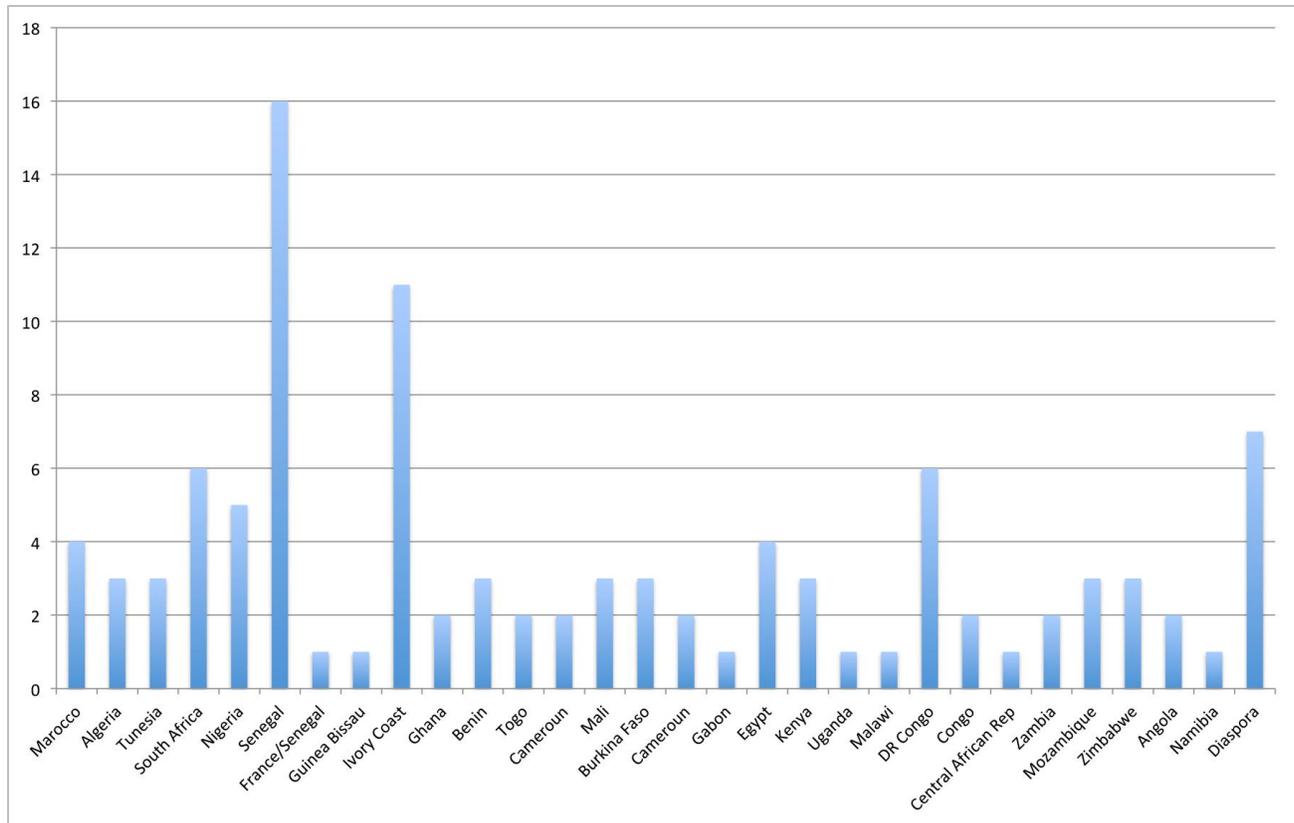


Table 3. Statistics Selection 2006, on the basis of the catalogue by Fillitz

who is an artist from the Diaspora, or whether artists needed to be living in an African country for being eligible. For the 2014 edition, the exhibition itself did no more inform about the artists' citizenships. As one of the curators, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, explained to me: "There is always this local critique – why do you exhibit artists living there or there, this is totally different to our situation! – We wanted as far as possible avoid that kind of discussion within the exhibition space!"

These decisions are fully in line with the intentions of the Biennale. After its first editions of approaching the project of a biennial of contemporary African art, the Biennale's vision turned towards producing with each edition a platform for artists "who recognize and accept their African origin."⁹ As former Secretary General Ousseynou Wade (2000-2012) explained, this step was one of accepting former

Ongoing critiques about the non-consideration of artists from the Diaspora, and of improving the quality of the Biennale. Moreover, each selection committee is free to decide its criteria for selection, among others which medium it gives preference. In this respect the Biennale does not interfere in decisions of the committees, the latter only should not constantly select the same artists. Regarding the consideration of only a few Senegalese artists, several stakeholders clearly expressed that a biennial project cannot be a local exhibition with international participation. The Biennale nevertheless keeps the dialogue with local artists ongoing, and seriously considers complaints and proposals for improvement from these latter.

These statistics are of interest too in as far as the Biennale invites all selected artists during the first week of the event. Around thirty percent of the overall budget is spent for bringing people in.¹⁰ Dak'Art thus promotes not only the circulation of

⁹ Yacouba Konaté, "The Invention of the Dakar Biennial (2009)," in *The Biennial Reader. An Anthology of Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, Solveig Østebø (Bergen and Ostfilder: Bergen Kunsthall and Hatje Cantz, 2010), 117.

¹⁰ Konaté, "La Biennale de Dakar," 79. Invitations are as well expressed to art specialists, museum directors, gallerists, or art journal publishers.

artworks, but the mobility of artists and other art specialists as well. During this time, the city is a burgeoning node of discussions and exchanges, of producing contacts and projects. A young Moroccan artist, selected in 2010, told me: “It is great being here. In my art academy in Germany my colleagues do not know about Dak’Art. It is great to experience this incredible density of African artistic creativity, it’s a feeling of a community. I am happy to live this experience.” For young Senegalese artist Barkinado Bocoum, the interactions the Biennale enables via this invitation policy were of major importance for his career: “Dak’Art has helped me in positioning myself as artist within a larger art worlds-network. I now get invitations to Belgium, to France, to Austria, and to another biennale in Morocco. This I like ... I like to meet those who are interested in my art, those who really want to interact!”

To complete this picture of the production of Dak’Art as a particular site of South-South circulations of contemporary African art, one needs as well to elaborate on the OFF. From the beginnings of the Biennale, some local Senegalese artists had organized their own exhibitions, so did galleries and international cultural institutes. In 1998, the Biennale produced a list of twenty-nine such ‘environmental manifestations.’ In 2000, this space became the OFF, and in 2002 an independent program was issued as Dak’Art OFF. From 2004 on, the corporation Eiffage Sénégal will act as sponsor for the latter. The OFF is conceived as space of artistic freedom, a freedom of exhibiting without any selection criteria, a space without the Biennale’s control. That strategy grew to a large conglomerate of self-organized and a few curated exhibitions. In 2010, the former old colonial capital Saint Louis was incorporated as another major center of activities, and today Dak’Art OFF further stretches out to other locations in the neighborhoods of Dakar. It has grown much larger than the official IN space, and counts over two hundred exhibitions by now, in comparison to some forty or sixty artists generally exhibited in the Biennale’s international exhibition. Mauro Petroni, an Italian artist based in Dakar for

over twenty-five years, takes care of the catalogue-maps of the OFF since 2000:

For sure one can say that the IN is more elitist, whereas the OFF is a really popular space – it is important to leave it without central curatorship, in order to have that variety of exhibitions. ... This combination between IN and OFF makes the special character of the Biennale.



Figure 3. 2014, Dak’Art OFF: Exhibition sign, photograph Fillitz

Dak’Art OFF is a highly heterogeneous exhibition field. Galleries and other major institution take the advantage of largely exhibiting international African artists. But the majority of the exhibitions is a result of local artists’ initiatives. These may be individual or group exhibitions, and non-African artists too are welcome, they just need to find a space for their shows, or to cooperate with local ones. As mentioned above, there are no restrictions, no exclusions, no oppositions between artistic groups.

Many Senegalese artists living in Europe or North America too do not miss the event, and fly in to exhibit their recent works during the Biennale. They often bring new ideas and projects with them, like late Amadou Sow, one of the ‘old masters’ of visual arts in Senegal (he as well created the Biennale’s logo). In 2010, he launched the project ‘Bottle Boys’ with a group of local young artists. Together they recuperated waste plastic bottles and used them as primary material for the creation of sculptures. Or

artists like Cheikhou Ba: he received international attention in the early 2000s owing to a collective exhibition in the OFF. He then moved to Switzerland, and returns to each edition of Dak'Art for keeping contact to the local art world, and for contributing to this mega-event. For artists Cheikh Niass and late Amadou Sow, the success of the OFF is a kind of late satisfaction: "This is the way we artists recuperate the Biennale. They can do what they want over there in the IN – it's interesting, challenging, that's good. But what is really going on in our countries ... this you can see in the OFF! Here you see the dynamics of our local artistic practices." For sure, Dak'Art OFF is the platform par excellence for Senegalese artists during the Biennale's time, and by now the OFF is a major player for the latter's overall performance.

Dak'Art: a Multitude of Gazes Informing South-South Circulations

When Dak'Art started as 'Biennale de l'art africain contemporain' in 1996, there were only poor exchanges and circulations beyond regional art worlds. The idea of local artists was to create a platform for trans-regional interaction and debate about artistic practices and achievements, as outlined in the first part.

Selection statistics of the first editions (1996 and 1998, Tables 1 and 2) actually document the Biennale's struggle to stretch out to other African art worlds. A broad knowledge was missing in these early times, as the then responsible Secretary General Rémi Sagna stated. It mainly was restricted to neighboring regions. By and large, this absence of a broader understanding of contemporary African art characterizes these early selection committees. The 2006 edition (Table 3) under general curator Yacouba Konaté was a milestone for the South-south circulation of artworks at Dak'Art, Konaté obviously aimed at showing various elements within the scope of his perception of an African modern art history, as the statistic documents. The decision to exclusively appointing selection committees with experts from Africa and/or its Diaspora from 2010 on corresponds to a decisive shift towards African

expertise. In doing so, views on regional African art histories from within were emphasized. This decision for sure strengthened the Biennale's focus on South-South circulations beyond influences of foreign perspectives.

Objections and critical voices of local artists vis-à-vis artists from the Diaspora appear as claims for exclusively positioning South-South artwork circulations within local and regional African art worlds. They appear as rejecting any influences for structuring the international exhibition according to European/North American dominant art discourses. In as far as the Biennale has continually aimed at extending its horizon, and in relying on African experts, these objections mainly concern the Biennale's strategy to positioning itself within the global biennials network. These critiques never were an issue for selection committees. The latter defined their selection criteria in accordance to their consideration of contemporary African art. One needs as well to acknowledge that the younger generation of local artists does not share these critical viewpoints. On the contrary, for them these interactions with artists of the Diaspora unfold possibilities for improving their art practices. Yet, although some of these objections still pertain, with its last editions of 2014 and 2016, the Biennale opened new exhibition premises around the international exhibition, extending to the arts of non-African artists, thus intensifying the challenge.

A specificity of Dak'Art is its conscious combination of South-South artwork circulation and the invitation of the selected artists, and of international art world professionals. In doing so, the Biennale complements duties of exhibiting with those of promoting interaction, exchange, and network building among artists and other art world professionals. Selection statistics too inform about the regional contexts of the artists who are brought together at each edition – although this later aspect never was a criterion for the selection committees. As artists have continuously stated, these face-to-face exchanges are even more important to them than the sole visit of exhibitions. Among artists, it creates possibilities to intensively discuss concerns

about artistic practices, about techniques, media, and their meanings. With art world professionals, it enables them to connect with other institutions and art worlds, and in many cases this favored their international careers.

Finally, although no part of the official Biennale, Dak'Art OFF has successfully supplemented the program of the former. In this field, South-South circulations of artworks are preeminently taken care of by galleries, international cultural institutes and other cultural institutions. Yet, exhibition initiatives of local artists outstandingly characterize the OFF, and allow for experiencing a multitude of artistic practices which differently conceive contemporary African art. It is striking that the objections and quarrels related to the Biennale's international exhibition are inexistent in this informal field. It is the artists' space! The OFF is free of any central structuring curatorial visions of art, of any dominant art discourse. This aspect is worth acknowledging in as far as it opens exhibition initiatives beyond debates of who is/is not an artist of Africa, and welcomes the participation of non-African artists.

Conclusion

South-South circulation of artworks at Dak'Art refers to artists of the local Senegalese art world, to artists from other regional African art worlds, and to artists who acknowledge their African origin while working in particular art worlds outside of Africa. In the context of the present topic, the Biennale strives to realize three major tasks, first to position itself as the biennial of contemporary African art within the global biennials network, second, to promote regional art networks, and third, to support artists for an international visibility beyond the continent. To these ends, two strategic policies have been considered, the nomination of selection committees and the invitation of selected artists and art world professionals.

Appointments of selection committees proved to be highly sensitive, in as far as they decide according to their preferential visions of important art

discourses. This aspect was most relevant with the early editions, when non-African, internationally renowned curators had been invited into selection committees. For many local artists they missed in expertise about modern and contemporary African art, and brought in criteria of Occidental modern art. When the Biennale relied exclusively on African experts, critical voices still mistrust their considerations of contemporary African art in as far as they see them within wider, international art discourses. Both these objections may be referred to partially conflicting perceptions of situated gazes: critical voices claim that selection decisions should clearly be based within local African art histories. In shifting its appointments to African experts, the Biennale acknowledged this demand, yet, for qualitatively positioning itself within the global biennials network, it too requires selections that reflect on ongoing global art discourses.

The invitation of selected artists and art world professionals constitutes a major aspect of Dak'Art's South-South circulations. This strategy is widely appreciated as it enables face-to-face interaction, debate, and network building. It truly is a catalyst for further South-South interactions on the continent between artists as well as between the former and art world professionals. Since many editions, many others have been flying in at their own costs to savor the Biennale's atmosphere and take advantage of the possibilities so provided. The Biennale thus is a center where a multitude of artistic positions from various African regions can be investigated, direct contacts established and project collaborations concluded.

Selections statistics inform about the regional connections that produce images of contemporary African art for each edition, and about the interactions that are enabled by the invitation policy. They demonstrate a continual emphasis on artists from Francophone countries, followed by foci on artists from South Africa and Nigeria, while artists from East African countries have been considered only marginally. They unravel on the one hand obvious privileged art discourses of the curatorial teams. On the other, they too may be understood as

preferential cultural connections of the Biennale itself.

Reflecting about the Biennale's South-South circulation of artworks one certainly needs to include Dak'Art OFF. The latter is opposed to the Biennale in as far as it largely is a non-curated space and highly heterogeneous in respect to the arts that are exhibited in the various locations. This missing, and clear rejection of any central curatorial vision is key to its success. Whereas Dak'Art's international exhibition has to negotiate a gaze that is a combination of local African art histories with wider international art discourses, the OFF allows for multiple gazes which are specifically expressed in each exhibition. The dominant one is clearly embedded within discourses of the local Senegalese art world. Others may likewise be situated in the confrontation between different regional ones, or they may stretch out to international discourses by including artworks of non-African artists. All depends on the specific organizers' viewpoints and intentions.

Three topics regarding the South-South circulation of artworks emerge from this examination of Dak'Art from within. First, selection statistics demonstrate that artistic practices from specific regional African art worlds are favored compared with others. Although selection committees are newly composed for each edition, and notwithstanding efforts to continuously reformulate perspectives on contemporary African art, the Biennale privileges certain African art discourses. In this context, 'South' does not inform about differences between local art worlds and their particularities. Second, the Biennale's combination of a localized gaze on African art histories with a wider perspective on international art discourses deeply influences this circulation of artworks. This raises the question whether an exclusive South-South circulation implies avoiding any connection to global discourses. With the Biennale's interests, with the inclusion of artists from the Diaspora, the appointment of curators with a determinate view on international discourses while considering local African practices, and with the invitation of

international art world professionals, Dak'Art requires plural perspectives. The OFF supplements these gazes unfolding a spectrum of artistic practices and concerns that rather conforms to a nearly exclusive South-South perspective. Yet, the point worth mentioning is that all reject evaluations according to criteria of Occidental modern art. Third, supplementing the circulation of artworks with inviting artists and art world professionals clearly produces opportunities for intensifying South-South collaboration. Given the often social and economic problematic situation of local art worlds in Africa, bringing these various art world actors together thus facilitates personal exchanges, and the planning of common projects in other places.

With its focus on contemporary African art, the Biennale's mission seems at first glance clear. It is, however, hotly debated within Dakar's art world, and its decisions and strategies raise issues regarding the South-South theme. Nevertheless, one needs to acknowledge the success of Dak'Art. With around four hundred applications to its international exhibition for each edition, and having so far exhibited artists with the citizenship from forty-one African countries where ever they are living and working, Dak'Art has an utmost local, regional, continental and trans-continental importance for the circulation of contemporary African art. As former Secretary General Ousseynou Wade stated: "Dak'Art is the biennial of contemporary African art, and it will continue to be so! Dakar is a cultural node stretching out on the continent and beyond."