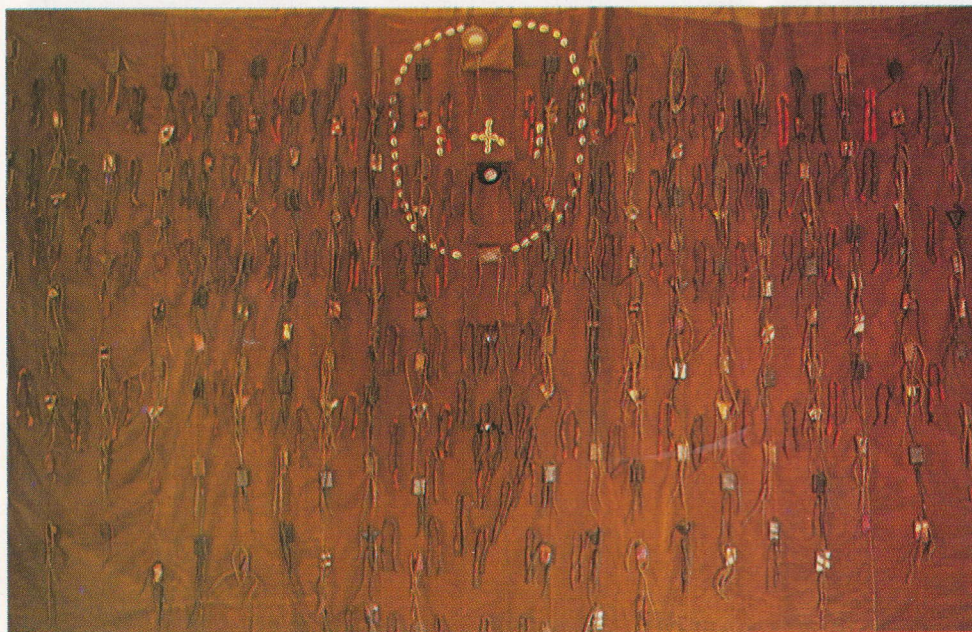
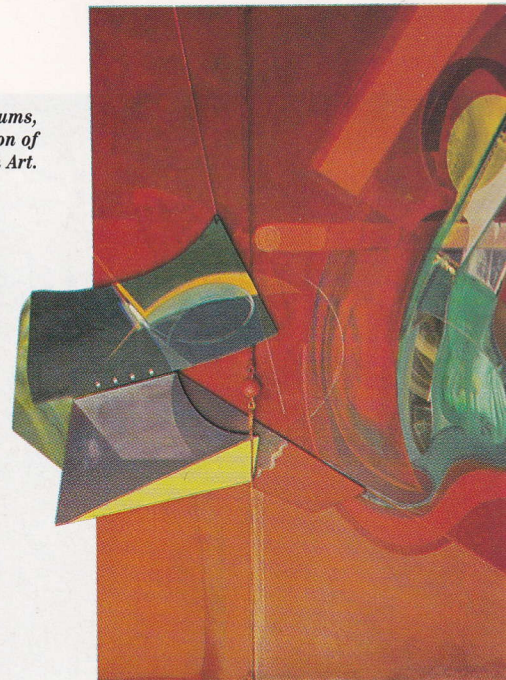


Right, Fodé Camara (Senegal): *The Course*, 1994, mixed mediums, 76½ by 65 by 3 inches; included in the International Exhibition of African Art at the Museum of Black African Art.



Above, Abdoulaye Konate (Mali): *Homage to Mandé Hunters (detail)*, 1994, beads on canvas, sandboxes, mixed mediums, 69 by 123 by 19¼ inches; included in the International Exhibition of African Art.

Right, Mylène Houelle (Senegal): *Rescued from Hell*, 1993, netting, metal studs, magazine scraps and mixed mediums, 39¼ by 38 inches; included in the Exhibition of Contemporary Senegalese Art at the National Art Gallery.



Above, Babacar Sedikh Traore (Senegal): *Table and Chair*, glass, water pipes, 47 by 98 by 27 inches; included in the African Design Salon at VEMA Space.

Right, Serigne Mbaye Camara (Senegal): *Jacques Kerchach*, 1994, wood and steel reinforcing rods, 65 by 35 inches; included in the International Exhibition of African Art. Unless otherwise noted, all photos this article courtesy Biennale des Arts de Dakar, Ministère de la Culture.





# REPORT FROM DAKAR

## Assembling Africa

*Dak'art 96, the third edition of Senegal's biennial art festival, included artists from 20 African countries in 10 official exhibitions and many adjunct shows.*

BY SUE SPAID

The main critical response to Dak'art 96, a multivenue exhibition of contemporary African art that took place May 9-15, 1996, in Dakar, Senegal, was that it was up too long. From the African perspective, any exhibition that lasts longer than four days risks being too market-oriented, and as long as most art collectors are Western, a market-oriented show is seen as encouraging the colonization of African artists. As the westernmost point on the African continent, Dakar's harbors served as the primary departure point for the slave trade, so the threat of pillage from overseas has been a constant in Senegal for centuries.

That said, Dakar is by any accounting a good site for a pan-African art exhibition. To date there have been three Dakar Biennials, with only the 1996 one devoted to African art. (The first one, in 1990, examined literature, while the second featured contemporary art from outside Africa.) Not only does the city boast dozens of established cultural venues available to exhibit art, but the Senegalese government has actively encouraged cultural production since the country's independence in 1960. Senegal's first president, Leopold Senghor, was an avid spokesman for "negritude," the rekindling of African heritage as a deterrent to further depredations from the West.

With a budget of \$700,000 (mostly donated by the European Economic Community), Dak'art 96 had the means to justify making a real attempt at inclusiveness. Any citizen of Africa could submit work to Dak'art, and only those eventually selected were required to pay the \$9.60 entry fee. In practice, though, it's uncertain how representative the biennial show really was. Only 20 of Africa's 54 nations had representatives among the 94 artists included in the event. About 84 percent of those artists reside in West Africa, and fully 60 percent, overall, were Senegalese. In any case, the show was nothing if not contemporary, with most of the artists under 45 years of age.

With literally dozens of cultural institutions participating in this year's Dak'art, each day was chock-full of exhibitions, panel discussions and openings, followed at night by fashion shows, art films and dance performances. Dak'art hosted 10 separate exhibitions of visual art—the International Exhibition of African Art, the Exhibition of Contemporary Senegalese Art, the African Design Salon, the Tapestry and Textile Art Salon, the Arts Education Salon and the five solo exhibitions repre-

senting one artist each from Africa's five regions (North, West, Central, East and South).

The International Exhibition of African Art, which presented works by 44 artists, took place at the newest wing of the Museum of Black African Art (run by the Institut Fondamental de l'Art Africain, or IFAN), constructed in 1993 to house temporary exhibitions. One of the striking features of contemporary African art is the omnipresence of collage and recycled materials. Such work seems less akin to Schwitters's neat collages and Man Ray's clever *objets trouvés* than to the radical intercultural spirit of the Beat era artists. Just as the latter attempted to redefine the identity of American youth in the wake of World War II, postcolonial African artists—those who came of age during Senegal's struggle for independence—have created



Moustapha Dime (Senegal): *Contemporary Dance (detail)*, 1995, sticks and mixed mediums; exhibited at Galerie 39, the French Cultural Center's off-site gallery.

works to reinvigorate their African identity.

The primary reason African collage and assemblage bear so little resemblance to their Western counterparts is simply that African artists use local materials and make references particular to their surroundings. One of the loveliest display ideas was the occasional blanket of sand on the floor, either to connect the white-cube museum to the out-of-doors or to allude to Africa's history of land worship. (About this link to the land, poet Aimé Césaire has written, "My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral . . . It plunges into the red flesh of the earth.")

Mali artist Abdoulaye Konate's installation *Homage to Mandé Hunters* consisted of a large canvas with hundreds of bead fetishes tied to its surface and three sandboxes with myriad objects hidden in the sand. With its beaded circle at the canvas's top, the work suggested a giant cloak spread-eagled on the wall. Gambian artist Chuckley Vincent Secka suspended batik fabric between sticks. This quasi-figural wall hanging depicts what looks like the thwart of a rowboat seen from above, but where one expects to find hands reaching for the oars, one finds feet worked into the batik, bringing to mind such foot-related labors as weaving, ceramics and sewing. Mali artist Ismael Diabate sews fabrics together with such large stitches that the thread forms abstract motifs. One such work, essentially a diptych, juxtaposes a sewn-fabric panel that has a gaping hole in it against another panel with a darker printed-fabric surface, resulting in a provocative standoff. Diabate's other work in the show has a small bundle of sticks, similar to those used for scrubbing teeth, fastened to the surface of the canvas.

Perhaps the painting most accessible to the Western eye was Senegalese artist Fodé Camara's *Le Parcours* (The Course), an abstraction in a lively palette of transparent reds, greens and yellows. It stood out, since overall the show was dominated by telluric colors. The irregular shape of *Le Parcours*—basically rectangular but with relief elements jutting beyond its confines—is accentuated by a small orb strapped to the painting's surface. Even brighter is Niger artist Boubacar Boureima's matte acrylic painting *Sakala*, which, in its strenuously optical effects, recalls the so-called Op art of the '60s. It is square in format, with a circular motif divided into 10 isosceles triangles whose points meet at the center. Each triangle contains painted images of different striped fabrics folded into accordion pleats. The combination of each pattern's vibrant colors, the pleats, and the meeting-up of the varying patterns to form concentric



**Ivory Coast's Kra N'Guessan and Burkino Faso's Siriki Ky use characteristic African patterns (similar to fabric designs) in their sculptures, but the combinations are more complex than those commonly found in textiles.**



*Siriki Ky (Burkina Faso): God?, 1994, polychromed wood, bronze and leather, 67 by 71 inches.*

circles contributes to the painting's jarring effect. It evokes a whirlwind of feverishly dancing skirts.

Serigne Mbaye Camara, a Senegalese artist who is also director of the Ecole Nationale de Beaux Arts in Dakar, showed an installation at Atissa (a Dakar fabric showroom) that proved more interesting than his sculptures at Dak'art. At Atissa, he installed a large wall hanging that has dozens of small wooden figures delicately affixed to its surface with hemp. The whole piece dangles over and partly in a luscious pile of sand. In its intricate, thready abundance the piece calls to mind Annette Messager's massive accumulations of hanging photos of body parts. Camara's wood-and-rebar sculptures at Dak'art, meanwhile, suggest skeletal figures, at once clunky and elegant. Despite their declarative physical presence, these works also speak of solitude, and in their statuesque silence they bring to mind well-known Senegalese painter Amadou Ba's comparable images of the nomadic Peuhl people. (Ba's work was not included in Dak'art, perhaps because it is so familiar, both in and out of Senegal.)

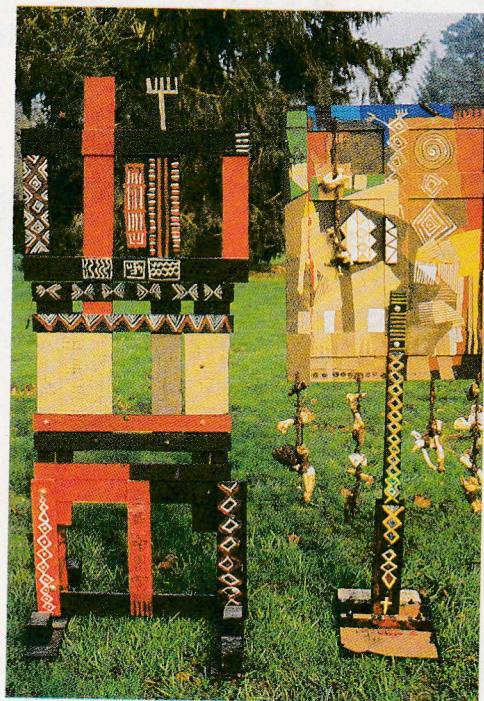
A giant strand of beads accents Senegalese artist Seyni Gadiaga's terra-cotta-colored painting. Its resemblance to a door frame gives it an architecton-

ic presence, while its collapsed landscape space suggests the desert complement to Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series. Ivory Coast's Kra N'Guessan and Burkino Faso's Siriki Ky use characteristic African patterns (similar to fabric designs) in their sculptures, but the combinations are more complex than those commonly found in textiles. N'Guessan's life-size wooden sculptures resemble remarkable African costumes, while Ky's wooden sculptures, part painted and part left natural, evoke the interdependence of nature and culture.

**T**he Contemporary Senegalese Exhibition featured 45 artists at the National Art Gallery, which generally offers temporary exhibitions of young artists. (An ancillary mini-show paid tribute to local painter Bocar Pate Diong, who died in 1989 at 43.) For the most part, this was a hodge-podge of super-energetic abstract painting. But while it was widely alleged that Dak'art was deficient in figurative work, several fine local examples here suggested otherwise. In Omar Katta Diallo's painting *Canton Chief*, hundreds of markings, evocative of language and dancing figures, form a portrait on a terra-cotta ground. Mamadou Tall Diedhiou's portrait *Marie Mégots* is a cigarette-butt collage. Netting, metal studs and magazine scraps give heft to Mylène Houelle's feminist painting *Rescued from Hell*.

The Tapestry and Textile Art Salon was held at the Chamber of Commerce, a colonial building whose facade was beautifully decorated with dozens of colored fabric strips that extended its large entrance. Among the 20 artists' work exhibited, the most remarkable examples of textile art were those by the Senegalese painter Madeleine Senghor. Her very dynamic fabric hangings make use of striking

*Chuckley Vincent Secka (Gambia): The Weaver, 1995, wall construction with batik fabric, sticks and mixed mediums, 74½ by 47½ inches.*



*Kra N'Guessan (Ivory Coast): Reliquary, 1995, painted wood, sand and bones, 90 by 31 by 20 inches. Works this page were included in the International Exhibition of African Art.*

color combinations—purple embroidery on a tan background, multicolored stripes on an orange background—and some fabric segments push out toward the viewer while others are sewn down as if in restraint. Diafara Kane's handsome wall hangings blend batik and traditional African patterns.

Perhaps the most surprising exhibition was the African Design Salon, held at VEMA Space, a multifunctional warehouse with a very contemporary facade, near the Gorée Embarcadero. This was an impressive show, featuring many unexpected interpretations of lamps, chairs, tables and couches—all with a distinctly African flair. The shapes and iconography used in these objects are similar to those found on African fabrics, and again sand played an instrumental role in some displays. Among the most successful works was Senegalese designer Babacar Sedikh Traore's table with a glass top that exposes its structure, pieced together from household water pipes and red faucets. It was accompanied by matching chairs and silverware with rebar handles. Ivory Coast designer Vincent Amian Niamien showed a very simple wooden chair, its frame a triangle within which the seat and back rest are suspended. Togo designer Kossi Assou's clever white chairs were cut from oil barrels and upholstered with African fabrics. Senegalese designer Sowalo Cisse's expansive carved couch upholstered in royal blue recalled the ceremonial elegance of Africa's precolonial kingdoms.

Unexpectedly touching was the Arts Education Salon at the Blaise Senghor Cultural Institute, which featured art works by very young artists (ages 5-20). The works here were quite moving, as they mostly addressed the daily experience of their makers, including such matters as AIDS, village life, the family and Islam. There were colored-paper constructions of dream homes, trucks and cars;



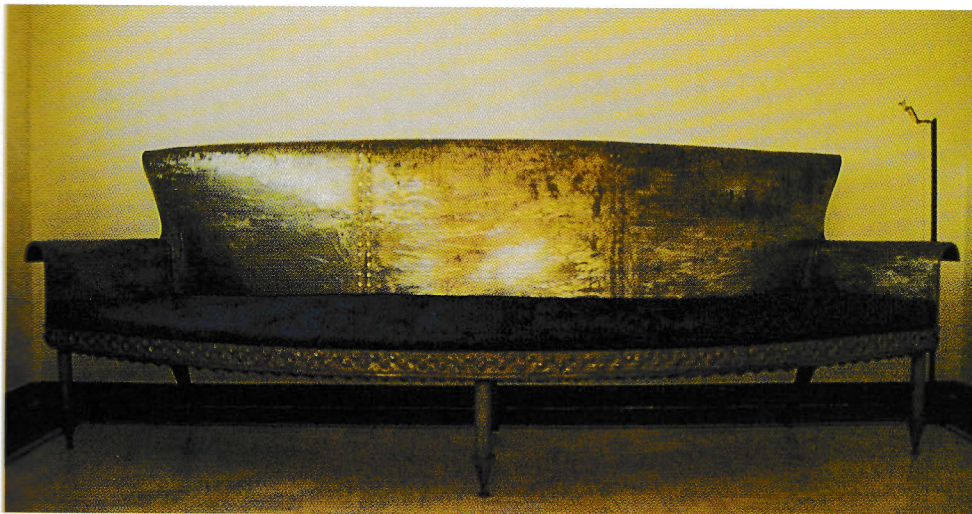
complex abstract paintings; and drawings detailing the social and political issues most on the minds of these children and youths. Given the United States's long-standing and ever blunter disregard for arts education, it was refreshing to see a society that relishes creativity and understands the relationship between imagination and democracy.

The five regional exhibitions featured South African Ezrom Kgobokanyo Legae (South), Cameroonian Pascale Marthine Tayou (Central), Ethiopian Zerihun Yetmgeta (East), Moroccan Kacimi (North) and Senegalese Moustapha Dime (West). The 59-year-old Legae exhibited abstract bronze sculptures of deformed goats (metaphors for the sacrifices and horrors of apartheid) at the Museum of Black African Art's newer wing. Unfortunately, amid so much energetic, ephemeral and gritty work, these bronzes seemed quite staid.

Twenty-nine-year-old Tayou's grotesque assemblages, exhibited at Dakar's Goethe Institute,

ters and Amharic writing, express a need to revivify traditional African and Ethiopian cultures, using ordinary materials, and to resist being overrun by a Western cultural and technical invasion. Kacimi's oneiric canvas, painted in a style reminiscent of both Neo-Expressionism and automatist drawing, spanned three walls of a room in the Museum of Black African Art's newer wing.

Moustapha Dime's exhibition at Galerie 39, the French Cultural Center's gallery annex, was the clear favorite at Dak'art. He presented autonomous works on the first floor and an appealing installation upstairs. Many of the works portray various stick figures with hoe-heads engaged in various dances. The stick figures are quite different from one another, some of them jute-wrapped and others embedded with metal objects that look like tool parts. *Contemporary Choreography*, the installation upstairs, contained nine such figures encircling two others amid a sea of yellow fabric. Most of the stick



Sawalo Cisse (Senegal): Blue Couch.

exemplify the first generation of post-independence artists (those Africans born into states already freed from colonial rule), who personalize their artistic expression, rather than feeling obliged, like their predecessors, to explore the nature of African identity. Yukiya Kawaguchi, curator at the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, observed in the catalogue how

[Tayou's] works express a refusal of platonic art, a European art, which pretends to be the projection of the will, and why should [the artist] ignore this? Tayou's world isn't heaven. It is on our level, the body's. His work manages to denounce the West which doesn't blush while taking, one after another, in the name of art, the diverse contemporary art forms, ignoring them unscrupulously after using them.<sup>2</sup>

Tayou's assemblages integrate the ordinary materials of daily life such as trash, plastic bottles, underwear, suction cups, sandals, knives and forks, dolls, condoms, etc. Tayou's opening speech was short and to the point: "This is my shit. This is your shit. Let's consume the shit!"

At the Four Winds Gallery, Yetmgeta presented about 20 paintings on bamboo surfaces. These abstract works, which contain African and Ethiopian symbols, signs and motifs, alphabet let-

figures were gender neutral, but the central couple was male-female, and the circle itself contained another male and a female. Over all, the installation suggested both the encircling comfort and strength of the community, as well as its potential threat to marital fidelity. Downstairs, *Contemporary Dance* posed the couple on the outside of the circle, with an individual coming between them. Dime also installed a rather large wood sculpture in the French Cultural Center's courtyard.

There were many smaller exhibitions not officially sponsored by Dak'art 96 that proved vital complements. Few works at Dak'art 96 could be characterized as Pop, since the biennial's artists seem more fascinated by everyday experience. By contrast, Africa's cottage industry of recycling tin cans and plastic bags into useful objects does evoke Pop art, since the bold corporate logos affixed to these materials assume, in their second lives, something of the double function (citation and critique of capitalism) made familiar by post-Pop and postmodernist artists worldwide. Ecopole, a temporary garagelike space near Dakar's center, housed an informative traveling exhibition (organized by the government of



Vincent Amian Niamien (Ivory Coast): Wooden Chair. Works this page were included in the African Design Salon at VEMA Space.

Quebec) devoted to the West African art of recycling. All the display cases were contained in giant silver trunks and were accompanied by detailed texts and excellent photos of cottage industry workers processing reusable garbage. The exhibition itself, ready to pack up and travel at a moment's notice, exemplified the recycling ethos. Incidentally, another Ecopole exhibition featured art works from Kinshasa, Zaire. Among them were about five works by Cheri Samba, perhaps the best-known of contemporary African painters. These early '80s paintings were noticeably worn from frequent exhibition and casual treatment, with the canvas frayed and torn along the bars of the stretcher. The inadvertent point seems to be that these paintings are not primarily regarded as valuable



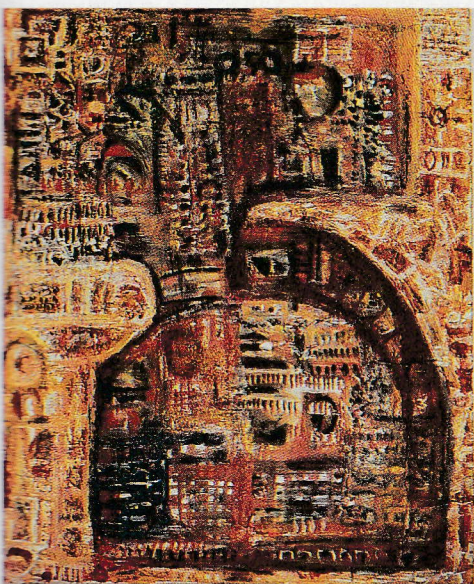
Kossi Assou (Togo): Salon Bidon, 1994, oil barrels and fabric.



**Twenty-nine-year-old Tayou's grotesque assemblages exemplify the first generation of post-independence artists, who personalize their expression, rather than feeling obliged, like their predecessors, to explore the nature of African identity.**

commodities; they are made to be seen, not owned and conserved.

The Franco-Senegalese Alliance organized an exhibition of another traditional African art, *sous verre* (paintings under glass), for the Alliance Française exhibition space. Twenty-one artists were divided into three categories—the traditionalists, the modernists and those with an “ambiguous palette” (abstract painters). *Sous verre* is painted backwards on glass that is then flipped over onto a sheet of paper. The works presented at the Alliance



**Omar Katta Diallo (Senegal):** *Canton Chief*, 1995, paint on terra-cotta, 23 1/4 by 19 1/4 inches; included in the *Exhibition of Contemporary Senegalese Art*.

Française varied considerably in ambition. Some were highly detailed and imaginative, while others were no better than what could be had on the streets of Dakar for a few dollars.

An artist-organized alternative to Dak'art, called TENQ 96, was staged in the barracks that had housed the Chinese workers who built the city's soccer stadium a few years ago. TENQ 96 was a playful workshop to facilitate inter-professional and inter-cultural dialogues. (The name “TENQ” means both “thank you” and “think tank.”) Underwritten by the British Council, the Mission for Cooperation, and the Senegalese Ministry of Culture, TENQ 96 seemed more representative of African art than Dak'art. Fifteen artists from seven countries worked and lived on-site for two weeks



**Mamadou Tall Diedhiou (Senegal):** *Marie Mégots*, 1995, cigarette butts and mixed mediums, 21 1/2 by 17 1/2 inches; included in the *Exhibition of Contemporary Senegalese Art*.

prior to the show's single afternoon viewing. Eight of the TENQ artists were also Dak'art invitees.

The art works for TENQ were either constructed in situ, complementing the barracks's architecture; arranged in careful relation to the site, with its numerous courtyards and walkways; or consolidated into mini-exhibitions within rooms. Most of the works addressed issues familiar from Western art of the last few years, aiming to critique the gallery system and its commodification of the art object. Senegalese artist Kan-Si's gridded walkway consisted of squares containing either words (English or French written in chalk), objects (such as a rock), or simply a painted patch of color. With its combination of philosophical terms and everyday words, the work offers itself as a magical path, and it led in this case to a giant gridded wall covered with mostly abstract markings that vaguely resembled cartoonish figures and calligraphic strokes.

Also for TENQ, Ivory Coast artist Yacouba Touré blocked off a simple courtyard in front of a room and presented a large industrial spool. On the room's wall, he scribbled phrases like “you don't know,” “go away,” and “F off” in English and French. Perhaps this apparent hostility represented the vulnerability African artists feel in the face of Westerners who collect African art the way investors trade penny stocks. After all, Africa's national treasures have, for the most part, been sold abroad for a song. As for Touré's contribution to Dak'art, his was the most compelling image reproduced in the catalogue—a huge and colorful fabric piece with plastic plates hanging from it—so it was disappointing to find two rather meager fabric collages had replaced that work in the show itself.

In the barracks' main courtyard Senegalese artist Guibril Andre Diop presented a pair of massive sculptures that likewise comment on the position of the

African artist. Both works are made of partially painted wood. Evocative of a workable snare, *Trap* alludes to life's pitfalls, in particular the perilous course that artists walk between making art and making a living. The title of Diop's other sculpture, *Infinite Time*, suggests his intention to resist being rushed into the international art market. Diop remarked that TENQ's noncommercial nature made its offerings especially meaningful; collectively they constituted a gift to the public. In fact, the practice of exchanging art for money is relatively new in Africa. Previously, African artists exchanged their art for tools and materials. Jean Baudrillard has lamented the passing of humane practices that explicitly value human labor (or “symbolic exchange,” to use his term). As long as African cultures give precedence to the social, *partager* (sharing) and open discussion will facilitate his ideal.

Senegalese cultural theorist Joe Rangelissa Samb (a.k.a. Issa Samb), whose Dakar restaurant is a gathering place for artists, presented a large target painting and a wall hanging. He was said to have greeted the Senegalese president at Dak'art's opening ceremony, then left to visit the prisoners in jail; their art works were on display at the Biennial Village Gardens. Elsewhere, artist El Hadji Sy stretched one of his pouchlike paintings between two buildings. Upon close inspection, one discovered bowls made from calabash squash resting inside the work's pockets.

In this postmodernist age, it is surprising to hear so many Dak'art speakers refer to art as universal, as if there were some universal man to create or experience it. Given the dozens of African countries and hundreds of African languages and tribes, it would seem that if any continent were predisposed to relativism, it would be Africa.



**Pascale Marthine Tayou (Cameroon):** *Universal Socks '95*, trash, condoms and mixed mediums, 59 by 29 1/2 inches; included in Dak'art's regional show of art from Central Africa at the Goethe Institute.





Zerihun Yetmgeta (Ethiopia): Paintings on Bamboo Surfaces, mixed mediums; included in Dak'art's regional show of art from East Africa at the Four Winds Gallery.

Perhaps the belief in a universal art stems from the African concept of Muntu, which holds that the whole human race constitutes a single family, so that people everywhere are connected to one another. In fact, Africanist Ali Mazrui concludes his insightful book *The Africans* with the observa-

tion that "Muntu, man, needs a final scare to convince him that the world is indeed a village, and the human race is a family."<sup>3</sup> As the post-independence generation continues exploring the range of African identity, African contemporary art will evolve to reflect the diversity of its population.

Dak'art 96 and its sister exhibitions were instrumental in demonstrating the truth of one vital strain of Africanist thinking: a conviction that the European influence in Africa is shallow, not deep, and that colonialism was merely a blip in Africa's rich history. Amidst the stresses and strains of late capitalism, the West has much to learn from African humanism, in particular the indigenous traditions of social welfare, the morality of sharing and reciprocity, the necessity of recycling (*récupération*) and the process of consensus-building. The forthcoming Dak'art 98 (May 7-14, 1998) will invite artists from outside Africa to exhibit side by side with African artists. □

1. Ali Mazrui, *The Africans*, Boston, Little Brown, 1986, p. 272. (*The Africans* is the book that accompanied the 1986 WETA television series of the same name.) In precolonial Africa, land worship existed as a function of agriculture and the burial of ancestors. In postcolonial Africa, it

has come to mean territorial worship, with the attendant assertions of power and sovereignty. Mazrui argues that "the west has provided these artificial borders which have enclosed the battlegrounds—the borders left over from partition" (p. 290). In fact, "Africa's colonial boundaries may be the biggest single cause of Africa's tensions."

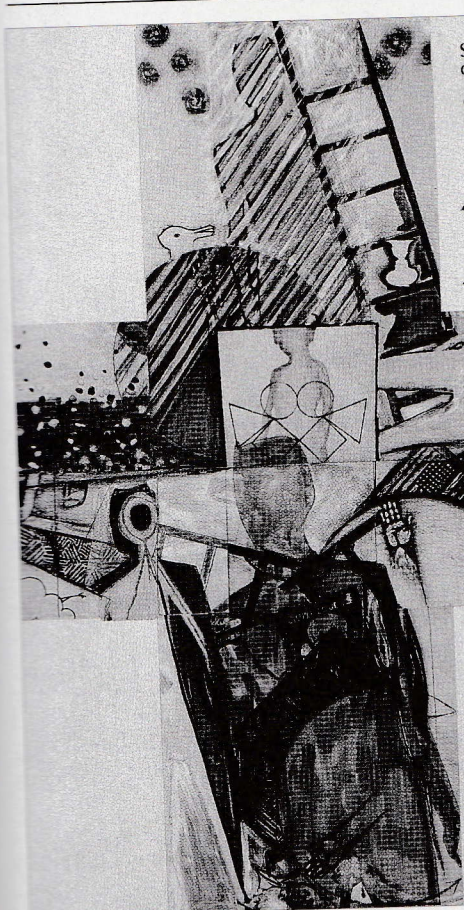
2. *Dak'art*, Paris, Cimaïse, 1996, p. 81.

3. Mazrui, p. 315.

Author: Sue Spaid is a curator and critic based in Los Angeles.



Kan-Si (Senegal): Gridded Wall, 1996, chalk on wall and mixed mediums; included in *TENQ 96*, an artist-organized alternative to Dak'art, sited in barracks that once housed Chinese workers. Photo Sue Spaid.



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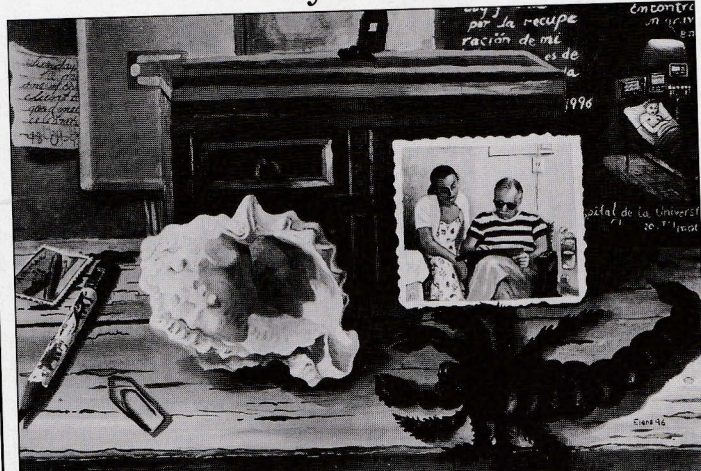
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## Elena Climent

### To My Parents



Elena Climent, *Turquoise Table with Beach Photo*, 1996, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 5 7/8 x 8 inches (14.3 x 20.3 cm)

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