

The Wake

L'éveil, le Sillage

Concept note
of the 15th Dakar Biennial
2024



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Remembering Saint-Louis in Senegal. A huge wave of sand crashes over me. It passes through me and continues on its way, sweeping along the banks of the river, to die in its arms. A unique tangle of yellow-ochre and blue-grey: this is the colour of my earliest memories, the foundations of an imagination that is now finding its essential shape and its meaning. Such memories have forged in me an intimate definition of absolute beauty, a precious feeling where fear and wonder intertwine, a pure and total joy of being in the world. There was a time when pythons still populated Gaston Berger University, when the blue caravans of the Moors frequently roamed through the sandy paths of the districts of *Sor*¹¹, and when I would sometimes hear the adults worrying about the advancing desert over the *tarxiis*¹². The wind and the river taught me, without a word, the humility of the human being in the face of nature. And in the face of art.

What remains of these visions? What to make of my wanderings, years later, in an island of Saint-Louis abandoned by tourists, devastated by unemployment and other ravages of the global pandemic? Of those late-night conversations by the river, with the night watchmen fanning the fire under the boiling teapot, still reeling from the images of George Floyd's murder? Of the smell of tear gas from the fishermen's demonstrations at *Guet Ndar*¹³? Of the sinking of sea-venturing pirogues laden with our sisters and brothers? And what about the apocalyptic scenes of villages swept away by rising waters and the interminable minutes it takes to cross the new *mbuus*¹⁴ fields on the way out of town?

We now experience a sense of imminence and the bitter taste of the ending of a world. Admittedly, life has resumed its course, the birds have stopped venturing out of the *Djoudj*¹⁵, the tourists have now returned and the waiters have gone back to earning their livelihoods. But I want to believe that in the hearts of my generation the echo of something pure and powerful has been awakened and persists, an echo going back to childhood. A salutary fear, and a clear vision of an imminent metamorphosis: a personal, social, ecological and economic transformation that is as inescapable as it is imperative to our collective presence in the world. To our very existence.

Because our trees, our world, our society and our youth are on fire.

Our artists are at the heart of this metamorphosis. Gathered in Dakar, they give shape to the new world by wielding the unspeakable and unspoken language of colours and feelings. Let them awaken us, let them carry us along in their wake.

In his great Arabic poem¹⁶, Khalil Gibran writes :

*«It is said that before entering the sea
a river trembles with fear.
She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages. (...)*

*The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.»*

11 Neighbourhood of Saint-Louis, on the mainland side, to which the island of Saint-Louis is linked by the Faidherbe bridge.

12 According to the ataya ritual, this refers to the third and final tea, the least bitter and the lightest.

13 Neighbourhood of Saint-Louis.

14 Wolof term for a small plastic bag.

15 The Djoudj National Bird Park is the third largest bird reserve park in the world.

16 "The Fear", Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 1923.

In addressing the impossible question of what is art, the only possible answer is surely the experience we have of it. An impulse, a music, a motion that neither begins or ends with the work on display. Immerse yourself in the work and its melody. Let yourself be carried along in its wake. Understand and embrace the foam and the trace that it leaves behind, and savour the story of its birth and elaboration.

This is the invitation issued by the 2024 Dakar Biennial: to join and experience a journey through an Atlantis that artists have secretly repopulated. The theme of this fifteenth edition of the Dakar Biennial is part of a continuity, an unstoppable current that embraces a whole range of temporalities: the central idea being to link the past and the future by giving them equal importance. This concept is partly inspired by Professor Christina Sharpe's influential work *'In the Wake: On Blackness and Black Being'*¹⁷, in which she examines the black condition and its literary, visual and artistic representations in relation to notions of exhumation, mourning and uprooting.

Through this Biennale we will explore the various meanings and evocations of the term 'wake' (awakening, trail, funeral wake, *gindiku*¹⁸), whose rich semantic range ultimately provides cultural and metaphorical bridges between art and society. Dakar is an ideal staging ground to convene such a contemporary and artistic conversation on environment and repair. In the soil of the city and the shores of its land - a West African Finisterre - that understands climate change, extractivism, social upheaval and the usefulness of imagination to transcend the challenges of contemporary life. This place is able to speak to the rising concerns brought up in research and exhibitions, that are thematically connecting environmental concerns, social concerns and colonial histories. Significantly, many of these conversations are staged on or about the water¹⁹, as is so much the case in Dakar and St Louis. At this time, the world is looking increasingly to Africa for creative solutions - asking how indigenous knowledge has understood environmental change for generations and created forms of resilience that are unprecedented, and full of meaning for the present and the future.

To navigate between the wake and the foam, we will make landfall on Glissant's cherished concept of 'archipelagic thinking' as an antidote to hegemonic forms of world-making²⁰. This helps us to recognise that now more than ever society is in flux and artists are moving between both spaces and identities to create a dialogue between islands of culture and a conceptualisation of the sea as 'a living dermis, which rallies, relays, connects'²¹. This fluid movement is something that *The Wake* connects, recognising that an archipelago is not a single island, and a wave always creates an energetic flow into another direction.

The artists of Africa and the diaspora are in the place and the function where the world desperately needs them: sentinels of the imaginary, pioneers of a vital metamorphosis - digging the beds of new streams and forming the silt of new rivers. As they join the sea. These are the themes, concepts and issues that underpin and form the enquiry and experience that will be Dak'art Edition 15.

Salimata DIOP

17 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake : On Blackness and Black Being*, 2016.

18 Wolof word meaning the path, the way.

19 see WISER : Oceanic Humanities for the Global South: <https://www.oceanichumanities.com> Lesley Looko's Venice Biennale, Panama Pavillion, Water Aid's Waterlife project.

20 Martínez-San Miguel, Y., & Stephens, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Contemporary archipelagic thinking: Towards new comparative methodologies and disciplinary formations*.

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Glissant, É., & Chamoiseau, P. (2022). *Manifestos*. MIT Press.

21 Patrick Chamoiseau, *Ecrire un pays dominé*, 2002



Salimata DIOP

Biographie / Biography

Biography

Salimata Diop is a curator, art critic and composer. She grew up in Saint-Louis and Dakar in Senegal. Her multicultural heritage and passion for culture, history and the arts led her to specialise in curating contemporary art and she is now based in Dakar and La Rochelle (France).

From 2012 to 2013, she co-directed the documentary series *African Masters* for The Africa Channel, revealing the studios of artists including Yinka Shonibare, El Anatsui, Mary Sibande, William Kentridge, Wangechi Mutu, and Ousmane Sow. Salimata Diop then directed the programming of the Africa Centre in London from 2014 to 2015, before being appointed artistic director of the contemporary art fair AKA (Also Known as Africa) at the Carreau du Temple in Paris, where she organised the programming of the first three editions from 2015 to 2017.

Together with collector Amadou Diaw, she created the MuPho (Musée de la Photographie de Saint-Louis du Sénégal), which she directed from 2017 to 2018, with the aim of building and establishing a new link for the recognition, documentation and dissemination of 20th and 21st century African photographers.

She then pursued her career as a curator through a number of exhibitions and publications. These include *Art Africa Fair* (2017), Cape Town, for which she organised and curated the *Bright Young Things* prize, revealing the work of artist Laeila Adjovi - future Grand Prix winner of the Dakar Biennale in 2018-, *La Villa Rouge* (2018), *Les Chants invincibles* (2022) as part of the OFF of the Dakar Biennale, and more recently *Pourquoi j'ai arraché ma Peau (Why I tore off my skin)*, the first solo exhibition of French-Cameroonian artist Beya Gilles Gacha at the Tropiques Atrium in Fort de France, in June 2023.

Salimata Diop holds a Master's degree in Foreign Literatures, Languages and Civilisations (CPGE Maison d'Education de la Légion d'Honneur & La Sorbonne Paris IV), and a Master's degree in the History of Art and Collections (Warwick University & IESA).

She was named one of the "50 most influential Africans" by *Jeune Afrique* magazine (2018), and one of the "avant-garde Frenchwomen under 30" by *Vanity Fair* magazine (2018), and will join the directory of experts of the Club XXIème in 2021.



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