

The City as Site: Building an Audience for Contemporary Art in Africa

– Kerry Greenberg

In 2010, during a conference at Tate Modern on curatorial practice in Africa, Raphael Chikukwa (National Gallery of Zimbabwe) and Riason Naidoo (South African National Gallery) marvelled at the long queues they passed on their way into the Turbine Hall. While Tate Modern attracts on average five million visitors a year, for it and other major public institutions in Europe and America, diversifying and sustaining such an audience remains a priority.¹ In Africa, where arts education is limited and museums, where they exist, are often seen as a product of colonialism and the domain of the elite, establishing a sizeable local audience is arguably one of the biggest challenges facing arts professionals.

Since the Dakar Biennale was conceived in 1989 and first realized in 1990, efforts to build audiences for contemporary art across the continent have escalated and diversified. Some of these strategies have been more successful than others. In 1995 the inaugural Johannesburg Biennale emphasized local artistic production in the new South Africa, but it was criticized for being too inward looking. In 1997, the second Johannesburg Biennale was internationally acclaimed and launched Okwui Enwezor's career, but failed to gather enough local support to continue.² Since then, numerous curators have explored a wide range of approaches to foster appreciation for the visual arts in their communities. In Cotonou, Fondation Zinsou focuses on the youth, bussing school children in and dedicating significant resources to education programs.³ In Zimbabwe, before rampant inflation destabilized the country, the National Gallery sent outreach officers with exhibitions to townships and rural areas in trucks repurposed as galleries.⁴ There are curators who have devised exhibitions that have considerable popular appeal but lack critical acclaim, and others who believe that simply sustaining a good exhibition programme will ultimately reap its rewards.⁵

In recent years there has been a proliferation of large-scale exhibitions and festivals in far-flung places, from New Orleans to Kochi and Muziri, as politicians and local arts communities have sought to showcase artistic practices, build contemporary arts infrastructure, regenerate and revitalize cities, and attract international attention.⁶ Sub-Saharan Africa has not been immune to this trend and there are now many examples of such events in the region. The Dak'art Biennale in Senegal, which was founded in 1992, and Rencontres de Bamako in Mali, which was established two years later, are two of the oldest and best known. Although their funding, organizational structures, and modus operandi are different, both these biennales usually center around one large-scale gallery exhibition and a number of satellite projects that occur in other parts of the city. These projects tend to be *situated* rather than *sited*, selected for exhibition *in*, rather than created especially *for*, a particular place.

As Barry Curtis notes in his foreword to *Exploring Site-Specific Art*, there are many ways in which artists can function in “different contexts to dramatize existing conditions; draw attention to the overlooked; or suggest expressive possibilities that are latent in interactions between artists and environments.”⁷ In Sub-Saharan Africa, where challenges to building hard and soft arts infrastructure abound, Picha Encounters, a photography and video biennale in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD), a triennial festival for public art in Cameroon, have embraced site-specificity.⁸ Using SUD as a case study, this essay reveals how commissioning ephemeral and permanent works, which engage not only with a physical site and its inhabitants, but also the economic, social, and political factors that make a place what it is, has enabled the organizers to extend the art viewing experience both into

and out of the white cube, to impact positively on the city, and critically, to reach an otherwise inaccessible audience.

Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD), Cameroon

Cameroon, bordered by Nigeria to the west, Chad to the northeast, the Central African Republic to the east, and Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo to the south, has always been an important trade center. Douala is not the political capital of Cameroon, but with a large port and international airport is the country's commercial hub. Situated where several rivers converge in a tidal estuary, Douala is hemmed in by water and densely populated. Despite being one of the richest cities in Central Africa, basic infrastructure is severely lacking. Swathes of unregulated settlement make the provision of critical services not only difficult and expensive but also impossible without relocating large numbers of people. Extensive flooding during the rainy season leaves the roads in disrepair while the built environment is progressively eroded and the natural environment polluted by overuse. There is a highly contentious relationship to the political regime in power, which is widely seen as repressive, and a lack of faith in the government's ability to provide even the most basic services.⁹ As Emiliano Gandolfi notes, "It is no accident that the administration of Douala does not issue maps, which would confirm the embarrassing presence of whole parts of the city."¹⁰

A diverse population inhabits Douala in improvised ways, with growth strongly determined by informality and contingency, according to unwritten rules. Ethnic divisions are complex and public space is contested, making it particularly challenging to identify areas where it is possible to put forward projects for the collective good. Gandolfi argues, "The possibility of establishing connections, of giving an impulse to shared spaces and stimulating a process of collective imagination that will generate a better city can stem only from actions inexorably locked into the neighborhood logic, but also sufficiently detached from specific interests."¹¹ It is in this context that the recently deceased artist Goddy Leye asserted, "development is an aesthetic project."¹²

There are no contemporary art museums or art schools in Cameroon. There is, however, a burgeoning art scene supported by independent initiatives that fill an institutional void. Of these, Cercle Kapsiki, a collective of five artists — Blaise Bang, Salifou Lindou, Jules Wokam, Hervé Yamguen and Hervé Youmbi — formed in 1998 to produce urban interventions, and Art Bakery, founded in 2002 by Goddy Leye with the support of the RAIN Artists' Initiatives Network and the Rijksakademie to facilitate experimentation in video art, have become well known outside Cameroon.¹³ While these developments are significant, the vitality of the Cameroon art scene today and the international success of several artists from Cameroon are in no small part due to Doual'art, an independent arts organization established in 1991 by Marilyn Douala Bell, a socio-economist who used to work as a consultant for the World Bank, and Didier Schaub, an art historian.

Doual'art did not have an office or exhibition space for the first few years of its existence, and from the beginning the city was their site. Whether initiating the painting of murals, installation of billboards, theater plays on the streets and in local bars, or jam sessions on the Wouri River, each of their projects reflects the co-founders' different skills and specific interests, as well as their understanding of, and commitment to, their city.¹⁴ Iolanda Pensa describes how Douala Bell and Schaub have developed "a working method that dovetails culture and development, without it being possible to identify the exact boundaries of the spheres that belong to each."¹⁵ Doual'art understands development not just in terms of the provision of basic infrastructure, but also the ability of the inhabitants of a city to express themselves and actively partake in shaping the environment they live in.

La Nouvelle Liberté by Joseph F. Sumeagne has been one of Doual'art's most contentious projects. Commissioned in 1993, the sculpture was erected in the summer of 1996. Reactions to the more than ten meter high figure, assembled out of discarded items such as old tires, broken lights, scrap

metal and disused electrical appliances, were initially positive. Made as a counterpoint to New York's Statue of Liberty, *La Nouvelle Liberté* stands on one leg with its left arm balancing a stylized globe above its head, the pose and construction emphasizing prudence and the difficulty of maintaining freedom.¹⁶ Installed in the center of a roundabout in Deido, at an important junction en route to the only bridge crossing the Wouri River, the sculpture attracted a great deal of attention and it was not long before a campaign against the work, its commissioners and the artist emerged with allegations that *La Nouvelle Liberté* contained evil spirits.¹⁷

It appears that much of the controversy stemmed from the artist's ethnic background as a Bamiléké, which is different to that of his critics. Sumegne was unable to complete the work, but since the authorities had granted permission in advance and the sculpture was privately funded, it has remained. According to Zayd Minty it has become an "homage" to the street peddlers or *sauveurs*—literally "people who save or rescue things"—who have taken it on as "a symbol of their often persecuted and maligned lot in a city that demands their services and rejects them simultaneously."¹⁸ Although still known as *Nju-Nju du Rond-Pont* (evil spirit of the roundabout), the range of responses, both positive and negative, attest to the power of art and its importance in a developing context.¹⁹ Today, *La Nouvelle Liberté* is a major landmark, which anyone in Douala is able to provide directions to. By making something from nothing the artist has not only stimulated an engagement with, and debate about, aesthetics, he has also demonstrated the vibrancy of the city, not "as an idealized, pristine space, but as the messy difficult place it is."²⁰

In 1995, Douala Bell and Schaub restored an old cinema adjoining La Pagode, a historic building belonging to the Manga Bell family in the old colonial center of Bonanjo, where they stage between twelve and fifteen exhibitions per year.²¹ Having a permanent space, however, has not altered the founders' belief that "art is a factor of change and the African city is an inspiration in its creation."²² Rather, their commitment to initiating cultural projects that stimulate collective engagement with the processes of urban development and regeneration has intensified.

Today, discussion is intrinsic to each of their projects and the process is as important as any product. In 2005 Doual'art organized *Ars & Urbis*, an international and multi-disciplinary workshop, to consider relationships between the city, civil society and contemporary art. This meeting paved the way for *SUD*, a tri-annual festival for public art, realized by Doual'art first in 2007 and again in 2010. The three-year interval between each *SUD* enables invited local and international artists to prepare projects for locations of their choice in Douala. International artists are invited for residencies in two parts. On the first visit they are encouraged to immerse themselves in the social, political, economic, physical, and artistic realities of Douala, and during their second visit they usually realize an artwork in the city. Each triennial has a theme, which is discussed during the *Ars & Urbis* workshops, providing a framework for the artistic interventions.

For the inaugural edition of *SUD*, in 2007, the themes were broad, and during the course of seven days, fifteen interventions by artists from Cameroon and beyond addressed topics ranging from urban mobility to noise pollution, and the informal economy.²³ The Cameroonian artist Alioum Moussa designed a bridge with brightly colored metal handrails resembling people holding hands. This footbridge connects Bessengue Akwa with the main road and is an important piece of infrastructure that had been missing. An open call for proposals was assessed by the community before Moussa's project was accepted, providing, as Zayd Minty notes, "a rare space for residents to debate aesthetics."²⁴ By actively engaging the community in decision-making, Doual'art was able to ensure that the residents were not only end users of a badly-needed bridge, but also active collaborators in the artistic and curatorial processes which resulted in a piece of contemporary art being permanently situated in their midst.

The 2010 edition of *SUD* revolved around water, a critical theme given that Douala—situated between a major port, mangroves and a web of rivers and tributaries—has an abundance of natural

water, but little formal plumbing and sanitation. During *SUD*, Douala becomes a stage for an array of screenings, performances, installations, events, sculptures, and interventions. Some are temporary, others are permanent, but all seek to impact on the daily lives of Douala's inhabitants. In 2010, the most successful projects were those that balanced aesthetic or formal concerns with a deep awareness of the environment they were working in.

In 2010, Salifou Lindou and Lucas Grandin each created site-specific installations amongst the lush vegetation on the banks of the Wouri River in Bonamouti. Both projects utilize everyday materials and were conceived to create a degree of private space in the public realm. In Bonamouti, limited access to piped water and sewer systems forces many to bathe in the river. According to Lindou, who lives in the neighborhood, this situation has resulted in nudity becoming commonplace, compromising traditional relationships between men and women.²⁵ His project *Face à l'Eau* (2010) consists of five vertical wooden structures, which rise out of the muddy pathway leading to the river and stand almost four meters tall. Each screen is divided into a grid with some sections filled with colorful corrugated plastic and others left open, framing the river and foliage. From a distance, the staggered screens create the illusion of a single, yet delicate structure. It is an unobtrusive intervention, offering people some privacy, as well as a place to hang their clothes while bathing. In addition to the screen, Lindou made a navigable path down to the water using car tires filled with concrete. His construction is simple but effective, utilizing materials that can be sourced locally and at little cost.

Further up the bank, Lucas Grandin built *Le Jardin Sonore* (2010), a water sound garden. The five-story structure is constructed out of wood and partially covered by a climbing plant, blending into the natural environment. Rainwater is collected off several sections of yellow roofing and stored in tanks towards the top of the construction. The garden is open to the community and anyone is able to turn a small lever, which allows water to flow from the tanks through transparent tubes and onto the indigenous plants below using a hydroponics drip system. The water, before falling on the plants, drops into metal cans of different sizes, creating a melodic tinkle, which brings our awareness to the fragility of the ecosystem. The garden is well kept and, as Grandin hoped, has become a place for meeting, discussion, learning and contemplation. Unexpectedly, members of the community, together with Hyppolite Kamguia, a botanist in Douala who advised Grandin on which species to plant, have extended the garden to a nearby hill.²⁶

Both projects are visually appealing and socially engaged and were constructed using limited resources. By most measures they are successful. However, in Douala's tropical monsoon climate, the installations will require regular upkeep to last, and enduring success will depend on whether the community deems these works important enough to maintain.

Dutch artist Kamiel Verschuren's *New Walk Ways in New Bell* (2010-11) tackles the issue of individual and collective responsibility more directly in New Bell, a sprawling area southeast of the city's colonial centre. It is one of Douala's poorest neighborhoods and the open drains on either side of the street are filled with garbage and stagnant water. During *SUD* in 2010 Verschuren began cleaning one hundred meters of a one-kilometer stretch of the gutters and installing wooden drain covers. Small holes drilled into the planks inscribe the boards with texts about the different properties of water, allow rainwater, but nothing else, to enter the system, and render the wooden boards useless for any other purpose (and therefore less likely to be stolen).

For Douala's art and the artists they work with, *SUD* offers the opportunity not only to rethink the public domain, but also to remake it. Whether through permanent interventions or temporary gestures that foster connectivity and dialog but leave little visible trace, each of the artists involved seek to affect the daily lives of Douala's inhabitants. The apparent freedom of working in a city like Douala comes with a great responsibility. The projects described above, but also the public sculptures, murals, performances, and open-air screenings, can only exist with the sanction and participation

of the community. The public realm need not be the only site for contemporary art in a city like Douala, but making work about issues relating to the everyday experience outside of the gallery, in places ordinary people frequent, has proven to be a very successful way of building an audience for contemporary art, while simultaneously developing infrastructure and changing people's perceptions of the city they live in.

Marc Sands, *Understanding Tate's Visitors: Your Quick Reference Guide to Tate's Audience Segmentation*.

- 1 In spite of great international interest, the second Johannesburg Biennale closed a month early, with the Johannesburg City Council citing financial difficulties as the official reason. This was the last Johannesburg Biennale and the organizing institution, the Africus Institute for Contemporary Art (AICA), has subsequently been dissolved.
- 2 The Fondation Zinsou was established in Cotonou, Benin in 2005 and is free to visit. According to its website, Fondation Zinsou has trained four hundred teachers, partners with eighty schools, and attracted 3,500,000 visitors. http://www.fondationzinsou.org/FondationZinsou/About_us.html.
- 3 Raphael Chikukwa, interview with the author, October 22, 2010.
- 4 *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter* (May 26 – September 25, 2011) at Iziko South African National Gallery is a good example of a recent exhibition which attracted large numbers of visitors, but also heavy criticism. See Sean O'Toole's review "The Cake Shop: Vladimir Tretchikoff at Iziko South African National Gallery," *artthrob*, <http://www.artthrob.co.za>.
- 5 Prospect was conceived after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005 and first took place in November 2008. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is the first of its kind in India and is scheduled to take place in early 2012 across two sites: the metropolis of Kochi, and the ancient port Muziris.
- 6 Barry Curtis, in Judith Rugg, *Exploring Site-Specific Art: Issues of Space and Internationalism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
- 7 The first edition of Picha took place in 2008. This was followed by the creation of an art center in August 2010, which delivered the second Lubumbashi Biennale the same year. Occurring fifty years after independence the 2010 edition appropriately emphasised space (the city of Lubumbashi) and time (the memory of independence). The biennale focused on specific sites in the city that are imbued with a particular history or evoke certain economic, religious or political power structures. Thirty-two photographs by nine photographers were printed as 2 x 3 meter billboards and erected in carefully chosen sites around Lubumbashi. Video screenings occurred in a wide range of venues, from the Palais de Justice, the square of the Basilica of Saint Mary to the Theater in Kamalondo.
- 8 Cameroon is one of the few African nations colonized by France in which the government in power descends in direct line from the country's pre-independence regime. Only two presidents have ruled: Paul Biya and, before him, Ahmadou Ahidjo, a man handpicked by Paris, whom Biya (his vice-president) replaced in a move orchestrated by France. A paramilitary body established by the Biya government in 2000 was supposed to improve security in Douala but instead terrorized the local population. For a discussion of Commandement Opérationnel see Dominique Malaquais, *Blood Money: A Douala Chronicle*, Chimurenga Magazine 1, no. 3 (2009): 35.
- 9 Emiliano Gandolfi, "Art Differently! How art can make change," in *Douala in Translation: A View of the City and its Creative Transformative Potentials*, ed. Lucia Babina and Marilyn Douala Bell (Amsterdam: Episode, 2007), 146.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 11 Lionel Manga, "Catch le Mango!" in *Douala in Translation*, 36.
- 12 Other initiatives include the Kheops Group (established 1995), the KFactory and Les Scénographies Urbaines (inaugurated 2003), the Bandjoun art centre (founded by Barthélémy Togo), DiARTgonale, a contemporary art magazine edited by Achilleka Komguem and founded in Yaoundé. For a more detailed discussion see Iolanda Pensa, "Princess," in *Douala in Translation*, 112.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 15 Christian Hanussek, "La Nouvelle Liberté: Le Nju Nju du Rond-Point," in *Douala in Translation*, 217.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 17 Dominique Malaquais, "Quelle Liberte: Art Beauty and the Grammers of Resistance in Douala," in *Beautiful Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics*, ed. Sarah Nuttal (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 135.
- 18 Christian Hanussek, "La Nouvelle Liberté," 218.
- 19 Dominique Malaquais, "Quelle Liberte," 135.
- 20 The structure was built in 1905 by August Manga Ndumbe. Marilyn Douala Bell, "A celebration of art in the city of Douala," in *Douala in Translation*, 121.
- 21 *Africa e Mediterraneo*, no. 50 (2005), 14, in Zayd Minty, "The freedom to dream? Urban transformations through cultural practices in Douala," in *Douala in Translation*, 156.
- 22 The artists included Pascale Marthine Tayou, Lionel Manga, Philippe Mouillon, Sandrine Dole, Lucas Grandin, Stefan Barbic, Gwenaëlle Lelardeux, Michèle Magma, Joseph F Sumegne, Kuo Eyango, Hervé Yamguen amongst others. In *Douala in Translation*, 122–3.
- 23 Zayd Minty, "The freedom to dream?," 187.
- 24 Salifou Lindou, interview with the author, December 8, 2010.
- 25 Lucas Grandin, <http://lucas.grandin.free.fr/jardinsonore.html#jardinmai2011>.