

Cédric Vincent
**Friction in
Benin**

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On November 6, 2012, e-flux circulated an announcement with misleading information about a biennial or two in Benin. Cédric Vincent wrote this important essay on how that announcement gave form to the way information spins a dispersed and globalized art world in many directions simultaneously, for better or for worse. We didn't know to publish this essay in the November 2012 issue of e-flux journal because Cédric hadn't written it yet, but we can now include it in that issue as a message to the past.

– Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle (December 30, 2013)

Everything was looking good for the second edition of the Benin biennial. On November 6, 2012, an announcement for the biennial appeared. There was, however, a strange problem with the announcement.¹ While the event announced had the exact same theme as the exhibition going up right before my eyes (“Inventing the World: The Artist as Citizen”), as well as the same artistic director and identical dates, there were a few incongruities: the list of sponsors had changed, as had the show locations and, most importantly, the lineup of artists had been totally revised. Moreover, the event as a whole had undergone a slight but significant name change. Whereas before it had been called “Biennale Bénin 2012,” now it was titled “Biennale Regard Benin 2012.” Unless some serious last-minute changes had occurred, there was only one possible conclusion: one event had become two. Indeed, such was the case. The strange announcement was not for the event I was witnessing go up, but for a completely different, if similar-sounding, event. From November 8, 2012 to January 13, 2013, two contemporary art biennials centered on the exact same theme took place simultaneously in Benin.

However, for visitors who weren't aware of the double-dutching going on, Biennale Bénin 2012 was the only biennial occurring in Benin during those months. It took place in a disused department store called Centre Kora, and the artistic director was Moroccan curator Abdellah Karroum.² Karroum's plans for the show were quite ambitious. His goal was to go beyond the habitual, to cast his gaze beyond Africa and its diasporas – a laudable intention and a most effective way of positioning Biennale Bénin vis-à-vis Dak'Art and SUD (Douala), both of which have a resolutely Pan-African focus.

The first edition of the Benin biennial, held two years earlier, in 2010, had been a fairly modest affair. It was not a major group show, but rather a mobilization of Cotonou's principal arts institutions, including a series of open studios. Though unspectacular, the event allowed visitors to discover diverse arts spaces and cultural

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organizations scattered around the city. Coinciding with the fifty-year celebration of Benin's independence, the biennial benefitted from the accompanying media attention.

The second edition of the Benin biennial, officially titled "Biennale Bénin 2012," employed a fairly conventional approach: a group show presented as an international undertaking, bringing together some forty artists around the theme "Inventing the World: The Artist as Citizen." Its statement of intent, published in the first issue of the *Biennale Journal*, offered little in the way of explanation: "The artist as citizen," wrote Karroum, "takes upon himself the task of transmission that gives meaning to his work, in an extension of research in/on the domain of art, toward societal action." A few key themes emerged: a sharing of forms of knowledge; a determination to transcend borders; a focus on art as linked to, or in the service of, the social.

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curatorial point of view, Regard Benin's use of independent structures and the deployment of site-specific installations were effective civic gestures. This was so not only because spaces to show art are few and far between in Benin, but also because the theme chosen by Regard Benin – "Inventing the World: The Artist as Citizen" – lent itself well to a performative treatment.

The decision by Regard Benin to use the exact same theme as Biennale Bénin was so crude that it suggested a desire on the part of Regard Benin for visitors to mistake the two events as a single, unified biennial. Only those in the know could tell where one event ended and the other began. At the end of the day, Regard Benin could position itself as the action-based complement to Biennale Bénin.



Meschac Gaba, *Musée de l'art de la vie active, bibliothèque roulante* [Museum of the Art of Active Life, Travelling Library], 2012. Performance, Cotonou, Benin.



The Berlin-based artists Andreas Siekmann and Alice Creischer gave a Claymation workshop on the theme of land grabbing as their contribution to the Biennale Regard Benin, 2012. Thirty-five participants produced three films for the project.

In light of these first two iterations of the Benin biennial, the challenge for Biennale Regard Benin 2012 – lest its organizers lose face – was to propose a quality program on the same theme as Biennale Bénin, but with a far smaller budget. For a sense of how serious the challenge was for Regard Benin, it's useful to review some budgetary numbers: while Biennale Bénin had serious money – 260 million CFA (around USD 518,000) – Regard Benin had only 50 million CFA (a little under USD 100,000).³

The organizers of Regard Benin chose to follow the model used in the 2010 Benin biennial. By partnering with a range of local institutions and businesses, which lent their spaces for exhibiting works, Regard Benin mounted a decentralized event. While the Biennale Bénin installation was more convincing from a

To clear things up, an official decree was published in late September 2012, signed by none other than the Minister of Culture, Jean-Michel Abimbola. The decree stated unequivocally that Dominique Zinkpè was the executive director of Biennale Bénin 2012. A key figure in the local arts scene, Zinkpè was one of the initiators of the first Benin biennial in 2010. That's why it would be a mistake to say that Abdellah Karroum was the sole organizer of Biennale Bénin 2012. The whole thing was, in fact, coordinated by the Consortium, an entity run by Zinkpè. This decree could have discouraged the organizers of Regard Benin, but it did precisely the opposite: embittered, they took to working even harder.

On Wednesday, November 7, 2012, the day after the Regard Benin announcement was released, a press conference was held at Centre Artisttik Africa. Ousmane Alèdji, the Centre's director and a staunch supporter of Regard Benin, offered some rather misleading remarks. He expressed relief at the fact that the 2012 edition of the Benin biennial was being held under the name "Regard Benin." After hearing

him speak, one was left with the impression that the name was what mattered most. (The 2010 biennial, as well as the organization that resulted from it, had borne the name “Regard Benin.”)

In his press conference, Alèdji resorted to the hackneyed rhetoric of cultural dispossession in order to defend *his* biennial:

For the sake of our country, we wanted this international market to be grandiose. Yet – nothing here you don’t know – it has suffered due to attempts at recuperation, or worse, appropriation. We have always sought, and we will continue to seek, to explain to our partners, even the most important, that the market of which I speak is Béninois and that it is legitimate that Benin and its people should remain in control of it. To say this is not to pick a fight, but to express a conviction. This market is ours and we will continue to claim it as long as others seek to take it over.

As Alèdji’s comments suggest, the aim was less to offer an alternative event or a counter-biennial than to ensure the survival of the Regard Benin label, lest it disappear behind the other event’s name. If this was the goal, then the gambit proved successful. Go to your browser and enter the words “Biennale Bénin”: you’ll be directed to the Regard Benin site. No hacking involved; it’s just that the Biennale Bénin site is down. It must have been exceedingly difficult for media outlets to figure out what was what.⁴

Bearing in mind the foregoing, let us return to the November 6 announcement about Regard Benin, so as to understand its implications. In the communication chain, it was a vital link: a means of giving the event visibility not only on a local scale, but internationally as well. The announcement also constituted a challenge to the Biennale Bénin project. Biennale Bénin had released its own announcement on October 6, one month earlier to the day.⁵ The November announcement by Regard Benin was meant to restore balance vis-à-vis Biennale Bénin – to ensure that in the eyes of international onlookers, the latter would lose its status as the “official” event. The Regard Benin announcement read as follows:

“Inventing the World” is the modest theme of the first official edition of the Biennale Regard Benin, which had formerly premiered in June 2010 on the 50th Anniversary of Independence of the Republic of Benin. The Biennial Regard Benin breaks with the conventions of curatorial branding by renouncing the

vertical structure of inviting a general commissioner with a top-down curated exhibition. Purposely risking the label of dilettantism, the event will be unfolded by a local team of operators who will have occasional exchange with distant, yet close advisers ... Based on the successful, innovative nature of [the] pilot event, participating members of a federation of a dozen independent art spaces and their activities founded the nonprofit association Biennale Regard Benin in March 2011, which organizes this edition with a balanced network of partners. Therefore the name of this event remains unchanged as Biennale Regard Benin, as decreed by the Minister of culture of Benin in May 2012.

First observation: the text proves useless for readers hoping to learn something about the theme of the event. The focus, rather, is on pragmatic considerations. The ad first provides historical background, meant to reestablish the order of things; the opening sentence presents Regard Benin 2012 as the “first official” biennial, with the 2010 event as a trial run. This version of history allows Regard Benin to position itself as a guarantor of continuity. The closing sentence references none other than the Benin government to prove Regard Benin’s bona fides as the sole, legitimate biennial.

Second observation: the text insists on pointing out the absence of a vertical structure in which one artistic director controls the whole of the event’s programming. This is presented as a significant departure from the norm. The reader’s gaze is directed at a team of local “operators” working in tandem with international “advisors”: a pluralistic arrangement which, the authors claim, is highly original. The end result is striking to say the least. Abdellah Karroum and Didier Houénoude (co-curators of Biennale Bénin) are listed as artistic directors alongside Stephan Köhler, a cultural “operator” who has lived in Benin for several years. Dominique Zinkpè and Ousmane Alèdji are listed as executive directors – all within the framework of a single overarching project.

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Workshop participants document the Bénin Biennale exhibition at the Centre Kora, 2012. Photo: Chloë Champion

One might read all of this as a strategy meant to misinform and destabilize. That, however, would be too simplistic. For it must be recognized that the strategy does something else as well: it projects a certain vision of what a biennial in Benin could or should be. In this sense, a third way is opened up: an arrangement in which a reunified team comes together to revive the original, federated nature of the 2010 event. Seen in this light, the biennial as it appears in the *Regard Benin* announcement blurs the lines of a conflict-ridden situation. Moreover, Köhler claims to have been initially approached by Biennale Bénin to handle artistic direction alongside Karroum, before being discarded.

Since the announcements for both biennials were distributed by e-flux, it is important to point out that, while subscribing to e-flux's service is free, one is expected to pay a fee in order to have one's announcement distributed. Payment, however, does not guarantee publication. The ad is presented to the e-flux team, which either accepts or rejects it. This process acts as a form of validation – a stamp of approval that is relatively minor for an event like the Istanbul Biennial, but quite important in the case of a fledgling biennial such as Benin's. In this context, the publication of the *Regard Benin* ad had the powerful effect of inserting *Regard Benin* into a vast network of contemporary art events. The impact of this may appear ephemeral, but it's not, for e-flux is more than a platform for listing events: it's also an archiving mechanism.⁶ In this sense, we are not looking here at a misuse of the e-flux service, but rather at an instrumentalization of its strengths and weaknesses alike. The goal was to obscure the identity of Biennale Bénin and to bring credit to *Regard Benin* by relying on the fact that no other information was immediately available.



Zon Sakai, *Heavy Duty*, 2012. The Japanese artist performs one of his sculptures during the opening day of the Biennale Regard Benin, November 8, 2012. Here the artist approaches the King Toffa Monument in the center of Porto Novo. Photo: S. Zounyekpe. Copyright: Biennale Regard Benin and Zon Sakai.

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The *Regard Benin* ad was neither a hoax nor a fiction, for it referenced an event that actually did take place. What is interesting about all of this is that the ad shifted the conflict to a completely new terrain – that of the e-flux announcement service itself. Hiding behind the message in the announcement, and unbeknownst to the e-flux team, was a second, quite different message. What looked like a straightforward press release was, in fact, a statement of principle, the expression of an artistic and political stance meant as a direct rebuke to the intents and claims of Biennale Bénin.

What transpired in Benin in 2012 was anything but a trivial provincial feud. Rather, the two biennials and their announcements revealed the ways in which a scene is shaped by the conditions of a globalized art world, and how that scene is being constantly redefined by the artists, curators, and critics who take part in it.

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A longer version of this piece was published under the title "Mining the Biennale: A Story About Art and Globalization in Benin," in *Chimurenga Chronic*, August 2013. This text was translated from the original in French by D. Malaquais.

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1

See <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/inventing-the-world-the-artist-as-citizen/>.

2

Karroum was assisted by several co-curators: Didier Houénoué (Benin), Olivier Marboeuf (France), Anne Szefer Karlsen (Norway), and Claire Tancons (France-USA).

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These numbers are taken from Nicolas Michel, "Bénin: une biennale sinon rien!," *Jeune Afrique*, November 27, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2706p092-093.xml0/>.

4

The website universes-in-universe.org was a partner of Biennale Bénin 2012. A photo report is available on the site. See http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/biennale_benin/2012

5

See <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/biennale-benin-2012-inventing-the-word-the-artist-as-citizen/>.

6

In an interview, e-flux founder Anton Vidokle once admitted to having distributed an announcement for a fictional exhibition – a Kosovo Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale. On this subject and its implications, see Karl Lydén, "E-flux, Derrida and the Archive," *Site Magazine* 25 (2009):12–13.

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