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Jenny Mbaye and  
Miranda Jeanne Marie Iossifidis

This chapter explores the contours and dynamics that forge Dakar as a contemporary 'art world city,' inquiring into initiatives that operate at the crossroads of art, citizenship and society. In a context marked by a monopolistic role of the state, the chapter interrogates the practices of two independent art organizations, RAW Material Company and Kër Thiossane, and their different engagements with and through the city. Delving into the processes of alternative, independent 'art institution-building,' we draw on AbdouMalik Simone's notion of 'rhythms of endurance' to explore the ways in which new methods of sharing and producing knowledge are developed and curated. Located at the intersections of creativity, cultural politics, and urban transformation, our contribution focuses on the subjects of such creative and transformative processes. In doing so, we emphasize the capacity of ordinary citizens to engage in the practical and symbolic re-imagining of their city. This chapter demonstrates that curatorial interventions and critical perspectives, through engaging with multiple audiences and investing in 'art as a thinking system,' can create spaces of encounters, of expression, exchange, reflection, and speculation to produce an 'art world city' in constant recreation.

## Keywords

- Dakar
- Art Institution-Building
- Urban Transformation
- Rhythms of Endurance
- Art World City

## INTRODUCTION

Dakar was recently identified as one of the top five creative cities in the world.<sup>1</sup> The article referenced 'Dak'art,' the Biennale of Contemporary African Arts, and numerous independent organizations thriving in the city. In this chapter, we focus on the rhythms of endurance<sup>2</sup> through which arts practitioners, initiatives, and organizations operate on an everyday basis in Dakar. Specifically focusing on the experiences of Kër Thiossane, Partcours and RAW Material Company, we explore the ways in which these arts initiatives and organizations reaffirm the capacity of 'human infrastructures' to shape the city and its urban life in improvisational and organic ways. As such, this chapter goes beyond 'Dak'Art'—the blockbuster event that has significantly impacted the creative landscape of the capital

city—to engage with the day-to-day engagement and artistic commitment of civil society. It highlights the kinds of everyday creative practice that contribute to redefining, and hence transforming, the city, and shifts the focus onto the (extra)ordinary producers of urban spaces. Developing and revisiting new methods of acquiring and sharing knowledge, curating at the crossroads of art, citizenship, and society, these art initiatives are symbolically and practically reinterpreting ‘world-class’<sup>3</sup> aesthetics and imaginaries.

This chapter thus provides insights into what has contributed to establishing Dakar as an art world city by first engaging with the contours of the environment: the Biennale ‘Dak’Art’ and its fringe programming, ‘Off.’ In a context marked by an omnipresent state within the cultural field, we then introduce the notion of ‘art institution building’<sup>4</sup> to understand the ways in which alternative independent art initiatives contribute—on their own terms and conditions—to the curatorial sensibilities of Dakar. We discuss the practices of art initiatives and collectives such as Partcourt and Laboratoire Agit’Art. Such alternative art institutions establish new referents for artistic and curatorial practices and affirm their political responsibility through their engagement with and embeddedness in the dakarois context. We argue that Dakar’s art scene is characterized by a diversity of rhythms, and drawing on Simone’s concept of ‘rhythms of endurance,’ we turn to focus in more depth on the experiences of two distinctive art institutions, Kër Thiossane and RAW Material Company. As we shall conclude, albeit with a different approach to curatorial practices, the two art institutions are independent, not-for-profit art organizations which both address a multiplicity of audiences and invest in the notion of ‘art as a thinking system’ as way to transform the city.

### DAKAR AS AN ART WORLD CITY? THE CONTOURS OF THE ENVIRONMENT: ‘DAK’ART’ AND ITS ‘OFF’

In the insurgent formulation, ... the residents of the peripheries imagine that their interests derive from their own experiences, not from state plans, and that they are informed and competent to make decisions.<sup>5</sup>

1.....Libby Banks, ‘The Five Most Creative Cities in the World?’, BBC, 16 July 2019, [www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190715-the-five-most-creative-cities-in-the-world](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190715-the-five-most-creative-cities-in-the-world)

2.....AbdouMalik Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

3.....Asher D. Ghertner, ‘Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi,’ *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, ed

Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (Malden, and Oxford: Wiley & Sons, 2011), pp. 279–306.

4.....Koyo Kouoh, ‘Filling the Voids: The Emergence of Independent Contemporary Art Spaces,’ in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

5.....James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 258.

'Nation' and 'development' were the founding myths of a Senegalese modernity that rested on discourses of identity and unity.<sup>6</sup> In the nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, acknowledging the power of arts and culture in this process of nation building, the Senegalese government supported visual artists and their work considerably. This support was reflected in the arts education system in place since Senegal's first President Léopold Sédar Senghor: the École des Arts. Founded in 1960, this school paved the way to what came to be known as the École de Dakar, renowned for fine art, sculpture, and textiles. Set up to replace the École des Arts of Mali, the National School of Arts<sup>7</sup> was created to foster and promote young artists carrying forth Senghorian ideas regarding the relationship between modern African identities and the arts, and the President's philosophy of a modern valorization of Negro art: 'Négritude.'

Despite the tyranny of structural adjustments and the consequent withdrawal of the state from the field of cultural production, Dakar's Biennale of Contemporary Art, 'Dak'Art,' a state-sponsored event celebrating African contemporary art, has continued operating since 1992. As a flagship project that affirmed and certified 'a culture of the cultural entrepreneur state,'<sup>8</sup> this 'signature event' was initially thought of in 1990 as a Biennale of Humanities and Arts. Its genealogy, however, can be traced back to President Senghor's World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966. Since its inception, 'Dak'Art' has evolved substantially, most notably with the official incorporation of the fringe programme 'Off' in 2002 in its fifth edition. In this regard, we argue that the organically developed 'Off' and its dramatic growth over the years, as well as its unique contribution to 'monetizing' the exhibited art works, points to the rising and diversified, individual and collective productive participation in the event.<sup>9</sup>

The types of administration perpetuated by the elite and inherited from colonial systems have not placed importance on private and independent initiatives, a general rule considered to be 'especially true in the arts and in the situation of former French colonies.'<sup>10</sup> While in the contemporary landscape 'Dak'Art' remains a notable exception with regards to state support and organization of art events, our argument here is that Senegal's civil society, exceptional on the continent,<sup>11</sup> has nourished the capacity for ordinary citizens to engage in processes of practical and symbolic re-imagining of their city. This has been crucial for sustaining Dakar's position as an art world city, and in establishing the city's 'vibrant and dynamic "art world," a particular site for the production, interpretation, and collection of modern art.'<sup>12</sup>

6.....Aminata Diaw, 'Les intellectuels entre mémoire nationaliste et représentations de la modernité,' in *Le Senegal contemporain* (Paris: Karthala, 2002), p. 550.

7.....For more information, see: [www.ecolenationaledesarts.sn/articles/general/2/2016/11/17/historique-et-perspectives.html](http://www.ecolenationaledesarts.sn/articles/general/2/2016/11/17/historique-et-perspectives.html)

8.....Yacouba Konate, *La Biennale de Dakar: Pour une esthétique de la création contemporaine africaine: tête à tête avec Adorno* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), p. 34.

9.....Joanna Grabski, 'Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City,' *African Arts* 36, no. 4 (2003), p. 19.

10.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 15.

11.....Joan Tilouine, 'Barometre des sociétés civiles: Sénégal, Niger et RDC sur le podium,' *Paris: Jeune Afrique*, 28 April 2014, [www.jeuneafrique.com/164168/politique/barom-tre-des-soci-t-s-civiles-s-n-gal-niger-et-rdc-sur-le-podium/](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/164168/politique/barom-tre-des-soci-t-s-civiles-s-n-gal-niger-et-rdc-sur-le-podium/).

12.....Grabski, 'Dakar's Urban Landscapes,' p. 28.

Since the earliest editions of the Biennale in early nineteen-nineties, galleries and artists have been organizing exhibitions and openings on the margins of the official event. These were initiated by ordinary citizens and dedicated creative practitioners, i.e. local residents participating in Dakar's 'art world' who were not programmed in the official 'Dak'Art' selection. These spontaneous initiatives were animated by the 'Ateliers Céramiques Almadies' (Almadies Ceramic Studios), founded and led by artist and curator Mauro Petroni in conversation with public officials around a 'commission for environmental events.'<sup>13</sup> They were soon orchestrated under the banner 'Dak'Art "Off"'. The idea was simple: to create maps and signage for private exhibitions without interfering with the autonomy of these parallel events.<sup>14</sup> While the 'Off' gained more visibility, the Biennale gained more curatorial propositions with the 'Off.' As the former General Secretary of 'Dak'Art' put it, by supplementing the official selection with exhibitions located in over one hundred improvised venues, the four official sites of the Biennale have been enriched, benefiting both the official selection and the 'Off':

In regard to the 'Off,' there was a certain shyness in exhibiting until 2000. What we did was to say out loud that the Biennale needs to recognize the 'Off' as another side of 'Dak'Art.' These are not two oppositional elements, but one and the same event; a part of which is organized under the total responsibility of the General Secretary; and another part, organized by private initiative, but with the support of the Biennale.<sup>15</sup>

Since then, the 'Off' has significantly impacted and contributed to the official programme, while developing avenues of monetization, expanding the structure, propositions and reach of the event. As stressed by the former General Secretary of the Biennale, the 'Off' remains a key component of the Biennale's dynamic:

Well-known artists manage to get inhabitants of the neighbourhoods to come and visit workshops and exhibitions out of curiosity ... And while there is no sale involved in the Biennale as an international exhibition, in its 'Off,' artists do sell, and sell a lot.<sup>16</sup>

13.....Author's translation for 'Commission pour les manifestations d'environnement,' *Dak'Art 'Off,' Programme* (2012), p. 1.

14.....Ibid.

15.....Ousseynou Wade (former director of Dak'Art), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, June 2013.

16.....Ibid.

To their credit, this is something that the Senegalese authorities acknowledge when following the leitmotif of the former Ministry of Culture, to 'accompany and support what already works.'<sup>17</sup> The 'Off' is now organized from the confines of artists' workshops and art galleries, in buildings under construction, in personal homes, car parks, and other improvised exhibition spaces; it allows art aficionados to participate in the larger event, but also to challenge, and at times even contest, the Biennale. Displaying a 'multi-venue configuration [that] results less from a coherent curatorial vision than from the urgency of urban life in Dakar,' this art initiative emerging from civil society demonstrates that contemporary artistic life in the city 'takes place not only within formal spaces designated for the arts, but also between and beyond them.'<sup>18</sup>

For public officials, the 'Off' proposes an alternative use of Dakar's resources, and the geographies of the Biennale, which is 'not necessarily located in the city centre, but is also located inside dwelling places.'<sup>19</sup> This is especially valued by artists who continue to invest time, energy, and capital in contributing to the 'Off.' As such, well-known and successful artists and designers such as Ousmane Mbaye still regularly organize their own personal or collective exhibition in the 'Off' despite being part of the Biennale's official selection. Mobilizing Dakar's residents and transforming urban social space and visual experience, the 'Off' thus reaffirms the relevance of civil society's active participation and involvement in the creation of national and urban cultural spaces, as well as the capacity of informed citizens, as complex human infrastructure, to inform and change their field of practice and its context.<sup>20</sup>

The 'Dak'Art' and its 'Off' are, nevertheless, still inscribed in a context marked by a 'centralistic model of an omnipotent state [adhering to its] constitutional roles as initiator, regulator, controller, promoter, producer and critic.'<sup>21</sup> The state's monopolistic positioning with regards to critical artistic engagement has at times both constrained and limited the critical, dissident voices and alternative narratives. Serious institutional voids can be identified in a paradoxical environment, whereby artists are cultivated to be intellectually and financially dependent on the state. In Dakar, it has notably meant the acute absence of formal spaces to address theoretical concerns around contemporary artistic production, and has given rise to a process of alternative, independent 'art institution-building.'

## ALTERNATIVE INSTITUTION BUILDING

An 'art world city' can be defined as a 'multiscalar, urban site for artistic production, mediation and transaction [a] ... paradigm to account for the imbrication of the creative economy and the urban environment as well

17.....Ibid.

18.....Grabski, 'Dakar's Urban Landscapes: Locating Modern Art and Artists in the City,' p. 19.

19.....Ousseynou Wade (former director of Dak'Art) interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, June 2013.

20.....AbdouMaliq Simone, 'The Missing People: Reflections on an Urban Majority in Cities of the South,' in *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, ed. Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 322-36.  
21.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 15.

as the interplay of local and global dynamics shaping Dakar's art world.<sup>22</sup> As such, we argue that the enduring affirmation of Dakar as an 'art world city' is due to the capacity of urban citizens to reconfigure the urban landscape through alternative uses of public spaces, carved through their productive participation. Rescaling the debate between organic and planned developments, i.e. between bottom-up initiatives emerging from an urban community and top-down ones led by state institutions, our focus on urban creativity here is on collectives of participants—akin to the 'Off'—active in the political and material place-making of their city and their creative productivity.<sup>23</sup> To do so, we provide insights into two other art initiatives, both very different and distinctive in their genesis and process, which highlight how insurgent art practitioners have been contributing to the curation of Dakar as an art world city outside the institutionalization of the state: Laboratoire Agit'Art and Partcours. In both instances, though from very different perspectives—the former being an initiated collective and the latter being a collective initiative—are 'an attempt to satisfy personal needs. The need to distribute and disseminate, through a mechanism where decisions, choices and programming did not depend on a committee or an administration.'<sup>24</sup>

The Laboratoire Agit'Art is a collective of intellectuals and activists based in Dakar that has repeatedly criticized the overwhelming monopoly of the state in the field of art, culture, and creative practice, and distanced itself from state-initiated cultural politics. The Laboratoire Agit'Art, which could be understood as a synergetic combination of agency, agitation, and art, was created in 1973 under the leadership of creative practitioners across different artistic disciplines including, amongst others, Issa Samb (aka Joe Ouakam), Youssoupha Done, Mame Less Dia, Djibril Diop Mambéty, and Thierno Seydou Barry. Through its collaborative practices, Agit'Art demonstrates an ethos of 'destroy[ing] current diktats in contemporary art.'<sup>25</sup> Their collective represents 'forms of resistance against the dominant system but also a critique of political and cultural institutions,' which dominate the cultural and creative field in Dakar.<sup>26</sup> Multidisciplinary in nature, the Laboratoire Agit'Art grew out of a counter-discourse to Senghor's utopianism and the manifestation of *Négritude*, opposing the establishment while embodying a conceptually radical, generous, and intellectually stimulating approach to art. The collective has long sought to create a fundamental space of freedom in a tightly regimented artistic scene, with critical thinking and political discourse as key components of its ethos. Indeed, Senghor's École de Dakar rested on a classical, conventional, and monolithic understanding of fine arts, derivative of European Primitivism and dedicating little attention (if any) to alternative paradigms in art practices. In this context, Agit'Art affirmed

22.....Joanna Grabski, *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 3.23

Rosalind Fredericks, "'The Old Man is Dead': Hip Hop and the Arts of Citizenship of Senegalese Youth," in *The Arts of Citizenship in African Cities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 137–61.

24.....Simon Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' in

*Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 21.

25.....This was recently published in a manifesto of Agit'Art's heirs, as part of their contribution to 2018's Dak'Art 'Off,' *Dismemberment Manifesto*.

26.....Agit'Art, *Dismemberment Manifesto* (Dakar: Khadimou Rassoul, 2018), p. 1.



itself as an institution whose legacy lives on today as a destabilizing and agitating provocation that replenishes the dearth of free expression, production, exhibition, and critical reflection in cultural spaces.

Another alternative art institution of Dakar, we argue, is Partcours. Created in 2012 as a joint initiative of *RAW Material Company* and *Ateliers Ceramiques Almadies*, Partcours is an annual event with an itinerary that stretches across the city. It explicitly aims to bring together art and exhibition spaces in Dakar and its peripheries in order to raise the visibility of different kinds of spaces and to allow a larger public to discover artists from Senegal and beyond. Since its creation, Partcours has organized a yearly event (during the month of December) providing a shared space for gallerists, artists and audience to engage, exchange, showcase, and witness the diversity of Dakar's artistic scene. In a spontaneous and autonomous manner, Partcours brings together and unites artists and organizations, with each and every space being able to put forward a curatorial proposal. Contrary to the 'Off' in which anyone can exhibit anywhere, Partcours places emphasis on spaces which offer regular artistic programming throughout the year, as well as individuals and professional art organizations (rather than artists) dedicated to the Dakar art scene on a permanent and longitudinal basis. In other words, an improvised exhibition space cannot register to Partcours; this art *institution* aims, rather, to facilitate the collaboration between already-established spaces that share a sense of collective ownership over the initiative. Although challenging at times, this involves both shared decision-making processes as well as a symbolic financial contribution to support the cost of promotion and communication material. In its content, this event is programmed by neighbourhoods, with each art space in charge of its own programming, curation, and thematic approach. Unique of its kind on the continent, Partcours celebrated its eighth edition in 2019 with twenty art spaces that compose and reflect the dynamic landscape of Dakar's cultural ecosystem, interacting through this exchange-based relationship. <sup>27</sup>

From the walls of the popular neighbourhood of the Médina to private galleries, from art shops to independent art centres, from conventional cultural institutions to common spaces of high-end hotels, these different cultural sites cultivate art and knowledge through a variety of forms, perspectives, and methods. In doing so, they fertilize the ground of the urban fabric, ensure the germination of its imaginary, and contribute to creating the polyphony that is at the core of the 'cultural polis.'<sup>27</sup> While at times facing 'challenges in terms of decision-making as any kind of collective with a multiplicity of fields of interest and perspectives,' Partcours has 'put its mark on the city of Dakar, a mark that is getting stronger after each edition' as the new director of programmes of RAW explains.<sup>28</sup> Partcours has now become an institution in Dakar's cultural

27.....Jenny Mbaye and Cecilia Dinardi, 'Ins and Outs of the Cultural Polis: Informality, Culture and Governance in the Global South,' *Urban Studies* 56, no. 3 (2019), pp. 578-93.

28.....Marie Helene Pereira (director of programmes, RAW Material Company), email interview by Jenny Mbaye, 10 December 2019.



1a

1b



1c

2a



2b



△ 1a-c  
Espace Medina during 'Partours 8', photos: Jenny Mbaye, 2019

△ 2a-b  
Ateliers Ceramiques Almadies during 'Partours 8', photos: Jenny Mbaye, 2019

landscape, one in which 'the spirit of independence and conviviality remains the key to shared pleasure, a pleasure which, each year, makes this event a celebration for art throughout the city.'<sup>29</sup>

Exploring the process of alternative art institution-building and knowledge production outside the institutionalization of the state allows us to stress how 'the inventiveness, courage and resilience of these initiatives are testimony to the belief that art and creativity are fundamental parts of humanity.'<sup>30</sup> In a compositional gesture, these institutions claim their intent and desire for 'matters of concern,' and not only 'matters of fact,' thus renewing and making relevant a critical spirit and engagement closer to empiricism.<sup>31</sup> By empiricism, we mean that the knowledge and practice of an institution's curatorial intervention are based on the experience they derive from their senses, the pragmatics of their sensorial appreciation of the cityscape, and the relational affects with and through which they engage in the composition of their urban creative scene. In order to understand the ecosystem of contemporary art in African contexts, one has thus to move away from grand categories (artists, curators, critics, galleries, auctioneers, fairs, museums, grand exhibitions, art centres, collectors) as well as any form of binary logic, and focus on the projects,<sup>32</sup> the initiatives, and the institutions themselves. <sup>△Fig. 2a b</sup>

Redefining the institutionalization process through the concept and practice of independent 'art institution-building,' these various art initiatives (Dak'Art Off, Partcours and Laboratoire Agit'Art) have in their own ways developed strategies in the face of an institutional vacuum, elaborating new narratives and modes of curating Dakar as an art world city. Long-time Dakar-based curator Koyo Kouoh explains the importance of claiming and naming these independent organizations as institutions, by stating that it is 'an act to institute something. You're talking about inscribing something, but [it is also a] matter of instituting something that you found, that you *grow*, and that should have a life after you.'<sup>33</sup>

## RHYTHMS OF ENDURANCE IN INSTITUTION-BUILDING

While it is true that the grand categories [artists, curators, museums, etc.] do represent a part of the art world, the reality is that the majority of the actors and institutions that take part in this sector are, on the contrary, independent and acting alone: a fair amount of cases wrongly considered as exceptions ... To understand the system according to which [these alternative institutions] ... function, one has to move away from the grand categories ... as well as the binary logic of centre/periphery,

29 ..... Partcours Programme, 2019, p. 3.30

Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 16.

31 ..... Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto",' *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010), p. 478.

32 ..... Iolanda Pensa 'The Oeuvre in Progress:

The Sud,' in *Public Art in Africa: Art and Urban Transformations in Douala*, eds. Iolanda Pensa et al. (Geneva: Metis Presses, 2017), p. 18.

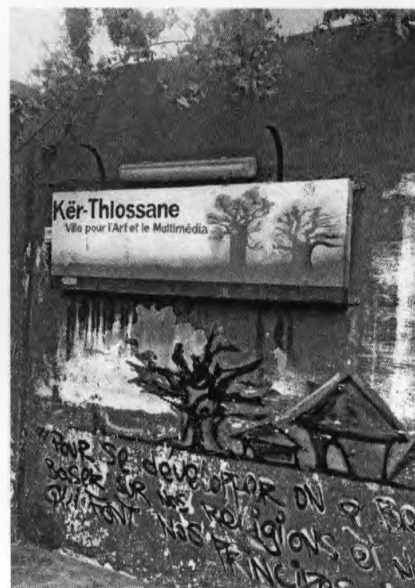
33 ..... Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

of we/them, in order to concentrate on the project itself. The project is what most deeply characterises all contemporary cultural production.<sup>34</sup>

Following our previous discussion of the political significance of alternative institution-building, we now highlight the ways in which the creation of these independent art initiatives can be considered 'an affirmation, a political gesture that proclaims the primacy of the people over the state apparatus,'<sup>35</sup> and one that has deep pragmatic implications. This section looks at two organizations that deploy and display similar 'rhythms of endurance' in the process of alternative institution building: Kër Thiossane and RAW Material Company. Ingrained in different neighbourhoods, and both positioned in an artistic field marked by a 'state-run postcolonial hangover,' the urban context of Dakar is central to both art spaces as they bring together dakarois and international cultural practitioners, artists, scholars, curators as well as activists around contemporary societal concerns. In fact, while cultivating diverse funding mechanisms beyond the event itself and beyond the white cube, their respective interactions with the city and its inhabitants is essential in both their approaches and practices. △ Fig. 3



△ 3  
RAW Material Company entrance,  
photo: Jenny Mbaye, 2019



△ 4  
Kër Thiossane entrance, photo:  
Jenny Mbaye, 2019

RAW Material Company (RAW) is a Centre for Art, Knowledge, and Society that was founded in 2011 by Koyo Kouoh after an initial dematerialized version of the space in 2008. RAW is staffed and managed entirely by women and holds exhibitions, residencies, a library, and a bi-annual eight-week academy described as 'an experimental residential programme for the research and study of artistic curatorial practice and thought'<sup>36</sup> and directed different lead faculties. RAW places heterogeneity of practice, knowledge, and cultural background at the forefront of its practice. It was

34..... Pensa 'The Oeuvre in Progress: The Sud,' p. 18.  
35..... Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 24.

36..... 'RAW Material Company,' [www.rawmaterial-company.org](http://www.rawmaterial-company.org) (accessed 12 January 2020).

borne out of the 'necessity to create a space for the sharing of knowledge. Its core motivation was to establish a space for alternative education and learning.'<sup>37</sup> For Kouoh, the 'roles of art institutions and initiatives are to develop their models in relation to broader artistic urgencies and in relation to society as a whole.' She argues that many recent independent organizations in Africa and beyond have emerged out of necessity and have been founded on similar principles addressing questions of 'action, space, power, control, and quality'<sup>38</sup> [Fig. 4](#)

Kër Thiossane is an independent art and multimedia villa that was established by Marion Louisgrand Sylla and François Sylla in 2002 in the neighbourhood of Sicap. It combines multimedia technology with traditional artistic and creative practices, encouraging interdisciplinary approaches to art. They have created a place where artists can learn to use multimedia tools through training courses, conferences, workshops, as well as residencies. Since 2013, Kër Thiossane has centred its activities on the project *École des Communs* [School of Commons] dedicated to the notion of *vivre-ensemble* [learning to live together], 'urban commons,' and 'shared knowledge' with different axis of intervention. Notably, it includes a monumental garden 'Jet d'Eau,' a fablab, as well as a festival, 'Afropixel,' that explores critical and unconventional ways for people to experiment with media and technology in relation to art and society. The team is comprised of part-time members for each strand of its activities; the fablab, festival programming and garden workers. As Marion explains,

In 2002, there was a lot of interest  
and cultural excitement in Dakar  
at the time ... But in terms of digital  
it did not have that much, nor a space  
for experimentation and creation ...  
So the project was ambitious.<sup>39</sup>

With similar but different ways of instituting, we seek to explore the different engagements of RAW and Kër Thiossane with and through the city by working with Simone's notion of 'rhythms of endurance.' This concept helps us understand the ways in which these initiatives, in the context of Dakar, 'conjoin rhythms of occasions and practices not easily attributed to any single person or thing.'<sup>40</sup> We believe these initiatives are 'shifters in a complex politics that may use the occasion of specific enunciations actualized in particular circumstances to create contexts for bringing provisional collectives to life, ones that don't pin down their constituents to overbearing judgments or histories.'<sup>41</sup>

Simone argues that such contexts—here used to understand the work of alternative art institutions—'enable endurance,' in the sense that endurance is something that is 'felt, where what was aspired to, what

37.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 18.

38.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 17.

39.....Marion Louisgrand Sylla (co-founding director of Kër Thiossane), interview by Jenny Mbaye,

Dakar, December 2019.

40.....Simone, *Improvised Lives*, p. 15.

41.....Simone, *Improvised Lives*, pp. 15–16.

was sacrificed for, what was the compelling imagination of all the strivings and hard work of care is not lost.<sup>42</sup> For Simone, rhythms of endurance involve processes that entail both composition and refusal; he draws upon the Art Ensemble of Chicago as an example to argue that 'it is a matter of composing the conditions that facilitate improvisation and dialogue among the players,'<sup>43</sup> similar to Latour's Compositionist Manifesto, to create platforms that 'release an untold energy that propels a different kind of "message for our folks," a different trajectory of historical time.'<sup>44</sup>

Simone's focus on the role of the ensemble, the mechanics of relations in rhythms, and the relationship between the contours of the environment and practices of bricolage, is instructive in our understanding of Ker Thiossane and RAW, two initiatives which are deeply entwined with the shifting ecologies of the city. As Kouoh eloquently outlines:

Dakar is the protagonist of our work, the main character of our work, the leading character, actually; if you consider RAW as a film, Dakar has the lead role as a city, as a space, real and imagined. The contemporary history of Dakar, if we take it from the festival 66 to today, through the creation of the biennale, shows on the one hand a very strong hand of the government to design the space of arts and culture. On the other hand, this is placed next to or post—or against, if you want—a genealogy of artistic practices in African societies, which reaches way back before 1966 to today.<sup>45</sup>

Put differently, these two independent art institutions remind us of the productive capacity of 'people as infrastructure'<sup>46</sup> whereby the needs of residents 'generate concrete acts and contexts of social collaboration inscribed with multiple identities.'<sup>47</sup> Indeed, both institutions are the results of years of reflection and maturation of their respective founders and artistic directors. These individuals contribute with their knowledge, inspiration, and experience, as well as with the support of their team, in significant and relevant ways to the creative scene of the capital city. Importantly, cities are places from which people, as complex infrastructures, can potentially and profoundly make change. Indeed, many new art centres are 'grappling ever more urgently with the question of what art can accomplish for the emancipation of their citizens in the

42.....Ibid.

43.....Simone, *Improvised Lives*, p. 20.

44.....Ibid.

45.....Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar,

December 2019.

46.....Simone, 'Reflections on an Urban Majority in Cities of the South,' p. 419.

47.....Ibid.

context of strained political relationships.<sup>48</sup> As Njami stresses, 'there is no centred causal logic, but rather a set of micro-logics which, when shared, constitute the warp and weft of the social fabric.'<sup>49</sup>

Inscribed in the legacy and heritage of politically engaged institutions like Laboratoire Agit'Art, both RAW and Kër Thiossane illustrate the ways in which independent initiatives emerge to 'fill the vacuum left by unfulfilled promises of cultural and artistic programmes led by the governments,' and 'set themselves apart from state-affiliated institutions as well as from commercial (art) markets'; in doing so, they create 'alternative models and platforms for negotiating art and history, and reflect upon the archive, visual culture, and cultural history.'<sup>50</sup> Such independent art initiatives are driven by the desire to share passions, ideals, knowledge, and experience in urban contexts scarred by deep social, political, economic, as well as cultural inequalities. Beyond 'a hierarchical and elitist system that reserves contemporary art for a certain segment of society,' and which highlights and reinforces social divides that 'stand out more starkly on the African continent,' these artistic initiatives explicitly aim to democratize 'culture' and make it more accessible to all.<sup>51</sup>

### MECHANISMS OF RELATIONS IN RHYTHMS

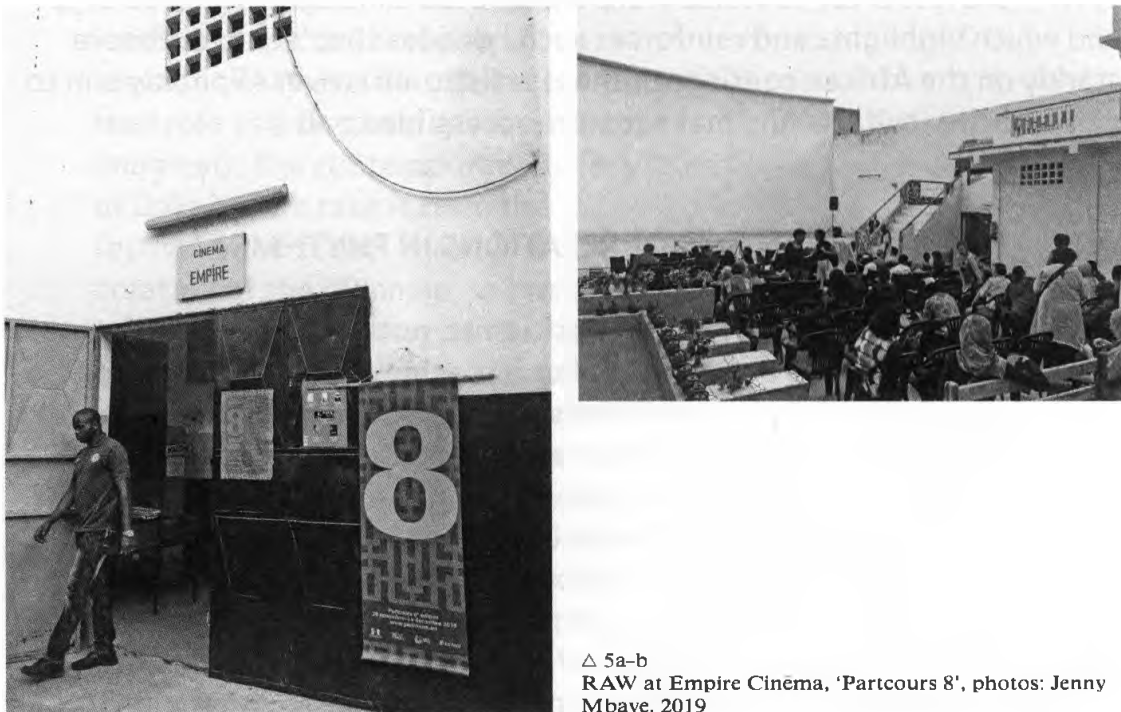
Latour reminds us that '[f]or a compositionist, nothing is beyond dispute. And yet, closure has to be achieved. But it is achieved only by the slow process of composition and compromise, not by the revelation of the world beyond.'<sup>52</sup> While evolving in a similar space, economy, and temporality (Dakar's creative scene and its not-for-profit project-based economy), Kër Thiossane and RAW are two distinctive, independent art initiatives whose complexities are made visible by exploring their orientations, programming, funding mechanisms, and internationalism. The two selected art spaces present different models of artistic interventions and critical perspectives on the transformational power of art, each with their specific focus: Kër Thiossane on the digital technologies and urban commons, and RAW on the development of alternative education and contemporary artistic theory. However different, both organizations are concerned with notions of art as a constellation of cultural practices apart from the commodification of the global art market, operating as part of innovative and collaborative international networks; an enterprise that is not without significant challenges.

Indeed, programming spaces for contemporary art in Dakar is a 'risky and unstable project.'<sup>53</sup> Though Kër Thiossane and RAW are long-term fixtures of Dakar, they are simultaneously fragile. They are concerned with the collective and with changing the urban landscape, diverse sites,

48.....Hortensia Volckers and Katharina von Ruckteschell, 'Foreword,' in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 7.  
49.....Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 24.

50.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Void,' p. 16.  
51.....Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 21.  
52.....Latour, 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto",' p. 478.  
53.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 10.



and sources of knowledge production. As not-for-profit initiatives, they operate within different temporalities and perform in a different economy to commercial galleries, purposefully inscribed in a lucrative ecosystem focused on art consumption. Both Kër Thiossane and RAW are critically inscribed in the project-based economy. For Kouoh, it is a 'context or a method of working that fragile-izes anybody that takes part in it, because a project can be big of course—I mean, it's not necessarily the size that that matters—it's really the conditions of work that matter.'<sup>54</sup> This is why alternative institution building, as discussed earlier, is so crucial. Sustaining such rhythms becomes part of the role of the curator. Njami argues that 'In cities such as Dakar, Lagos, Cairo and Douala, the concept of curator has been blurred, echoing the multiplicity of practices encountered in society, which cannot always be reflected in the codified language of contemporary art.'<sup>55</sup> 

△ 5a-b  
RAW at Empire Cinema, 'Partcours 8', photos: Jenny Mbaye, 2019

Artistic rendezvous such as Partcours or 'Dak'art's' 'Off' are composed of spaces dedicated to both cultural production and consumption; as such, some initiatives radically differ from others in their focus on consumer opportunities and citizenship. In Partcours for instance, not-for-profit spaces such as Kër Thiossane or RAW collaborate with commercial galleries such as Galerie Arte or Gallery Fakhoury. This, in turn, suggests that the distinction between public and private initiatives in the production of urban space begs further scrutiny in terms of challenges and potentialities for the greater cityscape. In this regard, both Kër Thiossane and RAW are focused on the 'production side' of the art ecosystem as private organizations with a public ambition: their interests and concerns are about methods of producing, acquiring and sharing knowledge through

54.....Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar,

December 2019.

55.....Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 24.



art. In this regard, the two selected case studies have common grounds in their establishment: 'The need to address an artistic and critical void. They respond to the urgency to create platforms of criticality and production.'<sup>56</sup>

Both initiatives are animated by a desire to curate artistic interventions that contribute to the urban commons, add value to the public culture and sphere, and engage with conversations in the public interest and for collective good. This entails going beyond a 'culture of events,' which is necessary but which doesn't do the 'daily work' of sustaining the practices of arts professionals. As Kouoh affirms: 'It can only happen through solid organizations and institutions that work on a daily basis, that don't wait for an event in order to exist.'<sup>57</sup> Here, building alternative institutions that are alternatives to the project-based economy but not the institutionalization of a project-based economy, is important. Independent art initiatives are focused on longevity, whilst inscribed and dependent on a not-for-profit economy, where long-term sustainable relationships with funding partners need to be nurtured. Considering the precarious and fragile financial working conditions of such independent art institutions, being part of different kinds of international ensembles becomes an important part of their rhythm of endurance.

Both RAW and Kër Thiossane are part of Arts Collaboratory, a self-organized network of twenty-five organizations situated predominantly in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, and joined by their focus on collective governance.

The network operates as an active ecosystem, where knowledge and strengths are brought together and harvested in processes of collective organization. It is a radical experiment in exploring the potentiality of art and social transformation when the experiences, dreams, and critical reflections of cultural practitioners from across the globe are allowed to meet.<sup>58</sup>

Both institutions refer to the network as an outstanding illustration of how the cultural and artistic field cultivates its own tools, mechanisms, and practices to rethink the world and challenge their imaginations beyond persisting hegemonic borders. Arts Collaboratory has an annual Assembly, includes smaller Banga (face-to-face) meetings, and undertakes collaborative projects. Such South-South cooperation and collaboration are important to Kër Thiossane and RAW, and this network is part of a practice of cultivating a 'transcontinental and transnational imagination,'<sup>59</sup>

56.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 10.

57.....Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

58.....'Arts Collaboratory,' [www.artscollaboratory.org](http://www.artscollaboratory.org)

(accessed 12 January 2020).

59.....Francoise Verges 'Mapping "invisible lives,"' in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 37.

comprised of spaces which 'question hegemonic viewpoints, canons and narratives of art, and develop and manifest approaches of knowledge production outside state institutionalization.'<sup>60</sup>

The innovative nature of such a network and its funding is not without challenges in terms of the number of institutions working together in different contexts and realities coming together. Since the initiation of the network, the funding is equally divided between the institutions, with an amount that is dedicated to collaborative activities, exchanges, and residencies. Furthermore, involvement in this international ecosystem means that Kër Thiossane and RAW, despite being in the same city and having collaborated before, 'got closer.'<sup>61</sup> The importance of this ensemble, the kinds of strategies and tactics developed and nurtured through these practices, is again a question of composition and refusal: it allows for the possibility to 'go beyond the consensus and existence of established structures, which permits 'in-between' zones, spaces in flux that connect theoretical, visual, practical and local knowledge.'<sup>62</sup> They represent potentialities and conceptions of the world beyond the bare dynamics of economic globalization.



△ 6  
Sen Éditions workshop for schoolchildren, Afropixel Festival. photo: Jenny Mbaye, 2019

### TRANSFORMING THE CITY WITH MULTIPLE AUDIENCES THROUGH 'ART AS A THINKING SYSTEM'


Kër Thiossane and RAW employ a diversity of artistic and working practices to animate and articulate different economic, cultural, and social values. However, the two significantly transformative practices are their engage-

60.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 17.

61.....Marie Helene Pereira (director of programmes, RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye,

Dakar, December 2019.

62.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 16.

ment with multiple audiences and their use of 'art as a thinking system.'<sup>63</sup> As Njami argues, art centres are 'spaces of proximity that know their audiences intimately,' and as such can 'act on their own environment by bringing endogenous and individually-tailored solutions to the problems they have identified.'<sup>64</sup> For both Kër Thioossane and RAW, the different kinds of publics they engage with are central to their orientation; as such, the organizations are sensitive to the diverse ways in which engagement can take place, as well as to the tensions and productive new relations that lie therein. Programmes such as RAW's Parlons Sénégalaises or Kër Thioossane's School of Commons demonstrate what is at stake; beyond engaging a diversity of audiences and sharing knowledge, they engage in a redefinition and reflection on identity, and on what it means to be from Dakar, and in the world. As such, these spaces also function as a 'place of building future generations of arts professionals on the continent.'<sup>65</sup> 

People who use Kër Thioossane see it as a 'space to free creativity ... demystify technology and, more importantly, as a space that 'creates vocations'<sup>66</sup> particularly because the organization opens up art and its space to different publics. As the programme/artistic director of Kër Thioossane explains:

From the very beginning, we addressed ourselves to two kinds of publics: young people at l'USP (engineering department) and forming 'young geeks' who are a bit like hackers, as well as invited European artists, and getting them to work together ... We positioned ourselves as a workshop, a space of dissemination, with the idea of opening a space to support young artists working with the digital.<sup>67</sup>

Opening up the space to different kinds of projects and actors is thus important for Kër Thioossane. One example is welcoming SEN Editions scientific entrepreneurs in a residency during which they further explored ludic approaches to learning STEM subjects in schools, and developed innovative pedagogical games for children using 3D printing facilities. Following their residency at Kër Thioossane, SEN Editions entrepreneurs were invited to animate workshops for a week with school children and pupils using the prototypes of their pedagogical tools in the garden of a public museum as part of 2019's 'Afropixel' festival activities.

RAW and Kër Thioossane's ability to engage with diverse publics and audiences is perhaps partly linked to the way in which they operate

63 ..... Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

64 ..... Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 22.

65 ..... Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

66 ..... Essoh (fablab animator), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, June 2019.

67 ..... Marion Louisgrand Sylla (director, Kër Thioossane), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

within their initiatives as modular families with extended relatives. RAW is described by the programme director as a space that is both a 'home' and 'family' for the team, as well as a space that creates and gives back. They remark that 'we are in a space which has, over time, enriched a scene and continues to bring a strong, innovative and critical discourse, on what is happening,' informing future interventions in the city's artistic scene.<sup>68</sup> Within the team, there is a level of autonomy and trust that means they feel able to initiate and nurture projects that they want to see happen. Similarly, Kër Thiossane is a space that is actually located within a family home; in fact, *kër* means 'home/house' in Wolof and *thiossane* refers to 'traditional Senegalese culture/heritage.' It operates a 'bit like a family' where 'people who pass through find their place and capability';<sup>69</sup> they are given space and are able to have encounters with people of different professions. This notion of the spaces as loci between different actors is described as 'tentacular' by the project producer/manager of Kër Thiossane, and as a 'passage' by the programme director of RAW: they are spaces created so that 'people can meet, be exposed to each other, exchange, be in contradiction.'<sup>70</sup> As such, a singular form of knowledge sharing here has less to do with what Njami (via Ranci re) terms the 'transition from ignorance to knowledge,' and more to do with a 'certain amount of work, both historical and societal,' that is done to cross borders of identities—reconstituting what counts as knowledge production itself.<sup>71</sup> Kouoh explains: 'I've always been interested in art as a thinking system, and not just as a display system. What kind of knowledge can be transmitted, and how to transmit it?'<sup>72</sup>

The experience of both K r Thiossane and RAW, in their respective and distinctive ways, reveal how the process of the institution itself is grounded as a response to Dakar, both reflective and prospective, and how it is informed by their own spatial literacy and understanding of the Senegalese capital. Resolutely inscribed in the contemporary art scene of the city, in genuine conversation with other art worlds on the continent and beyond, their curation at the crossroads of art, society, people, politics, and the exhibitionary provides an understanding of 'exposure' beyond artworks and towards one that includes exposure to ideas, people, and the connective urban tissue they are embedded in. Drawing on such a refreshing appreciation of artistic and curatorial practices and the role these play within a society, we thus conclude this article focusing on this notion of 'art as a thinking form,' and on the ways in which the different initiatives we have discussed—from Dak'Art Off, Partcours, Agit'Art, RAW Material Company and K r Thiossane—transform everyday urban and cultural life. More specifically, we stress that actors who change the city profoundly, and who have the potential and capacity to change the

68.....Marie Helene Pereira (director of programmes, RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

69.....Marion Aidara (production and communication manager, K r Thiossane), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

70.....Marie Helene Pereira (director of programmes, RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

71.....Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 23.

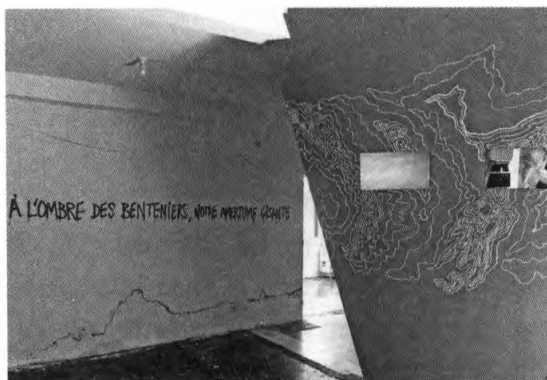
72.....Koyo Kouoh (director of RAW Material Company), interview by Jenny Mbaye, Dakar, December 2019.

city deeply, are engaged in everyday practices while inscribing themselves outside of the 'white cube curation.'

As previously discussed, insights into the curatorial practices of both Kër Thiossane and RAW highlight the important ways that their inscription in the city—and in the neighbourhood, in the case of Kër Thiossane—animate their commitments. Their capacity to open up and create spaces where people can converge, to create spaces of proposition, imagination, experimentation, and transcendence requires a continuous presence and engagement.<sup>73</sup> A prerequisite to any transformational practice is the creation of continuous dialogue between artistic practices and their environment in order to reveal how, within their constellations, certain histories are formed or formulated, repeated, universalized, and preserved. As Ngcobo explains,

These strategies are employed to reveal how artistic and curatorial gestures could perform transformative actions in political spaces, which may not yet be recognized as sites of struggle and may thus be allowed to enter a refreshed political sensibility.<sup>74</sup>

However, and more importantly, we argue that the transformative power of these art institutions lies in their capacity to pragmatically produce new energies and embody a new type of art organization as powerhouses of new, alternative energies.<sup>75</sup> △ FIG. 7



△ 7  
Kër Thiossane, *Ruins and Futures*, 'Partcours 8',  
photo: Jenny Mbaye, 2019

This capacity to invest in 'art as a thinking system' can be illustrated by Kër Thiossane's intervention in the 8th edition of Partcours, 'Ruins and futures,' which continued with its preoccupation with the 'commons' and 'learning to live together.' While there are significant challenges in establishing spaces—both physical and mental—of freedom of artistic, social, and political production that draw on and rely on an understanding

73.....This is something that Partcours has clearly institutionalized by including only arts organizations who have programmes throughout the year.

74.....Gabi Ngcobo, 'Endnotes: Was it a Question of Power?' in *Condition Report: Symposium on Building*

*Art Institutions in Africa*, ed. Koyo Kouoh (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 66.

75.....Volckers and von Ruckteschell, 'Foreword,' p. 7.

of art as a thinking form per se, such an approach shows how 'artists and intellectuals do not work to entertain us nor to decorate our homes. They work to produce food for thought and action and inspiration.'<sup>76</sup> Based on artistic experimentation, open source, and the free-culture movement of shared knowledge, Kër Thioossane's curatorial contribution took place outside of Dakar; it instigated a conversation between its neighbourhood Sicap, the jewel of the West African modern city under President Senghor, and the new satellite/smart city under construction, Diamniadio, which has become a flagship programme of the current presidential plan 'Sénégal Émergent.' Kër Thioossane's curatorial intervention included a popular event, 'Assembly of African Futures' that interrogated the involvement of citizens in the production of their urban territory.<sup>77</sup> Political but not partisan, animated by a collective outlook rather than a pursuit of personal advancement, and anchored in the realities of its urban fabric, Kër Thioossane shows us the conditions of the institutional transformative potential of art. As RAW's founding artistic director put it:

Independent contemporary art institutions are an important voice in the construction of a strong cultural private sector as well as in forging a critical opinion from an open civil society; ... art institutions are not only products of their environments [but critically] also active agents capable of shaping their societies in return.<sup>78</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored alternative arts institution building in Dakar in terms of the significant contribution to everyday urban cultural life that Kër Thioossane, RAW Material Company, and Partcours make. Taking as a starting point Dakar's status as an 'art world city' we argue that 'Dak'Art' and its 'Off' remain inscribed in a context marked by a monopolistic role of the state, creating institutional voids which generate an imperative towards what can be considered a process of alternative, independent 'art institution-building.' In focusing on Kër Thioossane, RAW Material Company, and Partcours, we have interrogated the specificities and challenges of composing and building alternative art institutions, and the different rhythms of endurance necessary to their everyday sustenance and transformation of and through the city. As Njami argues, 'It is no coincidence that, in most cases, there are women involved; [as such, art initiatives]

76.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 10.

77.....Partcours *programme*, 2019, p. 9.

78.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 19.

79.....Njami, 'Imagined Communities,' p. 22.

80.....Kouoh, 'Filling the Voids,' p. 10.

81.....Marilyn Douala Bell, 'Foreword,' in *Public Art in Africa: Art and Urban Transformations in Douala*. ed. Iolanda Pensa et al. (Geneva: Metis Presses, 2017), p. 9.

must have a thorough understanding of their audience.' And it is because of their proximity to the neighbourhoods and communities they are based in and part of that they are 'able to determine the needs to be satisfied to resolve issues raised by community living' and in so doing can act as 'a locus that allows for interactions between several actors.'<sup>79</sup> Through specific mechanisms of relations in rhythms, these independent art institutions are continuously evolving in a not-for-profit project-based economy whereby financial fragility has to be negotiated in order to envisage longer-term programming and the terms and conditions of their survival and sustainability. New alliances are being formed in this process across geographies and histories, and between partners equally engaged in investing in the relationship between arts, citizenship and society—a 'consistent fight against the instrumentalization of art for political purposes and its reduction to the field of leisure.'<sup>80</sup> Their curatorial intervention thus transforms the city by creating spaces of encounters, expression, exchange, reflection, and projection for an 'art world city' in constant recreation. Animated by 'the humanist idea of political generosity that participates in the emancipation of people and of their freedom,' art institutions such as Kër Thioossane and RAW Material Company ultimately show their dedication to 'reflect upon the levers that can accompany transformations of an urban society in search of identity and which are (or could be) contemporary creations or artistic acts.'<sup>81</sup> Through the artistic practices they display, stage and initiate, they institute new and alternative ways of seeing, of being and engaging with Dakar, always in relation with its different publics and audiences. 📍

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