

IN SEARCH OF OUR ROOTS. ON THE HISTORY OF SENEGALESE PAINTINGS

Anna Helfer

Ken Aicha Sy is a Senegalese French curator based in Dakar, Senegal. Her curatorial research project Survival Kit aims to create a tool, *Magalogue* (1), for understanding the history of contemporary Senegalese art, particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s. Hundreds of paintings, graphics, films, and archival documents from the École de Dakar are housed in European museums. At the same time, communities in Senegal have no access to their cultural heritage. Survival Kit takes up the urgency that people need to know their cultural roots, allowing collective remembrance of history to envision the future. Her four-year research into Senegal's artistic heritage took her to Germany and England, where she collaborated with the Weltkulturen Museum, Iwalewa House, and SOAS University of London. While conducting her research, she sifted through museum depots and interviewed several key figures from the cultural art scenes of Europe and Africa. She gained significant insights and perspectives on European and African museum institutions and the artistic activities and networks of that time in Senegal. Notably, the artistic and museum practices of collectives Huit Facettes and Laboratoire Agit'Art have significantly impacted Ken Aicha Sy's view of museums as a venue that responds to the community and cultural rootedness. Consequently, returning cultural heritage from Europe to Africa is closely linked to the need for museums and archives to transform themselves to adapt not only to the absent objects but also to the cultural and societal environment of the place of origin.

AH: Ken Aicha, you are conducting a research project called Survival Kit which focuses on the history of the arts in Senegal, particularly from 1960 to the 1990s. The project aims to provide an Afrocentric perspective, as European institutions and museums dominate most research about this period. Additionally, the project has a personal approach as your father, El Hadji Sy², is one of the artists of this period and a member of the collective Laboratoire Agit'Art. Could you please explain how the project came about?

KAS: The idea of Survival Kit started with thinking about what kind of history and knowledge I wanted to transmit to my kid about his grandfather. Returning to my history and family's history was a cathartic step. The project is linked to being a mother and the urgency of passing on our history.

¹ The *Magalogue* is a booklet combining historical information about museums, university archives, and art centers within the transcultural connection between Senegal, Germany, and England. It is written in French, English, and German and includes interviews with art historians, curators, journalists, artists, and experts in the field. Additionally, the booklet features reproductions of works and an image bank, particularly Senegalese art, which serves as a visual reference for the principles and concepts.

² El Hadji Sy, also known as El Sy, was born in 1954 in Dakar, where he currently lives and works. He studied at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Dakar from 1973 to 1977 and is a part of the second generation of Senegalese artists who emerged after the renowned École de Dakar. Along with filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, dramaturg Youssoufa Dione, and philosopher Issa Samb, Sy co-founded the trans-disciplinary art collective Laboratoire Agit-Art. In this collective, he created the spatial environments and visual language for their performances. Sy has also been a key figure in developing several artists' collectives, including Tenq and the interventionist group Huit Facettes, which was featured at Documenta 11.

Since I did not grow up with my father and my mother died, the question came up: "Where do I find information about my family and about the culture I grew up in"? Due to the lack of a father-daughter relationship, I had to visit the family and institutional archives to obtain the missing information. My father had not passed on this knowledge, so collecting it was up to me. It sounds sad, but I am also grateful because otherwise, I would not have started this project. Another entrance to this project was the personal archive of my late mother, Anne Jean Bart, a journalist and cultural writer for the newspaper *Soleil* in Dakar. She wrote extensively on the art and cultural scene of Senegal. After her passing, I stumbled upon many articles she wrote from that time. This prompted me to visit the *Soleil* archive, where I found more of her writings about the art scene. However, her personal archive at home was more iconographic, with many pictures, memories of that time, and about El Hadji Sy's family. So, finding all these documents, articles, and photos inspired me to embark on a personal project, *Survival Kit*, which then, over time, developed into much bigger projects. Another aspect, as you mentioned, was that most of the catalogs and books of Senegalese art from the 1960s to the 1990s, were written by scholars and institutions from outside of Senegal, mainly Americans and Europeans. Although books like Elizabeth Harney's or Joanna Grabski's³ provide thorough research on the subject, they don't offer a Senegalese perspective or involve collaboration with scholars or artists from Senegal. There is one exception I am aware of where Senegalese artists were involved in the knowledge-making process: the *Anthology of Senegalese Contemporary Art* by the *Weltkulturen Museum* in Frankfurt and its former curator, Friedrich Axt. In this case, El Hadji Sy contributed to the book's content and invited other artists to contribute to this publication. So, from that experience, I wanted to comprehend the history of visual arts in Senegal and, most importantly, to rectify any narratives or perspectives that may have been misrepresented, twisted, or misinterpreted. As a result, I began conducting interviews with the actors from this period to tell their own stories. There was a sense of urgency to this task, as no one is immune to the passage of time, and these artists pass away. However, I also needed to see the artworks to understand this fully. That brought me to Europe, mainly Germany, where most paintings are.

AH: The *Weltkulturen Museum* has many of your father's artworks, El Hadji Sy, because of his close collaborations with Friedrich Axt during the 70s and 80s. When Axt died, he gave his archive to the museum, which they are now taking care of. *Iwalewa House* on the other hand, collected very generously a lot of art from the *École de Dakar* and the Senegalese genre of "sous verre" behind glass paintings. When you began researching, did you know what was stored in the depots and museum cellars? Can you describe how it was for you to discover Senegalese culture or your father's work far away from your place of origin?

³ Harney, Elizabeth (2002): *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995*. Durham: Duke University Press; Grabski, Joanna (2001): *The Historical Intervention and Contemporary Practice of Modern Senegalese Art: Three Generations of Artists in Dakar*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

KAS: I was initially curious about what they had, but I had yet to learn what I would find. To my surprise, I discovered many things: paintings, paperwork, articles about the artists, documents related to the deal, money transactions, and transportation. I also came across many negative photos documenting various artworks and events and flyers promoting exhibitions and other events. But most of all, discovering artists and their paintings was the most exciting. For example, when I discovered Amadou Bâ⁴, it was eye-opening. I finally understood the aesthetics and philosophy of Négritude and what Senghor was trying to accomplish with it: to bring Senegalese and African culture into the spotlight. I am fascinated and touched by Amadou Bâ's artistic style. For me, he represents the École de Dakar movement. Upon discovering my father's work, I realized that he served as a catalyst for the art scene in Senegal, promoting numerous other artists but himself. At the same time, visiting the museum's depot and archives was, in many ways, very violent. As I looked at all the cultural artefacts and wondered why they were being kept there, I felt sad; in some ways, I was angry and frustrated. I questioned myself: "Do they think we cannot take care of our own artefacts?". It was shocking to discover the extent of the museum's collection as I delved deeper into the archives and depots. Despite the question of which museum has the right to host which artworks, my research made me realise how incredible it is that so many unique artworks and documents are locked away in bunkers where no one can access them.

AH: How could you access these depots and archives or depots, museums, and archives?

KAS: Most of the time, I could easily access the depots because my father's works were stored in these collections. So to speak, the institution had no choice. They had to grant me access to the materials related to my father. However, there were moments when I could not access certain areas. One of the German museums I contacted during my research residency at the Z/KU did not respond favorably to my request. Despite repeated reminders via email and phone, I was never granted access to their archives. This is a major issue. I saw this gesture as a hostage-taking of a memory that doesn't belong to them. Furthermore, I came across a disturbing realization that the archive is monetized. For example, at SOAS, I had to pay 200 pounds to access a digital copy of a film SOS Culture, featuring my father's performance. This experience made me ponder what would have happened if I hadn't had the money to access it. This led me to question how students from all backgrounds would access this information and raised concerns about the ownership and management of such archives and museums. Shouldn't we consider decolonizing these spaces and developing a new approach to moving archives that would be accessible to all?

⁴ Amadou Bâ is an artist and belongs to the first generation of the Ecole de Dakar. He gained popularity in Europe, especially in France, after his artwork was showcased in the exhibition *L'art sénégalais d'aujourd'hui* at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1974. Bâ's paintings blend traditional and modern styles, depicting nomadic and rural life in Africa. He is deeply rooted in his Sahelian hometown in Senegal, and his paintings revolve around the Sahel region.

AH: Your question goes to the heart of the debate about coloniality in museums. Historically, the construction of the European nation in museum discourses and collections has been intertwined with the creation of "otherness". As institutions of modernity, museums were both instruments of the nation-state and colonialism. Today, European museums are responsible for rethinking their legacy regarding ownership, representation, and accessibility. Survival Kit takes part in this debate as it questions this museum's legacy and wants to liberate Senegalese art from these depots, one-site narratives, and the captivity of otherness, making it accessible to the society where the artworks emerged. So, there is this aspect of restitution within Survival Kit. The project not only seeks to return art but also questions the concept of museums as isolated spaces where the future of these objects is preserved. Could you elaborate on that?

KAS: To answer this question, first, we must make ourselves aware and realize why encountering cultural heritage is so important and why we need places to encounter our history, culture, and epistemic systems. Countries with colonial pasts, especially, must have access to their past; only by connecting to the past can a society shape its future and profoundly impact people's consciences and perspectives. Having places that connect us to our past and roots is essential, not just for the duty of memory but also for learning from the events depicted, the development of creativity, the sense of aesthetics, and critical thinking. These are crucial qualities that help us face the world with the dignity of our ancestors. Second, regarding museums in Senegal, we must be aware of the museum as undoubtedly a problematic, inaccessible, and foreign space. The first museums in Dakar came after the model of Western museums through Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal and promoter of culture from the 1960-1980s. In the name of the Négritude philosophy, he established an academic art school, the École de Dakar, as I mentioned earlier. He also held significant exhibitions of European and African artists like Pablo Picasso, Henry Matisse, and Iba Ndiaye at the Musée Dynamique. His institutionalisation of arts serves as a means of promoting and disseminating a cultural heritage through propaganda and presentation, which, on the other hand, had less to do with how various aspects of Senegalese culture were practiced outside these walls.

Back then and today, many people perceive the museum as a curious and outdated place that mainly appeals to foreigners or the Senegalese elite. We have, therefore, to distinguish the status of museums in Europe from those in Senegal or even West Africa, as the local population are not encouraged to explore them. Consequently, the issues surrounding museums need to be considered in democratizing access to art, art education, and conservation. These questions about the Museum have been explored in Senegal by the artist collective Huit Facettes, who believed that art should be taken out of the cities and confront rural populations in their daily lives to fulfill its primary functions of awakening and developing a critical sense. For others, like the artists of the Laboratoire Agit'Art, artworks need to break away from walls, leave museums and galleries, and be

presented in the street, in spaces accessible to all people, share their practice with society to develop new perspectives, social values, and critical engagement with social-political contexts. So, confronting the public with a low threshold is essential, mainly because most don't have this kind of institutional art education. Therefore, a museum space must be where history, culture, and innovation converge. It should serve as a venue for inquiry and engagement, where we can learn about ourselves and connect with others. We need to involve more people in planning museum content to better understand the objects we exhibit rather than isolating them in boxes. The museum must be reimagined, made accessible to everyone, and focused on welcoming the future as much as the past. Otherwise, it will become an outdated witness to a regrettable past. The Survival Kit raises essential questions about the purpose of such spaces. What happens to collections after exhibits? How do we access archives, and what kind of expertise do these institutions have in understanding past events? Isn't it time to add an Afrocentric perspective to these issues that directly concern us?

AH: I understand from your experience that there is a discrepancy between how the artists at that time perceived art and its performance space versus the modern museum concept, where art is predominantly exhibited and locked away. Consequently, following the ideas of Huit Facettes and Agit'Art, who envision the museum space as a place where everybody can engage with art, be confronted, and where art can respond to and resonate with the public, your approach to circulating art back from Europe to Africa also means then to transform the museum radically?

KAS: Yes, exactly. Looking at these artistic practices means engaging with a long tradition of questioning the normativity of museum spaces and opening to formats that take art out of its isolation and into showcases hanging from walls. In this sense, I am also referring to Clémentine Deliss, whom I admire and who mentored me. She has been questioning the museum, especially the ethnographic museum, for a long time and was always ahead of her time. In criticizing those places as vestiges of the horrors of colonisation, she conceptualized the "metabolic museum" (5) as a way of rethinking these spaces as places of encounter. More precisely, she wanted to bring the collections back to life, remove them from storage, show them, question them, and work with them. As the director of the Weltkulturen Museum, she invited artists to work with the primarily stored objects in black boxes. She led them to develop different approaches to engage with them. Initially, touching, feeling, and manipulating those objects felt unusual, but it created an opportunity to move beyond their customary or conventional use. For the artist, it was also to work on new

⁵ In her book *The Metabolic Museum* (2020) Clémentine Deliss discusses how European ethnographic museums have been pressured to justify their existence for some time. The themes of their exhibits and the histories of their collections, which are often rooted in colonialism, have been under scrutiny. Change is necessary. Deliss combines personal experience and academic research in her novel on modern art and ethnology. She shares her insights as the director of Frankfurt's Weltkulturen Museum and her conversations with influential artists, filmmakers, and writers. The book also explores the current state of contemporary art and introduces the Metabolic Museum, a laboratory that experiments with innovative art and showcases collections for future generations.

material, forms, and substance. That is why it is so essential that the Senegalese society has access to these artworks to work with them. In her book *The Metabolic Museum* (2020) Clémentine Deliss discusses how European ethnographic museums have Let's examine art practices outside of Europe, where art is integrated into daily life, to reimagine museums as spaces that reflect social realities and dynamics. From that point of view, I think there is a twofold requirement for Africa's cultural heritage: European museums must open their archives and depots and transform themselves into open spaces where people worldwide can work with them. On the other hand, African museums must leave the legacy of European museums and reinvent themselves regarding their tradition of art and culture.

AH: In that sense, Survival Kit will be the special guest at the IFAN Museum, Dakar, at the exhibition Branching Streams. Sketches of Kinship. The exhibition is part of "Re-Connecting-Object," a major research project led by a transnational research group between 5 countries on the African and European continent. The project aims to de-center Eurocentric perspectives and allows for multiple epistemologies, fostering the generative power of locally anchored practice and knowledge on all levels of the project's development. You display Survival Kit as a work-in-process project with different materials, including interviews. Originally, you wanted to show the original artworks, but due to cost and insurance problems, you can only display photographs. What is the importance of originality in your project, and how does it relate to the museum? And finally, does this exhibition format reflect your ideas of a museum space?

KAS: The way I want to present my work is linked to the discussions I had during the project process. At every step, I had small presentations of the research, and I asked my audience: "What do you think?", "How do you want to receive the information?". After collecting all the feedbacks, it became apparent that there is a requirement for utilizing different mediums. As a result, the exhibition *Apologue de la peinture contemporaine sénégalaise* at IFAN is an additional step to present my project to a more specific audience, including students, art professionals, and people who engage in arts from all over the world. I will present different materials, photographs of the paintings, and, foremost, the movie *SOS Culture*. This is more accessible to a broader audience. Doing that is a kind of democratization of art and the way to access art. Additionally, all the scenography, which I closely developed with the scenographer Carole Diop, is linked to my experience of working with the archives in Europe. When I choose only to display prints of the original artworks, it is also a way to say something, the underlying connotation of "I don't have the right to do the exhibition; they don't give me the right to present." The archive containing the cultural heritage of Senegal is a powerful tool for maintaining control of the economy around the archive. Ownership of the archive is linked to political power. Therefore, those who cannot afford to buy back the archive don't have power. As I do not have the means to

purchase it, I am displaying prints instead to showcase the cultural heritage. In this sense, I built up the Magalogue to overcome these archival powers and the hegemony of museum spaces to find a more modern way, so to speak, to democratize knowledge about Senegalese cultural history. Answering the other question about originality: I like this question because it's what's important. Originality? Isn't it just as important to remember a deficient general memory of the past? The originality of this exhibition, beyond the form of the rendering, is the subject itself. The approach to it. This personal history that ultimately becomes the history of all. This memory and the problems associated with its loss or possession by a third party. I like the idea of showing the difficulty of access, the interminable labyrinth to finally reach something that belongs to us. The story itself is important, but so are the means of accessing it. And finally, what will remain of this story? How are we going to carry it through the centuries? Why should we talk about Picasso and not the works that inspired him? Why should we talk about Banksy when Elsy has been trying to get the works out of museums for 40 years? What are the limits and who sets them? Why should our history be less important than yours?



Artist El Hadji Sy



Founder of "Survival Kit" Ken Aicha Sy



Paintings of El Hadji Sy. Depot of Weltkulturen Museum, Germany



A Behind glass painting "Sous Verre" by Mor Gueye depicts Cheikh Amadou Bamba walking on water. Depot of Iwalewa House, Germany

SURVIVAL KIT

APOLOGUE DE LA PEINTURE CONTEMPORAINE SÉNÉGALAISE

DANS LE CADRE DE L'EXPOSITION « FLUX RAMIFIÉS - ESQUISSES DE PARENTÉS »

DU
18 MAI
AU
15 SEPT.
2024

MUSÉE
THÉODORE
MONOD



Amadou Bâ «La vendeuse d'oiseaux» 1983

WELTKULTUREN
MUSEUM



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BRITISH
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IWALEWAIHAUS



Archive register about the various Senegalese artists