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'Making Africa' at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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A design exhibition shows off the region's innovative engagement with the digital world



For the last two weeks of October, a man in a knitted beanie and a navy boiler suit occupied the soaring foyer of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a spray can in his hand and a flask of Touba coffee at his side, as he rode up and down on an industrial cherry picker. The explosive imagery he conjured on to the 12-metre-high wall in a palette of hot pastels, which now greets every visitor, combines a vast African mask with a canal boat, buildings, and the ones and zeros of the binary system. At the centre of the scenario, a busload of urgent individuals appears to be racing right into the museum.

"Graffiti is respected in Senegal, even by the older generation," said Atibou Diallo, the 35-year-old assistant to Docta — the man on the cherry picker — as he photographed the work in progress. "We do it in unloved, decrepit spots and then they turn into meeting places and people start to look after them. Then restaurants will open there."

The 40-year old Docta (real name, Amadou Lamine Ngom), the unofficial leader of street art in Senegal's capital Dakar, is not averse to supporting important healthcare initiatives in the "3D" graffiti form in which he is a specialist. But here the message is an invitation to see *Making Africa*, an exhibition that aims to shed new light on the continent, and which opened at the Guggenheim in Bilbao last weekend.

While it marches under the banner of "design", this is not a show of tables and chairs. Neither does it deal with the Africa of poverty and oppression, famine and disease with which the west is most familiar: this is not the design of water purifiers and antimalarial advances. Instead, *Making Africa* touches on social belonging, identity, relationships to the environment, a particularly informal type of urbanism, all frequently enabled or enhanced by the rapidly developing digital world.

It is about process not product. On show are films and photography that question pollution and gender; confident contemporary identities conjured through fashion and graphics; a model of a temporary structure by the architect David Adjaye (a London-based Ghanaian) for a Cape Town train station deliberately designed to create interracial integration in post-apartheid South Africa.



'Mame' (2014) by Omar Victor Diop

©Magnin-A Gallery



Africa, with its 54 nations, 2,000 languages and billion-plus inhabitants, is impossible to compress into a single show. “Had I aimed for a comprehensive view, I would have failed,” says the curator Amelie Klein, a design historian who admits to having been torn apart in the first workshop she staged in South Africa. “The title itself was highly controversial!” But throughout 2013 and 2014 she carried out many more meetings in Africa’s urban centres, including Addis Ababa, Dakar and Nairobi, to reveal new narratives and ways of thinking, unexpected material and unexposed artists and practitioners.

What emerges strongly is an Africa underpinned by informal systems and citizens who are adept at doing things for themselves. As Mugendi M’Rithaa says in an essay in the accompanying catalogue, “If necessity is the mother of invention, then Africa should be a superpower in innovation.”

What proved not to be an advantage in the industrial age (where locals were often subordinated — by the western-run mining companies, for example), in the digital one is proving rather different. “Ownership is becoming a vaguer issue with file-sharing, rapid prototyping and 3D printing,” says Amelie Klein. If mass production is gradually being superseded by the new imperatives and economics of customisation and production-as-needed, Africa may have leapfrogged an entire ugly epoch.

Landfill — literally millions of tonnes of waste from the west, including everything from superannuated computers to useless washing machines — is gradually being seen simply as material, not detritus but a usable resource. There’s an image here of the W. Afate 3D printer, assembled from electronic waste by the Togo-based collective WoeLab, that seems to sum up the past and future.



'Red Congolese Star' (1990) by Bodys Isek Kingelez, made of plastic and found materials

Elsewhere, there’s sculptural seating created by the Senegalese Amadou Fatoumata Ba from worn-out tyres, not for sustainable reasons but for a fascination with their past life. “I like them because they’re indestructible,” he says. “And when I start a piece, I never know where it will end up.”

But it is, of course, telecommunications and the internet that most clearly define contemporary Africa. Once “landlocked” by its geography and economics, it is now porous, able to engage in a two-way conversation with the rest of the world. The continent’s consumption of YouTube videos is voracious, and its ability to spill out footage equally rampant. Fokn Bois, a satirical, politically incorrect hip-hop duo from Ghana, even released their first album as a film: a snappy song about carrying out fraud in an internet café is shown here.

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Elsewhere is footage from Slum TV, set up in 2007 by Sam Hopkins, an artist who grew up between Kenya and the UK, that documents life in the downtrodden Mathare district of Kenya’s capital Nairobi, with the protagonists as producers. As a counterpoint to the NGO imagery of sewage spillage and dried-up wells, here a 97-year old man delights in his mobile phone, while a young one views his own as a problem — a possible object of theft.

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The elder man is right, though. In Kenya, M-Pesa — a branchless bank set up eight years ago that enables users to open an account and make all financial transactions via mobile phone — has enabled more than 17m people to engage in a banking system, and massively cut cash-based corruption. (It has since been rolled out in Tanzania, Afghanistan, India and eastern Europe.) It’s this kind of design that matters here.

But while Klein was keen to take an optimistic view — and there is a sense of celebration — an overview of contemporary Africa will never be without other, more harrowing realities. The illegal status of homosexuality is alluded to in Jody Paulsen’s “Universal Fag Map”, an exuberant felt collage of famous gay bars.

A series of beautifully crafted linocuts of Zimbabwean politicians by Kudzanai Chiurai speak of the corruption that bedevils so many governments. The Boko Haram kidnappings, the continual threat of sexual harassment, the legacy of colonisation — all hover at the edges of the show’s party atmosphere.

The consultant curator on the exhibition was the Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor, now resident in Munich, where he is director of the Haus der Kunst. This year he also played a big part in the Venice Biennale as curator of the exhibition *All the World’s Futures*. If his Venice contribution was polemical and dark, *Making Africa* seems remarkably upbeat and optimistic.

“They’re very different shows,” says Enwezor, speaking from Munich. “The biennale had to have a sense of occasion. And I wanted to create a sense of urgency. I wanted to give the artists — and their thinking — a platform. With *Making Africa*, it’s about pointing us in a direction that asks questions. It’s educative, and analytical, but open. What combines the biennale and this exhibition is that both are designed to start conversations.”

In the case of *Making Africa*, the exhibition suggests it’s a conversation that has only just begun.

‘Making Africa’, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao until February 21, then Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, March 22–July 31, guggenheim-bilbao.es.

Photographs: Expand Design; Pascale Revert; the Pigozzi Collection

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'Splice' (2012) by Ifeanyi Oganwu



'Sansa' (2010) by Cheick Diallo

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