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A RESILIENT CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART COMMUNITY FACES THE CORONAVIRUS STORM

Posted on [April 21, 2020](#) by [Hanou Amendah](#)



Enam Gbewonyo, Venice Nude Me Performance, © Michal-Murawski

Museums and galleries: shuttered! Art fairs and biennales: postponed indefinitely!
Previews, artists' talks, and performances: cancelled! The extreme measures taken to dampen the swift spread of the coronavirus pandemic have brought the art world in its

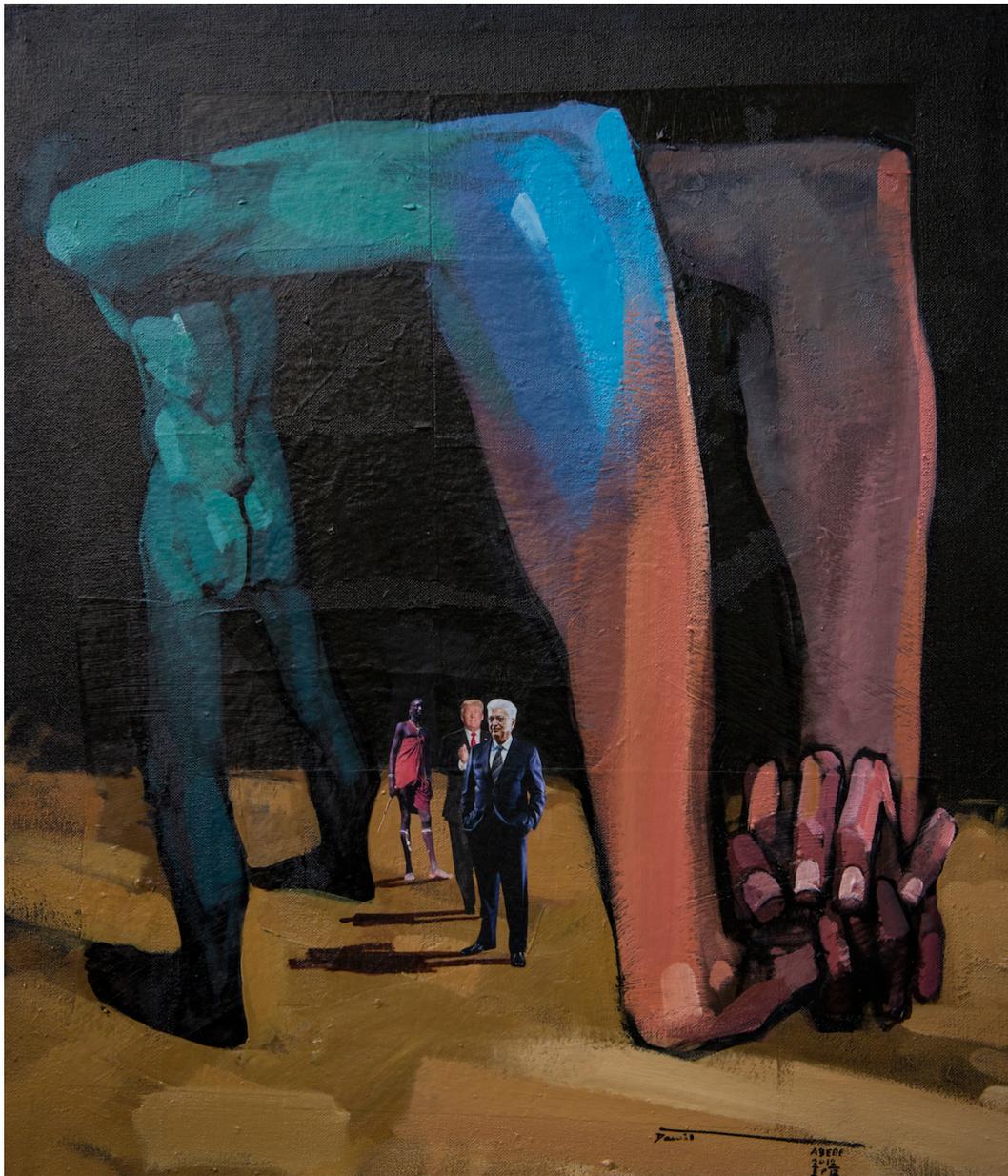
present form to a screeching halt. Unwittingly, the confinement measures have also exposed the fragile financial health of numerous art and cultural organisations and precipitated the closure of others. Suddenly, a question that would have seemed unfathomable only a few months ago, becomes reasonable: if some of these long-standing institutions cannot outlive this crisis, what would become of the budding contemporary African art scene?

The year 2020 was expected to be a promising continuation of the previous one, which saw new records established at auctions, unprecedented attention directed towards the work of Black or African artists, and greater diversity within museums' curatorial teams. In February, [Artnews](#) reported that representatives of prestigious art institutions were in attendance at the Marrakech edition of the specialist fair, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, with the intent to diversify their collections.

Then came March and the global spread of the coronavirus!

In line with the sanitary measures outlined by various authorities across the world, some galleries opened only by appointment while other organisations implemented social distancing measures through controlled entries. But soon, even these procedures proved inadequate, and the curtains came down on March 19th. That day, in quick succession, art galleries announced their temporary closures in droves while the New York edition of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair was deferred to 2021. In Senegal, the highly anticipated 14th edition of the Dakar Biennale, a long-running contemporary African art exhibition, was postponed.

Later that afternoon in the London offices of the auction house Bonhams, the planned Modern and Contemporary African art auction was one of the last art events to be held live. It generated £1,8 million, the equivalent of \$2 million (premium included), but came short of the pre-sale estimate of £1,9 million to £2,8 million. Giles Peppiatt of Bonhams indicated that he "was pretty satisfied in light of the conditions." He mentioned other high-value private transactions and pointed to the auction achieving 75% of the value of the pre-sale estimate as a positive indicator. On the whole, he insisted, "the market is very strong, very strong indeed." It is too early to predict the impact of the pandemic. However, he surmised it would have less impact on the contemporary African art market than on the mainstream contemporary art market for reasons that are twofold: "The contemporary African market has not had the type of meteoric rise" seen in other segments nor has it attracted buyers primarily seeking investments.



Dawit Abebe, Long Hands 8, 2019. Courtesy Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

The growth of Contemporary African Art has gathered pace in the past decade, bolstered in part by the launch in London in 2013 of 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair – a platform dedicated to promoting the work of artists from Africa and its diaspora. The fair has since rolled out two other editions in New York and Marrakech in 2015 and 2018, respectively. In Paris, a competing African Art and Design fair, AKA, was inaugurated in 2016. Along the way, existing galleries expanded their rosters to include African artists while new small galleries partly – or entirely – dedicated to African art emerged. In the secondary market, although Bonhams had been organising African Art auctions for a decade by then, it was Sotheby’s announcement in 2017 of a new dedicated department, which cemented the viability of the African art market.

Sales achieved at these specialist auctions, in the absence of other industry data

inclusive of galleries' turnovers, have become a proxy indicator of the relative size of the African art market. In 2018 (the last year for which data is available), all auctions by African artists generated \$48.2 million, according to ArtTactic's [market analysis](#). That same year, aggregate sales at public auctions amounted to \$29.1 billion, according to "The Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report." That is 0.16% in relative terms. Even if the data were to be adjusted to account for potential errors, and to include sales by leading African artists initially featured in other types of auctions, contemporary African art would still represent a markedly small share of the global art market.

Barring the auction records of Nigerian artists Ben Enwonwu, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and a handful of other artists whose works hover over the \$1 million threshold, the African art market is characterised in broad terms by relatively low prices, and small-scale operations run by very small to mid-sized galleries.



Tiffanie Delune, Foreign Familiarity, 2019. Courtesy Ed Cross Fine Art

Paradoxically, it is this very peripheral position, along with its inherent features (a small community, low prices, specialised art fairs and auctions combined with emotion-driven

purchases as opposed to sheer investment-driven decisions) together with the resilience and ingenuity of this art community that is proving salvatory.

Ed Cross Fine Art is one of the small galleries in the contemporary African art scene in London. Its decade-long nomadic model, which equates to relatively low overheads and tremendous flexibility, is particularly well-suited for these lockdown times. The programming is centered on a few solo exhibitions every year. The first of this year, "Seeds of Light," coincidentally the first by Tiffanie Delune with the gallery, had been disrupted by the restrictions and led to the cancellation of the artist's talk and low attendance. However, Mr Cross said, "sales were pretty good because we already sold some works before the show to a major Nigerian collector, and that was done online." Since then, two inquiries came through Artsy (an online platform that connects galleries to collectors), though they have not been concluded. Despite these potential sales falling through, he remained hopeful: "I have also been quite encouraged that things haven't completely stopped business-wise, you know, there have been some sales since [the confinement] started."

Owners of galleries with physical spaces also share the cautiously optimistic outlook. In southeast London, Kristin Hjellegjerde, founder and head curator at her eponymous gallery, with two spaces in London and one in Berlin, sounded upbeat. Sales and shipments are ongoing, despite some requests for cancelations and delayed payments. "A lot of collectors," she said, "have sent me messages showing their loyalty." The gallery's preparedness, a combination of long-term programming and advanced shipments, are also enabling Kristin Hjellegjerde and her team to navigate these uncertain times well. At the time of the interview late in March, artworks for an exhibition initially scheduled for May had already been shipped. They were also revisiting the concept for a show by a Nigerian artist, Gerald Chukwuma, in Berlin, which had to be postponed. Ms Hjellegjerde stressed that the gallery's team was putting the downtime to good use. "We are doing things we didn't have the time for. We started to prepare books for the artists. We are restructuring our website with viewing room; we are doing a lot of things that will be beneficial for the future as well."



Gerald Chukwuma, Onnyemma: The Kind Man's Story, 2020. Courtesy Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Technology has emerged as the nucleus of the galleries' survival strategy. Ms. Hjellegjerde indicated that they were relying on digital presentations with the dual purpose of showing work to their collectors and keeping "some sort of momentum" throughout the lockdown period. New technologies, digital interactions, and online sales have long been touted as the new frontier for the art world as a whole. However, the uptake has been slower than anticipated. According to the latest Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report, online sales represented only "9% of sales in the art market by value" in 2019, a slight decline of 2% compared with the previous year.

Galleries within the contemporary African art space mainly leveraged their websites, Instagram (the visual social network), and Artsy to implement their digital strategies. Few galleries had online exhibitions or viewing rooms before the COVID-19 crisis. Only 10% of the 79 galleries at the 2019 editions of both 1:54 London and AKAAs had online shows, primarily to complement exhibitions in their physical spaces. Since March, many have hastily ramped up their digital efforts and announced in their newsletters new online exhibitions, raising the proportion of galleries with digital shows to 23%.

Tafeta, a small gallery in London, is presenting Ghana Gold, a solo show by Nigerian photographer **George Osodi** documenting “unregulated gold mining in Ghana.” Meanwhile, the influential Parisian gallery A-Magnin also staged its inaugural online show “What Dreams Are Made of” via Artsy. As to Ed Cross Fine Art, they are preparing a solo show with Nigerian artist **Wole Lagunju** that will be hosted on Artland (a three-dimensional digital exhibition platform). Mr Cross explained that in the past, a form of stigma was attached to online-only galleries, those devoid of bricks and mortar assets. But the confinement changed that. “We are all online galleries at the moment.” Although technology has achieved – at least temporarily – an equal perception of all galleries, the crux of the issue is whether technology can also confound past statistics and enable galleries to generate enough buyers’ interest and revenue to sustain a long-term lockdown.



Enam Gbewonyo, Christie's Lates Nude Me Part II performance 1, © SMD Photography

The art world often makes headlines for its financial excesses. However, the reality for a large proportion of institutions and artists is steeped in economic insecurity and

uncertainty. The current crisis has only made matters worse and laid bare the vulnerability of artists who have not yet reached the upper strata of the art ecosystem.

The disruptions for British Ghanaian artist Enam Gbewonyo came in waves. She had to shorten her residency in Marrakesh (Morocco) and return to London to avoid being stranded abroad. “Borders were closing, [...] if I didn’t come back home I ran the risk of being stranded out there, and obviously, I wouldn’t have any income being out there, and I would have no way to work, and I would have bills mounting up here.” Then, her planned performance at Two Temple Place in London was cancelled. “It was a paid opportunity, and so you know it means that I have lost out on income.” For now, she is relying mainly on the income from her part-time job at Christie’s, which she can still do remotely.

Nevertheless, Ms. Gbewonyo considers herself “luckier than most.” She is signed up to the art agency MArt, which is looking for opportunities for her, and ultimately she is still able to support herself through this crisis. “It’s not the same case for many artists and creatives.” She highlighted newly launched relief programs by [Arts Council England](#) and the UK government, but the eligibility criteria could potentially leave many artists out in the cold.



Ade Adekola, Mirror mirror. Courtesy Retro Africa

For part of the art community in Africa, revenue concerns are secondary to that of healthcare and safety but remain nonetheless pressing issues. Dolly Kola-Balogun, co-founder of Retro Africa, and her team have been grappling with compounding challenges in Abuja, Nigeria. First, they had to close the gallery to minimise the risks for both their patrons and staff. The fast-paced changes of these last few weeks have compromised

the impending launch of their new website, as they had to weigh up the feasibility of an immersive digital experience that would showcase “the gallery in its entirety.” Then came the cancellation of 1:54 fair in New York, which the Retro Africa team was planning to attend for the second time in a row. It was “a big loss,” Ms. Kola-Balogun said. “A large percentage of the revenue is lost because our strategy as a gallery is mainly to earn a lot of revenue through art fairs.” With a limited collector base in Abuja, the gallery relies “mainly on sales from art fairs and clientele that [they] acquire as a result of those art fairs.” And while she acknowledged the existence of Lagos-based collectors, she attributed regular purchases and most sales of expensive pieces to international collectors. Officials of the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair have since announced its New York edition would be going digital. It is too early to ascertain whether the online substitute would garner as much interest and sales.



Vincent Michéa, Série Hôtel Ivoire N°1, N°4 et N°5. Courtesy Galerie Cécile Fakhoury

The high dependency on international collectors is not unique to Retro Africa. In an [op-ed published](#) in November 2018, in the French daily, *Le Monde*, curator, and director of the 11th edition of Dakar Biennale, Babacar Mbaye Diop, asserted: “the real market for African art is in the West. Its heart beats in London, Paris, and New York.” Some may disagree with that statement, pointing to South Africa or the dynamism of Nigerian collectors. Still, it makes the cancellation of the Dakar Biennale all the more dispiriting. “Dak’art,” as the month-long program of exhibitions is familiarly referred to, with its sprawling off-programming (up to 300 shows in 2018), has been a vital space for artistic experimentations, encounters, and dialogue. According to Ms. Lopez, director at Cécile Fakhoury Gallery in Dakar, the local art scene has evolved significantly in the past two years, and this edition particularly, “was expected to be a milestone event after the organisers had made fundamental structural and curatorial changes.” It is, she continued, “one of those rare occasions when people come to the continent, come to

Senegal, come to Dakar to see in situ what we have come up with as opposed to artists going to Europe to showcase their work. [...] Symbolically and ideologically, it is a powerful moment.”

Dak'art 2020 is – or rather was – a space of African artistic agency smothered before it could even come alive by the interconnectedness of our world that brought to its shores health issues birthed elsewhere. With isolation and border closure the new social norm for individuals and nations, the theme of this year, “*INDAFFA / FORGER / OUT OF THE FIRE,*” echoes through the streets of Dakar, to the echo chambers of our empty museums and galleries as both an ominous premonition and a talismanic incantation for resilience.



Serigne Ibrahima Dieye, 2_1. Sacrifice3. Photo courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury

Resilience has been rooted in narrative and deeper contextualization at Cécile Fakhoury Gallery. With four exhibition spaces in Dakar, Paris, and Abidjan, (Ivory Coast) where a second space opened just days before the lockdown, the gallery has been hit particularly hard. Serigne Ibrahima Dieye's first solo show in Abidjan was put on hold barely a week after it opened. The gallery in Dakar didn't get thus far. Vincent Michéa's exhibition "Toi Seulement," intended to be a mid-career retrospective, was hung but never opened to the public. The gallery recovered from these setbacks and reached from behind their closed

doors to their collector base through “a substantial newsletter that includes an interpretative reading of selected artwork, access to an online catalog, and the various inspirations that informed the work of a specific artist. [...] These are other perspectives and frames of reference that allow us to go deeper and beyond a simple biography, a text, and some images,” explained Ms. Fakhoury in a phone conversation.

These new perspectives also involved re-appropriating an old material: paper. The gallery has opted to go beyond the digital realm, and released catalogs of past exhibitions. “I think it is an incredible way for exhibitions to travel and exist through time.” The project has been in the making for two years and seems particularly prescient now.

Commercially, sales have continued behind the lockdown doors of the galleries, and Ms. Fakhoury remains confident: “we will find ways to showcase and promote the work of our artists.” As for the artists, she said she engages with them daily, and “they have continued to work, and that’s the most important thing. Their studios are also their places of residence. They are at home, and they are working.” On a reflexive note, she continued, “the disruption has triggered new reflections, exchanges, and discussions. [...] We are going towards a new landscape that will be very interesting, that will beget new things.”

There is a profound sense that the art landscape will emerge, somewhat changed from the shadow it has been forcibly plunged into, even if no one can quite predict the exact nature of these changes. Many have been calling for an overhaul of the art infrastructure for some time. In the last few years, the timid voices lamenting the cost of international fairs have grown louder. **Climate change activists** have called on the whole art industry to revisit its ever-expanding model of international art fairs and biennales underpinned by a high volume of air travel. Some artists, **curators**, and dealers have questioned what they perceive as a continuous marginalisation of African art through the existence of specialist platforms. Others have vented at the revenue model and the inequities that it generates. The list of the fault lines that run through the art architecture is long. This health crisis and the predicted economic crisis have the potential to be a moment of reckoning for the art world. The small, nascent, and nimble African ecosystem likely has some inherent abilities to adapt, adjust, and innovate.



Bamouin Sinzé, Evanescence. Photo Courtesy Gallery Cécile Fakhoury

Commenting on their geographical context, Ms. Fakhoury said, “I have a gallery in Africa, and I am disconnected from the big art market in Europe and the US. I have always had that idea of doing things differently. It was a real choice to start and stay in Africa instead of going to where the art market was established and structured. [...] I think there are maybe new things to invent, even at our level, at the level of the continent or a regional level. I want to stay very positive.”

These new modalities, which are being formulated and tested through the heat brought on by the health crisis, will be the real long-term legacy to investigate in the future. For the time being, even if the lockdown is proving challenging for small galleries and young artists, it has also been an incredible catalyst for innovation and prompt problem-solving. Artists, dealers, gallery owners, and directors are all, for now, uncoordinatedly

resolute in their determination to forge a way forward, “out of the fire.”

Note:

**The proportion of galleries with online exhibitions was accurate as of April 14th.*

** Interviews with Ms Lopez and Ms Fakhoury were conducted in French. All interviews were condensed for clarity.*

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