

# BOOK REVIEW

**Joanna Grabski. *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. xiii + 307 pp. 57 Color Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-02605-7.

Joanna Grabski's *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar* maps, in six vivid chapters, Dakar's contemporary (1990s to the present) art-making and art-viewing practices spatially, discursively, and historically. As such, it is a book that integrates art history with museum studies scholarship, analyzing Dakar's artists and their artworks through an investigation of the urban and institutional infrastructure in which they operate. Nourished by field research and relationships sustained over nearly two decades, Grabski sets in motion a number of engaging anecdotes to offer a framework for evaluating and interpreting contemporary African art that is grounded in local modes of sociability, political activism, and creative expression.

Grabski positions Dakar as an *art world city*, which, drawing on sociological and urbanist approaches to fields of cultural production, she defines as "a multiscalar, urban site for artistic production, mediation, and transaction" (3). The paradigm of art world city allows Grabski to foreground a local context of production while nimbly maneuvering between urban, national, continental, and even global framings of Dakar's artists. This is significant in that Dakar-based artists have been primarily framed through nationalist and Pan-Africanist projects, stemming from Léopold Sédar Senghor's early investment in the arts as national culture. Post-Senghor, in a period of reduced state support, such artists have been read through a global art market lens that imposes a set of expectations and aesthetic concerns that are not necessarily the ones most pertinent to African or Senegalese creative expression. *Art World City*, on the contrary, defiantly places Dakar and its urban environment as the structuring force behind its own art-making and viewing practices. Grabski elucidates the Dakar-specific narratives, regimes of visibility, and systems of value that shape the production, circulation, and consumption of art within the city. At the same time, she demonstrates how the local scene inflects art production at the scale of the nation (through the arts education programs located in Dakar, for example), the African continent (via the Dak'Art Contemporary African

Art Biennale), and even the global art market (by making urban life central to pictorial representations of Senegal).

The book's six chapters build on each other, though the thematic overlap in the first two sets of chapter results, occasionally, in the belaboring of certain arguments. Chapters One and Two focus on how art is exhibited in Dakar, providing new insight into how its exhibition culture departs from the norms of the global North. For example, it is artists rather than institutions in Dakar who organize and fund exhibitions. In addition, Dakar's exhibitions tend to lack a curatorial or thematic proposition, focusing instead on the featured artist's public persona. Moreover, the exhibitions do not take place in spaces consecrated exclusively to art conservation, education, or sale, such as museums and galleries. Instead, they take place all over Dakar and include a host of corollary activities that contribute to the city's *animation artistique*, exhibitions, and their opening nights function first and foremost as popular, rather than professional, events.

The importance of local sociality in Dakar's artistic production does not mean that the economic, political, and cultural impact of art is overlooked. Indeed, Grabski meticulously uncovers a local and robust knowledge-producing framework populated by journalists on the culture beat, art critics, and the artists themselves. These actors use exhibitions to set narratives about the art produced in Dakar for both local and international publics. Grabski then offers an original analysis of the city's most globally-visible exhibition, the Dak'Art Contemporary African Art Biennale. The predominant narratives about Dak'Art tend to situate the biennale as falling short of international standards, opting to focus mainly on *Africanité* and identity politics. Eschewing this framework, Grabski instead positions Dak'Art as a mediating platform that is deeply informed by the city's on-the-ground exhibition practices. She diversifies the interpretive lenses that operate in Dak'Art's discursive space by asking "How might Dak'Art bring inflections of the local, urban, or regional to the task of representing the [African] continent?" (94).

Chapters Three and Four delve into how art-making is practiced in Dakar. Throughout these chapters, Grabski brings to light how "the linkages and social webbing that characterize everyday life in the city generally also apply to life in Dakar's art world city" (112). As with Dakar's exhibitions, Dakar's artist studios function as social and narrative spaces that welcome non-specialists and professionals alike. In the studios, conversations around art objects allow artists to grow their practice discursively and to build relationships that may lead to material opportunities—in particular to invitations to travel or exhibit abroad. Grabski posits that the city's social logic makes it so that the value of an artist's network increases as it expands *laterally* rather than vertically. A brief history of Senegal's École des Arts, particularly in the overlooked decades of the 80s and 90s, also nuances Grabski's interpretation of contemporary Dakar artists. She describes how the school's turn toward research-based artistic practice encouraged artists to experiment with locally sourced materials, leading to the practice of *récupération*, or recycled art. On the global art scene, narratives of poverty have dominated

the discussion on *récupération*. However, Grabski demonstrates how Dakar's artists reject the poverty narrative and instead use *récupération* to explore aesthetic and ecological concerns.

The fifth chapter examines how local art practices render visible Dakar's urban space. Grabski contends that "artists in Dakar engage the city's lines of sight from below and within the city," articulating a grounded visuality that mines the city's pictorial offerings to produce new images of Dakar—and of African life, more broadly (183). In fact, it is from a site-specific vision grounded in Dakar, Grabski argues, that artists scale up to continental and global conversations about urbanization and postcolonial city life. The sixth chapter examines the art market in Dakar, paying particular attention to where art transactions take place. Though some artists will have non-exclusive contracts with international galleries, Grabski underscores the social webbing of the transactions that take place within Dakar. Artists sell directly to clients, many of whom have long-standing relationships with the artists, and they also negotiate with local businesses ranging from five-star hotels to hair salons in order to display and sell their art.

*Art World City's* detailed mapping of the sites, personalities, and social politics of art production in Dakar makes it an essential guide for scholars who are conducting field research. Its lucid, accessible prose and photo illustrations also make it an eminently teachable book. In addition, Grabski's book makes a historiographic intervention, given her attention to Senegalese artists working from the 1990s to the present. However, *Art World City's* most compelling contribution might be the way it models a scalar analysis that begins with—like the artists she describes—place-specific and grounded lines of sight that refract debates taking place in the nation, the African continent, and the globe. As such, it enacts the writing of global art history and urban studies via lived practices on the African continent.

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### For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Adams, Monni. 1989. "African Visual Arts from an Art Historical Perspective."

*African Studies Review* 32 (2): 55–104. doi:10.2307/523970

Gueye, Marame. 2011. "Modern Media and Culture in Senegal: Speaking Truth to

Power." *African Studies Review* 54 (3): 27–43. doi:10.1353/arw.2011.0052

Jules-Rosette, Bennetta. 1987. "Rethinking the Popular Arts in Africa: Problems

of Interpretation." *African Studies Review* 30 (3): 91–98. doi:10.2307/524541