Mombasa in chapter 4. This progression from macro to micro is mirrored by an increasing intimacy, or privacy, in the spaces and objects discussed.

Chapter 1 investigates the “fundamentally nonterritorial cultural landscape” (p. 26) of Mombasa’s Old Town in relation to the stone architecture it inhabits. It charts changes in the local perception of the stone buildings through hegemonic shifts: from the mercantile elite, to Portuguese colonizers, the Omani sultanate, the British imperialists, and the Kenyan nation state. Meier grounds her social analysis in Swahili concepts of spatial organization. The mtaa or neighborhood, for example, is not defined by streets or boundaries, but by migration and historic events, becoming a “palimpsest of communal memories and shared experiences” (p. 32)—its social and cultural interpretations changing and developing over time. As a result of such events, the prominent waterfront area was renamed mtaa ya mzungu or “white people’s quarter” after British colonization (p. 62).

In chapter 2 Meier turns to the sacred architecture of the predominantly Muslim Swahili community. Focusing on two intriguingly shaped mnara minarets, she connects the Swahili commitment to the global umma with the development of local religious building forms. The Mandhry and Mnara mosques are among Mombasa’s oldest, dating from the sixteenth century or earlier. While their main volumes are read as “stylistic and spatial entanglements, where diverse forms and histories interlock and overlap to create densely layered structures” (p. 85), their squat, unadorned conical minarets are peculiarly local, connected to older space-making practices where Islamic and non-Islamic spiritual realms intersect. Their long histories, complex forms, and inherent openness to diverse interpretations by different groups supported their becoming sites of resistance and collective agency during the colonial period.

Temporarily leaving these everyday spaces of cultural practice, in chapter 3 Meier turns to Zanzibar’s exceptional House of Wonders staked a spectacular claim to Zanzibar’s exceptional House of Wonders, completed in 1883. Scaffolded on three sides and exchanges in other port cities. Meier does not problematize the concept of “city” in relation to Swahili culture, nor does she study the forms of commercial, infrastructural, administrative, defensive, or public space that must have contributed to shaping urban culture. Moreover, perhaps in an effort to streamline and neatly package her research, Meier’s staunch focus on coral stone in the introduction belies the content of at least two chapters in which the building material is of secondary interest. Perhaps more disappointingly, she does not engage questions regarding architectural labor, interrogate local macuti constructions, or indeed explore the proximate “elsewhere” of the African mainland. Despite these criticisms, Meier’s book remains an immersive read, richly researched and precisely expressed. Engaging with her expansive consideration of Swahili “networks of affinity with faraway places” (p. 25), her focus on in-between-ness and emphasis on plurality in the construction of identity, is both rewarding and challenging to scholars contemplating historical built environments everywhere.

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book review

Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar
by Joanna Grabski
Bloomingtorn: Indiana University Press, 2017. 308 pp., 57 color ill. $45.00 paper
reviewed by Erin Schwartz

In her book Art World City, Joanna Grabski leads the reader through the tangled streets of Dakar’s vibrant and complex art scene. Her seventeen years of research and relationship building in the city allow her to guide us through her descriptions and analyses of how Dakar defines the paradigm of being an “art world city.”
She offers “art world city” as an example in which the urban area is a site of production, mediation, and translation, and the local and global dynamics of the creative economy uniquely combine. She examines the intersection of the local “art scene” and the “global art world.” The complexities of the global and local, visibility and production, and the ever-present economic challenges of being an artist in an international city are described by Grabski with nuance and clarity. Her arguments are built upon in-depth archival research and illuminated through numerous interviews and anecdotes. Her perceptive analysis marks how the specific urban environment of Dakar establishes and is constituted by the local art scene and the Dak’Art Biennale. In her exploration, she reveals the implied Western location of the “global art world” and critiques how contemporary African art literature has often failed to provide a look at art in places like Dakar on its own terms, in relation to the peculiarities of its unique, urban, creative economy.

Grabski begins her analysis by discussing the importance of visibility in the Dakar art scene and how artists, such as Joe Ouakam (1945–2017) are typically active agents in the mediatization of their works. Artists in Dakar engage in dialogs with their audiences, maintain their own archives, and author their own career narratives. The ways that they are visibly engaged in the act of being an artist is essential to the dynamics of the city’s art scene. In other writings about Dakar, this interconnectedness is often overlooked. Grabski points out that to miss this key feature of the art scene is to misunderstand how artists frame their works. The Dakar art scene is strongly artist-driven, and Grabski stresses artists’ agency throughout the book. They are not just agents of production, but also agents of their works’ brokerage, of their individual public personas, and they even shape the discourses about their works. The centrality of the artist’s persona in the creative environment of Dakar cannot be disregarded.

Grabski provides a fascinating breakdown of the Dak’Art Biennale by “mapping” the event socially and spatially. Her nuanced explanation of in- and out-sites (official and unofficial exhibitions), the ways artists engage the urban environment and local communities of Dakar, and the role of the Senegalese government and the international art world to shaping the aesthetics of Dak’Art is truly insightful and engaging. Her well-placed criticisms about outside reception and writing on the exhibitions present Dak’Art not as a singular, biannual event, but as a complex negotiation between elements controlled and uncontrolled, artists and organizers, critics and publics. Each element therein reacts to (or against) the others in a manner that makes the energy and creative potential of Dak’Art so vital to the global art world. Dak’Art, Grabski points out, could not be what it is without the unique creative economy of Dakar.

Indeed, in reading this book's description of how visibility and the urban experience are inexorably interwoven into the art scene, one realizes that Dak’Art could not exist anywhere else, nor would Dakar be the same without it, in the way that one could probably imagine other cities being more or less unchanged by the absence of their biennales. Grabski weaves the event of Dak’Art into the complex narrative of the art-world city. Her position as a person who has lived in the city and knows many of the artists working there shines through her discussion. As a reader one begins to see the city’s art community as she does, not through writings in exhibition catalogs, but rather connected and in context.

Equally interesting, Grabski guides the reader through the infrastructural and networked aspects of the biennale, presented as vital contact points between artists, collectors, journalists and the public. In Dakar, studios are discursive as well as productive, and artists craft their personas in those spaces as much as they do their artwork.

Grabski’s critique that Western-based writing on African contemporary art in general, and Dakar’s art scene in particular, has been unable to shake old tropes of “center” and “margin” by inappropriately using nonlocal rubrics to assess aesthetic and theoretical foundations of work, is deepened by her discussion of the strategy of récupération used by so many artists in the region. This process of reclaiming materials from the urban environment has been described as an act of necessity from scarcity by some writers, but Grabski demonstrates that this misunderstands the decision-making of the artists who engage in récupération. Materials from driftwood to glass to iron rebar have specific connotations for the artists who choose them. The manner in which they are gathered also vary from artist to artist, some seeking out particular items, others gathering objects as they find them and creating works around the discoveries. These artists have a clear engagement with theory and practice, and articles that erroneously describe the technique by assuming that artists are only reacting to a state of poverty are not taking the art on its own merits, and as such, entirely miss the point and the importance of the pieces. To this end, Grabski points out that the emergence of récupération in the 1980s and 1990s coincides with curricular changes at the École des Arts that shifted the loci of artistic production to the streets. This kind of urban engagement by artists is a conscious one founded on the consideration of materials and their relationship to the community. Her discussion of the work Long Walk to Change (2002), a sculptural installation by Ndary Lo (1961–2017) emphasizes the need to shift the focus of writing about art in Dakar away from Euro-American references. The installation features human-like figures made from welded rebar, striding together on a path made of old sandals. In her interview with the artist, he reveals the reasons for his selection of salvaged materials and their relevance to the meaning of the work. This one example sheds light on Grabski’s overall project, allowing Dakaroi art to be fully understood in its proper context. That the entire book is full of these conversations with artists is a testament to the time and dedication Grabski has given to the project.

Grabski uses the 2000 exhibition Démarches Urbaines (Urban Steps) to demonstrate the relationship between visibility and the urban experience. The exhibition showed the profound interconnectedness between Dakar (the city) and its art scene. The artists, Cheikh Ndiaye, Modou Dieng, and Mohammed Coulibaly, collaboratively planned, promoted, and staged the event. Seen as a watershed exhibition in Dakar, the show demonstrated how rooted art production is in the city. Grabski gives an insightful overview of Dakar’s urbanization since the end of the colonial era and uses the exhibition as a demonstration of artist agency on display within the urban creative economy.

Throughout the book, the author maintains that the Dakar art scene must best be understood on its own terms and not unnecessarily bound to the analysis-du-jour of the global art community. By providing a clear portrait of Dakar as a unique art world city, she demonstrates this obligation. The book concludes with a chapter on how artists sell art in Dakar. The common theme of agency is woven through this section as the artists in question actively display, archive, and broker their own works, developing relationships with collectors over time.

All the examples Grabski uses clarify how to write about and understand Dakar as an art world city and how to take the city on its own terms as a creative urban economy. The “art scene” is an inseparable part of the city as much as the city is woven from its art scene. This is what defines an art world city, one worth knowing and understanding more deeply.

Concise and insightful, Joanna Grabski’s Art World City should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in contemporary art on the continent of Africa, its politics, its display, its economics, and in methods of how to understand and write about it in a manner that treats the art of Dakar with the autonomy and agency it clearly expresses.

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