

1:54, CHANGING PERCEPTIONS, ONE SMALL SHOW AT A TIME

ART FAIR GENERATES REFLECTION ON THE PHENOMENON OF THE REPATRIATION OF THE AFRICAN ARTISTIC CLASS, THE EMERGENCE OF NEW SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND THE GROWING INTEREST IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART AND CULTURE

BY FABIANA LOPES



OMAR VICTOR DIOP, ALT+SHIFT+EGO #4, 2013



FOR THE 2016 EDITION of The Armory Show art fair, a significant space has been given to the contemporary artistic production of the African continent and its diaspora through the program *African Perspectives*, curated by Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba, founders of online platform Contemporary And (C&). The 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair will focus primarily on African contemporary art and Art of the African diaspora. After 1:54's inaugural year at Pioneer Works Center for Arts & Innovation in Brooklyn, New York in May of

2015, the fair will be back in town from May 6-8 this year for its second edition. Founded by Moroccan entrepreneur Touria El Glaoui, 1:54 had its original debut in 2013 in London, as part of the *Frieze Art Fair*, with the promise "to expand knowledge about Africa and its dynamic arts market". '1:54' is a reference to the fifty-four countries that constitute the African continent; it's also an effort to update the seemingly immovable negative perceptions of Africa. Thus, starting with the title of the show, the founder positioned the event as a

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AIDA MULUNEH, 99-SERIES, 2013

unique platform to represent and reflect on the multiplicity of contemporary art production and African culture on the international stage. This year's edition will present 17 exhibitors representing 60 artists from Africa and the diaspora, including Ryby Onyinyenchi Amanze, Betrice Wanjiku, Omar Victor Diop, Aida Muluneh, Billie Zangewa, Derrick Adams, and Ibrahim Mahama.

1:54 is also unique to other commercial art events - which may explain the event's relatively low number of participating galleries. Every year since its inauguration, the art fair invites participating exhibitors to go beyond commercial exchange to engage in meaningful dialogue. In that it includes, at the heart of the event, a unique program of talks and interviews with artists, curators and art researchers. Entitled 1:54 FORUM, the fair's discursive program

is organized by Koyo Kouoh, founder and artistic director of *RAW Material Company* (Dakar) and artistic director of EVA International - which is Ireland's Biennale International of Contemporary Art. Early in its first edition, the 1:54 FORUM program highlighted discussions that aimed to expand the possibility of understanding artistic and cultural creations of Africa and its diaspora. The discussions focused on the socio-cultural, historical, and political context of these creations. In 2015, the event brought together researchers and curators such as Naima J. Keith and Chika Okeke-Agulu, as well as artists like Hank Willis Thomas and Meleko Mokgosi. This year's 1:54 FORUM expands the subject of last year's forum by generating reflection on the phenomenon of the repatriation of the African creative class, the emergence of new social entrepreneurs, digital media, and the growing interest in contemporary African art and culture. Filmmakers, journalists, and entrepreneurs of digital media will share their views and the African perspective on these issues. This year the discussion sessions will also utilize a more collaborative format, collectively organized by curators Adrienne Edwards (Performa and Walker Art Center), curator of the new 1:54 PERFORMS performance session, Ugochukwu-Smooth (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College), and Dexter Wimberly (independent curator, ICI). Another partnership with the 12th Dakar Biennale, which opens in the same week of the fair, will allow 1:54 to have a channel to broadcast daily highlights from the biennale.

For the platform's next editions in the years to come, 1:54 will continue to explore the concept of diaspora, its pluralistic nature, and the creative production of afro-descendent artists from countries such as Brazil. With a program that is collaborative and focused, yet also meandering and exploratory, 1:54 is on a journey. Against all odds, 1:54 is changing perceptions about Africa everywhere it goes, one small show at a time.