

Koyo Kouoh, Our Ancestor

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On June 14 in Dakar, friends, family, collaborators, and partners of Koyo Kouoh gathered to celebrate and honor the life and work of Koyo Kouoh, who recently passed away. Everyone paid tribute to a life and a body of work centered on humanity, where community, love, and relational ethics were essential. In acknowledgment of the legacy she leaves behind, Global Africa wished to share and amplify this tribute by publishing the opening and closing texts from this commemorative day.

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© Djibril Dramé (Gadaay), photograph taken during the celebration in honor of Koyo Kouoh organized by RAW Material Company on June 14, 2025



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Biography

Koyo Kouoh founded [RAW Material Company](#) in 2008 and led its programs with care and conviction until 2019, when she was appointed Executive Director and Chief Curator of the [Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa](#) (Zeitz MOCAA), in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2024, she was named Director of the Visual Arts Department of the [61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia](#), upon recommendation by its president, Pierangelo Buttafuoco. While curating exhibitions and developing programs within her own institution, Koyo Kouoh also conceived powerful and visionary exhibitions around the world, such as [Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body in the Works of Six African Women Artists](#), first presented at Wiels in Brussels, Belgium in 2015. She curated [Still \(the\) Barbarians](#), at the 37th edition of EVA International, Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art, in Limerick in 2016.

She participated in the 57th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA), with the exhibition [Dig Where You Stand](#) (2018-2019), the result of in-depth research: an exhibition within the exhibition, built from the collections of the Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History. She initiated the research project [Saving Bruce Lee: African and Arab Cinema in the Era of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy](#), presented at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow and at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (2015–2018). She also contributed to the curation of [Douala Metamorphosis](#) during the Salon Urbain de Douala (SUD), Cameroon (2013), and the exhibition [Make Yourself at Home: Contemporary Hospitality in a Changed World](#), co-curated with Charlotte Bagger Brandt at Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, in 2010.

Deeply engaged in critical, pan-African, and international art circles, Koyo Kouoh served on numerous boards of leading arts organizations, including the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. She served as a juror for many prizes and distinctions, including the [Celeste Prize in 2015](#), the [Vera List Center for Art and Politics](#) (2018–2020), and the [Art Basel Awards](#) (2025), an initiative that aimed at celebrating artists, curators, and influential figures shaping the global art scene. Koyo Kouoh leaves behind a significant intellectual legacy as an author, editor, and publisher. Among her publications: [When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting](#) (2022), accompanying the eponymous exhibition at Zeitz MOCAA in November 2022; [Shooting Down Babylon](#) (2022), the first monograph

on South African artist Tracey Rose; [Breathing Out of School: RAW Academy](#) (2021); [Condition Report on Art History in Africa](#) (2020); [Word!Word?Word! Issa Samb and The Undecipherable Form](#) (2013); and [Condition Report on Building Art Institutions in Africa](#) (2012), among others. She curated the education and artistic program for the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in [London](#) and [New York](#) (2013–2017), and was a part of the curatorial teams for [Documenta 12](#) (2007) and [Documenta 13](#) (2012) in Kassel, Germany. In 2020, she received the [Grand Award for Art/ Meret Oppenheim Prize](#), Switzerland's highest artistic honor, acknowledging iconic figures in art, architecture, criticism, and exhibition-making. During her tenure at [Zeitz MOCAA](#), Koyo Kouoh launched innovative and visionary programs such as the [Atelier Residency Program](#), which extended the museum's activities into on-site production, and the [Museum Fellowship Program](#), in collaboration with the University of the Western Cape, aimed at young museum professionals and researchers across the continent. Her curatorial work focused on deep monographic exhibitions of African and diasporic artists. Throughout her career, she offered unprecedented visibility to artists from Africa and its diasporas. At RAW Material and beyond, she curated exhibitions with artists such as Otobong Nkanga, Johannes Phokela, Senzeni Marasela, Abdoulaye Konaté, Tracey Rose, and Mary Evans.



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Kër Koyo, by Marie Hélène Pereira

My name is Marie Hélène Pereira, and I'm part of the RAW Material Company team. I lend my voice to deliver this message of welcome on behalf of the entire team: Fatima Bintou Rassoul Sy, Mame Farma Fall Borom Xaliss, Marie Cissé, Filly Gueye, Haja Fanta, Kerry Etola Viderot, Marie Flavienne Sambou, Aminata Cissé, Fatou Sané, Omar Koné.

Daal len ak jam! We welcome you! Land in peace!

Welcome to RAW Material Company, a center for art, knowledge, and YES society, but above all, Kër Koyo, the home that Koyo Kouoh built with her own hands, with unparalleled generosity and intellectual rigor. A home where people are at the center of every thought and action. A sanctuary of art and humanity.

Kër Koyo has seen many beautiful souls pass through its doors, but today is extraordinary. Today is filled with love, heavy with sorrow and heartbreak, yet blanketed in hope and protective energy.

YES, Kër Koyo is filled with love today, even though we miss her voice and her long hugs terribly. So many of you made the journey to honor and celebrate her in her home, and for that, we are deeply grateful. This shows us that even though Koyo is no longer physically among us, she has not left us orphaned. Her spirit has been watching over us since she suddenly joined the ancestral realm on May 10.

Accompanying Koyo to her eternal home is undoubtedly the most painful task we have had to face after sharing so many paths and battles with her, from the creation of RAW Material Company in 2008 to 2011 here in Dakar, until today and forever.

Dear Koyo, all the Amazons of RAW say THANK YOU, from the depths of their hearts, and dedicate this quote to you, from the steadfast Maryse Condé whom you admired so much:

The dead die only if they die in our hearts. They live on if we cherish them, and honor their memory, if we place their favourite delicacies in life on their graves, and if we kneel down regularly to commune with them. A few words are enough to conjure them back, and to have their invisible bodies pressed against ours in eagerness to make themselves useful.

It's said that no one can truly understand the feeling of loss without having loved deeply. You were not just a mentor, Koyo, you were a mother, an aunt, a big sister, a visionary advisor, and an extraordinary organizer for us all. Your departure has left us heartbroken, grieving, and filled with an immense sense of loss. You were a true force of nature, a source of joy, kindness, generosity, and profound intelligence. Though the pain and sorrow still cloud our eyes, we feel immense gratitude for the privilege of having known you.

Hosting was your art, always making sure everyone felt welcome. You taught us to always feed people, except when it came to *miondo*, this was sacred!

At RAW, we always gathered around homemade meals and energizing ginger juice. Wine and champagne were always available, just in case we felt like giving in to an evening of laughter and storytelling. The lucky sisters, of course, received gifts: shoes, bags, and clothes for everyone!

Koyo, you showed us the way. You cared for us with such professionalism and pursued your intuition with unwavering determination, an intuition we consider one of your greatest gifts. You always sensed problems before they arose, and anticipated solutions for us and for RAW, a true pillar, in all circumstances.

We shared so much love, positive energy, tears, joy, challenges, and success with you. The road ahead is long, but we will remain standing, strong with all the lessons you taught us.

Thank you for your grace and generosity, Madame Koyo! Words are not enough to thank you, our hearts do, and will continue to, every single day.

Thank you for holding our hands, always and everywhere.

Thank you for opening the path for us.

Thank you for your light.

Thank you for your sisterhood.

Thank you for the school of life which is RAW Material Company.

We will carry RAW forward, knowing the essence of the fight you led to build a lasting institution to serve generations to come.

Be blessed, Koyo. May Issa welcome you with open arms, as he always did. May your spirit continue to walk with us in eternal presence.

Surrounded by your family, your friends, and colleagues, we are all gathered here today in communion to celebrate you in your image, with grace, light, and strength. There will be tears, of course, sadness is inevitable. But there will also be bursts of laughter, warmth, stories shared, a shared meal, music played, and above all, an abundance of love.

The entire RAW team, along with the members of its Board of Directors Sylvain Sankalé, Felwine Sarr, Roger Buerger, Laetitia Catoir say to you *jërëjëf* Koyo, *Gacce ngalama!*



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There has been music by Felwine Sarr

Since this morning, there has been music, words, testimonies, rituals, films, dance, poems, incantations, thought, silent emotions read on faces, others generously overflowing and becoming contagious.

We all came with a piece of something precious, to offer and share: a word, a smile, an attentive ear, thoughts, memories.

Since this morning,

There is Koyo's community; her family, her relatives, her friends, her affective and elective community who today gathered at Raw to celebrate her; to celebrate her life, who she was, who she is, who she remains in the vast and infinite life. Who she remains in the life that endures, who she remains in our hearts and minds.

Koyo had chosen her ministry, she had decided to enrich the soul of the community, to awaken the spirit, to nourish the sensibility, to refine the gaze, to weave the bond.

Koyo's legacy is one of grit; a broad gesture that spreads, a luminous heart that refracts its lights, a firebrand that kindles other fires. This is what makes us all, as many as we are gathered here around her.

No words could conclude, nor give an account of what has passed through us during this day, of what has happened, of what still continues to dig its furrow in us...

The few words I would like to share with you are here to prolong this suspended time; this atmosphere, this feeling of communion and co-presence.

The few words I'd like to share with you will not be words of promise. We often promise the departed and time and life sometimes erode our promises and commitments; not because we're not sincere; but the passage of time, the ceaseless flow of things.

Better than promising, just saying that we're simply going to continue the work, the movement, the path, the impetus.

We're going to extend the gesture, we're going to pass the firebrand to each other, we're going to continue to widen the glow.

This desire to continue the path, it's somewhere inside us, in a place where nestles that which escapes time and oblivion.

This day will live on in us, and we'll take it with us as a gift from Koyo to have been able to experience it together.