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Alexis Okeowo, "Koyo Kouoh's Lasting Legact," *Elle*, April 27, 2026

ELLE

Koyo Kouoh's Lasting Legacy

The visionary curator will make history at this year's Venice Biennale—a year after her death.

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When the artist Wangechi Mutu first saw the late curator and thinker Koyo Kouoh in person, Kouoh was on a bridge in Venice. It was a sunny day, and she was wearing a striking jacket that looked like it was made from *shuka*, the traditional red-and-blue cloth worn by the Maasai people in East Africa. “I remember seeing this person’s energy in this gorgeous red jacket. It was just so elegant,” Mutu says. A friend introduced them on that bridge; it was during the 2015 Biennale, when artists from Africa and the diaspora, Europe, the U.S., and other countries converged on the festival’s national pavilions. Kouoh and Mutu were both there to see the main show curated by their friend, Nigerian art historian, critic, poet, and curator Okwui Enwezor.

“She loved Africa. She didn’t lean on Europe as the blueprint. She was very clear that we have the ingredients, we have the recipes, and we have the capabilities.” —Wangechi Mutu

After starting Raw Material Company in 2008, Kouoh became known as a champion of building art institutions and supporting women artists in Africa. “She was a deeply dedicated and brilliant person. She was erudite,” Mutu says, adding, “She wanted to build art communities so that artists could support others. She was interested in people. She had no problem being in big groups and kind of holding court.” As Kouoh’s profile rose in Europe, she advocated for the inclusion of African and diaspora artists. “She knew that her visibility was rare in this upper echelon of the art industry,” says Thomas Girst, an art historian and global head of cultural engagement at the BMW Group. “It takes more energy and passion to make your voice heard. The things she stood for were not as established as they are now.”

Mutu agrees: “She loved Africa. She didn’t lean on Europe as the blueprint or the map. She was very clear that we have the ingredients, we have the recipes, and we have the capabilities—and we are ready to do this work.” She credits Kouoh with taking Zeitz MOCAA, the largest museum dedicated to contemporary art from Africa, from a museum that had a reputation for not engaging with local artisans and Black communities to a well-respected and well-regarded institution. Many view Kouoh’s acclaimed show “When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting” as a highlight of her career; the exhibit featured 120 artists and celebrated the beauty of the African gaze.

Mutu and Kouoh talked about style and shopping together, and discussed love, family, and the different countries in which they spent their time.