

Barthélémy Toguo

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Virginie Andriamirado

Meeting Barthélémy Toguo: “The essence of my work cannot reside elsewhere but in protest and critical questioning.”

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The works of Barthélémy Toguo, born 1967, a contemporary African artist of major stature whose production has been shown in such prestigious art museums as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, are one of the highlights in the exhibition Africa Remix. In them he perpetually explores the complexity of man's relation with the world and his kin: identity, civic and political conscience, exile or sex. Whatever the material chosen, the work and the artist are intimately connected.

Your installation exhibited in Africa Remix, Innocent Sinners, contains a variety of messages while using a lot of different mediums. Everything seems to be open. Do you consider *Innocent Sinners* as emblematic of your inspiration?

I have a lot of things to say, the question is how and which medium to choose in order to express them. Now, what makes me choose a specific technique or medium? Let's suppose I want to work on North/South exchanges: I will then choose the medium which will enable me to go as far as possible in my exploration of the subject. If I feel that painting or drawing will not convey effectively what I want to say, I will switch to organizing an installation or a performance. But if during the process I realize that I make no headway, I'll turn to video. This is how I feel the ground and let things build up around the materials selected. I am neither bound by any technique nor a prisoner of a medium, hence the multiplicity manifested in my different works. As for the subjects, they are inspired by the events of life, positive as well as negative: wars, social inequalities, the human's deeper feelings. All that can be a part of the same project. Thus in the hull of the boat you can see in Beaubourg are to be found not only things about Rwanda but also about the Catholic Church's position on condoms or the non-signing of the Kyoto Treaty by the United States. Where my work remains open another one can emerge. From my work on the Kyoto Treaty which was initially a performance, I produced a series of photographs and the ones I didn't use were recycled in collages. My universe is a nonstop and gradual creation.

An active presence in the world that surrounds you is a deliberate commitment on your part. Do you think this is essential in an artist's life?

I am convinced this is at bottom the function of the artist. “Art is not a solitary delight, said Kant. By offering a privileged image of the sufferings and joys common to all men, it is a means to stir the greatest number of human beings.” My purpose is not to produce a work only limited to aesthetic achievement. An artist should denounce, assert his position, challenge people so that they might wake up.

Have you always been conscious of this or is it the result of experience?

Considering the environment I grew up in, the country, the continent I come from, the essence of my work cannot reside elsewhere but in protest and critical questioning. The Cameroons, my country of origin, are meeting a lot of difficulties, and this is true of most African countries. As belonging to this continent I must live things in the raw, take sides, alert people. Apart from that what would be the meaning of being an artist?

Your public declarations are liable to disturb certain categories of persons - like your position on the Catholic Church expressed in one of your installations (1). Did they result in resentments which could have hampered your freedom of expression?

There are limits that obviously you must respect, but I cannot surrender nor resign myself to accept the defeat and the failure of the continent. I can but go on with a work the finality of which is the search for everyone's well being, African or not. Egoism and individualism cannot form the only bases of an artist's work. That is why the journey toward the other is so important for me. When two years ago I went to Serbia and Kosovo my aim was

to get close to people in order to offer them a place in which they could express their feelings. I had brought along blank postcards books ; I painted portraits of anonymous people on them. I invited strangers I met in the streets, the markets, on university campuses to write on the cards what they felt in any language they found suitable. I explained to them that this was an opportunity to tell the world about their experience and that they would be heard in the countries where the final work would be exhibited. I had the postcards stamped at the post office as if they had been sent. I didn't mail them, fearing they would get lost or censored. I was interested in preserving that notion of correspondence, of intimate confidences whispered. The result was exhibited in 2004 in the Palais de Tokyo (2). I recently did the same in Lagos, Nigeria, for the Nigerians deprived of speech in a country where there is a total absence of democracy. They expressed themselves heart and soul, the result is poignant (3). When you read those postcards you realize how great their aspirations are, my job was to transmit them. This is part of my task as an artist.

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They won't see it indeed but by uttering things they have recovered a kind of freedom, and they were relieved. In a country such as Nigeria where free speech is taboo it is easier to speak one's mind to someone who does not live and is not going to stay there. At least they know that what they said will be heard somewhere, this is the reason why I chose the postcard as the best means to convey a message throughout the world. The project isn't closed, I am considering a follow up in Cambodia, Cuba, Burma, Ouzbekistan. I am myself startled by the impact of such an eye-opening process.

You appeal to the complete gamut of our senses: touch, smell, sight, hearing. Is it a way to hold the public prisoner, as if somehow you didn't want us to escape ?

You are right. The bedrock of my researches rests on the fact that I am mainly preoccupied with striking the right chord in people. Each detail is being considered in relation with the entire scenography. There's nothing light in the subjects tackled. For example, during a trip to the Canary Islands I realized a performance to develop people's awareness of the situation of the political prisoners in Turkey (4). I wanted them to measure the atrocity of the tortures endured by these prisoners. The structure of such a work is quasi theatrical, I was dressed in a battle-dress and holding an iron. The sound was provided by a piece by J.S. Bach with interferences of Gabonese Fang chants. I applied the iron on a rough drawing representing a human body and when the body began to burn there were people crying in the public. The next day an association was created in Las Palmas to support the prisoners of conscience. I don't know about its status today but I did succeed in provoking raising an emotion which was strong enough to incite the public to act. The artists of the Southern hemisphere have so much to say that their creations are loaded with energy in their forms as well as the themes and also the diversity of the materials used. Their approach of art is different because they don't live the same situation as the Western artists.

Does this oversensitivity of the Southern-hemisphere artists strike you in an exhibition like Africa Remix ?

These artists really have a lot to say in a contemporary world with so little hope. Their energy and the strength of their works is a shock for the public of Africa Remix. The chair and the Eiffel Tower realized by the Mozambican Gonçalo Mabunda with recycled weapons coming straight out of the civil war which devastated his country speak for themselves. And also when the Nigerian Dilomprizulike shows the garbage bin and the shit of Africa in his intallation Waiting for the bus, or Solly Cissé's work. Each one of them has his own approach but they all show that beauty, aesthetics exist in spite of the suffering, the pain and the misery.

The same can be said of your installation Innocent Sinners. Your conclusion of the political situation in Africa and in the world is painful but from the hardly bearable images depicted in your watercolours arises something mellow and beautiful. Is it in order to leave the door open to hope ?

These watercolours show hurt bodies, amputated bodies but in the same time the beauty of the medium comes to balance the suffering. When I work on these watercolours, even though I'm painting ailing bodies, it's the beauty more than the pain that I see. My desire to bring out their beauty is part and parcel of the gesture of my hand. I pull the pain out, but then comes the washtint like a caress on the wound ; on the space delimited by the paper cohabit the suffering, the desire, the beauty inherent in any human being.

Were you bothered, considering your opinions, by the fact that Africa Remix was sponsored by the company Total and inaugurated by the president of Nigeria, at that time president of the African Union ?

If things had been clear from the start about the exhibition being supported by Total and inaugurated by somebody disrespectful of human rights in his own country, I wouldn't necessarily have refused to participate but my work would have been different. I feel it's my duty as an artist to say something concerning the situation of the African continent and doubly so if the exhibit is sponsored by Total and inaugurated by the president of Nigeria.

A guy who initiated such a project as the postcards written by the Nigerians could not abstain from showing such a piece in a museum expecting the visit of the president of Nigeria. It was at the same period shown at Africa Urbis in the musée des Arts Derniers, but if I had been warned I would have shown it in Beaubourg. It would have given me the impression that I had accomplished my mission, that I was at peace with myself. Like many participating artists I heard about the presence of Total and the president of Nigeria at the last minute. Though I still feel glad to have participated, the fact remains that I have been connected behind my back with people I didn't wish to be associated with.

You are working on a project for an art center in the Cameroons. Other artists of your continent already have or would like to get involved in similar projects. Is it out of a will to find palliatives to the lack of cultural policy in Africa ?

Evidently. We make it a point to act without our leaders, who do nothing for their countries. If today the thinking, quickening forces in Africa remain inactive - most of the time in Western countries -, Africa will go nowhere. If each of us came back home to bring - each in his own field - his little contribution, things would exist. The governments shun their responsibilities, so I'm going there to do something for Africa. I will not be satisfied with sending money to my family, obliging them to hang on my postal orders. I do not want to help only when necessary but to participate in the elaboration of a project involving the whole community. My art center, set up in Bandjoun, will enable local artists to be trained and to practice. They will also mingle with Western artists thanks to ad hoc residences. My objective is not to import a Western art center into Africa. The artists will be encouraged to create things which must be in adequation with the environment. The center will operate within an African community and its infrastructures (video room, library, conference room) will be at the disposal of the villagers. This place where to live and create I want it to fuse into the daily of the village. It is a personal project, I have put my own money into it and drawn the plans myself. The Institute of Visual Arts - I am currently looking for an African name for it - should open in the Spring of 2006. It will be managed by locals because I won't be able to devote all my time to it. And most important, I cannot stay too long away from my artistic explorations, the spirit of discovery of which keep me perpetually awake.

Interview by Virginie Andriamirado, June 2005

Notes

(1) Le procès de la Soutane, chapitre 1, 2005, exhibited from March 11 to April 23, 2005, Ecole supérieure d'art, Grenoble
(2) Head Above Water, 96 postcards exhibited in The Sick Opera, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, October 2004- January 2005

(2) Head Above Water, 30 postcards exhibited in the Grand Opéra, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, October 2004-January 2005

(3) In a Turkish Jail, 2001, International Festival of Las Palmas

(4) Head Above Water 2, in Africa Urbis, musée des Arts Derniers, May 19-July 21st, 2004

Barthélémy Toguo, by Carole Boulbès

Paris, September 1st, 2005, Magazine du Mudam, n° 8, December 2005

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