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## Meschac Gaba: Exchange Market

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York

26 April – 7 June 2014

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**This exhibition of new work by Meschac Gaba marks his first solo show in the US. Exchange is central both physically and metaphorically within the show: trading between Africa and the western world with cultural exchange is a core theme of Gaba's work. He lived between the Netherlands and Benin, experiencing conflicts directly. Codes of these identities are seen in how value is playfully presented, reassembling relationships between what we see as "first" and "third" worlds, or the local and the global.**

Entering the ground floor gallery is reminiscent of being in a bustling market place with 10 stands selling various goods underneath brightly coloured salvaged parasols. Titled *Bureau d'échange* (Exchange Office), it addresses cultural and economic value. Symbolic objects and tactile raw materials are meticulously laid out: gold-covered stones, cotton-wool buds, hand tools, devalued African notes and smart phones, among others. The inefficient covering from the broken parasols seems a metaphor for Africa's struggling economies, lacking in protection and framework.

Gaba is always dismantling recognised systems and hierarchies by constructing facades and structures that ask for a new level of engagement. The chosen objects have an inherent value because of where he is placing them in relationship to currency. The redundant paper currency of various African nations is used to decorate, or hung like leaves from the parasol.

Gaba's installation *The Museum of Contemporary African Art*, which is not on display here but was shown at Tate Modern in London in 2013, encouraged participation – to play the piano and purchase things from the shop – and active trading. Here, we are not asked to participate, but to be challenged outside the gallery with how to engage in systems perpetuating this separation of worlds, interdependent on one another. Within New York, the first and third worlds live side by side, but how is that negotiated, what practices of adaption enable this distorted cohabitation?

Gaba critiques the underlying values and principles of art and its potential to be renegotiated through a new series of wall-mounted and freestanding coin banks, known as *bankivi* in a mixed French-Mina dialect. Similar to the donation boxes found in shopping centres and airports, they take the shape of figures and animals, and reference the logos of African and western banks and emblems for causes and charities.

Upstairs, four coin-operated football tables made in Benin are at second glance unconventional; teams are of mixed race, religion and nationality, driven by a shared goal with mutual values and interests. The adjacent gallery hosts a playful billiard game titled *Iran*, both rooms reminiscent of the games room in *The Museum of Contemporary African Art* where a huge chessboard was politicised with a facade of euros and dollars. The concourse area holds wooden pallets covered with newspaper to form a display like an impromptu market or gift shop with decorated penholders, markers of identity and global politics.

Gaba is also known for *Sweetness*, a vast city sculpted from white sugar cubes in 2006, a timely comparison with the much larger recent work by artist Kara Walker highlighting similar issues of trade, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, an homage to the unpaid and overworked artisans who have refined our sweet tastes from the cane fields to the kitchens of the New World on the occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant", at the Domino Sugar Factory, Brooklyn until 6 July. While the controversially coloured building in Harlem's Sugar Hill by architect David Adjaye is to house a temporary exhibition, *If You Build It*, curated by arts collective No Longer Empty from 25 June to 10 August 2014.



Meschac Gaba: Exchange Market. Installation view (1), Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 26 April - 7 June 2014.



Meschac Gaba: Exchange Market. Installation view (2), Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, 26 April - 7 June 2014.



Meschac Gaba. Bureau d'échange [Exchange Office]: Brain, Stone, 2014. Wood table, metal umbrella frame, assorted banknotes, clothespins, electroplated gold brain, rocks and brick pieces, overall; 84 x 80 x 80 in 213 x 203 x 203 cm.



Meschac Gaba. Bureau d'échange [Exchange Office]: Cotton, 2014. Wood table, metal umbrella frame, assorted banknotes, clothespins, cotton stocks, overall; 84 x 80 x 80 in 213 x 203 x 203 cm.