

ART IN CONCERT WITH LIFE ITSELF

Barthélémy Togu in conversation with Kabelo Malatsie
and translator Raphaëlle Jehan

Your studies took you from Cameroon to Abidjan in 1990, and then to Germany and France. Tell us about this formative time in your life.

It was at the school of fine arts in Grenoble, when I started my series of photographs *Another Life*, that I realised I was truly creating an artwork. Until then I had only made copies, as we were taught to do at the fine arts school in Abidjan. Actually, they were copies of copies as, with time, the plaster artworks, which had been brought from the Louvre to Abidjan in the 1960s, were damaged and had lost their noses, ears, drapery, so we were forced to work from copies made by the students who had preceded us.

When I arrived in Abidjan, I knew that we would not be working from the original casts but I was proud to be learning a sense of observation. In this way I acquired the basics of sculpture, of modelling and moulding techniques.

In Europe, I was surprised to discover that art was not what I had been taught. While artistic creation in Europe had undergone many transformations, in Africa the professors, despite having studied fine arts in France, were still teaching a European model from the past. It was a real shock for me to discover a new artistic language, and [a challenge] to learn the codes of contemporary art while remaining true to myself. The most important thing was that I knew where I was from and where I was going. It was also a real shock that the school was so clean and minimal, there were no sculpture or painting studios, everything was white. I never saw the students working because everything was conceptual. I had to learn this as well. We no longer

talked about preparatory drawings from models but about computers and videos. So, to produce my work and not be left behind, I began to learn all these new media and their codes of expression.

Your wooden stamps in the installation *The New World Climax* reference the form of classical busts.

In today's world, you need a stamp for many things - to travel, to work; you always need to a stamp to do something. A stamp can trigger it all and it is a human being who decides your future with a simple stamp. The archetypal representation of the human being is a bust. But the choice of this form is not linked to my apprenticeship in classical sculpture in Africa; it is simply an illustration of the human figure.

You recently decided to return to Cameroon and to build a studio there. What prompted this move after establishing yourself in Europe?

I have reached a point in my work where I need to intervene in a more concrete way in the world. I focused for a long time on critiquing the direction that society has taken; I have protested against many things using words, gestures, actions, but I think that an artist has to act directly to help the world change and develop.

I have been part of the African diaspora for almost 20 years, and the time has come for me to return to my country because I believe I can contribute to its development. I feel both a duty and a desire to go back

there and to develop projects in the fields of artistic education and agriculture. At the end of the 1990s, I made various works on the problems of borders, and I have made many critiques of the nature of exchanges between north and south. Now it is time for me to bring real answers to vital subjects such as the quality of our food in the near future, as well as our long-term self-sufficiency in food. We need to create debates and spaces to allow reflexion on these issues and I feel an irresistible need to do this at home, in my country. It is a way somehow to move from global to local, and to stop talking and act.

Your art centre, Bandjoun Station, is in the relatively small town of Bandjoun. Why not locate it in Douala or Yaoundé, bigger cities where exposure to your projects would be greater?

The choice of Bandjoun is firstly a cultural one. It is a region where African classical art is very entrenched. There is a strong history of masks, stools and other African objects, both Cameroonian and Bamiléké. In this region of west Cameroon, unlike the south and coastal regions, ancient artistic practices continue to exist in a traditional way. I really want to link this with contemporary creation: I would like to orchestrate their 'marriage', to consolidate patrimonial knowledge and to introduce some fresh ideas using contemporary art.

The second reason is that I like the climate and the quality of life that this region offers. It makes me think of the Alps near Grenoble where I used to live. The vegetation

is green, the agriculture flourishing. All of this made me choose to settle there and embark on the adventure of developing a real long-term project and producing contemporary art.

There is an interesting idea of space or location (psychological and geographical) in your work, particularly with regard to movement across borders, as in *The New World Climax* and *Transit*.

When I left Cameroon in the 1990s, the only wish I had at the time was to leave - to get as far away as possible. I thought that leaving would be easy until I was confronted with the problems of borders and visas, and I gradually became aware of the difficulties that arise with setting out to encounter other cultures. This type of ordeal later became one of the subjects of my work. How to express this in art? In my first series, *Transits*, I staged performances in the no-man's-land zones of borders, airports and train stations. I disguised myself and, carrying sculpted wooden suitcases, made sure to attract the attention of customs officials so they would decide to search me without being able to open anything! Provocation and humour served me to expose and subvert the methods of the border police. In another performance, I dressed up with a cartridge belt filled with Carambar sweets, so I looked like a terrorist. Through these ways of questioning the system, I gave the border and customs authorities the opportunity to exercise their talents and authority, but at the same time I played with them. I use this as a weapon in my work, an answer to

my pains and the difficulties I encountered.

It is then, in my exploration of the journey, that things came to me; as Paulo Coelho has indicated: by going to things, things come to you. By choosing the journey, I discovered barriers and had to find solutions. I also discovered that, the more I travelled, the more this became a source of ideas for me - a person in exile, after all. The more I got out of my space of creation, my studio, the more I found sources of inspiration to feed my work.

In 2004, I started the series *Head above Water* in which I set out to meet people living in zones of conflict, to let them speak; I asked them to express their dreams and hopes on postcards that I had illustrated. It is a project with a strong social dimension: I went to Serbia, Kosovo, Hiroshima, Havana, Auschwitz and Birkenau, Rwanda, Johannesburg, to Tunis during the Arab Spring, and Tahrir Square. People aspire to freedom, claim their happiness and wish to express themselves, to move from one place to another, to meet other cultures, and this is the essence of travel itself.

You travel all the time for your art. Do you feel a sense of dislocation, a fragmentation of your being?

Travelling is a contemporary phenomenon. Everything is very fast nowadays; we move around much more easily thanks to the development of the transport system, ever faster and more efficient. At the same time, there are all the communication resources: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Gmail, etc. With these technologies at our disposal, we can imagine working in Kinshasa, producing in New York and



exhibiting in Berlin in a record amount of time. We can send three-dimensional images and plan the materials we will need to make a future piece from our hotel room. We are used to doing this. Organising the production of an artwork is much less complicated than before as everything is so fast. We no longer have to wait for mail, which in the past could take three weeks or even months to arrive.

In Bandjoun Station the external buildings and plantations are an extension of your work - perhaps they are your work!

As some intellectuals have observed, art is totally linked to society. Today, through my work, I am transcribing this idea again in the context of Bandjoun Station. With this

project, I aim to produce art and at the same time to get a whole community to dream by establishing a plantation that feeds people and helps them live. I also try to introduce a critical awareness with regards to society, for example the imbalance in commercial exchanges between north and south. This is what I've done with the plantation of coffee bushes whereby we produce our own coffee. In response to the west's monopoly on raw materials, we decided to roast our coffee beans ourselves, to make our own lithographed packaging, to fix the price of our product ourselves. With our plantations of bananas and protein-rich beans, we will eat healthily and this will become a form of total art.

The context of Bandjoun Station responds to the essence of what art should be, as formulated by Albert Camus [in his Nobel Prize reception speech]: 'Art is not, in my eyes, a solitary



revelry. It is a means of touching the greatest number of men by offering them a privileged picture of common suffering and joy. It requires that the artist not separate himself; he must submit to the most humble and universal of truths. And, often, he who chose his destiny as an artist because he felt himself different soon learns that he will nurture his art, and his difference, only in admitting his resemblance to everyone else. The artist forges himself in the perpetual back-and-forth from himself to others, halfway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. This is why true artists despise nothing; they oblige themselves to understand rather than to judge. And if they must be party to a cause in this world, it can be only that of a society in which, in the words of Nietzsche, no longer the judge but the creator will rule, whether he be worker or intellectual.'

The idea of working with agriculture in Bandjoun was vital to me. Today, all over the world, seed varieties are disappearing because of industrial firms that are trying to promote their own seeds, and this affects our way of living, our agriculture, the quality of our products, and so on. I wanted to act strongly by creating plantations and using our own seeds to question the quality of life that we want; to ask what type of agriculture we want for our future. The answer can be found in Bandjoun Station where we give young people the opportunity to make art, which opens their minds, and which African leaders barely think about, as they believe art is secondary while education and agriculture must be priorities because people are starving. We need to establish art education to open the minds of young people. So I created Bandjoun Station, to have artistic



education and agriculture together, to offer everyone the opportunity to eat good, healthy food while saving the 'original seed' planted by our mothers in Africa and passed from generation to generation.

Seeds are the basis of our food, a crucial link in humanity's development. For 12 000 years, farmers have sown, selected and freely exchanged their seeds. This is the entire history of agriculture. Yet, this ancestral practice is in peril. In the entire world, five chemistry firms that produce seeds control half of the market and have the ambition to become the sole owners of seeds. I think that everywhere in the world honest citizens should rise up against this infringement and demand the immediate termination of patents on seeds as it is unacceptable that private companies have a stranglehold on the world's larder. In New York, Tokyo, Addis Ababa, Sydney, everywhere in the world, we need to protest, to organise resistance with farmers, scientists, elected people ... All of us should fight and encourage disobedience as life cannot be 'patented' this way. We have to make a choice between abundance and rarity, war and peace. At stake is our food independence versus the industrial system of junk food. We are living in a situation of war that has never existed before, particular to the 21st century: 'the war of seeds'. Let's rise up!

Where do you see Bandjoun Station in 10 years' time?

I see Bandjoun Station like a laboratory where we experiment with the quality of agriculture alongside artistic and cultural projects. I see it, in 10 years, as a laboratory where we imagine

a new quality of life; a place of emancipation for the youth where theatre, music, dance and cinema are celebrated and contribute to the evolution of the community.

Bandjoun Station is to be seen as a true model of the integration of culture into society, not only with the creation of sculptures in the urban space but also with its plantations which represent the integration of art into the village. In each plantation, there are small houses dedicated to poets, with mosaic decorations on the walls, true masterpieces rich with their play of forms and colours which express an aesthetic that is accessible to all.

You work in different media including photography, sculpture, drawing, painting and video. How do you decide which medium is appropriate for a project?

When an idea comes to me, I start to reflect on the meeting of the concept that I have in mind and the possibility of its translation into matter. As an artist, I have to give form to my thoughts. So if I have a concept, I think about different ways to make it visible and I make a choice. If I think that sculpture is best suited to demonstrate that idea, then I make sculpture. If I feel that performance, with its gestures, sound and emotion, will allow me to illustrate it better, then I do a performance. If the idea is more about a social subject, such as the difficulties in interpreting the conflict between generations, which will take better form in a drawing series, then I start to work and, like a tracking shot in cinema, I create a large number of drawings. If I want to expose the behaviour of African leaders, as in my

series *Stupid African President*, denouncing their attitudes towards natural resources in their countries, then it seems to me more suitable to make photo-performances in a studio, to give the effect of a film or video still. I then adopt the appropriate outfit and stand in front of a microphone, ready to give a speech to the people, with a map of Africa behind me.

These approaches came from studying diverse courses in my artistic education: classical and academic in Ivory Coast, more liberal and free in Grenoble, more realistic and professional in Düsseldorf. I went through very different workshops, from engraving, sculpture and drawing to photography, video etc.

So, the medium must perfectly match the idea. There are no hierarchies: all media are good tools in reaching a goal, the main thing being to create forms which are equal to the idea that needs to be expressed.

Many people think that, in art, the technical question is old-fashioned. This is totally wrong: it is the subject that determines the medium. When I saw, in my Cameroonian passport, that there were a lot of stamps illustrating the difficulties of travelling and crossing borders, highlighting the burden of administration and its paradoxes, I decided to respond to this with giant stamp sculptures in wood, and so I created *The New World Climax* to draw attention to the limits on free circulation. Wooden sculpture was best suited to show this in physical, sculptural and graphic terms. The technique of engraving led me to create prints on paper which made the engraved texts on the stamps more readable. Finally, the idea arose to do a performance using these materials to

expose the weight of administration by carrying them from one place to another with a lot of effort. A medium is never outdated; it all depends on the use we make of it.

Your watercolours are mainly in green or red, and your installations use lots of white, as in *Celebrations* with its mosquito netting and cotton wool. Do these colours have particular resonances for you?

It is true that there is a predominance of red and green in my watercolours. It is a deliberate choice which has nothing to do with symbolic meaning. I simply feel most comfortable with these colours as they allow me to express a multitude of emotions.

Just one colour, one red for example, can express pain, beauty, softness, violence, joy or sadness. I love red and green; it is a question of choice. Thus, in *Celebrations*, I have created an installation of 35 music stands which works like a theatrical environment. It is an idyllic façade of dreams which gives an impression of purity and softness with all the fake cotton wool. When the spectator meanders in this white universe, he discovers that violence stands alongside beauty, suffering alongside pleasure, war with sexuality, death with life ... It is a big concert of human feelings which is life itself, a proposal with a universal dimension.