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**Virginie Andriamirado**   
**Barthélémy Toguo : " Exile is hand in hand with pleasure as it is with pain "**  
**Interview**  
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**A beacon among the artists of the African diaspora, Barthélémy Toguo studied in Abidjan, Grenoble and Düsseldorf. His numerous travels are integral to his artistic approach. He now lives in France, holds exhibitions all over the world, and nevertheless stays in close connexion with his country of origin, the Cameroons, for which the fruits of his exile are destined.**

**You have just finished the construction of the Bandjoun art centre, which was funded by yourself. Beyond the artistic aims, isn’it a way of returning to your country of origin the fruits of your exile?**  
This is the meaning of my work and also the meaning of my personal existence. The Bandjoun centre can be seen as the ultimate achievement of my life since I left my country. It does not signify that the journey ends there. The centre was not built in any location but in the place I was born in. I chose Bandjoun because I already owned land there. Therefore the construction work could begin quickly. It lasted a record two years. There you can find my home and my working space, next to the twelve ateliers-apartments. This centre which I conceived alone, I want to manage it independently. I want it to be an example for Africans, to show them that they can do things by themselves.

**Do you mean that the successful individuals among the African diaspora must do something for their countries?**  
It would be a good thing if more Africans of the diaspora could bring their expertise to their countries of origin. Some do participate in the reconstruction of a territory or the development of public or private spaces. The African diaspora should care more about the continent they come from. I appeal to the doctors, the architects, the sportsmen, the intellectuals to spare a few hours every week for Africa. Take for example an African M.D. who has achieved success in Belgium or in Canada; couldn’t he spare once a year just a week to transmit his experience to his colleagues who remained on the continent? A teacher could give two weeks of his two-month holidays to take a part in an alphabetisation plan.   
What we have acquired we must transmit, restitute to our country of origin. The thread must not be cut. Africa is in straitened circumstances. Beyond the lack of democracy, there are people dying out of want of care. The children the continent brought forth do not have the right to ignore that. More and more Africans have important statuses in the West - in art, culture, administration... They must not forget their duty toward their compatriots.

**Do you feel yourself as belonging to the diaspora community as an individual as well as an artist?**As an indivual, yes. I lived in the Cameroons until the age of 25. Even if I had been born in France, I would bear my origins inside myself. As an artist, I don’t claim any africanity, but universality rather. But you cannot choose to be attached or not to your origin. When I look at myself, everything reminds me of where I come from. As I see everywhere people suffering, I try to enlarge my scope, to englobe them in my compassion and in my action.

**Hence your work entitled Head Above Water. You ask people met in various countries to write what they feel on postcards that you then paint...**  
My project is to liberate their speech. I chose zones of tension such as Pristina, Lagos, Havana, Hiroshima, Johannesburg, or Saint-Denis in France during the 2005 riots. In each country I went to I asked people to write on the postcard I gave them. Very strong things came out, often painful because of the particularly difficult situation in certain countries. Art has a place everywhere, but all the more so in strenuous circumstances. The testimonies you get in Saint-Denis, quasi next door, have as strong an echo as the ones coming from far away tension-ridden countries.

**How did you manage to be accepted in Saint-Denis, considering the situation of 2005?**  
I was introduced by a Guinean student I met two months earlier during a workshop at the University of Saint-Denis. The neighbourhood she led me to was a war zone at the time. One look suffices for the guys to spot you as someone “not belonging”. They went to the “elder brother” who tested me before giving his agreement. They accepted only foreign journalists like the ones working for CNN, but rebuked the French press which according to them was bound to betray them. I told them: “What you are going to say, I’ll take with me to the top”. I wanted their deeper feelings to emerge. They considered me as a sort of journalist. On the postcards, several of which were written in arabic, some wrote their hatred, others their pain. There is a social dimensions to my work. Generosity is a duty for an artist: you must be able to transmit your abilities for certain things.

**You got physically involved in your series of performances called Transit which grapples with questions relating to the sufferings of exile and migration...**   
Yes, these performances realized between 1996 and 2002 were sometimes painful to achieve even though there were touches of humour and provocation. I have always considered as being part of my role as an artist the implementation through plastic representation as well as the action through performances, both feeding each other. I feel an urge in the course of concrete artistic realizations to hammer my opinions home by acting.   
I started the Transits by arriving at Roissy airport with suitcases sculpted in wood. That was partly provocation. In doing such a performance directly in an airport in the face of the security personel and the customs officers, I put myself in danger. It’s more trying than in an art centre. But the Transits do not only deal with migratory movements and their consequences. In Transit 6, in 1999, I took the Thalys train first class, dressed like a refuse collector; my fellow travellers were so disturbed that they finally asked the railways inspector to tell me to get off. It was not the colour of my skin that put them off, but my social status.

**Wasn’t there some sort of cathartic element related to situations you may have lived in real life?**  
Yes, it was like a catharsis, but my work is not autobiographic, even though there is inevitably a part of myself and my personal history in it. I have known the wrench of exile and its collateral problems. It does not prevent me from introducing some humour in my work - without minimizing the real problems. Exile is hand in hand with pleasure as it is with pain, this is what I want to express in my plastic work.

**Movement, displacement and circulation: these notions underline your work. Especially travel, which is linked with creation. You seem to very often put yourself in a situation of exile...**  
Because it feeds and helps my work progress. By making events happen, I find new paths helping me to develop, each stage in this journey feeds my work. In the end there is a web being woven as I progress. Bridges are built between the different creations: the Transits will meet Head Above Water which in turn will meet The Dangerous Visit, a project realized in Seville, where I delimit a territory for the homeless who will live in a space created by myself. This work on frontiers, territories is not far away from Transit and Head Above Water. My drawings are going to be a summary of what I saw and lived during the action stage. Thanks to travel and displacement things are to be born as a video, a performance, a sculpture or a painting.  
The video entitled Le jardinier assoiffé (the thirsty gardener) showing a gardener watering the dollar was born because I strongly felt the need for money of the populations enclaved in Pristina. The dollar had to grow rapidly, like a salad. One can read the work as a metaphor of the domination of the dollar in the world. This video also has an environmental dimension, that is, the stakes involved in the question of water.   
In the same perspective, I realized a video performance on behalf of persons I met while travelling who expressed compassion for some of their muslim brothers unjustly imprisoned in Guantanamo. From the time I spent with them, from the immense sadness I read on their faces a work was born under the form of a violent performance in which I stayed lying on bricks for six hours. The pain I felt was for me a way to convey the suffering of those who suffer. In my performances, the action must always suit the idea. In putting my finger on tickly subjects I try to bring forth emotion and reflexion.

**Figurative elements with strong connotation such as the “Rue balise” delimiting a territory, the wooden stamps signifying the passports or the sculpted aeroplanes or suitcases are found in your work. These objects accompanying your works all refer to an identical theme: displacement, migration...**  
This is what happens when obsession governs your creation. The suitcase is related with the bundles recently shown in the Palais de Tokyo. They refer to the things you take with you when you leave. The boat full of bundles that could be seen at the Fiac (international contemporary art show) refers to the pain of exile.   
Installations are very useful to tackle certain very complex questions. One leaves one’s country because of various reasons. Economic, sentimental or to flee from a war. An installation can show this complexity, show what is left behind, what is expected from the elsewhere one is going to.  
In Life’s Trial, an installation realized in 2004 for the Modern Art Museum of Saint-Etienne, two different canvasses stand like a couple looking far away. My purpose was to show that they want to go across, get on the other side from which they are only separated by a railing. They have an ideal vision of the other world which is symbolized by the white, aseptized softness of a cotton carpet. In the same space there is a coffin with plenty of contradictory religious signs. On one side, a towering animal protected by a mosquito net watches the human beings. The latter are deep in an undeclared war of religions while the couple believes that this is an ideal world. Animals, on the contrary of humans, don’t indulge in organized massacres, showing thus their superior intelligence.   
With Unfinished Theater shown in 2000 at the Biennale of Lyon, I had placed on a platform a boat loaded with goods named Celtica and a chartered plane baptized Air Mamadou. Between them were scattered stamps marked “No entry”, “Clandestine”, “République française”, “Pure and clean”. Nowadays merchandise cross frontiers more easily than humans.

**You used to have a project named Double face supposed to be shown in the Goutte d’or quarter. It finally never took place. Once more it manifested this desire for restitution. In your introductory text, you used the term “(re)integrate”.**  
Yes, I intended to pay my respects to the dreams of those inhabiting this quarter mainly inhabited by immigrants. They left their country wanting to become somebody and attain success. Once arrived, they have met with difficulties, lived in difficult conditions and at the end of the day few make it. I wanted to mingle with this exiled community circumscribed in a limited territory, in order to give to its members the possibility of living, even for a short instant, their dream. I wanted to photograph them wearing clothes representing their dreams. A street sweeper from La Goutte d’Or could have dreamed of being a soccer player, a policeman, a doctor or a pilot. As long as the exhibition lasted, a commmunity would have achieved recognition in dreaming. Unfortunately the project never materialized, I was confronted with personal difficulties at the time, but I have not given up yet.

**Wasn’t there something ambivalent in the project, in so far as it echoed the beauty and joy of dreams and at the same time the pain of something that will never happen?**  
To be the Man or the Woman of one day is no trifle in spite of the ephemereal character. It ressuscitates dreams and confers some dignity in allowing people to get out of their own selves and give a new image of themselves to others. The work of many African photographers rests on dream and yet their images have not vanished.

*[.](http://www.paris-art.com/)*[Africultures.com](http://www.africultures.com/)