

## Barthélémy Togo, African rebel

Barthélémy Togo, born in Cameroon in 1967, is an artist who left Africa to explore the western world. After several years studying in European schools, he continues to cross frontiers. Traveling the world, Togo constantly comes up against the limits of his personal liberty (a fact that forms an essential component of his work). Life is a state of transit: sustainable situations don't exist, everything is in constant movement.

Even when a person has gained national independence, individual independence is an objective that needs to be pursued anew each time he or she experiences barriers to free movement through airports, borders or customs. These obstacles, according to Togo, are evidence of the colonial attitudes that still reign. His work reflects what he sees every day: the western perspective excludes those people who don't exist in the public mind. One of his principles is "to have the freedom to do what one wants and do it anywhere." In his case, the places where he wants to work are Paris and Bandjoun (Cameroon). Considering that Togo always emphasizes that his work is his life and that his life is his work, it's possible to discover certain mechanisms that lead to the final result: his work. His installations manage to accurately create places and spaces of knowledge that show us that the era of globalization and multiculturalism is simultaneous with a colonial period. Whoever doesn't remain in their native country can easily find themselves in exile, utterly altered.

Both the contents of his work and his modes of expression are very complex. The first material he worked with was wood. In the 90s he utilized chainsaws, with whole or hewn trunks, and created performances representative of the search for his own wholeness. His body formed a living part of nature, while the trunks and branches found themselves already in the hands of death. The chainsaw symbolized the violent intervention of human beings (who also form part of nature) in nature itself, an intervention that, thanks to the power of the saw, happens very quickly. You could say that the way in which humans treat nature, with aims that are not predetermined, like the destruction of the forests for its use by humans, is a central theme in Togo's work.

Togo exemplifies an almost atavistic ferocity regarding the rules, opposing any norm that limits him, be it his mother's claim that even though he's over 30 he hasn't yet fathered a child; or his confrontations with individuals representing the power of the state. He thinks of all of these as blows against his integrity. Togo isn't a "noble savage" returning to humanity's origins; instead, he acts always in relation to the present and alludes to history only if its perception is relevant to the present. He chose the notion of "transit" as it refers to his own life, which involves arriving at destinations only to be deported, in his dreams as well as real life. Transit as it refers, above all, to artistic activities that arose from his reactions to actual experiences.

As he travels extensively, his discourse refers to common prejudices, humiliations that he suffers at the hands of the police, customs or even neighbors. Bald, muscular and a naïve of West Africa, Togo is just the type of person that suffers customs ordeals. The exhaustive search of his luggage inspired the piece *Transit 1*, which deals with the suspicions of the French police when he brought with him from Cameroon three hard-wood sculptures in the form of suitcases, pieces that underwent a meticulous inspection at the airport that lasted hours. Also, on another occasion, he arrived dressed as a mercenary with an ammo belt loaded with candy instead of cartridges. After hours of questioning, they allowed him to board the plane. For Togo, life is a game that at times can be

humorous, at times tragic, beautiful...or just the opposite.

**Gudrun Weinzierl:** Cameroon is one of the African countries with a very complex art world. The African art which people collect wasn't created as art work, but as objects employed for traditional rituals. Do you come from a traditional background where traditional religion influences people's lives? Did those ritual objects encourage your decision to chose an education in the arts?

**Barthélémy Togo:** When I was a child I knew nothing about art or museums. I was born in M'Balmayo in the land of the Bamileke in the southwest of Cameroon. Later I lived in Yaounde in the region of the Beti. I'm from a simple family who concerned themselves with the problems of everyday life. Neither art nor religion formed part of my environment. My father had a garage and was a taxi driver. I was also interested in cars and I used to accompany my father when he drove someone somewhere; I was fascinated by the large trucks filled with coffee or cocoa. Wood and bamboo were the first materials that allowed me to create something by myself. My first sculptures were small cars and trucks. When I started school I had to stop speaking Bamileke and begin studying French; from a very early age both my speech and my thinking were influenced by French. At school they didn't teach us anything about our roots, but only about the foreigners who arrived on our coast centuries ago. I remember drawing Portuguese merchants because the history of our own people wasn't given any importance in our school books. From a very early age traveling has been important to me; to set out, to go anywhere at all to meet new people.

**GW:** After studying art in Abidjan you went to Europe to continue studying art. Did you go to Europe because Europe seemed more worthwhile?

**BT:** In Cameroon I couldn't study, which is why I went to the Ivory Coast when I was 22. There I learned everything you need to learn from a classical education: to make heads in the style of Michelangelo or Rodin. Before going to Grenoble and Dusseldorf I was quite happy to have the opportunity to receive a classical academic education that focused exclusively on the art of white people. The aim was to learn technique and to reproduce classical works. I couldn't develop my own style in Abidjan. My life changed completely in 1992 when I was given a scholarship to the INSAAC Goethe Institute. For the very first time I created a sculpture in wood that came from myself. From that point on I knew that I could only express what was in myself. To have the opportunity to express something in the way I wanted was a great triumph for me. At the Ecole des Beaux-Arts I discovered another manner of teaching, because there the students were masters of their own creations.

**GW:** It's quite common for artists to have various homes, how do you deal with the contrast between urban life in Paris and the African world? Do general notions about well-being and necessity, order and chaos, freedom and the arbitrariness of authority correspond to your own vision?

**BT:** Life is full of emergency situations because human poverty is not the exception but completely common and omnipresent. Poverty doesn't disappear because of the color of someone's skin, nor because of national frontiers. Poverty in Africa is very visible, and I know that people in the West try to avoid seeing it because they feel they can't change anything. AIDS, corruption, hunger; as long as we don't know how to change things, they'll persist. As I'm an artist who lives in distinct cultures, I have the possibility of exposing the lies, the violence, the deception and the economic exploitation, all





Barthélémy Toguo, *Wildcats Diner#2* (2006). Acuarela sobre papel / watercolour on paper, 208x130cm.  
Cortesía / courtesy of Mario Mauroner Contemporary Art (Viena, Austria).



Barthélémy Toguo, *Wildcats Diner#4* (2006). Acuarela sobre papel / watercolour on paper, 208x130cm.  
Cortesía / courtesy of Mario Mauroner Contemporary Art (Viena, Austria).

through the medium of art. That's why I'm so interested in the building of the cultural center in Bandjoun. Nevertheless, art doesn't enjoy a high priority in a continent as weak as Africa. I see that poverty depends on the fact that the unity of the world is only spoken about, while politics tries to maintain separate worlds, separate nations, separate societies, even though its people and languages are blending and interacting.

**GW:** Besides the political aspect, you're concerned with the physical interpretation of the world: erotic aspects, blood, strange lizards and fabulous animals evoke a fantastic world. But these world aren't inoffensive or friendly either.

**BT:** I don't work according to the opinions of others. Everything I do has to do with me; I find inspiration in everything: TV, movies, literature, my own emotional life, meetings in the street or in bars...Love and suffering, passion and pain, these are all part of

normal life. Sexuality is very important in my work because it inspires me and because its as much a source of joy as a source of pain, it's the essence, the presupposition for relations between man and woman. For me, to present sexuality in a painting or an installation is like creating a landscape in which we also find fear and anguish, things that preoccupy us...

(Translation from German to Spanish: Ute Stadlbauer)

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