

# STAGING THE ABSURDITY OF REALITY; THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

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The diasporic condition is part of a modern experience where, as Karl Marx wrote "All that is solid melts into air."<sup>1</sup> Barthélémy Toguó's art practice is based on the hybrid experience of belonging to many cultures and geographic regions. The global artist, as a person who is constantly on the move, became a tool in the investigation of the mental borders of national states. In 1996, Toguó gave life to a series of performances called *Transits* (1996-1999) where the starting point was the repeated experience of being searched when arriving at the Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport, after visiting Cameroon. Toguó began to mock the Western paranoia by presenting people's fears in a disarming way. Using clichés, he staged himself in different roles, such as the foreign terrorist or the tribal mad man, trying to pass through the custom with wooden suitcases, or dressed as a Parisian refuse collector on a fancy train between Cologne and Paris. The performance project showed the mechanisms of an ambient fear that has no focus. The rigid security rules were there just to prevent anything that might be alien.

Through the years, Toguó is constantly exploring new mediums in his work. Drawing, sculpture, photography, video and performance are essential components in his various installations. Toguó is creating an universe with its own logic, where fragment from popular culture and world politics are mixed with inner dreams and fears. The childhood in Cameroon, in a town with cacao and coffee trade and logging is present in the tactile richness. There is a certain physicality to the works, where bodily labour has its own *raison d'être*. *Pure and clean* (2001), a performance produced at the *Political Ecology* exhibition in New York, consists of a washing to the tunes of *Lambarena*, an African version of Bach. The artist energetically rubs two American flags in soapy water and hangs them up dripping, a metaphor for the US refusal to ratify the Kyoto Treaty.

"Switzerland Bank, Jewish Inheritance," "Wanted, \$100 000 000 Mass Destruction Weapons," "Who is the True Terrorist," "Aids in Africa, Condoms in Vatican," "A 10 Second Coitus," are slogans carved into wooden sculptures in the shape of gigantic stamps, sometimes represented as prints on paper. The very physical act of printing shows the mechanism of labouring people. The blown up stamps reveal in themselves the absurdity and create a distorting mirror. Collected in a heap, they look like torn down Lenin statues; traces from an old, megalomaniac system.

The political level is sometimes revealed in a more subjective way, where the vulnerability and the vanity

of the body give a glimpse to an inner psyche. The watercolours in the *Dream Catchers* (2004) series have the simplicity of ancient cave drawings. They celebrate the beauty of the human body simultaneously as they destroy it; representing ritual scenes of local medicine, hypothetical ceremonies, erotic situations, sexual positions and the human body in general. The colour transparencies give the deformed bodies a fragile expression where the fearful uncanny exists next to the marvellous. Inner organs grow from genitals. Nails are hammered into heads.

One often says that the personal is political. Toguó's art practice is operating against the grain of what Foucault called "Biopower"<sup>2</sup>. The disciplined body as a symbol for the rational society is defied. Toguó uses madness or sexual expression to map exclusion and political oppression, but also to create humour and to celebrate the body. Like a Beuysian shaman, he is the defender of animals, plants and humans. At the same time he is a provocateur who challenges the viewer not only to take sides but also to confront inner fears and prejudice. Toguó's art is like a big drama where each component is essential for the whole. The cathartic moment may be invisible, yet it is there.

<sup>1</sup> Marx, Karl & Engels, Frederick, *The Communist Manifesto*, edited by John E. Toews. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999, p.68. See also: Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melt Into Air; The Experience of Modernity*, London: Verso, 1983

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, Michel, "Right of Death and Power over Life", *The History of Sexuality, Volume I; The Will to Know*, translated by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin Books, 1978, p.135-159. Original "Droit de mort et pouvoir sur la vie", *Histoire de la sexualité, tome I; La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p.177-211

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## Notre histoire

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