

Interview: Barthélémy Toguo

To say that Barthélémy Toguo is a multi-media artist might be an understatement, since Toguo not only works in painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, performance and installations, but he often mixes them in a single work in which the viewer is immersed.

Born and raised in Cameroon, Toguo moved to Europe to study and ended up living for extended periods in Germany and France, where he ultimately settled. He has exhibited extensively, including the Guangzhou Triennial, China (2008), the Tessaoniki Biennale, Greece (2007), the Seville Biennial (BIACS), Spain (2006), the Busan Biennial, Korea (2002) and the Dakar Biennial, Senegal (1998), among many others. He was also part of the celebrated traveling exhibition *Africa Remix*.

Toguo has always been socially and politically engaged; he was the only artist that declined participation in the 2007 African pavilion in Venice, on the grounds of the questionable sources of the money behind the Sindika Dokolo Collection: "What guides me is a constantly evolving aesthetic but also a sense of ethics, which makes a difference, and structures my entire approach." In the last years Toguo has been working on a residency project in his native Bandjoun, scheduled to open by the end of 2009.

This interview was done via email.

J. Roca.



The New World Climax, 2000. Installation with wooden seals, table, prints.

José Roca: For your installation *The New World Climax* you made oversized wooden seals that resembled the ones stamped on your passport. Can you talk more about this project?

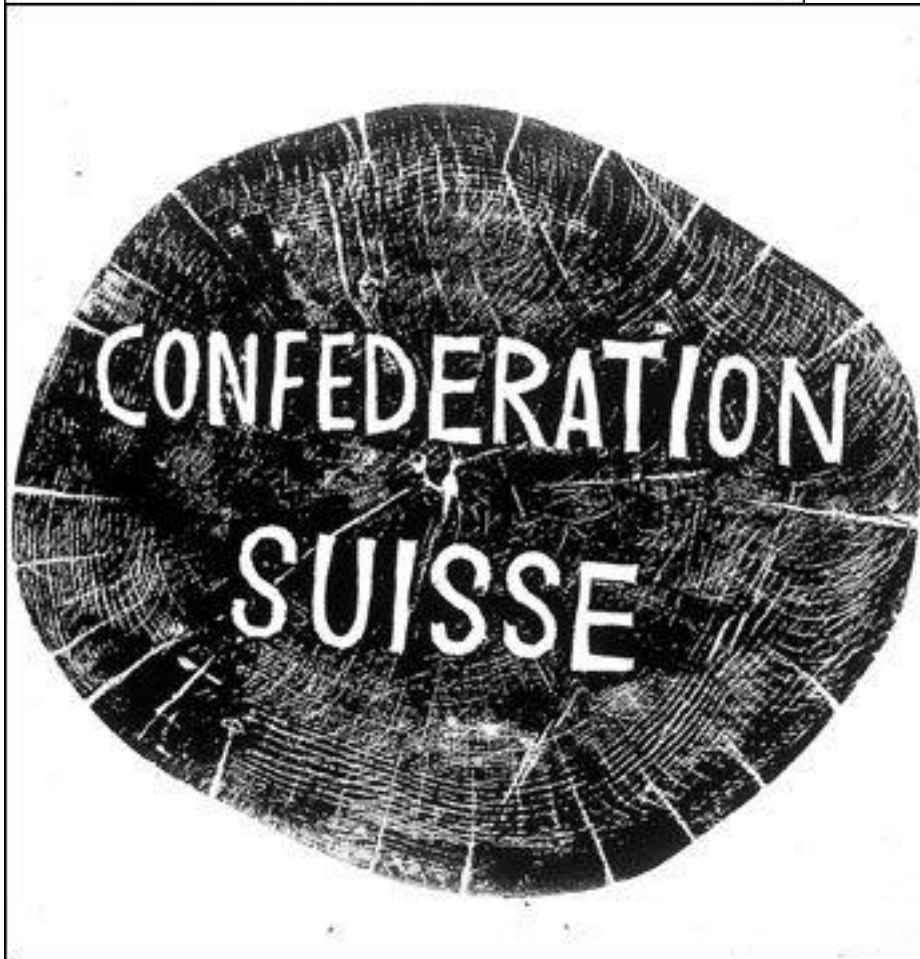
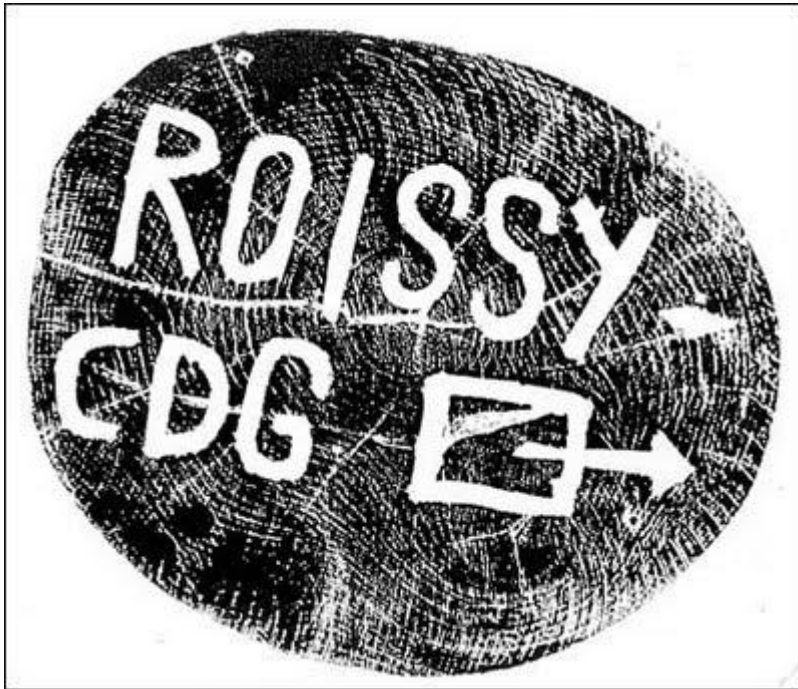
Barthélémy Toguo: Sometime by the end of the nineties I realized that my passport was completely covered with multiple stamps on every single page, which could be read like an engraved novel-illustrating the difficulties that I encountered in order to obtain a visa, or to cross borders between countries. At that time there was in Europe the beginning of the fear of the stranger, the immigrant, which led to the closure of frontiers and the promulgation of new immigration laws; in short, an obsession with the impending danger of "invaders". In order to illustrate the difficulties I experienced in embassies, airports and border posts, I decided to create *The New World Climax* (2000), for which I turned the stamps that I had in my passport into gigantic "rubber seals" in heavy, massive wood. I chose sculpture as a medium because I found it appropriate for a first approach to these issues, since the weight, mass, volume and matter illustrated the heavy burden of this obsession.



Toguo performing *The New World Climax*, 2001.

With the first public presentation of this sculptural work at the House of the Cultures of the World in Berlin in 2001, I included a performance in which I paid homage to immigrant workers, those who build entire nations with their physical work. Clad in typical worker's clothes, with a tape that played the music of "Bach of Africa, Lambarena" on my back, I lifted those heavy stamps from the floor with difficulty and then placed them on a large table, causing an enormous noise. Then I made impressions with the stamps directly on paper, a stamp on a passport. This work does not result from a scripted narrative, but rather evolves randomly, like the images of an ever-expanding card game. The issues at play are

interpreted as sculptural forms (the stamps), which are then used as a parody of the administrative gesture in order to render a trace, giving the status of the unique object to the resulting documents. *The New World Climax* encompasses these three artistic disciplines, sculpture, performance and printmaking.



From the series *The New World Climax*, 2000. Woodcut.

JR: Some of these prints look like fingerprints, which is striking because in recent years beyond the stamps, you are required to

leave an imprint of all your fingers when entering many countries like the U.S. Was this a coincidence?

BT: As an immigrant, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I have realized how deep is the desire to leave, to travel, and discover. Exile is a notion inherent to the human condition regardless of race and cultural provenance, and even more so in the last century since technology has made it easier. Men and women are always potential exiles, driven by the urge to travel, which makes them "displaced beings". We go from one place to another by different means, carrying our culture and encountering the other. Of course, this encounter can be beautiful or difficult. Travels are enchained by the brakeless rhythm of our society. We are constantly in movement. So, more than ever, this notion of traveling, of being in transit is current, under different forms as society evolves. By the same token, travel is increasingly difficult as administrations everywhere put in place new measures and laws to halt migratory flux; getting a visa and going through a border have gotten increasingly difficult. Having experienced myself these difficulties since I travel so much, I saw early on that the worst was about to come in relation to individual rights, put into question by biometric passports. I could see that powerful countries were putting together a new type of passport, which other countries would be expected to follow. Every human being would have to leave their fingerprints, a photo of the iris of their eyes, or an imprint of the shape of their face... even a blood sample in order to have their ADN information. You see how to travel becomes another story... In short, it was not a coincidence, I could see it coming, you could see it in the nervousness and arrogance of administrative staff everywhere, with their lack of sympathy and courtesy. The last straw was September 11, 2001, which would topple conventional logic and create new codes of "illogical logics".



View of *Heart Beat*, 2008. Baltic Art Centre for contemporary Art, Newcastle, UK

JR: Your work *Heart Beat* consists of a wall of newspapers whose text has been blocked with black ink, leaving only the images to provide the narratives. Were you interested in providing a more intuitive, less narrative approach to the way information is presented?

BT: After I finished my project *Conversation with Frau Schenkenberg* (1995) done with the aid of a Berlin journal, I understood the place of the image and its importance within a newspaper. But for more than a decade I have seen to what extent information is manipulated in the media, which of course has been happening at least since World War II and the Cold War. For me information is essential: I am always online and listen to the radio all day in my studio, I love newspaper headlines, and like to compare them in regards to the political slant of the media. It is for me a vital urge; I need to be aware of what is happening worldwide.



Heart Beat, 2008. Views of the walls.

This overdose of information, scoops, and scandals, both intoxicates and inspires me. You have to have some critical distance vis-à-vis information, precisely to be able to tell intoxication from information. But "intox" is also a formidable source of inspiration! In 2008 I created *Heart Beat* at the Baltic Art Centre in Newcastle. I decided to censor all texts of an English journal, with the help of students at Northumbria University in Gateshead. The premise of the piece was to use a marker to black out the articles and leave only the images, proposing a new newspaper that only has the photographs as a direct interpretation of what the viewer is looking at. The spectator not only has to make his/her own newspaper, so to speak, but also enters a sort of universal discourse through photography, and the results are sublimated by the graphic dimension of the ensemble.





Heart Beat, 2008. Detail.

JR: The installation also included drawings, paintings and sculptural elements. What was the purpose of these?

BT: Since *Heart Beat* is an installation, it automatically becomes an arrangement, my own way of organizing knowledge, a *mise en scene* like in theater. For me, an installation is a whole environmental proposal, and it has a single goal which is to include the viewer within it. Drawings, sculptures, videos and photos... it all contributes to creating a rhythm, a choreography that rewrites the stories proposed by the newspapers.



View of *Bandjoun Station*, Bandjoun, Cameroon.

JR: Changing the subject, I learned that you have started a project in Cameroon, slated to open in November 2009, which mixes art and agriculture. Can you talk about that?

BT: The project is titled *Bandjoun Station*, it is a very personal project sited on the high plains in West Cameroon, what we call the Grassland. There, I have created an art center to celebrate art and culture in all of its forms, a residence for guests (artists, choreographers, cinema directors, ethnologists, historians, doctors, researchers, etc) from all over the world that will come and realize their projects in relation with the locals and their environment.

Bandjoun Station aims to encourage the local population to develop a healthy form of agriculture geared towards local consumption and not towards industrial production in order to attain self-sufficiency. Right alongside this form of agriculture there is a large coffee plantation; ours can be seen as a critical gesture that amplifies the artistic act that denounces what Léopold Sédar Senghol used to term "the deterioration of the terms of exchange", where the export prices imposed by the West penalize and harshly impoverish our farmers in the south.



Farmer working on the agricultural project, *Bandjoun Station*.