

STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL

SAVVY THE LABORATORY
OF FORM-IDEAS
CONTEMPORARY

STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL



STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL

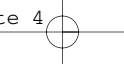
**STEFAN DHEEDENE, CHRISTIAN HANUSSEK / SALIFOU LINDOU, DUNJA
HERZOG, BORIS NZÉBO, MAARTEN VANDEN EYNDE / ALIOUM MOUSSA,
PATRICK WOKMENI**

CURATOR: ANNETTE SCHEMEL/ENOUGH ROOM FOR SPACE
SAVVY CONTEMPORARY, RICHARDSTR. 43/44, BERLIN-NEUKÖLLN

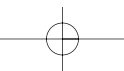
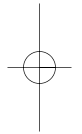
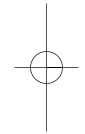
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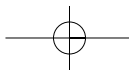
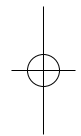
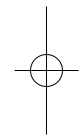
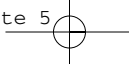
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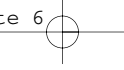
OPENING HOURS: THURSDAY – SUNDAY, 4 – 8 P.M.



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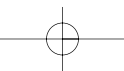
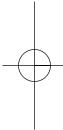
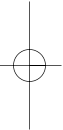






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PREFACE



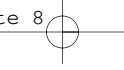
STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL

PREFACE In a bid to set-up a platform in Berlin where international issues on art can be deliberated upon, Savvy contemporary was founded. In a context where, from an art theoretical point of view, art is often classified with the help of the Cartesian coordinate system, it is of absolute necessity to develop alternative models of discoursing art, its history and theory at par with one another, irrespective of their “western” or “non-western” connotation, but with more emphasis on quality, social, historical and philosophical concepts. But in order to attain this ideal,

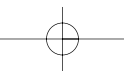
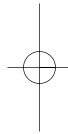
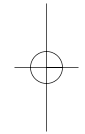
we will have to use these already existing terminologies to create a non-reticent atmosphere of debate; without any shy. In a quest to bridge this disparity in the mode of addressing art with a “non-western” background, the coincidence that brought the curator, Annette Schemmel, and the artist platform Enough Room for Space (ERforS) in contact with Savvy contemporary was almost an averment of ‘doing the right thing at the right time’. With their interests in a cross-continental collaboration between European and African/Cameroonian artists, ERforS not only affronts these geographical lines but also engages in a research that will bear new artistic fruits and testify the ideology of a new generation. Curiosity is the seed behind any truly genuine artistic activity... and with this research on how Cameroonian and European artists can relate with each other, their similarities

and differences will fuel knowledge exchange and further genial co-operations. In this light Savvy contemporary is proud to host Annette Schemmel’s ‘abstract’ of their research in the form of the exhibition “Stardust in a nutshell”. With the artists Stefaan Dheedene, Dunja Herzog, Christian Hanussek/Salifou Lindou, Alioum Moussa/Maarten Vanden Eynde, Boris Nzébo and Patrick Wokmeni, Annette Schemmel has succeeded in bringing harmony in heterogeneity. For Savvy contemporary “Stardust in a nutshell” is not just an exhibition with a relation to Douala, but more or less a further step in Savvy contemporary’s realisation of a utopia which sometimes seems as abstract as storing stardust in a nutshell.

*Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung
Art Director and Project Initiator
Savvy contemporary*



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INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

The exhibition "Stardust in a nutshell" presents works of four Cameroonian artists, together with those of four European artists (amongst them two cross-continental collaborations) and a range of objects that are meant to feed future projects on this axis. We are dealing with the question of how to relate to each other. And, maybe more importantly, we are showing what is linking us already, reflecting on the dynamics of back-and-forth movements among different starting points and destinations (intellectually rather than geographically).

The artists Stefaan Dheedene, Christian Hanussek, Dunja Herzog, Salifou Lindou, Alioum Moussa, Boris Nzébo, Maarten Vanden Eynde and Patrick Wokmeni have all spent considerable time in Cameroon. As experts for this context they are commenting on their works in the format of interviews. Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, the artistic director of Savvy contemporary, has contributed an inspiring essay for this exhibition catalogue on Boris Nzébo's practice. More info on the exhibition's context can be found in the background text.

This group show is part of the process towards a range of new artistic productions of Cameroonian and European artists that will be collaboratively realised in 2011, with the artist platform Enough Room for Space as its initiator. The display of "Stardust in a nutshell" reflects this

state of research.

I would like to thank Savvy contemporary for the invitation to curate an exhibition in their space and their kind support. My gratitude also goes to Marjolijn Dijkman and Maarten Vanden Eynde for their marvellous companionship on our trip to Douala and beyond. A special merci goes to Christian Hanussek for the contributions from his Douala archive and to all the artists involved in the project for their enthusiasm!

Annette Schemmel, Curator

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DUNJA HERZOG, BASEL, SWITZERLAND

The result of the project "Pah'Bèt" (2006/2007) are two small, animal-like objects from bronze and a publication with the subtitle "Fétiches en Discours" that explains how these objects function in a mysterious ritual.

INTERVIEW

**What is your link with Cameroon?
How did you start working there?**

My parents were working in Bafang in a hospital from 1981 - 1983. So I spent two

years of my childhood there. It was a very positive time for me and when I turned 20 in 1996 my father invited me for holidays to Cameroun. He visited his friends and I could rediscover places of my childhood.

During the last year of my art studies in 2003 I decided to go again to Cameroun, this time by myself. A friend from the Art Academy joined me and together we got to know the artists of Cercle Kapsiki. I stayed for 3 weeks at K-Factory, their residency place in New Bell. And so everything started... and I have to admit, I also fell in love...

Your project Pah'Bèt is the result of a collaboration with craftspeople in Fouban. How did you get in touch with them and how did you introduce your project? How did they feel about enacting a culturalist cliché of Africa?

One member of Cercle Kapsiki is Salifou Lindou. He is Bamoum, coming from Fouban and he is also a sculptor. When I told him about my interest to learn to cast bronze we decided to go together to Fouban, because he was also interested. When we reached the Centre d'artisanat in Fouban somebody organized an encounter with this group of craftsmen. But I really don't know how exactly we met each other in the first place... We went to the tourist shops and started a discussion about the difference of crafts and art. We had seen a nice, old-looking bracelet that the craftsmen had turned into an ashtray - I found that horrible! So the discussion reached a point where I criticized them heavily for being uncreative, just copying old artworks and turning nice things into banalities to cater the tourists. However, I suddenly found myself in the role of the happily shopping tourist who



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DUNJA HERZOG, BASEL, SWITZERLAND

considered buying an “antique piece” because it was a nice piece and on first hand not a copy (but you never know...). So I decided not to buy that object and to produce it on my own instead. The act of reproducing the desired object in the studio made me realize that I practised the same mode of operation like the artisans whom I had previously criticized for their lack of creativity. This led to further discussions and a lot of laughter with the craftsman. Then Arouna Kououtou had the idea to give my products a name because we had also discussed about the meaning of such items. We came up with “Pah’Bèt.” In Bamoun that means “taking something away and touching it...” I think there was also a lot of fun about myself inside this name, as a women working with these guys and because of my objects’ visible sexual genitals... We continued to make fun and then there was the

idea that these Pah’Bèt would also need a proper story of origins and a function. And so they were declared fetishes that were used during marriage ceremonies. It was the guys who finally had the idea to film a fake ritual.

So actually they where not enacting a cultural cliché of Africa. It was more about the fun to set up a new mythology of something that doesn’t exist - but that could have existed. And together we made use of the things and the knowledge that were around, so it looks quite real...

That’s why we also founded the CLUB of the Pah’Bèt. It was a collaboration rather than me having the ideas and them acting for me. It was a special and very ceative interaction.

Pah’Bèt is playing with fake strategies as described by Stefan Römer in 2001. At which point do you expect the vie-

wer to decode its fictitious nature?

For me it is both interesting if the viewer is able to decode the fake, but also if he/she takes it for “real”. I think our audience is generally quite used to be critical and this project is so close to what we think we might know about African rituals, objects etc. that they will automatically approach Pah’Bèt critically. And if they don’t, I don’t mind. So they think that they saw a real African object or ritual... What is real anyway?

But as soon as he or she takes a closer look at the book they will decode the strategy at once. It does need some time and investment of the viewer.

Your book includes a chapter with instructions how to “celebrate” a Pah’Bèt ceremony. This goes against the notion of secret societies and their mysterious practices that repels out-

siders and at the same time attracts their curiosity. Do you know about any other, "real" rituals for which written introductions exist?

No, I don't know any introductions to other rituals. I was also writing down the instructions because of the strong link of this project to anthropology and academics. It's this notion of trying to understand and dismantle things that are not so easily understandable or logic. So I was overdoing everything. I have to admit that the work is strongly influenced by my anger about anthropology, even though I know little about it. But I met some scientists working in Cameroon and I simply couldn't understand why they were doing what they were doing.

Besides: there are a lot of ceremonies that are less mysterious than we think - but there are for sure also some very myste-



rious ones!

Pah'Bèt in its seemingly pre-colonial costume touches upon a 21st century phenomenon of a newly structured world market: The battle for fossile resources, especially metals, that is fought on African grounds while we're speaking, causing many Cameroonians to develop strong resentiments against Chinese (investors) f.ex.

Could you expand on this?

There are always two sides. The Chinese investors bring money and infrastructure to the country and at the same time they are also buying territory and resources. When I was in Cameroun in January 2010 I traveled to Kribi and further to the East. By now it's a fact that Cameroon's new overseas harbor will be built between Kribi and Rio Campo (Equatorial Guinea). They have to build this harbor, because the one in Douala is much to small for the big oversea ships, and that has nothing to do with the Chinese. But right there, on the road to Campo, the Chinese own a huge territory where they take aluminium out of the soil. And someone is building now a new road from Kribi to Campo. I don't know who is financing it and it also doesn't matter because this region and Kribi will profit economically of the situation. (I don't dare to think of this develop-

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DUNJA HERZOG, BASEL, SWITZERLAND

ment's consequences for nature.)

In 2006 the market for bronze was very hectic. The prices went super-high for the craftsmen in Foumban, because the Chinese had bought all the metal in Douala and the sellers were rather selling to the well-paying Chinese than to the people in Foumban. So a lot of craftsman lost their job because they couldn't afford to buy their material. It's sad to see how this is affecting cultural production. The same is the case in Jo'burg. The people are pulling the copper wires out of the town to sell it to the Chinese.

But as a matter of fact the Chinese have a much longer trading tradition with Africa than the Europeans. And the Europeans don't like it when somebody else makes business in Africa...

Humor is a rare feature in European's engagement with Africa, as far as I

know. The past seems to weigh too heavy to allow for a light-hearted approach. Or is tongue-in-cheek a better way to frame the undertone of your Pah'Bèt?

I think in general that humor is important and this is especially true in Cameroon. I think that laughter is even a strategy of survival there! It is important to find a light approach to things so that people can engage with them. The West is already too terrified by the "dark, dangerous and mysterious" continent Africa. And mainly it is not dark, nor dangerous nor mystic. It is light (and the people have to take it light, otherwise it is much too heavy to live it). People are very friendly and open. Without humor nothing would work! Someone who is engaged with themes about Africa has to learn to take it lightly – there is no other way to seriously produce work. We

often also have still too much guilt in us – rightly so in a way, but totally useless on the other hand.

I think the notion of tongue-in-cheek is a good way to frame the undertone of Pah'Bèt, because I am rather addressing a Western viewer and reader. This also implies addressing our clichés of Africa, to expose them and to show how little we know and that we are very stuck in this perception.

The most distinct feature of the bronze objects of Pah'Bèt seem to be their female and male genitals. Would you agree that you're also dealing with gender clichés/hetero-normativity in Africa?

Yes, the genitals are quite important, but you'll only notice them by turning the objects, not necessarily in an exhibition

context. I think I did them first of all with regard to a oversexed image of "Africa": fertile, naked bodies, a lot of children, Aids etc. Secondly there is a link to what we bear in mind as classical "African Art" (a construction of course), mostly these sculptures everybody knows, with big penises, breasts and asses. I was playing with these prejudices about "Africa" and overdoing them terribly...

So, I think it is not so much about hetero-normativity in Africa (which Africa, besides?). Indeed, the gender roles in Cameroon do look very hetero-normal, also because homosexuality is criminalized. (I know quite some people that live it anyway and there are also quite a lot of women having the last word in the house, like everywhere else.).

In certain contexts the patriarchal attitudes are quite heavy though, the art field is

a good example: Like everywhere else in West and Central Africa, there are very few women in visual arts and it's not easy for them at all. They lack role models of elder women artists; their subjects are very different from the ones of their male colleagues and sometimes they are much more involved in the social matters of their society. Well, perhaps there we have the hetero-normativity playing out...

What are your experiences as a woman artist in Cameroon?

I have money - which means liberty - and because I'm not living the every-day life of Cameroonians, I am less subject to the before mentioned issues. It's nice to work there because everybody is friendly and helpful. And there is a lot of time to talk. For a woman there is also a lot of flirting, sometimes funny sometimes tiring. And

there are lots of clichés about white women (Porn magazines...).

Sometimes I felt lonely because there are not so many other women doing art. Cameroonian women's issues, like prostitution for example, are very delicate topics to deal with. And it's not so easy as with men to make deeper contact with women in a short time. Surely there are also exceptions...

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SALIFOU LINDOU, DOUALA, CAMEROON & CHRISTIAN HANUSSEK, BERLIN, GERMANY

The series "Parfum" consists of eight photos (50 x 60 cm) taken in a shop in Douala in 2007. The promising names on colourful boxes and fancy flacons – Cameroonian products altogether – contrast sharply with the rough shelves that act as their display.

INTERVIEW

How did you guys meet?

Christian: During my first visit to Cameroon in 2000. We started our

collaboration during the ARS&URBIS workshop in 2007.

Salifou: The first time we met was at the Goethe Institute. Christian had come for an exhibition in Cameroon. We started our collaboration in Douala in the framework of ARS&URBIS.

What is the most important link between you both?

Christian: We have a similar understanding of live and art.

Salifou: The sharpness of each other's artistic approach.

The photographs entitled "Parfum" belong to a body of work that includes also perfume drawings on paper. Why did you get interested in this subject?

Christian: Just like the visual arts reflect our visual reality, perfumes reflect the olfactory reality.

Salifou: We were researching on the role of perfumes in people's lives.

Is there a difference in the use of perfume between Cameroon and Germany?

Christian: The visitors to exhibitions had a preference for a single fragrance: "EXTASE", both in Douala and in Munich. I take this as a proof that there are no differences...

Salifou: People had the same interest in Cameroon like in Germany: the smell of perfumes, the difference amongst men and women, the flacon design as well; they were looking for the reference between design and smell.



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SALIFOU LINDOU, DOUALA, CAMEROON & CHRISTIAN HANUSSEK, BERLIN, GERMANY

Christian told me that people always ask you who did what in your projects although you seem to want to dissolve the individual authorship in your projects. Do you have an explanation for this?

Christian: The work of a visual artist is usually very solitary and it is rather exceptional to find a common base to work from. We profit from the fact that we're collaborating in the various media that we use in our individual practice.

Salifou: In the artistic process it is not important who does what. The satisfaction about the success of an idea matters!

In Germany there is little awareness of the exploitative colonial history that links us to Cameroon.

The memory of the Holocaust and the shame it brings about seems to monopolise the Germans' historic identity. In Cameroon instead the public opinion seems to almost idealize the era of German colonisation. Is your collaboration influenced by this imbalance?

Christian: We are rather looking at things that link the different cultures.

Salifou: Our cultural differences add to our relationship.

What is your next collaboration?

Christian: There are several ideas but they will transform in the course of their development.

Salifou: There are a lot of projects ahead!



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STEFAAN DHEEDENE, GENT, BELGIUM

The video "Crystal" (2002-2004, 2:50 Min) features a black singer performing George Bizet's hymn "Agnus Dei" in front of a jungle scenery: The dissonances of the Christian mission's history in Africa can't be ignored.

INTERVIEW

**What is your link with Cameroon?
How did you start working there?**

My link with Cameroon is more or less fading, but I lived there for two

years, from 2001-03. I went there quite unprepared, following my girl-friend who started to work there as a researcher for INIBAP (International Network for Bananas and Plantains). She stayed 5 years in total.

My preparation was mostly the investment in video equipment as I was told that there was a need by NGOs for a cheap and fast way to have audiovisual documentation of their work. The results were mostly short didactic and promotional videos.

Certainly then, my background was mostly sculpture. This was a way to make some kind of living there, but this little job took me to places in the forests and villages, where I wouldn't have gone otherwise. Coming back from Cameroon, I went through the

material and re-edited some of the material as video works. "Crystal" is the only exception; it was filmed from the start with the idea of a becoming a 'work of art'.

Who is the singer? Is he a professional? How did you meet him?

The singer is Cyril Nkoa. Back then he was a technician working at Africrea in Yaoundé. I met him while visiting a painting exhibition in Africrea where he was singing while doing his job. The last time I talked to him (2 years ago) he spoke about a small music school he had started.

He's not a professional (by our standards). He learned to read and sing notes through Pavarotti tapes and scores that he had borrowed from the Goethe Institut in Yaoundé.



Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi,

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STEFAAN DHEEDENE, GENT, BELGIUM

Whose version of "Agnus Dei" is he singing?

The version is by George Bizet, interesting to know that this is a corrupted version in the way that Bizet moved and repeated some sentences to turn the "Agnus Dei" into a poem (The church is very protective on the exact sequence of sentences). The point of continuation and corruption of the catholic was (and still is to me) a reflection on the (post-) colonial and missionary presence.

Where was the video recorded?

The video was recorded in a forest behind Mount Fébé near Yaoundé.

How is this video related to your work in general?

Most of my videos from Cameroon seem like a bogey of an ethnic-, anthropological- or nature documentary about Africa. Yet, the concept of truthfulness that characterizes these genres is undermined by meaningful sounds, texts and images that take the subject out of its isolation.

Another way of questioning this truthfulness is to create a gap between the articulated and the expected. Most videos deal — in an economical documentary mode — with an increasingly objectified Central Africa. More and more it seems to become a scientific playground for bio-engineers, biologists and geologists who attempt — by means of legitimized research (in all kinds of frameworks of development aid) — to objectify this continent into stereotypes concerning the

negative relation between ethnic codes on the one hand and codes of production on the other. As if there was a pre-existing or natural foundation for underdevelopment that can be found and that produces these stereotypes. This negative relation, guided by media and vulgarisation in both directions, seems rather an effect of a regime of identity and difference. These new Western attempts to upgrade the life quality of the average African, seem to generate (with new declarations of belief) often the same impact as the Christianisation in the colonial period.

My recent works are mostly sculptural and installational, but still based on observations and encounters. The 'documentary mode' still plays a very important role in the installations as

they deal mostly with mimicry and reconstruction and its occasion for mistake while reconstructing or mimicking. Certainly "Crystal" deals with mimicry!

My interest in video documents is not fixed to the promise or urge to transfer any knowledge. This 'documentary mode' rather offers an occasion for mistake. A documentary project is substantially paradoxical, as the image and its reference in reality are put under pressure by the logic of representation. Thus the documentarism supported by photography develops into a bogey of resemblance. The more an image claims to be documentary, authentic, unfiltered and unmanipulated, the more isolated is the picture and the cultural abstraction from its reference in reality. A docu-

mentary project has however the ambition to come closer to the truth than other visual genres. It is originally deeply colored with a love of truth, which forms the heart of the documented knowledge-production.

However, the documentary project can also be easily reconciled with the disbelief and uncertainty that the images arouse. "In documentary mode, reality becomes an attraction", writes Jane Gaines. Not because it is ordinary, but because it becomes suddenly strange.

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PATRICK WOKMENI, DOUALA, CAMEROON

The 15 pictures of the series "Les Belles de New Bell" (2008) show the girls of Douala's neighbourhood New Bell in their dizzying night life. Other series depict the rappers on the streets or street rioters of the 2008 political unrest in Douala. A complex choreography of gazes in his pictures reflects the artist's awareness for the politics of voyeurism.

INTERVIEW

How did you get into photography?

I started in 2006 with an educational workshop organized by the Centre Culturel Français in Douala.

How do you see yourself: More as a photojournalist or more as an artist? Does it make any difference?

I consider myself an artist rather than a photojournalist, since I try to bring to the surface a human depth. This is something photojournalists would not do. For them a cliché is a cliché.

New Bell is a popular neighborhood of Douala and your place of

residence. Who are the girls in your series "Les Belles de New Bell"? (Somebody said they were prostitutes?)

The girls in this series are what I call "girls of the night". By means of some cash they will act out your unacknowledged fantasies.

How do you choose your subjects? Is there a link between your different series, i.e. "Les Belles de New Bell", "Les Rappeurs", "Les Révoltes de Février 2008"?

I choose my subjects instinctively. If I had to name a link, it would be the contexts by which the different layers of the Cameroonian society are represented.



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PATRICK WOKMENI, DOUALA, CAMEROON

Could you tell me if people are as skeptical towards you if you approach them with your camera, as they are towards us as tourists that are taking pictures?

The people are indeed skeptical whenever I approach them with my camera, but less than with regard to tourists. The words to convince them are more readily accepted if they are coming from my mouth instead of a stranger's.

Could you explain this strong skepticism towards photography in Cameroon? Does it play a role for your work?

People here are suffering and they find it difficult to accept that their very personal misery should be shown

by the bias of a photograph. At the moment this is influencing the development of my projects, but in the end it always works out.

In three words, how would you describe your live as artist/photographer in Douala?

My live as an artist in three words is hassle, incomprehension and appreciation as soon as the work is presented.



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ALIOUM MOUSSA, DOUALA, CAMEROON & MAARTEN VANDEN EYNDE, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

The public space project IN_DEPENDANCE aims at inspiring a dialogue about the 50th anniversary of Cameroon's independence from colonial rule. Couples of a black and a white t-shirt bearing the words "in", and "dépendance" respectively on their front will be distributed to couples of Africans and Europeans in Douala.

INTERVIEW

How did you guys meet?

Alioum: I met Maarten through our artist friend Dunja Herzog with whom I have earlier collaborated on projects in Cameroon and other African countries. When I was selected for a residency at IAAB in Basel in 2006, Dunja suggested traveling to the Netherlands to meet her artist friends in Rotterdam with whom we could plan a project between Douala and Rotterdam. This is how I met Maarten and Marjolijn in their studios, in Rotterdam.

We spent two days at their house and I thought they were very human and friendly people who share my values and so we became friends.

In March of this year they came to Cameroon for research and to exchange with the local art scene. During this stay we had got to know each other more profoundly and so the project with the IN_DEPENDANCE T-shirts came up.

For us this is a way of saying that Africa is not at all independent, since it continues to be affected by the activities of the countries of the North. These T-shirts only make sense, if they belong to two people, to a black person (with DEPENDANCE) and a white person with (with IN).

Could you name the links of your individual work with this project?

Alioum: There is a strong link with my current practice as I am working with a social and political perspective.



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ALIOUM MOUSSA, DOUALA, CAMEROON & MAARTEN VANDEN EYNDE, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

I am recalling the utopian aspect of Africa's independence with drawings that comment on our Southern countries' news.

Maarten: I see it more as a spontaneous collaboration, which emerged from a connection we had with each other; a kind of brainstorming momentum, which is a typical part of the Enough Room for Space vibe during our projects. You get inspired by the presence, thoughts, ways of working of other artists and therefore you go outside of your regular working patterns. I would have never made this work alone.

The project "IN_ DEPENDANCE" is your first collaboration and related to the 50th anniversary of Cameroon's independence in 2010.

What should be re-discussed in this context?

Alioum: I would appreciate it if we could explore the history of Cameroun's independence in depth, which means for Maarten and me to find a working set up that is much more complex than the T-shirt and the poster, maybe with videos and photos etc.

Alioum has already realized other projects with disguises and clothes (i.e. a drag performance in Paris, for example). What are your experiences with this medium in public space?

Alioum: So far my experiments with disguises were exclusively done in Paris and Basel. It looks to me as if in

the context of my country it wouldn't have been the same, but it was a superb experience because people were very friendly and I got into interactions with passersby in the street.

In 2006 during my residency in Basel I worked with clothes made from plastic bags from the trash (BEBBI SAGG). I put on this plastic outfit and went on a tour through the city with my bike. In Paris I passed on plastic masks with a portrait of president Sarkozy to passersby and I took photos of them.

In Berlin you present IN_DEPENDANCE as poster, in Douala your will distribute pairs of T-shirts. Could you expand on the context of the SUD 2010, your forum for this project?

Alioum: I would like to state that the SUD 2010 (Salon Urbain de Douala) is organized by Doual'art, the centre of contemporary art in Douala. It will be a meeting point for art professionals from around the world. This year's SUD with a focus on the subject water will be headed by the curator Simon Njami (who did also AFRICA REMIX), together with Didier Schaub (artistic director of Doual'art) and Koyo Kouo, an independent curator living and working in Dakar in Senegal. We'll also have artists from all over the place coming to work on site.

This platform is at the same time an occasion to present our own work, but also to meet other artists.

So our project that links an artist from the North to another from the South fits perfectly into this context.

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BORIS NZÉBO, DOUALA, CAMEROON

Like most of Boris Nzébo's paintings, collages and drawings, "Regard Urbain" (Acrylic on canvas, 2010, 120 x 120 cm) and "Profile I" (Acrylic on canvas, 2009, 70 x 65 cm) consist of a layering of a portrait with typical urban vistas from his city, Douala.

INTERVIEW

You started your professional career with painting advertisement panels. What made you want to concentrate on fine art?

I realized that applied arts were not what I needed in order to express myself and to make myself understood by a certain number of people... But besides, these commercial signs for barbershops constituted my first artist books and helped me to find the first models for my paintings. I took these advertisements into the context of contemporary art, with a strictly artistic approach.

Who are the people on your paintings?

You, me, the other, neighbors, friends, imaginations, people from the street, etc. Everybody around me.

You seem to have a thing about hair. Could you explain it?

I think every creature is interested in hair... even those who are bald dream of having some. Nobody gets around hair from their very birthday on. It's an architecture of identity, it's expressive and esthetic.

How did you come up with your visual language? It makes me think of pop art...

My style is inspired by the pop movement of the 60s to the 80s, this is in homage to Andy Warhol and Keith Haring who I admire... actually I see myself in the "Neo-Pop Art" movement of the 21st century, with my very own language and artistic "handwriting".

From 1995 to 1998 I did a vocational training as silkscreen printmaker (graphics). This is how I managed to



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BORIS NZÉBO, DOUALA, CAMEROON

improve my graphic work, and in 2007 I was selected for a residency at ArtBakery under Goddy Leye's tutorage. I spent almost my whole stay there studying books about pop art and discussing it with Goddy - this is how I developed my visual language.

You work with 3-dimensional media as well, in the form of installations, sometimes in public space. What is the common feature of your work?

There is none. I try to be an all-round artist touching on all kinds of materials, yet within a consistent visual language.

Your works often bear titles referring to life in the city ("Kwatt d'exile", "Regard urbain", "Ville

coiffé"...). And I remember that you moved to Douala as teenager. What is Douala as a city offering to you as an artist?

The city of Douala is my field of research and of experiments in my search for inspiration... I grew up in this environment and since a couple of years I am using this environment for my artistic narration...

You told me that you were interested in everything that is beautiful. What is beautiful for you?

My sense of beauty is a leitmotiv with its metaphorical and philosophical diversity. There are:

The beauty of the mind...

The beauty of corruption...

The beauty of peculation of public

money....

The beauty of the environment...

The beauty of social, economical and political problems...



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I GOT GEOMETRIES IN MY HEAD

I GOT GEOMETRIES IN MY HEAD

On the works of Boris Nzébo

The allusions are evident! The traces are clear! The magnitude in the visual language is almost omnipresent and omnipotent...

Heads of all categories: big or small, banana- or apple-shaped, beautiful or ugly... but all carry the peculiar African hair designs that shout at references to other masterpieces. A look at Boris Nzébo's works calls in memory J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere's photography series "Hairstyles" or the hair salon posters found in several

African cities. These advertisement posters of hair styles that are offered by the various coiffeurs have been carried around the world and shown in some exhibitions¹ as a trophy. They have helped to show how dynamic the concept of beauty in Africa is and that the fashion catwalks in Africa are the streets and the market places; reminiscent of the Malian designer, Alphadi. But the downside of these posters is that they have also helped to propagate a stereotype of an "exotic" African art around the world.

But it will be a great mistake to reduce Boris Nzébo's work to this one-dimensional level. Nzébo's paintings, collages and installations are a synapse of a socio-urban re-/ generation and of his cultural awareness. His paintings transform and blend the three-dimensionality of architecture, sculpture and hair design onto the

two-dimensionality of a canvas. This is not a mere superimposition of structures with the purpose of an aesthetic representation.

Like many artists in his generation, especially from Douala, the economic port-metropolis in the littoral province of Cameroon (e.g. Patrick Wokmeni or Guy Woueté), Nzébo is interested in a contemporary urban development and nomadic phenomena. This generation's interests manifest themselves, from a geographical point of view, as a research on rural-urban movements (intra- and international) and settlement strategies. From an architectural viewpoint they treat functional and constructional characteristics of space and the interaction with the city dwellers. Their art can also be read on a sociological scope as being influenced by "big city life" behavioral patterns and urbanism as a

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way of life... with or without knowledge of Louis Wirths's 1938 publication².

In his poetic collage with the title "Village" (2008) Nzébo combines a cut-out profile of a female head with a frontal picture of a house... one of those wooden houses constructed in the villages around Douala.

Another picture of a plaited head's rear-view is added, as if trying to show all dimensions of the head, with the house being the face and his drawings eyes.

"Kwatt of exile" (2008) is a similar collage piece: Cut-out profiles, shifted and pasted; a walking black structure in the profile; all pasted on a picture of a wooden house.

This becomes interesting when one understands what "kwatt" means: "Kwatt" is a bastardized and amputated word from English, quarter and French, "quartier" derived from Cameroon's lingua-franca, Pidgin and Franglais... thus a reflection on

a refuge home or quarter.

Nzébo's acrylic paintings, occasionally on a 100x100cm canvas, carry themes like "Couloir d'Or", "Voisine de rue", "Construction du milles-pattes" or "Vulgarisation", all from 2008. The titles draw allusions sometimes to the plaited heads or the geometrical structures with which they are superimposed and do recount a story of Nzébo's social context. Painted in bright and almost pop art-like colours, the paintings are like a summary of points, lines, levels and curves that culminate to a geometrical cluster.

His affinity to geometrical structures and space is also visible in his installation entitled "Ville coiffée" (2009). This installation encompasses hundreds of same-sized pictures of houses and city views with drawings and collages of heads on them. All these pictures are pasted on a wall corner

and floor, so that a three-dimensionality is simulated. The play of words in the title refers on the one hand to hairdressing people and is on the other hand a metaphor on making a city look clean, handsome and elegant. In short it is about shaving the city! The French word "coiffer" is also a synonym for controlling or manipulating, id est maybe a bid for his generation to take things into their hands and put some order around.

Boris Nzébo's works are in Beuys' sense social sculptures; but in the head. Even though they treat geometry or are in a quest for form, they usually defy or cannot be simplified to the concept of a sculpture as a three-dimensional entity in space! This complies with Beuys' theory that "sculpture could not be identified with material objects alone, but rather that the sculptural element encompasses other,

invisible entities as well³. They are silhouettes of the context young artists of African origin find themselves in today and thus carry this fine blend of beauty, concept and form.

Just like Ojeikere's poignant photo series on hair sculptures, "Hairstyles", are intended to keep in memory this ephemeral art of plaiting and a traditional entity, so is the case too with Nzébo who consciously or unconsciously embalms this art and culture in his works.

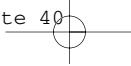
Boris Nzébo strives for a combination of inorganic and organic forms. This is already given, as he already has geometries in his head.

Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung
Art Director and Project Initiator
Savvy contemporary

1 Plakate in Afrika; 20. Oktober 2005 bis 26. Februar 2006; Iwalewa Haus

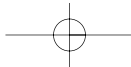
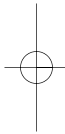
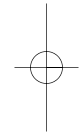
2 Louis Wirth: Urbanism As A Way of Life. In: American Journal of Sociology 44, 1938, P. 1-24

3 Wolfgang Zumdtick: Social Sculpture Research Unit, 2008; Oxford Brookes University



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THE BACKGROUND



THE BACKGROUND OF "STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL"

AT CLOSE DISTANCE

It is only a few months ago that my boyfriend came back from his regular shopping tour to a discounter some 200 m down Richardstrasse in Neukölln, all excited about a new art space that had opened on that same strip, but even more excited about its artistic director: a Cameroonian! This was just too much of a coincidence: We had been talking for years about a curatorial research trip that would take me to Douala, Cameroon, together with the artist platform Enough Room for

Space (ERforS) in March 2010; I had co-organised a peer-to-peer discussion with a delegation of Cameroonian art professionals in Rotterdam (ERforS with Istrike and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, documented in issue #25 of the Rotterdam-based artist magazine Fucking Good Art!) and attended the "Africa Reflected" lecture series at Maison Descartes in Amsterdam in autumn 2009.

And now this faraway place had installed its satellite right around my corner! This was the wink of fate I had needed to go for the challenge. Soon later, I accepted Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung's kind invitation to share some of our travel's outcome with the audience of Savvy Contemporary. As an 'expatriate' based in Germany, he was not less excited about the occasion to extend his knowledge on young art from back home.

Our research trip to Douala – a lively harbour city with ca. 3 Mio inhabitants and one of the most dynamic hubs of contemporary arts in Central Africa – was based on Swiss artist Dunja Herzog's enthusiasm for the art scene of this city (see interview). Her connections to the founders of ERforS, the artists Marjolijn Dijkman and Maarten Vanden Eynde, had brought about the wish to relate to Douala with an artistic project. Stefaan Dheedene, a Belgium artist who had worked in Cameroon for some time (see interview) was involved in these plans early on. Berlin-based artist/curator Christian Hanussek (see interview) – a connoisseur of Douala's art scene – provided us with some more indispensable information on its artists and organisations. And the Dutch Mondriaan Foundation proved to be supportive and generous enough to finance a site-visit to concretize our plans.

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The seven days I spent in Douala (a short while due to my baby-daughter back home) felt like a beautiful, small eternity: The physical experience of this tropical city was so dense, so numerous the studio visits and encounters with artists' initiatives and so different the concepts of temporality. The daily schedule was re-adapted constantly due to traffic jams, black outs, the absence of agendas and sudden, heavy raining and still those couple of days seemed long enough to do what we had set out for. Boris Nzébo and Patrick Wokmeni (see interviews) were amongst the artists that we found most inspiring.

We had brought with us a range of European art works dealing with the notion of memory and history, inspired by art critic Lionel Manga's hint at the 50th anniversary

of Cameroon's independence from colonial rule (1884-1919 colonised by Germany, until 1960 by the UK and France, whose influence is strongly felt economically up to today). These art works were meant to take us into discussions that would help to develop a collaborative project with practitioners on site.

We presented them firstly at the artist-in-residence station and "laboratoire de création contemporaine" ArtBakery, initiated by artist Goddy Leye. ArtBakery is located in Bonendale, a village that still bears traces of German colonial trade infrastructure and that is turning into an artist village recently. Three more presentations were held in the space K-Factory, run by the artist initiative Cercle Kapsiki, at the youth centre Maison de la Jeunesse and at Doual'art, the spine of Douala's art scene. As an NGO this last institution has been

fostering fine arts and their anchoring in the city of Douala since 1991 (Prince Bernhard Prize 2009 for exceptional achievements in the fields of culture and development). The second edition of Doual'art's public art triennale SUD (Salon Urbain de Douala) will take place in December 2010.

The piece that proved most productive for the purpose of inspiring a discussion was the video "Vita Nova" (26 min, 2009, see image) by Brussels-based artist Vincent Meessen. It uncovers the contradictory relationship of French intellectual Roland Barthes with his grandfather, a colonial officer in Burkina Faso, brought forward with a compelling visuality. The beauty of this work and the discussions it enabled about the need to question master narratives, even if they're coming from 'trustworthy' sources like Roland Barthes, made us want to present it also at the opening



of “Stardust in a nutshell” in Berlin. The spontaneous plan for a collaboration of Maarten Vanden Eynde (Brussels) and Alioum Moussa (Douala) in the form of T-shirt couples distributed to couples of African and European visitors to the SUD 2010 to inspire dialogues about Cameroon’s ‘in-dépendance’ can be considered a first material result of these discussions (see interview). Presented firstly in Germany in the format of a poster for take-away, this project hints unerringly at the colonial entanglement of Germany with Cameroon that is all too easily dismissed from the collective memory. The loss of this belatedly acquired colony in the course of World War I (due to oppressive rule), remained a hot topic in Germany’s public opinion until the raise of the Nazis, who instrumentalized it for their propaganda against France and England. No less than 70 theatre plays with Germany’s African

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Colonies as their subject matter had been published here between 1919 and 1933 and countless small 'Kolonialwarenläden' (shops for colonial goods) popped up all over the place. Yet, after World War II the cruelties of the Holocaust seem to have monopolized the Germans' historic memory, causing their colonial past to comfortably fade into oblivion.

At Maison de la Jeunesse we had concentrated on concepts of the future, again based on a suggestion of Lionel Manga to imagine the 100th anniversary of Cameroon's independence for a change. Futurology is a focus point of Marjolijn Dijkman's artistic practice that has culminated in a video belonging to her body of work entitled "Wandering through the future" (2007). For this video she had sampled scenes from science fiction movies representing specific moments in

the future in chronological order, with mostly horrendous scenarios ranging from the year 2008 to the year 802701. The reluctance of our young audience to relate to these "all too Western" projections into the future and their resignation towards their own future puzzled us.

PRESENT PERFECT!

The topic of temporality proved very exciting as a starting point for a collaborative exhibition project amongst Cameroonian and European artists, precisely because of the varying perceptions of the past, the present and the future on both continents. During our stay in Douala we identified some 6-8 artists with whom we would like to continue to work. They are emerging or established, from various artist circles, with a wide range of practices and open-minded. We will take the successful and long-lasting collaboration of Christian

Hanussek with Salifou Lindou from Douala (see interview) as a model for the curatorial challenge of our project: to find an intellectually matching partner for each of the Douala-based artists amongst our networks in Europe. These partners are selected by a flexible attitude, matching working method and complementary skills and the willingness to engage in a collaborative project. With this strategy we hope to help both to develop new aspects of their practice. The outcome of these collaborations that will take off during the SUD 2010 will be presented in Douala, the Netherlands and Germany under the title "Present Perfect!" in 2011.

STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL

To get back into the present, i.e. to our starting point at Savvy contemporary in Berlin-Neukölln, I would like to add a few remarks about the exhibition whose back-

ground we have retraced so far. I am considering "Stardust in a nutshell" as a curatorial report, a show out of the hand-luggage and a freeze frame of ERforS's engagement with Douala. Installed as a sort of storage space, loosely referring to my mental image of a customs office, the exhibition's display reflects precisely this process-related character. We are taking the risk to publicly lay out the results of our research, for further scrutiny and as a means of inspiration for artistic projects to take on shape. "Stardust in a nutshell" will also be the context for a peer-to-peer discussion on the concretization of "Present Perfect!" amongst some of the participating European artists. Objects like the historic photo album of a German 'Schutzmacht' soldier from Cameroon's colonial era (courtesy Bonaventure Ndikung) and copies of Hennes & Mauritz clothes, made in Cameroon from typical

central-African 'commemorative textiles' (courtesy Marjolijn Dijkman), found their place amongst the art works.

But this exhibition is also a meeting of artists from two very different continents via their art works and their statements in the interviews. For very practical reasons not all of them can be in the same place simultaneously. Needless to say that the differences in the working realities of the artists we met in Douala and those we know in Europe are substantial. Yet, as contemporary artists they address politically relevant topics and approach their practice conceptually, with a highly self-reflective sensibility — just like their European counterparts. Together they share the same present that is more or less perfect, in different ways influenced by the past and framing their look-out into the future. Last but not least they are

companions in a quest for beauty. The stardust in the exhibition's title tells about it. Luckily there are occasions when this beauty can no longer be jealously kept in the studio or in the curator's luggage!

Annette Schemmel, Curator

Links (in order of apparition):
www.enoughroomforspace.org
istrike.net
www.wdw.nl (Witte de With)
www.smba.nl/en/special-projects
www.fuckinggoodart.nl
www.savvy-contemporary.com
www.dunjaherzog.org
www.maisondescartes.com
www.marjolijndijkman.com
www.maartenvandeneynde.com
www.stefaandheedene.com
www.mondriaanfoundation.nl
www.lionelmanga.com
artbakery.250free.com/homeEnglish.htm
www.doualart.org
www.normal.be (Vincent Meessen)

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IMPRESSUM

STARDUST IN A NUTSHELL

Curated by Annette Schemmel/
Enough Room for Space

PUBLISHER

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the laboratory of form ideas

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Bejeng Ndikung

Events Director - Stefan Fuhrmann

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Still of "Vita Nova" in background text:

© Courtesy Normal

With the interviews:

© Stefaan Deheedene; Dunja Herzog;

Christian Hanussek/Salifou Lindou;

Marjolijn Dijkman for Alioum

Moussa/Maarten Vanden Eynde,

Paul Huf for Boris Nzébo, Patrick Wokmeni.

TEXTS

Annette Schemmel (Introduction,
Background), Dr. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng
Ndikung (Preface, "I got geometries in my
mind"), Interviews: Annette Schemmel
with the artists

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