

Barthélémy Togo

works projects publications biography texts links contact coming soon
œuvres projets publications biographie textes liens contact actualités

press
interviews
► **critics**

critics / critiques

Jan-Erik Lundström,

Performing the hyphen : Theses on Barthélémy Togo's theatres of translation

in Catalogue **Barthélémy Togo : *The Sick Opera***, Paris: Paris-Musées: Palais de Tokyo, 2004.

It is the blessing and the curse of the diasporic artist to incessantly and exuberantly disarm, displace and dislocate doxa and dominant discourses (which always are equal to discourses of domination), received ideas and (by majority rule) consensual truths, all awhile making others visible. Already Walter Benjamin knew this, writing in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule." Member by default of the cultures of hybridity, effortlessly and self-evidently tuned to doubled and nested paths of subjectivity, not to mention crisis and exigency, the diasporic artist "rides the hyphen" (African-American, Asian-English, African-French, West-Indian-French... the hyphen marking both continuity and discontinuity)¹, bundles two (at least) worlds within one self, in frustration, in jubilation and in self-assertion, while destabilizing and debunking the norm. Addressing the fatigue and indolence which dominant culture presently aims at "the multicultural" and "the postcolonial," as if these were isms, trends, temporary territorial and/or moral claims quickly to be deserted, and not major, decisive and complex strands of human collective experience, and as if it was possible to map and explore the diasporic through only a few brief bursts of discourse; the artist of the diaspora is asked to and demanded of—for the sake of survival—to constantly reinvent his/her praxis.

Curiously, multicultural discourse is ridiculed and the political-correctness charge is hauled at it with increasing frequency in direct proportion to collapsing certainties regarding the very core identity of Western culture. As the parameters of assimilation/tolerance/stigmatization/expulsion shift and turn, particularly in the present-day landscape of fear, the artist of the diaspora performs his/her counter-discourse, keeps adding the impure and the hyphenated, excels in disidentificatory difference.² This artist also knows that no advances are to be taken for granted: A successful strategy or seemingly powerful inroads may quickly be neutralized or cancelled by suffocating and repressive tolerance. Look at hybridity loved to death. Look at identity-politics watered down and debilitated. Both fear and suspect benevolence, ignorance and animosity! Even critical art's own identity crisis may upturn and destabilize already cleared paths of representation. "In matters of war, positioning is everything."³ Do know that it is never sufficient to state and formulate; all has to be continuously restated, reformulated, restated, reformulated. Keep moving, keep moving, do not allow it to catch up with you.

Considering the multifaceted artistic production of Barthélémy Togo, it would be a mistake, however, to characterize his work as exclusively aimed at narrating or questioning the post-colonial or diasporic subject. In fact, the surrealist and humanist laughter of his contributions, its non-sequitur logic, its mild ironies and its oscillation between inaugurating theatres of the real and supporting a realist aesthetics, gains their full momentum only when understood as stories of the crisis of the European or Western subject. A spokesman for minority rights, a chronicler of the hazards of border crossings, acute observer of power and the absurdities of the everyday, diasporic storyteller translating cultures while rearticulating Black/African identities, interlocutor of territorial contests, an impresario promoting and subverting the Black male body and the sea of desire, political ecologist and ecologist, a traveller spelling dialogues of North-South/South-North, a translator (as Stuart Hall has it, translation describes "those identity formations which cut across and intersect frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed... from their homelands... who belong at one and the same time to several homes and to no one particular home") who invests his translational skills against dichotomies to instead usefully complicate our world views; Togo's stories or actions or installations or performances or plays do also disobey the definitions of otherness. Refusing to be cast as (a victimized) other, Togo manages to show that these presumably "other" stories are possibly not any other story at all, but the story of France, of Europe in the modern/postmodern world.⁴ The story of Europe is the story of exile, of migration, of cross-cultural exchange, of uprootedness and hybridity, of creolité and opposition, intervention and assimilation. Contemporary culture is cross-cultural. The crisis of the European subject concerns its inability to reformulate its outdated master narratives.

Togo's actions and social interventions, for example those gathered under the title *Transit* (presented as *Unfinished Theatre*, a major installation at the 5th Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2000),⁵ make the class-biased or racist Western gaze upon the African or post-colonial or minoritarian subject visible. Indeed, the primary effect of these actions (where staged events mix with incidents)—checking in at the airport with suitcases sculpted in wood; arriving to customs without a visa, thus testing the adherence of the authorities in charge to international regulations on how to receive an asylum-seeker; turning up in first-class train coach with a Paris dustman overalls; taking a seat in an airplane wearing an oversize wooden hat—is precisely to make visible the Western gaze upon the diasporic subject, while toggling both "race" and "class." In Togo's art, a mirror is held out where dominant culture and "the moral majority" is asked to identify itself and display its self-image as well as its view of the other. In fact, one might even claim that Togo's mirror—never falling prey to reductive multicultural pluralism—manages to make manifest the very disintegration and collapse of

the Western subject as a grand modernist narrative.

Now, regard the installation as a framework and a structure from within which experiences of various kinds may be gathered, stored, processed, represented and articulated. Regard also the installation as a most delicate and complex space from within which stories may meet, compete, act, interact, repeat. Note that “experiences” and “stories” may be facets or aspects of each other or, as well, radically differentiated phenomena. Note that a sculpture may be a story and that a video may be a sculpture and that a photograph may be a counterspace. Observe also that the installation, even if it is a medium in and of itself, is able to accommodate media of many kinds; in Togu’s case it includes drawings, sculptures, objects, photographs, videos. Note that works in all these media function as works of their own, as documentations of performances or actions as well as actual props employed in the very actions/performances themselves. Consider that these works, these constituent parts, often inseparable or seamlessly intertwined, are, in the installation, reconstructed and reinterpreted within a new totality. Regard in addition the installation as a stage set or a tableau where stories are as if they were spatially (and thus also phenomenologically) choreographed, laid out for the viewer, completed only as they are re-choreographed through and with the viewer. Think as well of the installation as written and dramatized space; think of the installation as a script—made up of objects, texts, images which all enrol and empower an atlas of experience and emotion—performed by the viewer; a script written by the artist, enacted by the visitor.

Given this basic paradigm of the installation, Barthélémy Togu’s installations often take on certain particular characteristics. Not specifically environments, with a typically immersive aesthetics, they present themselves as three- or four-dimensional collage or assemblage: photographs, sculptures, videos and others, gathered, juxtaposed and displayed on the installation stage. Indeed, several installations adhere even closer to the spatial and formal traditions of the theatre stage, unfolding themselves on a platform, imitating or being an actual theatre stage. Often resolutely anti-naturalistic, the objects deployed by Togu in his installations toy with scale, play or speculate with material, choose or are represented in the wrong medium, as particular themes or specific observations/experiences are embodied, reworked, translated. Things are out of proportion, perspective is illogical, juxtapositions and associations do not dissolve into a linear narrative, information is insufficient or overdetermined: stamps, the kind used by customs officers, appear in several installations but are dysfunctional, oversized and crafted in wood. An airplane, representing a counter-diasporic airline on a mission to bring the peoples back home, is as well sculpted in wood, indexing the space of wood in “traditional” African art (and the wood carver as a key stereotype of the “traditional” African artist),⁶ and reminding one of the exchange between African and European artists that was a key moment of the birth and emergence of Modernism. Devices of distancing and disidentification,⁷ as well as proximity and identification, of irony and laconic humour, methods of unsettling expectations and reversing proportions, the use of “soft” materials for “hard” issues, the diversified application of media and differentiated modes of story telling—all these theatrical devices (as we might consider them) are crucial in that they adopt more complex subject positions than otherwise expected by the diasporic artist. They counter the stigmatizing discourses intended to mark others and are resistant to simplistic master/slave or oppressor/victim dialectics. Even when indicating maltreatment and exploitation, displaying discrimination or documenting racist attitudes or actions, exploring exile experiences, or saddling the problematics of borders; the work of Togu may be simultaneously prankish, playful, provocative and restitutive: Make them choke on their laughter, but do not rehearse enemy speech. Affect is also analysis and action beats reaction. Avoid containment and exoticization through wit, subversion and decentering strategies. Enter the stage, obliquely.

As all discourse is located, Togu, Cameroonian by birth and since many years a Parisien, speaks from postcolonial diasporic urbanity. This is the mother tongue, so to speak, of Togu’s art. Yet do not make the mistake of not observing the way in which both a political economy of the globalized present and a psychic economy of the human condition is rendered and interrogated in the work of Togu. Many installations relate to the diasporic condition indirectly and implicitly, while instead focusing the contemporary landscape of fear, anxiety, anguish and disaffection, lived and survived. Just as Togu through his actions and in his installations stages and performs the life of exile or of asylum, his works also narrate a fragmented yet desiring

contemporary body and subject, all but lost in the labyrinth of identity. Sexuality, ethics, relationships, political and human ecology, belonging and not belonging, territories and borders are among the themes dramatized and staged in various works. Again, even if Togu often centres himself, in the figure of the artist, as subject, the staging and the performative element of his work overrides—without denying them—elements of autobiography.

The “burden of representation”⁸ is unhooked through Togu’s circuitous, nested and layered strategies (to mention a few: using allegory in *Life’s Trial*, speaking metaphorically in *The World’s Greatest*, allowing both farce and tragedy in *Transit/Unfinished Theatre*), through his blending of document and “the thing itself,” making differentiated versions of identification possible. Enabling both identity and disidentity, in his frank, burlesque and precise readings of our contemporary malaise, Togu manages for meaning not to settle, thus allowing to keep political possibility in motion.