



Georges Adéagbo: The Artist in Writing

By Gauthier Lesturgie

"What is history other than a reconstruction?"
Simon Njami

Every day in Cotonou, Benin, where he lives, Georges Adéagbo puts together an eclectic mass of documents, be they collected or produced, which he painstakingly arranges and associates directly on the sandy floor—a collection subsequently informed by the context and the men and women involved in the venue where he has been invited to exhibit. For a recent show in Berlin,² the artist spent four weeks on the spot, after several months of exchanges. In the German capital, he once again collected countless “documents” (books, cuddly toys, disks, newspapers, clothes, maps,

etc.), an unlikely miscellany arranged in several groups thus creating liaisons between these different places and contexts, a montage between his personal history and those borrowed from other people. This need to hoard things and the routine rigour with which the artist conducts his daily quest seem almost to stem from an impulsive urge, but let us swiftly steer away from such quasi-pathological analyses which have been many times attempted by others about Georges Adéagbo's work, and let us see it rather as an altogether constructed endeavour.

The mechanisms at work and the aesthetics of the artist's work lead us perforce towards the notion of archive, although defining his praxis as hailing strictly from archival research also represents a speedy short-cut. The documents brought together are of very different kinds, in their form, their “qualities”, and their sources, as well as in their messages; their presence in a shared space and a precise arrangement put them within purely subjective associations. These “imitation archives of Mr. Adéagbo” are not therefore conceived in order to document, inform and illustrate one or more issues; rather, they assume the significance of encounter, time and chance, to thus give shape to the brisk fleetingness of an individual mind.

As Jacques Derrida put it in his introduction to *Archive Fever*,³ the Greek origin of the word archive, *arkheion*, initially described the house of the magistrates who wielded legislative power: a closed, fixed place, recognized and symbolic, where was selected and interpreted what needed to be conserved. Here we must make a basic distinction in relation to Georges Adéagbo's praxis: his “archives” are moveable, designed to be spread, communicated, and even dispersed. Although initially conceived in his own home, they vary in accordance with where they are put on view, so we are no longer within a process of conservation, but one of diffusion. The artist goes so far as to construct vertical display cases which can be hung and act as autonomous installations that may

be transported and acquired, but the precise though exploded arrangement of the works prevents any “fixation”. So it is the notion of discourse and communication rather than that of preservation which gets the upper hand. Nevertheless, the issue is to understand which ideas are transmitted and how they might be read.

Here we have a paradox which once again weakens the use of the term “archive” with regard to Georges Adéagbo’s praxis: although the written word is visually ubiquitous in his installations, this mass of documents still remains mute. The associations woven by the artist are to be understood in connection with endlessly open relations, so it is up to us to take up a researcher’s stance to construct meaning in the face of these non-hierarchical arrangements which reject any linear narrative. This exercise applies to collected objects which have to be set apart from those produced by the artist and his team. The installations are actually often organized around texts and paintings produced by Esprit Ptit Frère, younger brother of the artist Esprit, a former collaborator with Georges Adéagbo. These canvases are copies of different pictures and illustrations borrowed from art history and journals⁴ used to illustrate quotations of the artist in inverted commas. Added to these latter are short handwritten texts on cut-out paper where one can read succinct statements about the artist’s writing, and writing in the broad sense. The words of Hal Foster in his text “An Archival Impulse”⁵ help to describe this complex assemblage of archives which are “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private”, paradoxes which can define any archival undertaking.

Combined on the basis of affective and thus temporary associations, the installations take on a precise fragmentation, a “matrix of quotations and juxtapositions”⁶ which thus proposes an order to which only the artist really has the key. With neither beginning, middle nor end, they seem to invade walls in an almost organic way, even finding their way into areas of circulation, hampering any “logical” reading. To borrow Edouard Glissant’s words making reference to the notion of rhizome as developed by Deleuze and Guattari,⁷ the installations become an “expanse where you no longer know who is the offspring of whom”.⁸ There is the idea of a sort of illogical puzzle with different solutions, which one finds in the artist’s written language. Constructed, this written language, like the spoken one, is rhythmic, and broken up into different sequences which Georges Adéagbo has fun taking apart and putting back together again, just like his installations. In this way he develops his own language by moving away from traditional narrative structures, so this too is an exercise in appropriation once again used for associations, shifts and juxtapositions of eclectic histories, so as to deliver an unexpected understanding of them.

Each text first written in French is then translated into German, and then into English; this translation work, which, needless to add, is adapted to the place where the artist is invited to exhibit, can also be extended to all his procedures. If we regard his monumental installations as a complex and multiple system similar to language, we can then see his work as an undertaking involving subjective idiomatic translation which finds its relevance during processes of shift, which brings us once again to Edouard Glissant when he refers to translation: “the poetics of translation is precisely a poetics which informs processes of relations and not contents”.⁹ By putting Jean-Marc Jancovici’s book *Changer le monde* alongside a cover of the journal *Jeune Afrique*, titled “Un chef d’Etat doit savoir partir” [“A Head of State must know how to stand down”], a German press cutting with the words “we are all from the lower classes”, as well as a Hanna Höch exhibition invitation, Georges Adéagbo constructs “sentences” offered to readers who must then decipher their many different layers.

Sidestepping the straitjacket of a single meaning also seems to be a wish expressed in his writings. At times sentences uttered a first time are repeated almost the other way round, and certain conjunctions are (dis-)placed in the structures, and thus dislocate them.

Georges Adéagbo creates an interplay of association with History itself, and thus demonstrates its flexibility. In one of the histories of Esprit Ptit Frère, he makes the link between wars of religion—as it happens, the St. Bartholomew Day massacre of protestants in Paris in 1572—and the extermination of the Jewish people under the Nazi regime. Below: an article about the genocide in Rwanda close to a German TV programme which has on its cover an image from Disney’s *Jungle Book*, and, further on, the Berlin wall is compared, as a monument, to the Tholos of Delphi: “the juxtaposition of disparate styles and images treats historical integrity in a violent manner”.¹⁰ Another painted canvas starts with “L’histoire et l’histoire: il était une fois l’histoire” [history and history: once upon a time there was history], like ruins after an earthquake, the artist’s reconstructed history and histories put Mireille Mathieu, Jesus, Charles de Gaulle,¹¹ Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Teletubbies in a web of common relations: all, at differing levels, are indicators and/or driving forces of shifts, exchanges and translation to be re-questioned from other angles.

“Writing as the beginning of writing”, says Adéagbo, which seems to show us that the established structures of language, like writing, created and imposed by western cultural spheres in order to relativize and translate all cultures, need reviewing. This proceeds by way of a distinction between writing and what is written—the written word. In western metaphysics, writing is solely defined by the written work, a multiple but limited system which is not adapted to all cultures and expressions. However, it is indeed in this rigidity that the birth of History was established, it is indeed the appearance of writing that sets Prehistory apart from History; it thus seems urgent to redefine its codes. At an individual scale, this endeavour proceeds, for Adéagbo, by way of an art praxis that is not synonymous with a refusal of languages, as we have seen, but, conversely, like his whole “collection”, with an appropriation and a deconstruction of these languages to try to “to construct a free language based on the imposed language”.¹² “The written word to become writing, how has the written word become writing?”¹³

1. Simon Njami, at a round table at the Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin, Monday 26 May 2014, as part of the exhibition “Giving Contours to Shadows” curated by Dr. Bonaventure Ndikung and Dr. Elena Agudio (SAVVY Contemporary / Neuer Berliner Kunstverein: 24 May - 31 July 2014).

2. Georges Adéagbo, “Les artistes et l’écriture...!”, Barbara Wien Wilma Lukatsch, Berlin, 2 May - 25 July 2014. Exhibition venue, publisher, bookshop and archive specializing in artists’ written words, which invited the artist to reflect about the notion of writing, both in his own work and also in a broader sense.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, translated by Eric Prenowitz.

4. Among other things and in order to demonstrate this tremendous eclecticism, we find in the exhibition in Berlin Hieronymus Bosch’s *Hell*, *The Proclamation of the German Empire* by Anton von Werner, the famous poster “Réservez le vin pour nos poilus” [“Keep the Wine for our Troops”] by Suzanne Ferrand, and Gustav Klimt’s *Judith and Holofernes*.

5. Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”, *October*, n°110, autumn 2004, p. 3-22.

6. Hal Foster, *ibidem*.

7. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, translated by Brian Massumi.

8. Édouard Glissant, in an interview with Luigia Pattano, *mondesfrancophones.com*, 26 August 2011.

9. Édouard Glissant, *ibidem*.

10. Michael Archer, *Art since 1960*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1997.

11. “Qu’est devenu Charles de Gaulle de France, en voulant se faire passer pour Napoléon Bonaparte le général?”, [What became of Charles de Gaulle, wanting to pass for Napoleon Bonaparte, the general?] the artist comments about a painting.

12. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (from *Le Discours antillais*, 1897), University Press of Virginia, caraf books, 1989.

13. Statement painted on a canvas on view in the Berlin show.



Georges Adéagbo

Vue de l'exposition / Exhibition view *Les artistes et l'écriture...*

Galerie Wien Lukatsch, Berlin 2014.

Courtesy: Galerie Wien Lukatsch, Berlin.

Photo: Nick Ash

Georges Adéagbo

La naissance de Stockholm... / The Birth of Stockholm...

Commissioned, bought and found objects. Preparatory study for the installation at Moderna Museet. Cotonou, Rep. of Benin, March 23, 2014.

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