Anna Brus
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The Bandjoun Station

DCNtR Debate #3. The Post/Colonial Museum

An Interview with Barthélémy Toguo, conducted by Anna Brus and Bernard Müller

This conversation focuses on the local activities and community work of the visual arts centre and museum of contemporary art Bandjoun Station in the West-Cameroon highlands.[1] The project that is run by the Cameroonian artist Barthélémy Toguo goes far beyond the model of most Western museums, combining culture and agriculture, dinner gatherings, festivities, music, and education for children with contemporary art. Its residency programme brings global artists as well as technicians, physicians, economists, agriculturalists, and a variety of other experts into conversation with the local community. Toguo reports on the benefits of this mutual exchange, but also on the initial struggles to install an ›art space‹ in a region where, for many people, art is part of a sacred practice.

Addressing the prospect of the restitution of African art, Toguo makes it clear that this decision should be made along with the artists' ancestors and the local population, and he offers Bandjoun Station as a place where such debates can take place.

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Fig. 1: Bandjoun Station, front side with wall paintings. Copyright: Barthélémy Toguo.

Anna Brus (A.B.): Since 2007, when Bandjoun Station was opened in a rural area near to the city Bafoussam, in the West Region of Cameroon, it has become a centre for visionary, community-oriented museum practice. How does your approach differ from the standard Museum? What does the work you are doing there look like?

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Barthélémy Toguo (B.T.): Yes, it's a very different approach from Europe because we have the name of a museum, which is certainly a Western name, but how it functions, its approach or practice, is not the same as in the West. Very early on, we associated an agricultural project with our museum project. The museum has its own plantation. It produces food for the public because we understood that to put on art events in Bandjoun, it would be necessary to build up cohesion. Food and festivities are at the centre of our preoccupations, for giving something to the people, so that they eat and embrace the culture that we offer. Therefore, we had to acquire land, and on this land we planted banana trees, maize, manioc, coffee. Imagine the Tate Modern having a potato plantation in London! During the harvests, we distribute to our community what we have cultivated, to the population of Bandjoun, and we associate cultural projects with this result, for example music festivals like the Goldstar Festival. The Goldstar Festival was created for young rappers and young slammers to come inside the museum, to eat, to party, and to discover what we do. So, you can see that our museum becomes a multiplicity of things that we embrace simultaneously and has a different approach from the West. That's how we were able to get the population to take hold of our project, because if we had come just with contemporary art, it would have been very difficult. Not only is contemporary art difficult to understand, just like it is for most Westerners, but we also didn't want to copy a Western museum model. Rather, we moved it around; we wanted to take a more abundant, more expanded approach to embrace the population and to bring them back to our cultural project as well. That's how we operate.

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Fig. 2: Talla Zaché, planter in Bandjoun. Copyright: Barthélémy Toguo

Bernard Müller (B.M.): What happens when someone comes to the residencies? Are there programmed meetings for when an artist comes?

B.T.: When an artist first arrives in Bandjoun, we first set up meetings in the high schools and we organize a presentation of his or her work at Bandjoun Station. We keep it down to earth; we go to the neighbourhoods to tell the head of the blocks that we have an artist who has arrived and that they should come and listen to what he is going to say because he will also come to them. So, there is this communication work that we do before, so that when he arrives he can go to the public, go to the local leaders, to the villages, and meet the people; and he involves them in his project. Above all, the idea is that each time an artist arrives in Bandjoun Station, he

or she must have a project in which he or she will involve the local community. There was a photographer who arrived and he wanted to do a work with the women who break the stone in the Bandjoun quarry. He first went to church on Sunday to introduce himself and, on Monday, he went to the quarry to meet these women, the stone-breakers, and chatted with them for weeks, built a trusting relationship before making portraits. So, he doesn't come with a camera and the very next day start shooting the photos. To go straight to the people and take photos is seen very badly there.

So the work of communication is, first, we approach, advance, and trigger in the neighbourhoods, in the churches, and also in meetings. We are in an environment where the Bamiléké are the ethnic group and they really like to hold meetings and tontines[2] and so we try to go to these meetings, these tontines, as well as additional time meetings that still exist there, to announce that an artist is coming.

A.B.: The Bandjoun Station website stresses that the place not only fosters artistic exchange but also theoretical and practical exchange on environmental and social issues…

B.T.: Yes, Bandjoun Station is a multi-sided and diverse place. It is not only for the field of art, it's for the field of agriculture, health, and professional training, too. When someone useful, someone with a special skill, arrives in Bandjoun, we look for the sector where we will bring this person. It may be in the field of agriculture, in the field of automobile mechanics, in carpentry, or in the health field. In this case, we bring him to the Bandjoun hospital, if they are an ophthalmologist or a dentist, we present him to the head of the department of medicine or to a doctor. This is a little bit how we work promoting exchanges and ideas in the region. We receive all the competences coming from abroad, from Germany, France, Denmark, and we place these people in fields in a useful way, so that they will train the people everywhere in Bandjoun. We put the residents at the service of the people, of the community.

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A.B.: What is the relation between your museum and other cultural institutions like the Musée de la Civilisation in Dschang, and the little palace museums nearby? Is there any kind of exchange and collaboration going on?

B.T.: We meet regularly with Sylvain Djache, who founded the Musée de la Civilisation in Dschang, with Mr. Nchare, who manages the Musée du Palais de Foumban, or with Albertin Koupgang, who manages the Museum of the Bandjoun chiefdom, in order to exchange ideas. We have a project with Sylvain Djache from the National Museum in Yaounde to receive an exhibition that they organized. We also have an agreement with the University of Dschang and organize workshops and symposiums with international professionals and with the Fine Arts Institute of Foumban. We have only been in existence for seven years. We are at our beginnings, but we have very good relations with the Museums of Foumban, Dschang, and the Royal Museum of Bandjoun. We don't have a project on our hands that we could set up, but we are open with these places because we collaborate well.

B.M.: In a 2014 magazine article, you talked about the school project, creating a school of visual art, but at the time it was suspended. Is something taking shape? Is it this concept of a school or is it rather, as you just said, something that you practice in a periodic way with each person who comes, each contributor? Or is there an idea of creating a space for teaching visual art?

B.T.: For the moment, we operate in a more informal way and we do training. We also exist as a school, but periodically, not with a new school year and each year training for a diploma. We have just invited a Danish curator, a Senegalese, an Ivorian theorist, and teachers from art schools in France. We brought them to Bandjoun a year ago to organize a training course for managers of cultural institutions. We invited managers of heritage museums in West Cameroon because there are about 120 traditional chiefdoms that exist in the West Cameroon region and these chiefdoms have small museums with trained guides working in them. They were invited to a training course in Bandjoun Station for a fortnight, together with Jacob

Fabricius, from the Aarhus Museum in Denmark, and Hafida Jemni di Folco, from Ivory Coast, who runs a curatorial study program in Paris, and Laure Malécot, who is an artist and journalist in Paris and Dakar. So there is a school, but it is periodic, it is at a certain point in time. When we find a small budget, we organize a training course in a specific field. It can be in the medical field, in the economic, or in the cultural or agricultural field.

A.B.: What were the main problems you encountered beginning with the involvement and activation of the community? How did you pave the way in the very beginning for the acceptance and welcoming of your practice?

B.T.: In the beginning, there were some misunderstandings. The walls of the Bandjoun Station were covered with mosaics designed from my graphic universe. The imagery can frighten people because they think it's magic. Art is magic. An artist who creates, who draws, who invents something new, for many, it is magic. People in the area thought, at the beginning, that it was a house where occult practices were taking place. So, we have this local problem, which is very important, that people flee from cultural spaces because they think there are occult practices behind it. It is necessary to explain to people what a museum is, and the ideas from my graphic universe, which is all around Bandjoun Station, can be misleading.

When we started our work, we cooperated with a Christian school and the priest that teaches there liked the project and he brought the children to Bandjoun Station. When the children came home in the evening, they told their parents what they saw, where they were taken. The families were very upset and went to church in the evening to interrogate the priest, threatened him, and asked him why he had brought their children to this place of magic, this sect. We understood that there was an educational problem that we had to meet with the parents first. Members of the Catholic Church came back to the school to have a meeting with the parents to tell them that it is important for the children to discover the culture in the museum. It was really the regional Catholic Church that came to calm the situation down!

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What we learned from that is that we must be able to create a conversation to reach out to parents, to even go to churches and local meetings, to go to canteens, to neighbourhoods to talk about what we do. We have to establish communication work that must be done at the grassroots level. So, we have this problem with the public on a daily basis; we are in a rural area, too, and it is not easy for people to understand these things. We understood that we had to associate – as I said at the beginning – agriculture, restaurants, food, and music with embracing contemporary art.



Fig. 3: Drawing workshop with the students of the Institute of Fine Arts of Foumban and the professors Pascal Kenfack and Olivier Tima. Copyright: Barthélémy Toguo.

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Fig. 4: Fashion show and performance by the stylist Yvy Gisleine Mbianda. Copyright: Barthélémy Toguo.

A.B.: Your online collection database shows that you not only have a collection of contemporary art but also a collection of classical African art, figures and masks from Cameroon, the Congo region, Nigeria, etc. I was wondering where these objects came from, where you collected them, in Europe or on the Continent? Regarding what you just said, do these objects contribute to making people think that it's a place of magic? Doesn't the presence of this type of object contribute to – as you were saying earlier – the association of Bandjoun Station with occult activities, with a sect that would come and take traditional objects?

B.T.: The classical objects come from the exchange I have had with African collectors – from Bafoussam, Foumban, Yaoundé, or Douala. The contemporary art in Bandjoun Station also comes from exchanges that I made with contemporary artists during

their lifetime, or from their galleries or collectors, as well. That's how we built up our two collections, which are a mix of classical and contemporary art.

This idea that Bandjoun Station is an occult place is also connected to an installation I created in 2010, when we had just started our cultural work. I had been living in Bandjoun since 2000. When I arrived, we didn't see too many coffins and, in 2002 and 2004, little by little, I saw shops opening where coffins were being made. In 2005 the area where I bought planks was transformed into coffin shops and, in 2010, a whole street, a whole district, the Bafoussam district, became the industrial coffin factory. I told myself as an artist that there is a problem in Africa. Why are people dying? Why are all these things made, these coffins that I see everywhere in the street, on motorbikes, on people's heads! I arrived in 2000 and I didn't see this atmosphere! By 2010 it was becoming incredible! I said, it's not normal, there's a problem. I was also doing a tour in Benin, Senegal, and Kinshasa, so I need to work with that. So I decided to have a carpenter in Bafoussam make 54 coffins that would speak about what Africa is going through at the moment, this visual hecatomb. And so, the carpenter made 54 coffins for me, and they had to be moved from Bafoussam to Bandjoun Station for storage. For a whole day I transported coffins with my car and everybody in Bafoussam, which is the third largest city in Cameroon, saw how the gentleman who lives in Europe, who is building the museum, is moving coffins. It frightened everyone that I could build this house to put coffins in. That's what created the atmosphere of fear. This marked Bandjoun Station. The installation called *Time* was shown at the Biennale in Lyon, so the coffins were transported from Bandjoun to Lyon, but not everybody saw the coffins coming out of Bandjoun, the same people who saw them returning were not there. So until today, there are some who think that inside Bandjoun Station, there are coffins. This is the problem we had.

But it's true; the fact that we have classical art can frighten people. Classical art in Africa is also considered sacred because it's part of the culture and we have used it for sacred ceremonies as well. When you see someone who has it, you're going to

say: »This is someone who believes in sacred worship practices, in magic«, and that can be taken badly. But I think the basic problem is literacy, from the start. We are among a somewhat illiterate people and the problem of education is very important. In Africa, education must be accelerated, we must call for the education of people, culture, school, and dialogue as well.

To get back to the story of the unsettled parents, when the school children came to visit the museum, we had put a bucket of water at the entrance with gel where the children had to wash their hands first, so as not to dirty the museum. They washed their hands, wiped them with towels and went inside. Inside they were given a presentation of vases made by the women potters in the town of Foumban. Twenty kilometres from the town of Foumban, there is a quarry where the bricks for the construction of the Royal Palace were made. That's how I was able to acquire about twenty gigantic vases. The children were fascinated by their grandeur and when they came home, they told their parents that they washed their hands at the entrance and that they discovered the vases, and there was this misunderstanding that the parents thought they had washed their hands in the vases or in gourds. In Africa, washing hands in a gourd is a sacred act because we put the skulls of our ancestors and grandparents in the gourd to be buried in the family home. So, the parents thought that the owner of Bandjoun Station used magic to take the knowledge, the brains, of their children and that it was the priest who brought them to me so that I could take their knowledge. So you see, there is a problem of education in the region that needs to be solved, through conversations, through meetings.

B.M.: It's interesting how it's said, how it's formulated. This symbolism, this fear of being robbed, of having a spiritual part of oneself taken away. Sometimes it's healthy to be wary, but why be wary of yourself and not of certain sects. Did you grow up in Bandjoun?

B.T.: I grew up in Yaounde, but my family is from Bandjoun and I came back to settle where my family comes from.

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B.M.: Do you remember having lived through experiences like the ones you tell us about as a child? Being taken to places where there were strange objects and then you were told it was a museum?

B.T.: In the region of Mbalmayo where I was born, there is not the cultural strength and continuity that the Bamilékés have. Among the Fangs, among the Ewondo, the traditional chieftaincies have mostly disappeared. I was born over there, I came back to Bandjoun at the age of 25 or 30, just because my parents live there. Unfortunately, during my youth in Mbalmayo, there was no museum and there was no culture to be found anywhere like in the West of Cameroon, where until today there are still chieftaincies which are respected. This is something else! The West region of Cameroon is culture! Since they are in the inland they were less affected by colonisation. Those inhabitants who are on the coast, on the sea like the Douala have been very much affected by the West, which asked them to destroy their cultural practices. The Bamiléké on the mountains in the interior of Cameroon are more remote and have been able to preserve their traditions and culture. Among them, seeing something cultural in the home, sculptures or drawings, you say: »Here is someone with a strong mind, a strong spirit and a belief system«. But, of course, sometimes this is scary, you're a little bit suspicious of someone who draws because he's a scholar, he has strong spiritual knowledge and you might be afraid of the artist, even spiritually.

B.M.: Precisely in relation to the impact of colonialism, how does the debate on decolonisation, decoloniality, this awareness that there is this symbolic and physical violence from colonialism, how does this debate take place in Bandjoun? Does it translate into a desire for the return of certain objects? Concerning the royal paraphernalia of Njoya, for example, I think that people know that these objects are in Europe. Is there something being said – not only in intellectual circles – about a desire for the return of colonial objects? In fact, I have two questions, for one, is the debate on colonialism, that is everywhere today, happening in small towns like

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Bandjoun? And, secondly, what about the restitution debate?

B.T.: People talk less about it and those who are informed about it think that when these objects are returned, they shouldn't be put in a museum, as they were in the West. They think they should be redistributed to the cultures from which they came, so that they can continue their daily work, the usual work they used to do. So if an object arrived and it was an object from Batcham or Bangangté or Foumban, which was used for a ceremony, it would have to go back to that culture and continue to serve. It should not return to a closed, glassed-in space, such as a museum, because from the outset it was not intended for museums. Such an object was intended for ceremonies, for practices, for acknowl- edgements by a chief who wanted to appreciate the arrival of his host, offer him a stool and ask him to sit. So put the stool back there, in the chiefdom. That's what they think, they don't think about returning these objects to museums, they want them to be able to return to their usual functions in society.

A.B.: Could you imagine Bandjoun Station as being an intermediate place for the return of certain objects coming from Europe? Would it be a place that enables thinking about restitution as an evolving process that helps to identify spaces of return – as spaces that are created by the people who are going to receive the objects?

B.T.: A place for debate and exchange, of course!

B.M.: And for the physical transition of the objects? That is to say that at some point the objects would pass through there, surrounded by debate and discussion?

B.T.: Yes, of course. That's our role, that's the function we want to occupy, we want to exercise, to be a place of passage. It would really be ideal, not to welcome the pieces and lock them up in Bandjoun Station, but to have a dialogue on which approach to follow, because it is necessary to prepare well and build up procedures,

to understand the steps that the work will follow. We are a cultural space and we want to exercise this with the museum curators, to create a link between the museum and the community, between the museum and the inhabitants. We really need to weave this, this rapprochement between these two worlds.

B.M.: This is very interesting. One could imagine a kind of forum to which one could bring from the region about ten objects, objects that are potentially returnable. At this forum the discussion takes place with local chiefs, with the guides you were talking about, the potters, and all the people concerned, and at the end of this discussion one would come to a conclusion of what to do.

B.T.: We could not only invite representatives of the places where some of the works come from, we would certainly also invite the chiefs, the inhabitants of the towns and villages that surround Bandjoun Station. Everybody invited would think about how to develop a project of return and imagine together with the curators from abroad how the works can be restored. The chiefs, too, will tell us how they are going to welcome the work in their community, because the idea is not only to give without knowing what they are going to do with it, but to invite new imagining about what they are going to do with it, how they are going to receive it, where they are going to put it. Bandjoun Station is in the field; we know who are the people to invite for a conference.

That's an essential and current project that we must set up, we must talk about it. It's current, it's our moment, our period, and we need projects in this field!

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Footnotes

[1]The print version of this text is published in the Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften, issue "The Post/Colonial Museum", 2022, p.137-148, https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-5397-7/the-post/colonial-museum/

[2]In a tontine several people join together and pay a regular contribution; the sum is collected in turn by one of the partners. The members of such an association, which can vary from ten to one hundred, determine the amount of regular contributions and the frequency of the meetings. The tontine allows each member to easily make use of a large sum of money, which he or she can use as they see fit: launch a business, pay for a hospitalization, organize a wedding, or make an important purchase.

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