

Diversity in Contemporary Art from Benin

George Adéagbo, Meschac Gaba and Romuald Hazoumè: the references in their art to their homeland Benin

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Introduction

The field of research that will be central in this thesis is contemporary art from the African continent. This field is broad because the continent of Africa contains many countries and numerous communities with their own habits and forms of art production. In this thesis, contemporary African art from Benin will be analysed based on the works of three artists. Benin has been chosen as the country of research because I am fascinated by the historical art of Benin, in particular, the Benin bronze heads made during the 14th-16th century. Much has been written about these bronzes because of their removal from the royal palace in Royal-Benin in 1897 by the British. Many of the bronzes can be seen in European museums, especially in the British Museum in London, where most of them are located. This is also the museum where I first saw the bronzes. Although I am interested in the historical art of Benin in general, I find the art of the three artists that will be discussed in this thesis particularly interesting. In contrast to the historical art, there has been substantially less written in the West about contemporary art from Benin. In literature on contemporary African art, there are many passing references to the three artists that will be discussed in this thesis, but just a few monographs are to be found. I feel that these artists deserve more attention and recognition, which is why I aim to demonstrate their importance.

The artists who have a key role in this thesis are currently starting to become just as important in the contemporary art world as the Benin bronzes are of the historical art world: their works are just as fascinating. Therefore, I have chosen to write my thesis about them. The first artist is Georges Adéagbo (1942) born in Cotonou, the second is Meschac Gaba (1961) also born in Cotonou and the third is Romuald Hazoumè (1962) born in Porto Novo. Besides my personal fascination, these artists have been chosen because of their connection with the Netherlands. Recently all three of them showed their work in the exhibition *Global Imaginations* (27.06.15 - 04.10.15), held in the Meelfabriek in Leiden in collaboration with Museum de Lakenhal, which is also located in Leiden.¹ In this exhibition, many artists from different countries were brought together to show their perspective on today's globalised world. The artists came from all over the world, allowing the exhibition to give an overview of diverse views on the globalised world.

¹ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/en/overview/global-imaginations> consulted on the 2th of January 2017.

The literature that is available about the three artists consists mainly of biographies and short texts describing their best-known artworks in books on contemporary African art. There are hardly any critical articles that provide a more in-depth analysis of the works of the artists, most writings are rather descriptive and stay on the surface of the subject. With this thesis, I want to contribute to the discourse on contemporary art in Benin.

When researching the subject, it became apparent that there wasn't much literature in printed form to be found in the Netherlands. There was, however, a lot to be found in the online exhibition archives of various museums, which would clearly state when works by Adéagbo, Gaba or Hazoumè were included. For that reason, this thesis often references websites as a source.

Using what literature and internet sources I could find, I will investigate how the artists Adéagbo, Gaba and Hazoumè reflect in their art on the culture of their homeland Benin, and what the differences and similarities are in their working method, recurrent themes and references to the debates from my theoretical framework, discussed later in this introduction. This thesis contains three chapters, each focusing on one artist in chronological order. The first chapter is about Georges Adéagbo (1942), who works mainly with found materials from his hometown combined with objects, like for example wooden sculptures from Africa, art created by local artists from Benin and written texts. The second chapter focuses on Meschac Gaba (1961) whose work is quite diverse, but a central theme is what a museum of contemporary African art might look like. Romuald Hazoumè (1962) will be central to the third chapter as the youngest artist of the three. On the one hand, he creates works with themes as slavery and the contrast in wealth between Africa and the Western world and, on the other hand, he creates masks made of particular found material. In the conclusion, that is slightly longer than usual, a comparison is made between the three artists based on several criteria. The first is their personal background, the second their working method, the third the themes the artists use in their work, the fourth their references to Benin and the last their place in the debates mentioned in my frame of reference.

The corpus of this thesis is mainly formed by various artworks by the three artists. The works presented at the *Global Imaginations* exhibition are part of the corpus, complemented with works that show the artists' different working methods. I chose the works that were presented at the *Global Imaginations* exhibitions as a starting point for forming the corpus because it was recently held and because of the access to the

information about these artworks. To understand the society and culture that the artists operate in, it is important to enter the field of anthropology and consult texts on the history of Benin and contemporary Benin.

Frame of reference

My frame of reference is formed by three books about contemporary African art. Firstly, *Reading the Contemporary. African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (1999) written by Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor. Oguibe is a Nigerian-born American artist, a professor of art and African-American studies, art historian, art curator and contributor to post-colonial theory studies. Enwezor also comes from Nigeria and is a curator, art critic and educator in art history.

The title of the second book is *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (2008) written by Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu. Okeke-Agulu is an Igbo-Nigerian artist, art historian, African and African Diaspora Art professor at Princeton University, an art curator and a blogger on African and African diaspora art history.

The third title is *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (2013) edited by Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel. Belting is a German art historian of medieval, renaissance and contemporary art. Buddensieg is a German art curator and Weibel is a Ukrainian artist, auteur, and curator, and founder of the ZKM Centre for Contemporary Art and Media in Karlsruhe.

There are several themes that can be traced in these books. They form the discourses that are now important in the field of contemporary African art. To briefly introduce them: firstly, the art world is becoming more globalised than in the 20th century. It is now not only the Western world that decides who can be included or excluded in a contemporary art exhibition: art experts from all around the world have more influence and that means that Western artists can also be excluded.² Art historians, critics and curators are discussing ways to broaden the art world so that it can become equal in ethnicity and background of the artists. Secondly, there is much debate about the terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. According to the studies mentioned above, modernism is often seen as an including and

² Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009, p. 10 and Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, pp. 18, 20 and 21.

excluding system, in which the West dominates. From a postmodernist point of view, art specialists want to break with this tradition of inclusion and exclusion. This is maybe the reason that so-called 'third world' countries, for example, countries in Africa, are now more present in the global contemporary art world in the postmodernism period.³

Thirdly, there is a debate about identity. For artists from Africa, for a long-time identity was given to them by the Western world and not based on cultural tradition. After the period of colonisation, African artists got the courage to disagree with the cultural identity given by the Western world and they started building their own cultural identity. The inclusion-exclusion mechanism still is important, not only for contemporary artists from Africa but for every artist. The various scholars argue that one's identity is one's trademark and to find out what that is, one should also find out what it is not. Therefore, one must exclude what one is not and include what one identifies with to create one's own identity. This can be through different things, for example ethnic, national and linguistic relationships.⁴

A final topic that is discussed in the literature about Africa is that African artists feel that the focus in interviews is mainly on themselves as makers, their background and what influence that might have had on them. They do not feel that the focus is on their art and its meaning.⁵

The themes will be explained further in the different chapters. What this thesis wants to contribute to the discourse is a comparison of three artists from the same country with the focus on their artworks, their meaning and the different approaches these artists have in making art. The focus will also be on their homeland Benin, but with the artwork as starting point, instead of Benin.

The first aim of this research is to better understand the artworks, going beyond a general description which is often seen in many monographs, by relating possible meanings of the artworks with the debates summarised in my frame of reference. The second goal is to see if there is a connection to be found with their homeland Benin, not only in the

³ Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, pp. 9 and 21 and Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, pp. 18, 20 and 21.

⁴ Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, pp. 71 and 303. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009, pp. 11 and 25. Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, p. 21.

⁵ Olu Oguibe, 'Art, Identity, boundaries: postmodernism and contemporary African art.' In: Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 19.

connotation of the works but also in the way they are produced. The third is to see if there are differences and similarities between these artists, the themes they use in their work, their working method and their references to the debates since they share the same homeland. With this approach, I hope to contribute to the debate in the field of contemporary African art about understanding what the artworks themselves tell us, instead of only showing interest in the background of the artists.

Chapter 1: Georges Adéagbo, history rewritten

This chapter focuses on the art of Georges Adéagbo and how he reflects in his installations on his homeland Benin. Specific works will be analysed in chronological order to determine this possible connection and to discover if these connections have changed since he started working as an artist until his most recent work.

Adéagbo was born in Cotonou, Benin in the year 1942. He studied Law in Abidjan, Ivory Coast and continued his studies in Paris, France. When Adéagbo finished his degree, he received a job offer in France, but he had to go back to Cotonou because he was expected to take care of his father. Adéagbo currently still lives in Cotonou and in Hamburg, Germany where he works as an artist.⁶

The artworks that Adéagbo produces are always site-specific, which makes them each unique and a recognition for the residents of the city. According to Caroline Ewing, an art adviser and consultant, in her study of Adéagbo's work *Abraham – L'ami de Dieu (2006)*, the objects that are part of the installations can be classified into four sections: the first contains objects that he finds near his home in Cotonou during his meditative walks. The second comprises of signs and paintings he commissions at home. Adéagbo works together with local artists from Benin and asks them to make artworks for him that he incorporates in his installations. The third covers objects he finds or purchases in the city he is invited to exhibit his work. The last section, that is always a part of his installations, is written texts that illustrate his thoughts about a specific topic.⁷ Silvia Eiblmayr, art historian and curator, writes that Adéagbo's way of working is meant to demonstrate the procedure used to write history.⁸ One can say that he combines his own culture with the culture and history of the place where his work will be exhibited. This creates a unity that is based on different elements that together tell a new story. This is what writing history is as well. Tobias Wofford, assistant professor of African art and African American art at the University of California in Los Angeles, called the installations a combination of personal and global objects. He argues that the profusion of objects and texts creates a situation where the meaning becomes mutable and the lines between the self and the other, or even 'West' and

⁶ <http://www.jointadventures.org/adeagbo/bio.htm> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁷ Ewing 2010, p. 146.

⁸ Eiblmayr 2002, p. 9.

'non-Western', begin to blur.⁹ According to Eiblmayr, Adéagbo sees himself as a neutral mediator between cultures, wanting to represent all the possible sides of different cultures in his work.¹⁰ These scholars share the view that the aspect of combining elements of cultures and diverse objects is important in the work of Adéagbo.

From several sources we know that Adéagbo never had the intention to become an artist. He would have gotten a job in law if it was not for the care for his father drawing him back to Benin. In Benin, he felt lost and started making meditative walks around Cotonou. This is how his artistic career began. Adéagbo collected objects that were appealing to him, but were considered lost by others; examples are little sculptures, clothing, bits of cloth, shoes, records, books, toys, newspaper clippings, written notes, stones, packs of cigarettes and pieces of plastic. He considered these objects to be fragments of knowledge that were connected to humanity. Adéagbo saved them from being thrown away and gave them a new purpose in his home. In his backyard, he started organising small exhibitions with the objects that he collected by placing them in a special order that he felt was the right one, together with books he kept in his home.¹¹

According to Octavio Zaya, an art critic and curator, the installations in his back yard were called constellations and were materialised reflections of his thoughts.¹² Kersten Schankweiler, a post-doctoral researcher of art from Africa, explains that Adéagbo is constantly working on new installations, even when travelling. He then works in hotels with all kinds of material he can find.¹³ He does not consider himself an artist who produces art to please the public but he makes installations of what is considered in a specific place as their art. He alludes to local art in the installation and by doing this, illustrates that there are different ways to look at it, because of where the objects were made in the world. Adéagbo creates a new order to history and nature with the objects that he finds when he walks around a place.¹⁴ Ewing argues that these re-performances of the objects he collected during his meditative walks served to heal his own fractured sense of place and identity and that in the beginning he also made these installations to honour his ancestors without the site

⁹ Wofford 2009, p. 69.

¹⁰ Eiblmayr 2002, p. 34.

¹¹ <http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?bio=en&m=33> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

¹² Zaya 2012, p. 12.

¹³ Schankweiler 2012, pp. 82 and 84.

¹⁴ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/en/story/georges-adeagbo> consulted on the 11th of March 2016.

specificness that became important later in his career.¹⁵ Ewing's information illustrates that identity is important in Adéagbo's work and that his first installation was not made as art for the world to see.

It was in the early 1990s that he first met an art critic who would be his introduction to the contemporary art world. The critic was Jean-Michel Rousset, who was in that period an assistant to the French curator and gallery owner André Magnin. Magnin is a specialist in the art of 'non-Western' cultures and focuses especially on sub-Saharan art.¹⁶ Recognition by Rousset led to Adéagbo's first exhibition in 1994 at Salines Royales, located in Arc-et-Senans (France). He exhibited there as part of a group of artists from Africa and the diaspora countries with the exhibition *La Route de l'Art Sur la Route de l'Esclave* (1994-1999). This exhibition travelled through countries that have a slavery history in the period from the 17th to the 19th century. Countries that were included are Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Martinique.¹⁷ The work that Adéagbo presented at this exhibition was *Archaeology or L'Archéologie* (1994) as he writes it himself (Fig. 1).¹⁸

The usage of art to re-write the colonial history

Analysing this artwork, based on the picture taken in figure 1., that first struck me were images of Mary with baby Jesus, which, I believe, refers to the colonisers who tried to convert the local population in Africa to the Christian faith. What we see as well, are dates and one in particular clearly reads '1872'. From looking at the photo it is not clear what this date means in this context, but it seems that in connection to slavery, this date is referring to *The Underground Railroad Records* by William Still. published in this same year.¹⁹ If Adéagbo is referring to this book, the book's title is referenced in the title of the exhibition, which

¹⁵ Ewing 2010, p. 146.

¹⁶ Wofford 2009, p. 69.

¹⁷ <http://themen.iablis.de/2010/koehler10.html> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

¹⁸ <http://www.deutschefotothek.de/documents/kue/70000609> consulted on the 29th of September 2016. Unfortunately, the work is nowhere to be found on the internet, because it got lost due to a cargo ship that lost his shipment in the Caribbean.

¹⁹ William Still was an American abolitionist. *The Underground Railroad Records* tells the stories of 649 slaves who escaped via the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses used by 19th-century slaves in the United States. <http://freedomcenter.org/content/william-still> consulted on the 14th of March 2017.

translates into 'the route of art on the slave route', in which the Underground Railroad can be this road.

Another important element in *L'Archéologie* are the many newspapers and books. By only analysing the photograph, it is impossible to know what these books and newspapers are about but they have something to do with the topic of the exhibition.

In line with the topic of the exhibition, Adéagbo's inspiration must be found in the different places that belonged to the slave trade route, combined with objects from his meditative walks to give the public his own view on the exhibition theme. The objects that could have been collected during his walks are the sculptures, which have an African appearance. The stones are keeping the artwork in a solid position and are, in my opinion, only used to protect against the wind.

After participating in this exhibition, Adéagbo was invited to take part in many group exhibitions and there were also some solo exhibitions organised around the world. This made him one of the most important artists in the international contemporary art world at this moment.²⁰ Adéagbo was invited to participate in the 48th Biennale in Venice in 1999 by Stephan Köhler who had seen his work *Cannibalism* (1998) in Sao Paolo in 1998. Adéagbo's work *Story of the Lion* (1999) was exhibited in front of the entrance to the Arsenale at the Venice Biennale, which in the colonial period was the gateway to the Mediterranean and Northern Africa (Fig. 2). In the beginning, the artwork was not planned to be part of the official Biennale exhibition, but at the very last moment, Harald Szeemann, the artistic director of the Venice Biennale, invited Adéagbo to be part of the official exhibition. The appreciation of the art world for the work of Adéagbo was made apparent when he received the jury award during this edition of the Venice Biennale in 1999.²¹

This artwork was the first one Adéagbo made in collaboration with Stephan Köhler, who has been his co-curator ever since the 48th Biennale. Together with Köhler, Adéagbo created an installation with the theme of domination through military power over Africa in the colonial period as well as the trade between Italy and Africa from the colonial period onward. The space around the four lion statues was the place where the boats left in the past. Therefore, the work is called *Story of the Lion*. *Story of the Lion* was exhibited in the

²⁰ <http://www.caacart.com/pigozzi-artist.php?bio=en&m=33> consulted on the 11th of March 2016.

²¹ <http://themen.iablis.de/2010/koehler10.html> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

open air, freely accessible for everyone.²² Köhler says on his website jointadventures: "Georges Adéagbo's installation piece for the Campo dell' Arsenale merged into an alloy with the historic site and induced the visitors to think about the origin of mankind, his evolution, Africa's contribution to the source of inspiration and the history of Venice in particular. Also, the position and instructive contents of the installation contrasted many of the works exhibited in the Biennale venues and raised questions, why African nations have never had a pavilion and what has caused their under-representation."²³ After analysing the works of Adéagbo, this was also my conclusion about the working method of Adéagbo: he combines histories and rewrites them into a shared one.

The installation was only on view for one day and the preparation was short. His way of working for the installation in Venice differed from other installations because he first collected objects in Benin and then flew to Venice to collect other objects in archives and at flea markets. The design and arrangement were made in Venice, which also differs from other installations that were prepared in his hometown of Cotonou. The period of preparation also differed: this installation was made in a few weeks, while for other installations Adéagbo needed at least six months of preparation.

The pictures on Köhler's website show various objects placed on the ground and some of them on poles (Fig. 3 and 4). Also, there are many written texts and wooden sculptures from Africa, which were sent from Benin to Venice. This does not mean that all these sculptures originally came from one of the African countries: some could also have been purchased at flea markets or on one of the artist's walks. This is part of the artist's idea, that you cannot judge an object or image by first impression. We see paintings in bright colours on temporary walls that have been placed on the square, these paintings were produced in Benin by local painters. They show buildings and important places in Venice, painted in a colourful and illustrative style that is typical of the art from Benin.²⁴

An important element in the installation is a world map with the flags of European countries (Fig. 5). This map most likely refers to the countries that are part of important Biennales in the world. There are no African flags represented which could refer to the fact that before Adéagbo's installation at the 48th Venice Biennale, no African countries took

²² <http://www.wefaceforward.org/artists/georges-ad%C3%A9agbo> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

²³ <http://www.jointadventures.org/adeagbo/venice.htm> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

²⁴ <http://www.jointadventures.org/adeagbo/venice.htm#partzero> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

part.²⁵ Adéagbo refers to Benin in different ways. Firstly, with the paintings representing the history of Venice in a way that is common for local artists from Benin. Secondly, by bringing the objects that he found in Benin to Venice to incorporate them in the installation. Thus, the makes the two cultures merge.

A new perspective on the history of the exploration of our world

2002 was an important year for Okwui Enwezor, renowned art historian and curator from Nigeria because he was asked to be the artistic director of the Documenta 11 in Kassel. This edition of the Documenta aimed, so Wofford explains, to provide a correction to the debates raised by earlier shows about the role of ‘non-Western’ artists in these exhibitions and their position in the increasingly global art market.²⁶ Adéagbo was invited to participate in this edition of the Documenta and exhibited the work entitled *The Explorer and the Explorers Facing the History of Exploration – The Theater of the World (2002)* (Fig. 6). This work was, as with his other installations, especially produced for this exhibition and location. According to Wofford, Adéagbo used the theme of the Documenta 11 in his work by producing the installation in such a way that the audience would reconsider the role of history in an age of increasing globalisation.²⁷

In this installation, he explores different notions of the past and challenges the claims that were seen as the truth for many years in mostly Euro-American empirical history. According to Wofford, the notions Adéagbo particularly focused on, are the ones that produce and maintain a Western hegemony throughout the globe.²⁸ This means that his way of working, grouping objects and texts together that have no direct link with each other, provides a new history that may surprise visitors and give them another perspective on the fixed history in schoolbooks.

The object that is, in my opinion, most present in the installation is the canoe surrounded by four totem poles.²⁹ These objects immediately trigger the feeling of ‘Africa’ and that feeling is confirmed on Köhlers website jointadventures. This website includes

²⁵ <http://www.jointadventures.org/adeagbo/venice.htm#partzero> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

²⁶ Wofford 2009, p. 65.

²⁷ Wofford 2009, pp. 65 and 66.

²⁸ Wofford 2009, p. 66.

²⁹ Totem poles are wooden statues that are manufactured as sanctuary for a group of people. There are always figures incorporated that reveal the meaning.

among other things exhibition views where the whole process from preparation to the actual show is photographed and explained. On one of these photos, you see how the totem poles are being made in Cotonou, where Adéagbo's workshop is located (Fig.7). The figures on the totem poles are based on photocopies that Adéagbo had made of other totem poles that he found in several books in his library. Schankweiler in her study on Adéagbo's installations, explains that these photocopies were glued to a dummy and given to local sculptors Edouard Kinigbé and Hugues Hountondji who produced the ones that were on show at the Documenta.³⁰ The figures based on the photographs from the library show how a different way of looking can create one's own interpretation based on a cultural background.

Not only the totems were produced by a local artist from Benin, the colourful illustrations hanging in the middle of the wall are as well (Fig. 7). The illustrations, made by Elie Adahoumé, also named Esprit, a signboard painter, are based on photocopies of images Adéagbo collected in Kassel or images that are part of his reference library.³¹ With these two different works as part of the installation on show in Kassel, the reference to Benin is in my opinion very strong. The first work is produced in Cotonou by local artists, the second work is a combination of objects found in Kassel and produced in a new style in Benin. Not every object that was shipped from Benin was made by a local artist. Some objects were old statues from Benin or sculptures created for the tourist market that Adéagbo found somewhere on his walks. As we can see in figure 7, these objects are placed on the canoe mentioned before, together with different books, a German flag with a Masonic emblem over one side of the canoe and a white t-shirt over the other. On the outside of the canoe different postcards, photocopies, and handwritten texts were pinned. On the floor, there are books, newspapers, and many more objects. An important object outside of the canoe is the globe of the world, which I believe can be linked to the theme of the exhibition, namely becoming more global.

Figure 8 shows walls covered with objects depicting the highlights of a fixed history of Europe and North America, such as album covers and pictures of movie stars that are considered important for the history of the Western world (Fig. 8). They are combined with historical objects from Adéagbo, such as African masks. In contrast to this recorded history,

³⁰ Schankweiler 2012, p. 84.

³¹ Schankweiler 2012, p. 84.

in the past, the history of the different countries in Africa was transferred to the next generation by masked performances and storytelling, as I have learned from several lectures about art from Africa. It is my contention that by combining written texts with items that are important for the history of for example Benin, a new global history can be written.

However, this is easier said than done, as explained by a question that Wofford poses in his article: “In this increasingly globalized world where more and more marginalized identities compete for attention on the world stage, how can the past be remembered so that no one type of memory dominates and erases the others?”³² This question illustrates the problem that Adéagbo is dealing with. His installations are his solution for the problem of memory domination: he shows that there are other parts of history as important as the dominant history, based on your personal history. He explains to the visitors that in a way their history is just as important as the history of the writers of history books. You can combine those histories to create your own memory.

The title of the work, *The Explorer and the Explorers Facing the History of Exploration – The Theater of the World*, refers in one sentence to what you are looking at. Many books in the installation are about European travellers and explorers such as Columbus. Adéagbo sees the visitor as an explorer of this installation with all its objects, thus as an explorer of the world in all its facets. Kitty Zijlmans, professor of contemporary art history and theory and world art studies at the university of Leiden, explains in the introduction of the online catalogue of *Global Imaginations* exhibition held in Leiden, that she sees the exhibition in Kassel more as a Western construction of Africa with books about Africa written by Western authors and music from Africa produced in Europe. By showing these items, the Western idea of Africa is shown instead of what Africa really is about.³³ Schankweiler mentions a similar notion in *Die Mobilisierung der Dinge*, published in 2002. She explains that Adéagbo reflects in his works on how Europeans look at African artefacts by using book titles. Several books in the Documenta installation refer to how Europeans see the colonisers as heroes and look down upon the colonised countries in Africa.³⁴ Are the objects that have the stylistic features of a certain culture in Africa, for example, Benin, made for religious or ceremonial purposes, or are they made to sell to the tourists? The installation in Kassel also

³² Wofford 2009, p. 72.

³³ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/essay-kitty-zijlmans> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

³⁴ K. Schankweiler, 2012. Pp. 35, 37 and 38.

shows how important selection is in writing history because by choosing these objects, a particular part of the history is referred to, whereas a different choice would lead to another aspect of the part being highlighted. When do we see the complete history, and is that even possible? By showing different angles on what is considered a 'fixed' history, Adéagbo demonstrates with his work that this is not the case.

The shared history of Leiden and Benin

One of the recent exhibitions that Adéagbo participated in was the *Global Imaginations* exhibition in the Meelfabriek in Leiden in 2015, which was his first show in the Netherlands. His work, which was made in collaboration with Stephan Köhler, was entitled: *Who would take up defense and come defend us if we had not taken up defense and defend ourselves" ...! Global imagination: The defense...!* (2015) (Fig. 9). The installation filled one room in the Meelfabriek and was produced especially for Leiden. Kitty Zijlmans was one of the curators and she explains in the introduction of the online exhibition catalogue what inspired the artist to make this work. According to Zijlmans, Adéagbo considered the history of the textile industry of Leiden and made a connection to his interpretation of *The last judgement Triptych* from 1526-27 made by Lucas van Leyden. Those important elements from the history of Leiden were combined by Adéagbo with religion. Zijlmans argues that history depends on the one that is telling it.³⁵ In this case, the history of the city Leiden is told through the eyes of an artist from Africa.

My attention will first go to the clothes that are part of the Leiden installation. There is a grey t-shirt, some trousers, and other items of clothing. By showing this clothing and the rug on the floor, the history of the Leiden textile industry is referred to. Another part of the installation that relates to the history of Leiden are the paintings. These paintings are representations of art pieces that form part of the collection of Museum the Lakenhal and pictures from, for example, the Meelfabriek. Like he did in the Documenta exhibition, Adéagbo took photocopies of paintings and important buildings and took them back to Cotonou, where he asked a local artist to produce a reproduction in his own style.³⁶ The painting that can be recognised easily is *The last judgement* tryptic by Lucas van Leyden,

³⁵ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/essay-kitty-zijlmans> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

³⁶ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/georges-adeagbo> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

1526-27 (Fig. 10). In the reproductions the colours have become brighter than the original ones, but also the artists have given their own interpretation to the works. For example, on the middle panel of the *Global Imaginations* version of *The Last Judgement*, you do not see an identical copy of the original, but you see somebody sitting in front of the work, which refers to the bench that is standing in front of the original painting in Museum the Lakenhal. This gives an extra dimension to the work as if it were painted whilst watching a visitor looking at the work. Heaven is represented as the Meelfabriek in Leiden. This can, in my opinion, refer to the judgement of Adéagbo's work at *Global Imaginations* in the Meelfabriek. On the side panels, Adéagbo seems to have incorporated other paintings that are part of the Lakenhal collection and a self-portrait of the artist who was commissioned to paint the triptych, together with texts about last judgements. By incorporating this self-portrait, Adéagbo gives the otherwise anonymous painter from Benin a face and shares the credits for the artwork. One can say that the structure of the original painting by Lucas van Leyden is the basis for Adéagbo's interpretation but it is scaled to smaller dimensions and includes different elements as mentioned above.

What is also interesting in this installation are the LP's without their cover. From a distance, you cannot see what music it is and by which artist and this is the same with the African sculptures that are in the installation. Without knowledge of sculptures from Africa, you do not know in which country the sculptures are made. This was the case in the *Primitivism* exhibition in the Museum Of Modern Art in New York in 1984. The work of Western artists, for example, Picasso, was placed next to a sculpture made by an artist from Africa. No credits were given to the artist from Africa, it was only exhibited to show that these sculptures were a source of inspiration for Western artists. Without a nametag, the sculptor is unknown, which is the same for the LP without its cover. You need the cover to know whose music is on it.

Other items in the installation came from flea markets Adéagbo visited for inspiration during his stay in Leiden. All these works were first sent to Cotonou to arrange together with the clothes and the reproduced paintings. There is another important reference to Benin showing the historical connection between Leiden and Benin. From the 16th to the 18th century, Leiden textile was sent all over the world, including Benin.³⁷ The third connection

³⁷ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/georges-adeagbo> consulted on the 24th of April 2016.

between Benin and Leiden is the research that has been conducted by scholars from the National Museum of World Cultures in Leiden, former Museum Volkenkunde, and Leiden University

With the analysis of the different works by Adéagbo made over a period of about twenty years, I see a change in his working style. The installations that he made in Cotonou in his backyard were not site-specific and were a tribute to his ancestors. This changed when Adéagbo was invited to participate in travelling exhibitions, like *La Route de l'Art Sur la Route de l'Esclave (1994-1999)*, which was based on slavery and had a connection with different countries that shared the same history. Later, Adéagbo created works that were specially made for the city where he exhibited, for instance, the one in Leiden in 2015.

There are also aspects that stayed the same, such as the arrangement of the objects. In the works that I have analysed in this chapter, the items are placed in a room with a strict arrangement that is based on a combination of different factors including the theme of the exhibition. Space is carefully used and specific objects are placed together to show a different approach to the fixed history we know from history books. Secondly, the works are site specific and contain elements that are clearly linked to a certain city or exhibition theme. Thirdly, there is the strong connection the works have with his homeland Benin.

To summarise: there are different ways Adéagbo relates his work to Benin. The first is the objects that he finds in Benin on his walks, which he then includes in his installations. Secondly, the reproductions made by local artists in Benin. Adéagbo makes photocopies of items and artworks that he found in the city where his installations will be exhibited. These photocopies are brought back to his studio in Benin and given to local artists as an example to produce reproductions in their local street style. Finally, he takes the objects that he finds on flea markets and other places in the cities that are hosting the exhibition to his hometown Cotonou. There he makes the final arrangement of the installation together with the items found in Cotonou and the reproductions. According to Zaya, the arrangement of the installations and the travelling of the objects are references to Benin as well, namely to the street markets of Cotonou. The markets are places where the people recombine and renovate the contingent relations between bodies, spaces, and signs.³⁸ This means that the

³⁸ Zaya 2012, p. 38.

market salesmen need to use their space wisely and must place signs with texts that are appealing to attract as many people and sell as much as possible. Their setting must be changed every day to keep it lively. This is also what Adéagbo does in his work: he creates a new installation every day and breaks it up in the evening just like the salesmen. His installations also refer to the small streets between the market stalls, these small walkthroughs are also located between the different items Adéagbo is presenting in his installations.

The three references to Benin show that Benin is important in the way the installations of Adéagbo work out. It is not only a source of inspiration but also the country where his studio is located. Adéagbo's is known all over the world judging by his exhibitions worldwide. According to Oguibe and Enwezor, Adéagbo is praised for his art and is a famous name in the art world.³⁹ This is important for the status of many artists from Africa because he is an example for many contemporary African artists. Adéagbo is aware of his identity and status and he shows this by including things that represent his memory and history. He also deals with identity in his work - his own identity but also the identity of the many countries he bases his work on. He shows a different part of their identity by approaching their history from a different angle. All his works have a reference to the colonial past of the African continent, which is at this moment very important in the debate about contemporary African art. Especially during the colonial period identity was given to African people by the Western world, rather than being based on cultural tradition. I believe that Adéagbo gives not only Africa but also the whole world a new shared history. The next step that society can take as a response to the work of Adéagbo is creating a new identity based on this new history.

[The art of Adéagbo analysed from the frame of references](#)

There are many debates and ideas about contemporary African art mentioned in my frame of reference and in some of them, the work of Adéagbo can serve as an example or show a different point of view. One of the ideas that Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu mention in their book, *Contemporary African art since 1980*, is that contemporary art from Africa is shaped

³⁹ Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 21.

by the continent's past, for example by migration, exile and postcolonial critiques.⁴⁰ This notion is visible in the work of Adéagbo because he is responding to historical moments and the way they are written down from a Western point of view. In his work, he expresses to the world a new history that is inclusive and sees events from different perspectives. Events that have shaped Africa as a continent caused by, among other things, the Western society in the power position. Another aspect that is mentioned by Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, is the role of ethnographical museums and their authority over the African continent.⁴¹ Adéagbo's working method can, in my opinion, be placed in the tradition of the ethnographer in the sense that he is creating a story by combining different objects from a specific place. In contrast to the traditional ethnographer, Adéagbo is pushing it a step further by combining the history and objects of a specific place and showing that a story has more sides to it than the fixed one told by for example an ethnographer.

In the first chapter of *Reading the Contemporary. African art from Theory to the Marketplace* by Oguibe and Enwezor, there is an example mentioned about a contemporary African artist being interviewed by a Western scholar who is only asking about the background of the artist and not about his art. This is compared to the Western ethnographers who are on a journey of discovery about how people live in Africa.⁴² To me, this example sums up the discourse of power and confinement in the Western appreciation of modern art. It creates, in the end, a story that is one-sided. The art of Adéagbo offers a different position in which a story has a shared history in which everyone can tell their part. Oguibe pleads for recognising the universality of the concept of history in which specific configurations are offered by individual cultures themselves.⁴³ His ideas are visualised in the art of Adéagbo through his inclusive method of re-writing history of individual cultures all around the world. The only difference here is that Adéagbo is gathering the information instead of the various cultures. I believe this extra step Oguibe offers needs to be taken into account by writing history books to create a history that is as inclusive as possible.

The last book of my frame of reference is *The Global contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* by Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel, three European scholars. Like the two previously mentioned books, both written by African scholars, this book also mentions the

⁴⁰ Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009, p. 11.

⁴¹ Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009, p. 17.

⁴² Oguibe in: Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, pp. 17 and 19.

⁴³ Oguibe in: Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 320.

re-writing of history and in this case what they call 'global' history. Weibel mentions that this re-writing of history is a process that has taken place in societies for a length of years.⁴⁴ I believe that this is true because you keep adding layers with new information but in my opinion, the fixed history stays the same. What Adéagbo is offering is a re-writing of this fixed history. Not recent history of, say, ten years ago, but a few centuries ago, which is revolutionary. Another element that Weibel mentions is the idea that understanding media is the prerequisite for understanding the world because we experience the world through media.⁴⁵ This is, of course, true but these media are not selling an objective view of society. They tell stories from a specific point of view and do not include the story of everyone on an even level. Adéagbo is in my opinion giving society this inclusive history that globalism is asking for.

Not only can the work of Adéagbo be a contribution to the frame of reference, it is also the case that the frame of reference can be helpful to understand the work of Adéagbo better. As this chapter has shown, the central theme in his work is our integrated history. With his artworks, Adéagbo invites the visitors to re-envision the historical narratives and show the possibilities of an inclusive history in which each part of the world is represented equally. To understand his works of art better, the debates mentioned in my frame of reference are helpful, because they explain the issues of the historical narratives that are written from a Western viewpoint and what these historical narratives are about, for example, the colonial past, identity and authenticity. As a conclusion, I would like to say that Adéagbo's work is fundamental for the debates about contemporary African art and shows a solution for the problems concerning equality in our inclusive history.

This chapter has shown that Adéagbo wants to express to us that our history is written from a Western perspective. With his art, he re-writes the history into a new shared one by combining the history of Africa with the history of the Western world. This is the main theme in his work and is different every time because he travels around the world and creates works that are site specific. In the second chapter, Meschac Gaba's idea for a museum of contemporary art from Africa will be analysed that deals with on the one hand the notion of

⁴⁴ Weibel in: Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel 2013, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Weibel in: Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel 2013, p. 25.

lacking contemporary African art in Western art museums and on the other on the African continent as well.

Chapter 2: Meschac Gaba, the museum revisited

This chapter will focus on Meschac Gaba, his working method and artworks. By studying Gaba's art and background, I aim to examine how he reflects on his homeland Benin in his artworks and performances. Like Adéagbo, Gaba was born in Cotonou in 1961. After living there for 35 years, he moved to Amsterdam in the Netherlands, to work at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in the period 1996-1997.⁴⁶ One of his reasons for going to Europe, Kerry Greenberg, curator of international art at Tate Modern, mentions in her study, was the lack of an art school in Benin on an academic level. He explicitly did not want to study in France, because of the many links with Benin originating from the colonial past.⁴⁷ The Netherlands had no connections to Benin during the colonial period. After he left Cotonou, Gaba became more aware of his African roots, but according to Simon Njami, independent curator and the co-founder of *Revue Noire*, a journal of contemporary African and extra-occidental art, he still considers himself a citizen of the world, which will be explained later in this chapter by analysing his artworks.⁴⁸ At this moment he lives and works in Rotterdam.⁴⁹

In the beginning of his artistic career, Gaba was inspired by banknotes he found on the streets in Cotonou. It was the money of the National Bank of Benin, perforated into small circles by the bank to disable it. Ever since Gaba found these bills, he has used money or the idea of value in his artworks. According to Greenberg, in the beginning of his career, Gaba created colourful collages in which these banknote dots were included. At first, these collages were a combination of paint and banknote dots, two-dimensional and framed behind glass. Later, his works became three-dimensional reliefs. In my opinion, he gave the money, that was now useless to most people, a new meaning. Greenberg writes that Gaba's art was noticed by minister Armand Zinzindohoué of Benin and he was invited by Zinzindohoué to participate in an exhibition at the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris in 1992.⁵⁰ This museum does not exist anymore, but its collection merged into the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. For Gaba, this was his first exhibition outside of

⁴⁶ <http://www.stevenson.info/artists/gaba.html> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁴⁷ Greenberg 2013, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Wolfs, Roesink, Visser 2010, p. 8.

⁴⁹ <http://framerframed.nl/nl/mensen/meschac-gaba/> visited on the 27th of February 2017.

⁵⁰ Greenberg 2013, p. 13.

Benin and concluding from my research it seems that after this experience he wanted to learn more about art techniques, a subject that was not available in Africa as an academic study, as Greenberg explains in her study, but in Europe it was.

Gallery Stevenson in South Africa, one of the galleries that represent Gaba, mentions on their website that after moving to Amsterdam, Gaba's breakthrough in the Netherlands was in 1997, with the start of a project called *Museum of Contemporary African Art*. This project started off as separate installations presented in different cities around the world but was presented in its totality in 12 spaces at the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam.⁵¹ The goal of this exhibition is explained in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* 2013, which is a catalogue accompanying the exhibition with the same name at the ZKM in Karlsruhe. The editors explain that Gaba was examining the inclusion and exclusion mechanisms of the art world and especially the position of contemporary art from Africa.⁵² Gaba noticed that there were many museums of contemporary art in America and Europe but not one in Africa. In his observation, Gaba is supported by Annette Busch, a freelance curator from Germany. She indicates that museums in Africa are in general rare because most of the art from the past and contemporary art is part of European and American collections.⁵³ According to Phyllis Clark Taoua, working at the department of African Studies, University of Arizona (Tucson) and Taylor Kathryn Miller, graduate student at this university, the fundamental question Gaba asked himself was: what should an exhibition space for contemporary African art look like? ⁵⁴ I believe that this thought and later this actual 'answer' was revolutionary and highlighted an important aspect of the art world that had been neglected so far.

As explained by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, associate director of curatorial affairs at Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art in Evanston, and Christa Clark, senior curator at the Newark Museum in Newark, (US), there are three types of museums where African art is presented in Europe and America. The first type is the natural history museum, which was developed in the 15th century and had the mission to define and categorise cultures through their representative material productions. This means that items were collected for their scientific characteristics and for this cause were divorced from their aesthetic quality. The

⁵¹ <http://www.stevenson.info/artists/gaba.html> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁵² Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, pp. 348-349.

⁵³ Busch 2015, p. XII.

⁵⁴ Taoua and Miller 2016, p. 190.

second type is the ethnographical museum, which has much in common with the scientific museum, for example, the representation of culture by a range of objects, but it differs in its appreciation of aesthetic quality. The last type is the art museum where objects are collected for their aesthetic quality and divorced from their cultural origin, function, and context.⁵⁵ Art from Africa is still to be found in all the above kinds of museums and mostly in the science and ethnographical ones, especially in the past, because it was not valued as high art. I believe that both historical and contemporary artists from Africa deserve more appreciation. The art world is more willing to let artists from elsewhere in because, for a while now, contemporary art from Africa is to be seen at important biennales around the world and the Documenta in Kassel. Despite the fact that the status of artists from Africa is getting better, museums with a contemporary art collection still have a canon that is mainly based on the art of Western artists. In my opinion, these museums would be more interesting if they displayed a story that is based on contemporary artists from all around the world because it would show an image of a shared world.

Gaba's vision on a museum of contemporary African art

With his art project *Museum of Contemporary African Art* (1997-2002), Gaba formulated a rule that every museum should obey, namely that it must have a collection. In the case of Gaba's museum, the type of museum is not important because he wanted to generate a museum that is not permanent in one place but can travel around the world. This is a new concept of a museum and to explain this concept I will start with an introduction before I discuss the actual artwork. In general, museum collections are static because they are in a specific building and city. According to Clark Taoua and Miller, Gaba let go of this idea and saw the collection and presentation as a museum. What Gaba also found important to state by creating this project, was his vision for a museum of contemporary African art instead of the editorial perspective of a curator.⁵⁶ 'Editorial perspective' in this context means working from a subjective viewpoint of the curator. Gaba's concept seems a bit contradictory to me, because he created his museum from his subjective viewpoint too, by sharing his own vision. According to Njami, his message to the world by creating this museum was that in the future

⁵⁵ Bickford Berzock, Clarke 2011, pp. 4-5.

⁵⁶ Clark Taoua, Miller 2016, p. 189.

we as citizens of the world will have a museum in which we will define ourselves and our practices, aesthetics and historicity.⁵⁷ This seems to imply that all human beings can create their own museum and become the curator of their own life. According to Clark Taoua and Miller, Gaba confronted the viewer with a Eurocentric impulse to look at Africa through an exclusively ethnographic lens.⁵⁸ He has done this by creating many different rooms that all show a different angle on what contemporary African art can look like. The most important thing is that these angles are created by an artist from Africa instead of a European curator who never lived there.

The first room of the museum that Gaba created was *Draft room* in 1997. *Draft room* was first presented at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten Amsterdam when Gaba just finished his study there. Figure 11 shows an overview of *Draft room* in which objects were spread over a few classrooms in the building and were a combination of handmade, found and altered objects.⁵⁹ At the presentation of his first museum room, visitors were asked to support his museum by purchasing a small brooch made from a banknote dot and a safety pin. This idea had two reasons according to Greenberg. The first was symbolised fundraising, which is common with the opening of a new museum. The second is that these objects could be used as a marketing object.⁶⁰ By creating and sharing these objects, Gaba stepped into the footsteps of the Western museums, that use marketing objects but also funds to support new exhibitions and even new museum buildings. Taoua and Miller explain that the devaluation of money was again a topic in *Draft room* because the dots of perforated money bills were worthless, but Gaba gave them value again by making an art piece out of them, something that you take home and you paid for.⁶¹ In my opinion, devaluation and valuation are also applicable to the found and later altered objects, which were of low value but were placed in a museum, which gives them a new meaning and makes them valuable.

A few rooms in the museum were ordinary museum rooms, such as the *Library*, *Museum restaurant* and *Museum shop*. In the *Library*, the idea of dying oral languages was shown by a wooden coffin in the middle of the room. Inside the coffin shown in figure 12,

⁵⁷ Njami in: Wolfs, Roesink, Visser 2010, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁸ Taoua and Miller 2016, p. 190.

⁵⁹ <http://www.museumofcontemporaryafricanart.com/entree.html> consulted on the 27th of October 2016.

⁶⁰ Greenberg 2010, p. 14.

⁶¹ Taoua, Miller 2016, p. 191.

there was a soundtrack, that could be listened to using headphones.⁶² According to Taoua and Miller, the library was not based on the Western idea of a library, but more on the West-African market.⁶³ The bikes with computers mounted on them are something you would not see in a Western library. They seem to ask questions about the mobility and access of information. The combination of computers on a bike could literally mean the way online information travels. In the *Museum restaurant*, the visitors could eat, like in a normal museum restaurant. The food was prepared by different graduated artists of the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten and could be eaten by sitting at long tables, which you can see in figure 13.⁶⁴ The artists also contributed to the *Museum shop*, not only with items that the visitors could buy but also with organised talks with the artists who produced the works (Fig. 14). Examples of the objects that were sold are t-shirts with images and text on it, cups and sculptures Gaba produced especially for this shop.

Several rooms in the series were interactive. One example is the *Architecture room*, where visitors were invited to build their own museum out of wooden blocks as shown in figure 15.⁶⁵ Another example is the *Game room*; in this room, the visitor could complete a puzzle, which showed the flags of among other countries Chad, Morocco and Algeria. They were also invited to play chess, as you can see in figure 16. In the *Salon*, a computer game could be played which was based on the Adji computer game, an adaptation of the traditional African game Awélé (Fig. 17).⁶⁶ This game contains a board with holes and 48 seeds, the goal is to collect more seeds than your opponent.

Not every room referred to is a standard room in the museum. A very odd room for a museum, for example, is the *Marriage room*. *Marriage room* was introduced after Gaba's marriage with Alexandra van Dongen, curator of design at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It was first shown as a performance and afterwards, the room was filled with pictures of the marriage, together with an aftermovie, the wedding dress, gifts from the guests and the guestbook (Fig. 18). The *Marriage room* not only showed the happy pictures of Gaba and van Dongen but also pointed at the underlying

⁶² Greenberg 2010, p. 33.

⁶³ Taoua, Miller 2016, p. 196.

⁶⁴ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/meschac-gaba-museum-contemporary-african-art> consulted on the 27th of October 2016.

⁶⁵ Gresié, p. 1.

⁶⁶ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/meschac-gaba-museum-contemporary-african-art> consulted on the 27th of October 2016.

tensions of immigration and marriage between two different cultures.⁶⁷ A room in which regularly shown objects are on display, but in an irregular way, is *Art and Religion room* (Fig. 19). This room showed different religious objects without any hierarchy. According to Greenberg, this referred to the long relationship between art and religion across cultures. The room also had a link to contemporary Benin, where many people are poly-religious. *Summer room*, *Music room*, and *Humanist space* were rooms that are also not very common in museums. In *Summer room*, cloths and clothes in many different colours were presented hanging from the roof and in the *Music room*, many instruments were presented on a tapestry on the floor, inviting visitors to play them (Fig. 20 and 21). *Humanist space* was the last room Gaba created in the series of twelve (Fig. 22). It was first presented at Documenta 11 in Kassel. People could borrow golden bikes and ride around the city of Kassel. Gaba's appearance at the Documenta made him an internationally respected artist. During the exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the lending of bikes was not possible. They were presented in a static way.

According to Enwezor, the *Museum of Contemporary African Art* referred in its totality to Africa, not only because of its name but also because of the display method. He mentions that each installation of the museum's twelve sections was displayed in the style of a West-African market. These markets were some kind of bazaar of objects organised in horizontal displays on the floor.⁶⁸ This is what the museum contains, objects that are gathered together because they can add a layer to the story the rooms need to tell, just like a bazaar where objects need to be placed in a certain way to become appealing to the potential buyers. If you place certain objects together the story might be stronger or you might sell more than if you place other objects together. This is a reference to Benin, but it is not clear if this reference is a conscious or unconscious choice of Gaba. This is not the only reference that can be noticed I believe. The first reference to Benin can be found in the *Draft room* where African money from Benin is introduced as a marketing and payment tool. The second reference can be found in the *Library room*, because of the arrangement and because of the story that can be listened to at the coffin. The third reference is to be found in the *Art and religion room*, where the many religious artworks interchangeably stand next

⁶⁷ Taoua, Miller 2016, 194.

⁶⁸ Greenberg 2010, p. 30.

to each other, which is very common for the situation in Benin. These references are just a few examples, but there is much more to distinguish.

Tresses as representations of culture

After the *Museum of Contemporary African Art* project, which lasted five years, Gaba was invited in 2003 as one of the artists to present on behalf of the Netherlands in the Dutch pavilion at the Biennale in Venice, Italy.⁶⁹ This was also the year that he started to make a new series called *Tresses* during a residency at the Ps1 contemporary art centre in New York. *Tresses* are large wigs in the shape of buildings or vehicles in many different colours. The first *Tresses* series was inspired by the large skyscrapers of New York and contains eighteen sculptures. Figure 23 shows an overview of the *Tresses* series inspired by the Skyscrapers of New York presented at Studio Museum Harlem in 2005. The *Tresses* are brightly coloured and have the contours of the large skyscrapers they represented. Except for the contours, I believe the colours have no reference to the buildings. According to Greenberg, Gaba wanted to recreate these buildings using artificial hair. She also mentions that the inspiration for the extensions he used to create the wigs came from the many West-Africans making a living in the city by braiding hair. Unfortunately for Gaba, these braiders in New York were not able or did not want to create the *Tresses*. For this reason, he went back to Cotonou where local braiders realised the project.⁷⁰ This element of inspiration from one place and the manufacturing in another continent reflects the ongoing process of globalisation and it makes Gaba a citizen and an artist of the world.

The second series of *Tresses* was called *Car Tresses*, produced in 2008, and was inspired by vehicles that he saw in Johannesburg, South Africa. Figure 24 shows the *Car Tresses* Exhibition view in situ at Galerie Paris in 2012. The green car is a pickup, the grey with green car seems to be a Volkswagen van, the brown one in the back is a Volkswagen Beetle and the orange/red car is a firetruck. Vehicles are status symbols, not only in Africa but all around the world. To create wigs in the form of vehicles shows a second link with Africa. In Africa, hair is an important communication tool and can also be a status symbol. It

⁶⁹ <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/level-2-gallery-meschac-gaba/level-2-gallery-meschac-gaba-artist> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁷⁰ Greenberg 2013, p. 19.

is not clear whether Gaba made this connection himself, but it could have been the case, because of the importance of hair as a status symbol in Africa. According to Ivor Powell, an art historian and art critic who lives in Cape Town, Gaba examines the relation between the so-called First and Third World by means of these vehicles.⁷¹ The luxury vehicles embody the First World and the old and less fancy vehicles the Third. In my opinion, this is incorrect, because Gaba also created vehicles such as fire trucks and oil tankers. They do not represent the First and Third world differences. I believe they are part of both worlds and are part of jobs that have both worlds have in common.

In 2016, a new *Tresses* series was shown at the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam as part of the exhibition *Africa 010*, which showed two centuries of art from Africa. A small part of the exhibition was devoted to contemporary art from Africa, including the work of Gaba. Gaba explained in an interview that he wants to incorporate in his work the city where he is working at that moment.⁷² This is also the case with the *Tresses* in the Wereldmuseum. Gaba was inspired by the buildings of Rotterdam and created *Tresses* that represent these buildings in colourful braiding's created in Cotonou. Figure 25 shows a few examples: the left one is the SS Rotterdam, the one in the middle is Het Wereldmuseum and the right one is the Martkhal. The *Tresses* are a combination of inspiration from one place and production in another. As explained, Gaba had the '*Tresses*' made in Cotonou. It is can be noticed again that the colours are not related to the colours of the actual buildings. The two buildings and the ship are grey and Gaba gave them a new colour.

Another interest of Gaba is the museological history of Africa, which was already introduced in his work *Museum of Contemporary African Art*. The continent Africa has no tradition of museums and Gaba examines why this is the case. In 2010 he established a museum called *MACA: Musée de l'Art de la Vie Active* in his birth town Cotonou. This was not a museum in the form of a building, the whole city was called *Musée de l'Art de la Vie Active*.⁷³ One of the activities in this project was a performance with the *Tresses* introduced above. This shows that the *Tresses* series are not always shown in a static display.

This series of *Tresses* was based on iconic figures of history, such as Martin Luther King, Kwame Nkrumah, and Joan of Arc. These historical iconic figures were not from a

⁷¹ Powell 2010, p. 74.

⁷² Faber 2016, p. 73.

⁷³ <http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/there-is-no-originality-in-my-work-other-than-my-own/> consulted on the 24th of October 2016.

specific period or a specific place in the world. The Western icons were combined with icons that are important for the history of the African continent. Gaba organised a parade with thirty people wearing wigs of synthetic hair symbolising a global narrative (Fig. 26). In this parade, Gaba was the one leading the group as the commander of the marching band. The wigs were worn by persons that were not recognisable because the wigs covered their faces. The symbols that are recognisable from figure 26 are the red cross, which refers to Christianity. The black wig with the figures on top in four different colours refers, in my opinion, to the helmet of Pericles, who was a prominent and influential Greek statesman, orator and general of Athens during the Greece's Golden Age. The orange dollar sign refers to money and wealth in the Western world. The orange saxophone refers to jazz music, which was developed by black people in Amerika.

According to Powell, the procession had the feel of a private festivity. The general public's response was positive, they glanced up because it was a colourful procession and something you do not see very often. Not everyone was positive, some people and in particular parents with young children were scared and pulled their children from the streets. This was mainly because of the *Tresses* that represented the god of iron and hunting, which looked a bit terrifying. This was not Gaba's intention. He wanted to ask questions about the local interpretations of a museum in Cotonou and how people respond to art.⁷⁴ The performance was held again in Karlsruhe during the opening of the exhibition *The Global Contemporary* at the ZKM, Center for Art and Media in 2010. The goal of this exhibition was to document the globalisation of the visual arts and the rise of contemporary art over the last twenty years by including artists from all around the world. The exhibition explored subjects as curating after the global turn; art and the migration of pictures; the end of the canon; and new strategies of representation. According to the organisers Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel, the ceremony was re-enacted in a European context and showed a combination of historical figures from European and African history. With this ceremony, Gaba wanted to show that there is a need for a truly global history.⁷⁵ In my opinion, the ceremony shows that all these iconic figures have created our history and the history of all parts of the world are connected by these figures and their actions.

⁷⁴ Powell 2010, pp. 70 and 72.

⁷⁵ Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, pp. 348-349.

There are references being found to Cotonou, such as the manufacturing of the wig, and the hair braiding. Gaba needed Benin to complete the work because it could not be done elsewhere. The second connection with Cotonou is *MACA* in which the *Tresses* are presented in a performance. The third link regards the icons these *Tresses* represent. Some of these icons refer to important figures from the African continent and some of them refer to European history.

Colourful artworks with a political message

Gaba's colourful art is not only fun to look at, it is at the same time critical about the meaning of the concept of identity. A work that explains his critical conception of identity is *Colours of Cotonou*, which he created in the period 2007-2009 (Fig. 27). *Colours of Cotonou* shows many different frames, some are filled with a painting or another artistic material and some are empty, as shown in figure 27.⁷⁶ It can be understood as a work that shows the many different techniques to work with, but according to Greenberg, it can be understood as a work with a deeper meaning about identity and power. Greenberg explains that Gaba was inspired by a speech given by the president of Benin, who spoke about intellectuals, the people who are in positions of power, representing the city. Gaba did not agree with this vision because he thinks the politicians do nothing for the city.⁷⁷ In my opinion, he presents them as the empty frames in his work and the many, diverse local people of Cotonou embody the filled frames. Except for the title, this work also refers to the political situation in Benin, where the people with money have the power but do nothing for the country.

One of the most recent works Gaba created in the Netherlands was in 2015 when he was invited to be one of the artists exhibiting at the group exhibition *Global imaginations* in the Meelfabriek in Leiden, organised by Museum De Lakenhal. Gaba presented the work *Citoyen du Monde*, which looks like a flag with many colours (Fig. 28). The flag was a combination of all the flags of the countries in the world. With this work, Gaba was asking critical questions about the balance of economics in the world.⁷⁸ In this flag, every country has the same space. The world is in harmony. In my opinion, the work is about harmony in

⁷⁶ <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/gaba/index2009.htm> consulted on the 27th of October 2016.

⁷⁷ Greenberg 2013, p. 22.

⁷⁸ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/meschac-gaba> consulted on the 27th of October 2016.

general, not just the economy, as the website of *Global imaginations* explains. If you look at the flag, every part is even and it can also symbolise for example the equal distribution of food.

Citoyen du Monde, translated citizens of the world, became the trademark of the exhibition and for me represents the theme of the exhibition very well. The flag is a symbolisation of all the people in the world, separated by the different colours that are the land barriers. It was one of the works that were not located inside the Meelfabriek but it was hung between two buildings of the Meelfabriek. Gaba's idea about the balance in the world can portray an ideal image of the future, but for now, it is a utopian idea. The idea of flags was already introduced at the *Museum of Contemporary African Art* in the *Game room*, where people could make a puzzle to create a flag. There was also a round board with a wheel in front of it, which consisted of many flags from Africa. *Citoyen du Monde* can be placed in the tradition of *Museum of Contemporary African Art*. The reference to Benin is not so clear in this work. It rather signifies the feeling Gaba has about globalism. He sees himself as a citizen of the world and not just as of Benin or a citizen of any other place where he lives for a while.

The art of Gaba analysed from the frame of references

Gaba's art has changed over time. He is now part of an international art world, instead of only the national art scene of Benin. Gaba explains that his working method applies to all his art and is that of perpetual reflection and research.⁷⁹ The *Museum of Contemporary Art* perfectly reflects Gaba's working method, which first started off with museum rooms that were exhibited as individual artworks, but to which he kept adding new layers and further research. In the end, it was presented as a museum with twelve rooms, which is the complete research project. This is also the case with the *Tresses* series. Gaba first created a series about New York and kept adding new themes to the series. This project is still in progress as the recently created important buildings of Rotterdam show. *Colours of Cotonou* and *Citoyen du Monde* are individual artworks outside an overarching project but can be placed in the story of *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, because of their theme and

⁷⁹ Wolfs, Roesink, Visser 2010, p. 8.

appearance. What has stayed the same over the period analysed are the themes Gaba introduced in his works, such as globalisation, contrasts between rich and poor, authenticity of art, and museological issues.

The central theme is, as we have seen in this chapter, the Western idea of a museum and its art canon. Gaba noticed that there is no museum of contemporary African art in the Western world, as well as on the African continent. He created one in his work *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997-2002* and gave the idea of the museum a new definition by making it un-static. Gaba is not awaiting his space in contemporary art museums, he creates his own. It is an intervention into the current situation in museums where curators have the power to create a story, but in this case, Gaba as an artist is in charge. This can be placed into the debate of inclusion of artists from elsewhere. Oguibe mentions about this debate that in the enlightenment period, the figure of the individual genius was reserved for Europe. In the contemporary world, this is changing into a more open system in which more and more artists from elsewhere are included.⁸⁰

In *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, Gaba, an artist from Africa, created the meaning of contemporary African art, something that is not common as Kasfir explains, because mostly Western curators, collectors and critics give African art meaning.⁸¹ I believe that in 1997 Gaba took one of the first steps in making contemporary African art visible in The Netherlands by showing his works in the twelve rooms at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The reason that it is uncommon for African curators or African artists to give meaning to an African artwork is according to Belting the lack of infrastructure of art institutions and academies to train scholars on the African continent.⁸² Gaba is an example of an artist who went to Europe to study art. He noticed the same as Belting, that there are no museums of contemporary African art in the Western world, as well as on the African continent. Gaba is, in my opinion, an example of an artist that noticed a debate and tried to change it instead of waiting for this change to happen.

As we have seen in the paragraphs above, the work of Gaba is a realisation of a wish mentioned in the debates, a wish to create a museum of contemporary African art in which

⁸⁰ Oguibe in: Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 21.

⁸¹ Kasfir in: Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 98.

⁸² Belting in: Belting, Buddensieg and Weibel 2013, p. 30.

a contemporary African artist is in charge. This wish is written from a personal urgency in *Contemporary African Art since 1980* and *Reading the Contemporary* because of the African background that is noticeable by reading these books. In *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art World*, the wish is written down from the perspective of the global world in which artists from all around the world are included. This feels less personal and more as a duty to fulfil. My frame of reference helped me to understand the idea of inclusion in the art world, which is the underlying thought in the work of Gaba because it explains the need to create a museum of contemporary African art from different viewpoints.

As we have seen in the first chapter about Adéagbo and the second about Gaba, in my opinion, the relation between the Western World and Africa is the central theme in work of both artists brought to expression in various ways. In the third chapter, the work of Romuald Hazoumè will be analysed. He deals as well with these relations but from the perspective of colonisation and slavery.

Chapter 3: Romuald Hazoumè, colonial past in the present

Romuald Hazoumè is the youngest artist of the three. The aim of this last chapter is like the previous ones, namely to find out how Romuald Hazoumè in his art reflects on his homeland Benin. Hazoumè was born in 1962 in Porto Novo, Benin. He is of Yoruba origin but grew up in a catholic family. Even though he grew up in this catholic family, he did not forget his Yoruba roots.⁸³ Hazoumè had a high-level sports career as a judoka but did not push it through, it is not known if he stopped his sports career to become an artist or for another reason. In the year 1972, he participated in his first exhibition when he was ten years old. This exhibition was held for amateur painters and was the very early start of his artistic career.⁸⁴

In the 1980s, Hazoumè was often invited in West-Africa to exhibit his work in galleries and at fairs. After a while, his work was noticed by important people in the African and European art world and he was invited to exhibit in many museums and galleries in Europe. An important man in the African art world in the 1980s was Yves Bourguignon, who was at that period the head of the Institut Français in Cotonou. He believed in Hazoumè and gave him the opportunity to exhibit his works. Another important man in the European art world was Andre Magnin, who already bought Hazoumè's art in the beginning of his career, as a curator of the Jean Pigozzi Collection.⁸⁵ According to Yacouba Konaté, curator and professor of Philosophy at the Université de Cocody in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and Peter Pakesch, an Austrian curator and artistic director of the Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz, Hazoumè had his breakthrough in the 1990s. This was among other things caused by the rise of a globalised art world.⁸⁶ I believe that Hazoumè belongs to a group of artists that got a chance to be part of the art world, caused by the idea of a globalised art world where artists from all countries belong, not only artists from Europe but also from elsewhere. In 1992, he was included in the exhibition *Out of Africa* in the Saatchi Gallery, London, and since that exhibition, his work has been shown all around the world. In 2007, he won the Arnold Bodè Prize at the Documenta 12, in Kassel, which was a huge recognition of his art.⁸⁷ Hazoumè

⁸³ <http://www.magnin-a.com/en/artistes/presentation/46/romuald-hazoume> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁸⁴ Zinsou 2005, p. 16.

⁸⁵ <http://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Expositions/L-artiste-beninois-Romuald-Hazoume-au-Grand-Palais-pour-Picasso-2015-11-06-1377476> Consulted on the 15th of February 2017.

⁸⁶ Konaté and Pakesch 2013, p. 112.

⁸⁷ <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/hazoume/> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

received this prize for four of his masks and his work *Dream* (2007), which will be discussed later in his chapter.

According to Daniela Roth, an art historian focusing on African countries, Hazoumè is self-educated in the field of art because he never went to an art university or followed an art education. His way of making paintings, photographs and sculptures is self-taught. Hazoumè is not only self-educated in the arts, but also speaks eight languages, four of which are African and four European, which he also taught himself.⁸⁸ It is not the case that Hazoumè did not go to college at all. According to Thomas Filitz, he studied the Fa in France because it gave him answers to his life questions.⁸⁹ The Fa is a deity of the Fon people of Benin and the Yoruba community of Nigeria. Hazoumè has his roots in Nigeria, but he was born in Benin. In Nigeria, the ancestors of Hazoumè were part of the Yoruba, who called the Fa by a different name, namely the Ifa.⁹⁰ Hazoumè uses the word Fa because he is living in Benin.

Hazoumè always stayed in Benin, because according to Kanoté and Pakesch, he sees it as his mission to help the people that live in Africa from within the African continent instead of from the West. He sees many people fleeing to the West, but this is not what he considers an answer to the problems and poverty on the African continent. He sees himself as an ambassador of his people in Africa. Another reason these authors mention for working and living in Africa is the lack of economic pressure, something that is very present in the Western world.⁹¹ This thesis is supported by Gerard Houghton, director of special projects at the October Gallery, who mentions that Hazoumè is very proud of his roots and of his position as an artist. According to Houghton, this is among other things caused by the important place artists take in on the African continent because they have an important role in the reconstruction of a new culture after the colonial period.⁹² In my opinion, the art of Hazoumè is suited to fill this role because one of the main themes in his work is the colonial period and the position of the West.

⁸⁸ Roth 2013, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Filitz 2002, p. 145.

⁹⁰ Asante and Amaza 2009, n.p.

⁹¹ Konaté and Pakesch 2013, pp. 106-107 and 123.

⁹² Houghton 2012, n.p.

Various art forms with one central goal

According to Matthew Drutt, an American editor, writer, and independent curator who specialises in modern and contemporary art, the work of Hazoumè is a complex fusion of anthropology, cultural history and documentaries. Hazoumè explores issues of Western colonialism, slavery, diasporas and the place of traditional African rituals within contemporary society.⁹³ He produces installations, masks, canvases, and photographs. What is prominent in almost all the works of Hazoumè are discarded plastic containers, especially gas canisters, in any form you can imagine. In the 1980s he started with a large series of masks made of gas canisters, which will be discussed later in this chapter. These masks, but also other works he makes, are contemporary but have also strong connections to the traditional past because of the mask tradition in the African continent.⁹⁴ They are made of waste material from, for example, the petrol industry but to me, they have a traditional esthetic because of their appearance that reminds me of masked ceremonies of African tribes that lived in the past. These canisters have become Hazoumè's trademark and made him a well-known artist all around the world.

Hazoumè's installations are politically loaded but also show a clear form of humour, because especially the masks do not look stern at all. With his works, he touches upon themes such as the consumption society and oil winning.⁹⁵ Another theme is slavery, not in the traditional sense when the Europeans colonised Africa and other parts of the world in search of inexpensive employees, but contemporary slavery in Africa, where men are forced to ferry contraband petrol between Nigerian sources and their Beninese consumers. One of Hazoumè's photo series focuses on this undercover system of exploitation and will be discussed in this chapter.⁹⁶ I believe the work of Hazoumè always reflects Benin, but according to Daniela Roth most of the people that live in Benin have never seen the work of Hazoumè. The cause for this strange fact is that Hazoumè has always created his artworks for the European market.⁹⁷ In my opinion, he offers the Europeans a peak in his world by means of his art.

⁹³ Koch 2005, p. 5.

⁹⁴ <http://www.magnin-a.com/en/artistes/presentation/46/romuald-hazoume> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁹⁵ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/en/story/romuald-hazoume> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁹⁶ <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/hazoume/> visited on the 11th of March 2016.

⁹⁷ Roth 2013, p. 21.

As already mentioned above, Hazoumè works in many different techniques. I will firstly discuss the three overarching techniques he uses and subsequently a few large installations. The first is sculpting, meaning not the traditional sculpting techniques, but the creation of masks that made Hazoumè famous. The first mask Hazoumè made was for a masked New Year's party in Germany in 1989. The people who saw the mask were amazed by its quality and originality. According to Koch, Hazoumè's interest in masks was awakened when he was a child. For the Katala, a primary school for mask making and learning proverbs through play, he had to make a mask out of salvaged materials.⁹⁸ This is what Hazoumè in a sense is still doing, the masks he made thereafter are made of Western trash, for example, empty canisters, he finds on the streets of Porto-Novo. According to Roth, Hazoumè shows with these masks the bond between Africa and the West.⁹⁹

In their appearance, the masks show, from my point of view, elements of both African and Western cultures, the hairstyle and accessories are sometimes referring to Africa and sometimes to the Western world. One of the materials that he uses is plastic and especially plastic jerry cans. These jerry cans are slightly manipulated to create the faces that according to Annett Busch, freelance curator, writer and translator, Hazoumè already saw in them from the beginning: old, weathered faces. The masks are portraits of real people Hazoumè knows or sketches inspired by, for example, photographs he sees in magazines.¹⁰⁰ For this reason, the works have names that refer to these people. Figure 29 is an example of one of those masks that is formed by a round small black jerry can. To me, it seems to represent an angry male based on the look on its face. The nose is formed by a shoe and the eyes are made of batteries. Every mask has a name, this one is called *Afokpo*, named after a site in Nigeria and made in 1992.

He chooses to use these jerry cans to make his art because he wants to show the people that the world has become a dumping place.¹⁰¹ These jerry cans are the result of an economy that creates a lot of waste and he uses this waste in a positive manner. The masks were enthusiastically received by the public, according to Konaté and Pakesch, because Hazoumè is selling the Western cliché of Africa in the form of masks to the Western people. But these masks do not refer to the traditional African ones made for ceremonies and

⁹⁸ Koch 2004, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Roth 2013, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁰ Houghton 2012, n.p.

¹⁰¹ Zinsou 2005, p. 32.

rituals, they refer to the object fetishism found in the Western consumer world.¹⁰² The series of masks started in the beginning of the 1990s. They are still produced and were on show at the October Gallery in London as part of the exhibition *All in the same boat*, which is built around the refugee crisis and was exhibited from October until November 2016. The mask in figure 30 is a contemporary example of a mask called *Tchigan*, 2015 produced by Hazoumè. It shows a female made of an orange jerry can with black hair made of rope. On its head, there are two heels of women's shoes. The masks are exhibited together with installations, paintings and pictures about the same theme. This exhibiting method suits Hazoumè because of his diverse ways of working.

Painting is the second art form he employs. He does not see himself as a painter, but as somebody who follows traditions. His works can look dissimilar, because of the many materials he uses to create the diverse artworks but, according to Thomas Fillitz, professor of social and cultural anthropology at the university of Vienna, one thing is the same in all Hazoumè's artworks, namely that it is based on tradition.¹⁰³ The masks discussed above are also part of the African tradition. On the African continent, masks play an important role in ceremonies, but also in dances. In the case of painting, he bases himself on the tradition of the Yoruba and Fon, who worshipped the Fa or Ifa by creating symbols only they can understand. Hazoumè is recreating this by painting symbols on cloth that nobody outside the Yoruba and Fon communities can understand. Figure 31 is an image of one of Hazoumè's paintings called *Pot à Eau*, 1997, which means water pot. In the middle of the painting, we see a circle that could be the water pot the title is referring to. There is a brown frame painted around the pot and on this frame there are signs painted that are not clear to a viewer that has not studied the Fa. The colours blue and brown are bright and it seems to me that they refer to water and land.

Initially Hazoumè signed his paintings, but he does not do that anymore, because it is not in harmony with the Fa symbols he uses in his paintings. It could be the case that this is not in line with the goal of the earlier painted symbols, which were not meant to sell or to exhibit but only for worship.¹⁰⁴ His knowledge about the Fa and the meaning of the symbols is something that Hazoumè does not discuss with Western people because they do not

¹⁰² Konaté and Pakesch 2013, p. 110.

¹⁰³ Filitz 2002, pp. 146 and 153.

¹⁰⁴ Roth 2013, pp. 71-72.

believe in it. From the beginning in the 1990s until today, Hazoumè produces these paintings. His working method has stayed the same and he works with an important rule for himself. The paint that he uses must be gained from natural sources, for instance earth. There is only one exception to this rule and that is the use of acrylic paint.¹⁰⁵ These paintings are in total a reference to Benin because of the theme, tradition and religion they are based on. Besides the reference to Benin, they also refer to Nigeria where the Fa is important to the Yoruba community. Figure 32 gives an example of a painting that is more recent than the previous one. *Papillon de Nuit (Night Butterfly)*, 2015 is a painting in the colours red-brown, white and black. The title suggests that the figure in the middle of the painting represents a night butterfly but to me it looks like a cross. This confusion can be caused by the fact that Hazoumè is using signs that are not understandable for the uninformed.

The third working technique that Hazoumè works with is photography. These photographs show the modern slavery in the petrol and water industry between Nigeria and Benin. The jerry cans are almost recognisable in every picture, with them the petrol or water is transported on scooters. A photo series that is about the transportation of petrol and water is *Cargoland*, 2012. One of the images of the photo series, *Water Cargo*, 2012, shows a rusted old scooter with three iron extensions on each side. On these iron pipes hang 35 iron cans filled with water. This seems from an economic point of view a good solution to transport as much water as possible, but it is very dangerous because the scooter and its cans are too wide to travel a normal road.

This is an example of a transportation method that is common in Benin. 'Cargo' in the French part of Western Africa means anything of weight and value that needs to be transported. This is not the only meaning it has in Benin because it also refers to the light weighted scooters that carry the heavy loads of material including petrol. These scooters are not the normal ones you see in everyday life but they are refashioned to carry more load by taking off material that should protect you from dirt and during accidents. (Fig. 33) Thousands of these scooters ride around Benin to transport water and petrol. According to Hazoumè *Cargoland* a place where an entire system is based on the distribution network of petrol and water.¹⁰⁶ This is exactly the case in Benin because it is the number one way to make money. It is also very dangerous because they carry a lot of material with them that

¹⁰⁵ Filitz 2002, p. 144.

¹⁰⁶ Houghton 2012, n.p.

can catch fire. Petrol only needs a spark of fire to cause the men on these scooters to lose their life.

Installations out of waste material

Aside from these techniques, Hazoumè creates installations. The first installation that I will discuss is *La bouche du Roi*. (Fig. 34) Between 1997 and 2005 Hazoumè created the artwork that was in 2007 commissioned by the British museum in London. The shape of the artwork is based on an 18th-century print of the British slave ship, the Brookes. This type of model was used in the campaign of William Wilberforce, an English politician for the abolition of slavery. The canisters are placed in the form of the ship and each one represents one individual slave. Since the slaves had no voice, the canisters are portrayed with wide eyes and an open mouth.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to the print, these slaves have gotten a voice by placing microphones near them. The sound that you can hear is a riddle of different names. These names are very important in the work because according to Roth, these names are first names of the Yoruba, the Mabi, the Fon and the Ouéme folks originating from the mid and the south of Benin.¹⁰⁸

The name of the work *La bouche du Roi* means in English the mouth of the king. It is the name of the place where the slaves were shipped off in the 17th and 18th century over the Atlantic Ocean, the estuary. This work is about Benin and its colonial history. According to Drutt, the work explores the history of slavery and colonialism in West Africa, including Benin, and problems it has created afterwards for the colonialist groups in Western Africa. Important issues that are the result of the colonial history are among other things loss of memory and issues with identity. Many of the 304 canisters have a symbol painted on the side or small objects attached that refer to the gods they might have called to before their bondage. The names, symbols and the small objects give them a part of their identity back because they can be traced back to a certain tribe or region.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2007/la_bouche_du_roi.aspx consulted on the 3th of November 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Roth 2013, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2007/la_bouche_du_roi.aspx consulted on the 3th of November 2016.

Koch mentions that, to make the beholders more aware of the circumstances on these ships with 300 slaves, smell is introduced that could have been the 'aroma' on the ship. Examples are urine, sweat, tobacco, vomit, excrement's and different kinds of food.¹¹⁰ With this work in the British Museum, a debate was opened about the role of the United Kingdom as one of the countries that made possible the slavery of thousands of innocent people. The work also opened the discussion about the sustainability of materials such as petrol and water, the role of humans in the corrupt circuit of petrol in Western Africa, but also the sustainability of humans as a resource in the colonial period.

The second installation has a slightly similar theme as *La bouche du Roi*, but refers more to the current reason to cross the ocean, namely the dream of a better future. In 2007 Hazoumè was invited to participate in the 12th Documenta in Kassel and presented there among other works, *Dream*. (Fig. 35) This edition of the Documenta was led and curated by the couple Roger-Martin Buerger and Ruth Noack. According to Marte, there were three important themes that needed to be taken into consideration by the artists producing their contribution. The first theme was 'Are the modern our antiquities', the second 'What is the naked existence' and the third 'What should we do'. The contribution of Hazoumè was called *Dream* installation and represented a large ship with passengers made of jerry cans. According to the descriptive text in the catalogue of this edition of the Documenta, the work showed 421 jerry cans also called canisters representing 421 passengers who were well-prepared for the crossing of the ocean from Africa to Europe.¹¹¹

The question is, did these passengers actually arrive in Europe or is this work an embodiment of a dream that rarely comes true? In the year 2007, the number of boats travelling from Africa to Europe was less high than it is right now in 2016. The news channels show very often a full boat of refugees dreaming of a better future, but who were not able to arrive in Europe without the help of the marines. Sometimes the marines are too late and a lot of refugees die on the water. The work can be a mourning statue for the families that stay behind and have no clue about the fate of their loved ones. Hazoumè explains that he sees a lot of people fleeing the country hoping for a better future. His goal is to help the people building their own future in their own country. The theme of the work refers most to the third theme central for this edition of the Documenta, namely what should we do.

¹¹⁰ Koch 2005, pp. 5-6.

¹¹¹ Marte 2007, p. 358.

Hazoumè asks the public the question, what should we do to prevent the people crossing the ocean?

In 2013 Hazoumè created many installations and I want to mention two works to give an idea of the themes that keep coming back. The first work is *Rat singer: Second Only to God!* (Fig. 36) *Rat singer* refers to Pope Benedict XVI Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger. The work shows a boat that is capsized with around it many canisters referring to slaves. Ratzinger is presented as a rat with sunglasses. Hazoumè still gave him the looks of a hero but according to Konaté and Pakesch, makes him a dictator at the same time, because he is the only figure on the boat while all the slaves are drowning in the water.¹¹² It can, in my opinion, also be a possibility that the canisters are kneeling for the rat who is placed on a throne. The last work I want to mention that was produced in 2013 is *Food for Europe*. (Fig. 37) In this work, you see the flavours and odours that the Africans associate with their homeland. Examples are rice, red hot peppers and smoked fish. The suitcases are filled with fantasies of the Western world.¹¹³ These two works show again the importance of the refugees as a theme and their fate that is in the hands of nature when they cross the ocean.

[A fictitious health care organisation for Western people](#)

Like Adéagbo and Gaba, Hazoumè was invited to be one of the artists presenting their art at the *Global Imaginations* exhibition in de Meelfabriek in Leiden. The work that he showed there to the public was *NGO SBOP*, which he created in 2011. (Fig. 38) The title means NGO 'Solidarité Béninoise pour Occidentaux en Péril'. It is an organisation established for Western people in need. The work is not only an installation but also contains a movie where trusted social and political patterns are brought down. If you look at the installation you notice immediately the jerry cans that are part of most works of Hazoumè. These jerry cans and the petrol brand II symbolises for Hazoumè the political and social tension caused by the secular dependence worldwide on oil and the black oil market in Benin. The petrol brand also stands for the colonisation by France in the past, because they brought the idea of the need for oil there.¹¹⁴ According to Konaté and Pakesch, the work can be interpreted in many ways. On

¹¹² Konaté and Pakesch 2013, p. 114

¹¹³ Konaté and Pakesch 2013, p. 114

¹¹⁴ <http://www.lakenhal.nl/nl/verhaal/romuald-hazoume> consulted on the 29th of October 2016.

the one hand, the work symbolises the growing problems of poverty in the modern Western societies, and on the other hand, the work looks very critically at the structure of giving and taking. It places African societies in a position they have never been in that is: the giving continent.¹¹⁵ Hazoumè is critically looking at the power positions because when you are in the giving position, you are in the more powerful position, but the taker does not always ask for help.

From the 1990s until today, the central elements in the work of Hazoumè are the jerry cans. Not only are they important in his masks, but also in his other installations and pictures. In his paintings, the jerry cans are lacking. This, because Hazoumè is referring to the deity of the Yoruba and Fon people called the Fa. These paintings are not figurative in a way outsiders can understand what they see. It is a secret language that can only be understood by members of the Fa. The jerry cans and the Fa are both references to Benin, both in different ways. The jerry cans are referring to the economy of Benin that is based on petrol and water industry in which the jerry cans play an important role in transporting it. The names given to the canister are names that are well known in the Yoruba community of Nigeria, but they can also refer to people Hazoumè knows personally. The symbolic language and themes in the paintings refer to the Fa and the folks that believe in this god. In his work Hazoumè is not only referring to his homeland Benin but also to Nigeria where his ancestors lived.

[The art of Hazoumè analysed from the frame of references](#)

My frame of reference shows diverse debates about contemporary African art and a global art world to which the work of Hazoumè can be a contribution as an example. As already explained in the first chapter, Oguibe and Enwezor mention in their book an example of an interview in which the focus was on the background of a contemporary African artist instead of his art.¹¹⁶ Hazoumè is responding to this notion by making use of clichés to achieve his success by means of creating masks out of trash, which refer to the traditional African art where masks are common. The notion that authentic African art consisted solely of masks

¹¹⁵ Konaté and Pakesch 2013, p. 104.

¹¹⁶ Oguibe and Enwezor 1999, p. 17.

and ritual sculptures is also mentioned in *Contemporary African Art since 1980*.¹¹⁷ The overlaying debate in which this discussion about masks can be placed is authenticity of African art. For Hazoumè it is a way of showing the Western society what they want to see but if they look at his other artworks they see the dark side of their big companies on the African continent and their fight over petrol for the lowest price.

These traditional African masks are one of the art forms Westerners mention first when thinking about African art. Another notion that is mentioned about contemporary African art by Hassan in the same book is that because of the many political and economic problems in Africa, artists have less access to art material, modern techniques and facilities. He explains that this inspired artists to produce art from locally found sources.¹¹⁸ To this notion, the art of Hazoumè can serve as an example, because he creates his masks and installations out of found canisters that show at the same time the source of the problems in Benin, namely the modern slavery in the petrol and water industry. This notion of supporting the Western countries by low paid jobs with the risk of losing your life is mentioned in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* by Weibel concerning the colonial past. He mentioned that the colonies were never an end in themselves, but always a means to increase the wealth of the motherland.¹¹⁹ The way this is written by Weibel seems to be that he forgets the current situation in many African countries where people work for Western multinationals for a low income. This is exactly what Hazoumè is visualising in his works, namely the water and petrol industry, including the very risky scooters that are used.

Not only is the art of Hazoumè a visualisation of the debates mentioned in my frame of reference. It is as well the case that his central theme, namely the Western hierarchy compared to the rest of the world in past and present, adds a layer to the debate that is not mentioned in any of the books. This layer is formed by modern slavery caused by multinationals and the refugee crisis that is currently a problem in the world. The wish to go to Europe is perfectly visualised in Hazoumè's work *Dream*. I believe that the position of refugees in combination with contemporary African art will be a new debate in theoretical books and articles about contemporary African art in the future, a problem that Hazoumè paid attention to in his work long before it became a worldwide problem in 2016.

¹¹⁷ Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ Oguibe and Enwezor 2009, p. 233.

¹¹⁹ Weibel in: Belting, Buddensieg, Weibel 2013, p. 22.

Conclusion

To briefly summarize: the central question of this thesis was, 'How do the artists, Georges Adéagbo, Meschac Gaba and Romuald Hazoumè, reflect in their art on the culture of their homeland Benin?' To find an answer to this question, three chapters focus on one of the artist's works and their central themes. As we have seen in the different chapters, the artists refer to Benin in different manners and can be connected to my frame of reference in different ways. The first chapter has shown that the theme in the work of Adéagbo is centred on our integrated history. With his artworks that are a combination of different objects including found objects from Cotonou, signs and paintings commissioned in Cotonou by local artists, objects he found or purchased in the city the work was exhibited, and written texts by himself about the topic of the artwork, Adéagbo invites the visitors to revision the historical narratives and show the possibilities of an inclusive history in which each part of the world represented in an equal matter.

The references to Benin are present in the work of Adéagbo mostly because a part of each installation is commissioned or found in Cotonou. It is also always the case that the objects, collected from different parts of the world, come first to Cotonou where all the elements of the artwork are brought together in the actual installation. There is one more reference that is less clear than the other two above. The installations are built up in such a way that they look like the markets of Cotonou with the many market stands and straight walkways. The work of Adéagbo is underscoring my frame of reference because in all the three books the re-writing of history is mentioned, the same as the inclusive history that Adéagbo is explaining in his work. It is also the case that my frame of reference is helpful to understand the work of Adéagbo better, because it explains the debates about identity, authenticity and a fixed history from a theoretical point of view that is applicable to contemporary African art in general.

The second chapter was about Gaba who was born in the same city as Adéagbo. The art of Gaba is diverse and it deals with many different themes, of which one is most prominent, namely the Western idea of a museum and its art canon. Gaba noticed that there is no museum of contemporary African art in the Western world, as well as on the African continent. He created one in his work *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997-2002* and gives the idea of the museum a new definition by making it un-static. Another large project

of Gaba that is still growing until this day is called *Tresses*, in which he creates wigs based on different cities in the world and their specific elements such as buildings, cars and heroes.

In the works of Gaba references to Benin can be found. In general, you can say that his work *Museum of Contemporary African Art* refers in a few rooms to Benin in the sense of religion, objects from Benin and stories about Benin. His *Tresses* series refer to Benin because they are produced in the country, but the wigs also refer to the idea of hairstyle that is important in Africa in general. A work that is not part of a series or project is *Colours of Cotonou*, which also has a strong reference to Benin. Not only in the title but also the theme because it refers to the politics of Benin. The work of Gaba can be placed into the debate of inclusion of artists from elsewhere in the art world. This debate is mentioned in my frame of reference from a personal need in the case of African authors and from the wish to globalise by European authors. Gaba visualises the wish of a contemporary African art by creating one instead of waiting for a place in one of the Western museums of contemporary art.

In the last chapter, the work of Romuald Hazoumè was analysed and has shown that Hazoumè produces many different art types, like paintings, photographs, masks made of jerry cans and installations. He deals with the idea of the Western hierarchy compared to the rest of the world. Not only in the colonial past but also in the form of modern slavery, which makes the picture less pretty than the West would want it to be. One of the objects that is presented in all his artworks except for his paintings is the plastic jerry can. These canisters are used by people who transport petrol and water for a low amount of money.

Hazoumè refers to Benin in different ways, for instance the symbols in his paintings that refer to the Fa, a deity of the Yoruba from Nigeria, and the Fon from Benin. His masks and photographs refer to the petrol and water traffic in Benin and the waste that is produced by these industries. His installations refer not only to Benin but also to Africa in general. Some of his installations refer to the colonial period when many people from different countries, including Benin, were transported by ships to Europe, and others refer to the refugees who in the present-day are going to Europe as well in the hope of a better future. The work of Hazoumè can be placed in the debate about authenticity of African art because he is dealing with this notion in the form of contemporary masks made of waste material. Another debate that is important is the colonial past and the relation between the

West and the rest of the world. In many installations, Hazoumè deals with this notion mostly by creating ships.

The artists all refer in a different manner to their homeland Benin but what they have in common, is that the production of the artworks is mainly based in Benin. If you look at the art there are more references that differ between the three artists. Adéagbo uses objects he found and artworks he commissions in his installations, but it can also be the case that he is referring to the markets of Cotonou in the way his works are built up. Gaba, however refers to Benin by producing parts of his art in Benin, but also by using objects from the country in his installations and by the themes he chooses. Lastly, Hazoumè connects in his art to the dark side of Benin, the refugees that are fleeing the country, the colonial past and the modern slavery in the petrol and water industry.

As a conclusion, it has been made clear that all three artists refer to Benin in their work but a visitor might not see this reference straight away. Some references can namely be found in the working method or by small objects that look like they could come from any African country and not specifically Benin. Hazoumè is referring to Benin in the most noticeable manner and he is also the artist that bases all his art on different parts of Benin. This is not the case in the work of Adéagbo, who is more focused on telling an alternative history with the contribution of among other things objects from Benin. Gaba refers in some of his works specifically to Benin but most of his works are based on other cities or Africa in general.

As we have seen in the different chapters, the works of the three artists deal with different debates that are mentioned in my frame of reference: identity, inclusion and exclusion, and authenticity of African art and globalism. It is not the case that every artist deals with all of these debates, but together they represent them all. The work of Adéagbo deals with identity and our fixed history, Gaba uses inclusion and globalism in his work and Hazoumè creates works that focus on authenticity and the background of artists represented in their work.

What is important to mention, lastly, is that my frame of reference is built on two books written by African scholars, *Reading the Contemporary* and *Contemporary African Art since 1980* and one book, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art World*, written by European scholars. In the two books written by African scholars the personal urgency to include contemporary African artists into the art world is noticeable. They seem to feel

responsible for these artists. The book written by Western scholars is less personal concerning art from elsewhere. It also deals with art from all around the world, not only from Africa. The urgency that the art world needs to change is again visible, but in my opinion more from a viewpoint of guilt in the sense that the Western art world has dominated the canon for too long. What we must realise, is that my frame of reference and the artworks provide insight in another. Without art, literature is just words without visualisation. Without literature, artworks can only be explored to a certain extent.

This MA thesis can be seen a contribution to the research field of contemporary African art from Benin and contemporary African art in general. It also contains a comparison based on the references in their art to their homeland Benin. The research in this field is far from completed because the artists are still producing new works of art that scholars could publish about because of the interesting layers the works contain. There is an opportunity for researchers as well in visiting Benin to find out more references and understanding the background of the artists better. Contemporary art from Africa is, in general, less often analysed than traditional art from Africa. It is a rather new field that has a lot of opportunities and it deserves as much attention as contemporary artists from other continents get nowadays.

To me writing this MA thesis was enlightening, because it helped me to understand the deeper meaning of the art of Adéagbo, Gaba and Hazoumè. My frame of reference offered me the debates about contemporary African art from different perspectives to which I found many connections in the artworks. I realize that these three artists only represent a small part of the art of the African continent and in Benin as well. Despite this small representation of the artistic production in Africa, they produce vastly different artworks from the various theme that are important from their point of view. These artists have shown me that we are responsible for our shared history and world nowadays and that we live in a global society in which everyone can be equal if we all take responsibility.

The art of Hazoumè made the biggest impression on me, because it is diverse and in your face. He shows that the Western people keep taking elements from the African continent in the form of petrol nowadays, but also art and slaves in the past. Hazoumè uses the only thing that the Western society, generalizing spoken, brings, namely trash to make makes, the one thing that represent Africa art to many Western people. The ironical aspect

of his working method, is that he sells it to these Western people, which makes it, in my opinion, a full circle.

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Illustrations

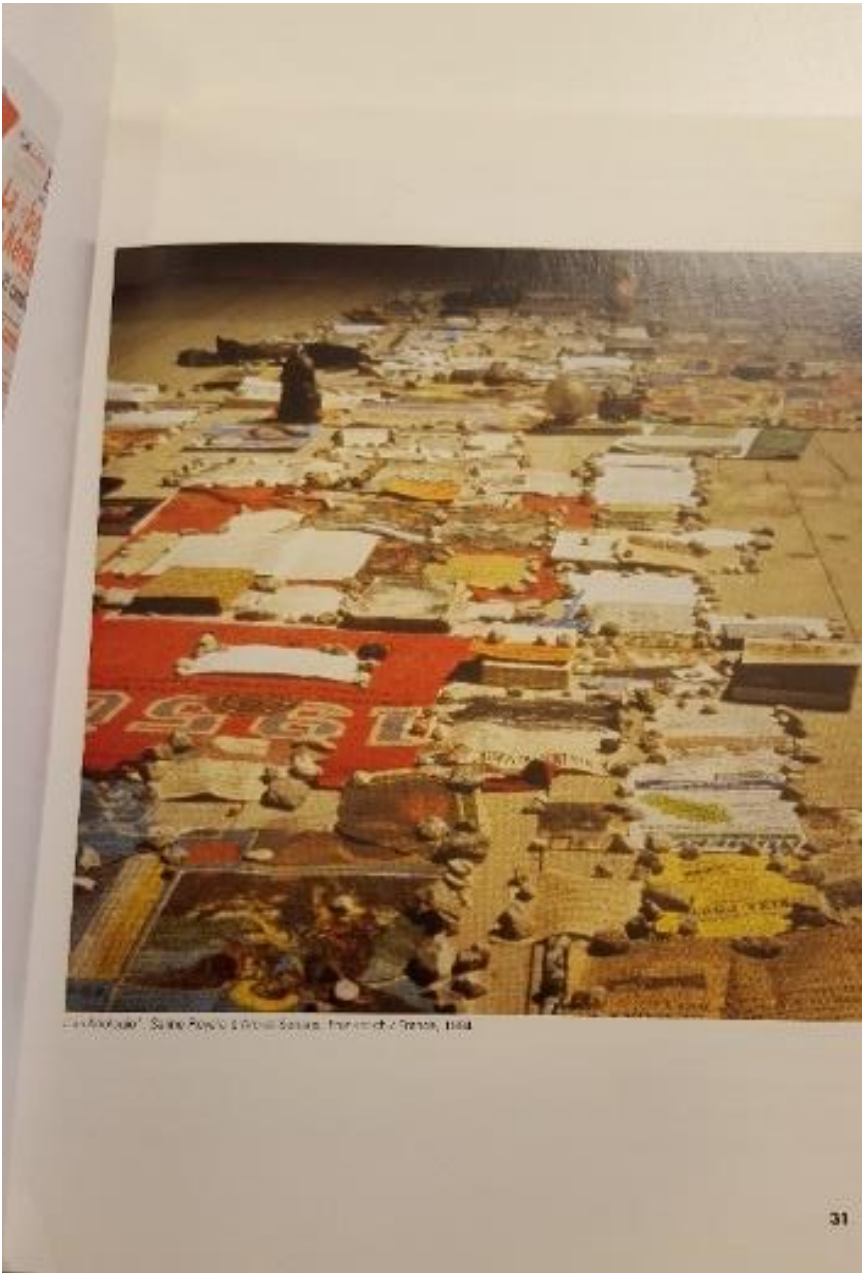


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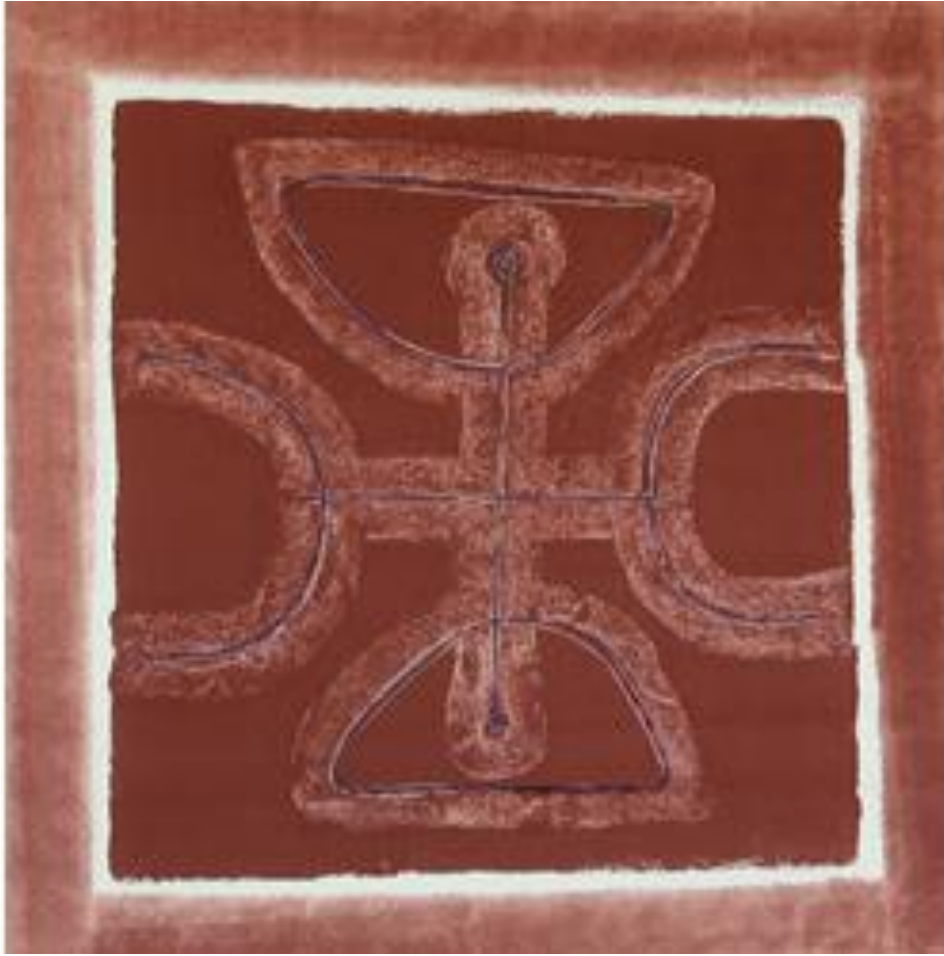


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Figure 30: <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/hazoume/>

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