

**SPARCK**

Space for Panafrican Research Creation and Knowledge

T O T E M S



© Hervé Youmbi

AFRICA  CENTRE

Hervé Youmbi's mobile multi-media installation is on a 4-city tour across the continent. Straight from the Dak'Art Biennale, Totems will be erected at the Drill Hall in downtown Johannesburg on **24 June 2010**, before moving to Cotonou and Kinshasa.

"Totems" considers the impact of late capitalism on the contemporary African art world. In the 1990s, artists from Africa joined the global rush to enter the North's grand "temples of art" – the cluster of celebrated museums, galleries, auction houses, festival and fairs in and around which the high stakes, big bucks power game of art plays out. The hype that accompanies this headlong rush has turned these spaces into veritable objects of lust for artists from the "developing world", many of whom will never be invited to show their work there. "Totems" casts a critical gaze on this state of affairs, exposing clichés intrinsic to the global art market: clichés that brand industrialised nations as paradises in the imaginaries of artists whose own countries offer them little in the way of recognition or infrastructural support and that simultaneously relegate their work to second-rate status.

"Totems" is a two-pronged critique. It interrogates the aesthetic and monetary values and the criteria for recognition imposed by the art world's "first world" hubs. At the same time, it queries the choices made by artists hailing from the "developing" world and, in the process, challenges them to think differently about the very nature of validation. Now as at the height of the colonial period, power – economic, political, social, cultural – remains resolutely in the hands of the Northern "centre". Under the circumstances, Youmbi argues, looking to the North from the South is a fraught project: the mix of longing and anger that it causes for so many is at best unproductive. This is true for artists as for others. From artists, however, it should call forth a particular type of response, he holds. New types of criteria and spaces are needed, new approaches to validation. These need to emerge away from the self-appointed centre, at the hands of creators willing to develop novel ways of thinking about art – wherever it comes from.

The time for "centres" and "peripheries", "leaders" and "followers" is long past, "Totems" argues. What is needed now is engagement in an explicitly multi-centred dialogue. This dialogue, however, will not come to pass, Youmbi suggests, if those whom the "centre" keeps at bay continue to look at it through blinders or as guests at a party to which they have not been invited.

"Totems" is a two-part installation – completely mobile and modifiable depending on its location – made of travel bags and a series of photographs.

The photographs depict artists hailing from the "third world". The artists' eyes are hidden behind dark sunglasses. The primary function of glasses is to improve the wearer's vision. Here they do the contrary. The vision of the men and women who wear them is impeded. Everything they see is filtered through the prism of a branding device: the logo of a major museum (Louvre, Tate Modern, MOMA, Pompidou Centre, Guggenheim Bilbao) gallery, auction house (Saatchi, Sotheby's) or art fair (Art Basel, FIAC, Venice biennale), or the stylized rendition of a work deemed "iconic" by these temples of the contemporary art world (work by Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Xiao Gang, Andy Warhol, Takashi Murakamo...). An artist wearing such a pair of glasses can "see" through them, but everything he sees is shaped by the brand marker through which his/her gaze is filtered and by the mix of admiration, envy, longing and alienation that s/he experiences in the process.

The totems - columns of varying size - are constructed from travel bags piled on top of one another like brickwork. Each bag is adorned with an image: again, logos (museums,

auction houses, art fairs) or stylized depictions of “iconic” artwork. The travel bags are symbols of hope for achievement and fortune, as well as desire for exploration and conquest (a reversal of the colonial trope). At the same time, they speak to the fact that most African artists do not feel, and are not considered to be, at home in the Northern art world. Fundamental to their meaning is the kind of bag they reference: a type of carrier used by millions of Africans daily, as they move across airports and train stations worldwide. This on the one hand evokes the central place that Africa occupies in an increasingly mobile globalised world and, on the other hand, the complex effects that this accelerated movement can have on individuals and communities.

The installation is highly mobile and flexible. How it is displayed largely depends on the location. The bags used to build the columns are made of sturdy, water-resistant fabric and the portraits are printed on tarpaulin. Both are simple to pack and light: the bags fold and fit into a few suitcases and the portraits are easily rolled up in plastic tubing. All of this makes for straightforward and inexpensive transport: the piece can travel with the artist as checked luggage. In order to raise the columns, the travel bags are filled with foam. Simple mounts are used, which are produced to order in each venue where the work is shown.

The work is physically altered by its travels not only in how it responds to individual venues, but also by what and whom the artist encounters in each city. In every location, one or more new portraits are added to the collection: pictures of artists Youmbi meets along the way. In this manner, the installation evolves, echoing in tangible ways the itineraries of the artist and his bags as they move through (rather than away from) the continent’s art world.

## Totems opens at the Point Blank Gallery | Drill Hall on Thursday 24 June 2010 @ 17:30

Exhibition closes on 2 July 2010

Plein & Twist Streets

Joubert Park

Entrance Plein St

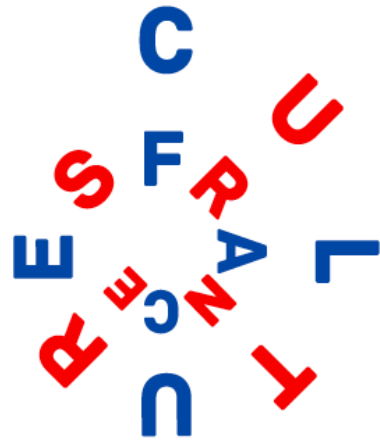
 Safe parking available

For more information:  
011 - 333 1112  
078 - 764 4741



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With the generous support of:



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Hervé Youmbi's "Totems" will be joined by:

**Ruben Abels (Netherlands), Iris Vetter (Netherlands) and Pamela Phatsimu Sunstrum (USA/Botswana) for a one-day international art show!**

**Opens: 30 June at 5.30pm  
Closes: 01 July 2010**

Special Thanks to:  
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Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi