

Chocolate, Banana & Banana Chocolate

Chocolate.....

Moana Mboka (Lingala for “the boy from back home”) has been living in China for three years. This man of the chocolate hued skin made his way here for health reasons (better care in these parts) and stayed because the business opportunities were good. Though he decided against nostalgia, his ties to Africa remain strong. The continent can and will break the bonds holding it back, he insists, if it hitches its wagon to the China Mao Tse Tung built. 20 000 chocolate folk make their home in Guangzhou and another 200 000 pass through every year, for business purposes mainly. A good percentage of the 20 000 live in a neighbourhood the press calls “Chocolate City” and “Little Africa”. The truth, though, is that there is no African ghetto here. The 20 000 and the 200 000 together have turned the whole of Guangzhou into a chocolate city.

Moana Mboka, our African guide, tells us tale after tale of this city-as-market, capital of Guandong Province and factory to the world.

Moana Mboka is a pseudonym, of course: the name we have given this expatriate who dreams of an Africa no longer “developing”, but once and for all developed...



Banana.....

Vincent is Chinese and has been living in Guangzhou for a few years now. The economic crisis, he explains, has brought down the number of Africans in the city, many of whom, he says, have now moved on to India in quest of greener pastures. There is much to be gained culturally from exchanges between Africa and China, he tells us, but many an opportunity has been squandered on the Asian side: too much attention is being paid to profit and too little to other forms of gain. He guides us through the city, shows us spaces dedicated to culture and creation, brings us to the art centre he runs and



Chocolate Banana.....

The young Chinese artist with a thing for Congolese food wanted to see how far he could take his romance with Africa. Basically, he decided to become African, like

tells us of the Africans who come to visit it - but are they “real” Africans, he wonders aloud, African Africans, or might they be Afro-Europeans, Afro-Asians, African-Americans? It’s a thick palette, all of this, and it makes more complicated still the nature of China’s relation to Africa. Vincent also tells us about Chinese folks who live in Europe: bananas, they call them here, because they’re yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Later, Vincent introduces us to a young artist whose friends are for the most part Congolese guys. The artist says he has a thing for Congolese food; there’s this dish he loves, made, he claims, with rotten fish. He has it often, in a local African restaurant staffed by a Chinese chef.

the Congolese friends from whom he’s learned to love rumba and reggae. To do this, he went on a tanning binge: 365 days of full-body exposure to the rays of the sun. With Swiss watch timing - this hour to that hour precisely, every day - and the determination of Shaka Zulu himself. He’s got video to prove it: transhumance by way of melanin enhancement, a metaphor for the shifts daily underway, some visible, others less, in the migration, back, forth, diagonally, through and through, between this place and that place, Africa and China, China and Africa. In Kinshasa and Maputo, young men wear Che Guevara T-Shirts made in Chocolate City, China by yellow hued folk

who speak Lingala.

Chocolate Banana...

B&G residencies:
Guangzhou: January 2010
Bonendale/Douala: April 2010 (Art Bakery)
Dakar: May 2010 (Dak’Art Off)
Basel: June 2010 (Focus 10 / Art Basel)
Brazzaville: July 2010 (CCF)



Chocolate Banana

A piece by Bill Kouéliany and Goddy Leye

The piece, created during a residency in Guangzhou, is a mobile video installation on migration between Africa and China. The subject is a rich one, open to a wide variety of approaches, which we have given ourselves leave to explore.

Our video is shown in taxis that we have outfitted to resemble taxis in Guangzhou: on the divider between the front and back seats, we have installed small flat screen monitors. In Guangzhou, the monitors play video clips about the city. Here, they play our video. People who take the taxis - from everyday folk to members of the art fair public - are the audience for the piece.

A man appears, who begins to tell a story. He is an African from DRC living in China. He has been in Guangzhou for three years. His story opens onto many other stories. Stories of paths: paths taken in life and not, paths that cross, paths lost, found, direct sometimes, but more often than not winding and prone to lead into dead ends. Our storyteller acts as a go-between for Chinese and African traders. “I help with difficult situations”, he says. Often things are complicated between African traders as well and, there too, he helps.

Through his story we learn how Africans acquire goods in Guangzhou for export back to the Continent. And we begin to see how this modern Mecca of a city transforms those who encounter her.

Our man did not come here to trade. A phys ed teacher sidelined by injury, he came in search of a good doctor’s care. What he learned here, we have learned too: this city leaves none indifferent. As you move through and in and out of her streets, she changes you.

And so we wonder: together, can we dream of a day when Africa’s cities will come alive like this city? And when they do, will the rest of the planet shut-down?

Our main character crosses paths with another man, a Chinese artist. The Chinese man tells a very different story - not for balance (this piece we have created is not a documentary) - but for difference: the telling of other dreams and paths followed to find them.

Footage of the city and in particular of “Little Africa”, home to most Africans in Guangzhou, tells still another story. A back-story for the characters in our video.

B&G
The Congolese man speaks French. The Chinese man speaks English.



AFRICA CENTRE



SPARCK

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PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEYS

A SPARCK PROJECT
 SPACE FOR PAN-AFRICAN RESEARCH, CREATION AND KNOWLEDGE

SPARCK is a programme of the Africa Centre, an NGO based in Cape Town, dedicated to supporting African contemporary creation. SPARCK is a Pan-African initiative of residencies, installations, performances, publications and web platforms. It has no centre, no one place from which it operates: SPARCK is a resolutely open, moving, experimental and engaged project, whose activities manifest in a wide range of forms and places, across Africa and her diasporas.

SPARCK is built around three-year thematic modules. The first of these modules (2009-2011), NETWORKS, explores translocal cultures that drive our contemporary, hyper-globalised world: cultures that live and grow outside the ambit of borders, institutional rules and artificial divides between the “formal” and the “informal”. At the heart of NETWORKS is a key question: how can we deploy creative practices to understand the art, the uses and misuses of deal-making: the constant, unbelievably rapid and ever-shifting exchange of goods, objects, ideas, dreams and cruelties that fuels monetary, political, social and aesthetic economies in our extraordinarily violent late capitalist era? NETWORKS seeks to answer this question in alternative ways, looking to artists rather than economists or academics, the IMF or the World Bank, and to do so not from boardrooms or classrooms in Washington, Paris or London, but from spaces of everyday life in Africa and the African diaspora - from a neighbourhood in Kinshasa called People’s Republic of China, from Little Senegal in Harlem, from a fast food restaurant in Dakar named Little Manhattan, from Matonge quarter (both of them, identically named, one located in Brussels, the other in Kinshasa)... For SPARCK, Africa is both a focus and a platform, a locus to and from which we propose to look to think globally about our collective present and possible futures as inhabitants of planet Earth.

SPARCK sponsors, supports and collaborates on numerous projects. Each project is independent, but all are linked to the basic question(s) asked by the NETWORKS programme. Among these many projects is one entitled “Photographic Journeys”, a series of six one-month residencies that bring together nine artists in six cities: three in Africa - Aba (Nigeria), Lubumbashi (DRC) and Touba (Senegal) - and three in the diaspora, the first of which is Guangzhou (China). Some are mid-sized urban centres, other are megacities; all are major centres of deal-making positioned at the heart of networks that crisscross the globe. The three Africa residencies took place in 2009-2010; participating artists were Emeka Okereke (Aba), Sammy Baloji (Lubumbashi) and Aliou Mbaye (Touba). The first diaspora residency, in Guangzhou, occurred in early 2010, bringing together two artists, Bill Kouéliany and Goddy Leye. The work that they produced there and in a follow-up residency in Bonendale, Cameroon, is entitled “Chocolate Banana”. It was first shown in the Off programme of the Dakar Biennale in May 2010 and now comes to Focus 10 at Art Basel. It will then move on to Brazzaville, Bill Kouéliany’s home, where it will be hosted by the Centre Culturel Français.

When all six of the Photographic Journeys have been completed, an exhibition will be organised. This, however, will not be an ordinary exhibition. The works will be displayed in public, urban spaces as flashes of light: broadcast as massive projections onto the façades of buildings in cities across the world, creating palimpsests - superimpositions in which one city and then another and another, in wall-high blow-up images, mix it up with still other cities on whose surfaces the images are projected. These showings will be accompanied by sound, slam poetry, performance and, if previous SPARCK events are any indication, much impromptu debate.

FROM CHINA WITH LOVE...

I wake up bursting with energy. Some days are like that - no reason: just the way it is. Days ablaze with the power to get things done. Doubts, frustration, anger: there yesterday, gone today. Life is a stage director. What will today be made of?

I check my emails. Answer Kadiatou. She’s tried everything to get Goddy a Chinese visa. Gotta keep trying, I write back, fire on all cylinders. Somehow he’ll get to Guangzhou. And this work will get done. Even if all we’ve got is a week: this is going to happen.

The money issue, I try to ignore. I don’t even want to think about the bill SPARCK is racking up with these countless trips back and forth Goddy is making from his home in Douala to the Chinese embassy in Yaounde. I know: I know how much I had to spend on taxis, emails, printouts, all for documents that end up in a pile somewhere, useless and forgotten.

When a child comes into the world, you know. Everybody sees the baby - pretty, ugly - but the thickness leading up to that moment, the work of it: very few people see that. And that’s a problem. I believe in showing the how of it, the process, the fear, the pain, the conviction one has at times that it just can’t be done: showing how we get from the nothingness of the there to the absolute presence of the here.

The room, doorbell. I open. Two hotel staff flanked by four policemen. Dark uniforms. The hallway is dark too, darker than I remember it. Like death row.

- The police need to see your passport.

- ...

- Where are you from?

- Congo.

Congo! Congo! The cop closest to me keeps repeating. Badge #020419. The word Congo comes out of his mouth and, along the way, gets tangled up in a Chinese sentence. What does he think this is about? Dirty business he’d rather not be handling this early in the A.M.? Or just a routine check?

My passport is doing the rounds: from one hand (badge #020419) to the next and the next. None of the cops speak English. A woman on the hotel staff is translating back and forth. There’s a disconnect, though. They’re chattering away - lots and lots of words - and she’s saying little in English. It’s driving me nuts. As it is, Chinese sounds harsh to my ears; now it’s starting to sound like guns firing. One wrong move and you’re hit. Then there’s laughter: the lady and the cops are yucking it up. One of the policemen - not badge #020419; a larger specimen - comes up to me fast. Like he wants to get down to serious business. Down on the ground? He’s gesticulating, pointing at me, then at his colleagues, then back at me.

Tomorrow I’m to show up at police headquarters, the hotel lady says.

I close the door. Through the peephole, I watch them walk away, become fiction.

Feels like a (bad) dream...

Excerpted: From *China with Love* , by Bill Kouéliany

TRANSLATIONS, PROVISIONS & TOLLS

A TRAVELLER'S TOOLKIT

Our singular species, a post-primate entity equipped with a large brain and wont to travel upright through the biosphere, is a recent development: Mother Nature came upon the idea of us just a little while ago and so here we are now, afoot on Earth, the solar system's warmest planet, we are told. We've been at it, populating any and all lands above the water line, since our ancestors' very first days. Out of Africa it is - archaeology says so and evolutionary science concurs. We march on. Or at any rate walk. A walking species, we, by definition. Homo mobilis: we move therefore we are. Who we are is a function of tensions, always already present, between the here and the there, where we are and where we might be, how and whether and where we stay or go. Everywhere - in all cultures, all places - "here" rimes with "clear": things sure, familiar, serene; "there", elsewhere, is a matter of doubt, anxiety, the strange, the unknown. Shall we grow roots or drift, unmoored? Gather moss or roll? Might there be a middle ground? Homo mobilis #1, the very first of our kind, probably had that question in mind. Accompanied by #2, 3 and 4 (possibly more) s/he settled on a piece of Earth's crust and (for a time, at least) made a home there. With roots came rules and then exclusions. Battles too, to defend the now private enclave: this is mine; you, my friend, will move on. To hell with hospitality. Fences and walls and moats followed. Homo militaris was born and, fast behind, homo bureaucrat, demanding the right words (vernaculars, translations, dictionaries), sufficient means and appropriate papers (passwords and insignia first, then passports and visas). Those first enclaves have grown into nation states overseen by governments hell bent on sovereignty. Borders, borders everywhere.

To the dustbin of history! Borders, that is.

We've all been branded: homo sapiens sapiens is now officially postmodern. But doesn't travel unfettered. There's those damn borders, of course, but also all that baggage - nostalgia, for one, travelling first - or cattle-class, in the bags, even, of those who are running for their lives and will never look back. Music, also, and games, recipes, techniques for fermenting (bread, alcohol), ways of doing and thinking and clothing our bodies... All of these, always, have been part of the trip, provisions for the voyages we set out upon, translating who we are - name, body parts, dreams. We cross paths with others also on their ways elsewhere, bearing baggage too, and our provisions and their provisions - material, immaterial - meet. Come together, connive, mix and meld ... or not, failing to do so and so setting on a course for collision, disdainful, angry, ugly. Mostly, we eye one another and consider the possibilities.



Bill Kouelany

Multimedia artist and writer.
Lives and works in Brazzaville.

Author of "Cafard, Cafarde" ("Bugged"), presented at TILF International French Language Theatre, Paris, and co-author with playwright Jean Paul Delore of "Peut-être", a jury selection of the Francophonies en Limousin festival (both 2007).

Selected recent exhibitions:

- 2010: Off, Dakar Biennale (Senegal); Focus 10, Art Basel (Switzerland); Chocolate Banana (SPARCK)
- 2009: PANAFA: 2nd Pan-African Festival, Algiers (Algeria)
- 2008: Casa Africa, Las Palmas (Canary Islands)
- 2007: Documenta 12, Kassel (Germany)
- 2007: Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin (Germany)
- 2006: Dakar Biennale, official selection (Senegal)

SHADOWLANDS

Standing on the dock before travel begins in this startling ChinAfro / AfroChinese voyage: two artists. She, Bill Kouélany, is Congolese, he, Goddy Leye, Cameroonian. Neither takes anything lying down. A hard-headed crew, and an ambiguous one to boot. What they do and show as artists - paint, film, write - will speak for itself, they insist, or just stay silent. They have nothing to add. No exegesis. No comment. As for this - their latest project - it is not a documentary, they state. It bears no witness, is certainly not a travel diary or (worse) a thesis - in sociology or anything else; it's not a novel, it ain't the movies and no, absolutely no, it isn't some kind of docu-fiction... And yet, it is all these things, bits and parts and shreds of each, along with others - many others - for which a name remains to be found. Migration is a topic, certainly, complete with pseudo-concepts ("migrancy", "migritude", the scholars intone) standing in for things on which no one has the beginning of a handle. The point, though, here, is to do away with all the labels, flush them out and away, exit all the blabla and its ability to stop thought dead in its tracks. And so it is the genres - the ways of seeing and doing and saying - that migrate in the piece our two artists have created. We are at sea in a shift-flux, inside-outside, space-time vessel. At large in a cosmopolitan world. Cosmopolitan but not border-free. This is not NGOland; there is no room here for happy dreams of humanitarian justice. No clichés. No identity politics. Let it be perfectly clear: there are countries, continents, nation states, papers/IDs/passports ... and so, yes, sadly, there are borders built to keep out those who would come in. Still, despite the hard edges and the cuts and bruises they visit on passing limbs, there are other things: there are porous spaces and moments that the borders somehow never manage to foreclose, tiny breaks and tears through which dreams and slivers of flesh, rhythms and images and words filter in and out, bringing with them the heartbeat of emergent histories. Despite it all, subjects and poems travel.

The subject and the poem, here, are a strange and heady mix: pungent stuff. The recipe may sound sweet, but on the senses, up close and personal, it's dynamite: chocolate banana. To begin with, there's a colour clash (black vs yellow; one hue here - deep cocoa - and two there (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) and there's a shape clash as well - a flat rectangle cut into small squares vs a curvy phallic thang. The mix makes fun (and in the process makes a mess) of the usual clichés: Africa as sex toy, hot and heavy and fruity; Europe, the old continent, tired and in need of chocolaty afrodisiacs. Chocolate the colour of ink - "encre de Chine" (China ink) in French, but - ah! Orientalism - "India ink" for English speakers... A forest of symbols growing dense and wild, paths winding through and across and under. Have we crumbs to find our way back? B&G are busy making it as hard as they can for us, moving the signposts, complicating the terrain. As far East as they can take us, for some good, radical decentring.

Regardless, it's a mish-mass-mess: contaminations, borrowings, exchanges, mixings, symbioses, parasitic collusions, fusions. No one ever comes out intact from these contacts, these proximities, these comings together. No one. And so it is that human cultures - no matter where or when or who - are exercises in marquetry, elegant inlayings and weddings of disparate elements, rather than the pure, unadulterated wholes - fictions, all - invented by the miserable arts of communitarian and essentialist politics.

Still, here were are, fast in the hold of a turbo-capitalist craft gone berserk on the high seas of our late age. Money Money Money makes it all go round and homo mobilis is on the run, chasing more and more and more cash. By land, sea and air all roads lead to China. Buy it cheap over there, sell it for more somewhere else: it's win win every time. So long as Beijing keeps a cap the Yuan. So long...

Lionel Manga
Essayist
Author of « L'ivresse du papillon »
Editions Artisteafrika/Edimontagne
2009

Douala, May 2010



Goddy Leye

Multimedia artist and hactivist.
Lives and works in Bonendale / Douala.

Founder of Art Bakery, a laboratory for contemporary creation located in Bonendale, on the outskirts of Douala. Artists and historians of contemporary art come to the Bakery from around the world for residencies, academic training and a wide variety of creative undertakings.

Selected recent exhibitions:

- 2010: Off, Dakar Biennale (Senegal); Focus 10, Art Basel (Switzerland); Chocolate Banana (SPARCK)
- 2010: Johannesburg Art Fair (Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin, Germany)
- 2009: Peter Herrmann Gallery, Berlin (Germany)
- 2009: Pret à Partager, Dakar (Senegal) and Maputo (Mozambique)
- 2009: PANAFA: 2nd Pan-African Festival, Algiers (Algeria)

This isn't a first for them. Both have been in the business of going global and decentring for some time now, she moving onward and outward from the River Congo, he from the River Wouri, from Brazzaville and Douala to the sea and the skies beyond. Goddy, years ago already, in an installation that turned a white cube gallery into a sacred space filled with evanescent signs: calligraphy traced in dust and sand, impossible to approach without scattering it to the winds. Bill in "Vagabondages" ("A Vagabond's Travels"), the first of her texts that she chose to make public, in tandem with her first paintings, a far cry from the Poto-Poto school that the scholars said was Congo Brazzaville's one and only contribution to modern art. Now in the heart of AfricAsia, just off the boat and moving fast, Bill & Goddy are hard at work pulling roots, channelling old captain Tchicaya U Tam'si from all those years ago, way back when: "Far from my roots too. I'll take to circling the globe, while waiting to move onward to other galaxies. Peace born of freedom from all ties, from loyalty sworn to putrid agonies. I set my wounds on fire. Heartache from now on will leave me cold. To those whom life would moor to the motherland I have this to say: Move! Get out! Toss out the taboos, viva la vida: live life large!" And expand: walk, run, drift, grab independence by the throat... Get a move on! Which is precisely what that taxi arrangement is that B&G have devised to launch their chocolate banana into motion. Here - but then again: where's here? - they've got it zipping around the city in the back of a cab. Movement all around. Metaphoros - you knew that, right: that the Greek word for "metaphor" means movement? Call it a modern metaphor, or a metaphor for modernity. Here and there (where did you say?), in Africa as in China, taxis make good trans-spaces: transport, translation, transition, transposition. In this car they've taken over, transformed so it looks like a Guangzhou taxicab, you can take a long trip on a small screen, see far and wide and in motion the video way. A large space in a small space positioned in a slightly larger space - a Russian doll arrangement; non-stop movement; free-floating signifiers: good and ironic short circuiting meant to mess with any attempt at claiming the essence of roots, colours or cultures. Move along now: ain't nothin' to say, but everything, yet, to see and hear. Welcome aboard the good ship Chocolate Banana. Some luggage, though, we won't be taking onboard: "Where you at?" "Where you from?" "Where you going?" No room, here, for that old, stale stuff. We're looking for new material here.

Nicolas Martin-Granel
Academic

Paris, May 2010