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Dominique Malaquais



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“You have to look for tropes that play in the market. The trope of the burden of Africanness is what collectors are looking for”

(Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi quoted in Baumgardner [2015: n. p.]).

“[E]very art production will be absorbed quickly into the commercial cycle that transforms not only the meaning of art but also the very nature of this art”

(Marcel Broodthaers quoted in Alberro [2009: 2]).

In 2010, Cameroonian artist Hervé Youmbi (1973-) embarked upon a project titled *Totems to Haunt Our Dreams*¹. This undertaking led him to several cities: Douala, where he makes his home; Aba, in Eastern Nigeria; Dakar; Johannesburg; Cotonou; Kinshasa; and New York City. Four years later, astride Douala and the Grassfields region of Western Cameroon, he set to work on a second project, called *Visages de masques* (“Faces of Masks”). In both *Totems* and *Visages*, Youmbi examines the place—and, at times, the non-place—that artists hailing from Africa occupy in the global art

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1. The French language title of *Totems to Haunt Our Dreams* is *Ces totems qui hantent la mémoire des fils de Mamadou* (literally, These totems that haunt the memory of Mamadou’s sons). The present essay was first articulated in the context of a paper given at the Institut français d’Afrique du Sud, Johannesburg, on 10 March 2015 (<<http://ifas.hypotheses.org/1648>>) and, in revised form, at École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, on 27 March 2015. Selected ideas addressed in the first part of the paper were initially explored in two previous publications (MALAQUAIS 2011, 2012). The text presented here draws on extensive conversations and formal interviews with Hervé Youmbi between 2009 and 2016, in person as well as online and by telephone. I am most grateful to the artist for his openness in discussing his process and goals and for his support of my work. I hope, with these pages, to do justice to his œuvre and to the many insights he has generously shared with me. Many thanks too to Gary Van Wyk and Lisa Brittan, Hervé Youmbi’s New York gallerists, for their keen observations and encouragement, to Silvia Forni, whose knowledge of Youmbi’s practice and production resonates throughout these pages, and to Ann Cassiman, Filip de Boeck and Renzo Martens, whose suggestion of key sources played an important role in shaping the closing section of this text.

world. With considerable humor, a trenchant dose of irony and a richly nuanced reading of contemporary political and economic landscapes, he takes to task the structural violence of the institutions that constitute this world. Together, *Totems* and *Visages* powerfully critique the art market, the spaces and practices to which it gives rise, and the larger, late-capitalist system to which they collectively belong.

While they share certain fundamental formal and conceptual features², *Totems* and *Visages* engage in distinct ways with the market and the art world institutions that it undergirds. In the following pages, I seek to highlight and to unpack these differences. Of particular interest to me are ways in which each project envisages the phenomenon of commodification. Key considerations, addressed in a range of manners by both endeavors, include the dangers that commodification presents, the pleasures that it procures, the desire to move beyond its ambit, the craving to partake of it, the means one might deploy to counterbalance its effects and the uses to which it can most effectively be put. I also contemplate how and to what effects concepts of perceived value, monetary worth and fetishization are brought to bear in the two projects. Notions of co-optation, a central concern in both undertakings, draw my attention as well.

Because *Totems* and *Visages* are works in progress, still unfolding as I write, the analysis I propose is tentative. Both experiments are characterized by multiple layers of signification and, as they evolve, they will develop new layers still, impacting both their meanings and the relation they entertain with one another. This will be the case, in particular, with the *Visages* project. As I show in the second part of the paper, its very essence hinges on changes of status: its constituent elements are meant explicitly to move across locations and, in the process, across registers of sense. With each shift, new strata of meaning accrue and, with them, new interpretative possibilities.

Totems to Haunt our Dreams

Totems is an ephemeral architecture: a shifting, morphable space that moves across continents and oceans to tell a politically charged story about what it means to be an artist at work on the global art scene today. By way of this movable architecture, *Totems* debunks a cluster of preconceived notions. First among these are widely held perceptions about the place on the international art market of artists who make their home in Africa.

2. This is due in part to the fact that the two projects were developed concurrently. While production on *Totems* and *Visages* began in 2010 and 2014 respectively, their conception overlaps. As early as 2010, when he was in the thick of bringing *Totems* into being, Youmbi was at work on preliminary sketches for the elaboration of *Visages*.

Rush for the Center

In the mainstream media, increasing attention is paid to places in Western Europe and North America that African women and men risk life and limb to reach (Benson 2015). Over and over, one hears horror stories suggesting that Africa is little more than a space of pathos: a locus of poverty, pain and desperation, whose inhabitants are intent above all on leaving. In this representation, little concern is shown for other types of quests by Africans: the desire to reach places in the “North” (and increasingly in the “East”) not only because lives depend upon it, but also because they hold interest for people engaged in building carefully planned alternative futures. In print, online and on television, strikingly little attention is paid to the fact that, for millions of Africans, making one’s way to such places can be a matter not only of survival, but also of bourgeois dreams of investment and pleasure.

Totems takes this lack of interest and turns it on its head. It looks at the fascination that certain places in the North exert on African imaginaries wholly outside the sphere of daily survival, precisely because they are spaces of bourgeois aspiration. These loci, Youmbi tells us, become veritable “fetishes”, or “totems”, in the eyes of those who dream of reaching them, for they have come to function as symbols of success in what art historian Olu Oguibe (2004) calls “the culture game”. The places that Youmbi has in mind are very particular ones: museums, galleries, auction houses and international art fairs. All are located in the North. They are the trendsetters of the contemporary art world: where an artist needs to be if s/he is going to play the culture game effectively—by the rules of the art market, that is.

This shift in gaze that Youmbi proposes, a distinctive refusal to dwell on pathos, comes as a welcome move away from clichés. It is not, however, a happy foray into a world of moneyed possibilities. Equal parts humor, irony and cold appraisal, *Totems* is a powerful call for change. It demands that artists in the “South” do for themselves what others—Northern curators, African governments and bourgeoisies—so often fail to do: evacuate tired tropes according to which Europe and North America are the center and Africa lies on the margins, in order to develop spaces from which artists in Africa can themselves define what is relevant and, in turn, make this relevant to the art market.

Artists in the South, Youmbi observes, are bedazzled by museums like the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim and the Louvre, by auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christies, and by international art fairs such as FIAC³ and Art Basel. They are blinded, he tells us, and lost as if they were in a maze. *Totems* brings this argument to life. The work is in two parts: an ephemeral

3. Foire internationale d’art contemporain, held yearly in Paris since 1974.

maze made of stacked travel bags (fig. 1) and a photo-gallery of giant portraits. The portraits feature artists from so-called “developing countries” sporting sunglasses stencilled with the logos of major Northern art spaces: the Tate Modern, Great Britain’s premier venue for contemporary art (*see cover*), New York’s MOMA, the Louvre and FIAC. The logos make any kind of proper vision impossible. All that the wearers can see are the backs of the totem-space advertisements branded onto their eyewear. They are literally blinded.

The portraits are arrayed around the columns of travel bags, among which viewers are invited to wander in search of meaning. The bags are of a type that low-income travellers from Africa use to ferry products of various kinds for sale on distinctly less glamorous markets: food, cloth, inexpensive manufactured goods⁴. Each bag, like the sunglasses, carries a “high art” logo. Among the spaces referenced, in addition to the Tate Modern, MOMA, Louvre and FIAC, are the Metropolitan and Guggenheim Museums, the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Art Basel International Art Fair, and the Sotheby’s and Christies auction houses. The entire installation folds and rolls into a suitcase and a few poster tubes. It is art ready-to-go, prepared for a head-long rush across oceans should the self-anointed center come calling.

Commodification

Yumbi does not stand above the fray, claiming to be different from the logo-blinded artists he portrays. He identifies himself as one of many such creators, appalled by the totems game, but prepared all the same to partake in the possibilities of its moneyed pleasures. Hence a self-portrait that he shot in Johannesburg, in which he is seen wearing glasses branded with a depiction of another sort of art world totem: an iconic 1981 work by Andy Warhol in the shape of a dollar sign (fig. 2). Several artists whose portraits appear in the *Totems* installation also sport glasses emblazoned with Warhol’s *Dollar*, as well as with depictions of other contemporary art world icons, notably Damien Hirst’s (in)famous *Golden Calf* (2008) and diamond-encrusted skull, *For the Love of God* (2007) (fig. 3). These same icons of art world success appear in logo form on the bags that make up the columns at the center of the installation. Also present are images of such renowned contemporary works as Takashi Murakami’s *Panda* (2003) and *Homage to Louis Vuitton* (2002) and Jeff Koons’ *Rabbit* (1986) and *Balloon Dog* (1994-2000).

4. These cheap, sturdy, two-handled and zippered carriers, mostly (though not exclusively) made in China, are widely used throughout the continent. In many parts of West Africa, they are referred to as “Ghana-must-go” bags. Originally derogatory, this appellation was introduced in Nigeria in the early 1980s. In Ghana itself, they are often called “*efiewura sua me*” (“help me carry my bag”).

The focus on art world success and, more broadly, on money and fame in the installation is fraught. On the one hand, Youmbi shows, he is fascinated with the fetish spaces and artworks that *Totems* references. Unequivocally, he makes clear, he wants to be exhibited alongside Hirst, Murakami, Koons and others of their international stature. On the other hand, he staunchly objects to the economics and the politics of a world in which he and his peers have little choice but to seek such proximity. Inherent in the installation is, thus, a fundamental conflict. At hand is not a univocal message.

Nor is this simply about the artist, or artists more generally. It is also a matter of institutions—of the totem spaces themselves and what they want from artists like Youmbi. This is not, Youmbi's installation suggests, merely a matter of artists on the so-called periphery aiming to penetrate the self-professed center. It is also a story of that center gaining power and prestige from engaging with what the art market persists in defining as the "outside": with Africa (or the South more broadly). Indeed, as Youmbi points out, such fetish space museums, galleries and art fairs as are referenced in the installation gain a great deal from instrumentalizing African artists. The latter are brought in in carefully calibrated increments to spice up an art-world center that might otherwise prove dull. Thus, for example, the Louvre, which a few years ago lent contemporary flair to a rather staid exhibition on the British 19th century painter and printmaker William Hogarth by prefacing it with an installation by the Nigerian and British artist Yinka Shonibare MBE⁵ (Member of the Order of the British Empire). Or, for another, more recent example, the 56th edition of the Venice Biennale, which called on the famed Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor in a bid to bring firmly into the global 21st century an art world venue better known till now for its Northern bias (Lane 2015).

A complex back and forth is at work, *Totems* suggests, in which Southern artists reaching for the center exist in a symbiotic, but highly unequal relationship with a center calling on them to bring itself into being⁶. This relationship, in Youmbi's eyes, is akin to a maze. It constitutes a seductive danger zone in which African artists run the risk of losing themselves: of being reduced to the role of exotic commodities, even as they themselves actively seek to commodify the fetish spaces in which they dream of being put on display. Hence the maze-like quality of the central column arrangement in the installation, a place in which one risks, literally, getting lost.

For readers familiar with Achille Mbembe's (2001) writings on post-colonial alienation, a subject of considerable interest to Youmbi, the foregoing makes a great deal of sense. Indeed, it constitutes a strikingly elegant iteration of ways in which such alienation functions. Briefly, Mbembe's

5. *William Hogarth (1697-1764)*, 20 October-8 January 2007.

6. This position echoes T. TRINH's (1991: 17) much-quoted observation that "without the margin, there is no center, no heart".

argument is that, in the postcolony, the few rule over the many thanks to a system that encourages the latter to buy into their own oppression by aspiring to and by mimicking the violence and the vulgarity of their oppressors—that is, by participating in their own abjection. This, arguably, is precisely the process in which Youmbi's artists are engaged.

Rejoinders

There is more to the installation's argument than this, however. At the same time as he is concerned with issues of structural violence and abjection, Youmbi is determined to think through and to hope for ways of fighting back. One method for doing so, he argues—one key way of countering the blinded rush to the center that the institutions of the art market impose—is to create networks that operate outside established institutions. In particular, he is an advocate for developing artist-to-artist networks that privilege fluidity, building bridges between people and places where institutions fail to do so because they are too big, too rigid and, most importantly, too intimately tied to the global art market.

In Africa, perhaps more so than elsewhere, Youmbi points out, it is difficult for artists to connect with one another. Travel within the continent, he notes, is prohibitively expensive. For example, it is impossible to fly directly between the two main cities of Central Africa, Douala and Kinshasa, even though the distance is only 1,800 km. The “simplest” route is *via* Europe, which involves multiplying the distance sixfold. This itinerary, however, is complicated, for it requires a transit visa, a document that proves exceedingly difficult for artists like Youmbi to obtain, since they are doubly stigmatized as both Africans and artists—persons, that is, who do not hold conventional employment. To undertake this kind of trip, one needs the backing of institutions such as museums or foundations, most of which are located in the North. What this entails in practical terms is that an overwhelming majority of African artists fail to travel within their own continent and the result is a truncated art world.

What is to be done about this, Youmbi asks? One solution, he holds, is to become an activist artist. One can deploy one's art to build bridges, creating something akin to what sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone (2008) calls an “infrastructure of people”. Whenever and wherever he travels within Africa, Youmbi seeks to initiate partnerships with local artists and arts collectives to advocate for joint action across borders. Specifically, what he calls for is the creation in Africa of spaces where the work of African artists can be shown and appreciated locally. The goal is not, he posits, to give birth to institutions that replace museums in Europe and North America, but instead spaces that can exist alongside them. The point is to evacuate long-standing center-periphery models and to replace them with multiple,

equal, coeval centers, in the process developing a new paradigm for the art world (Youmbi 2011).

Such advocacy is both the goal and the subject matter of much of Youmbi's work⁷ and it is a core thematic thrust of the *Totems* installation. The argument, here, is not that it is inapposite to seek entry into the Tates, MOMAS and Guggenheims, or that it is wrong to crave dialogue with the Koons, Warhols and Murakamis of the art establishment, but that to pursue this exclusively is counterproductive. The goal sought should rather be a back and forth conversation in which different types of equally relevant centers speak to one another. These centers, Youmbi holds further, need not all be of the same kind. Tate-type institutions are not necessary everywhere. There are other ways of thinking about how, where and under what conditions one can show art. By this he means site-specific solutions, better adapted to economic, political, social, historical and cultural contexts in a city such as contemporary Kinshasa, Cotonou or Dakar.

In this regard, Youmbi is particularly interested in ephemeral and moving architectures. Imposing permanent buildings, he states, are not always a necessity. Smaller, flexible spaces are sometimes a better choice. In this, he is inspired by uses of temporary edifices in his own country, for instance tents that are deployed to welcome funeral ceremonies and related events in cities and countryside alike. Hence the movable maze that he has installed as the centerpiece of the *Totems* installation. If the museum will not come to viewers in Kinshasa, Cotonou or Dakar, *Totems* argues, art itself can be made to do so and, in the process, to become the museum itself. In such a museum, artists whose work is on display can function outside the restrictive confines of the global art world.

But, of course, matters are not so simple. Indeed, they often prove quite messy, as witness the fate of *Totems*. In 2011, Youmbi's installation was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, in Washington DC. It is now a part of the permanent collection in one of the totem spaces whose maze-like pull it calls into question. There, it will be shown alongside pieces of classical African art valued at dizzyingly high prices on the international art market and side by side with works of contemporary art by African artists—works that, by virtue of their inclusion in the Smithsonian, have acquired the status of masterpieces. This is both as it should be—for the work well deserves such pride of place—and troubling, for, in fundamental ways, it proves Mbembe right.

The question, now, is what happens beyond this point. *Totems* exists as a limited edition. It can be sold again, to another institution and then another, up to five times. Such commodification is double-edged. On the

7. *Face2Face*, an installation developed over four years, from 2003 to 2007, similarly, though in a very different form, focuses on practices of artist-to-artist networking and on the elaboration of multiple art world centers (MALAQUAIS 2012: 56-57).

one hand, it might be argued that every sale of the work enhances the center's power of abjection. Alternately, the claim can be made that, with each transaction, Youmbi's installation edges its way further into the heart of the art-world system, in effect colonizing it. Complicating matters further is the fact that, as he develops the artist-to-artist networks for which his work calls, Youmbi continues to create his logo sunglass portraits and to craft new columns of logo-clad bags. In doing so, he produces still new iterations of the installation. The maze continues to grow and, with it, the artist's imbrication in a system whose weight is both peril and pleasure, closure and possibility.

Visages de masques

The space of entanglement (Nuttall 2009) in which Youmbi finds himself proves to be a very productive one. *Visages de masques*, his most recent endeavor, exemplifies this. The project gave rise to a first exhibition in Cameroon, in 2015. In this context, again, viewers encountered an ephemeral architecture, a maze and faces, as well as a focus on the art market (fig. 4)⁸. At center, standing and lying on their sides, were wood crates of the type museums and galleries use to transport precious objects. On each was pinned a photograph of an illustrious work of classical African art: a mask that has become an icon—a totem—in the canon of Africanist art history. The pieces depicted belong to the National Museum of African Art, the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums, and the Musée du quai Branly in Paris—institutions, all, that have played a critical role in the construction of this canon. Below each image, museum-style, was a label indicating the provenance of the mask, its date, constituent materials and collection history. The arrangement of the wood crates echoed that of funeral stones in a graveyard. Viewers were thereby invited to wander through a maze speaking to the origins of the masks depicted, that is to the fact that the overwhelming majority were looted by Europeans in whose hands they became inanimate—some might even say dead—objects: trophies of power first and then, with time, objects to be contemplated from afar as icons of Euro-American taste and wealth.

Classificatory Schemes

In their context of origin, the works depicted on the crates had a ritual purpose. What makes them precious in the eyes of their collectors is this fact precisely: that they were used. This, in the jargon of those who seek

8. For an evocative description and an insightful analysis of the first *Visages* installation, see S. FORNI (2016: 46, 50-51).

such objects out, is what renders them “authentic” and this authenticity, in turn, is what makes them valuable. It is what drives the highly lucrative trade in classical African art. In the installation, the crate maze was surrounded by a circle of masks hanging from above. These were recent works, all designed by Youmbi and executed in collaboration with carvers and beaders in the Grassfields of Western Cameroon, a region famed for its extraordinary masking culture. So-called authentic masks from this part of Central Africa, mostly made in the late 19th and early 20th century, fetch increasingly high prices on the international art market.

The carvers and beaders with whom Youmbi collaborated in this setting⁹ (fig. 5) frequently produce works for the commercial market: tourist curios and export replicas of antique masks recognized as “authentic” because they were employed in ritual settings. At the same time, they produce works for local consumption—most notably masks known as *yegué*, commissioned by members of an initiation association called Ku’ngang for performance in ceremonial contexts. Though authentic by the criterion of ritual use, such masks tend to be disdained by collectors because they are not antique. Two key functions of value on the classical art market are age and rarity and, insofar as these are contemporary productions, they are typically seen to lack value. Worse, in the eyes of many classical art aficionados, these recent masks incorporate elements of mass culture—plastic and synthetic hair, for instance. While some collectors do appreciate such formal neologisms, they belong largely to a niche market, one that rarely frequents Sotheby’s or Christies, both of which specialize in “authentic” “antique” works of art.

This, alongside the Euro-American fascination for one-of-a-kind objects and with authenticity as a proof of value, is precisely what interests Youmbi. In funeral ceremonies he has attended in the Grassfields, he has come upon masks that are wholly made of plastic: objects manufactured in China for use in North America during Halloween celebrations. Among this genre are masks that reproduce the features of a horror film character inspired by Edward Munch’s famous *Scream* (1893)¹⁰. Repurposed, these plastic masks enter the fray of powerful danced ceremonies, side by side with masks for which the region is renowned—notably beaded elephant caps (*tcho bapten*)¹¹. Drawing on these two, apparently diametrically opposed

9. Youmbi identifies his principal collaborators as Alassane Mfouapon, a sculptor based in Foumban, the capital of the Bamum kingdom, renowned for his copies of late 19th and early 20th century sculptures; Taku Papa Victor, a sculptor whose workshop is located in the village of Batchitcheu (Fondati chieftaincy); and Marie Kouam, a beader who makes her home in Baham chieftaincy. Key advice, he adds, was provided by Taku Etienne Djoumbi, of Balassié village (Bandja chieftaincy).

10. The character in question is Ghostface, a mysterious masked killer who stalks actress Neve Campbell in the 1996 black comedy slasher film *Scream*.

11. Names for this type of ritual object vary from community to community. *Tcho bapten* is the appellation in use in Bandjoun (NOTUE 2005: 161), the chieftaincy where the *Visages* project was first developed.

models and melding them with still others, in the context of the *Visages* project Youmbi has been designing striking hybrid masks: wooden carvings, covered in multicolored beads and buttons, which are characterized by a mix of elements that stands on its head the traditional Africanist canon¹². While the latter has long insisted on a strict delineation between individual genres, styles and regional affiliations (Kasfir 1984), Youmbi blurs these categories. Traits one would not otherwise encounter side by side are mixed. Long, beaded cloth panels, features associated with elephant caps, rub shoulders with bristling, horn-bedecked crowns, floor-length dreadlocked coiffures and cowrie-studded surfaces commonly seen in Ku'ngang masks. Two distinct genres of ritual objects are fused into one. Features associated with the carving styles of distant regions—Dogon (Mali) and Bwa (Burkina Faso), most notably, but also Yoruba (Nigeria) and Kota and Punu (Gabon)—are brought into the mix as well¹³. Add to this the distended eyes and mouths of Hollywood-inspired Halloween masks and the result is wholly surrealistic (fig. 6).

The circle of masks hanging above the 2015 *Visages* installation was made of such carvings. Also present were castings of masks Youmbi had bought in Douala markets that cater to tourists: pieces that he had previously transformed for use in a work titled *Ensemble vide* (early 2000s, Malaquais [2012: 51]) and which, in 2014-2015, he presented to a Grassfields metal-smith who, at his request, cast them in brass¹⁴. Individually and as a group, these various objects confound(ed) distinctions between “high” and “low”, “traditional” and “modern”, “authentic” and “commercial” art¹⁵—distinctions that play a critical role in the production and reproduction of market value.

Meaning on the Move

The masks in the 2015 installation were slated to follow a complex and peripatetic life course. They were to begin their existence as part of a contemporary, conceptual work of art. This would be followed by a second stage, in which they would leave the kind of white cube space where works of this genre are most commonly displayed to enter the ritual life of the Grassfields region. There, they would become the personal possession of Ku'ngang initiates who, through participation in danced rites hosted by the association, would, in local parlance, “activate” them. Thus, works of conceptual art would morph into spiritually charged power objects. In a third stage, some of the masks would leave the Grassfields to travel toward a new set of white cube spaces, in Africa (as before) or in Europe or the

12. See also S. FORNI (2016: 46).

13. *Ibid.*

14. Papa Zouli, the caster chosen by Youmbi, works in Foumban.

15. See also S. FORNI (2016: 38, 44, 46).

United States. In a fourth stage, they would head back to Western Cameroon, there to re-enter the Ku'ngang universe—and then possibly return, once more, to Europe or the United States.

With each move, Youmbi's hybrid creations would acquire a new status. Layers of meaning would accrue, resulting in thoroughly slippery objects, impossible to categorize in terms of dichotomies that have long structured how material and cultural production hailing from Africa is analyzed, exhibited and marketed. Classificatory schemes shaped by economic, social and political forces intimately linked to the capitalist project—schemes rooted in the colonial period and powerfully at work in its postcolonial aftermath—would find themselves undermined. Put otherwise, each carving would embody and precipitate an ontological crisis. Questions would abound: should it be seen as a “ritual” object? As a piece of “African” or of “contemporary” art? As a “traditional” piece? As “unique”? Would it be perceived as an “individual” or a “collaborative” production? All of the categories used by “specialists” in the North (and increasingly in the East) to deal with African art would be thrown into question. The effect of this would be to destabilize the structures of validation and valuation at work in the self-anointed center(s) of knowledge production.

To gauge how this plan unfolded, it proves useful to follow in some detail the travels of a single mask in the *Visages* installation. On March 30, 2015, in the Grassfields village of Dakpeudjie, a district of Bandja chieftaincy, Ku'ngang initiate Hervé Yamguen appeared in full association regalia, wearing one of the *Visages* masks. The occasion was a funerary ceremony held in honor of fellow Ku'ngang member Mbà Nzà Yamdjieu Tani Wansi Pierre (fig. 7). Yamguen was particularly well positioned to accompany Youmbi's mask in its transition from a work of conceptual art to one of ritual power. A widely published poet and a highly accomplished multi-media artist based in Douala (Malaquais 2009), he is an *habitué* of white cube exhibition spaces dedicated to highlighting conceptual art. Simultaneously, he is a connoisseur of Grassfields ceremonial practice. Prior to passing away, his father, Daya Yamgeu Dieudonné, designated him as his ritual heir. In order to take on this weighty responsibility, Yamguen began spending increasingly long periods of time in Bandja¹⁶, acquiring knowledge indispensable to his new role. This process significantly inflected his work in Douala, driving in compelling new directions his production as a painter, sculptor and writer. That Yamguen is a close friend of Youmbi's—the two, in the 1990s, were co-founders of Cercle Kapsiki, one of the most influential artists' collectives on the Cameroonian art scene in the second half of the 20th century (Malaquais 2008)—added further weight still to Yamguen's

16. Yamguen's paternal home lies in the Balassié district of Bandja. Video footage posted online by TV channel Camer24 shows ceremonies marking his accession to the ritual identity conferred upon him by his father, <<https://www.facebook.com/Camer.Vingt.Quatre/videos/991218077557124/>>.

role as *porteur*¹⁷, as did the fact that Youmbi's family, like Yamguen's, hails originally from the Grassfields region.

In late 2015, the mask designed by Youmbi and activated by Yamguen left Cameroon for London. There, it was exhibited at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, an event that has both ridden and significantly fed the wave of contemporary African art's burgeoning success on the international market. In this setting, Youmbi and his New York Gallery, Axis, developed a scenography for the mask that elegantly highlighted aspects of its two previous lives (fig. 8). The mask was hung, in minimalistic fashion, against a white backdrop. Here as in the first *Visages* display, a travel crate appeared—in this case, the very container in which the mask had traveled from Africa to Europe. On the crate was attached a plastic sleeve that contained all of the documentation required to ship the object from Cameroon to London *via* DHL, including descriptions of its ontological status and its value for customs purposes. Standing atop the crate, a video monitor played a loop of anthropological-style footage filmed by Youmbi showing Yamguen ritually activating the mask during the funerary ceremony in Dakpeudjie. Also included was an editioned photograph by Youmbi of Yamguen wearing the unconventional mask, appearing beside another masquerader outfitted in a more typical example¹⁸. Alongside, on the wall, was a museum-type label that described the carving first as an anthropological artifact and second as the work of a contemporary artist—descriptions at variance with the shipping documents, which read “contemporary mask/art work for exhibition” and stipulated that the object was “neither [an] antiquit[y] nor recognized or classified as cultural propert[y]”. All of these elements together constituted an installation titled *Two-Faced Mask/Double Visage*.

In this setting, the slipperiness of the object was on full view. Recalcitrant to any form of classification, it was all at once a conceptual piece exhibited as part of a multimedia installation, a one-of-a-kind work of classical African art and an ethnographic specimen. Rendering it slipperier still was a stipulation made by Youmbi. Should the carving be sold, its buyer would not be able to take possession of it. Instead, the mask would travel

17. I borrow the term *porteur*—one who effects, or assists in effecting, a transition—from historian E. NIMIS (2015), who in turn borrows it from the work of Algerian novelist and filmmaker A. Djébar.

18. Comparing the two performers in the photograph, it is clear that the mask worn by Yamguen is strikingly novel in several respects. It is studded with white buttons, whereas the more conventional carving bears cowrie shells, and, on the sides and rear, it is adorned with brightly colored dots that recall the work of Damien Hirst. A single row of cowries frames the buttons. This was included at the express request of a ritual specialist (*taku*)—a leader of the Ku'ngang association in Bandja, who vetted the mask prior to its ceremonial activation—along with a specific number of horned projections and a thick fringe of dreadlocks, enough to cover the dancer's body completely. These features, for the *taku*, constituted the essential components of a Ku'ngang mask—a baseline beyond which all other possible stylistic and formal features were negotiable.

first to Cameroon, where it would be ritually de-activated. Following this, it would be returned to its new owner. The buyer would find her/himself imbricated in a most unusual back and forth, quite unique in the cycle of extraction and acquisition that has historically attended the entry into Northern collections of artworks produced in Africa. Not only would s/he have to forego the gratification of immediate possession and, as the mask traveled back to Africa, relinquish certainty as to when and in what form it would come back. By engaging in this intricate transaction, s/he would also be enabling and becoming an active participant in a performance—the mask’s de-activation—that would forever change its signification.

Arriving at a decision to sell the piece had been complicated for both Youmbi and Yamguen. Their feeling, initially, had been that the carving should return to Cameroon to remain in the latter’s possession for ceremonial purposes. In the eyes of both artists, by way of its move from white cube space to sacred arena and back, the mask had quite effectively put paid to the classificatory schemes it had been devised to destabilize. It was now in a position to fulfill a second, related and equally important purpose. Re-entering the Ku’ngang sphere permanently, it could participate in an experiment dear to both men: a joint endeavor to re-enchant the ritual field¹⁹.

In certain respects, both men had hoped that the mask would not sell. Of particular concern to them was the fact the *Visages* project was beginning to gain traction in the Grassfields. The appearance of Yamguen’s innovative mask at the Dakpeudjie ceremony had aroused considerable local interest. Since the event, four additional masks had been ritually activated, at the hands of four different Ku’ngang members. Some ten association members had approached the artist to inquire into the possibility of commissioning a mask from him and a host of new carvings were in production. In this setting, the matter of a sale to a Northern collector presented significant problems. Above all, Youmbi faced an ethical conundrum: was it morally defensible, he asked himself, to remove Yamguen’s mask from its ceremonial home in order to sell it for a profit?

In the wake of *Totems*, eschewing the sale—refusing to rush to the center—made a great deal of sense. This was all the more so as *Two-Faced Mask* had drawn considerable interest at the 1:54 fair not only from private collectors, but also from curators of major Northern art-world institutions: from the center itself. At the same time, a decision not to sell ran the risk of limiting to a significant degree the heft of the *Visages* project. *Totems* identified a problem; *Visages* was devised to intervene in this problem. The former spoke to the violence of the market; the latter sought actively to inflect it. To be fully operational in this respect, however, the second

19. Youmbi’s project, writes S. FORNI (2016: 47), “is as much about producing masks that [...] challenge the views of urban gallery-goers as it is about engaging members of [...] local masking societies in a discussion about contemporary ritual expression and probing the boundaries of stylistic possibility”.

project would need to extend its reach further: it would need (or so it seemed at the time) to beat the market at its own game. The sale to an institution of an object whose very existence constituted a rebuke to classificatory schemes upon which the hegemony of the market and of the institutions it serves relies would constitute a highly effective move in this direction.

In the end, in agreement with Yamguen, Youmbi opted to sell the mask²⁰. The manner in which the sale unfolded brought several layers of complexity to the *Visages* experiment, decidedly enhancing its critical potential. A key factor, in this regard, was the identity of the buyer. The mask was acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), a Toronto institution known for the strength of its Africa collections. Founded in 1912, the museum has a long history of engaging through the lens of anthropology with objects hailing from the continent. In recent years, what had, in this setting, been a rather staid approach to pieces and practices as ethnographic phenomena has undergone a quite substantial shift in perspective at the hands of a new curator, anthropologist Silvia Forni. Brought onboard in 2008, through a series of innovative exhibitions, publications and events S. Forni has set about proposing alternative readings of works on display as part of a bid to reorient ways in which Africa has historically been constructed in the Northern imagination. In this context, she has sought to highlight the agency of African artists and art dealers as active participants in the complex task of challenging Eurocentric conceptions. In particular, she has focused on manners in which, over the past six to seven decades, such practitioners have impacted the circulation and the valuing of works defined as “traditional” by the market in African art (Forni & Steiner 2015). Although her approach is wide ranging, Cameroon specifically has drawn her attention.

Forni, who has conducted research in the Grassfields for over ten years, had been following the progress of the *Visages* project since its inception. As the present words were being penned, the summer 2016 issue of the journal *African Arts* came out with a masterful article authored by her on *Visages de masques* (Forni 2016). In this text, Forni examines the imbrication of the *Visages* project in historically dense networks of art production and exchange at work within the Grassfields and linking Western Cameroon, directly and indirectly, with a broad range of actors across Africa, as well as Europe and North America. Youmbi’s hybrid carvings, she shows, belong to a long line of objects whose very existence is a rebuke to the kinds of classificatory schemes that his project seeks to deconstruct. Thus situated, *Visages* takes its rightful place in an exceptionally rich and complex art historical landscape.

Framed by Forni’s interconnected interests in the circulation, the reception and the marketing of works of art, the African Collection of the ROM’s

20. The mask activated by Yamguen was sold with a second carving, which had not undergone ritual activation. In a text currently in progress, I consider ways in which the two pieces might be seen to function in relation to one another.

Department of World Cultures offered a particularly apt home for Youmbi's mask. This was all the more so as, by brokering its entry into the Toronto institution, the artist and curator together were engaging in more than a simple sale/acquisition. Bringing into a Northern center of knowledge production *on* Africa a rejoinder *from* Africa about the economically and politically skewed nature of this production, they were effecting a decidedly decolonial intervention (Lockward *et al.* 2011).

While such a concerted artist-curator move is not common, neither is it an isolated phenomenon. It is shaped by sustained efforts to “decolonize the museum” (*L'Internationale Online* 2014; Lonetree 2012) deployed by practitioners in a wide range of disciplines and geographical locations since the mid-2000s—efforts which, in turn, build upon a richly layered history of institutional critique reaching as far back as the 19th century and extending to such ongoing developments as the Rhodes Must Fall campaign²¹. In October 2014, the ROM was the theater for a much-awaited exercise in institutional (self) critique: a public discussion by scholars, museum professionals and activists revisiting *Into the Heart of Africa*, an exhibition staged by the museum 25 years earlier, which prompted a wave of controversy and protest that echoes today still, centered around accusations of institutional racism (Butler 2008). The exchange, bracketed by a three-day symposium²², marked the launch of “Of Africa”, “a multiplatform and multiyear project aimed at rethinking historical and contemporary representations of Africa [by] purposefully [...] challeng[ing] at every step monolithic [depictions of the continent], museum collections, and colonial histories”²³. Rather than on “splashy exhibitions” (Whyte 2014), Forni and “Of Africa” co-curators Dominique Fontaine and Julie Crooks have relied in this ongoing project on

21. A very partial list of milestones in this history might include: the 1863 Salon des refusés; the *Futurist Manifesto*'s call to “turn aside the canals to flood the museums” (MARINETTI 1909); the eponymous “institutional critique” movement, whose launch is associated, in the late 1960s, with such conceptual art figures as Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniels Buren and Hans Haacke, and 1970s and 1980s experiments building upon this legacy (ALBERRO & STIMSON 2009); the birth of the Guerilla Girls in response to MoMA's 1984 male-centered exhibition “An International Survey of Recent Paintings and Sculpture”; interventions by Fred Wilson in the 1990s and early 2000s, foregrounding race and class in the making of art institutions as zones of exclusion and violence (WILSON & CORRIN 1994; GLOBUS 2011); projects by groups of artists (the Yes Men, Electronic Disturbance Theater, Raqs Media Collective) determined to eschew the institutional frame altogether, “evading the official art world and the attendant professions and institutions that legitimate it, and developing practices capable of operating outside of the confines of the museum and art market” (ALBERRO 2009: 7, 14-15); experiments in developing “a museum without objects” (VERGÈS 2014); and the setting alight of museum holdings on the campus of the University of Cape Town in February 2016 (<<http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-04-05-groundup-report-is-uct-a-safe-space-for-art/#.V0EZJ4RU9FI>>).

22. “Of Africa: Histories, Collections & Reflections”, 24-25 October 2014.

23. <www.rom.on.ca/en/of-africa> and <www.rom.on.ca/en/blog/of-africa-at-the-rom-exploring-the-complexity-of-african-and-diasporic-experience>.

targeted initiatives, a number of which foreground the work of contemporary artists. Thus, for example, Nástio Mosquito was invited to perform *African, I guess*, a spoken word and video intervention in which he channels multiple voices and personas to radically lay bare the mechanisms of identity formation in a postcolonial world²⁴. Punctuated with a resounding “Fuck Africa!” the performance actively “resists, sidesteps and overturns any idea of a stable subject [...] as a mode of engagement that allows [the artist] to be a proactive shaper of identity rather than a passive respondent” (Ryan 2013). Youmbi’s classification-busting mask, a work that flatly refuses fixed identities, echoes this stance, engaging in an eloquent conversation with the project of institutional critique launched by Forni, Fontaine and Crooks.

But does the place at the ROM that the piece has come to occupy within a broader history of institutional critique allow it to evade the trap of institutional—and thus of market—co-optation? While the question is akin to that posed earlier in regard to the *Totems* installation and its sale to the National Museum of African Art, the stakes, here, are higher. For, as previously noted, *Visages* was meant not only to dodge the bullet of the market and its institutions, but also to beat these spaces of peril and pleasure at their own game—to out-fetish the fetishizer. In the final section of this paper, I propose that the project succeeds in this respect, though not necessarily in the manner one might have expected.

In an article published in 2005, artist and theorist Andrea Fraser holds that most experiments in institutional critique launched to date are wanting in one fundamental respect: they assume that there is an “inside” and an “outside” the institutions of the art world, and that, as a result, there exists a possibility for artists, curators, scholars and the like to impact them from an external position.

“[T]he institution of art is not only ‘institutionalized’ in organizations like museums and objectified in art objects. It is also internalized and embodied in people. It is internalized in the competencies, conceptual models, and modes of perception that allow us to produce, write about, and understand art, or simply to recognize art as art, whether as artists, critics, curators, art historians, dealers, collectors, or museum visitors. And above all, it exists in the interests, aspirations, and criteria of value that orient our actions and define our sense of worth. These competencies and dispositions determine our own institutionalization as members of the field of art [...]. [T]here is no outside for us [...]. [This is so] not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered society’, or has grown all encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us” (Fraser 2005: 281).

The strength of Youmbi’s *Visages* project lies in its recognition of this state of affairs. Rather than positioning itself at a remove from the market, looking in from a putative outside, it internalizes the market’s mechanisms.

24. For an audio recording of this performance: <www.rom.on.ca/en/of-africa#symposium_daytwo>.

Even as it questions their legitimacy, it takes seriously the classificatory schemes upon which the art world relies to reproduce its structures and actively builds itself into this cycle of reproduction. In the process, it puts these schemes to work to its own advantage. Revealing as wholly artificial dichotomies deployed by the art world to shape the value of works such as he has created, Youmbi simultaneously leverages these dichotomies to increase the works' value. Rather than reject the categories they constitute, he appropriates them. Taking them all onboard, he creates meta-objects that are all at once "originals" and "copies", "real" and "fake", "traditional" and "modern", "ritual" and "conceptual".

The resulting works are marketable to multiple audiences at the same time. Among these are: Ku'ngang initiates; contemporary art aficionados; curators of which Forni is an exemplar, determined to set the museum adrift from its colonial moorings; theoretically-inclined art historians akin to the founders of Youmbi's New York gallery, whose scholarly interests and business strategies alike straddle the fields of classical and contemporary art; and a researcher such as myself, whose work focuses on intersections between artistic production, political engagement and the structural violence of late-capitalism. Further audiences still for Youmbi's hybrid works include artists who, like Youmbi himself, advocate for the creation of arenas in Africa where art of all kinds can be exhibited for the benefit of African audiences; cases in point are Barthélémy Togo, whose residency space in the Grassfields, Bandjoun Station²⁵, welcomed the first *Visages de masques* installation²⁶, and Mansour Ciss, whose Villa Gottfried²⁷, located in N'Gaparou, Senegal, hosted another iteration of the project during the 2016 Dak'Art Biennale. The carvings are likely too to attract niche collectors such as are referenced earlier in this paper, who seek out ceremonial works characterized by a melding of "local" and "global" materials and significations. Also interested, in time, in all probability, will be tourists. As new examples of Youmbi's hybrids enter the ritual field, commissioned by a growing

25. <<http://bandjounstation.com/en/>>.

26. The choice of locale for the first *Visages* installation was inspired. In a system wherein creators from the continent more often than not find themselves ghettoized as "African" rather than "international" or "global" practitioners (Ugochukwu-Smooth in BAUMGARDNER 2015: n. p.), Barthélémy Togo stands out as an exception. Widely exhibited in venues that identify themselves explicitly as showcases for international contemporary art and represented, alongside such key figures as Georg Baselitz, Robert Motherwell and Nancy Spero, by blue chip Paris and New York Galerie Lelong, he is a powerful player in the art world. Youmbi's decision to begin the *Visages* experiment at Bandjoun Station (facilitated by a six-month residency *in situ*) ensured that, in its first stage, *Visages* would be perceived as a "high art" intervention. At the same time, Togo's insistence that Bandjoun Station function as a space that the local community can appropriate for its own needs (TOGUO 2011) meant that, even at this early point in its development, the project would resonate in the Grassfields.

27. <<http://www.villagottfried.de/english/index.htm>>.

number of Ku'ngang initiates, they will attract the attention of travelers to the Grassfields, Cameroon's most visited region. While some initiates may be willing to sell their masks, a more plausible scenario is that copies will emerge for sale on local markets²⁸—replicas that, in turn, may make their way abroad, giving rise thereby to still other possibilities of commodification.

Rather than rend asunder the market, Youmbi's *Visages* embraces its strategies. Whereas *Totems* expresses a palpable ambivalence *vis-à-vis* the machinations of art world institutions—a dread before the maze—*Visages* positions itself squarely within the labyrinth. It allows itself to be cannibalized by the market, the better to construct and reproduce itself. As such, it constitutes both a riskier proposition and a subtler experiment than its predecessor.



As the *Visages* experiment proceeds, it will penetrate ever deeper into the maze brought into focus by *Totems*. At latest count, in mid-May 2016, Youmbi and his sculptor and beader collaborators in the Grassfields had created over two dozen masks. One of these has made its way to Bandja, where it has been ritually activated by Yamguen. While not an exact replica, it is formally quite similar to the ROM example. Designed to replace the carving now in Toronto, it is involved, Youmbi explains, in an ongoing conversation with its Canadian counterpart. This adds yet another layer of complexity to *Visages*. The two masks speak to one another as if in a gallery of mirrors. Every move each makes, every gaze cast upon it, reverberates in the other. The result, for all concerned—the two artists, viewers, ritual practitioners, gallerists, curators, scholars, collectors—is an ever thicker engagement, in equal measure treacherous and exhilarating, with concepts of value, commodification and co-optation at play in our late-capitalist world.

Institut des mondes africains (IMAF), CNRS, Paris.

28. Youmbi is keenly aware of (though not particularly sanguine) about this last possibility. “Though [he] value[s] the creative and aesthetic input of the village artists [with whom he collaborates on the *Visages* project, writes FORNI (2016: 49)], he also want[s] to make sure that replicas of his masks [will] not quickly become a feature of the art stalls found in cities and towns throughout Cameroon”. One is tempted to argue with him, however, that such a development, while potentially jarring, would enhance the undertaking.

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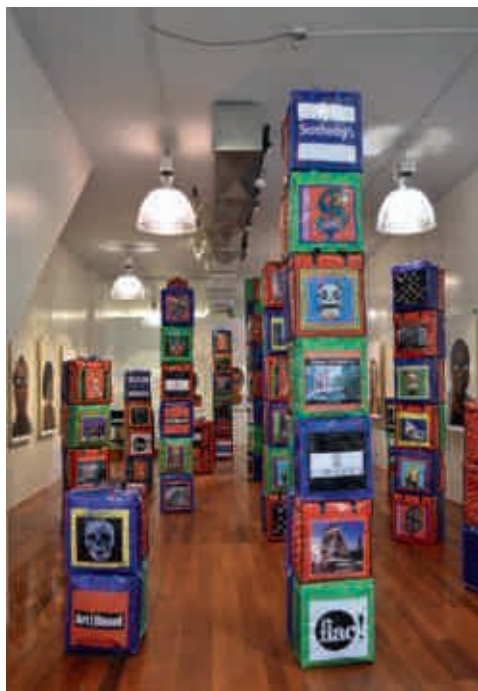
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FIG. 1. — EPHEMERAL MAZE MADE OF STACKED TRAVEL BAGS



Photograph shot at the United States opening of *Totems to Haunt Our Dreams*
(Axis Gallery, New York City and Newark, New Jersey, 2011)
Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 2. — SELF-PORTRAIT BY HERVÉ YOUMBI SHOT IN JOHANNESBURG, SHOWING THE ARTIST WEARING SUNGLASSES FEATURING A REPRESENTATION OF ANDY WARHOL'S *DOLLAR*



Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 3. — PORTRAIT OF WRITER AND MULTIMEDIA ARTIST BILL KOUÉLANY (BRAZZAVILLE)
WEARING SUNGLASSES FEATURING A LOGOIFIED REPRESENTATION
OF DAMIEN HIRST'S WORK *FOR THE LOVE OF GOD*



Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery.

FIG. 4. — VIEW OF THE FIRST INSTALLATION OF THE *VISAGES DE MASQUES* PROJECT.
PHOTOGRAPH SHOT DURING THE EXHIBITION *STORY TELLERS*
(BANDJOUN STATION, BANDJOUN, CAMEROON, 6 MARCH-30 OCTOBER 2015)

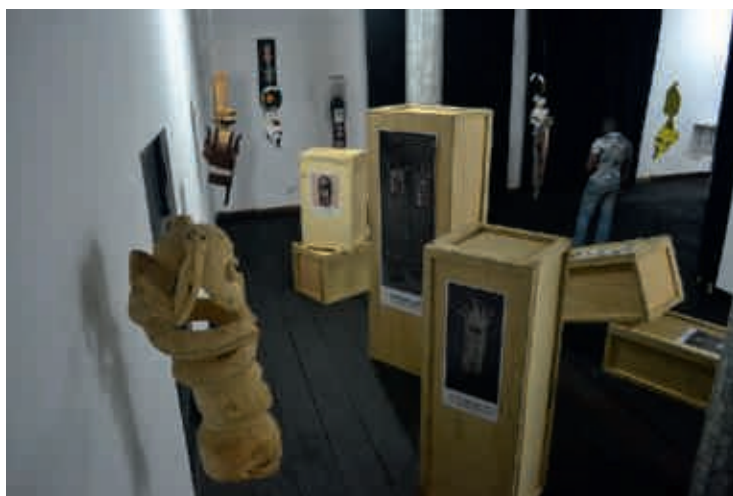


Photo : Hervé Youmbi. Courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 5. — BEADER MARIE KOUAM (BAHAM, CAMEROON) AT WORK ON A MASK DESIGNED BY HERVÉ YOUMBI AS PART OF THE *VISAGES DE MASQUES* PROJECT



Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 6. — HYBRID CARVING CREATED AS PART OF THE *VISAGES DE MASQUES* PROJECT



Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 7. — MULTIMEDIA ARTIST HERVÉ YAMGUEN (THIRD FROM LEFT) PERFORMING AT THE FUNERAL OF KU'NGAN INITIATE MBÀ NZÀ YAMDJIEU TANI WANSI PIERRE, IN THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS VILLAGE OF DAKPEUDJIE, BANDIA CHIEFTAINCY, ON 30 MARCH 2015. YAMGUEN APPEARS IN A HYBRID *YEGUÉ* MASK DESIGNED BY YOUMBI AS PART OF THE *VISAGES DE MASQUES* PROJECT



Photo : Hervé Youmbi, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery.

FIG. 8. — INSTALLATION VIEW OF THE *VISAGES DE MASQUES* PROJECT AS IT WAS PRESENTED BY AXIS GALLERY AT THE 1:54 CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART FAIR (SOMERSET HOUSE, LONDON, 15-18 OCTOBER 2015)



In this iteration, the installation was titled *Two-Faced Mask*. On the far left is a portrait of Yamguen from the *Totems* series.
Photo : Axis Gallery, 2015. Courtesy of Axis Gallery.

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ABSTRACT

In 2010 and 2014 respectively, Cameroonian artist Hervé Youmbi (1973-) embarked upon two multimedia projects: *Totems to Haunt Our Dreams* and *Visages de masques*. Multiyear endeavors, both were still unfolding at the time this article went to press. In *Totems* and *Visages*, Youmbi takes to task the structural violence of the art market, of the institutions and practices to which it gives rise and of the late-capitalist system to which they collectively belong. This paper proposes an analysis of the two projects, centering on key questions that they bring to the fore. In particular, it explores ways in which each engages with the phenomenon of market commodification. Also considered are concepts of perceived value, monetary worth and fetishization, as well as notions of co-optation. Through a detailed comparison of ways in which the two projects address these and related concerns, a picture emerges of a simultaneously powerful and internally fraught political *corpus* of work.

RÉSUMÉ

Je(ux) du marché. Hervé Youmbi et le labyrinthe du monde de l'art. — En 2010 et 2014, l'artiste camerounais Hervé Youmbi (1973-) lançait deux projets multimédia : *Ces totems qui hantent la mémoire des fils de Mamadou* et *Visages de masques*. S'étalant sur plusieurs années, ces réalisations étaient toujours en cours au moment de la parution de cet article. Avec *Totems* et *Visages*, Youmbi prend à partie la violence structurelle du marché de l'art, des institutions et des pratiques qu'il génère et du système capitaliste qui les sous-tend. L'article propose une analyse centrée sur une palette de questions que *Totems* et *Visages* mettent en lumière. En particulier, il s'intéresse à la façon dont ces travaux traitent le phénomène de la marchandisation. Les notions de valeurs intrinsèque et monétaire, de fétichisation et de cooptation sont également explorées. D'une comparaison détaillée de la manière dont les deux projets envisagent ces thématiques émerge le portrait d'un *corpus* à la fois profondément engagé et traversé par le doute.

Keywords/Mots-clés : Hervé Yamguen, Hervé Youmbi, contemporary art, art-world and market, commodification, co-optation, decolonizing the museum, festishization, institutional critique, value/Hervé Yamguen, Hervé Youmbi, art contemporain, monde et marché de l'art, marchandisation, cooptation, décoloniser le musée, fétichisation, critique institutionnelle, valeur.