

VI.

Cooperation Projects on Cameroonian Collections  
Experiences and Perspectives

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## Serendipitous Intersections and Long-Term Dialogue

Art and Research as Collaborative Exchanges

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# Serendipitous Intersections and Long-Term Dialogue

Art and Research as Collaborative Exchanges

Silvia Forni and Hervé Youmbi

## Abstract

The relationship between research and the production of art and knowledge is an area of growing academic interest and reflection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This chapter contributes to recent literature that explores the complex and often not fully articulated relationship between artists and scholars, and the practical and tangible impact of research in the arts. The authors – a researcher and an artist – have collaborated for over a decade, with a mutually significant and beneficial impact on each other’s work. In this chapter, they reflect on the cooperation and exchange that have thus been critical to the development of their respective works. They explore power dynamics in, and the impact of colonialism on, the art world, especially the relationship between the “traditional” and the “contemporary”, the meaning of “success”, and how these are articulated in the visual languages of the societies and landscapes of West Cameroon.

*Intersections fortuites et dialogue à long terme : la création artistique et la recherche en tant qu'échanges collaboratifs (Résumé)*

*La relation entre la recherche et la production d'art et de connaissances est un domaine de réflexion universitaire qui suscite un intérêt croissant au XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Notre chapitre contribue à la littérature récente qui explore la relation complexe et souvent mal articulée entre les artistes et les spécialistes, ainsi que les effets pratiques et tangibles de la recherche dans le domaine artistique. Nous proposons ici une réflexion plutôt fluide et non structurée sur un peu plus d'une décennie de conversations et d'échanges qui ont été essentiels au développement de nos travaux respectifs. Cette réflexion suit vaguement une série de sujets qui nous ont été proposés par les rédacteurs de cette publication. Par souci de concision, nous avons décidé de résumer les principaux points plutôt que de fournir une traduction et une transcription complètes de notre conversation.*

## **Introduction: Encounters and Mutual Influence**

Somewhat at odds with other experiences highlighted in this volume, to this day, we have never been involved in any type of formalised project together. Nevertheless, our paths and work have intersected in many ways over the course of the years, and we acknowledge that our shared research and reflections have had a significant impact on both Silvia Forni's academic and curatorial work and on Hervé Youmbi's creative practice. There is a definite distinction in impact and scope between funded projects with specific outcomes and the open-ended long-term professional and human relationship that we are considering here. However, it is exactly this indefinite and unprescribed horizon that makes it possible for each of us to continue to learn from one another in ways that inform and transform our practices in a rather organic way.

Although we have had many encounters, and we were both part of a few formal gatherings and recipients of one large grant, this chapter is – somewhat paradoxically – the first coauthored product of our long working relationship. Over the last decade, Forni has delivered conference papers and written a few articles centering on Youmbi's work.<sup>1</sup> These were discussed at length with Youmbi who supported these activities by generously sharing images and frequent updates on his developing artistic practice. The

collaborative effort underpinning academic writing is something usually just acknowledged in passing, but the question posed to us by the editors of this volume made us reflect more intentionally on the importance of building mutual trust in the relationship between an artist and the scholar(s) writing about their work. We both often felt that this worked quite nicely as a mutually beneficial relationship which strengthened Forni's position as a scholar and contributed to enhancing the visibility of Youmbi's work, resulting in residency opportunities and important acquisitions. This chapter is a rather fluid reflection on just over a decade of conversation and exchange that have thus been critical to the development of our respective works.<sup>2</sup>

## Contemporary Art, Traditions and Markets

For many years, long before our paths crossed, both of us had been reflecting on the complex relationship between African contemporary art production, academic taxonomies, market demands, and opportunities. Since the late 1990s, Silvia Forni had been exploring contemporary village-based artistic production in North West and West Cameroon, the relationship between objects and collections, and local conceptions of political authority, prestige, gender relationships, and financial success. Following the seminal work of Michael Rowlands, Jean-Pierre Warnier, Nicolas Argenti, Christraud Geary and Christopher Steiner, Silvia Forni's research sought to explore the multiple ways in which contemporary makers articulated ideas of tradition and modernity through their aesthetic choices. In addition, starting in 2010, she was interested in exploring the markets available to contemporary rural artists and how middlemen and dealers influenced both the artistic production and the way this was framed in markets. At the same time, Hervé Youmbi had started reflecting on the persistent social impact of colonisation on African societies fifty years after independence. Through his work *Totem that Haunt our Dreams*, completed in 2010, he questioned the aspirations of Africa-based artists who still saw cultural institutions in the Global North as the inescapable arbiters of success, despite the desire many had to make art from an African perspective. Building on his questioning of the identity and aspirations of individual artists, Hervé Youmbi was interested in exploring the idea of cultural identity and the factors that shape and influence cultural

values and transformations. In many ways, what troubled us both were the strict academic and commercial boundaries dividing the “traditional” and the “contemporary” and the very real challenges posed to these definitions by the complex reality of artistic production happening in cities and villages on the African continent.

Grounded in our independently developed interests and research, our thinking finally started to converge in 2010, when Silvia returned to Douala after spending several weeks in West Cameroon, often referred to as the “Grassfields”, and particularly in Foumban researching the local art market. Over a few visits to Hervé’s studio, we spent hours discussing the artificial separation between the traditional and the contemporary, exchanging ideas and thoughts about the changes and transformations that we were witnessing in how “tradition” was being articulated in the visual language of the palaces and masquerades of West Cameroon. What unfolded during those visits was an intense and generous exchange that in many ways reinforced our independent commitment to continuing this research through our distinct languages. Collaboration was indeed an interesting part of those conversations. Though singular authorship is the highest currency both in academia and in the art world, we were both interested in thinking through ideas of collective forms of creativity. Forni’s research on the market for contemporary “traditional” art, the workshop and the collective efforts that often contribute to the creation of artworks was very much aligned with Youmbi’s own interests.

After spending some time reflecting on the ways in which artists’ individual trajectories are shaped by the inescapable fields of power of the international art world (institutions, biennials, fairs and galleries), Hervé Youmbi was beginning to investigate the role of art in contributing to shifting cultural identities on the local level. While contemporary studio artists presented themselves as players on an international scene in dialogue with makers from other countries, these international tensions were taking a different form at the local level, where artists and performers operating in the “traditional” sphere were developing new visual languages that reflected their contemporary understanding of community, political, and religious practices. For both of us, the creative and often collaborative creative intelligence that bestowed specific meanings to different art forms in local communities was a compelling counterpoint to the globalising and homogenising effect of the international contemporary art scene, often characterised by sweeping trends that strictly inform – to the point of limiting – the space of

individual creativity. While we pursued these avenues of research and reflection with different methodologies and from different vantage points, we strongly valued the opportunity of sharing and discussing our ideas with one another, testing their validity and heuristic potential in contexts (North West and West Cameroon and the contemporary art world) that were familiar to both of us and constituted a strong foundation for our conversations.

### Long-Term Exchange as Collaboration

Not framed by specific funding, institutional networks or timelines, but fuelled exclusively by mutual interest and trust, the relationship we established afforded avenues of collaboration that were driven exclusively by our research and creative interests at any specific moment. For Hervé Youmbi the chance to discuss with academics and researchers was a welcome sounding board for ideas. Even before meeting Silvia Forni, he had developed a strong and meaningful working relationship with art historian Dominique Malaquais, who was the first art historian to publish significant scholarship about his work.<sup>3</sup>

Meeting Silvia Forni provided yet another avenue of collaboration: her position as a curator in a large encyclopedic museum made it possible for him to test the practical and conceptual possibilities of producing contemporary works that were meant to transition between different spheres of presentation and fruition.<sup>4</sup> Although it was not really planned that way, upon encountering the first material iteration of Youmbi's contemporary idiosyncratic "traditional" masks at an art fair in London, Forni proposed to acquire the work for the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. Knowing well what the intent of the project was, she was keen to witness the completion of the multiple transitions of the first works in the *Visage des Masques* series which travelled from the contemporary art space of Bandjoun Station to the dance field, and from an art fair back to the community before being permanently accessioned by a foreign institution. Because of her deep interest in the project, Forni was invested in negotiating the institutional latitude to make sure that the work could travel from London back to Cameroon, then to the ROM, following a somewhat unconventional journey and timeline for the acquisition of a contemporary artwork. Becoming involved firsthand in this



Figure 1 | Hervé Youmbi and Silvia Forni in the atelier of Marie Kouam, one of Youmbi's collaborators, November 2021 © The Authors

project provided Forni with the opportunity not only to *think*, but also to *do* things differently when it came to building a collection of African art in a large Canadian museum. At the same time, the ROM's purchase provided Youmbi with his first important institutional endorsement, which, as often happens, was followed by other museums acquiring his works in the years following.

Unlike many scholar/curator-artist interactions, our relationship neither began nor ended with a project or a product, but it is mostly grounded in a sincere interest in exchanging ideas. Silvia Forni wrote and likely will continue to write about Hervé Youmbi's work.<sup>5</sup> She also acquired two important artworks for the institution she was working for. Yet there was never a sense that these were the final goals of their interactions. Rather, these events emerged as the punctuation of an ongoing relationship that continues to unfold through encounters in Cameroon and other parts of the world. The absence of a specific economic framework allowed for a high degree of flexibility but also reduced the potential power imbalance of traditional institutional collaborations, where terms tend to be determined by the side controlling the finances of a project. That said, we both know that our exchanges have had an impact on the way we do our respective jobs. It is a relationship that has provided reciprocal intellectual nourishment while also pushing us to think beyond our areas of expertise and remain open to different forms of articulation of our shared interests.

Although we are conveying a rather positive picture, we do not want to give the impression that our positionalities are not shaped by the structural imbalances which shaped many collaborations between researchers in the Global North and artists in the Global South. We are clearly aware that we are not operating outside the systems that define our roles as curator/researcher and artist/researcher. The fact that we first met in Cameroon where Forni was doing research sponsored by the museum she was employed by long before we would meet in Europe and in the US is not a factor that we ignore. This framework created a specific setting and expectations that were neither unusual nor unique. Artists usually welcome researchers and curators due to their potential to open up future opportunities. Yet we know that our relationship is not exclusively defined by the transactional opportunities that have emerged at different times, as we are both convinced that there is much more to be gained as researchers, artists, and humans by taking a long-term approach that allows for relationships and questions to evolve. As we continue to stay in touch, discuss, and exchange we look forward to discovering how our thinking will change with time and what new horizons we will contemplate together as individuals and professionals in the years to come.



- 1 Forni, Silvia (2015): "Objects Fit for Kings: The Antiquities and Replicas Art Market in Fouban", in: *Africa in the Market: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art from the Amrad African Art Collection*, Toronto, pp. 94–119; Forni, Silvia (2016): "Masks on the Move: Defying Genres, Styles, and Traditions in the Cameroonian Grassfields", in: *African Arts*, Vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 38–53; Forni, Silvia (2017): "Visual Diplomacy: Art Circulation and Iconoclashes in the Kingdom of Bamum," in: Basu, Paul (Ed.): *The Inbetweenness of Things*, London, pp. 148–157.
- 2 This reflection follows loosely a series of prompts that were provided to us by the editors of this volume. For brevity, we have decided to summarise the main points rather than provide a full translation and transcription of our conversation.
- 3 See Malaquais, Dominique (2008): "Douala en habit de festival", in: *Africultures*, Vol. 73, pp. 83–92; Malaquais, Dominique (2011): *Hervé Youmbi: Plasticien*, Montreuil: Éditions de l'Œil; Malaquais, Dominique (2011): "Imagin(IN)g Racial France: Take 3 – Hervé Youmbi", in: *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 157–166; Malaquais, Dominique (2016): "Playing (in) the Market: Hervé Youmbi and the Art World Maze", in: *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Vol. 223, pp. 559–580.
- 4 Interestingly, at the time of writing this chapter in 2023, Youmbi is producing a documentary that brings together the reflections of many researchers, curators and museum professionals that have impacted his work in one way or another. The documentary reverses the relationship between artist and researcher, but also acknowledges the productive importance of scholarship and the art ecosystem writ large in helping to clarify and focus an artist's creative practice.
- 5 Forni, Silvia; Malaquais, Dominique (2019): "Village Matters, City Works: Ideas, Technologies, and Dialogues in the Work of Hervé Youmbi", in: *Critical Interventions*, Vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 294–305.

