

INTERVIEW WITH GODDY LEYE (Dec. 2010): SELECTED EXCERPTS

by Annette Schemmel
translation by Dominique Malaquais

A month and a half before his death, Goddy was interviewed by curator and art historian Annette Schemmel, who is currently at work on a PhD at the Freie Universität in Berlin. The interview lasted several hours and was conducted on a bus. An excerpt appears below that goes to the heart of what Goddy believed as both an artist and an arts activist. The interview was conducted in French. It appears here in English.

Annette Schemmel: My doctoral thesis focuses on informal professionalization strategies deployed by artists in Douala. I mean by this ways in which they gain access to economies of knowledge about art. You are a specialist who is deeply engaged in this process; what are your views on the subject?

Goddy Leye: In the 1990s, most of what artists [in Cameroon] knew about art they had learned in workshops, seminars, and symposia organized, notably, by the Goethe Institut in Yaounde and, then, by doual'art in Douala. From this period too dates the emergence on the scene of the first artists' collectives. The very first of these was Prim'Art, which I helped found in Yaounde in 1993. Then, in 1995, came a collective called Club Khéops (like the pyramids, yes, yes!), among whose members were Salifou Lindou, Blaise Bang, Hervé Yamguen, Koko Komégné, and Joël Mpah Dooh. In both Yaounde and Douala, these collectives developed projects that extended beyond the realm of simple exhibitions into that of engaged reflection.

One such project, which played an important part in structuring the local scene, began in 1996. We had held a workshop on the production and use of natural, earth-derived pigments. How, we asked, could you use natural pigments to make contemporary art? The

workshop took place in Prim'Art's Yaounde space and brought together the members of Prim'Art and Club Khéops. Look around today and you'll see that many artists [in Douala and Yaounde] are working with earth-derived materials. This is a result of shared knowledge: a process whereby those of us who knew taught those of us who did not how to make acrylic paints from natural pigments. Now this knowledge is everywhere on the contemporary urban arts scene. In the 90s, thus, artists and the collectives to which they belonged played a very important part in professionalizing the scene and shaping its practices.

A.S.: What, in the final analysis, is a professional artist?

G.L.: Professional artists are people who spend 90% of their time making art and do it with devotion. It isn't something they do in passing, for a time, before moving on; it defines their lives and they define themselves in terms of it. Still, there's more to it than that ... To be a true professional, you need to be autonomous in the making of art as in all aspects of your life, and you have to have been trained; you have to have learned what art is.

A.S.: So it's possible to "learn art"?

G.L.: Yes, it's something you learn! My point is not that you learn how to express yourself artistically, but that you can learn (or teach someone) the techniques required to express yourself. Technique alone is not enough—it's not what makes you an artist—but that's no excuse to turn your back on training or say it's not necessary ... In my eyes, an artist is someone who is curious, who is constantly learning, training him/herself, seeking to understand what s/he can't yet grasp, in order to go always further. An artist is a permanent apprentice.

A.S.: And you—how did you acquire your training?

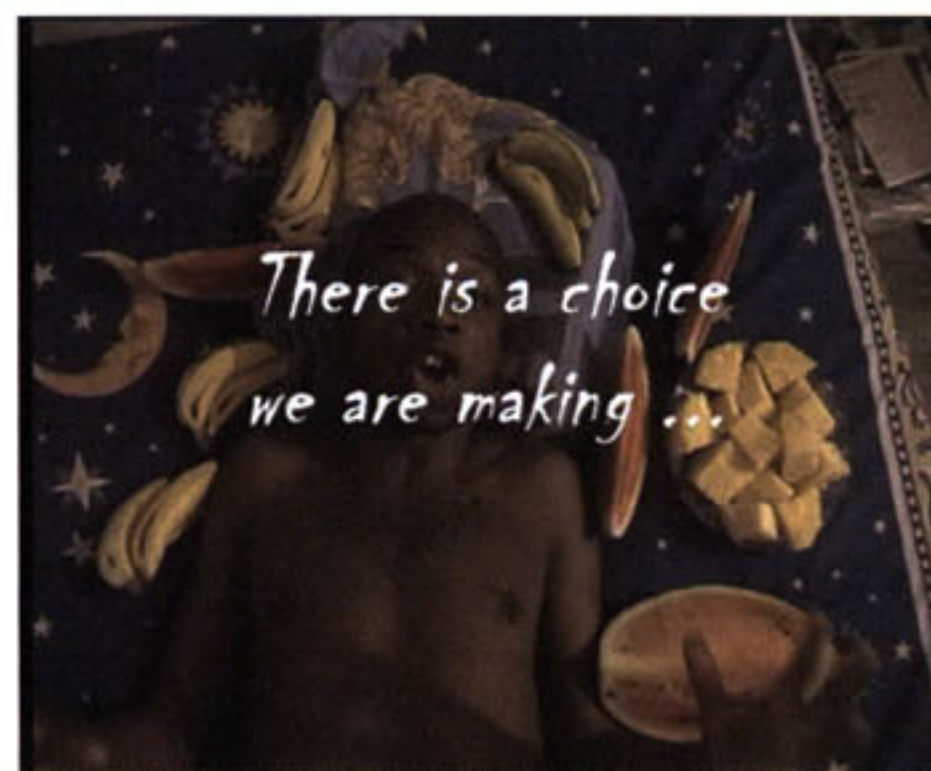
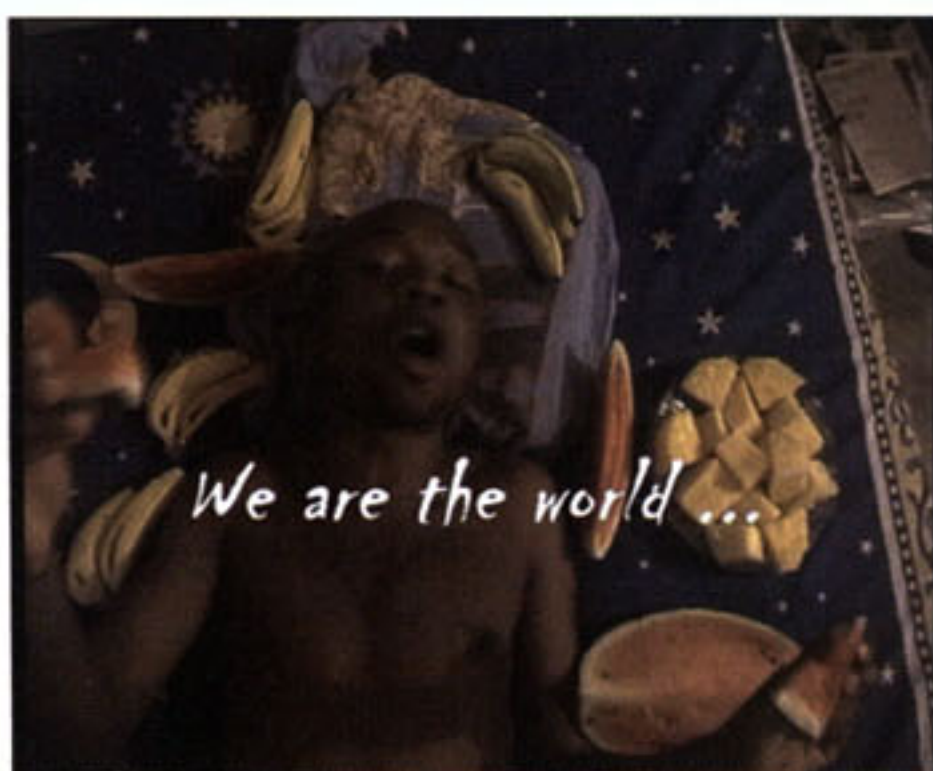
G.L.: In three ways. First, I learned alone, in high school in Mbouda, in Western Camer-

oon. I painted, I drew: I was constantly at it. A bunch of us had created a group called "The Art and Drawing Club." If you ask me today how it is that I came to have this passion for art back then, I can't really answer, because there wasn't any particular model or example around me. I was an autodidact. I read and I bought myself books about painting techniques, drawing, how to render the human body, about working with charcoal and pencil, and so on.

Then came university. My first year was 1986. At the University of Yaounde, you couldn't get a fine arts diploma. In high school, I had studied science. When I got to university, I decided to study languages and literature. It wasn't just because I couldn't get a fine arts degree; it was also because, at the time, I was thinking about becoming a journalist. Naturally enough, given my interest in art, I joined the Visual Arts Club. There, students in all disciplines—law, economics, natural sciences, biology, physics—met to make and discuss art. We had a space on campus and we'd go there every day. It was open twenty-four hours a day. Between classes, I'd come to paint; then I'd go back to class and come back again. It was a real passion.

I was lucky ... What there was, [in the library] ... was books on the visual arts that had been acquired in the 1960s and 70s. Because classes had never been given in art history or in fine arts, no one had ever cracked their spines. So here I am, a student in languages and literature in a library full of books on art! And I'm pretty much the only one reading them! Boy, did I take advantage of that! There were books on Picasso, with whom I'd already been fascinated as a high school student; and now I could study his work. I began reading and working voraciously. I'm studying languages and literature and, at the same time, treating myself to an in-depth education in the history of art. That's how I learned about modern art—that was my focus—and this learning period proved extraordinarily useful for what was to come next.

At this point, as you can see, I was still an autodidact, and that just wasn't enough. In 1987, Dr. Pascal Kenfack came to the university to meet students there. He'd just returned from France, where he'd been studying, and had



been awarded a PhD in fine arts. I made his acquaintance and he took a few of us under his wing ... In his workshop, we talked with him, exchanged ideas. He told us about techniques that he had acquired in the French university system. We worked in his ambit, but very independently. That's how I learned, where I was formally trained, for five years, in Dr. Ken-fack's private workshop, and it was amazing!

The third was by taking part in artists' residencies and workshops. In the early 1990s, I was lucky enough to spend three months as a resident artist in French art schools. It was a critical moment for me, as I had just set out on a professional career as an artist and my mind was buzzing with questions. When I returned to Cameroon three months later, I had sixteen kilos of books in my bags! I can still remember the day!

A.S.: What is the ArtBakery's take on artist training?

G.L.: My point of departure is this: most artists in Cameroon are trained in the workshops of fellow artists. For decades—from the 1960s to the 1990s—this meant something quite specific. Workshops were minuscule, interstitial places, located in passages between buildings. ... The older, more experienced creators passed on their knowledge to the younger ones. This kind of arrangement is nothing new: That's how it worked in Europe in the age of masters and apprentices and, here, prior to the colonial period, in the workshops of the continent's master sculptors. I wanted to create something at the ArtBakery that drew on this tradition.

To make clear the context of this decision, I must underscore again how fundamental the Goethe Institut symposia, conferences, and workshops of the early '90s were in structuring the art world in Cameroon. They provided models for us, in the early '90s, when we founded Prim'Art. What we would do then, as a group, was meet weekly and one of the members would present his work to the others as if they had never met before. A critique of the work would follow: there was no ripping apart of the work, just discussion to clarify key points. When I settled in Douala,

I drew on these experiences. The ArtBakery deployed this same process with which we had experimented within Prim'Art, adding to it a layer of professionalization. ... It is with this in mind precisely that one of the first projects put in place at the ArtBakery was a program of artists' residencies.... The goal being to help birth a veritable local arts scene. I am determined that there should be a strong arts scene in this country: It's what shapes what I do. I want what I do—art—to be respected by the people among whom I live, by those who hold the reins of power, by others. For this to be possible, it's necessary that there be more and more of us here, able to show that art is more than mere fantasy. It's a fantasy, of course, but a high level one. A serious fantasy!

With the ArtBakery, we are redefining the concept of the residency. The point is not just to give artists a place to work for a year, two months, or three months, and then bid them farewell. The point is to offer artists a space where they will put into fundamental question their habitual practice. Not in the vein of "what I've been doing is all wrong." No. In the vein, rather, of questions: "What, in my practice to date, has been strong and what weak? How might I address this imbalance?" This is the principle that structures residencies at the ArtBakery. And it's why, with all but a few exceptions, artists who come here find their work undergoing changes very quickly. Because here they have access to information, to constructive, not destructive, criticism—and this is a far cry from the places many of them have been frequenting, places where the goal has been to destroy rather than grow what they do. The arts scene is such that, in many instances, more established producers are unhappy with the arrival of younger ones, for they are afraid that they will be supplanted.

I firmly believe that we can create another kind of system, an environment in which young artists feel safe, intellectually and psychologically, where they can explore new territories. Physical space plays an important part in this too: most of these young artists were working in tiny rooms in their parents' houses; at best they had 3m x 3m, the principal workspace was their bed, and what small surfaces they could afford

to paint on had to fit under the bed for storage. Here, they have space to expand. ArtBakery gives them room to grow. Physical space, because there really is a lot of space here; and mental space as well, because they are safe here, which allows them to do things they would never dare do at home—even explore subject matters that might otherwise appear taboo....

My goals are modest. I try to create opportunities for young artists and curators to meet at the ArtBakery. The ArtBakery seeks to create new networks—networks among curators, so that they (mostly women at the moment, it should be underscored) can come together with greater ease. I am neither a curator nor an arts teacher; I am an artist. But I do have experience and I can share that experience. I certainly don't run a traditional school: The ArtBakery is a workshop, an alternative platform to acquire knowledge. To my mind, art is a universal quest and people, wherever they are, should be able to talk about it. Things may change from place to place—how art is presented and made—but, in the final analysis, it is the same thing everywhere. Once we get back to the basics—to what is essential—then we are all talking about the same thing. So the long and the short of it is this: wherever you come from—the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa—as long as you think there's something you can learn from the ArtBakery, you are welcome.

Lucia Babina is a cultural producer, the founder of iStrike.ultd, a member of the cooperative Cohabitation Strategies, and has co-edited a special issue of the journal Fucking Good Art (2010) and Douala in Translation: A View of the City and its Creative Transformative Potentials (2007).

Dunja Herzog is a multimedia artist who has worked extensively in Cameroon through residencies at the ArtBakery (2006) and K-Factory (2003). In 2006, Herzog took part in the ArtBakery's prizewinning "Exit Tour" project.

Dominique Malaquais is Senior Researcher at the Centre d'Etudes des Mondes Africains and co-director of SPARCK. She began work in Cameroon in 1992. Her publications include architecture, pouvoir et dissidence au Cameroun (2002), and a short monograph on Douala-based multimedia artist Hervé Youmbi (2011).

Annette Schemmel is a freelance curator associated with EnoughRoomforSpace.org, writer and doctoral candidate in art history at the Freie Universität in Berlin. She recently curated "Stardust in a Nutshell," an exhibition of contemporary art work made in Cameroon by both local and visiting artists (Savvy Contemporary, Berlin, 2010).

