

"À l'école de Ernest Barlach, le sculpteur"

G E O R G E S A D É A G B O

80th-birthday homage

For decades, the installation artist Georges Adéagbo, born in Benin in 1942, has commuted between Cotonou (Benin), Hamburg and exhibition venues all over the world. He came to the attention of the European art scene in the 1990s, and today he is regarded as a pioneer of a self-confident art of the "global South" and is one of the most important artists from Africa. He participated in Documenta 11 (2002) and the biennials in Dakar (1996), Johannesburg (1997), Sidney (1998), São Paulo (1998), Venice (1999 and 2009), Lyon (2000) and Shanghai (2016). Numerous solo and group exhibitions in renowned institutions have made him known in Europe, the USA, Africa, Australia and Japan over the past three decades.

In 2017, Georges Adéagbo received the Finkenwerder Art Prize, and the Kunsthaus Hamburg honoured him with an exhibition. In 2019, he invited the Warburg House in Hamburg to take part in a project. On the occasion of his 80th birthday, our museum is now dedicating a comprehensive solo show to him.

Georges Adéagbo's works are expansive assemblages that spread across walls and floors. In them, craft objects meet everyday objects from different cultures, found and flea market items, carpets, clothing, records, posters, newspapers, books and self-authored philosophical texts. Beyond Western patterns of order and hierarchies of values, Adéagbo weaves a dense network of relationships between things, images and thoughts. Their non-linear, richly ramified coexistence opens up for associative observation that can create countless connections.

Adéagbo's small-scale aesthetic of abundance shows parallels to conceptual approaches in Western art as well as a rootedness in West African cultural traditions: the lively liveliness of African markets, the auratic object stagings of voodoo altars, the visual language of popular

sign and advertising painting or the strategies of creative recycling of consumer goods known as *récupération* - all of this appears in Adéagbo's spatial installations.

Adéagbo's art achieves its complexity of content and polyphony through a transcultural pendulum movement that Adéagbo constantly performs between Western and non-Western contexts, between history and the present. In doing so, he persistently (and against the background of his own experience) illuminates colonial power structures, the effects of their asymmetries and their survival in "postcolonial" times. He also addresses the stereotype-rich constructions of self-images and images of others, which he brings to the point precisely and not without humour. In this way, blind spots in the personal and social, in politics and culture can come to light, and global developments reveal their interactions with local conditions.

In his arrangements, which are always related to the respective exhibition site, Adéagbo interweaves individual history(s) with themes and events of global relevance. Adéagbo counters the knowledge of global conflicts with a utopia of universal connectedness, which is reflected in his cross-border life and work: His inter-cultural transfer enables the transformation of value, meaning and ideas.

In recent years, the work of the expressionist Ernst Barlach (1870-1938) has left many traces in Georges Adéagbo's oeuvre. We have therefore invited Adéagbo to deepen this preoccupation, to actively incorporate the collection of the Ernst Barlach Haus into his work, to interweave it with his own perspectives and to take the museum in new directions.

The exhibition has been realised in cooperation with Stephan Köhler, Kulturforum Süd-Nord e.V., Hamburg–Cotonou.

AT THE BARLACH SCHOOL

The motto chosen by Georges Adéagbo for this project, "À l'école de Ernest Barlach, le sculpteur", "In the school of Ernest Barlach, the sculptor", obviously has nothing to do with art historical notions of stylistic influence or the transmission of artistic skills. Rather, Barlach seems to be an authority of integrity for Adéagbo, his "school" an inspiring institution that stimulates thought and action.

1

The starting point for *À l'école* was one of Adéagbo's works from 2015: Inverted Space was the name he gave to his showcase on the Altona balcony overlooking the port of Hamburg [see the illustration on one of the pedestals in room 2] - an ideal location for his artistic view of the Hanseatic city, also as a trans-shipment centre for "colonial goods" and a hub of colonialist activities. At the time, Adéagbo included in his presentation a copy of Ernst Barlach's autobiography *Ein selbsterzähltes Leben* (A Life Told by Himself), published in 1928, as well as postcards showing works from our museum's collection. This integration aroused interest and a desire for new things. It grew when Adéagbo turned a publication by our museum on Barlach's wood sculptures (*Ernst Barlach. Woodwork*) into an artist's book in 2020 by inscribing his own texts [Room 8].

We wanted to continue and intensify the dialogue started by Adéagbo on a museum level. What view would the West African collector, philosopher and arranger take of the North German sculptor, draughtsman and dramatist? In what contexts would he embed Barlach in a museum dedicated to this artist? Thus followed in the same year the far-reaching invitation to Georges Adéagbo not only to show an installation *in* the Ernst Barlach Haus, but to present the Museum as an installation.

This marked the beginning of a new period of collecting for Adéagbo. At his two residences in Hamburg and Cotonou, he collected found objects, gifts and acquisitions, such as a series of West African wooden figures

and masks, literature of various provenances (including literature by and about Barlach), driftwood, a wall object in the shape of an elephant's head, a lamp in the shape of a red bustier, a winged mythical creature reminiscent of a Gothic gargoyle.

In addition, Adéagbo commissioned works in Cotonou. The woodcarver Hugues Hountondji translated Barlach's drawing *The Dream* (1912) into a relief [Room 5], while the sign painter Benoît Adanhomè transferred eight Barlach sculptures into painting after photographic models and designed five canvas banners with sequences of images based on Adéagbo's photo collages. Both the paintings with Barlach motifs [rooms 1, 2, 4, 5 and 8] and the banners based on newspaper and magazine photos [rooms 4, 5 and 8] are accompanied by texts by Adéagbo, which undermine the striking character of the pictures with multi-layered philosophical messages. The banners are striking nodes in Adéagbo's cosmos: with their colourful text bands and moving image sequences, they seem like visual news tickers whose staccato follows a world event that is at once continuous and disparate. Immediately after their creation, Adéagbo tested Adanhomè's paintings in first arrangements.

Finally, Georges Adéagbo selected several Barlach works from our museum collection for his project. The life-size wooden sculpture of the biblical lawgiver Moses [Room 8] was of particular importance from the beginning. It has now been incorporated into Adéagbo's assemblage together with other wood, plaster and bronze sculptures, porcelain figures and a selection of Barlach's drawings spanning four decades [see insert].

2

As in all of Adéagbo's previous works, the artistic work this time also includes a philosophical-literary one: Texts written in French prepare Adéagbo's assemblages, reflect and permeate them on paintings, banners and as handwritten notes on loose slips of paper; in our exhibition, the aforementioned *Woodwork* book [Room 8] is added as a special feature. The thematic range of these writings is immense. For

example, the *À l'école* project has triggered reflections on Napoleon's reintroduction of slavery in 1802, on the Creator God and the Trinity, the French President Emmanuel Macron and his alleged administrative assistance to the ride-hailing service Uber, the chequered history of Benin's independence under its long-time president Mathieu Kérékou, on the Kaaba in Mecca and Neil Armstrong's flight to the moon. Adéagbo also writes about his own dying and the vitality of nature, the power of blood, the meaning of suffering and loving, teaching and learning. All this is repeatedly tied to the central idea "In the school of Ernest Barlach, the sculptor".

3

The fact that Georges Adéagbo constantly transforms the German first name of his artist colleague into "Ernest" when writing about him is a symptomatic detail. By renouncing orthographic correctness, Adéagbo also bids farewell to the illusion of a supposedly authentic artist's personality to which he could devote himself more than 150 years after his birth. Instead, Adéagbo practices a courageous approach, appreciative and confident. This is exemplified by the paintings based on Adéagbos' designs. The Barlach objects, isolated in front of monochrome backgrounds, experience a double shift and alienation - from space to surface and from familiar iconographic traditions to the sphere of new interpretations. Thus, the floor plate appearing oval in the photograph of the porcelain *Russian Lovers* (1908/09) apparently inspired Adéagbo to write this epigraph: "'The bird is in the egg, like the egg in the bird'... / 'Not all Christians have the same customs, the same traditions, but the egg is the origin of life for all of them'..." [Room 8]. At the end of the intercultural chain of transformation, the translation finally meets the original work in *À l'école*. Barlach returns from Benin as an Other - and bird and egg find each other.

Value hierarchies are abolished by transfers like this. In *À l'école*, Barlach's iconic masterpieces lose the privilege of an elevated presentation - but not in the sense of a pedestal fall, but in favour of an inclusive gesture: between flotsam and jetsam, everyday trivialities and

cultic objects, Barlach's art is embedded in a living narrative context about God and the world. As players under Adéagbo's direction, his figures can unfold their expressive power with "gestures of piety and gestures of rage".

Beyond the depiction of his own "special feelings", Barlach sought a universal, supra-temporal perspective in his art. His existential themes and motifs - war and violence, power and powerlessness, but also charity and spirituality - offer Adéagbo significant points of departure for his own narrative threads. Their ramifications have a liberating effect on Barlach, breaking open a narrow perception that all too readily encloses the contradictions, abysses and comedy of his work in a Christian-based idea of Barlach as a gentle comforter of the soul. The span of Barlach's oeuvre between the floating and the furious, "hellish paradise and paradisiacal hell" can unfold in Adéagbo's polyphonic chorus of strange and familiar, banal and special things - just like Barlach's wandering spirituality, who felt the label "Christian sculptor" to be restrictive even during his lifetime: "I am much Christian, much pagan, much Buddhist, much, much else. Nordic, ghostly, addicted to witches - very nebulous".

4

When talking about Barlach's sculptures, Adéagbo is usually quick to mention African sculptures. He seems to discover a comparable eloquence and liveliness in the figures of Barlach, who also perceived his woods as animated matter. However, Barlach was inspired in his sculptural work less by African than by medieval and Far Eastern carving. Eastern Europe, however, was the main source of inspiration for the motifs and style of his art. A journey to the foreign lands of southern Russia in 1906 helped him to develop his own style. In addition to the archaic stone idols he encountered in the steppe landscape, it was also the physiognomies of beggars and peasants, day labourers and drunkards, which were haunted by harsh realities, that gave concrete form to his ideal of a "simple" pictorial language. Barlach's "primitivism" was thus diametrically opposed to that of artists such as Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein: He was not interested in romanticised "noble savages"

but in precarious existences as the embodiment of human existence par excellence - and therefore with a claim to a "brotherly feeling".

The names of the places and regions Barlach travelled to in the summer of 1906 - Kyiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk - have had a different ring since the end of February 2022 at the latest. What Barlach called his "journey to the heart of southern Russia" would have been a trip to the Ukrainian People's Republic only a good ten years later, in December 1917. Barlach's special relationship to this region resonates with Adéagbo when he repeatedly links Barlach's works to current war events. Adéagbo allows us to experience Barlach as a very contemporary artist.

5

Georges Adéagbo activates us, but even in the Barlach school he does not lecture. Even his texts, always marked as quotations, leave open who is speaking here, and his assemblages signal undogmatic openness. They neither prescribe nor prescribe anything, but sharpen the view. Regarding Barlach's *Blind Beggar* (1906 [Room 8]), Adéagbo remarks: "You don't have eyes for lying down and sleeping, you have eyes for looking and seeing'...".

Karsten Müller

CATALOGUE

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