



ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ
CARGO LAND



Water Cargo, 2012.

Mixed media installation, 175 x 550 x 320 cm



ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ CARGOLAND

An Interview with Romuald Hazoumè.

Gerard Houghton: Romuald, I remember your once telling me how you're always looking for ways to show us what Africa 'is' right now, at this moment in time. How do these new works suggest the immediate reality of contemporary Africa?

Romuald Hazoumè: Well, let's begin with the 'masks' which were the first artworks I ever showed in Europe, and which link back to those traditional African masquerades still surviving into the present. My 'masks' aren't the same power objects as those masks formerly used for ceremonial purposes. Instead, they're portraits of real people I know, or sketches inspired by something, maybe a photograph, I've recently seen. In Africa today much attention is paid to the way women dress their hair, and lots of information is transmitted in the coded language of coiffure. If a woman is unattached, but looking to meet someone, her hairstyle will spell out that fact. Again, the way a certain knot is tied might mean she's had enough children already and has had enough of men too, and the knot in question announces that her firm resolve won't be undone. So each of my 'masks' denotes a real individual or a distinct personality type today – not in some distant past. Some of the 'masks,' like *Fukoshima*, deal with non-African realities and refer to other current events. I purposely altered this work's title, out of respect for the pain of the Japanese people displaced by the twin natural disasters of March, 2011. The poignant photograph of that young Japanese woman, draped in a blanket, her face a study in shock, touched the hearts of many around the world, and this 'mask' records my own immediate reaction to what happened there, including my admiration for the way the Japanese collective banded together, offering to the world examples of individual bravery and group solidarity. By changing the title to *Fukoshima* the link is made to another Japanese city, also the



scene of a nuclear disaster, and both references reveal certain consequences of man's constant thirst for power, be it nuclear energy, coal power or the 'black gold' of oil fuelling our booming economies. Much of what happened in Japan was predictable, but with the explosive meltdowns of the nuclear reactors came clouds of radioactivity spreading through the air, falling as rain, draining into the rivers and flowing into the global marine system. It was a good thing everyone was watching carefully, since the whole world is now involved.

Gerard Houghton: This idea of a collective, and of the artist as the representative of that community, finds frequent expression in your work.

Romuald Hazoumè: Well it's important to understand that although I spend time travelling around with various exhibitions, I always return home to Porto-Novo, since that's where I come from, and where I am happiest and can work best. An African proverb says: "When you don't know where you're going, just remember where you come from." I know where I'm from, and am very proud of those roots. In Africa, artists played important roles in the reconstruction of their countries after Independence from the colonial powers. They were of incalculable value to the emerging states in forging a common sense of national identity, and that crucial role was founded upon the artists' traditional position within their communities. The fact is that in our culture we cannot live without our communities. This is built into our customs and our beliefs. There's no way, for example, that we would exclude old people from our



homes, or put them into a retirement home. We still need them, perhaps to answer questions about things that we ourselves still don't understand. Having received our training from them, we've no right - even if they go mad - to evict any person from the family house. We have a real duty to take care of them, just as they once looked after us. Our art follows a similar logic, in the sense that any artist works for and is at the service of his or her community, because that wider community has fashioned our lives and our art. If we were to forget these traditions today, then it would uncouple us from our people, and that would mean a regression at the level of that community which we wish to help advance. The very last thing we'd want is for this traditional culture to disappear, and today in the face of all the destabilising pressures that assail us from outside, we need to mount a coordinated resistance.

Gerard Houghton: So you see the artists as leaders who have a vital role to play in the maintenance and development of each community?

Romuald Hazoumè: Well, even though artists are not in any real sense politicians, we still have a prominent role to play in what I call 'the politics of the people.' We are the ones obliged to tell the truth to the community, since our elected politicians appear constitutionally incapable of that! Remember Fela Kuti, the charismatic Nigerian musician. His music challenged the Nigerian government and exposed the endemic corruption that existed. Who, when knowing Nigeria today and listening to Fela's songs, is going to say that he wasn't absolutely right? Fela changed so many things by getting on the government's nerves so much. He was harassed, beaten and tortured



Moncongo, 2011.
Found objects, 51 x 22 x 28 cm



Fukushima, 2011.
Found objects, 52 x 24 x 14 cm