

AtWork Toolbox

by Simon Njami

“A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself (who then ceases to be a theoretician), then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate.” Gilles Deleuze

For our quest to find an appropriate translation, we had to, as once suggested by Marcel Proust, “find our own instrument of Combat”. The combat is huge. How to transform the society we are living in? After long debates and brainstorming, we decided to choose three instruments that could help us fulfil our goals: Africa, Notebooks, Community.

Africa is a metaphor for the world. All that is happening there is happening everywhere else. Africa is young: which means that it represents a marvellous laboratory not only to reflect on the past, but to think another future and another way to relate to each other. As many contributors put it when asked “Why Africa?”, it is an evidence that imposes itself, not like a continent or a geographical space, but like a theory in the making. Like a “tool that must be useful to all”, Africa must function and set new standards. We must revitalize this ancient wisdom, this philosophy of the “welcome” table, and, in our time of speed, invite some slowness.

Notebooks. We have lost our ability to transform things with our hands. In those contemporary times we are living in, we are slowly becoming mutants who will soon forget how to write. This craftsmanship that allows one to reflect on oneself and the world, and to record feelings, reflections, images and moments, is a unique tool that permits the survival of a vernacular memory. Notebooks refer to writing and writing to time. The confrontational time spent in trying to fill, with one’s own hands, some blank pages, is a journey that opens doors we thought shut forever by revealing the fragility and the ephemeral that can only survive within ourselves.

Community is something that is daily talked about. But instead of representing a coherent and harmonious ensemble, it is always referred to as a divide if not a disease. Because we are no longer able to make the distinction between community and sectarianism, togetherness and clan, belonging and exclusion. In Africa, where the poison has not yet had an irreversible effect, it is still possible to open young minds to the greatest challenge of the 21st century: how are we going to live together? How are we going to be faithful translators? Are we going to think, with Arthur Rimbaud, that “I is an other”? It is a challenge worth taking on board.