



View of "Saâdane Afif: *Anthologie de l'humour noir*" (Anthology of Black Humor), 2010, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

**IT SEEMS THAT MUSEUMS** increasingly want exhibitions to speak about museums themselves—in order to justify their importance by reflecting the legitimacy of their history or to demonstrate their openness to forms and approaches they used to be able to assimilate with only the greatest difficulty, such as movement, the performative, or criticism. As part of this shift, institutions deeply desire the supposed challenge of exhibitions constructed around immaterial works—examples include "Voids" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the recent Marina Abramović retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the institutional success of an artist such as Tino Sehgal—which offer opportunities for an unrepeatable tour de force.

Nothing has changed, but everything is different: Perhaps it is simply the publicizing of this museal porosity that will be the coup de grâce of institutional critique, which was, for Conceptual artists, a way out of their ambivalent relationship with the museum. But for a generation born in the 1970s, the museum is no longer considered a totemic foe, and this is, moreover, undoubtedly the principal reason why artists are no longer so eager to bite its hand. Will a period of mourning follow, in a typically postmodern mutation of a radical discourse into a posture of lamentation?

"A knife without a blade, which is missing the handle": While preparing the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1946, André Breton contemplated this impossible object, described in an aphorism by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. The

eighteenth-century German physicist-cum-philosopher is also quoted in Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940), which gave us the term *black humor*. Lichtenberg's phrase could well describe another "*Anthologie de l'humour noir*," Saâdane Afif's exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (on view until January 3), a show that remains elusive and ungraspable—somewhere between mourning and sarcasm. In the single room that is the Pompidou's Espace 315, some fifteen poems are printed on black-painted walls: poems or song lyrics that Afif commissioned from other artists, as well as from writers, critics, and friends. Each of them comments in its own way on the object in the middle of the room, a Ghanaian casket in the form of a miniature Centre Pompidou, constructed mainly from wood (and itself titled *L'Humour noir*, 2010). During the opening night of the exhibition, two actors, standing on bollards imitating those on the plaza outside the Pompidou and situated around this unique sculpture-sepulchre, read these texts aloud, as if they were taking part in a wake, filling the empty coffin with voices. But who was the cadaver? Although the casket is in the shape of the museum, it has the measures of a human body—perhaps the artist's. On the back cover of the booklet that accompanied the performance, however, Afif copied the phrase that appears on Marcel Duchamp's tomb: "*D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent*" (Besides, it's always others who die). With the *vanitas* he presents in this exhibition, Afif celebrates the museum as a great necropolis of all the deaths that art announced in the twentieth century.

—François Piron

SAÂDANE AFIF

"ANTHOLOGIE DE L'HUMOUR NOIR" is typical of the kind of exhibition I make now; it is a moment, a stage in a process; it is intentionally "permanently incomplete." The conceptual tools that determine my practice today favor and expand the format of the exhibition. This show is at the Centre Pompidou, a place that particularly resonates with me, as it is the museum where I discovered art when I came to Paris as a teenager. In the early 1980s, the Pompidou was an entirely open space; this was well before the security psychosis that gradually put an end to this kind of openness. At that time, the Pompidou was a true public space. One entered it like the metro; people smoked, ate, rested there; and when I discovered that I could enter the galleries for free, I felt at

home in this museum: Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers's original concept was fully functioning. Going to the Pompidou became my favorite promenade, and in preparing this show, I wanted to evoke that memory from when I was fourteen while recalling the conflicted relationships that avant-garde artists and movements from Dada to the Situationists have had with the idea of the museum.

My work today does not rely on the object: It is developed through the accumulation or interweaving of elements that can be more or less visible. One of the tools I have been using involves collaborations and commissions, notably of texts—poems or song lyrics—from people I know: friends, artists, writers, and others. In this sense, an exhibition is literally a *pretext*. For these texts also become my works and are the point of departure for other forms

of production: performances, songs, sometimes also objects, which may, in turn, give rise to other texts, and so on. For the Pompidou, at the start, I considered the idea of a retrospective of these texts and a performance, which made me think about a ceremony, a wake where people would come to read their texts next to a casket. This led me to travel to Ghana to commission Kudjoe Affutu to make a casket in the shape of the Centre Pompidou. In Ghana there is a tradition, unique in the world, of fabricating coffins in the shape of objects that are connected to the life of the deceased. Affutu pursues this tradition: He was the assistant of Paa Joe, who became internationally famous after his caskets were exhibited at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 in the exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" (Magicians of the Earth), along with those by Kane Kwei. This is yet



Above: Actor performing at the opening of Saâdane Afif's exhibition "Anthologie de l'humour noir" (Anthology of Black Humor), 2010, Centre Pompidou, Paris, September 14, 2010. Photo: Bérénice Rapegno.



Right: Visitor reading Laetitia Pariani's written contribution to Saâdane Afif's exhibition "Anthologie de l'humour noir" (Anthology of Black Humor), 2010, Centre Pompidou, Paris, September 28, 2010. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

another level of this multilayered project. It means a lot to me to have had this object made in Ghana and not in a set shop in Paris. The process of commissioning this casket—just as anyone can do over there to bury a loved one—and bringing it back to the Pompidou constitutes a great deal of the meaning of this work; it helps define what it is.

The story of this exhibition is intertwined with my personal history and the Pompidou's, but also with those of the deaths announced in art. The avant-garde never stopped announcing the dead, including the death of art itself. The *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, which André Breton published in 1940, and from which I have borrowed the exhibition title (producing a bit of wordplay), is itself a kind of casket for Dadaism, a sort of retrospective of the foundations of this movement. Furthermore, there is, among these layers of meaning, the history of the relationships between modern art and African art, with Derain, Matisse, and Picasso, and how controversial these were—encapsulated by Picasso's famous declaration "Negro art, never heard of it!" And finally the very history of the Pompidou, the history of its architecture, and the death of a certain internationalist utopia it promoted with "*Magiciens de la terre*," which was highly important, although the experience of that show seems to have faded from the memory of the Pompidou quickly, as if it had been of no consequence at all.

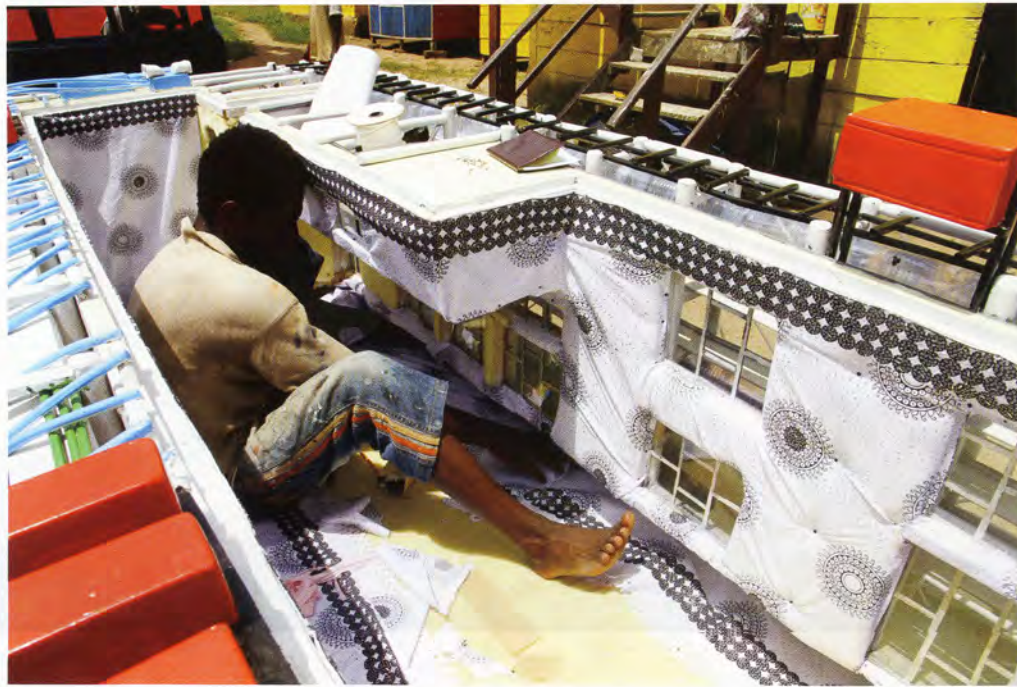
This casket brings these various strands of meaning together, without making explicit whether the show ultimately serves the artist or the institution, or simply reflects those consecrations that prizes represent—since this exhibition results from the Prix Marcel Duchamp I was awarded in 2009. But the casket metaphorically holds all these texts, these voices, these overlapping histories. It is, as is often the case in my work, a kind of *vanitas*, at once tragic and comic. And this show is, like all the exhibitions I do, founded on exchanges, dialogues, circulations. The story that I'm telling you here is the one that I told the authors of the texts, who adapted it to their own preoccupations, their styles, through the filters of the relationships I have with them; to what they know about me and my work. The signature of the other is the motif of my work, in the same way that flowers can be a motif for a painter. It isn't about the disappearance of the author, but rather about the incorporation of the other into the work, and about seeing these commissions as equivalent to making a really good sketch. It is a very important part of my studio work, which consists of orienting, explaining, establishing game rules, making the other understand how he is instrumentalized and how he retains his freedom. Every author is free to use these texts as he pleases, to publish them, to sell them to

Madonna—and I am free to use them and to interpret them in my work. The exhibition, I believe, is founded on the surfeit of information produced between the casket and the fifteen texts that are posted on the walls. The resulting information overload structures the relationship between the thing exhibited, the artist, and the visitor, which makes the show, ultimately, a form of abstraction. □

*Translated from French by Molly Stevens.*



From top: Kudjoe Affutu in his workshop, Awutu, Ghana, May 30, 2010. Apprentice and Kudjoe Affutu in front of his workshop, Awutu, Ghana, June 30, 2010. Kudjoe Affutu in front of his workshop, Awutu, Ghana, July 8, 2010. Photos: Regula Tschumi.



**The signature of the other is the motif of my work, in the same way that flowers can be a motif for a painter.**



Saädane Afif, *L'Humour noir* (Black Humor), 2010, wood, nails, glue, paint, Plexiglas, fabric, thread, plastic. Installation view, Centre Pompidou, Paris.