

**Romuald Hazoumè**  
Beninese Solidarity  
with Endangered  
Westerners

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Space01

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**Romuald Hazoumè**

Beninese Solidarity with  
Endangered Westerners

**Kunsthaus Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

21 September 2013 to 19 January  
2014

In co-operation with  
steirischer herbst

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Romuald Hazoumè is a Benin artist who is celebrated within the global western-oriented art scene. He was *included* from a position that seems to be far away. Which images of Africa and which African art do we imagine? Stereotypes come into mind. Hazoumè plays with these clichés, critically summing up today's social problems in his oeuvre. His art tells us a lot about African issues that are quickly perceptible as European, and finally, as global problems.

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## Love

The Goddess of Love greets the entrants. Protected by warriors, she has credible command of the ability to store and pass on love. Locks that people attach to many European bridges as a token of loving relationships can be recharged here by the power of love. As an idol, the great goddess demonstrates and allows us to try out the possibilities of the voodoo cult, which has one root in Benin. Alongside the suits of armour from the world-famous Graz Armoury, which are reminiscent of the wars Austria fought against the warriors of the former Ottoman empire, alluding also to the religious threat, she underpins global aspects of spiritual penetration as well as the collision of quite different cultural traditions. As a goddess, she is able to store the power of love, demanding in return the necessary respect with the help of the warriors.

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## Petrol

Canisters are widespread items in Benin. However, instead of using

them to carry water (otherwise quite common in Africa), they are chiefly used to smuggle petrol. Several private oil refineries situated in the nearby Niger Delta are frequently the target of illegal dealings. After heating and enlarging them over an open fire, plastic canisters are filled with stolen petrol and smuggled to Benin via perilous routes, mostly overnight. The film *Roulette Béninoise* shows just how dangerous these transport routes are. Riding their motorcycles, bikes, or even by foot, smugglers are forced to transport their valuable fluid cargo much too rapidly, thus often resulting in fatal explosions. Just as in Russian roulette, the participants' nerves decide how long they can play the game without losing their lives. *Rare Finerie* is the name of this economically significant underground market where fuel is traded. Also the sinking boat is made of petrol canisters that Hazoumè borrowed from daily practice in his home country. The plastic parts are painted, individualised and reminiscent of numerous different masks that have made the artist world-famous. *Rat Singer* is sinking, and with it the protective

amulets still hanging on the handles, yet unable to save the boat from its fate. The rat, it seems, literally leaves the boat first. What or whom it represents—corrupt government leaders, a resigning pope, global oil economy or unresolved refugee problems—is left to one's imagination.

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## Trade

Some two thirds of the Benin people are agricultural workers, thus accounting for a major part of the country's produce. Cotton production, which is regarded in Benin as a significant economic factor, is also important. The colourful and wildly patterned cotton textiles are representative of Africa in the western world. Dutch firms that copied those batik patterns from Indonesia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have been manufacturing them ever since. Instead of inspiring the Balinese people however, African soldiers based there took these so-called WAX materials home, thus contributing to their wide popularity. Today, Dutch designers still export their patterns from Europe to Africa, where they continue to be attrac-

tive today. This work consists of twelve cases covered with textiles, beneath which carved fishes, amongst others, are arranged in circles, just as they are customarily dried and preserved in Benin. There are petrol canisters standing next to them. Crude oil leads to the formation of global networks of power and the greed for it destroys the oceans, just as products derived from petroleum do. Romuald Hazoumè returns this *Food for Europe*.

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## Hunger

Chocolate is said to make you happy—even the smell of it makes your mouth water. As a widespread foodstuff and stimulant in Europe, it is also a symbol of how global markets work. The cocoa bean only flourishes in tropical regions, its main growing region having shifted over time from South America to Africa, where, above all, children in Côte d'Ivoire are responsible for the production of this *Anti-Dépresseur*. Those children earn a living for their families with beans for cheap chocolate, which satisfies our hunger for happiness.

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## Migration

Although Lampedusa Island, located between Tunisia and Sicily, covers an area of only 20 km<sup>2</sup>, it has already gained a sad reputation. Thousands of refugees from Africa are still seeking refuge on the island, which for them represents the gate to the western world. Reception camps are just as full as the boats and ships that bring those people to Europe. While many lose their lives in the process, others are sent back home. Europe just ignores their precarious situation.

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## Aid

*Beninese Solidarity with Endangered Westerners* is the subtitle of this exhibition. Romuald Hazoumè organised collections in Benin for Europeans in need, thus reversing the meaning of development aid in *ONG SBOP*. Europeans have branded Africa as a poor country in a European, western sense of the word, to which it also corresponds according to the criteria of the world market and World Bank. In Benin alone, a relatively small country with a

population the size of Austria's, there are over 200 non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They spend an enormous amount—more than 40%—of all donations on their administrative tasks alone—and many of them are even corrupt. A lot of money comes in without ever getting where it is needed most. Together with other famous Africans, Hazoumè therefore decided to found his own organisation designed to send aid to the western world and at the same time to make clear to Africans that they are in a position to help themselves. Which aid would enable us in Europe to become wealthier, and what kind of wealth do we mean by it?

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## Romuald Hazoumè

Romuald Hazoumè (\*1962) lives in Cotonou, a city on the coast of Benin, and works in the capital of Benin, Porto Novo. Involved in various different exhibitions throughout the world, he has enjoyed recognition as an artist in global art discourse especially since he received the Arnold-Bode Prize of documenta 12 (2007). He has twice appeared at Neue Galerie Graz: in 1996 at the exhibition *Inclusion:Exclusion* and again in 2008, during the exhibition *UN/FAIR TRADE. The Art of Justice*. As an artist, Romuald Hazoumè takes an intermediate position from which he is able to enjoy and flirt with the attention of the western world, while at the same time reflect the African perspective. In Benin, Hazoumè is regarded as an *enfant terrible*, as a national rebel. Hazoumè speaks eight languages—four African and four European ones. Besides English and German also French, which is Benin's official language since colonial rule from 1895 to 1960. In Benin, a relatively small country situated between Togo and Nigeria where some 60 languages are spoken in all, approxi-

mately 20 percent of the population speak French. Hazoumè's family is—like many others—Roman Catholic and follower of the Ougu cult at the same time. Voodoo religion, which from the African point of view does not contradict the principles of Christian faith, has influenced him strongly. In Benin there exists a rather rudimentary educational system. The transfer of knowledge and skills follows other traditions, especially language and narratives are in the foreground. Hazoumè produces art exclusively for the western world, yet he uses its definition of art and artists in order to convey a lot about Africa. He has therefore made a decisive contribution to the turn in post-colonial discourse.

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## Events

**22 September to 3 October 2013**

Free admission to the exhibition in connection with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kunsthaus Graz*.

**24 September, 3 pm**

Guided tours for teachers  
Monika Holzer-Kernbichler,  
Astrid Bernhard

**28 September 2013, 12 pm**

Guided tour in connection with the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kunsthaus Graz!*  
Günther Holler-Schuster

**5 October, 2 – 4 pm**

*SpaceKids, Kanister! Kanister!*  
Minimum of 3 children from 6 to 10 years of age  
Marta Ocepek

**5 October 2013**

*Museum Night*  
Guided tours through the exhibition at 6, 8, 10 and 12 pm.

**12 October 2013, 11 am**

Curators' dialogue in the frame of *steirischer herbst*  
Günther Holler-Schuster,  
Margarethe Makovec and Anton Lederer

**9 October 2013**

*Students' day 2013*  
3 pm: Guided tour for all students and staff members of Graz universities  
Günther Holler-Schuster

**19 October 2013**

*Getting to know Romuald Hazoumè's work*  
Christof Elpons

**2 November, 2 – 4 pm**

*SpaceKids, Kanister! Kanister!*  
Minimum of 3 children from 6 to 10 years of age  
Marta Ocepek

**7 December, 2 – 4 pm**

*SpaceKids, Kanister! Kanister!*  
Minimum of 3 children from 6 to 10 years of age  
Marta Ocepek

**7 December, 2.30 pm**

*Getting to know Romuald Hazoumè's work*  
Christof Elpons

For further information about our events:  
<http://www.museum-joanneum.at>  
0316/8017-9200