



Harmattan

on

lagoon

Sept 4 - 29, 2002

Maison de France, Kingsway Rd (opposite Ikoyi Hotels), Ikoyi

French Cultural Centre

EVENT OF THE MONTH

HARMATTAN on LAGOS

THE HARMATTAN: (Bruce Onobrakpeya)

I elaborated this Harmattan project from our studio work here. We started building a workshop at Agbarha in 1989. That took time. We didn't have money. In fact, it was only in 1998 that the first meeting took place. The building needed to a storey and for there to be enough room for the numerous artists in the bungalows we had constructed around. We did not do any publicity but the first year nearly 20 artists participated in this Harmattan meeting.



Why? I believe for several reasons but if you have to trace the origin, it is undoubtedly with Uli Beier that it could be found. When he was teaching in Ibadan, then in Ife, he would bring students for a nomadic work at Oshogbo. I was part of his privileged pupils. We owe all much to Uli Beier. It was a great period in the years 1960-1970 and each person wanted to renew this type of experience. Indirectly, the idea of Harmattan comes from him. The other reason, undoubtedly, comes from my experience here in the workshop at Ajao Estate. When I opened it in 1976, I wanted it to be not only a creation and meeting place, but also a venue for training young artists and a documentation site for art in the present day in the world. That was my utopia at that time. Today, my assistants are numbered about 6 but there was a time they were much more than that. I trained a lot of Nigerian engravers and graphic artists. Soon enough the space here could no longer take all the candidates and my young colleagues who wanted to work with me. This was why I thought about building an annex in my native home of Delta State. The Agbarha project was thus born out of this necessity



We therefore opened the Harmattan in 1998. The workshop took place during the dry season and this was how the name came about. The first year we were 18 people at Agbarha Otor Centre. It was an experimental project. The idea was to produce large-sized emboss, paintings and sculptures on stone. Artists came from Lagos, Benin-City, Uyo, Port-Harcourt. The result of this 2-week intensive work was encouraging. We decided to redo it in 1999. For the second edition of the Harmattan, more artists came. There were also female artists. At the end of the experience, a catalogue was published which included the 1998 edition. In 2000, the third edition attracted more than 75 artists coming from everywhere. Ceramics was

added to the basic disciplines. Kilns were constructed on the spot. The Harmattan took its real dimension in 2000. As we didn't have enough space to lodge people, we called on villagers in the surroundings and the help of Agboebo town. Schools were already informed as well as the authorities of Delta State. At the end of the third Harmattan, we understood that this informal and spontaneous gathering was becoming an event, a little like a festival. The project had to be rethought. In 2001, I was in the United States and the Harmattan could not take place. Financial constraints also contributed to this cancellation. A lot of money is needed to accommodate such a large number of people, feed them, insure them and take care of their medical need if it became necessary. Money for artistic projects is usually difficult to raise... but we however profited from this hitch to renovate the house a bit, arrange it, transform the building, construct a new series of sheds for the visiting artists.

It was then in 2001 that the Harmattan restarted. Seeing the unexpected crowd, we had to double the workshop: 15 days for the first group and 15 days for the second. Harmattan lasted for a good one month with the introduction of new disciplines like jewellery, bronze, sculpture and wood carving, metal works etc. It became a collective and multidisciplinary experience. Moreover, the workshop gave rise to seminars, evenings of reflection and dialogue. Several schools were invited to participate and to meet the artists present who came from all over Nigeria. At the end of the workshop, an exhibition was organised which attracted a lot of people and the authorities of Delta State.

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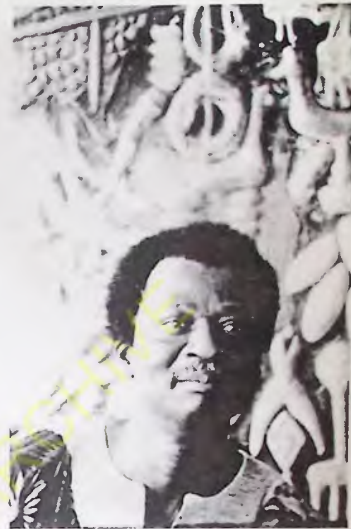
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This project between artists-friends has today become an event which resembles almost a Festival. For me, it is a source of extraordinary enrichment. The mere fact of meeting with other colleagues, dialogue with them and see them work was very fortifying. I learn a lot like that notably metal work. There is this interactive aspect which is the most important thing. Harmattan offers the time for communication. There were also those exposés. Every evening, everybody would come and meet to exchange with someone who works in a



specific domain. Debates could be prolonged late into the night because everybody stayed in-house. This educative aspect is primordial. For me it is the major contribution. What is formidable in the Harmattan is the environment. I love this beautiful region which is far from all a lot. One is

finally absorbed in the reality of nature. It is a change from Lagos and big cities. The landscape offers its riches and also its traditions. The ecological side and the culture of the people disclosed our roots. Working thus in a rural region has an excellent sanitary effect on all the participants. There is enough space for each person and this nature is as good for morning exercises as for concentration. We don't have any other thing to do than to think about work and concentrate on what we are about to do. We also have excellent rapport with the neighbouring communities. People are employed. We dialogue with the chiefs and representatives of the towns who came to see us. People came to see art. In this region, they have an innate sense of art and beauty through their own traditions. We are really far from our urban milieu with industries, air and spirits pollution, economy, politics and all that result from this industrial trip.



We now have to continue, prepare the next stage, continue to construct the main building which is not finished. People come to see us every year. I believe that soon we shall be able to conveniently receive all the artists in residence throughout the year. Agbara Otor Centre could become a sort of permanent workshop-gallery and a venue for reception, information and dialogue on art not only in our country but in the whole of Africa. I hope we will have the opportunity of developing these programs thanks to the support of international institutions like the UNESCO for instance. It is not only urgent to preserve and developer living art, it is also necessary to save our inheritance and what is left from the past. Everything is tied together and for that, this workshop should have an international visibility and repute. I think that collectively, we started off well to get there.

Information gathered by Pascal Letellier (Director of the French Cultural Centre Lagos) on August 9, 2002.