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Fraiture, Pierre-Philippe

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‘Without Art Congo Is Just a Mine’
Art as the Restoration of Shattered Bodies

Bambi Ceuppens

Introducing Congoism

Johnny Van Hove uses the term Congoism to describe the ways in which American and European intellectuals have represented DRC (henceforward Congo) since the nineteenth century as the ultimate antidote to Western ‘civilisation’, a place of decontextualised radical alterity. The pervasiveness of the trope is in no small part related to the fact that so many Westerners were caught up in various ways in Leopold II’s colonisation of the Congo Free State, from the Polish-British Joseph Conrad and the Anglo-Irish Roger Casement to the many Scandinavians who played a crucial role in the king’s colonial project. The latter fact helps explain why the Senegalese, who were exhibited in Oslo at the 1914 Jubilee Exhibition, were presented to the Norwegian public as ‘Congolese’.

Van Hove traces Congoism back to contradictory American descriptions of enslaved Angolans and Congolese as either weak and docile and therefore only fit to be house slaves, or as rebellious, likely to escape and best suited as field slaves. A similar polarising logic characterises Joseph Conrad’s representation of the Congo Free State as ‘the Heart of Darkness’: a place where Congolese are victims of atrocities inflicted upon them by Europeans, while being little more than beasts themselves. Post-independence representations likewise show Congolese simultaneously as cruel perpetrators and pitiful victims of gruesome violent acts.

In his novel Congo, Michael Crichton writes that the moment his protagonists left their aircraft and arrived in the country:

They also left civilization, and all the unquestioned assumptions of civilization. They were jumping not only through the air, but through time, backward into a more primitive and dangerous way of life – the eternal realities of the Congo, which had existed for centuries before them.

While the idea of Congo as the ultimate ‘other’, out of time and out of sync with the rest of the world has remained stable since the nineteenth century, the
elements that supposedly characterise its ‘otherness’ have changed over time. In 1965, journalist Richard West described the country as

[A] place of cannibalism, slavery, crocodiles, gorillas, driver ants and the black mamba snake, which has been known to chase and kill a galloping horse and rider. [...] the classic country of raped nuns and stewed missionaries, of pygmies and poisoned blow-darts, of voodoo and leprosy.  

Nowadays, Congo is routinely and erroneously described as the ‘rape capital of the world’ and a place of grinding poverty epitomised by photographs of adults and children risking their lives for a pittance extracting raw materials for new technologies in artisanal mines.

**Poor People, Rich Culture**

The title of the memoir by French journalist Edward Behr, *Anyone Here been Raped and Speak English?*, derives from a query a BBC reporter addressed to rescued Europeans who had been taken hostage during the siege of Stanleyville in Congo in 1964. The question is indicative of ongoing preconceptions about Congo as a ‘rape country’ and for the casual and callous cruelty with which Western journalists, photographers, and humanitarian workers feed on real crises in the country. The controversial film *Episode III – Enjoy your Poverty* by Renzo Martens was based on the premise that poverty is Congo’s major export product, making the fortune and reputation of film-makers and photographers while leaving Congolese out of pocket. Film-makers associated with Yole!Africa in Goma (see Matthias De Groof’s chapter in this volume) try to counter stereotypical representations of eastern Congo by foregrounding young artists in the region. Sammy Baloji has criticised the proliferation of NGOs in conflict zones in that part of the country in the exhibition, *Hunting and Collecting* (MuZee, Ostend, 2014). More recently, Pamela Tulizo’s photo series *Double Identity* denounces Western media representations of women in eastern Congo by showing the tensions between their global media image as eternal victims of sadistic Congolese men and their self-image as elegant, proud, self-confident, strong, and talented.

Sammy Baloji is widely considered one of the world’s most important contemporary artists. In 2020, Pamela Tulizo won the third edition of the prestigious Dior Photography & Visual Arts Award for Young Talents. Baloji and Tulizo are part of a roster of Congolese artists whose works have captivated Western art lovers since the nineteenth century. If, as has been argued, Congoism was developed to legitimise colonisation and justify the plundering of...
Congo’s immense natural resources,\textsuperscript{13} it should be noted that after the end of the transatlantic slave trade, Western interest for Congolese natural resources went hand in hand with the development of trade in Congolese artworks.\textsuperscript{14}

Such artworks by mostly anonymous artists now form part of the core collections of the best known so-called ethnographic museums and museums for world cultures.\textsuperscript{15} The African object that first fascinated Pablo Picasso was a wooden figurine made by a Vili artist who lived on the Loango coast in the region of the ancient Kongo kingdom, which covers parts of Angola, DRC, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo.

The pioneering role that Congolese artists have played in modern and contemporary art (contemporary art only starts from the 1970s onwards) world is less known. The first sub-Saharan African painters to make watercolours were the Congolese Albert Lubaki and his wife Antoinette and Tshyela Ntendu during the 1920s. In 1968 the painter Pierre-Victor Mpoy became the first African artist to have works of art exhibited at the Venice Biennale. In 2018 Bodys Isek Kinglez was the first African artist to get a solo show in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Also in 2018 Sotheby’s in London announced that Congolese artists did particularly well at their second sale of modern and contemporary art: twelve of the fourteen works on offer were sold at a price that represented just under a third of the total sale price for all artworks. Between July 2018 and June 2019, the list of contemporary African artists who had achieved the highest prices at sales was dominated by Congolese: Cheri Samba at numbers 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9, and Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, who is only thirty years old, at number 3.\textsuperscript{16}

Congo is not only known for its outstanding classical artists and contemporary visual artists. Kinshasa is the capital of comics in Africa and of Congolese rumba. In 1960, \textit{Indépendance Cha Cha} by Joseph Kabasele and African jazz became the unofficial national anthem of all newly independent African countries. In the words of the Congolese guitarist Felly Pepe Manuaku,\textsuperscript{17} Congolese rumba subsequently colonised the whole of sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of South Africa.\textsuperscript{18} In 2008 the group Konono No. 1 got a Grammy nomination for their album \textit{Live at Colour Café}. One year later the group Staff Benda Bilili received the prize for best musicians at Womex (World Music Expo). In 2012 Rachel Mwanza won the Silver Bear for best actress at the Film Festival in Berlin for her role in the Canadian film \textit{Rebelle}. In 2017 Dieudo Hamadi won the Grand prix du cinéma du réel at the Festival du Réel in Paris for his film \textit{Maman Colonelle}. In 2019 Nelson Makengo accumulated international awards for his films \textit{E’ville} and \textit{Rising Up at Night}. Together with Sammy Baloji choreographer and dancer Faustin Linyekula is Congo’s most celebrated artist.

This list, while not exclusive, not only upsets the Congoist notion of Congo as a place of eternal savagery, it also throws up an apparent paradox: how can
one of the poorest countries in the world manage so systematically to punch above its weight artistically? In an interview with Filip De Boeck, André Yoka Lye Mudaba, novelist, playwright, and director general of the Institut National des Arts in Kinshasa gave the following explanation:

We have lost everything; we no longer have economic or political power. We have lost our family ties and we no longer know what the fixed values are. Artistic development is the only possibility that remains to express something together and it is a kind of lifebuoy in the hope of giving a meaning to this existence.¹⁹

In the documentary *The Rumba Kings*, Yoka describes Congolese rumba as being not only dance but a state of mind and the joy of living. In the same film, Manda Tchebwa, an expert on Congolese music, describes the history of Congolese rumba as the story of a people who decided to fight against oppression through music. Paul Mwanga, who formed part of the first wave of urban Congolese musicians during the colonial era, confirms this by stating that he and other musicians created music out of love for their country: in the face of White colonisers who insulted them by calling them *macaques*, they decided to show them that they were going to create something to restore their dignity.

Against the idea that art would be a luxury that poor people cannot afford, these Congolese describe artistic creativity as their ultimate weapon in their fight against dehumanisation. Journalist and author Vincent Lombume Kamasi goes so far as saying that ‘suffering, despite its negative side, has something beautiful about it: it is what propels us upwards.’ When one reads Russian literature of the Golden and Silver Age or listens to the glorious rumba played during Mobutu’s dictatorship, one would indeed be tempted to conclude that autocratic regimes are conducive to the creation of great art—which does not mean that suffering is a necessary condition for artistic creativity.

Writing from the Caribbean, Derek Walcott described art as the restoration of shattered bodies.²¹ In the Congolese context, the most extreme example of defiant artistic creativity is possibly that of the man who at the start of the twentieth century made mural paintings with a plantain-stalk brush in his mouth held in his teeth, having had both his hands cut off.²²

Kinshasa, Congo’s postcolonial capital has been described as an urban theatre,²³ a tableau vivant,²⁴ a city of performers,²⁵ a place where ‘everything is ART. City or art installation, in the open air, where each inhabitant of Kinshasa plays his or her part or gives his or her “performances” under a scorching sun. Despite the hunger that constricts their bellies’.²⁶ The Kinois author and artist
Sinzo Aanza reacted angrily when the French cineaste Renaud Barret described Kinshasa as being characterised by incredible political and social chaos without paying any attention to its history and current context. Barret’s Congoist representation of Kinshasa is reminiscent of Western representations of classical Congolese objects created by people living in an eternal, unchangeable tradition and goes against the explicit recommendation of Black curators and scholars to take into account postcolonial conditions when describing and analysing contemporary black art.

**Striving for Freedom in the Face of Colonial Violence**

Most Congolese are more invested in the actual living conditions in their country than in Congo as a trope. Against ahistorical Congoist perspectives, many Congolese describe the relations between their country and the outside world as defined by predation since the time of the transatlantic slave trade, depriving the country first of its human resources and subsequently from its many natural resources: ivory, rubber, wood, copper, gold, diamonds, uranium, coltan, cobalt, and so on. The sense of constituting a community of suffering, cursed for the abundance of their human and natural resources, coveted by the outside world, is an important source of national identity. An immense sense of pride in Congo’s rich cultural heritage in general and Congolese popular music in particular is another.

If making art is what makes human beings human, for many Congolese, Congolese popular music is what makes them Congolese. This idea is far removed from Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s notions of an essentialised national genius, but grounded in a Congolese reading of Congolese history: Congolese realise that rumba was forged in a context of colonial oppression and extraction, even as it was largely developed outside of Belgian control. The musicians were self-taught, but for the Belgian jazz musician Bill Alexandre who introduced the electric guitar. The music industry was dominated by Greeks from mainland Greece and Rhodes (which was ruled by Italy between 1911 and 1947) who gave the musicians free rein. The colonial authorities considered rumba harmless dance music and the lyrics mostly innocent and inoffensive.

Zoë Strother has shown that some Pende masks created during the colonial period referred specifically to the colonial context while colonial violence and poverty led to an artistic flowering, including a rebirth of masquerades from the 1940s onwards: as the colonial government had replaced legitimate political leaders with stooges, dancing became a unique way for young men who refused to collaborate with the colonial administration to gain prestige and excel in their
own society. It could be argued that in the face of colonial violence, both ritual masquerades in the countryside during the 1940s and urban rumba during the 1950s allowed young men (and in the case of rumba also women) to create an alternative world in which they, not the colonisers, could rule supreme. But whereas Pende masquerades remained local, rumba could become a national genre because the Belgian authorities allowed for it to be broadcasted on Radio Congo belge throughout the colony.

There are also analogies to be drawn between the parallel universes of Pende masquerades and rumba music on the one hand and late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century Congolese figurines, grafted gourds, and mural paintings that made fun of Europeans on the other. Losing oneself in dances, be it in the context of rural masquerades or city bars, and mocking White people may only offer a brief respite from violence without producing a real alternative, but to dismiss such pleasure and laughter as hedonist escapism is to deny the humanity of individuals striving to experience an exhilarating sense of freedom under the most difficult circumstances.32

The Mobutu Years: Academic and Urban Art

There was never a formal music school in Belgian Congo and little formal art education. In 1943, the Belgian missionary Marc Wallenda set up Saint Luc de Gombe Matadi, based on the Belgian Saint Lucas Academies. The institution moved to Léopoldville in 1949 and was officially recognised as the Academy of Fine Arts for higher education in 1957. During that same year, a private art school founded by the Belgian artist Laurent Moonens in Elisabethville was officially recognised as the Official Academy of Fine Arts at secondary school level. To this day, these remain the only institutions for art education in the whole of Congo. Since, in the absence of bursaries, few parents can afford to send their children to study art in Kinshasa, the number of academically trained artists in the country is very small compared to those who received little or no formal academic training, especially outside of the capital.

In 1971, Mobutu proclaimed his official ideology of authenticity: Zairians had to reconnect with the supposedly authentic precolonial culture from which they had been alienated as a result of colonisation. Mobutu was neither a purist nor a man who had thoroughly studied precolonial Zairian cultures. The first ordinary congress of his party, the Popular Movement of the Revolution, instructed the National Executive Council in 1972 to ‘focus Zairian culture on a process of permanent recourse to authenticity rooted in the heritage of traditional cultural values or, to accept external cultural contributions’.33 Congolese
‘authentic’ culture turned out to be a mixed bag. A few examples may suffice: the native tongue of the self-proclaimed ‘Bantu chief’ was a non-Bantu language; the traditional wrapper he obliged women to wear was industrial cotton cloth based on the Indonesian wax technique; l’abacost, the suit men were supposed to wear, was based on the suit worn by Mao (whose Little Red Book inspired Mobutu’s Little Green one) while its name came from the French à bas le costume [down with the suit]; the Lingala in which Mobutu used to address his fellow citizens had developed during the colonial era, as was the case for the rumba music, which formed a core part of his political propaganda; rumba musicians could continue to play electric guitars and other imported instruments while traditional orchestras could amplify their music; Mobutu’s major building projects in Kinshasa and the region in which he grew up were largely modernist and drew no inspiration from precolonial architecture.

In 1973, some ten young male artists affiliated with the Academy of Fine Arts in Kinshasa published the manifesto of the Congolese avant-garde, which inscribed itself in the authenticity ideology. The artworks (mostly statues and paintings) created by these avant-gardists did not draw inspiration from specific precolonial Congolese artistic traditions, but combined a generalised and idealised vision of ‘traditional’ Congolese culture with the academic formalism in which students of the institution had been trained since the colonial era. Like rumba music, academic art transcended ethnic differences. But in a curious way, it mirrored the displays in colonial museums like the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which systematically ignored objects that showed the influence of the European presence on material culture and only exhibited so-called authentic Congolese objects as if colonialism had never taken place.

Both in terms of form and content, the artists ignored tensions and strove for harmony instead. Themes that referred to the alleged authenticity of Zairian culture – such as ‘mother and child’, ‘the market’, ‘the family’, and ‘the palaver’ – kept the realities of both colonial history and Mobutu’s Zaire firmly out of sight. Academic art was in essence purely decorative. It lacked the performative quality that characterised the use of ritual power objects such as statues and masks, as well as the mass spectacles with music and dance that Mobutu organised for propaganda purpose. And being firmly apolitical, it also set itself apart from the contemporary art that developed elsewhere at the time. While Mobutu used academic art as part of his political propaganda, Western connoisseurs qualified it as retrograde, exoticising, trading in stereotypes, a poor imitation of Western art, and so on.

By contrast, self-taught male urban painters had a different approach to the colonial past and, from the 1980s onwards, found their way to the international art market. During the 1950s, some Congolese painters without formal training...
who made oil paintings (as opposed to the aquarelles made by the Lubakis and Tshyela Ntendu) drew the attention of Europeans; little is known about those catering for a Congolese clientele. I am aware of only two such paintings (a great many colonial paintings made for Western patrons survive), both in private collections in Belgium: one made in Léopoldville in 1959 with reference to the second trip of King Baudouin, the other created in Elisabethville in November 1960, at the time of the Katangese secession, depicting a party at the occasion of Congolese independence on 30 June 1960. During the 1970s, expatriates first began to collect and describe urban paintings in Lubumbashi. Bogumil Jewsiewicki bought his first painting in Mbandaka in 1968 and went on to collect some two thousand paintings in Beni, Bukama, Bunia, Goma, Isiro, Kananga, Kikwit, Kinshasa, Kisangani, Kolwezi, Lubumbashi, Matadi, Mbandaka, and Mbuji-Mayi; they now form part of the collections of the Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Some urban painters like Cheri Samba started out as comic book artists; others, like Cheri Cherin and Cheri Benga, initially made mural publicity paintings. Thus, they tend to combine pictures and texts. Urban paintings are not so much objects as images or conversation pieces: they must be put into action through human interventions, prompting and stimulating reflection and debate among those who contemplate them in the social setting of the living room in which they are displayed, and they are abandoned once they have lost their power to set discussions in motion. As such, these secular commodities retain the performative nature of ritual power objects and in a similar way draw inspiration from an oral culture that makes abundant use of allegories, fables, innuendos, metaphors, metonymies, puns, and symbols. The aim is not to obscure certain subjects by avoiding the use of plain language, but to stimulate discussion, advising, or teaching. This means that urban paintings can have different meanings: on the one hand, artists rely on the public’s ability to read symbolic signs at the deepest level; on the other hand, the paintings have a certain open-endedness, which allows and even encourages people to give them their own meanings. They share this characteristic with many rumba songs. Franco Makiadi Luambo, one of the greatest rumba stars, used to say that his songs were only half composed, and that the listener had to add meaning. He was a recognised master of mbwakela, lyrics in a coded language, rich in metaphors and symbols that attack tyrants, oppressors, or rivals, which allowed him to record songs in which he criticised Mobutu and his henchmen indirectly, alongside songs in which he praised him. If the open-endedness that characterises many urban art forms is reminiscent of Umberto Eco’s opera aperta the development of such open works in DRC preceded that of a new scientific paradigm and postmodernism in the West. It can also be used to great advantage under an oppressive regime in a context of colonial or postcolonial censorship. In this respect, Pierre-Philippe
Fraiture suggests that Mudimbe’s early books criticised the Mobutu regime but escaped censorship because they were so abstruse.49

Paintings representing the colonial past do not have the dense meanings that those representing contemporary society have, because the painters do not have the same knowledge about the urban culture at the time (the songs that were popular, the rumours swirling around Radio Trottoir) that make contemporary urban painting so difficult to interpret for those who are not familiar with current urban cultures in Congo. Nevertheless, some are open to different interpretations. During the 1970s, the colonial period and the Congo crisis were prominent themes. The most ubiquitous image was called *Colonie belge* (1885–1960). Not distinguishing between the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo, the painting focused on a Congolese soldier whipping a chained Congolese prisoner under the watchful eye of a Belgian officer. Usually, other enchained prisoners were shown in the background and sometimes, at the right-hand side, two women would be seen weeping over the prisoners’ plight. The territory of the prison usually referred to the region from which the purchaser hailed.

When Mobutu came to power in 1965, he was popular because he had put an end to the Congo Crisis. His ideology of authenticity inspired in many Zairians a deep sense of pride in precolonial cultures. Even ardent critics of his dictatorial regime have told me in interviews and personal conversations that he was right to urge Congolese to reconnect with precolonial cultures. I’ve already mentioned that academic artists drew inspiration from precolonial cultures in their artworks. Kasereka Kavwahireri has analysed authenticity as framework for writers and thinkers during Mobutu’s rule.50 In his African philosophical bibliography, Father A. J. Smet records twenty-eight texts by and interviews with Congolese philosophers that deal with authenticity, and this list is far from complete.51 In his 1973 address to the United Nations, Mobutu asked the General Assembly to vote on a resolution to ask the former colonial powers to return the cultural heritage they had appropriated. It inspired the popular painter Tshi-bumba Kanda Matulu to make a painting of the event, which he called *The Most Applauded Discourse at the UN*: ‘So he spoke, and we all agreed; not a single thing was disputed’.52 Mobutu had tried to foster a national identity by establishing institutions such as the Théâtre national congolais (1970) and the Ballet nationale du Zaïre (1974). A national poll among students conducted in 2010 established that the majority described Congo as a unitary and indivisible state, a pluri-ethnic, multilingual, and pluricultural nation, and defined Congolese identity as characterised, among other things, by its music and theatre.53

But over time, Mobutu and his cronies ran the economy into the ground, and his rule became increasingly repressive. An awareness of the fact that he reintroduced punishment by chicotte for prisoners allows for a different reading...
of the *Colonie belge* paintings executed during his dictatorship. A painting by Gabriel Londe, *Colonie belge*, currently held in the RMCA’s collections, takes on a specific meaning when one knows that he was imprisoned and possibly whipped during the Mobutu years.

Apart from King Baudouin on Independence Day, few historical Belgian persons figured in urban painting. Next to local cultural heroes who had contested colonial rule, Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of Congo, emerged as a national cultural hero. Some paintings referred to Lumumba’s speech on 30 June 1960, which could be represented as having the power to make independence happen that and subsequently drive away Belgians, bearing testimony to the power of the human voice in transforming the world.54

During the 1840s, sculptors on the Loango Coast carved ivories that included representations of shackled enslaved persons being transported across the Atlantic Ocean; during the 1950s, colonial scenes on gourds grafted by Benoit Mada and Laurent Bumbu included shackled prisoners. In urban painting, shackles represent colonialism as a transformation of the slave trade. Thus, Lumumba is often represented as a Christlike figure who sacrificed his life for his countrymen’s freedom: having casted off the shackles that symbolise colonisation on Independence Day, he was stripped of his shirt and vest and shackled after his capture and ended up dying between two companions, like Christ and the two thieves on Mount Golgotha. Through its diffusion on the 20 makuta bill, the image of Lumumba breaking the chains of colonialism gained national currency.55

On one level, the academic art and urban paintings produced during Mobuto’s reign seemed to be each other’s opposite in their treatment of the colonial past: in line with Mobutu’s ideology of authenticity, academic artists effaced the colonial past while urban painters preserved it. However, both types of art works were produced for a Congolese clientele. Ownership of such art orks became a mark of belonging to the upper middle class in the case of the former and of the lower middle class in the case of the latter.

**The Post-Mobutu Years**

After the fall of Mobutu, international researchers and cultural institutions returned to Congo. In 1996, Daniel Shongo, the new director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kinshasa, offered great freedom to students and created exchanges with international schools. Students started revolting against their teachers. In 1997, a number of students and alumni, including Francis Mampuya, founded an art collective called Librism [Freedom]. Next came an art collective called Synergic Librism, which included Vitshois Mwilambwe Mwendo, Steve Bandoma,
and Freddy Mutombo, followed by the art collective Eza Possibles [It Is Possible] to which Vitshois Mwilambwe, Francis Mampuya, Mega Mingiedi, Pathy Tshindele, Eddy Ekete, Kura Shomali, Kennedy Dianga, Freddy Mutombo, and Iviart Izamba belonged.\textsuperscript{56}

In 2003 the Academy of Fine Arts set up a partnership with the Haut école des arts du Rhin de Mulhouse – Strasbourg. A number of students from Kinshasa graduated from there. Rare were those who, like Steve Bandoma, could afford to individually fund further education abroad, in his case in South Africa. Other students expressed their dissatisfaction with the teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in different ways. After graduating, Freddy Tsimba did an apprenticeship with a blacksmith; JP-Mika did an apprenticeship with the urban painter Chéri Cherin. Alumni like Gosette Lubondo followed master classes organised by international cultural institutions in Congo. Other students, such as Eddy Ilunga Kamuanga, dropped out. Artists with no formal academic training like Sammy Baloji received training from Western artists. The international cultural institutions Wallonie-Bruxelles International, L’Institut Français, and the Goethe Institut started organising exhibitions with works by young artists. Some found their way to the international art market. As a result of the economic decline that had set in during Mobutu’s regime, urban painters lost their Congolese clientele and became all but wholly dependent upon foreign clients to survive, while academic artists, deprived of Mobutu’s patronage, no longer got commissions and continued to fail to find buyers outside of the country.

Unlike Mobutu, none of his successors saw culture as a priority. Although this means that many artists struggle to survive, like musicians during the colonial era, they have great artistic freedom. But as during the colonial era, they must be careful not to fall foul of the censors, as some artists have found out to their cost (cf. Faustin Linyekula.\textsuperscript{57} Contemporary art, whether made by academically trained or self-taught contemporary artists is inherently political, although as far as I am aware, Steve Bandoma is the only one who has ambitions of following in the footsteps of his politician father. Contemporary artists started out experimenting with forms before addressing the situation of Congolese society, in much the same way that urban painters after the end of Mobutu’s rule started painting his demise, the economic crisis, and its consequences (the disintegration of families, street children, the rise of evangelical churches, the arrival of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the two Congo wars, and so on) in paintings that were often dense with meanings.

Escaping the Hole
Congolese often cite the fictitious fifteenth article of the constitution, ‘Débrouillez-vous’ [Fend for Yourselves], which has inspired urban paintings,
to express how they have to make do by any means necessary. Artworks such as *Ici on crève* [Here We Die], visual artists such as Aimé Mpane, and the song ‘Nini Sali tè’ by the group Mouvement Populaire de la Musique evoke the struggles of ordinary Kinois trying to survive. Four days after it came online in November 2021, the clip of the song racked up eight hundred thousand views on YouTube. It was quickly, albeit only briefly censored. Its lyrics clearly struck a chord with many Congolese:

Study! We did it.
Fasts and prayers! We did it.
We have even undone family ties.
Fight and persevere! We did it.
But what have we not done?58

The Kikongo word *kiesse* originally meant ‘designated the happiness/madness brought on by spirit possession’.59 For the inhabitants of the capital, the transformation of *Kin Kiesse* or *Kin la Belle* [beautiful Kinshasa] to *Kin la poubelle* [Kinshasa, the garbage bin] remains emblematic of the ruin that the country became during Mobutu’s reign. Kinois now also describe their city as *libulu* [a hole]. But if they live in a hole, they might as well dance in it.60 However, the famous Kinois ambiance,61 a (post)colonial transformation of the kind of madness associated with precolonial ritual,62 is not purely escapist pleasure: apart from allowing Kinois to forget their daily troubles, it lets them escape the darkness at home when there are electricity cuts.

The parallel world that Kinois nightlife offers for many of its inhabitants resembles similar worlds created by Kinois artists such as Bodys Isek Kingelez and Pume Bylex. In 1985, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Mobutu’s coup on 24 November 1965, Bodys Isek Kingelez made the sculpture *Kinshasa: Cité du 24 Novembre de l’Authenticité Africaine*.63 But as he became disillusioned with Mobutu’s rule, he started creating the models of ideal clean cities on which his reputation rests. Their empty silent streets and empty harmonic buildings stand in sharp contrast to the actual realities of his home city, a metropolis with twelve million inhabitants, slums, endless noise, garbage heaps, open gutters, pollution, and potholes.

The model of the tourist city created by Pume Bylex, another Kinois and self-taught artist who is twenty years younger than Bodys Isek Kingelez, also presents an ideal, clean world that is far removed from his hometown. Curiously, the utopic cities that both artists create share the totalitarian nature of Mobutu’s dictatorship even as they mirror the hole that Kinshasa became under his reign. Unlike the ambiance that characterises Kinshasa’s nightlife, the artis-
tic projects of both artists leave no room for dialogue: they turn their back to
the city and its inhabitants by withdrawing into their own minds. In the words
of Pume Bylex:

Your mind does not need to take public transport. Your mind does not have
to get on a plane to return to your room in Kinshasa or Brussels when you
are somewhere else. The mind is free, and even in captivity it cannot be con-
fined. Consider a prisoner. Lock him up in a cell somewhere. What do you
see? If the prisoner feels the need to see his house or his room, he doesn’t
need permission from the guard. A guard would never allow my mind to
see my room! But my mind can get out even without the guard’s permission,
and go to see my room. By this I mean that the mind is the basis, for in your
mind there are relations far more complex than those outside, in the visible
world. That is the power of the mind, and this power is a victory.64

As such, the artworks by Bodys Isek Kingelez and Pume Bylex do not appear
to confirm Andre Lye Yoka Mudaba’s insight that ‘[a]rtistic development is the
only possibility that remains to express something together’.65 On the one hand,
it is fair to say that these artists try to find individual freedom from an oppres-
sive reality. On the other hand, it is rare for Congolese artists to represent the
situations they criticise by reproducing them. Urban painting is unusual in its
attempt to represent city life as chaotic as it appears to be. But on the whole, like
precolonial Congolese art, (post)colonial Congolese art tends to eschew realism
for idealised forms of representation. As such, Bodys Isek Kingelez and Pume
Bylex place themselves in a long tradition, as do other contemporary artists.

Kiripi Katembo photographed the Kinois cityscape in the reflection of the
stagnant water pools that abound in the city (it may have led to his untimely
death as a victim of cerebral malaria). The drawing Kin Délestage by Mega
Mingiedi and the film Nuit debout by Nelson Makengo present power cuts in a
poetic way. In her photography series Imaginary Trip, Gosette Lubondo staged
travellers in a disused train, evoking the atmosphere of the colonial era when
the trains operated. In her next series, Imaginary Trip II, she staged schoolchil-
dren in uniform in an abandoned school set up by a missionary congregation
in 1936. In a sense, many contemporary Congolese artists are like Perseus who
did not look the Medusa in the eyes, but severed her head while looking at
her reflection in the mirrored shield given to him by the goddess Athena. This
staging aspect recalls the nature of ritual performances.

Other artists leave earth altogether to create parallel worlds in outer space:
Balufu Bakupa Kanyinda in his movie Nous avons aussi marché sur la lune
(2009), Monsengo Shula’s recent space paintings, and the performers who are
part of the Collective Kongo Astronauts, for example. This fascination with outer space has many sources: the Christian faith shared by many Congolese, the popularity of Hergé’s 1964 comic book *On a marché sur la lune* [Destination Moon], the visit of Apollo 11 astronauts to Kinshasa in 1969, and Mobutu’s failed space programme.

However, once again it would be wrong to dismiss such fascination with outer space as pure hedonist escapism. Monsengo Shula has named one of his paintings of a classical Congolese sculpture in space *Ata Ndele*, the title of a song recorded by Adou Elenga in 1954. Its lyrics ‘*Ata ndele mokili ekobaluka*’ [Sooner or later the world will change] got the record taken out of circulation by the colonial authorities. The painting’s title thus leaves open the question whether the predicted change refers to Congo’s colonial past or to its future. *Après Schengen*, a series of photographs and a performance created by Kongo Astronauts in 2019 after the closure of the Maison Schengen in Kinshasa where Congolese have to obtain a visa to visit the European Union, suggests that if Congolese cannot escape their living conditions in their homeland they can only go to outer space.66

### Making Art Out of Dirt

Kongo Astronauts create their robots by means of motherboards, cables, and batteries that contain minerals mined in Congo in difficult and often dangerous circumstances.67 As such, they are among an increasing number of artists who make artworks out of recycled objects. The Kinois Freddy Tsimba was one of the first visual artists to make extensive use of recycled materials. The nickname given to his fellow Kinois and colleague Emmanuel Botalatala, *Le Ministre des poubelles* [the Minister of Garbage], speaks for itself. Also in Kinshasa, the group Fulu Muziki make their own musical instruments with what they find in the street. In their animated films, which criticise the sacrifice of Congolese workers and their environment for economic exploitation, the Lushois Têtshim and Frank Mukunday bring workers and miners, represented by stones from the subsoil, to life by stop-motion before they are destroyed by machines and turned into dead stones again.

In Kinshasa, Eddy Ekete, one of the co-founders of the annual performance festival KinAct in 2015, created the mask *The Can Man* to criticise pollution. In its wake, many more masks have been created. They owe more to precolonal masquerades than to contemporary performances, not only formally (e.g. masks resembling those worn during Pende masquerades) but also because the masks render the alternative personalities the artists (now including street children) create visible. Most such masks are made with recycled materials to
criticise Kinshasa’s environmental problems: *The Electric Woman* by Falone Mambu draws attention to power cuts; Junior Mvunzi created a mask of a traditional warrior by means of cans to denounce Western multinationals exporting mountains of waste to African cities; New-mama Mobando warns of the dangers of deforestation; *Tshombo* [Telephone] by female artist Nada Tshibwabwa refers both to the exploitation of coltan and the high cost of mobile phones, which are indispensable in a megalopolis like Kinshasa; Sarah Ndele’s *Plastic Woman* points to the dangers of microplastics; Junior Longalonga (also known as Savant Noir) pays tribute to Congolese who lost their lives during the brutal rubber exploitation in the Congo Free State with the mask *The Rubber Man*.68

All these artists seem to operate according to the logic that if they have to live in a hole, they may as well try to turn in into art. As such, they can be compared to alchemists trying to turn lead into gold—and more often than not, succeeding in doing so.

**Carrying the Past on One’s Back and in One’s Body**

Just like the colonial system tried to erase the precolonial past and Mobutu, in response, tried to erase the colonial period, when Laurent-Désiré Kabila replaced Mobutu in 1997, he tried to reconnect with independence. His son and successor, Joseph Kabila, was the first president to honour his predecessors:69 he had a monument built for his father and statues erected for Patrice Lumumba and President Kasa-Vubu, and proclaimed Simon Kimbangu and Laurent-Désiré Kabila national heroes. However, this official recognition of the colonial past alone cannot explain the increasing interest of contemporary artists in that era.

Faustin Linyekula who is, in his own words, obsessed with Congolese history, has said that for a long time he avoided the colonial past for fear of using it as justification for Africans’ inability to govern their countries today, preferring to identify and emphasise Africans’ own responsibility for their misery and for the ruins they created after independence.70 He finally confronted the colonial past in his choreography *Congo* in 2019. In an interview at the opening of an exhibition with photographs of his series *Kolwezi* in Brussels in 2017, Sammy Baloji said that, growing up, he did not know colonial history: ‘I went to a Catholic school where we were mainly taught to forgive’.71 Describing why he makes robots, Précy Numbi says that he does not want to go back to the past because Congolese already carry the past on their backs.72 Nevertheless, his robot Lumumba is a clear reference to the past. For many Congolese, Lumumba represented the hope for the future of their country. With his assassination, Congo died in some ways. And as he was never properly buried, his ghost continues to haunt the country. Many young Congolese bitterly
reproach their elders for betraying the independence Lumumba fought for, as their road towards upwards social mobility is blocked. Georges Senga’s *Une vie après la mort* is based on Kayembe Kilobo, a Lushois man who dresses up like Lumumba.73 I once found on Facebook a photograph of a man tied to a tree on what appeared to be the Avenue du 30 juin in Kinshasa similar to representations on urban paintings, in clear reference to Lumumba’s imprisonment before he died. Balufu Bakupa Kanyinda fruitlessly tried to get a film about Lumumba off the grounds for years, but his figure looms large over Congolese film.74

Contemporary artists seldom directly express anger vis-à-vis their parents or grandparents who are responsible for the ruins they created after independence.75 Instead, many retrace these ruins to the shaky foundations upon which colonial society was built. While urban painters tried to retrieve and remember the past during the Mobutu years of which they retained personal memories, contemporary artists who were born after independence turn to the colonial past to find clues to explain the postcolonial condition. Unlike urban painters, Tshibumba Kanda Matulu eminent among them, they do not try to recount the colonial past in a narrative sequence. Instead, it emerges in relation to problems affecting contemporary society. As such, these artists are on the whole less concerned with individual persons and historical events than with the structures that continue to shape Congolese society since the colonial era. Aimé Mpane’s work *Congo: L’ombre de l’ombre*, which contains the date of the Berlin Conference, is unusual in that regard.76

Through his robot, Numbi wants to show Lumumba as a twenty-first century superhero. Like other robots and some masks, Numbi’s Lumumba also references the fact that new technologies developed in the West depend upon Congolese natural resources. In that sense, there is a clear connection with the shackles that Lumumba threw off on Independence Day and that he was forced to wear again after his imprisonment. In a similar way, the animation films made by Têtshim and Mukunday about labourers and miners toiling in Katanga’s industrial centres can be interpreted both in relation to colonial and postcolonial society. In Congo, history repeats itself, but it is history, not simply a throwback to ‘the eternal realities of the Congo, which had existed for centuries before them’.77

There appears to be some truth in Barly Baruti’s observation that in Congo, the wounds of colonialism are still so fresh that it is impossible for Congolese to make fun of colonisation the way the French do in the comic book series *Asterix*. One could counter that it took the French almost two thousand years to satirise the Roman colonisation of Gaul or point to the fact that Ernest Lubitsch made his satire on the Nazis, *To Be or Not to Be*, during World War II. Congolese certainly made fun of Belgians during the colonial era, not only through artworks
but also by giving them nicknames and mocking them when they were sure Belgians could not understand them, for example. Since the end of Mobutu’s dictatorship, they have started joking about mobuitude or mobutuité. Nelson Makengo’s short film Théâtre Urbain, in which Barbie and Captain America go looking for the special belt that survived when Kimpa Vita was burned at the stake in 1706, certainly has the light touch one associates with many Congolese encounters. But it is true that postcolonial art tends not to treat colonial history lightly.

Faustin Linyekula initially wanted to become a poet, but after the Congo Wars that hit Kisangani where he studied and now lives and works particularly hard, he wondered how he could dream of poetry amid ruins and decided to dance instead. He considers the body an archive that expresses the traumatic legacy of colonialism and postcolonial wars:

The body also reveals the violence that was done to us. The hands that were chopped off because the Congolese did not work hard enough on the rubber plantations. The whippings that left scars on my grandfather’s back. The wars, the rapes, up to and including the acts of cannibalism during the latest civil wars. That whole history of physical violence must be reflected in the physical forms of culture, in dance especially.

While Sammy Baloji deals systematically with the colonial past, all his art is in fact informed by the ethnic cleansing of Baluba in Katanga during the early 1990s, which had its origins in the colonial past. Increasingly, he draws inspiration from precolonial art forms, including scarification, Kongo textiles, the Luba lukasa memory board that serves as a mnemotechnic device, and the Luba kasala, a sung or recited ceremonial poem. Artists like Steve Bandoma and Freddy Tsimba refer to Kongo minkisi in a similar way. If, as David Van Reybrouck writes, ‘the body is […] a site of revolt, of refusal, of rebellion’, this would go some way to explain the enduring importance of music, dance, performance, and the interest in ritual performative objects in contemporary Congolese art.

**Conclusion**

My brief description of the ways in which a number of postcolonial Congolese artists represent the colonial past or draw inspiration from older art forms suggests that the lines between ‘ritual’, ‘urban’, and ‘contemporary’ art and between self-taught and academically trained artists, between artists who (in)directly address the colonial past or ignore it through hedonistic escapism are not clear cut.
In 2021 Aimé Mpane became the first artist of Congolese descent to have an individual show at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels. One of his works of art on display, *Or* [Gold], refers simultaneously to the fact that Congolese power objects could not stop colonisation or soften its harsh nature and the ongoing exploitation of Congo’s natural resources by foreigners.

Possibly more than any other country in the world, Congo confronts us with the stark contrast between relentless ongoing human exploitation and human creativity. Unlike capitalism, however, culture is not a zero-sum game: even as colonialism brutally disrupted and destroyed Congolese cultures, Congolese (like colonial subjects elsewhere) created new ones. In the words of the French Cameroonian author Léonora Miano: when one’s worlds disappear, one doesn’t die; one invents a new one, albeit it not from scratch. Many Congolese post-colonial artists struggle with the phantom pain of colonialism, while defiantly holding on to performative practices that the colonial regime tried to suppress.

But since Congo’s contacts with the West at the end of the nineteenth century, its artworks have been resources for foreigners as much as the country’s rich natural resources. There is a certain irony in the fact that the ahistorical academic art produced under Mobutu’s rule never found many buyers abroad, whereas Western private collectors and museums are willing to pay hefty sums for artworks that oppose Western Congoist visions on Congolese history and culture by exposing and denouncing the ways in which foreign powers and enterprises continue to exploit Congo’s natural resources at the detriment of the population. Like classical art, most urban and contemporary Congolese art is now to be found in private and public collections outside of the country. If, as Sinzo Aanza wrote on Facebook on 19 May 2020, without art Congo is nothing but a mine, it is of the essence that Congolese have the opportunity to come face to face with the various art forms Congolese artists continue to create as they stubbornly refuse to be dehumanised and represent Congolese as victims.

The fact that they continue to make art in the face of financial hardship and political and societal opposition (artists like Géraldine Tobe and Freddy Tsimba have been accused of witchcraft) can be interpreted as a refusal of victimhood. In that regard, the name of the artistic collective *Eza possibles* is revealing, all the more so when taken into consideration with the often-used expression, *L’impossible n’est pas congolais* [the impossible is not Congolese]. Paraphrasing Lord Darlington in the third act of Oscar Wilde’s play *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, it can be said of many Congolese (artists) that even if they are in the gutter, they keep looking at the stars.
Notes

1. Apart from the authors whose texts I quote, I am indebted to the many Congolese artists and musicians it has been my privilege to meet and get to know these past years.


7. Van Hove, p. 79.


10. E. Behr, Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English? (Hodder & Stoughton General Division, 1987).

11. Renzo Martens, Episode III – Enjoy Poverty (Imagine Film Distribution, 2009.)


20. Cited in Brain’s The Rumba Kings.


25. Olivier Marboeuf, cited in ibid.


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36. See Kamba (2014).


41. Jewsiewicki, in Ceuppens and Baloji (2016).

42. Ibid.


62. Trapido, p. 32.
64. Cited in De Boeck, "Illuminating the Hole"...
65. Quoted in De Boeck et al. (2005), p. 202, my emphasis.
67. Ibid., p. 516.
72. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEc-DzytYbM [accessed 14 January 2022]
73. For an analysis of Une vie après la mort, see Gabriella Nugent, Colonial Legacies, pp. 85-118.
75. See Drouère.
82. Van Reybrouck (2006).
83. See https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x18c/dad (03:01).