

Sanne Sinnige

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Urban Now: City Life in Congo

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The exhibition *Urban Now: City Life in Congo* took place at WIELS (Brussels) from 8 May – 14 August 2016 and was co-organised by Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and Belgian anthropologist Filip de Boeck. Baloji currently divides his time between Lubumbashi and Brussels and has exhibited his work in manifold exhibitions, such as *Hunting and Collecting* in Mu.ZEE in Ostende (2014), the Belgian pavilion of the Venice Biennale (2015), and this year at Documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel. Furthermore, he is co-founder of Picha Encounters, the forerunner of the Lubumbashi Biennale. Trained as a photographer, Baloji works mostly with photography and video. His work concerns the daily life of Congolese people and the idea that a reading of the Congolese past can elucidate its present. De Boeck is professor of anthropology at the KUL (Leuven) and coordinator of the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (Leuven). He has published extensively on topics relating to Kinshasa, DRC, and urban anthropology and he also directed the film *Cemetery State* (2010), which speaks about the Kintambo cemetery in Kinshasa.

Here I would like to take a brief moment to look at the collaboration of Baloji and De Boeck, which implies an intersection of anthropology and contemporary art practices. As such, this collaboration provides an example of the parallel occurrence of the ethnographic turn in the contemporary art field and the sensory turn in anthropology.[1] Art critic and historian Hal Foster signalled in 1995 an ethnographic turn in the contemporary art field, even though this intersection can be found in earlier film and art practices, such as the work of filmmaker Maya Deren.[2] A relatively recent ‘sensory turn’ in anthropology has equally been observed, which entails an increase of anthropologists’ interest for contemporary art in order to communicate research, and which may result in collaborations between anthropologists and artists.[3] I would like to note that the practice of the artist as ethnographer has

been criticised by Foster, mainly for the underlying assumptions that fuel such a practice, even though the intersection between anthropology, film, and art has relatively recently been acknowledged by film scholar Erika Balsom as a location of rich and diverse moving image production.[4] We will see in the discussion of the video installation *Pungulume* (2016) that Baloji has consciously adopted a language-strategy in order to tackle the problems that may come with ethnographic film.

Let us now return to the discussion of the exhibition. Through the symbolic meta-concept of the ‘hole’, with which the Congolese cities and landscapes are arguably ‘pockmarked’, Baloji and De Boeck aim at investigating the urban landscape of DRC. Examples of such a ‘hole’ are the colonial modernist infrastructures in Kinshasa, which are depicted in photographs in the exhibition. Posing the question how the residents of these ‘landscapes’ give meanings to these various ‘holes’, Baloji and De Boeck have adopted photographic, filmic, and ethnographic means. Even though the DRC as Belgium’s former colony has concerned a variety of artistic initiatives, it is argued that public knowledge about the DRC, especially when it comes to the historical relation between Belgium and DRC, is lacking.[5] In that view it is significant that Wiels, as a major contemporary art centre in Belgium, for the first time has invited a Congolese artist to shed light on contemporary life in the DRC.

The exhibition consists of two exhibition spaces in which mostly documentary photographs are exhibited, some of them presented as series: *The OCPT Building*, *The Cemetery*, *La Cité du Fleuve* and *the Vegetable Gardens of the Malebo Pool*, and *Land Chiefs*. Not all photographs are discussed in the visitor guide; neither do they seem to belong to one of the previous series, which creates confusion at times as to what the photographs are about. In addition to these photographs, the video *The Tower* (2015) and the photo-essay *Essay on Urban Planning* (2013) are exhibited in these two spaces, juxtaposed with what I will call ‘curatorial interventions’. For example, the visitor at the entrance of the exhibition is confronted with a wall that is covered with pictures depicting private luxury. Such a curatorial intervention creates a dialogue with the other works in the exhibition while guiding the viewer to questions on which I will elaborate a bit further. In a third, albeit smaller space the new video installation *Pungulume* (2016) is presented that deals, in contrast to the other works that depict the landscape of Kinshasa or Lubumbashi, with the landscape of Fungurume, a village that lies in the Katanga province.



Fig. 1: Installation view of *Urban Now: City Life in Congo*, photographed by Sven Laurent.

I concentrate in this review on the various references to the Cité du Fleuve district and the *Pungulume* (2016) video installation. The use of documentary images in order to reveal aspects of the reality of living in Kinshasa and DRC is my focus. I argue that tensions between the pieces and the curatorial interventions demonstrate that the documentary image can be adopted in order to support a specific narrative on ‘reality’.[6] Despite the aforementioned lack of information about certain photographs, I argue that the exhibition succeeds in revealing particular abstract notions of living in the DRC concretised in three themes: utopian dreams, appropriation, and transformation.

The wall at the entrance of the exhibition features a photograph by Baloji that depicts a part of the newly-constructed district La Cité du Fleuve. In entering the exhibition, the meaning of this juxtaposition of images is not immediately clear. However, references to the Cité du Fleuve district are recurrent. For example, in the second exhibition space stands a monitor that depicts the promotional video *La Cité du Fleuve* (2009), which is produced by Real Image Dubai and which advertises the Cité du Fleuve real estate development project. Not a work by Baloji or De Boeck, this video entails another curatorial intervention. The video depicts images of Kinshasa, the Congo river, and virtual images of the planned district, while the male voice-over promotes Kinshasa as a comfortable and thriving city to live in.



Fig. 2: Installation view of Urban Now: City Life in Congo, photographed by Sven Laurent.

These images stand in remarkable dialogue with various photographs in the exhibition. For example, one photograph shows an advertisement billboard with a picture of the current president of the DRC Joseph Kabila and a picture of a 3D simulation of the Cité du Fleuve district, next to a line of text that

reads ‘our dreams of yesterday, reality today, a better future tomorrow’.[7] This billboard is placed on a dilapidated fence, which causes the image of the Cité du Fleuve district to appear utopian. As such, there exists a friction within the image itself, but also in relation to the promotional video. The images of Kinshasa and the Congo River in the promotional video have been used to enhance the appeal of the Cité du Fleuve district. On the photograph with the billboard however the visitor is confronted with the utopian quality of this district in relation to a glimpse of reality. Nevertheless, even though this district may seem surreal, we must be careful to perceive the promotional video as ‘unreal’, for as the exhibition continues the painful consequences of this reality become clear.



Fig. 3: Installation view of Urban Now: City Life in Congo, photographed by Sven Laurent.

The visitor guide explains that the Cité du Fleuve district is constructed on sections of the Malebo Pool area, which are exploited by residents for their vegetable gardens. Some of these ‘horticulturists’ are portrayed by Baloji in the photograph series *La Cité du Fleuve and the Vegetable Gardens of the Malebo Pool*.



Fig. 4: Installation view of Urban Now: City Life in Congo, photographed by Sven Laurent.

At first sight these portraits do not seem particularly compelling or original. However, the camera adopts a position that effectuates the photographed subject's position to be approximately at the same height as the spectator, which simulates the feeling of an encounter. Furthermore, all the portrayed subjects in the exhibition are posing and facing the spectator. The well-known and overtly criticized 'gaze' has as a consequence been restricted, or is, perhaps, returned. The photographer appears to point the spectator at a fellow human being rather than an 'other', coping with specific conditions that are further explained in the exhibition guide. The residents are forced to move due to the construction of the Cité du Fleuve district and will consequently lose their vegetable gardens.

Returning to the wall at the entrance, the strategy of juxtaposition that has been adopted here seems to indicate the presence of contrasts and references within the exhibition. In this particular case, the pictures on this wall appear to embody ideals or dreams that fuel the construction of districts such as the Cité du Fleuve. However, the visitor guide details that a local upper middle class remains 'hypothetical' in DRC, which indicates that the largest part of Kinshasa's residents could not afford to live in such a district. This contrast is enhanced by the juxtaposition of advertisements and photographs, which seems to simultaneously imply a connection and a contrast between dreams and reality. The question arises as to who is going to live in the Cité du Fleuve

district? What will happen with the horticulturists and their vegetable gardens? An answer may be provided by Baloji's photograph of an assembly of brick houses in the second exhibition space. The caption reads that these houses were built by the multinational mining company Tenke Fungurume Mining, for villagers that have been relocated.



Fig. 5: Sammy Baloji, Site Cielux, Municipality of Masina, Kinshasa, 2013 (OCPT building).

The three-screen video installation *Pungulume* (2016) sheds light on the history of Fungurume, which lies in the area where Tenke Fungurume Mining is operative. For centuries, this region has been home to the Sanga. We meet Mpala, the current Sanga land-chief of Fungurume, and his court-elders, who recount the history of Fungurume and its landscape. Simultaneously, the video alternates between images of the protagonists, the landscape of Fungurume, and the mining activity in this landscape. An important aspect of this video is that Mpala recounts the history in his mother tongue Sanga – which means that the protagonists speak about themselves, instead of somebody else speaking about ‘them’. Furthermore, the choice of not using French, the former coloniser’s language, forms an important strategy in the debate on ‘decolonisation’.[8] While watching the video, the force of the depicted excavators and circle blades gradually intensifies, enhanced by the zoom of the camera and the increasing sound. Baloji has called these machines ‘aliens’ during a screening and interview that was organised on the occasion of this

exhibition.[9] It becomes clear that these ‘aliens’ seem to be eating the Fun-gurume soil, which raises questions on the relation between landscape and history.[10] The contemporary images are interchanged five times by excerpts that Baloji has re-appropriated from the anonymous colonial film *Panorama Star of the Congo* (1912), leading the viewer to question the colonial origins of the contemporary mining industry in Katanga.[11] Mpala narrates a historical event that describes the resistance that his ancestor Mpala Mulowa Nyama fomented against the Belgian colonists, eventually leading to the Belgian appropriation of Katanga. Even though the introduction of the video appears peaceful, the narration and images shift during the video to the darker reality and origins of the contemporary mining industry in the region.

Colonial ‘ghosts’ also return in some of the photographs in the exhibition, for example in *TheOCPT Building* series. The photographs of the former colonial post office OCPT bear witness to the lack of maintenance of the building, while clotheslines reveal that the building has been transformed into a domestic place.

Perhaps philosopher Robert Ginsberg’s definition of a ruin is valid here: a human construction that ‘no longer dwells in the unity of the original, but may have its own unities that we can enjoy’.[12] Even though the photographs are the only source of information in this exhibition on how the Kinois deal with these colonial ‘ruins’, the photographs do reveal that the buildings have been appropriated and find a new meaning in the contemporary context of the city.[13]

The spectator receives a glimpse of living in contemporary DRC in *Urban Now: City Life in Congo*. Through the recurrent strategy of juxtaposition of documentary images on various levels, the exhibition reveals specific abstract aspects of the reality of living in DRC, such as the dreams that may exist in the minds of its residents and the manner in which structures and landscapes are appropriated. The transformation of landscape and structures also points at the dark origins of these realities. The colonial past lingers in the works and may evoke in the viewer a more serious concern for the depicted situations.

Sanne Sinnige (VUB – Brussels)

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Notes

- [1] Rutten & van Dienderen & Soetaert 2013, p. 460.
- [2] Foster 1996, although a shorter version of this chapter was published in Marcus & Myers 1995, pp. 302-309. Film scholar Catherine Russell mentions filmmaker Maya Deren as an early example of the intersection of ethnography and avant-garde film making during a round table discussion that was held on the 3 May 2016 by the Artists' Moving Image Research Network, featuring film scholar Erika Balsom, filmmaker Pratap Rughani, artist Ben Russell, Catherine Russell, and anthropologist Christopher Wright. See 'Round table discussion: Documentary, ethnography and the avant-garde', *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, #2, 2013: 82.
- [3] Rutten et al. 2013. Filip de Boeck has previously collaborated with artist Marie-Françoise Plissart, which led to the publication of the book *Kinshasa: Tales of an Invisible City* (2014).
- [4] Foster 1996. For Erika Balsom's claim see 'Round table discussion: Documentary, ethnography and the avant-garde', 2013.
- [5] Brassart 2014; Goddeeris 2015, p. 435.
- [6] Plantinga 2013 discusses the relation between documentary image and reality.
- [7] Translated by the author.
- [8] Filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha critiques ethnographic films that speak 'about' the depicted subjects in her film *Re-assemblage* (1982).
- [9] This event can be viewed online at <https://vimeo.com/168227893> (accessed on 25 October 2017).
- [10] De Boeck & Baloji 2016, p. 191. In a forthcoming publication in *Antennae*, Winter 2017, my colleague Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou and myself discuss the depiction of landscape in *Pungulume* (2016) more profoundly.
- [11] Nimis 2015 proposes the term re-appropriation, which entails a second appropriation.

[12] Ginsberg 2004, p. xvii.

[13] For more information on colonial architecture in the DRC, see Johan Lagae, 'Rewriting Congo's Colonial Past: History, Memory and Colonial Built Heritage in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo', *INHA*, 2005 (<http://inha.revues.org/499>, accessed on 25 October 2017). See also the text 'Des pierres qui (nous) parlent' by Johan Lagae and Sofie Boonen in the catalogue of the second Lubumbashi biennial (<http://panicplatform.net/content/curated/Catalogue%20Picha%202010.pdf>, accessed on 25 October 2017).