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Untitled, 2022, Matthieu Kasiama / CATPC, courtesy CATPC and KOW Berlin, photo: Ladislav Zajac



*Art
or
Earth?*

The International
Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred

A bird alights in the Dutch Pavilion. He sits before a camera's double eye, which oscillates between Lusanga and Venice, while devouring small white cubes. Titled *Mvuyu Libérateur* (Mvuyu the Liberator, 2024), the sculpture depicts, in the words of CATPC member Blaise Mandefu, 'The virile bird who cracks open white cubes. This bird is sensitive to the pain of its fellow creatures, the other animals. When he finds another bird or animal trapped by hunters, he intervenes to help the animal free itself.' Now he has come to free all those held captive by the museum's insatiable appetite for profits from plantations. He uses his beak to prise these cultural institutions wide open. Below him, forests are beginning to bloom in their stead. Tree roots, animals, fish, rivers and human bodies encircle these broken cubes. Mvuyu has arrived with a warning: one should tread more carefully on this sacred earth.

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC) define art as a living force born of a sacred Earth and art making as a sacred endeavour. They create objects filled with intention as vessels of cultural memory and community protection. As CATPC member Ced'art Tamasala explains, 'If the sacred Earth gives all things life, art belongs to Earth. In this way, art practices too become a sacred, life-giving endeavour'.¹ The circumstances under which these practices take place and the intentionality behind them imbue them with the potential for regeneration.

Since 2014, CATPC have been working steadily to purchase ancestral lands confiscated in 1911 by the British-Dutch multinational corporation Unilever and its subsidiaries. Through a collective process of creating artworks and selling them abroad, the inhabitants of Lusanga have earned enough money to buy back parcels of the exhausted palm oil plantations where they and their families once toiled. As of today, 200 hectares of land have been reclaimed and recultivated to provide sustenance for the community. They call this undertaking—to regenerate sacred forests and institute a sustainable economy for them and others to thrive—the *post plantation*.

The dream of the post plantation began as a cocreation of Lusanga's inhabitants and former Congo director of Greenpeace, René Ngongo. Together, with the help of Renzo Martens, they have built an economic framework in which Indigenous communities can choose to prosper through purchasing and replenishing arable land. CATPC produces artworks in clay from remaining old-growth forests around Lusanga. These are cast in cacao and palm fat in Amsterdam, then exhibited globally and sometimes sold on the international art market.

In the collective's words, 'There is no function for cacao and palm fat that is more sacred than to represent the sacrifices of the past and the present and to engender the future and bring back the forest'. CATPC appropriates these raw materials to evidence the art world's ongoing complicity in the horrific plantation economy.

The sculptures created for the 60th Venice Biennale function much like contemporary power objects. They also tell stories. They tell stories of stories, animated across multiple scenes, much like film stills, in which forests, rivers, animals, spirits, ancestors, and children intertwine across allegories and narrations. Some works speak of the West's devastating impact on the Global South and give presence to plantation ancestors who died as enslaved people. Others intimate a brighter future in which the community decides its own fate guided by its chosen values. In concert they reflect on the past and foretell what may be to come. In this sense they are also future-forming.

In Lusanga, each clay sculpture hosts seeds and earth of the liberated plantation. Those reproduced in cacao, sugar or palm oil in the Rietveld Pavilion are their enchanted clones. When the sculptures are exhibited or acquired by collectors and museums abroad, CATPC hopes that the stories they impart will germinate change as they traverse the globe. In the words of the collective, 'Each sculpture will mark the passage from a painful and dark past to an ecological future, a future in which the sacred forest will flow through the pavilion'.²

From Plantations to Museum Coffers

Museums, from Tate Modern in London to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, and Museum Ludwig in Cologne, were founded, at least in part, on plantation profits. In one example, among many, recent research traces the wealth behind the Stedelijk's construction in 1895 to colonial imports, including cacao, coffee, and tobacco, grown almost exclusively on plantations.³ Plantation ownership was also packaged into financial products and sold as shares.⁴

To this day, a speculative market endures on the promise of extraction and the perpetuity of the plantation economy. It is no coincidence that the Port of Amsterdam, the world's largest import hub for cacao beans and the biggest repository of plantation labour, lies only 15km away from the Stedelijk Museum. Although Unilever presumably sold its remaining Congolese holdings in 2009, many of its former workers now toil for companies furnishing the raw materials still used in its products. As recently as 2019, these companies—financed in

part by Belgian, British, German, and Dutch development banks—paid day labourers as little as US\$1.20 per day for full-time work under life-threatening conditions.⁵

Wealth from plantation extraction continues to flow to museums under the guise of corporate sponsorship, sometimes in the name of care or social justice. Yet if those still working on plantations today find themselves the subjects of critical discourse or trendy exhibitions, they are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to be the authors or direct beneficiaries of it. As expressed by scholar, curator and documentary filmmaker Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, ‘It is impossible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world’.⁶

The White Cube: A Reckoning

White cube galleries, and their intentionally atemporal, ahistorical modernist architectures, are steeped in ideologies of dominance. Early on in his collaboration with CATPC, Martens hoped to forge a forceful critique of the art world’s complicity in Congo’s devastating plantation economy. He strove to incite what he called a ‘reverse gentrification programme’, grounded in the idea that not only well-positioned artists and the cultural institutions they exhibit in or the audiences they cater to should benefit from critical discourse about inequality but also the disenfranchised plantation communities they profit from financially and intellectually.

In 2017, Lusanga laid the cornerstone of its own ‘white cube’. Conceived as a joint initiative with Martens and designed by Dutch architecture firm OMA with input from Arsene Ijambo, general secretary of the Association of the Architects of the Congo (SAC), Lusanga’s White Cube was intended to ‘repatriate’ some of the social, economic, and cultural capital indebted to the community and others like it. Though it was a striking achievement, the collaboration also raised concerns. As art historian and critic Claire Bishop wrote in 2017 regarding Martens’s entanglement with CATPC, ‘Can ethically troubling overidentification with neocolonial corporate capitalism productively operate in tandem with ethically reassuring social engagement, or do these two contradictory impulses neutralize each other?’⁷

When the Mondriaan Fund invited Martens to represent the Netherlands in the 60th Venice Biennale, he and CATPC chose to rethink their partnership. After long deliberation he, together with the collective and Dutch Pavilion Curator Hicham Khalidi, made the decision to define his role more explicitly as one in service to CATPC and its aims.

On February 7, 2023 CATPC performed *Mosi*, a sacred ritual to formally redefine their relationship. Martens, as part of the artistic team, and Khalidi, as curator, see themselves foremost as mediators and translators of CATPC's evolving vision. For the first time in the history of the Venice Biennale, a community who lives and works on a former plantation speaks for itself from the international stage of the Dutch Pavilion.

In 2023, CATPC placed their Lusanga White Cube on trial before the entire community. It was pronounced guilty and sentenced to return stolen lands and art. All energy would henceforth be concerted towards the post-plantation. For CATPC, the Lusanga White Cube represents all white cubes throughout the world. They hope that the path towards reconciliation initiated at home will ripple across the globe, beginning in the Rietveld Pavilion. The *jumelage*, or twinning, of the Lusanga White Cube with the Rietveld Pavilion forges a channel for this transmission. Via a livestream between the two spaces, audiences in Lusanga are able to connect with the Dutch Pavilion, and visitors to Venice become Lusanga's invited guests. The livestream plays an especially significant role for the wider plantation community, who lack the time and resources to travel to Venice. It offers a reciprocal gaze where once a blind eye was turned.

Facing the Belgian Pavilion, Confronting History

It is no coincidence that those watching the livestream from Lusanga within the Rietveld Pavilion also face the Belgian pavilion. It is CATPC's long-held desire to speak to those in power in Belgium about the atrocities committed in Congo. Following King Leopold II's private annexation of what he named the Congo Free State, large swathes of land he misleadingly designated *terres vacantes* were given in concession to private enterprise to exploit. When the Belgian Parliament took control of this vast territory in 1908, it granted the Lever Brothers (under the name Huileries du Congo Belge) free reign. Companies like Unilever stripped the land of its biodiversity. They scraped the ground too of its inhabitants. As it became increasingly difficult to recruit labourers to work under the plantation's gruelling and often deadly conditions, men and women were coercively pulled from different villages, severing families and ancestral lineages. The plantation became a blank slate, evacuated of history and humanity, and Lusanga was one of many places to bear this catastrophe. Most of CATPC's members are the children of these displaced peoples. Cleaved from their cultures and communities, today they search for remnants of their past.

Balot Returns

A fragment of this history has finally been recovered, albeit temporarily. For the duration of the Venice Biennale, the Lusanga White Cube has been converted into a shrine for a single Kwilu Pende power figure known abroad as *Chief's or Diviner's Figure representing the Belgian Colonial Officer, Maximilien Balot (Balot, for short)*. Maximilien Balot (1890–1931) was a colonial agent dispatched to forcefully recruit labourers for the Lever Brothers' plantations. In 1931, fed up with the abuse and in revenge for an assault on Kafutshi and other women by territorial agents, Balot was decapitated and dismembered. The Belgian force's murderous retaliation fuelled what became a powerful Pende uprising. *Balot*, made that year, was carved in an act of resistance to harness the agent's malevolent spirit in service of the Pende people. It remained hidden until 1972, when it was purchased by an American scholar who later sold it to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in Richmond, where it resides today.⁸ For the first time in half a century, the sculpture returns home.⁹

Luyalu, or the Force

For CATPC, to exhibit in the Rietveld Pavilion presents a double bind. This ambivalence is expressed in the exhibition's title, *The International Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred*. Not only must they contend with their ambivalence towards participating in an elitist art world event to which they have little access and for an audience with whom they have a conflicted relationship, they feel they must hold themselves accountable for the privileges this opportunity affords, while others within their community are struggling to survive, let alone make their own work visible. In Tamasala's words, 'We are not sure that good intentions will have the desired result or that good intentions will really lead to sacred forests....in reality, we are at the very beginning. And, even if it works, it is a small step on the path towards those forests [in the four corners of Congo] being regenerated'. Instead, CATPC is guided by an ethos of *luyalu*.

Luyalu is the vital force in our lives, in nature and our relationship with Earth, which we express through art. This force is interwoven with the reality of our lives in the ruins of the plantation in Lusanga. Its strength animates life and enables us to find our own strength thanks to many years of practice and generations upon generations of experience in spirituality, art, and the connection with Earth passed onto us by our ancestors.

This is the “Muzindu” (depth) that has enabled our group to connect with our allies, our ancestors, and draw inspiration from them to create the “kikungika ya mbasi” (the composition of the future), based on the inspiration revealed by the unsuspected depths buried in each of us, brought together to share life.

We are “Mosi” (one, in Kikongo), and together we form the “Luyalu ya Mosi” (the strength of the whole as one, in Kikongo). That is Luyalu: our collective methods of thinking, acting, working and sharing everything, from art to the land, in connection with our ancestors.’

CATPC is a practice born of our shared Earth. It is an active, ethical framework to rethink our responsibility to one other. For every baby born in Lusanga, a tree is planted in his or her name so that they may grow together. In the words of curator Ruba Katrib, ‘The artistic project of CATPC...understands humanity in a different way. It is agency and voice at the same time’.¹⁰ These lives, as they unfold before us, enunciate and enact new possibilities for justice and healing across the colonial difference.

NOTES

- 1 Since November 2022, Hicham Khalidi has been conducting recorded interviews with CATPC members, Renzo Martens, and other collaborators and allies (see publication). At times, Ced'art Tamasala, on behalf of CATPC, would respond in written letters. This quote is an extract from a letter dated 3 February 2023.
- 2 Idem.
- 3 See Laura van Hasselt, 'Geld, geloof en goede vrienden: Piet van Eeghen en de metamorfose van Amsterdam, 1816–1889', PhD diss. (University of Amsterdam, 2022).
- 4 See Renzo Martens, 'Erken dat uitgebuite plantagearbeiders co-auteurs van het Stedelijk Museum zijn', *www.nrc.nl*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/06/07/erken-dat-uitgebuite-plantagearbeiders-co-auteurs-van-het-stedelijk-museum-zijn-a4166578>.
- 5 Human Rights Watch (2019), 'A Dirty Investment: European Development Banks' Link to Abuses in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Palm Oil Industry,' <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/25/dirty-investment/european-development-banks-link-abuses-democratic-republic>, Retrieved 28 January 2023.
- 6 Sabrina Ali, 'Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: 'It is not possible to decolonize the museum

- without decolonizing the world', *www.guernicamag.com*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/>
- 7 Claire Bishop, 'Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise: SculptureCenter', *Artforum* 55, no. 9 (May 2017), <https://www.artforum.com/events/cercle-dart-des-travailleurs-de-plantation-congolaise-2-230139/>.
- 8 For more on the power figure *Balot* read: Herbert F. Weiss, Richard B. Woodward, and Z.S. Strother with a contribution from Christophe Gudijiga and Sindani Kiangu, 'Art with Fight in It. Discovering that a Statue of a Colonial Officer Is a Power Object from the 1931 Pende Revolt', *African Arts*, Spring 2016 Volume 49:1.
- 9 In March 2024 a ceremony was held in Lusanga with notables of the region, local chiefs, present and former plantation workers, and the community of Lusanga. In this ceremony, *Balot* was restored to its rightful place. This triumphant moment will ripple through the exhibition in Venice.
- 10 From the recorded interview by Hicham Khalidi with Ruba Katrib, Renzo Martens, Amanda Sarroff, October 8, 2023.

COLOPHON

This publication is issued on the occasion of the exhibition *The International Celebration of Blasphemy and the Sacred*, held conjointly in the Dutch pavilion at the 60th International Venice Biennale and the White Cube, Lusanga, DRC.

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