

SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

ILLUMINATING URBAN LIVES

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Filip de Boeck and Sammy Baloji. *Suturing the City. Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*. 2016. United Kingdom: Autograph. 330 pages. Color Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$42.70. Cloth. ISBN: 9781899282197.

Sammy Baloji and Filip de Boeck with curator Devrim Bayar. "Urban Now: City Life in Congo." Exhibited at Galeria Avenida da India, Lisbon, March 24 to June 17, 2018.

The exhibition "Urban Now: City Life in Congo," by photographer Sammy Baloji and anthropologist Filip de Boeck, is a polymorphous creation, bringing together Baloji's film captures of the city of Kinshasa with De Boeck's insights into urban life, history, and the ruptures and continuities inherent in Congolese social life. The authors' collective creative interpretation of urban life is expressed through various media: a book, a picture exhibition, films, and an installation. The exhibition, curated by Devrim Bayar, has circulated widely since its launching in 2016 at the WIELS Contemporary Art Center in Brussels. It has been seen at The Power Plant (Toronto), The Open Society Foundations (New York), and Galerias Municipais / EGEAC (Lisbon).

The pairing of anthropology and photography can be traced to their common function of representing otherness. This particular relationship is reinforced by the use of film, which allows the narrative and the temporal dimension to emerge in visual representation. Jean Rouch understood this while creating his movies "on the move" to juxtapose the narratives of West African villagers and the ambition of the new urban dwellers, as in *Moi un Noir*. The encounter between the anthropologist-turned-filmmaker Filip de Boeck and the photographer-turned-ethnographer Sammy Baloji was a most promising one. And both creations—the exhibition and the book—are enriching and enriched by their double perspective.

The authors

Sammy Baloji (Lubumbashi, 1978) is a photographer and artist researching the history and social life of Congo. He is one of the founders of “Rencontres Picha,” a photographic biennial held in his hometown of Lubumbashi. His work revolves around the theme of the historical roots of contemporary splits and contrasts in Congolese social life. Baloji became known when one of his earlier works, *Mémoires*, was awarded a prize at the Bamako Photography Encounters in 2007. This work, based on a juxtaposition of colonial pictures of violence and dominations with a contemporary exposition of the mining region of Katanga, the Baloji homeland, is emblematic of Baloji’s subsequent works. In Portugal he participated in the collective exhibition “Present Tense” (2013), exhibiting his work on Chinese investment in the deteriorated mining companies, with contrasting images of the daily lives of the workers and inhabitants of the region. Historical tensions, from colonialism to neoliberalism, are continuously explored in his work.

Filip de Boeck is a Belgian anthropologist working on postcolonial social intersections, best known for his works on urban settings and youth agency in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He works at the Catholic University of Leuven and is the coordinator of the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa. His incursions into visual arts and documentary include curatorial projects such as *The World according to Bylex* for the Royal Flemish Theatre, (Brussels 2008) and *Kinshasa: The Imaginary City*, for the 9th International Architecture Biennial (Venice 2006). Documentaries include *Cemetery State* (2010) and *The Tower: A Concrete Utopia* (2016), created in collaboration with Sammy Baloji. He also collaborated with photographer Marie Françoise Plissart on a work entitled *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (2014).

The exhibition

The exhibition challenges the viewers, escorting them through the visibilities and the unseens of Kinshasa’s urban life. Baloji’s pictures, large as life, are paired with an installation on the new ghetto condominiums in Kinshasa and with two documentary films, *Fugurume/Pungubume* and *The Tower*. The exhibition is divided into several nuclei, including a first-hand view of life on the streets, the OCPT Building, the Cemetery, La Cité du Fleuve and the Vegetable Gardens of the Malebo Pool, and Land Chiefs. It opens with a scale model of the city of Kinkole, one of the last planned quarters of Kinshasa, partially built in the late sixties. The geometrical proportions of the model immediately remind the visitor that architecture and urbanization are utopian exercises, expressions of a desire to control and organize social settings, which is even more true in colonial cities such as Kinshasa itself. The precision of the model poses a sharp contrast with the city portraits that follow. People, cars, wired skies, and colored advertisements enact the lively daily life of Kinshasa’s larger roads, their incongruence best

expressed by a walking bridge leading nowhere, a modern structure from which just the stairs remain.

A picture of roads leading to mountains on the horizon and promises of a better future from a smiling president direct us to the OCPT building. The Office Congolais de Poste et Télécommunication (OCPT) is the old post office building and current center of international communications, nowadays just known as “le Bâtiment” (the building), situated in the quarter “Sans Fil,” the wireless neighborhood in a reference to the telegraph. This tall construction with modernist lines is now home to several families related to the original company employees, improvising their homes like scenarios on a stage. The building’s social life extends to the outside, where an improvised commercial center is assembled under the arcades. Baloji’s photographic work expresses the continuity and contrast between the original intentions of the building and the present living adaptations, in a revisitation that points to the future in more than one way. The OCPT building with its different scenarios is one of the better iterations of the colonial past.

The new utopias in Kinshasa—as well as in every other major city—are aimed at the emerging middle and upper classes. Baloji and De Boeck dedicated two nuclei to the new project *La Cité du Fleuve*, meant to be built on an artificial island in the nearby Malebo pond. The installation, constructed with pamphletary bright pictures of the dreamed bourgeois life, together with a promotional video, presents a sharp contrast with the portraits of the actual inhabitants of the area, working on their vegetable gardens. These large images give the viewer an immediate sense of identification with the farmers pictured. The same approach is used to depict the cemetery of Kintambo, officially closed but still active in an informal way.

The last nucleus is dedicated to the land chiefs, posed in their homes with some of their regalia. Those life-size portraits of the ones who represent the old lineages and land owners contrast with the “nouveau riche” dreams of the Cité du Fleuve builders. The historical role of the chiefs is illustrated in the documentary on the Fungurume town in the Katanga region. A rich mineral center, Fungurume has seen multiple multinational companies coming to explore their copper wealth, from colonial times to the actual Chinese company that brought the bonds of the acting American company. In the documentary, local land chiefs of the Sanga offer their views and list their genealogical-based rights; they are not part of the mining consortium.

The exhibition ends as it started, dialoging between the past and the present, the state-based utopias and the individual experiences. We are invited to the Tower, a utopia turned into a concrete construction owned and built by the Doctor, who guides us on a tour while climbing its twelve levels. For the authors, this building is the reflection of another construction, the Forescom tower, built in 1946 as a symbol of a modernity led by a colonial government. Colonial and postcolonial utopias face each other as contrasting but intersecting realities.

The book

The exhibition is accompanied by a book, *Suturing the City. Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*, which explores the social complexity of urban life in Congo. *Suturing the City* is a major work on African urban fabric that can be read independently of the exhibition. Filip de Boeck explores his deep knowledge of Congolese life and, together with Sammy Baloji, leads us through a major exploration of Congo's colonial and postcolonial realities. As a major anthropological work, this book is built around specific insights that become allegories of social challenges. The authors use the metaphors of "holes," "suturing the city," or even "acupuncture" to better express the meanings and strategies of urban dwellers' daily life. "Holes" refers to the physical potholes in Kinshasa physical infrastructures, the mining holes, the cemetery holes. The "mountain" metaphor represents the land spirits for Katanga populations, the achievement of conquest for colonial officers, or major mining opportunities for multinational companies. There are also urban mountains, or towers, the old utopia of modernity from the colonial state, the utopian tower of the Doctor or the new utopias for entrepreneurs dreaming of a new Dubai, the major utopian driver in the Global South.

The book is divided into nine parts, exploring the different points of the city as acupuncture points operating in the soft tissues of the social fabric. Through these acupuncture points, the authors explore how the conditions of coloniality in Congo have left their mark on the present landscape and social relations. In "The Urban Politics of Syncopation," the complex social relations in urban settings are explored even further, from networking in the market to solidarity, competition, and aggression, expressed in witchcraft accusations, divinatory practices, and Neo-Pentecostal discourse. The city is marked by its deteriorating colonial infrastructures, its postcolonial state dreams of grandeur, and its neoliberal promises of shining urbanizations. But the inhabitants are above all survivors whose voices express their concern of not making it through the day in this entangled social tissue.

The city is also the place where a visible sharing of space implies both the living and the dead. In "Corpus Vile: Death and Expendable youth in Kinshasa," De Boeck comes back to a subject he has discussed and presented at length in his former works, *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (2005, edited with Alcinda Honwana) and the documentary *Cemetery State* (2010). The authors contend that in a country where there is no place for younger people to make their lives, death as a major ritual passage to the condition of ancestor is no longer a social concern. Youth must survive between the dead and the living, using funerals as a site of political contestation against their elders.

The land chiefs in Fungurume are fighting for ancestral rights, discussing at length their claim to the land that is now disputed by the mining companies. In Kinshasa, land chiefs are being challenged for their land rights in places where new urbanizations want to take root. Autochthonous notions

of property and land ownership were previously settled by colonial legislation as they are today by postcolonial edicts.

Both the exhibition and the book open with a photographic wider-than-reality model of the colonial city. The contemporary urban spaces bear the weight of their collective past, as utopian dwelling places built over pre-colonial land rights, which confronts their present-day mission, the social mending of significant relations. De Boeck and Baloji interweave writing and pictures to give voice to these multiple experiences. Looking through the urban holes and the acupuncture points, the authors manage to present a sutured and lively city, a place of tensions and experiences expressive of their contested past.

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