
H-France Review Vol. 23 (August 2023), No. 136

Gabriella Nugent, *Colonial Legacies. Contemporary Lens-Based Art and the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021. 232 pp. €55.00 (pb). ISBN 9789462702998; €41.00 (ebook). ISBN 9789461664273.

Review by Sarah Van Beurden, Ohio State University.

This concise study of Congo-focused camera-based contemporary art is constructed around four case studies. The first study focuses on Sammy Baloji's 2006 *Mémoire*, a photography-based reflection on the history of mining in the Katanga region. The second examines Michèle Magema's 2002 video installation *Oyé Oyé*, which considers the role of women in the politics of the Mobutu regime (Joseph-Désiré Mobutu or Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the country from 1965 until 1997). The third case study encompasses photographer Georges Senga's 2012 series *Une vie après la mort*, on the figure of Patrice Lumumba and his long-term presence in Congolese imaginations. The last chapter investigates the performances, visual recordings, and collaborations of the Kinshasa-based artist collective Kongo Astronauts from roughly 2013 to 2019. What unites these artists, in addition to their focus on the Congolese past and their use of lens-based tools, is their affiliation with the "archival turn." Each artist engages in reworking and reflecting upon various archival materials, encompassing visual, written, or media-based formats.

Each chapter contains one central case study, with references to related Congolese as well as other contemporary art. While the case studies at the center of the book are all lens-based art (photography, film, multimedia), they are situated in relation to other art forms, such as performance arts and painting. The book is not a historical work in the sense that it does not aim to reconstruct a past. Instead, it looks at how the past is represented and reflected upon in art.

Nugent's professed central interest in this book is the memories and afterlives of colonialism. Her focus on lens-based art is motivated by its ability to create multiple temporalities and entanglements with multiple images and screens. In her introduction, she rightly notes the troubled past role of the camera as a tool of colonialism, although her discussion of the subject does not fully engage the existing scholarship. [1] Likewise, the broad scholarship on the relation between history and memory is not completely explored; the study would have benefited from more theoretical framing of the works discussed, specifically with regard to the various ways the past lives on in the present. Central to the author's approach is Jacques Rancière's "contention that visual art changes what is seeable, sayable, and knowable" (p. 153).

The main body of the book opens with a chapter on Sammy Baloji's *Mémoire* series, a collection of collages in which the artist combines archival photographs of the mining behemoth Union Minière du Haut-Katanga with contemporary photographs and an accompanying video featuring Faustin Linyekula, a performance choreographer and dancer. "Time occurs through the orders of the body, the context and collisions of colonialism and the concerns and conventions of anthropology and photography" (p. 35), Nugent writes, arguing that the archival figures in the Baloji's landscapes evoke multiple temporalities that occur simultaneously. The contrast between the immobile bodies in Sammy Baloji's photos and the dynamic performance of Linyekula, who is nonetheless rooted to the same spot and whose movements have been placed in a loop, Nugent argues, raises questions about the cyclical nature of the Copperbelt exploitation and the precarity of the postcolonial body and life, with its limited mobility and possibly futile movements. Linyekula's performance is overlaid with a soundtrack of independence and other postcolonial political speeches, evoking past hopes for new futures that stand in opposition to the social, economic, as well as bodily immobility of exploited communities.

The second chapter revolves around a close reading of Michèle Magma's *Oyé Oyé* (2002), a video installation in which the artist positions two videos side by side. On one screen, archival footage of dancing women participating in *animation culturelle et politique* is displayed. These publicly performed and state-sponsored singing and dancing events became characteristic of the Mobutist era. The footage, drawn from a 1999 documentary by Thierry Michel, *Mobutu, Roi du Zaïre*, is rendered in black and white (as opposed to the original color) and juxtaposed with a second screen which displays Magma's body (her head and feet cut off by the screen) marching in a Zairian school uniform. Nugent analyses Magma's piece in the context of the history of women in central Africa, who lost societal ground to men during both the colonial and postcolonial eras. The looping of videos of women's movements on both screens symbolizes women's bodies used in service of the celebration of the state. While women were central to subsistence economies, cultural transmission, and societal resilience, (post)colonial political economies undermined their autonomy. As Nugent argues, Magma's work renders visible the gestures and spaces of women's opposition. Nugent also refers to Sammy Baloji's work here, using Magma's work to question the gendered assumptions in Baloji's work. Ultimately, however, both artists' work is characterized by the rendering visible of forms of exploitation and extraction of workers and women.

Lubumbashi-based photographer George Senga's photo series *Une vie après la mort* is at the center of the following chapter. In this series, Senga juxtaposes Lumumba memorabilia and photographs with images he made of his former teacher Kayembe Kilobo, who maintained a lifelong tradition of emulating the prime minister's dress and aesthetic. Nugent uses a discussion of the series to reflect on the historical visual economy of images of Lumumba. She demonstrates the long-term effects of colonial photography--and particularly its emphasis on the well-dressed figure of the *évolué*--in shaping images of Lumumba, as well as the role of dress (especially men's suits) as a space of resistance against the Mobutu regime's emphasis on "authentic" dress. Popular paintings, particularly those of Thsibumba Kanda-Matulu, are another link in the history of this visual economy, visible in among others their clear photographic sensibility, as Nugent argues. Senga's work draws attention to how images or visual echoes of imagery of Lumumba have transformed in meaning, having moved beyond the specter of politics into personal lives, and from depicting possible futures to past futures.

The last chapter of the book discusses the work of the Kongo Astronauts, an artist collective based in Kinshasa. In its initial form, their art is performance-based but they are also deeply invested in the “transmission and retransmission of their work through photographs, short film, and collaborations” (p. 119). The street performances consist of alien, astronaut-like figures navigating the urban landscape of Kinshasa in costumes made from recycled electronic waste, exposing links between the digital interconnectedness of the world and the exploitation of Congolese mineral resources—in other words, how extraction and exploitation enable connection. The videorecordings of the performances undergo a process of fragmentation and creative montage, becoming interspersed with imagery echoing the violence of extraction. Nugent argues that their reliance in part on visual imagery of the global space age of the 1960s and 1970s is used to build out impressions of the global connections of today’s technopolitics but also allows the artists to invent “counterfutures” (p. 146) that fulfill the unfulfilled optimism of the 1970s.

Nugent’s choice to treat Congo-based and diaspora-based artists in the same work highlights the global context of today’s art world, as do the references she makes to the artistic connections that exist between the art discussed in the book and work by other artists from a range of locations, including South Africa and Belgium.

The book would have benefitted from a closer editing process (artists are not always introduced when they are first mentioned, for example), and at times the author does not adequately contextualize the works she discusses. For example, there is a lack of reference to the street performance scene in Kinshasa as one of the foundational contexts for the work of the Kongo Astronauts, or previous treatments of the subject in Monsengo Shula’s work.

The title and framing of the book as focused on colonial legacies don’t entirely do the work justice. Although I would be the last person to argue with the fact that colonial legacies deeply impact Congolese society today, not everything can be reduced to those legacies either and much of what the author discusses in this book is in fact postcolonial (Lumumba’s murder, the Space, Mobutu’s authenticity politics, etc.). As she notes, what the artists discussed have in common is “an engagement with the time and aspirations associated with the end of colonialism and the emergent postcolonial state” (p. 123). Although all of these events and phenomena have some colonial roots, they nevertheless cannot be reduced to those, since their postcolonial reworking was also generative in and of itself. The real heart of this book, which makes an interesting contribution to the study of a highly dynamic contemporary Congolese art scene, lies with its delicate unpacking of the past futures the art under discussion renders visible.

NOTE

[1] See for example the works of Arielle Aisha Azoulay and John Pepper, “Snap of the Whip/Crossroads of Shame: Flogging, Photography, and the Representation of Atrocity in the Congo Reform Campaign.” *Visual Anthropology* 24 (2008): 55-77.

Sarah Van Beurden
Ohio State University
van-beurden.1@osu.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172