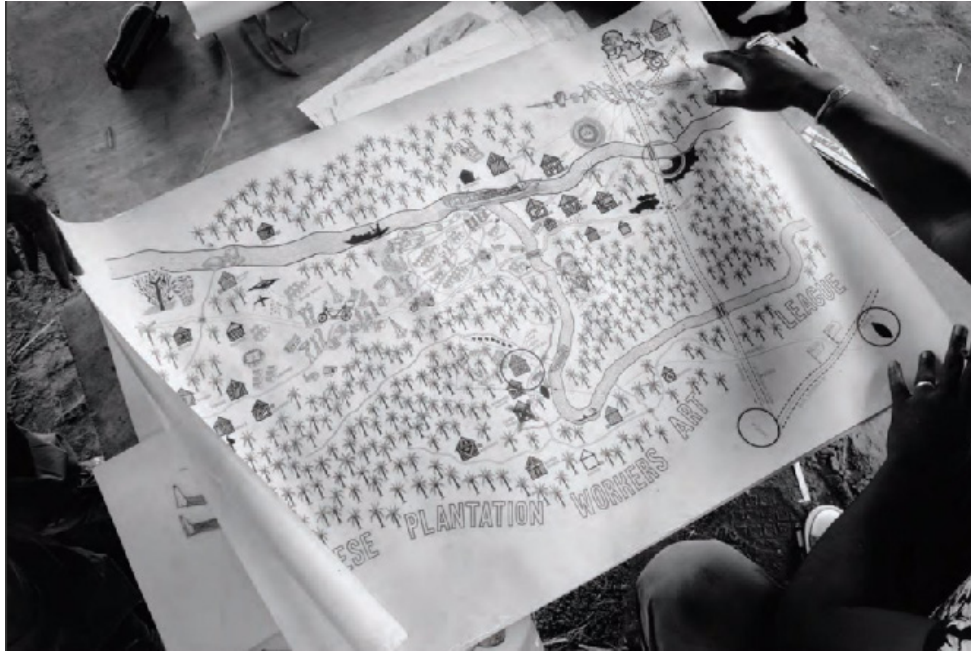


ARTFORUM

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise

By Chika Okeke-Agula — May 1, 2017



Collective map by members of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congoese Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC), CATPC studios, Lusanga, Democratic Republic of the Congo, September 2016. Photo: Léonard Pongo.

A Dutch artist decided to help Congolese agricultural laborers by training them to be artists and then selling their artistic output overseas, generating revenue with which to transform the workers' wretched plantation world into an art-tourism and research haven. In 2012, he established the **Institute for Human Activities (IHA)** at KASK/School of Arts of University College Ghent, Belgium, where he and his associates planned their Congo mission, and whence they still direct it. This, in a nutshell, is the backstory and business plan of artist **Renzo Martens's Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC)**, a group of low-wage farmer-artists, artists, and ecologists based in Lusanga, a small town in the Bandundu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The recent CATPC exhibition at SculptureCenter thus inevitably raised complex, even fraught issues about the project and its politics. More broadly, it compelled serious questions about the political economy of North-South postcolonial relations and about the ethics of what one might call the NGO development mentality. The exhibition was unquestionably important. And yet it was also decidedly underwhelming, because the art on view was not particularly interesting.

Nicely installed in the large gallery were twelve figurative sculptures that ranged from life-size to tabletop scale, all made from the same material: chocolate. Originally modeled in clay by the CATPC artists, they had been digitally scanned in the Congo, then 3-D printed and cast in the Netherlands. Nine of these were actually three sculptures reproduced in triplicate. At the far end of the gallery stood three iterations of **Thomas Leba's Poisonous Miracle**, 2015, depicting a long-limbed old woman who, having been bitten by a monstrous chameleon, is afflicted with a nasty skin disease.



Left: View of “Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise” (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League), 2017. Photo: Kyle Knodell.
 Right: Daniel Mvuzi, *Si j’avais su* (If I Had Known), 2016, ink and graphite on paper, 12 1/4 x 13”.

Another triple print, ***The Art Collector***, 2014, by **Jérémie Mabila** and **Djona Bismar**, showed a wrinkly-faced, bespectacled man in a double-breasted suit, sitting atop a mound encircled by a serpent and floral forms. This figure (originally titled *The Financier/Sponsor/Shareholder/Capitalist/Art Patron*) inexplicably had just one leg and came across as sinister. The largest of the singular sculptures, ***Self Portrait Without Clothes***, 2014, by **Mbuku Kimpala**, one of the women in the group, showed a naked female figure seated with her legs spread out. She makes what might be a plaintive gesture, whereas another naked figure, Bismar’s ***The Spirit of Palm Oil***, 2014, stands with a fist clenched at the hip, the other hand pointing in a manner reminiscent of the threatening pose of minkisi Mangaaka - those powerful figures of ritual jurisprudence among the Kongo people. The third of the triplicate works, Bismar’s figure stood out for its powerful affect. At the front of the gallery were two sculptures from 2015 that reflected a wide gap in levels of technical mastery among the artists: **Mathieu Kilapi Kasiana**’s crudely formed, grotesque head, ***Man Is What the Head Is***, and the art school-trained Cedrick Tamasala’s cute, competently rendered ***How My Grandfather Survived***, featuring a figure representing a priest sent by King Leopold II of Belgium. The priest is showing a boy an open book on which is printed “*Heureux les pauvres*” (happy are the poor).

Also on view in this space were nine small ink-and-graphite drawings from 2016 in a style that left no doubt about the makers’ lack of technical know-how. In their pictorial naïveté, they reminded me of the early- to mid-twentieth-century drawings produced by the mostly illiterate students at the fine arts school Le Hangar (the Warehouse), established in the Congolese Katanga province by Frenchman Pierre Romain-Desfossés. There was *Viol* (Rape), a rape scene by Irene Kanga; *Si j’avais su* (If I Had Known), episodes of mystic-ritual violence by Daniel Mvuzi; and Mao Kingunza’s funny picture of a petty thief, *Voleur piégé* (Trapped Thief).

Behind the main gallery, a reading room featured a shelf of scholarly books and documents, packaged self-portrait heads also cast in chocolate by two of CATPC’s members (on sale at the front desk for forty-two dollars apiece), and a video monitor with slides of the group’s activities and events. Curiously, no justification for Martens’s decision to use chocolate as the medium for the workers’ sculptures was on offer. The 456-page book that accompanied the show muses on the material’s properties and circulation as a commodity, but offers no fleshed-out explanation of why it was chosen over other possibilities. And such an explanation would be welcome, since, after all, the Congo was never a major producer or exporter of cacao. The connection between chocolate and the much more devastating and lasting Belgian colonial exploitation of the Congo’s natural and human resources is not clear.

Martens achieved art-world notoriety with his 2008 video ***Episode III: Enjoy Poverty***. In some sense, CATPC is a follow-up to that video, wherein the artist cynically instigates hapless Congolese youths to photograph and sell images of their sick, malnourished, and impoverished compatriots, just like Western photojournalists. Vexing at best, that work apparently inspired Martens to find an alternative solution to the problem of the Congolese poor. In any case, reading CATPC literature showing how money raised from these chocolate sculptures has paid for Lusanga’s development, it is impossible to shake off the question, Is this the latest frontier in the Western art world’s self-congratulatory and all-too-sporadic missionary work?

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