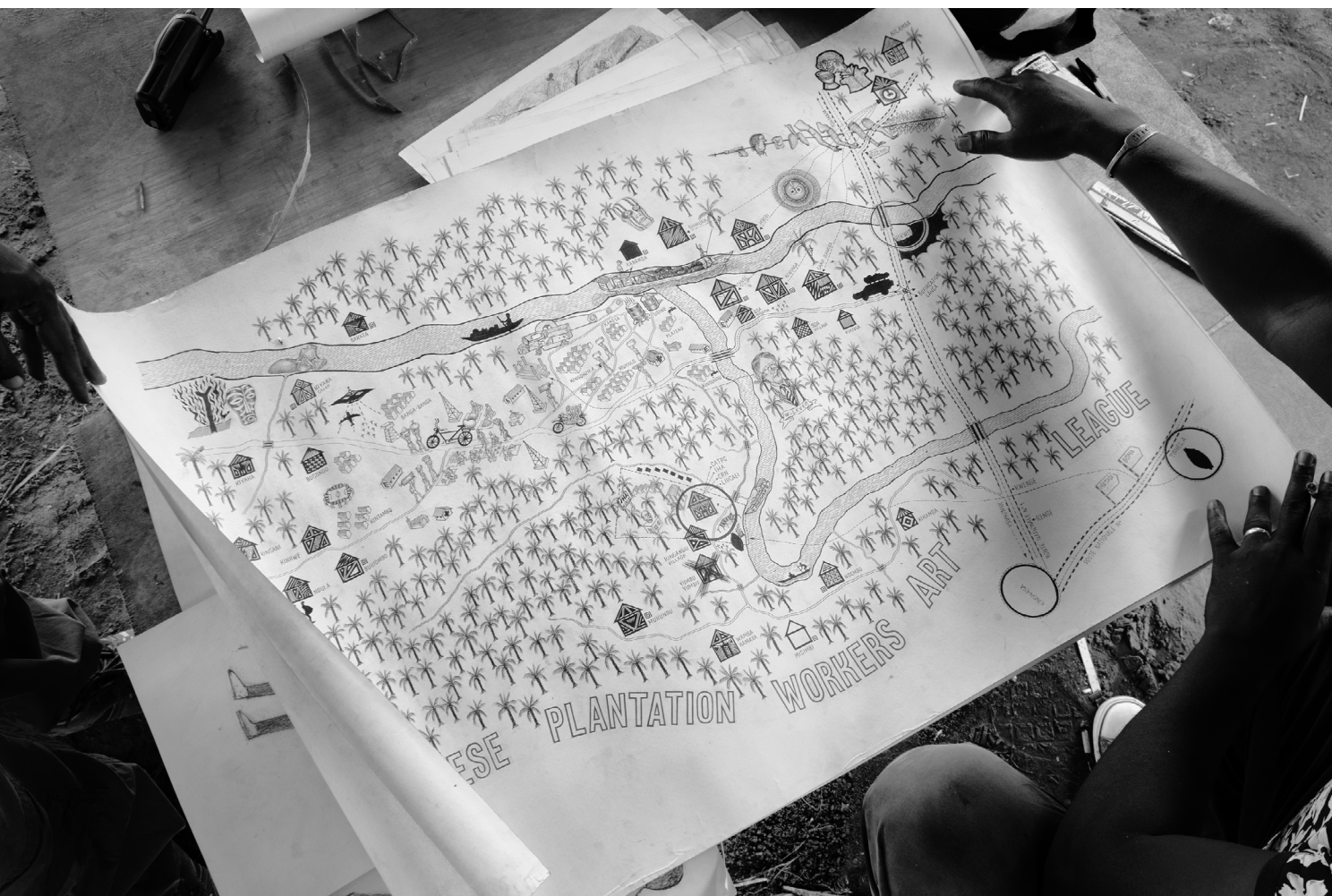


SculptureCenter
Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise



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Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise
January 29 – March 27, 2017

Curated by Ruba Katrib

SculptureCenter

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise



Introduction

Ruba Katrib

This exhibition is comprised of sculptures rendered in cacao, drawings, a video piece, and a reading room that provides information on how and why these artworks came to be. The participating artists belong to the collective Cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise (CATPC) and work together to make their individual artworks, with the support and guidance of outside collaborators who help get their expressions out into the world. They live in Lusanga, formerly Leverville (named after William Lever, the early twentieth-century Belgian founder of the local palm oil plantation that turned into the modern day Unilever corporation), in the Democratic Republic of Congo. All of the artist members of CATPC have worked or work on plantations run by multinational corporations that make many of the daily products we buy in stores in the USA, Europe, and beyond. Their sculptures are figurative and their pen-and-ink drawings depict complex structures and personal narratives; the video, *Upside Down World* (2017), is composed of a series of actions and performances by artist members, set on the CATPC property. The title comes from an artwork donated by Carsten Höller who had previously participated in the Unilever-sponsored commission series at Tate Modern in London, which ran from 2000 – 2012. All these components come together to form a cosmology that addresses the materials of life and labor, and their circulation.

Most of the works deal with the circulation of goods and wealth in a direct manner. In Cedrick Tamasala's drawing and sculpture on view, he addresses the inequities between labor and profit specific to the extraction of resources from Congo. In his large ink and graphite drawing, Tamasala illustrates the complex movement of product and wealth out of the plantation and into faraway cities. His sculpture, *How My Grandfather Survived* (2015), depicts a priest showing a boy a book. On its open pages the phrase "Blessed are the Poor" can be read, referring to the deceptive role of priests in colonized territories, who used Christian ideals to teach colonized people not to value money and power as colonial authorities put them to work and looted their sacred material possessions. In other works, like Jérémie Mabiala and Djonga Bismar's *The Art Collector* (2014), the portrait of the patron is complicated by his strained expression and the vines that tie him to the box he sits upon. The acknowledgment of systems of art and finance is continuously linked to more personal expressions: the members of the CATPC site themselves within both the plantation and the system of global trade. Within the exhibition, modes of reproduction and circulation characteristic of modern and contemporary art, as well as other commodities, are emphasized in the display of multiple casts from each work's edition of five (with two artist's proofs). Recurring versions of the same sculpture, like Djonga Bismar's *The Spirit of Palm Oil* (2014) reinforce specific imagery, while also revealing the conditions and possibilities of their construction and consumption as artworks.

The presentation of this exhibition in New York adds to the urgency of its content, because the city is one of the financial and artistic centers of the world where significant wealth is accrued and circulated. As inhabitants of the global north and residents of New York City, we need to discuss our local context, and we also must gain a deeper understanding of how our version of an economic reality was formed and how it persists, as well as how it

might change. We have to ask ourselves questions: Where does our wealth come from? Why does art continue to thrive as more money accumulates in fewer hands? What is the relationship between culture and the plantation system, historic and contemporary? Exploitation of workers continues in old and new forms in the sweatshops and plantations that produce the goods we purchase at low prices. Simon Gikandi, in his book *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011), tells the story of William Beckford, who came from a wealthy sugar plantation-owning family in eighteenth-century Jamaica and moved as an adolescent to London, where he lived out the rest of his life. Gikandi makes the persuasive and nuanced argument that Beckford's modern education and cultivation as an art collector and patron was in part also an attempt to "disavow" the brutality that stained the source of his fortune. In Gikandi's formulation, much of high modern culture was developed in direct response to the slavery system. Yet, Gikandi also points to the absence of the topic of slavery in Enlightenment philosophy and modern self-fashioning, the blind eye turned to the widespread practice that enabled and informed the cultural and technological developments that thinkers probed. To understand our current state, it is essential to recognize this glaring lack of acknowledgment of the role of violence and exploitation, both past and present, in building the wealth and comfort of Western nations. Under these conditions, can culture be repurposed to redress these wrongs? And how do we avoid the ignorance or complacency in providing content that disregards or absolves the entities that commit injustices?

In this exhibition, we present the expressions of people who are caught in economic systems of exploitation. We ask ourselves to openly and honestly receive this communication from them and to consider its implications. In their work, CATPC is working out thorny issues in real time, in real space, and with real people. Things will continue to unfold, and if we pay attention we may start to learn.

The following text first appeared in Cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise (Sternberg Press, 2017)

CATPC in New York, from the Village to a Hyper-Capitalist Art City

Ruba Katrib

New York, November 2016

More often than not, successful artists function as recognizable names that circulate through the contemporary art economy as well as in secondary markets. Artists' names come to identify their work through varied press announcements, building a brand that theoretically creates further exhibition opportunities and boosts sales. Artists tend to live in identified art centers: many of the artists participating in international biennials, meant to represent a global art world, were born in places outside the global North but currently reside in a handful of major cities in Europe and the United States.¹ And in the Euro-American art world, artists from the global South are often under-represented in comparison to their northern counterparts. Further, artists who continue to live and work in the global South are often considered demographically equivalent to those that have emigrated elsewhere. While there are numerous reasons to leave one's country that often aren't accounted for in biographical listings, one reason is certainly economic. How do these conditions affect artist communities in cities and towns beyond Berlin, New York, London, or Paris? How can artist communities in more remote areas

¹ For a chart examining the places of birth and residence of Documenta artists between 1968 and 2007 that shows this phenomenon, see Chin-Tao Wu, "Biennials Without Borders?," in *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (Autumn 2009), <www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/biennials-without-borders> [accessed November 28, 2016]. A look at the same demographics from the 2015 Venice Biennale shows that 44 percent of the artists represented live in Europe: "How Geographically Diverse Is the 2015 Venice Biennale?," *ARTnews* (March 6, 2015), <www.artnews.com/2015/03/06/how-geographically-diverse-is-the-2015-venice-biennale/> [accessed November 28, 2016].

engage with the flow of the international art market without moving to a western capital in the logical effort to be closer to their gallery or to receive more studio visits? What would it change if there were more participation in the Euro-American art world by artists who reside outside of international art cities? And how will they access this art world with all the complications of staying put in the so-called margins?

The financial centers of the world support large art communities. These hubs are bustling because of profit and nonprofit economies sustained by the global elite. Bankers and artists live side by side. In New York City this creates an active schedule of events, openings and dinners, galas and auctions. There is no doubt that things are moving and shaking here, and the topics of art and gentrification are regularly raised in scholarly symposia to cocktail parties. As is commonly lamented, artists that moved to Brooklyn decades ago can no longer afford to live there after downtown Manhattan's prices skyrocketed, and now many even established non-profits have to move as their rent multiplies. There is no doubt that New York is becoming pricier, with Brooklyn cited as the most expensive place to live in America. A handful of enterprising artists have managed to thrive under these conditions by tapping into the wealth and finding opportunities to get a piece of it. Connected individuals can get help from real estate developers who provide free or cheap studio space and may enjoy continued sales of their work. But many others do not profit from the city's riches, or find that they reach a limit or hit a rough patch. Maybe they never get their work off the ground and in front of those with means. Despite factors determining monetary success, most artists probably want to live in New York so they can attend the exhibitions, openings, lectures and to participate in a lively art community—and they want to do so without having to rely on the gamble of accruing extraordinary financial wealth.

The collective Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) is based in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where its artists live and seldom leave. They are present or former agricultural workers embedded in the exploitative labor system of the largely foreign corporate-run plantation. Organized, encouraged and supported by European nationals with links to the Euro-American art world, the members of CATPC work together, exhibit together and earn together. All profits from the sales of their work return to CATPC, an approach that ensures that all members, not just a privileged few, share in their success. With the CATPC exhibition at the SculptureCenter in New York City held in early 2017, the commonalities and differences between working as an artist in the geographic sites of the DRC and the US become clear, and much is to be learned.

Although the members of CATPC retain individual authorship of their works, as a group they favor homogeneity in approach and final product. In all their sculptures presented at the SculptureCenter the same material is used, chocolate, and the artists express their individuality through the original forms they cast; whether portraits, self-portraits or recreations of memories. These unique expressions join to form a collectivity within the frame of collaboration and material uniformity—creating a new economic flow around labor, which continues to retain the mark of exploitative multinational corporations, but is now redirected through the art market. CATPC members produce their sculptures in editions, a common method of making artworks. When multiples of a single edition are shown together, as in the exhibition at the SculptureCenter, the sculpture's commodity status—created by the socioeconomic complexities of their material makeup and presentation as artworks, aka luxury goods—is emphasized. In addition to sculptures, the members also make singularly authored drawings and will most likely come to use other art forms in the future, such as film and photography. However, signature styles are pooled together and collectively established under the rubric of CATPC. Artistic techniques—and methods for making and exhibiting art—are developed under group influence, with equal priority given to expediency as much as expression (the art

must be able to leave the DRC, even if the artists can't).

The CATPC alliance challenges the prevailing model of a few star artists coming to represent a whole. That members share the profits from the sale of their works, thus far totaling \$30,000—not far from the cost of a single painting of a sought-after emerging artist in New York—disrupts the logic of hyper-capitalist art consumption. The wealth is shared by the group and put back into the resources they are constructing in Lusanga: their new exhibition and research center and their own plantations. Their membership in CATPC ensures that they can generate significant shared capital, sums of money that would take many lifetimes of laboring on plantations to accumulate. Using these funds, they can invest in, and themselves profit from, the natural resources extracted by multinational corporations. Their joint effort comes back to serve all. And so far, none of the artists have wanted to break away from the group to pursue their own career.

Art is often viewed as a generator of change. In New York in recent years, artists and arts institutions are seen as boosting commerce and increasing the desirability of a neighborhood but displacing longtime residents. Art is also credited with raising awareness about social issues and helping individuals and at-risk communities tap into their creativity. However, even these more socially engaged programs can dissolve and lose support as neighborhoods and cities gentrify. Is this just the inherent impact of art? Will an art collective in the DRC bring about changes in the local community comparable to those that resulted from the concentration of artists on the Lower East Side? Will hip boutiques be opened, to be followed by franchises? Will art tourism to Lusanga increase? To say that such a thing couldn't happen raises many questions as to why it wouldn't. To say that it could provokes questions as to what would happen if it did. There are many differences between Lusanga and New York, but it's worth considering if the impacts of art could operate similarly in both places. Through its global engagement, is contemporary art a possible common denominator between such different sites?

In the symposia and conferences taking place in Lusanga with local and foreign participants, CATPC members contribute to the discourse built around their works, yet it is still presented internationally through the mechanism of the Euro-American art system. As plantation workers and artists, their expressions are under-represented. Yet, how do we respond to the collective voice of CATPC? Do we require CATPC members to fully engage with this system? What would such engagement entail? Artists in New York can represent themselves in most contexts, but they lack the protection that a union provides. If their work stops selling, or never sells, they are on their own with whatever capital they have accrued. Their exhibitions are scrutinized and judged on their sole performance, and they can fall into or out of favor. Further, artists in New York must spend a huge percentage of their time working on their art and their careers. For most, the goal is that art becomes their primary profession. The members of CATPC make art, but as individuals they have some buffer from the volatility of the market and the changeability of trends. Whatever they earn goes a long way. They use their art in the pursuit of other sustainable models for the betterment of their community, and redirect the surplus of their artistic labor into more traditional forms of labor, like building their own plantations. Collective art production contributes to the regained agency of individuals in the socioeconomic sphere. For CATPC members, the profit made on their art makes it possible for them to stay in their homes and reengage in traditional labor, without being forced into exploitative economic situations, as long as their artwork continues to circulate and sell in the market. This possibility is likely because CATPC members are embedded and invested in their local context and are making that the core subject of their work—their mission of reinvestment promises to make their project appealing and resilient. The betterment of local community is at the core of the CATPC project in Lusanga, where art activity will continue to be used to effect all kinds of change to come.

From the Plantation to the White Cube

René Ngongo and Renzo Martens

Inventory of CATPC’s experimental garden, purchased with funds from art sale profits

<u>Cocoa:</u>	6650 plants in good condition Surface covered with distance of 10 feet between two plants: 14 acres
<u>Palm Oil:</u>	801 plants in good condition Surface covered with distance of 30 feet between two plants: 17 acres
<u>Fruit trees:</u> (Mix of different species including avocado, mandarin, pineapples and bananas)	944 plants in good condition Surface covered with distance of 32 feet between two plants: 15 acres
<u>Material in stock:</u>	12 machetes, 2 wheelbarrows, 10 hoes, 10 beakers, 3 rakes, 5 watering cans, 7500 cocoa bags, 800 palm sachets, 2 notebooks, 5 pens, and 1 slat.
<u>Agenda:</u>	February and mid March 2017: Planting of banana trees March 2017: Planting of the cocoa feet under banana trees September 2017: Planting of palm trees May 2017: Planting of vegetables

In 1911, William Lever signed a treaty with the Belgian government that gave him access to the palm oil of the country’s colony in Congo. He established the coordinating base of his business in Lusanga, at the confluence of the Kwenge and Kwilu Rivers, and renamed the village after himself: Leverville. On a plantation built on confiscated land, Unilever, one of the biggest multinationals of our time, began accumulating its fortune. The company imposed monoculture, introduced a forced labor system, and, after the plantation workers revolted in 1931, all but forbade cultural activities that did not serve the work. These actions resulted in the destruction of the local ecosystem and the loss of a rich artistic heritage. This history took place not only in Lusanga but elsewhere in Congo as well. Monoculture was likewise imposed on people, plants, and landscapes to the benefit of distant shareholders on Unilever plantations in Basongo, Ingende, Bumba, and Barumbu.

What happened in Congo had already occurred in the Caribbean and Latin America: it is only one example of what we call today the plantation system, which has been the engine of European and American expansion. In economic terms, plantations have formed the backbone of science, progress, and industrialization.¹ The immense wealth this system generated financed the construction of several well-known art institutions. Some of them, such as Tate Modern in London, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, are havens for the free expression of critical ideas and aesthetic taste that continue to benefit from profits extracted

through plantation labor. A familiar embodiment of this practice is the Unilever series at Tate Modern, where artists like Doris Salcedo, Tino Sehgal, and Ai Weiwei have shown works that deal with economic and political repression.

By exhibiting at SculptureCenter in New York, the members of CATPC gain access to the type of infrastructures that plantations have historically financed. This is remarkable in itself—the closing of the divide between those who are forced to shut up and work and those who get a chance to shape contemporary taste and ideas. More importantly, gaining artistic visibility enables people to make a decent living, which plantation labor does not. It is a big step toward a better world, but it is not enough.

In New York, CATPC helps art lovers, tourists, and collectors get a clearer view of the current value chains and power structures that govern the global art world. Yet the institutions that exhibit CATPC’s work themselves remain dependent on unequal economic systems. One can argue that CATPC’s activities actually cause further gentrification and reinforce class divides: the material with which CATPC’s sculptures are produced, cocoa, is harvested in often exploitative plantations throughout Africa. If CATPC has a more legitimate position than most global artist groups to critique inequalities, it too forms part of and supports an exploitative divide. By exhibiting at SculptureCenter, the artists have only temporarily switched from the bottom to the top position in the current value chain.

For this reason, CATPC has decided to use the profits from the sale of their sculptures to buy back land and develop ecologically responsible, community-owned cocoa gardens. That way, not only do the profits of the artistic production remain in the community and finance its further development, but the members of the cooperative take responsibility for the entire value chain of their work. In a few years, CATPC will produce works for which they have both harvested the raw materials and provided the critical artistic vision. This will be unique and important. The artworks will be made without destroying the forest and harming other species, animal and vegetal. This will be a new model.

Over the last two years, the chocolate sculptures have been exhibited frequently in museums and galleries, helping viewers and collectors understand the current economies that govern us all. Now that plantation workers have put their knowledge to the service of the art world, the art world should put its resources to the service of the plantation workers.

This spring CATPC, together with its sister organization the Institute for Human Activities (IHA), will build a museum in CATPC’s birthplace, Lusanga: a quintessential white cube designed by the architects of OMA. It will be the main element of the Lusanga International Research Center for Art and Economic Inequality (LIRCAEI). This will be an important moment. With the establishment of LIRCAEI, plantation workers will reclaim the infrastructure from which they can investigate, validate, and broadcast the strategies of resistance that have developed over time in plantation zones in the shadow of modern Western conceptions of subjectivity. The museum will attract the capital and visibility needed to empower it to invent the post-plantation reality of tomorrow.

The white cube and the plantation are opposite sides of the same coin. The white cube is a place for dissent, critical thinking, and taste. The plantation is a profit-generating place where dissent is crushed by the military and from which workers long to flee. The white cube has been separated for too long from the economic structures that sustain it. It must now be recontextualized and put to the service of the people that financed it. The task to redefine the mandate of art, we feel, is dependent on the reformulation of what a plantation can be.

René Ngongo is President of the CATPC and Renzo Martens is Artistic Director of the IHA.

Kinshasa and Amsterdam, January 19, 2017

¹ Anna Tsing has written about the significance of plantation economies as a driver of industrialization and monoculture in her essay “Unruly Edges: Mushroom as Companion Species” in *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 148.



Installation view.



Installation view.

Cedrick Tamasala, *How My Grandfather Survived*, 2015, installation view.



Installation view.

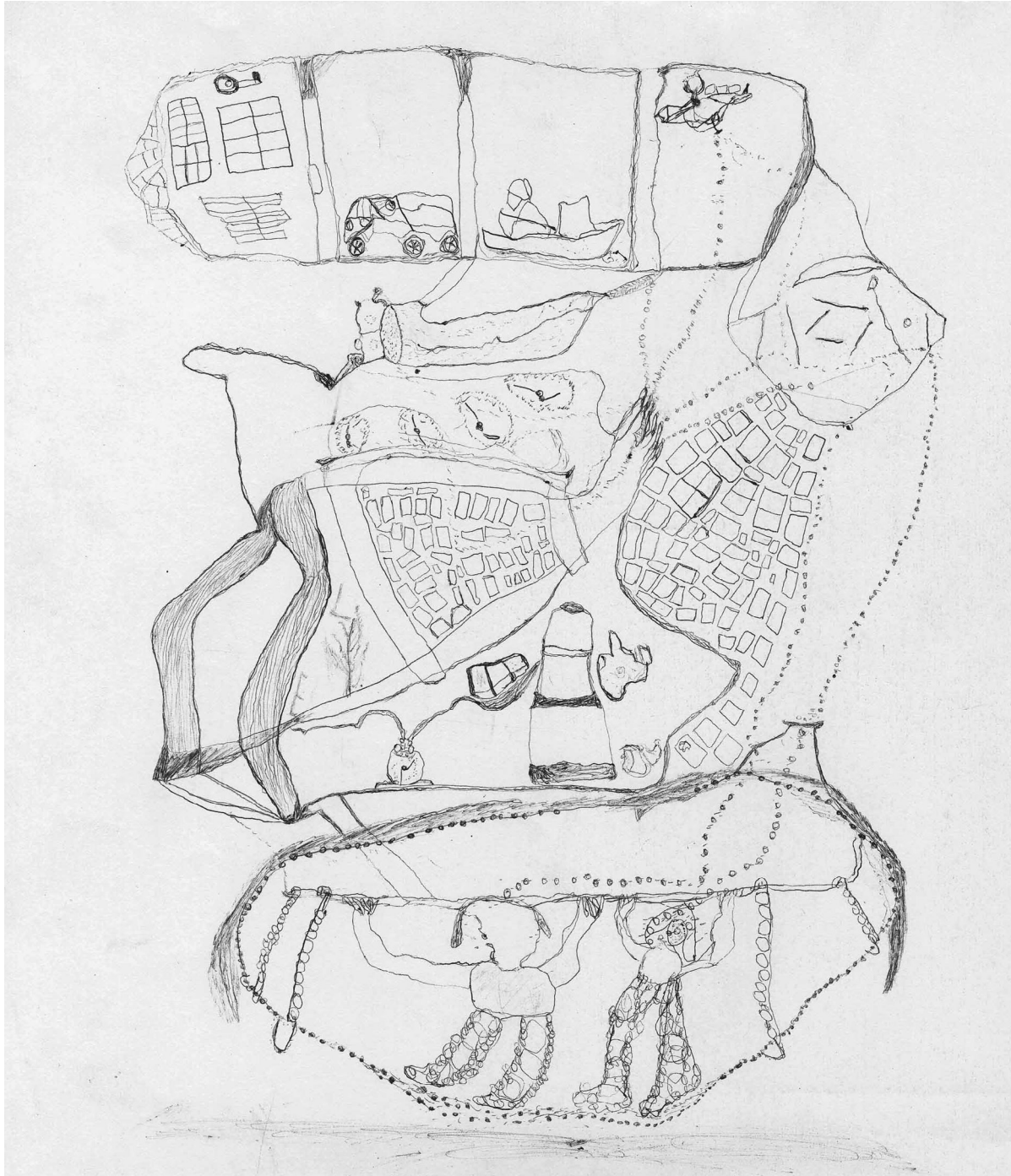


Installation view.





Installation view.



Matthieu Kilapi Kasiama, *Charge familiale*, 2016.



Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise, *Upside Down World*, 2017, installation view.



Installation view.



Installation view.

Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise

Upside Down World, 2017

Video

41:08 minutes

Filmed and edited by Eléonore Hellio

Djonga Bismar

The spirit of Palm Oil, 2014

Chocolate

35.8 x 16.7 x 16.1 inches

(91 x 42.5 x 41 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

The spirit of Palm Oil, 2014

Chocolate

35.8 x 16.7 x 16.1 inches

(91 x 42.5 x 41 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

The spirit of Palm Oil, 2014

Chocolate

35.8 x 16.7 x 16.1 inches

(91 x 42.5 x 41 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Self Portrait in Chocolate, 2014

Chocolate

4.3 x 4.3 x 4.3 inches (11 x 11 x 11 cm)

Unlimited edition

Irene Kanga

Viol, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Matthieu Kilapi Kasiama

Charge familiale, 2016

Ink on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Encore un tour de cric, 2016

Ink on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Man is what the head is, 2015

Chocolate

12 x 12 x 14 inches

(30.5 x 30.5 x 35.6 inches)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Résistance, 2016

Ink on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Jean Kawata

Féticheur ou démon du village, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Mananga Kibuila

Self Portrait in Chocolate, 2014

Chocolate

4.3 x 4.3 x 4.3 inches (11 x 11 x 11 cm)

Unlimited edition

Mbuku Kimpala

Self portrait without Clothes, 2014

Chocolate

24.4 x 35.4 x 27.6 inches

(61.9 x 90 x 70 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Mao Kingunza

Voleur piégé, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Thomas Leba

Poisonous Miracle, 2015

Chocolate

54.7 x 22.4 x 33.9 inches

(139 x 57 x 86 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Poisonous Miracle, 2015

Chocolate

54.7 x 22.4 x 33.9 inches

(139 x 57 x 86 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Poisonous Miracle, 2015

Chocolate

54.7 x 22.4 x 33.9 inches

(139 x 57 x 86 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Jérémie Mabiala & Djonga Bismar

The Art Collector, 2014

Chocolate

47.2 x 25.6 x 24.4 inches

(120 x 65 x 62 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

The Art Collector, 2014

Chocolate

47.2 x 25.6 x 24.4 inches

(120 x 65 x 62 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

The Art Collector, 2014

Chocolate

47.2 x 25.6 x 24.4 inches

(120 x 65 x 62 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Daniel Mvuzi

Révolte: la vie des morts, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Sans titre, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Si j'avais su, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

12.2 x 13 inches (31 x 33 cm)

Cedrick Tamasala

How My Grandfather Survived, 2015

Chocolate

15 x 8.3 x 9.4 inches (38 x 21 x 24 cm)

Edition of 5 + 2AP

Sans titre, 2016

Ink and graphite on paper

39.4 x 27.6 inches (100 x 70 cm)

All works courtesy the Cercle d'Art des

Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise; Galerie

Fons Welters, Amsterdam; and KOW, Berlin