Bodys at Rest: An African Artist Gets His Due at MoMA

Bodys Isek Kingelez's urban fantasia

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Bodys Isek Kingelez with "Étoile Rouge Congolaise" in Nantes, France, 1993 Courtesy André Magnin

Bodys Isek Kingelez almost wasn't famous. He lived in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.) — which was still known in the 1980s as Zaire, per edict of the autocrat Mobutu Sese Seko — a city scarce on opportunities for a contemporary artist. A bit of a recluse, Kingelez had ditched his early career as a schoolteacher for a more oblique civic engagement: constructing, out of paper and plastic and found materials, scale models of fantastical buildings that he imagined for the city.

When the Parisian curator André Magnin visited him in 1988, Kingelez was forty, and worked as a restorer at the national museum, tending to masks and other traditional items. His own art — meticulously crafted, vividly colored, always representing civic or business edifices — piled up at his office and in his modest home. Magnin picked Kingelez to be one of the artists in *Les Magiciens de la Terre*, the mega-group show he co-curated in 1989; mixing fifty Western artists with fifty from the so-called Third World, it made a forceful statement, especially for the time, about equal worth in contemporary art. Even so, the Congolese press treated Kingelez as a footnote, emphasizing the selection of the popular painter Chéri Samba instead.

“Ville Fantôme” (1996) Maurice Aeschimann. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection

Kingelez is now the subject of a fun and absorbing retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the apotheosis of a career that took off through that Paris exposure, making him a regular at biennials. It comes late for the artist, who died of cancer in 2015, and even later for the museum, as this is MoMA’s first-ever survey of a Black African artist. In that respect, the idiosyncratic Kingelez is an unexpected choice. But one has to start somewhere, and the show itself is a delight. Attractive in its jaunty, toy-world charm, it gets profound on longer look, as the cityscapes reveal the artist’s stubborn civic optimism dueling with his frustration at broken social promises and missed possibility.

Screen captures of the “Ville Fantôme” virtual-reality tour Courtesy of Third Pillar VR and Plastic Demo.

Kinshasa is the crucial context. Prior to the Paris show, it was the only major city Kingelez had known since arriving from his village after secondary school. In the late 1970s, when Kingelez began to make art, the energy was souring in many African cities, lofty post-independence dreams giving way to cynicism in the face of corruption, neo-colonialism, and complicit leadership. Mobutu's histrionics amplified this phenomenon in Zaire. Having taken power in a coup in 1965, he had imposed in 1971 his doctrine of *authenticité*, under which people were told to spurn suits and ties for Mao-like ensembles, switch from French to African names, and call each other *citoyen*. The mishmash didn't stick, leaving the single party, the M.P.R., with no ideology beyond plundering the country's mineral wealth, while ordinary Zaireans lived by "Article 15," a fictional law invented by street wags that stated simply *débrouillez-vous*, find a way to get by.

Architecture and planning underwent a parallel decay. A wave of truly interesting African modernism had swept major cities on the continent as countries attained independence, starting with Ghana in 1957, and with the biggest batch, including the D.R.C., in 1960. In major African cities like Abidjan, Accra, and Dakar, both European and local architects endowed civic and corporate buildings with aggressive designs — blunt rectangles, cylinders, pyramids — plus elements such as breezeways or louvers or sheathing intended variously as decoration or to suit the climate. But by the 1980s, with money and belief exhausted, high architecture retreated, and unregulated sprawl took over as the language of urban expansion. Kinshasa was no exception, with no better symbol than the *Tour de l'échangeur*, four tubular concrete shafts soaring more than 200 meters high with a rounded triple-level belvedere on the top intended to serve as a city landmark — like the Eiffel Tower or Space Needle — as well as house a restaurant and other entertainment amenities. Begun in 1971, the tower looms over the city today, yet was never finished or put to use. Mobutu shifted his attention in the 1980s to building palaces and useless amenities in Gbadolite, his home village far up the river.

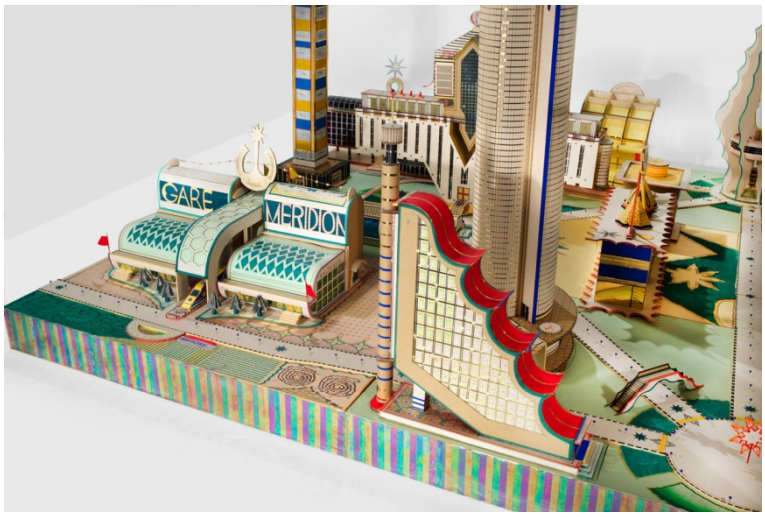
Kingelez was attuned to this psychic and political environment, and the needs it left unfulfilled. He had come to Kinshasa after high school, like so many rural migrants; his village was called Kimbembele-Ihunga, a place impossible to find on the map, at the edge of Bandundu and Kasaï regions in southwest D.R.C. At university in Kinshasa he studied economics and industrial design, so he was not exactly an autodidact. The urge to make art only hit in his late twenties, however, in a kind of epiphany. The medium he landed on would stick for the rest of his career. He called his works "extreme maquettes" — paper-based models of almost always imaginary buildings, and eventually whole cityscapes. They varied in size, but often reached two feet high or more. They landed between architecture and sculpture, but were not meant as literal designs — rather as general propositions, or fantasies. What made them truly distinct was their style, rich with ornaments and full of bright color applied with paint, marker, or colored pencil.

"U.N." (1995) Maurice Aeschimann. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection

The exhibition gathers 33 of these maquettes, many of them quite involved: The largest, *Ville Fantôme* (1996), fills a base that is roughly nineteen feet by eight feet, with buildings several feet high. All the works show imaginary buildings, except one — a rendering of that unfinished concrete tower in Kinshasa, *Approche de l'échangeur de Limete Kin* (1981). Three feet high and made of paper and cardboard colored with paint, marker, or pencil, it is close in structure to the original, though gold-toned with pink, orange, and brown accents instead of the concrete gray, and with its spire off-kilter, looking distinctly (and one presumes, intentionally) wobbly. Later Kingelez invented structures with clear marked purposes — airports, stadiums, universities — and sometimes urgent relevance, such as *The Scientific Center of Hospitalisation the SIDA* (1991), an elaborate gingerbread-house hospital; that title appears verbatim on a label affixed as a canopy, using the French acronym for AIDS, a major concern in Congo at that time.

What he made of Mobutu is never clear. The M.P.R. acronym, for the ruling party, appears on a monument in *Place de la Ville* (1993), a model of a plaza with a rambling city hall–cum–conference center, a second building dominated by scalloped shapes, plus paper trees and statuary. A version of Mobutu's green-and-yellow Zaire flag flies atop the buildings, but incomplete, the central torch-bearing brown hand replaced by a ghostly white shape. Then there are two works titled after Kingelez's rural village. Reinvented in *Kimbembele Ihunga* (1994), the village becomes a space-age downtown with some fifteen buildings in assorted shapes — bulbs, wheels, fans, scallops, shafts — and a cacophony of decoration. One of three large, complex cityscapes in the show, the work includes a railway station with a sleek high-speed train ready to depart, as well as a "Kingelez Stadium." One can read the work as

aspirational and development-minded, but also a sideways comment on Mobutu's Gbadolite and similar artificial cities manufactured by autocrats.



"Kimbembele Ihunga" (detail) (1994) Maurice Aeschimann. Courtesy CAAC-The Pigozzi Collection

By then, the Mobutu regime was falling apart, the president sick and often out of the country, the government dysfunctional, and the Rwandan civil war spilling into the east of the country to spark a regional conflict that continues to mutate to this day. Mobutu fell in 1997, and died in exile in Morocco the same year. His successor, Laurent Kabila (father of the current president) promptly changed the country's name back to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Through it all, Kinshasa carried on in its usual resourceful way. Kingelez stayed, though he now traveled for exhibitions and European residencies. His spent the newfound means from purchases and commissions on imported art supplies, but also on Kinshasa real estate.

His work became more global in references, however. *U.N.* (1995) is a wild alternative design of a United Nations headquarters that looks like a demented fairground attraction. *Nippon Tower* (2005) and *Development Australian Bank* (2007) make geographical assertions in their title, and *Sports Internationaux* (1997), a tower of beer and soda cans crossed by an oval horizontal structure adorned with Lipton tea bags, is odd but clearly of global intent. (His proposal for replacement twin towers for New York City after the 9-11 attacks, with their third structure intended as a water-cooling system for putting out fires, is not in this show.) *Ville Fantôme* ("Ghost City") is peak Kingelez: With skyscrapers up to four feet tall amid a forest of lower-rise buildings in seemingly every possible shape, it looks like a demented mash-up, drizzled in colors, of Las Vegas, Dubai, and the capital of Wakanda in the film *Black Panther*. Adding to the overload of signifiers, some towers are marked "USA," and one cluster of buildings is labeled "Seoul." (This piece is also the subject of a three-minute virtual-reality experience at MoMA, in which you zoom amid the buildings, though this reviewer, deterred by the long line, skipped the opportunity.)

“Sports Internationaux” (1997) and “Nippon Tower” (2005) QAGOMA, Natasha Harth; Courtesy Aeroplastics Contemporary, Brussels. Vincent Everarts Photography Brussels

Kingelez was on a residency in Sète, a port on the French Mediterranean, in 2000, when he fell ill, resulting in his cancer diagnosis. He lived another fifteen years, but his output slowed. The cityscape *Ville de Sète 3009* (2000), made during that visit, contains some of the classic Kingelez motifs — scalloped triangle buildings, weird tubes, bulb or cone spire ornaments — but makes greater use of translucent materials that give the work airiness and new light. With diagonal lines sectioning curtain-walls (in the manner of I.M. Pei’s Bank of China building in Hong Kong), and a star-like grid of roads, it suggests a geometry at work, a vector field. It is the rare Kingelez work that feels squarely *futuristic*, and not just for its title. More often he seems to work in an alternative present, concerned with expanding the scope of possibility to address civic needs. And though his maquettes are not meant for literal implementation, the cascade of materials and style vernaculars involved in their making returns, inexorably, to the improvisational genius at work in Kinshasa and other African cities.

“Ville de Sète 3009” (2000) Courtesy Musée International des Arts Modestes (MIAM), Sète, France

“As I see it, he is more of a mental-mapping phenomenon, and his sculptures represent a dogged mining of the contemporary African psyche,” the British and Ghanaian architect David Adjaye writes of Kingelez in a catalog essay. “The power of his work comes from his ability to aggregate his observations in fantastical scenarios.” There is nothing stereotypically

traditional in Kingelez's maquettes — no village motifs like thatched huts, nor for that matter the slum vernacular of tin-roofed shacks. Instead he offers a kind of shadow history of African modernism as it might have been and could yet be, suffusing his work with the while tormented, romantic history of nationhood and belonging, from the independence era through globalization, with its promises and contradictions. The absences are striking as well. Kingelez never put human figures in his works. He never depicted housing. He only did cities. Perhaps that was just his obsession, but it reminds us that infrastructure, public facilities, the skyline, remain central to how a society narrates itself, its way of being. They are always improvable, and they are worth the fight.

The sheer color and invention gives the MoMA show a snack value that has earned it raves since it opened in early summer. The works live on white pedestals with rounded, irregular shapes, prepared by the German artist Carsten Höller; they are not encased in vitrines, so one feels proximity. But there are missed opportunities, too. A thirty-minute documentary about Kingelez, with ample interview footage, is shown near the elevators, in an area where noise is near-certain, making it impossible to hear. The catalog is truly excellent, its highlight a fluent and wide-ranging essay on Kingelez's life, art, and context by curator Sarah Suzuki, but little of that information makes it to the gallery. The risk is that Kingelez's work lands out of nowhere, and comes off like a brilliant curiosity.

Kingelez is at one end of the spectrum for African artists, in that his exposure owes primarily to Western curators and patrons. They include Magnin and the businessman Jean Pigozzi, whose famous private collection of African contemporary art, considered the world's largest, owns a good number of the works in this show. Kingelez didn't exhibit in Kinshasa, nor seek out Congolese collectors. To be clear, this was also by his choice: He was obdurate, grandiose, and didn't care for the company of other local artists. That's fine; it's who he was. But if MoMA, after looking away from Africa so long, is to play catch-up (for instance with the Brooklyn Museum, which has presented surveys of El Anatsui and Wangechi Mutu), the hope is that it will pick up the pace, broaden the range, and not limit the pleasure of deep engagement with the work to those who already know.

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moma.org
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