

2018

The Lubumbashi Biennial: Towards New Protagonisms

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Recommended Citation

GÉO, DANIELLA. "The Lubumbashi Biennial: Towards New Protagonisms." *Artl@s Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (2018): Article 8.

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The Lubumbashi Biennial: Towards New Protagonisms

Daniella Géo *

Abstract

This article provides first-hand commentary on the Lubumbashi Biennial (DR Congo), in particular its fourth edition in which the author formed part of the curatorial team. The text reflects on the role and relevance of this biennale, taking into account its specificities, context and modus operandi, as well as making brief parallels with other recurring art events in an attempt to situate the Congolese biennale within the histories of contemporary art biennales.

Résumé

Cet article offre un témoignage de première main sur la Biennale de Lubumbashi (République Démocratique du Congo), et en particulier de sa 4^{ème} édition, dans la mesure où l'auteur en a été l'une des commissaires. Le texte propose quelques réflexions sur le rôle et la pertinence de cette biennale, tenant en compte ses spécificités, de son contexte et de son mode de fonctionnement, tout en faisant de brefs parallèles avec d'autres événements artistiques récurrents et en inscrivant la biennale congolaise dans l'histoire plurielle des biennales d'art contemporain.

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It is no longer a revelation that hundreds of biennials are held in the most diverse regions and that new initiatives continue to emerge. However, the expression on the face of anyone who hears the Lubumbashi Biennial mentioned for the first time is one of surprise—despite it already spanning four editions.¹ The cause of such a reaction, at times accompanied by disdain or perplexity, at others by admiration, is not so much unfamiliarity with the city, which still enjoys little exposure on the international scene. What seems most surprising, even to professionals from the field of arts—being from Europe, the US, Asia or Latin America,² is that it is a biennial in the Democratic Republic of Congo. “Wow, the Congo has a biennial?”

Unfortunately, the image of the DRC is often associated to social afflictions, political fissures and precarious development. And that image of sterility does not, at first glance, seem to accommodate the idea of an art biennial. Above all when such a portrayal is considered as almost natural to sub-Saharan peoples, in a comfortable insistence on ignoring the colonial history and neo-colonial state-of-affairs of several countries like the DRC.

Undeniably, it is wonderful that, since 2008, a biennial has been held in truly adverse conditions.³ But why such astonishment? Seeing as several of the most recent biennials have taken place in scarcely-known locations with socioeconomic problems, such as those of Kochi-Muziris, India (2012), Tirana, Albania (2001), Biennale Regard Benin, in Cotonou, Benin (2010) and Project Biennial D-0 ARK Underground, in Konijc, Bosnia (2011).⁴ The Founder-Director of the International Biennial Association (IBA), art historian and curator Marieke van Hal, even considers that there are two broad types of biennial: those that are held

in places where the art infrastructure is well developed and those, as is the case of the Lubumbashi Biennial, where the basic infrastructure necessary for the advancement of contemporary art is lacking.⁵ It is precisely as a response to this gap or deficiency in a broader social setting, that many such artistic manifestations are initiated.

It is worth recalling that various periodic art events were created due to reasons that transcend the sphere of art, including one of the most celebrated, the Venice Biennial. The oldest of all the biennales was designed, most importantly, as a way of driving the then feeble state of the local economy up to the same level of other cities of northern Italy. The idea, therefore, was to combine tourist activities, engaging the potential of the canal-strewn city with art trips, following the success of the universal exhibitions of the 19th century—hence the model of national representations, effective to this day⁶ despite persistent criticism.⁷ Pertaining to the wave of biennialization of the 2000s and a more commensurable example in regards to the Lubumbashi Biennial is Echigo – Tsumari Triennial Niigata Prefecture, Japan, which was launched in 2000 to revitalize this rural region that has suffered from depopulation and ageing and, first and foremost, from a succession of environmental catastrophes that has hit the region.⁸ Political motivation has also been central to a number of cyclic art events. The best-known of such cases was the creation of documenta in Kassel in 1955 as an effort to respond to post-war trauma and reconcile Germany with the international modern world. The Biennale Grafike in Ljubljana, rooted in the country's political program of the time, is an example of an early proposal that strove to be

¹ This article was written shortly after the fourth edition with additional information included in 2017 and 2018. Currently, the biennale is already in its fifth edition, which ran from October 7th to November 12th 2017.

² A British director of an international arts organization with whom I attended the opening of both the São Paulo biennale and Rio de Janeiro's international art fair Art Rio in 2014 was amused by the reactions of fellow curators and artists from different continents every time I mentioned the Lubumbashi Biennial, so frequent were the bewildered looks she witnessed. Similar reactions were also common in Belgium, where I live.

³ DRC was placed 176th in the latest United Nations Human Development Index ranking (2015) of 187 countries. Further information at: hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/COD

⁴ Further information at <http://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/home/biennial-map/>

⁵ Marieke van Hal, “The relevance of the Biennial,” lecture, Strelka Institute, Moscow,

16/07/2013. Available at

<http://www.strelka.com/en/videos/event/2013/07/16/marieke-van-hal-sally-tallant-jara-bubnova-the-relevance-of-the-biennial>

⁶ Vittoria Martini, “A brief history of *I Giardini*: Or a brief history of the Venice Biennale seen from the Giardini”, Art & Education. Available at <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/a-brief-history-of-i-giardini-or-a-brief-history-of-the-venice-biennale-seen-from-the-giardini/>

⁷ There have been several critics of the national representation model, see for example Finkel Jori, *At the Venice Biennale, national artists know no boundaries*, Los Angeles Times, June 6th 2011, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/06/entertainment/la-et-venice-wrapup-20110606>

⁸ Marieke van Hal, *Rethinking the Biennial*. Master Thesis in Philosophy. Royal College of Art, London, 2010. Available at researchonline.rca.ac.uk/1350/1/VAN%20HAL%20Marieke%20Thesis.pdf

culturally liberated from dominant models by seeking a more horizontal approach and therefore represents an initiative to unlock other possible avenues for the history of biennials. At the height of the Cold War the event intended to promote Yugoslavia's non-alignment with either Imperialist polarities, as well as fostering a more democratic cultural exchange⁹ by presenting artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain in its inaugural edition in 1955. Soon afterwards, it widened its range of participants to include artists from South America, Africa, Asia, the former United Arab Republic, and Eastern and Western Europe. In Africa, the founding of the Johannesburg Biennale in 1995 was primarily driven by South Africa's then recent sociopolitical transformations. Okwui Enwezor, curator of its second edition, considers this biennial somewhat commemorative of the end of apartheid and a means to "signify to the rest of the world that the work of the imagination is a fundamental part of a society in transition, as it moves toward democracy and develops new concepts of global citizenship."¹⁰ Although it lasted only two editions, the Johannesburg Biennale remains an emblematic initiative that marked the beginning of the post-apartheid era.

In the case of the Lubumbashi Biennial, whose origins reside on neither political nor economic grounds, the reason for any surprise—and appreciation—should not be its very existence but the fact that it emerged, like few others,¹¹ from its own diminutive cultural scene rather than from public policies implemented by local or national governments, either as the result of private initiatives or fostered by art institutions, as is the norm. Founded by seven friends,¹² some of whom were already active in the cultural sector, such as writer Patrick Mudekerezwa and one of DRC's most

prominent artists of today, Sammy Baloji, the Lubumbashi Biennial carries as a mark of its roots the need and desire of the Congolese youth to produce, experience and share art.

Situated in the southern region of Haut-Katanga, with over 1.7 million inhabitants and an area of 747 km²,¹³ Lubumbashi is the country's second largest city, after the capital Kinshasa. It is the main mining region of the DRC, producing most of the country's copper and most of the world's cobalt.¹⁴ Art spaces are scarce in Lubumbashi, as are art education structures and, for most, the means to expand art practices. The Fine Arts Institute [Institut des Beaux Arts], situated in a grand modernist building and the only art school in the region, offers undergrad education that covers traditional media, such as painting, drawing and sculpture. The Lubumbashi University [Université de Lubumbashi] does not provide a bachelor's degree in art. Those who wish to further their studies in the field and are part of a small minority who can afford to relocate find themselves having to move almost a thousand miles away to Kinshasa. There, the Fine Art Academy offers two more years and has been investing, albeit still very timidly, in opening up to less conventional approaches. The French Institute Halle de l'Etoile and later the Centre d'Art Picha, the latter also founded by the Lubumbashi Biennial's members, were at the time of the fourth edition the only two spaces in the city which offer sporadic and mainly practical workshops on visual arts as well as opportunities to attend or present at cultural events in fields ranging from visual arts to literature, podium art to fashion. The Galerie d'Art contemporain, a small gallery situated in the state's archeological, entomological and ethnographic museum—the Musée National de Lubumbashi—was created in 2000 and has since been maintained

⁹ Anthony Gardner and Charles Green, "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global," *Third Text*, 27:4 (2013), 446-447.

¹⁰ Okwui Enwezor, "Mega-Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form," *MJ – Manifesta Journal*, no. 2 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004), 108-109.

¹¹ *Periferic* in Iasi, North-East Romania (1997), Luanda Triennial in Angola (2006-2007), Athens Biennale in Greece (2007), *Prospect New Orleans* in the US (2008) and Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India (2012) are other initiatives instigated by local artists for the most part, and also curators and an art critic. Van Hal, "The relevance of the Biennial" and *Rethinking the Biennial*, 20-21.

¹² Sammy Baloji, Aimé Kalenda, Trésor Makonga, Patrick Mudekerezwa, Alex Mulongo, Rosa Spaliviero and Rosemary Tshawila. The only non Congolese founder is the Senegalese-born Italian Spaliviero. Sammy Baloji, *Confirmation des noms des*

fondateurs de la biennale pour un article, e-mail message to the author, January 15th, 2016.

¹³ The estimated population of Lubumbashi as recorded in 2015. For socio-demographic and economic data, see <https://www.caidd.cd/index.php/domnees-par-villes/ville-de-lubumbashi?domaine=fiche>

¹⁴ D.R.C. has one of the world's richest mineral reserves with more than one thousand kinds of minerals and precious metals, including gold, diamond, manganese, high-grade copper and cobalt – the latter of which is an essential substance for technological products such as mobile phones and computers.

For more information on the mining sector, see <https://www.investindrc.cd/fr/> and <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Congo-Democratic-Republic-Mining-and-Minerals>

by the Rachel Forrest Foundation in collaboration with Asbl Dialogues that runs it. This gallery is the sole institution dedicated to continuously exhibiting the works of Congolese visual artists, most of whom are local academic painters and sculptors.



Figure 1. Lubumbashi Biennial member Rosemary Tshawila and undergrad fine arts students minutes before artist Mónica Nador's presentation on her oeuvre, Sept 2015, Institut des Beaux Arts, 4th Biennale de Lubumbashi.

By founding the Lubumbashi Biennial the youngsters strive to answer to the hiatus at the very base of the visual arts sector. The initiative re-imagines Lubumbashi and in each edition it boosts the reconstruction of its symbolic place. In this regard, the biennial as an act, as a political stance in relation to the world, is of great significance in itself. It represents the championing of a position and an action of transformative quality that reclaims the protagonism of their own (art) history.

And its importance is not limited to its generative potential. The Lubumbashi Biennial retrieves the primordial function of biennial-as-learning—about the other, about oneself, about the world, life, art, through the experience of art. In view of the extremely limited access that, on the one hand, artists and the general public have to that which is outside the region and, on the other, those from elsewhere have to local and national content, the biennale is presented as a privileged space of exchange.¹⁵ Art and the experience it provides are effectively demonstrated as the essence of this encounter, in refreshing contrast to the market-driven shackles of so many other biennials¹⁶ and the affectation that goes with it.

In such a dynamic, that which was fringe indeed becomes a new, albeit small, center. Despite the Lubumbashi Biennial's lack of documentation¹⁷ and publicity (one of its greatest—and recurrent—flaws), it has gradually been affecting the art system's geography. One of the few African biennials to be part of the IBA, the Lubumbashi Biennial has been attracting ever-increasing interest among art professionals from diverse countries. The 4th Biennale¹⁸ in particular has found resonance in academic events, such as the “Biennale Cultures in Africa” seminar¹⁹ held at Columbia University, New York, in which it was one of the main study topics, and the “Mediating Past, Present and Future: historical narratives and 20th/21st century art; Dialogues with Global South experiences” conference²⁰ on decolonization in regards to art, education and history in Southern

¹⁵ An example of an otherwise improbable encounter was that between Brazilian artist Mónica Nador, who is known for collectively made murals such as the one developed for the biennial with students of the Institut des Beaux Arts, and women from the nearby village of Makwacha that hand-paint motifs on the external walls of their houses with natural pigments. The experience affected Nador to the point that ever since she has been trying to carry out a collaboration with them. The importance of informal meetings favored by such events is observed by Gardner and Green. Gardner and Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global,” 13

¹⁶ One of the artists in the 4th Lubumbashi Biennial has praised how nice it was to participate in a biennial where fellow artists were not concerned with which gallery represented whom – having experienced the opposite situation while participating in a Moscow Biennial. Biennials, as exhibitions in major institutions, are known to suffer pressure from their funders and the art market. Art historian and sociologist Sarah Thornton even stated that “various art biennales served as covert art fairs” in her book on the mechanisms of different operators within the art world, from an auction house to an art school, an art fair to a biennial (Venice to be more specific). Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 170.

¹⁷ The lack of documentation in particular is a great loss for the history and memory of the Lubumbashi Biennial. To obtain just the basic information about the first experiences and how they were evolving, we from the curatorial team had to rely mostly on oral accounts of the previous editions, which often contained considerable discrepancies and several gaps. So far, only the second edition has published a

catalogue on the biennial, which was released in 2012. Simon Njami, ed., *Rencontres Picha* (Trézélan: Filigranes editions, 2012), 160. A single catalogue contemplating the 3rd, 4th and 5th edition is to be published in 2018. There are no proper websites still active on any of the biennials except the fifth, which contains a caption about the 4th and is partially operational for now. See www.biennaledelubumbashi.org. For more information on the 4th Biennale and in particular on how the artworks were received by local and international audiences, and insights from the artistic director, see respectively Z. S. Strother, “Meteoric Realities. The Fourth Biennale of Lubumbashi,” *Nka – Journal of Contemporary African Art*, n° 41 (Nov 2017), 176-187 and Z. S. Strother, “Toma Muteba Luntumbue in conversation with Z. S. Strother,” *Nka – Journal of Contemporary African Art*, n° 41 (Nov 2017), 166-175.

¹⁸ The 4th Biennale's participating artists were Charif Benhelima, Frances Bodomo, Bakary Diallo, Jonathas de Andrade, Alfredo Jaar, Jean Katambayi, Pecho Kamunga, Richard Kaumba, Kapwani Kiwanga, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Gulda El Magambo, Michèle Magema, Carole Maloba, Eddy Masumbuku, Mega Mingiedi, Adrien Missika, Vitshois Mwilambwe, Mónica Nador, No Olho da Rua, Henrique Oliveira, Els Opsomer, Georges Senga, Pathy Tshindele, Joëlle Tuerlinckx, Maarten Vanden Eynde, Sarah Vanagt, Costa Vece.

¹⁹ Further information at <http://www.ias.columbia.edu/event/biennale-cultures-in-africa>

²⁰ Further information at <https://dialoguesdusud.wordpress.com>

countries hosted by the Académie des Beaux Arts in Kinshasa and organized in collaboration with the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, the Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil, and the University of Antwerp, Belgium, besides being lectured about at art institutions in different countries.²¹

Internally, in similar vein to the Lyon Biennale,²² Lubumbashi promotes the decentralization of the art scene, still very much concentrated in the country's capital. This decentralization reverberates in initiatives that have followed the biennial, such as the creation of the Centre d'Art Picha in 2010.²³ This was replaced by the Waza and Hangar Picha²⁴ art centers after the Biennale membership was reorganized in 2015.²⁵

Besides the five weeks of the 4th Lubumbashi Biennial, its longest duration up to now,²⁶ three workshops were organized earlier in 2015. At two of them, Brazilian artists Henrique Oliveira and Mônica Nador, in July and in September, respectively, developed works in collaboration with local artists and/or art students. The ateliers, as they were called, represent more than an educational program,²⁷ as they resulted in works featured during the Biennale and are to remain in permanent exhibition at the Institut des Beaux Arts, one of the three institutions to compose the

parcours of the event, along with a number of public interventions.²⁸ The continuing presence of the pieces reinvigorates the ensuing relationships between the students, teachers and staff members with contemporary art practices as well as with the memory of the biennale. It also raises the profile of the students, who feel part of the city's main art initiative; an experience which could have a positive impact on their future. Furthermore, the artwork labels identify their corresponding artist and each and every one of their collaborators, including current students of the fine arts academy who take enormous pride in their collective accomplishment.

The collaborative aspect of these productions has echoed one of the specific features of the Lubumbashi Biennial's fourth edition, of which I can speak with more propriety: the character of a collectivized structure and method of functioning.

Unlike what some art professionals from the geopolitical North as well as South, uncongenially wanted to believe, this biennial does not embody a new form of colonialism, whereby its existence, not only artificial—as if improper to the local culture—would bend to an imported model from the North.

²¹ Belgium, Brazil and England.

²² By decision of the French Ministry of Culture, the Lyon Biennale was created to replace the Paris Biennale, as a means to promote the art scene outside the French capital.

²³ Advised by Simon Njami, artistic director of the 2nd Lubumbashi Biennial, the Centre d'Art Picha was created as the Picha Asbl's headquarter. Sammy Baloji, e-mail message to the author, January 15th, 2016. From then on the Picha Asbl association not only organized the biennale but also small-scale exhibition projects, workshops, art residencies and concerts, besides having a compact music studio. The Centre d'Art Picha offered activities in various fields, as mentioned before. It rapidly became a cultural hub and meeting point of youngsters.

²⁴ The Centre d'Art Waza is run by Patrick Mudekerezwa, while the Hangar Picha is associated with the Lubumbashi Biennale and its current members.

²⁵ Trésor Makonga and Patrick Mudekerezwa left the partnership in 2015. Later that year, Italian Lubumbashi-based Gabriele Salmi, who has been a relevant supporter of the organization joined the group. Despite the decentralization effect, the Lubumbashi Biennale has also inspired the creation of a biennial in Kinshasa, the Yango Biennale, the first edition of which took place in 2014 led by the late Kiripi Katembo, who had participated as an artist in the 2010 Lubumbashi Biennial. Since his death a second edition of Yango has not yet taken place.

²⁶ The three preceding editions were held for five to eight days (June 13th to 22nd 2008; October 13th to 17th 2010; October 2nd to 6th 2013), the third having also organized two workshops and two artist-residences throughout the year prior to the biennale. For information on the 2nd and 3rd Biennales see respectively Njami, ed., *Rencontres Picha*, and Mudekerezwa Patrick, "His query has continued to go around in my own head," *Contemporary And*, Oct 29th 2013.

²⁷ <http://www.contemporaryand.com/magazines/his-query-has-continued-to-go-around-in-my-own-head-3/> and Elvira Dyangani Ose, "Rencontres Picha Biennale de Lubumbashi 2012/2013," *Contemporary And*, <http://www.contemporaryand.com/exhibition/rencontres-picha-biennale-de-lubumbashi-2012-2013/>

The 4th Lubumbashi Biennial took place from October 9th to November 8th 2015 and also organized workshops earlier that year, as will be noted further, and a film program conceived in collaboration with Rosa Spaliviero. The free-entry film screenings took place a number of times in different venues, the first being followed by Q&A sessions with the artists at the French Institute Halle de l'Etoile. The duration is one of the major differences between the editions due to its impact on the dynamics of the biennale and especially on how the public relates to the event. Having extended the period of the biennial from less than a week to more than a month, the 4th Biennale had to ensure the continuation of its film program and maintenance of the exhibitions. The latter has proven to be a far-from simple task as some of the works on view had to be temporarily displaced so that occasional activities unrelated to the biennial could be housed. However, this did not seem to be a problem for the onlooking Congolese artists; what mattered most seemed to be the chance to accommodate it all. The five-week period stimulated an increase in visits to the national museum, for example, which was free of charge during the biennial. Some local artists were reported to have paid multiple visits and carefully examined each work presented. Also, regarding the 4th Biennale educational program, for the first time guided tours were offered by the museum to schools to present the biennale and the contemporary artworks that intervened in the archeological, entomological and ethnographic settings as well as in the outdoor areas of the museum. Another significant difference between the biennial's editions so far is the shift of focus since 2013 from photography, video art and cinema toward the plurality of contemporary art practices.

²⁷ Regarding the 4th Biennale educational program, see footnote 26. During the opening week, two round table debates in the presence of some of the participant artists, the curatorial team and members of the biennale were organized at the Institut des Beaux Arts and the Institut Français Halle de l'Etoile.

²⁸ The 4th Lubumbashi Biennale was held at the Musée national de Lubumbashi (for the first time occupying its entirety), the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the Institut Français, and included interventions at the Marché de la Ruashi craft market, and at Route Kipopo, Avenue du 30 Juin and Carrefour rondpoint carroussel streets.



Figure 2. "Paredes Pinturas à Lubumbashi," collective work by Mônica Nador and students of the Institut des Beaux Arts Ismael, Jamac, Anima, Joel, Salva, Gael, Jeremy, Philippe, Mamady, Ebula, De kain, 4e Biennale de Lubumbashi, Oct 2015.

The Lubumbashi Biennial is informed—it would be senseless if otherwise—not by one single model, but rather by diverse proposals from a number of countries. According to Sammy Baloji, it was firstly the Bamako Encounters [Rencontres de Bamako – Biennale Africaine de la Photographie] in Mali, co-organized since 1994 by the Ministry of Culture, Crafts and Tourism and the French Institute, that gave him the belief that an art biennial could be staged in his city. The French involvement has been central to this event but its pan-African exhibition and participation of African or African-descent curators has opened it up to other standpoints. Although the Lubumbashi Biennial addresses the globalized art world, it has never disregarded its own context and local sensibility.

²⁹ "Réalités Filantes" [Fleeting or meteoric realities] is the concept-title of the 4th edition of the Lubumbashi Biennale. Drawing on the thought of Martiniquais theorist Edouard Glissant, the biennale proposed a reflection on a reality in rapid and constant transformation, where everything seems disposable. For further information on the

In search of a format proper to the Biennial, Toma Muteba Luntumbue, artistic director and curator, and I considered the strength and pertinence of the artists or artworks selected, focusing on socio-politically-driven and progressive approaches, which adopted a critical stance on the historical and current external impingements, as well as on internal issues and the role played by the Congolese or other African societies. We also sought proposals based on collectivity, without losing sight of aesthetic and formal questions and bearing in mind the 4th Biennale's conceptual framework.²⁹ Our choices were made while attempting to incorporate local perspectives and transform limitations into beneficial aspects. We could say that the

conceptual basis of the biennial, see www.biennialfoundation.org/2015/10/4th-edition-of-the-rencontres-picha-lubumbashi-biennale/ and Z. S. Strother, "Toma Muteba Luntumbue in conversation with Z. S. Strother".

Lubumbashi Biennial is an anthropophagic³⁰ form and way of being and doing a biennial, insofar as the different experiences that nurture it are filtered and reformulated by the local culture and *modos operandi*, to the point of, at times, subverting any planning.



Figure 3. Mega Mingiedi, *Lelo Awa*, 2010-2015. Installation (detail), Musée National de Lubumbashi, 4e Biennale de Lubumbashi, Oct 2015.

It must be mentioned that the “cannibalism” enacted by the 4th Biennale made use of a more horizontal spectrum of sources than the 1928 manifesto from which I draw the expression. While the foreign references considered, processed and reformulated according to national perspectives by the Brazilian modernists were mainly European, and Afro-Brazilian culture was not truly taken into account,³¹ the biennial pays particular attention to its African counterparts particularly as regards the

strengthening of African identity³²—a trait advanced by Dak’Art—Biennale de l’art contemporain africain, in Senegal, as the first Sub-Saharan biennale.³³

The interest in similar or at least closer sociopolitical experiences and cultural practices is not simply a matter of practicality or viability. It is the wish to achieve autonomy both from the prevailing large-scale economic models of biennials that, despite remaining prominent, are seemingly in constant crisis (from their format to their artistic relevance, from their conceptual coherence to their financial management), and from the cultural impositions and historical dominance of the North. And, more importantly, it is the desire to create a platform that not only understands and praises their local, national and regional identities but also embraces them as *the* perspective through which their place within a globalized art world is to be constructed. In this sense, the Lubumbashi Biennial is inscribed in the group of biennales of the geopolitical South that have converted their place “into the resistant image of cultural, art historical and international reconstruction” observed by Anthony Gardner and Charles Green.³⁴

Although the Lubumbashi Biennial’s guest artistic directors were from or had a background in Africa, and the selection of artists accentuates Congolese and African participants,³⁵ the category of regionally-oriented biennials is not quite appropriate. Or, it would be as appropriate as if it

³⁰ The notion of anthropophagy here draws on Oswald de Andrade’s Anthropophagus Manifesto (or Cannibalist Manifesto), which proposed the rethinking of Brazilian culture by considering the variety of influences, highlighting national perspectives and the reconfiguration of foreign models. The idea of biennale-as-learning instead of as education also reflects on this anthropophagic context, since it encompasses a rather horizontal exchange of experience and knowledge. The word learning relates to the processing of new findings, and therefore emphasizes the learner as someone who thinks, reasons something out, who is a protagonist in the exchange process. Whereas education is more problematic for comprising different systems, including the traditional one based on hierarchy, the educator’s protagonism and the transfer of content from those who know to those who do not. The relations between most biennial participants and collaborators, including during the workshops given by invited artists to local artists and art students, were mainly dialogical. This characteristic is due not only to the curatorial team’s consideration of local context but also, and to a great extent, to everyone’s backgrounds being so diverse and the prevalence of this anthropophagic behavior. For further information on Andrade’s anthropophagic concept and on the dialogical education system witness: Oswald de Andrade, “Manifesto Antropófago,” *Revista de Antropofagia* (São Paulo, May 1928), n° 1, 3, 7, and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1968), trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

³¹ Sara Roffino, “Is Brazil’s Most Famous Art Movement Built on Racial Inequality? A New Generation Argues ‘Yes’,” *Artnet news*, March 13 2018. Available at <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/tarsila-part-ii-1238654>

³² It has not been an unconscious decision or due to disinterest of curators from Europe or elsewhere that all the artistic directors invited to lead the different editions

of the biennial up to now have been African or of African descent. From the first to the fourth biennial, its artistic direction has been fronted respectively by Baloji & Mudekera, Simon Njami (Swiss-born to Cameroonian parents), Elvira Dyangani Ose (Spanish with Equatorial Guinea origins), and Muteba Luntumbue (Congolese and based in Belgium), who is also directing the fifth edition.

³³ Margareta Wallin Victorin states that Dak’Art would be a worthy addition to Gardner and Green’s list of biennales that move away from the perspectives and demands of the geopolitical North. Founded in 1992, it was the first to be held in the Sub-Saharan region and has since attempted to strengthen African identity. Since its second edition, Dak’Art has only exhibited works by African artists or its diaspora. This biennial has been fomented by public policies and investments since its debut and according to Victorin, the Senegalese government aimed at creating a particular identity for Dak’Art that differed from other biennales as well as intending to invigorate aesthetic discourse and theoretical analysis within Africa. Margareta Wallin Victorin, “Dak’Art, the Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary African Art in Dakar,” *Third Text*, 28:6 (2014), 563-565. The Lubumbashi Biennial does not follow the Senegalese biennial’s Pan-African perspective but rather a more global attitude with an emphasis on Africa. In a way, the Lubumbashi Biennial reflects the type of internationalism that ends up being promoted by the combination of Dak’Art, held at the Musée Monod d’Art Africain, and the so-called Off-exhibitions, which take place throughout the city and feature artists from Africa and other regions.

³⁴ Gardner and Green, “Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global,” 455

³⁵ About half of the artists in the 4th Biennale were Congolese or African.

were applied to European or North American biennials, which in general have historically followed the same line of conduct. The African emphasis is not a matter of politics of neighborhood, it pertains rather to the biennial's prism, to establishing its own outlook. The lens through which the Lubumbashi Biennial is conceptualized and conducted is African, Congolese in particular (just as the perspective of a biennial from Europe is European) without dismissing a global history of biennials, as mentioned before—even if that means rejecting that which is not suitable. In its modest scale, the biennial proposes an inclusive internationalism, involving contributors from Africa and from outside the region³⁶—despite the latter often forming a minority—thus favoring a transcultural exchange based on more horizontal relations.

The work developed in the weeks leading up to the event was, to a certain extent, carried out in a communal manner and according to the principles of shared economy. In this framework, the completion of certain stages of work does not necessarily require the acquisition of goods and products, but merely what they offer us. Possession is replaced by usage (or enjoyment). We do not need to own an electric drill, to give a factual example, only the holes in the walls for hanging up pictures. Therefore, in addition to financial support by western agencies, a few local actors and discounts on local services, certain partnerships arose in the form of loans or exchanges. It may seem rather impractical or unproductive by western logic and indeed it is not as fluid as having everything you need to hand. However, it has worked and responds to the codes of a social system that is not (through economic alienation, or its cultural tradition) based on consumption and which offers no shelter to the concepts of excess

³⁶ Not all the biennial curators are from Africa or of African descent. Solange Farkas, who is Brazilian like me, and German Jürgen Bock were both curators in the third edition. Farkas contributed with "How can I perceive a landscape", a projection of videos selected from Videobrasil's archive that reflected on landscape, and Bock curated Mozambique-born Ângela Ferreira's installation and performance "Entrer dans la mine."

See: site.videobrasil.org.br/news/1705451 and <http://www.buala.org/pt/vou-la-visitatar/entrer-dans-la-mine-angela-ferreira-bienal-de-lubumbashi>. As for myself, I shared the curatorship with Muteba Luntumbue, having participated and discussed the whole process of the biennale within the conceptual framework proposed by him as artistic director. The number of artists that are not from African countries or of

and waste, but rather to those of recuperation and re-signification. Gardner's and Green's proposition of Southern biennials as socialist or socialist inspired endeavors, in diametrical opposition to "biennials as a neoliberal symptom" in the North,³⁷ perfectly encompasses the Lubumbashi biennial scenario.

At the same time, young artists engaged, often spontaneously, in the final process of the Biennale, attended almost on a daily basis, regardless of any pre-arranged task. Besides the opportunity of continuous exchanges, to meet and be met by fellow art professionals and to earn some money,³⁸ what seemed to be their driving force was the desire to be involved in the workings of the biennale, of helping it to materialize and living it fully.

This investment, at once individual and communal, engenders a highly intense and different dynamic, I suppose, to the majority of other biennials, with the possible exception of those held in locations devoid of basic infrastructure or where it is incipient. In this respect, a lack of professionalization among the different roles required for any major art event, which range from producer to assemblers and press officers, to name but a few, is also a relevant factor. How to operate in such a manner is not obvious and, in this case, meant that individuals were each required to fulfill multiple tasks, myself and Toma Muteba Luntumbue included. But, it reinforces the perception of how transformative the potential is—for us all; of how much true commitment it involves; of how necessary it is for contributors and viewers alike to deal with potentialities of the real and the imaginary, for it to be a space of freedom and conviviality.

African descent varies from edition to edition. They represented about half of the participants of the 4th Biennale, in earlier editions there had been a smaller number.

³⁷ Gardner and Green, "Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global," 455

³⁸ According to the latest African Development Bank's census on DRC's employment rates from 2012, about 80% of the active population are engaged in the informal sector and the unemployment rate is 73%. One cannot ignore that the biennale also represented a relevant opportunity to earn some money, although its moderate budget had not offered real guarantees. For further information on the 2012 census, see:

<https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Congo-Democratic-Republic-Full-PDF>



Figure 4. Build up of Vitshois Mwilambwe's video-painting installation, Galerie d'Art contemporain, Musée National de Lubumbashi, 4e Biennale de Lubumbashi, Oct 2015.

Added to the budget constraints for our fourth edition, the limited variety of material available for the production of several works made on site and inconsistent or over-optimistic information demanded from the artists (especially those to whom the setting was new) and organizers a strong capacity to promptly find new solutions and strategies. Several of the projects proposed by the artists were transformed into a work that was different to that originally imagined. We all needed to adopt a more open, flexible and resourceful attitude with no place for pre-supposed hierarchies. It was necessary to continually adapt and readapt, since, as I tend to say, the reality of the

biennial itself is pervaded by “réalités filantes” (fleeting realities, the conceptual framework of this edition),³⁹ of which, with each passing day, I discovered new aspects. Overall, none of it meant a loss in quality. For some artists, the context afforded an even greater chance to experiment than that which is already typical of biannual platforms. This was reinforced by the non-existent market pressure. Here, it is important to stress that while the resources were too scant from a biennale's perspective, for some of the Congolese artists the event represented a means to expand their practice by enjoying access to more materials and/or assistants than usual.⁴⁰

³⁹ See footnote 31.

⁴⁰ Congolese artists felt respected and valued, also due to the opportunity the biennial presented for their works to occupy significant spaces on its circuit, as expressed by

Vitshois Mwilambwe during the “Mediating Past, Present and Future” conference debates in Kinshasa.

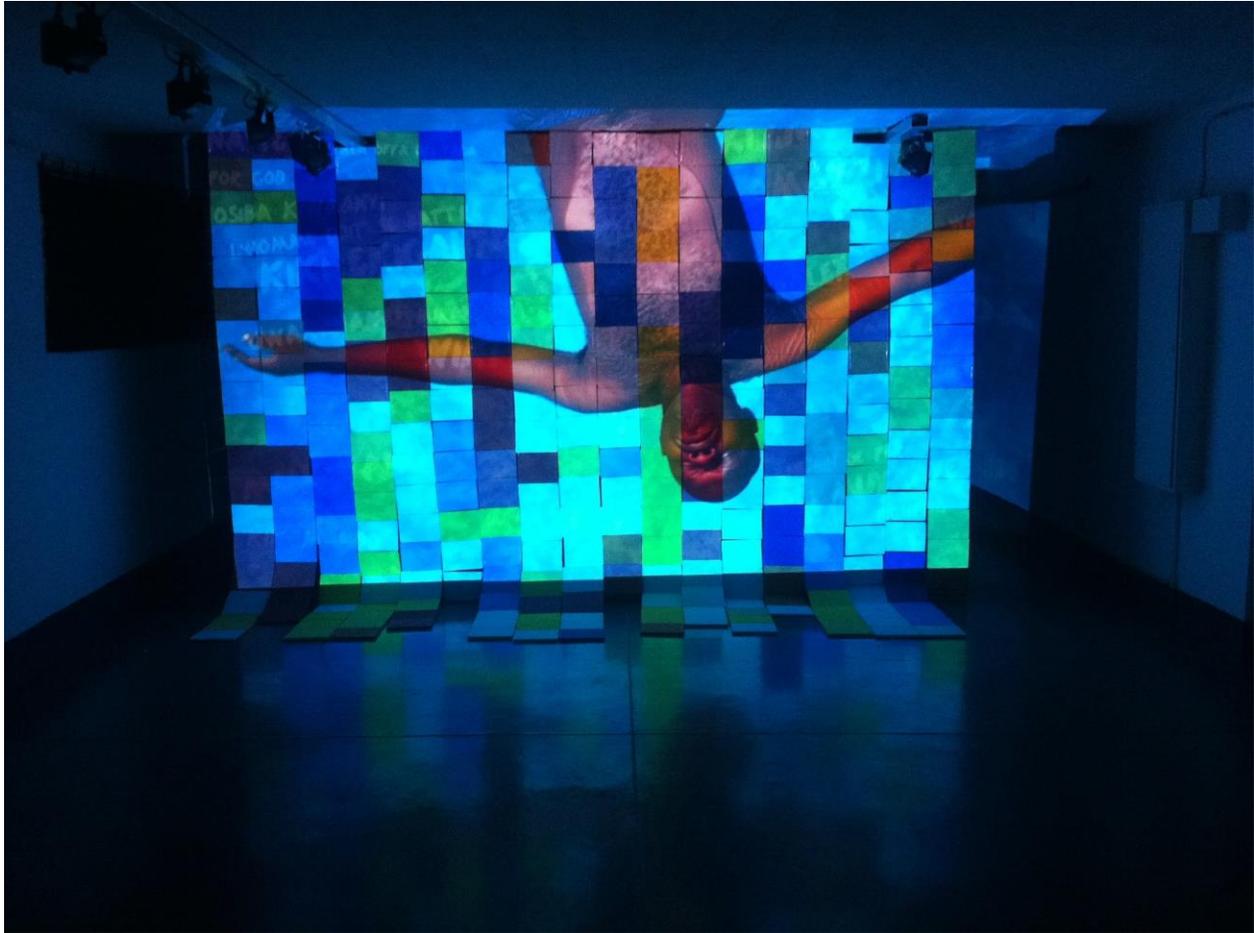


Figure 5. Vitshois Mwilambwe, "Day by day let me dream my future", 2014, video-painting installation, Galerie d'Art contemporain, Musée National de Lubumbashi, 4e Biennale de Lubumbashi, Oct 2015.

Bearing in mind the discrepancies as well as the negotiations, it would be no exaggeration to say that the 4^e Biennale de Lubumbashi made us all focus on what approaches us and should be the essence of any biennial, that is art and its potential to transcend realities and yet still to reflect on them.

The surprise engendered by the existence and continuous development of the Lubumbashi Biennial might be because of the fact that it presents Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo as a place of ideation, creation, construction and attainment, a place of congenial quality. Prejudice and preconceived ideas are powerful blinders.

Or could it be that the art professional who was perplexed upon hearing about the 4^e Biennale de Lubumbashi for the first time was not aware of the history of biennales, which have often emerged from adverse situations, Venice included, and in regions with insufficient socio and/or cultural infrastructure? The Lubumbashi Biennial is not only inscribed in this history as it also bolsters the not-so-new history of biennials that aim to build new protagonisms, social roles and perspectives for the present and the future, beyond the temporary utopia of the art event.



Figure 6. Primary school students entering Joëlle Tuerlinckx's NIGHT Cabine-Show "Palais des Glaces". The sculpture gained a new configuration due to lack of proper material, and the performance that composes the work was beautifully subverted by both the local musician-performers invited by the artist and attendees of the 4th Lubumbashi Biennial's opening. The artist was quite happy with the outcome and prepares a sound piece unfolding from the performance. Musée National de Lubumbashi, 4e Biennale de Lubumbashi, Oct 2015.