

The Kinshasa-based Kin ArtStudio in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Visual Arts Spaces and the Potential to Challenge Global Art's Representative and Legitimizing Mechanisms.

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Abstract

The emergence of visual art spaces over the past few decades on the African continent invites art practitioners, historians and critics to re-examine the conditions of production, diffusion and reception of contemporary art of Africa. In this thesis I critically engage with these conditions in relation to artworks and practices of the Democratic Republic of Congo, considering the curatorial logic that has governed the 'global art world'. I focus on the *Kin ArtStudio* as my main case study. I undertook research within this art space in 2016, from the 10th of April to the 15th of June, and again from the 16th of July to the 12th of September. My position as a participant observer turned out to be as engaging as informative.

The *Kin ArtStudio* is a Kinshasa-based visual art platform founded in 2011 by the Congolese artist Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo. It was established out of the will to empower emerging artists in that specific context, and facilitate the negotiation that the legitimization of their creations entails in today's global art and cultural dynamics.

In order to evaluate the stakes of such negotiation, I start with reviewing the existing mechanisms, trends and networks that have legitimized visual art productions of the Democratic Republic of Congo on a global stage, as exemplified by the *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* exhibition (2015). Then, my enquiry evolves towards specificity, towards the immediacy and the subjectivity that characterize Kinshasa's urban and socio-cultural context, and visual art practices therein. Subjectivity also applies to my four months immersive experience with that art space.

Drawing from my observations, setbacks, hopes and recent academic and practical debates around contemporary art practices on the African continent, the role those art spaces can play in the curatorship, circulation, reception and commodification of contemporary art productions cannot be underestimated. While operating in lasting postcolonial settings, they are going through the negotiation of their global and translocal situatedness, which can in turn lead to new legitimizing narratives. These will more appropriately inform understandings of contemporary art practices of Africa, challenging the identifying prism sustained by the 'global art world'.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Aristote Mago, Serge Diakota, Fransix Tenda, Nkembo Moswala, Gosette Lubondo, Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga, Papa José, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Noah Bleibel and Grâce Kalima.

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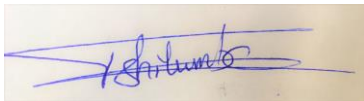
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Declaration of originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Arts at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'S. Shamba', written over a horizontal line.

Date: 27 March 2019

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List of Acronyms

ABA – *Académie des Beaux-Arts* (Kinshasa) – School or Academy of Fine Arts

DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo

ESAD – *Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs* (Strasbourg) – Graduate School of Decorative Arts

KAS – *Kin ArtStudio*

MACM – *Musée d'Art Contemporain et Multimédias* – Museum of Contemporary Art and Multimedia

YBAs – Young British Artists

YC – Young Congo

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Introduction

In social architecture, art and self-organized art spaces can have the capacity to become subversive micro-narratives that fuel oppositional movements (*Fischer* 2015: 96).

1. A Case Study: The Kin ArtStudio

In 2013, I met Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo whom I had contacted prior to a couple of months stay in Kinshasa. He introduced me to his project the *Kin ArtStudio* (*Kin* stands for *Kinshasa*), which is a physical platform for the support, promotion and appreciation of contemporary visual art practices in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo is a Congolese visual artist who founded the platform in 2011. At the time of our first meeting, the *Kin ArtStudio* was in its early (development) stage. Three years later, and as part of my research, I spent approximately four months engaging with the *Kin ArtStudio*, its activities and artists, closely relating to and working with this art space. At the time, these artists were Serge Diakota, Fransix Tenda, Nkembo Moswala, Aristote Mago, Gosette Lubondo, Alexandre Kyungu, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and Eddy Kamuanga to a lesser extent. The choice of the *Kin ArtStudio* as a main case study is not trivial or partisan. It carries prospects of alternative narratives of contemporary visual art of the DRC. The relevance of emerging visual art spaces on the continent is the subject of Chapter Three. Furthermore, my research extends to representations and discourses vested in Western art institutions and in the curatorial logic that emerged in the late twentieth century displaying an art of ‘the periphery’. These representations and discourses have been supported notably through large-scale exhibitions, and have claimed at times to frame the visual art of the Congo. The present study considers the establishment and the values of the *Kin ArtStudio* against the backdrop of these curatorial practices, as exemplified by the exhibitions *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) and, more recently, *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* (2015). The latter, although substantial, well thought out and celebratory in nature, revives the debate about the global cultural relevance of curatorial initiatives – mostly taking place in Western institutions – that seek to offer a window on the art from the Congo and on local contemporary art practices. The *Kin ArtStudio*’s emphasis on critical engagement, local relevance and global disposition is a reaction to a lasting postcolonial cultural state of

affairs, to which I shall regularly return. It is precisely this engagement that drew me into this platform, and that found an echo in my questions around representations of Congolese visual art.

The *Kin ArtStudio* is located and operates in Kinshasa, yet is internationally oriented in its practices and objectives. In order to outline these and introduce the platform, I shall borrow Berit Fischer's summary format in mapping out new spaces for negotiating art and histories from around the world (Fischer 2015: 93-112). She uses this format in her exemplary selection of such spaces in an essay entitled 'Thoughts on Mapping Decentralized Knowledge Production: The Plurality of Imagined Worlds'. This format is useful as far as it concisely presents the platform. The following description is based on my own informed interpretation of what the *Kin ArtStudio* stands for. The thesis' argument will progressively unfold outside the aforementioned theoretical framework, although correlating to it.

THE KIN ARTSTUDIO

Kinshasa, The Democratic Republic of Congo

Founded in 2011 by the artist Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, the *Kin ArtStudio* is a non-profit art space and initiative that encourages creation, experimentation, innovation and dialogue in the field of visual arts. It supports artistic development and seeks to strengthen young Congolese artists' capacities, and to professionalize the practice. The *Kin ArtStudio* responds to the absence of a strong local network and state interventions for the support, promotion, diffusion and commodification of contemporary visual art. It is a documentation, production and exhibition platform that has formative, promotional/diffusing and socio-cultural purposes. The platform acts as a guide for emerging visual artists and accompanies some of them in the early stages of their artistic journey. It also sets up projects and organizes art interventions in the immediate environment of Kinshasa. The studio is multidisciplinary, mainly engaging with painting, installation(s), photography and mixed media without restricting itself to these disciplines. It strives to remain faithful to its objectives and to foster collective and individual agency while functioning in a complicated and coexistent set of cultural dynamics, actors and discourses.

Core objectives:

- Empower local emerging visual artists

- Promote intercultural and international artistic exchanges, with an emphasis on integrity, respect and horizontality
- Foster critical thinking, experimentation and innovation within the field at a local level
- Contribute to the creation of a local and sustainable environment for the prosperity of visual arts and the professionalization of the practice – strive for local, popular and urban relevance
- Shift the centre of contemporary art discourse(s), and cultivate/negotiate creative and cultural agency
- Diffuse local productions, establishing new audiences and markets, and access international markets

Core formats:

- Supportive open platform for dialogue, exchange and learning about contemporary visual art (Fig. 1)
- Short- and long-term residency programmes
- Capacity building workshops: *Master Art*
- Public exhibitions and art interventions: *Mobile Art Gallery, Young Congo*
- Network
- Non-formal education for self-trained and graduated independent artists



Figure 1. (Léonard Pongo 2016) captures an open discussion on *Lusanga International Research for Art and Economic Inequality* (LIRCAEI) with Els Roelandt & J. A. Koster at the *Kin ArtStudio*.

Open art spaces on the African continent present relational qualities that are contingent to social immediacy and local configurations, yet are able to trigger a communal impulse for change and renewal. In Figure 1, Els Roelandt and Jaap Koster had just returned from the *Lusanga International Research for Art and Economic Inequality* (LIRCAEI), a space dedicated to research on global economic inequality through rethinking art practice located on a former Unilever plantation in the Bandundu Province. Their engagement with that space resulted in the publication of *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise* (CATPC) – i.e. *Congolese Plantation Workers Art League* (2017)¹. Although the KAS is not actively taking part to the LIRCAEI, that discussion was the occasion to openly discuss the relevance of that project, the plantation workers' understanding of their position within it, and the actual beneficiaries of that initiative. Although operating in different social environments, with different agendas and means, LIRCAEI and KAS both believe in a necessary shift of perception and global legitimization of art productions.

The *Kin ArtStudio* and similar initiatives resist defining fixation, and allow multiple translocal readings. From the outset, the project aligned to the networking, decentralizing and empowering vision of initiatives such as Arts Collaboratory² or The Triangle Network³, both networks of art organizations from around the world that support cultural exchange, art practices as vector of change and social engagement, and the professionalization of these practices. A former resident at the *Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunst* in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo joined his project to the RAIN⁴ network, a group of visual artists' initiatives from countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, set up by artists who were formerly associated with the Dutch school. The *Kin ArtStudio* has always been aware of the imperative to envision new forms of

¹ Barois De Caebel, E. & Roelandt, E. (eds.). 2017. CATPC : Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise / Congolese Plantation Workers Art League. Berlin : Sternberg Press.

² Arts Collaboratory is a translocal network consisting of over 23 diverse organizations across the globe focused on art practices, processes of social change, and working with broader communities beyond the field of art. As an ecosystem it is a process of collective study and practice on self-sustainability, self-determination and interdependence through radical imagination. Each organization in Arts Collaboratory is deeply engaged in its local context, working with various communities in the field of art as well as in the broader social and public realm. <http://www.artscollaboratory.org/about/>

³ Triangle Network is a global network of artists and visual arts organisations that support professional development and cultural exchange amongst artists, curators and other arts professionals throughout the world. Each Triangle Network partner is independent and develops activities that respond directly to the local needs and aspirations of artists and their audiences. Rather than being an homogenous structure, Triangle represents an 'ecosystem' where partners identify with the Network's focus on establishing diverse spaces and conditions for emerging artists and other arts professionals to learn from each other through dialogue and process-led activities. <https://www.trianglenetwork.org/triangle-network/about/>

⁴<http://www.r-a-i-n.net/info/>

internationalism in contemporary visual art that move away from a North–South reductive approach. It was built up following the bitter realization that only a few Congolese visual artists are present at an international level, and that the discourses around local visual art practices were created from a postcolonial posture that does not do justice to local creativity, creations and artists. It is this ‘translocal situatedness’, from which the studio wants to take forward its visions and agenda, that makes it an interesting case study.

Nevertheless, from the moment I was introduced to the platform and its local situation, it was evident that shaking up the postcolonial cultural status quo that governs the legitimization and circulation of local art productions would require much conviction, determination and tenacity. Here I am referring to the notion of legitimization in regard to contemporary art practices for the first time and will use the term several times and in several iterations throughout the present thesis. A dictionary entry of the term legitimization returns: “to make legitimate”. Following the same dictionary, legitimate means: “in accordance with established rules, principles, or standards”⁵. Then, from a strictly linguistic perspective, we can understand the process of legitimization as making in accordance with established rules, principles, or standards. Further, I refer to processes of legitimization in given contexts or cultural settings. Although a concept with legal connotations, legitimization rests on an array of accepted and subjective criteria, rules, principles, or standards that depend on the cultural framework or ideology in which it takes place. The act of legitimization inevitably entails the faculty of discerning or appreciating. Hence, when referring to instances of legitimization, I shall be specific about the conditions in which they occur; who or what legitimates? And, what does it mean or what function does it have in the broader argument?

In order to take the measure of this requirement, local engagement is necessary. Undertaking visual art projects while accommodating the realities of the local context is demanding. The second chapter will address these realities without falling into a rhetoric of complaint. The cultural and artistic ethic that is advanced by concepts such as translocal situatedness, collective and individual agency, or self-representation appears as an ideal when juxtaposed with Kinshasa’s practical realities and contingencies. Hence, it is necessary to situate these art spaces’ initiatives and activities in the *intervals* that constitute local contemporary cultural experiences characterized by postcolonialism. It is,

⁵ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/legitimate>

then, crucial to understand and delineate those terms in relation to specific contexts and localities and not homogenize them, thereby running the risk of forcing theory on to the DRC and Kinshasa in this case, and on to African multiple localities, contexts or specificities at large.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical backbone of this research and inquiry relies on postcolonial cultural studies (Hall 1997) and their application to African contemporary art practices (Oguibe 2004; Mosquera 1994; Kasfir 1999; Hassan 1999; Oguibe & Enwezor 1999). Mainly resting on postcolonial studies in order to develop on the problematic implications of representation, discourse production and geopolitical cultural relations, I also acknowledge critically the field as a trendy and influent paradigm for international curatorial practices. Discourse production relying on postcolonial theories have somewhat sustained curatorial practices displaying visual art of the African continent to commodifying ends (Huggan 2001; Ogbachie 2010). In the present thesis, postcolonial refers to a problematic cultural state of affairs that is hardly negotiated by art initiatives and artists from southern contexts.

When referring to contemporary art practices, the denomination *contemporary* frames practices that emerged in the late 1980s and intensified post-1989, as a response to a new global order that announced what some have termed the 'curatorial turn' (O'Neill 2007). Visual art practices entered a global realm in which cultural and critical discourses became increasingly constitutive of these practices. These discourses, embedded in postcolonialism and its cultural dynamics, have come to define what is contemporary in 'African art'. 'The curatorial' is then the regulative sphere of those discourses that has found its nest in the West. The present thesis does not conform to this cultural logic, and seeks to subdue it by ascribing to *contemporary* the critical and contextualizing gestures that visual art practices employ in their 'here and now' - ref. to the term *contemporaneity* (Enwezor, Condee & Smith 2009). Throughout this thesis, I will engage with the grey areas between (unjustified) oppositional propositions such as modern/contemporary, global/local, product/process, market-oriented/social activism or fine art/craft.

To complement this theoretical underpinning, alternative urban studies in relation to the city of Kinshasa (De Boeck & Baloji 2016; De Boeck & Plissart 2005/2014; Malaquais 2011) will contribute to my perception of the Democratic Republic of Congo's capital city, and the 'here and now' that is constitutive of visual art practices in that context. Filip De

Boeck has developed a reading of Kinshasa that articulates around notions of urban acupuncture, co-presence(s) and communal possibilities. In addition to my own engagement with the *Kin ArtStudio* in Kinshasa, this body of textual, visual and poetic work(s) around the city of Kinshasa provides key conceptual and methodological insights for grasping and interpreting the third-largest metropolis on the continent. Finally, and quite relevantly, recent debates, research and discussions about ‘independent’, artist-run or open art spaces on the continent will tighten up the investigative approaches of my inquiry, allowing me to discuss the *Kin ArtStudio*’s relevance in relation to dominant representations and discourses of the art of the Congo, the internationalism that it advocates, and the local situatedness of contemporary visual art practices.

3. Statement of the Problem

Congolese initiatives, avant-garde movements and art historians seem to have difficulty achieving international recognition. On the other hand, initiatives promoted from outside triumph every time. In some cases, the key probably lies in the frustrating feeling that such initiatives, for different reasons, are generating international appreciation because of ‘primitivist exoticism’ and what is seen as ‘unbridled eccentricity’ (Middernacht 2016).

The present thesis offers a reading of this art space with the firm belief that the appreciation of and the consideration for contemporary art productions and practices of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and of the continent at large, need to change. The ‘global’ art world is the validating epicentre of worldwide visual art creations, acting as an authoritarian superstructure. However, the quotation marks around the term ‘global’ indicate a significant problem. Throughout this thesis, I will use this term in various iterations. When used with quotation marks, it denotes the West’s hold on worldwide cultural and artistic dynamics as it has manifested since the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 and the curatorial turn, which I will develop in the first chapter. In contrast, when used without quotation marks, it relates to the international, borderless, cross-influential quality of the term in relation to contemporary visual art practices. The contemporary art world and the institutions that compose it, namely, museums, galleries, art foundations, centres, collections, fairs, biennales and auction houses, are increasingly setting their sights on African continental visual art productions. Contemporary African visual art turns out to be a speculative body of artworks whose value often relies on arbitrary appreciation. The system through which art that exists beyond the West (problematically referred from the West as ‘non-Western’) acquires cultural value and

significance is a fraud in many regards. The exoticizing and othering gaze that prevailed in exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York curated by William Rubin, has mutated in the age of ‘the curatorial’. Curatorial essays reviewing the art of the so-called periphery have often claimed to attempt to counter or rectify patronizing, undermining and colonial attitudes towards ‘African art’. This was the lead-in to the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition held in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Despite noble intentions, this exhibition, introducing a sort of redeeming representative and discursive curatorial trend that I shall discuss in the first chapter, has maintained power relations within the field of contemporary visual art. It brought relatively known artists to international recognition and acclaim, and popularized given local art practices under the trope of authenticity, ultimately acting as a gatekeeper of an emerging ‘global’ art world. Needless to say, it necessarily raised issues of representation, cultural agency and global relevance that I shall address throughout this thesis.

4. Thesis Layout & Research Question

I conceive of the *Kin ArtStudio* as a site, a hub or a platform that is able to address these issues, and potentially to be an incubator for alternative strategies and methodologies to promote and diffuse local contemporary art practices. This potential points to the question that has guided my research. Before stating it, I shall draw attention to the thread of the present argument. Adopting a contextual analytical approach, I start by reviewing mainstream and predominant discourses that have framed art from the Congo – better expressed as *of the Congo* – on the ‘global’ art stage since 1989. This non-exhaustive analysis that is framed from my particular perspective constitutes the first chapter of this thesis. Based on the view that the curatorial propositions I address in that chapter are too often generalizing or serving market-driven or valuing interests, I turn to Kinshasa, and to its visual art scene including the *Kin ArtStudio*, in order to inform my research on local visual art practices from a direct perspective⁶. Hence, starting with prevailing and common assumptions, I zoom into the particularities that define Kinshasa’s locality. In the second chapter I elaborate on the local embeddedness of contemporary art practices and on how they strive to exist, taking into consideration surrounding realities, contingencies and cultural dynamics. Finally, I have chosen the *Kin ArtStudio* as my central case study,

⁶ Perspective informed by an immersive and hands-on experience.

guiding my research and reflection, and proving to be a concrete and pragmatic intervention in regard to the debate I have outlined in this introduction. Insights, reflections and anecdotes that have ensued from my experience will punctuate the following text: more than just being an academic piece whose purpose is solely archival, my research aims at telling a story, and sharing it, in order to infuse the present debate with a sort of pragmatism. The 'global' art world can seem quite removed from the many artistic practices and contexts it pretends to include, and it is essential to look at such pragmatism and practical interventions as a source of knowledge. The third and last chapter will ponder on the relevance of recently established art spaces on the continent in relation to emerging artists, artistic autonomy and cultural agency. Thus, at the core of my research lies the following question: how are local art spaces able to challenge the postcolonial cultural logic that has dominated and regulated representations of contemporary visual art produced in DRC or by Congolese artists since 1989?

5. Methodology and Outline of Main Concepts

Who really cares about the sweat and tears, meat and grit of context when one is removed from the grinding reality of conflicts and negotiations, the actual pedagogical process that goes into shaping specific engagement, when this can be theorized in London? (Soon 2016).

As a critical investigative gesture, and wishing to centralize locality, I began my research working closely with the *Kin ArtStudio*, and surveying the conditions in which the platform operates in Kinshasa alongside various local actors and cultural dynamics. Not only did I survey the studio's activities and working conditions, but, not wishing to remain a passive observer, I also engaged to the best of my abilities with the *Kin ArtStudio*'s mission(s), goals and visions. This may raise questions in relation to objectivity and neutrality; however, my personal engagement and support must not be confused with partisanship. What might be considered my bias towards the *Kin ArtStudio* is limited to my conviction of the necessity for open and 'independent' art spaces on the continent – I will expand on the notion of independence in this regard in the third chapter. My involvement with the platform and with Kinshasa's visual art landscape has had the result of enabling me to academically reflect beyond mere necessity, and to grasp the 'specific urgencies' (Soon 2016) that the studio addresses, and the 'hows' able to sustain its mission, as much as the contradictions or ambiguities that complicate them. Drawn by the potential that I see in these visual art spaces, I set foot in the *Kin ArtStudio* in a rather idealistic state of mind;

however, the local reality set in all too quickly. That is when I started to learn, to see in those contradictions, ambiguities and constraints an invaluable source of knowledge. The imbrication of the curatorial with the Enlightenment's rational and universal thinking has relegated the so-called 'other's' visual art practices to a set of potential archives at the service of institutional critique and our own cultural discourse (Soon 2016). My methodology, through immersion, self-realization and active listening, has been adopted in defiance of such a curatorial trend.

Inevitably, my research depended on local engagement. At this stage, before further developing my argument and expanding on my experiences, I shall clarify what I understand by local or locality in the present enquiry. I move away from the dichotomy between local and global. Locality cannot be understood as untamed by global flows and processes – whether economic, technological, ideological or migratory. The global manifests itself in the local, and conversely. It is this interplay that asks for new ways of negotiation within the field of contemporary art. A local engagement that allows the specificities of Kinshasa to be informative will prevail over a postmodernist⁷ engulfing global take on worldwide visual art practices that dismisses the participatory agency of local actors.

Reorienting our gaze on 'place' as performative of knowledge is a way to deny globalization's deaf assimilating ideology that marginalizes place (Escobar 2001) or locality, yet claims to include it. In their reconceiving theories and conceptions of locality, several scholars have coined useful terms, responding to the decolonial need to come up with new epistemological tools and concepts. Aware that "there is no longer an authentic locality that can be preserved" (Saybasili 2011: 413) from global flows, Paul Virilio's 'glocality' (1995) insists on the fact that global regimes or processes are first and foremost performed or expressed locally. Arjan Appadurai's 'translocality' (1996) asserts that localities are definitely not isolated, and that there is an interconnectedness that links them, based on their peculiar contemporary experiences, and not under the global umbrella too often forced upon them.

⁷ In his evaluation of the concept postmodernism, Jameson, F. (1991: 159) refers to it as follows: "To describe it in terms of cultural *hegemony* is not to suggest some massive and uniform cultural homogeneity of the social field but very precisely to imply its coexistence with other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate".

Although locality evokes a spatial and geographic location, the geopolitics of contemporary art have to detach from a merely territorial understanding in order to embrace the “links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts” that locality implies (Appadurai 1996: 178). In this respect, my research is not concerned with a quest for authenticity that a romanticizing apprehension of the local often seems to imply. When the local is discursively channelled through terms such as ‘original’ or ‘vernacular’, it can denote a restrictive/reducing framing that impedes local visual art practices’ autonomous relational and outreach capacities. The conclusion will be the occasion to review the *Kin ArtStudio*’s position in relation to the glocal conjuncture in which it operates or to which it reacts.

Through this thesis, I am offering my own reading of the local, based on my academic subjectivity and the interactions I have experienced during my close involvement with the *Kin ArtStudio*, and considering the studio and its associated artists’ relational positionality as much as mine. I have attempted to remain as faithful as possible to what I have observed and to what the studio stands for, but the academic contextualization of this experience is already an infringement on this attempt. The simple act of conveying my research through a written and intellectual process only engages my accountability. I have laid down an argument, an individual reading that I am hereby proposing. The *Kin ArtStudio* stands as a family and welcomed me as a real member. However, much like a family member, my views do not stand for the project, even though I wholeheartedly care for it. I joined the *Kin ArtStudio* at a time when it was preparing the project *Young Congo*. This exhibition, its preliminaries, and its outcome crystalize in a significant way the issue at hand. It has reflected the inevitable tensions that come with attempting to propose new readings or narratives of visual art practices in a given postcolonial context, and within changing global cultural flows.

Chapter One : *The Magiciens Effect : An Enduring and Shifty Heritage*

1.1 *Magiciens de la Terre (1989) : A Referential Site of Criticality*

Touted as the “first truly international exhibition, bringing together artists from all over the world” (Martin 2013: 42), *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) set the paradigm in which ‘global contemporary art’⁸ would thrive and deploy its inconsistencies. Once the charge of incongruity falls short, there remain actual issues of postcolonial modes of representation, the relevance of globalism in the art world, and the legitimation of contemporary art that falls beyond the parameters of the West. Under noble intentions of inclusion, the curatorial approach perpetuated the myth of originality and discovery (Esche 2011). It asserted an arbitrary selection based on the supposedly high quality of the art works and their ability to “communicate sufficiently well in a visual-sensuous manner to a Western spectator” (Martin 1989: 153).

Despite the charge of exoticism (Lafuente et al. 2013), *The Magiciens de la Terre* show remains a referential site of criticality for many. It has raised critical questions regarding ‘the curatorial’ as a practice. In being staged as an international exhibition, this exhibition has exposed with audacity how showcasing works from diverse contexts and geographical locations – under the umbrella of ‘global art’ – is a consequential act of knowledge production. Remapping and new geographies were of high concern for Jean-Hubert Martin, curator of the exhibition and director of the *Musée National d’Art Moderne* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris at that time. On the brink of a new geopolitical order, he displayed awareness of the need to reconceive worldwide power dynamics, even though his theoretical justifications are misleading at times (Cohen-Solal 2014). This exhibition imposes itself as an analytical and theoretical vantage point to draw on the dominant discourses about contemporary visual art of the DRC. Shaping the notion of ‘global art’ and announcing a shift in global artistic dynamics, *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) relied on a set of actors, networks and curatorial approaches that contributed to the production of knowledge about visual art from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Extensively theorized and criticized, this exhibition is rather a departure in the present

⁸ Throughout the thesis, I will use quotes around terms indicating that I distance myself from their prescribing and prescribed meaning. The use of quotes also indicate a problematic use of the term. The analysis of some labels and cultural dynamics that have regulated discourses in the ‘global art’ world will disclose those problems.

argument, not a reference. Chronologically, it reflects the cogitations and transformative processes that were occupying art institutions and practices in the wake of a new global order. More importantly, it introduced the mainstream codes, discursive strategies and methods through which visual art from the DRC would be globally perceived, if not reduced, for the decades that followed.

1.1.2 *The Magiciens Effect*

This section seeks to engage with the discursive methods and modes of representations that have attributed meaning and positioned contemporary art produced in the DRC. Taking *Magiciens de la Terre* as a starting point, I will also refer to other exhibitions that have determined the discursive agenda around art practices from the DRC in the 'global' art sphere. This exhibition's historical and cultural momentum stands for the fact that it carried promises of a new global departure within contemporary art that would encompass worldwide regions and productions. In Joaquin Barriendos' (2015: 3) words: "what the Magiciens effect brings to light is nothing but the promise of attaining this totality through alterity", a paradigm that would supposedly alter the Eurocentric modern take on contemporary art. Noticing the downturn of the 'Magiciens effect' (Barriendos 2015: 3) or the failure of 'global art' in "this new globalized narrative", Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros asked an urgent question when opening the '*Beyond the Magiciens Effect*' three-day symposium in 2015: "So global art has failed – what comes next? What geoaesthetic regimes can we invent and deploy for the future? What institutionalizing gestures can we initiate to provoke a new shift? Finally, what museums and institutions can we reimagine"? It is with those same questions in mind that this chapter looks at that major exhibition.

1.1.3 *Postmodernism's Tentative Redemption & Curatorial Logic*

Magiciens advanced a discursive aesthetic that revolved around the notions of 'magic', 'ritual' and 'spirituality'. This discourse stripped the exhibited objects of their socio-political and geopolitical stakes, and bypassed any affinity that those creations have with modernism and its aesthetic mandate. Towards the last decade of last century, postmodernism had made its way through Western cultural and artistic institutions. The globalizing trend that took over visual art practices is a constituent of postmodernism. Indicating a transition from modernism, it became an all-encompassing rhetoric that would, on the surface, make Africa and African artists' dismissal from the history of modernity

unproblematic (Araeen 2011). Hence, 'global art' and subsequent exhibitions that endorsed that marker went on with crafting large-scale contemporary art shows in which artworks that do not meet Western criteria fell under qualifications such as "hybrid", "pastiche", etc., establishing a "postmodern canon" (Poppi 2003: 4). This is perhaps one of the biggest and most bitter legacies left by *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). As Anna Brzyski (2007: 20) notes rightfully in the introduction to *Partisan Canons*:

The canon or rather canons are never just a matter of discourse and, more to the point, they are never neutral or inconsequential. They determine not only what is good, significant, or valuable at a particular time and in a particular place, *but also what is not*.

The postmodern canon, as manifested in post-1989 curatorial practices, has not only ascribed significance to artworks falling beyond Western parameters: it has ultimately valued them. In this "Culture Game" (Oguibe 2004), representing is inseparable from valuing. In this thesis, postmodernism points to an apologetic cultural stance that reckons and tries to overcome the universalist and standardizing stretch of Western modernism, eventually ending up by perpetuating what it seeks to overcome. In this postmodern posture, 'global art' advocates the inclusion of 'marginal' art practices to marketing and commodifying ends. This logic blurs the lines between contemporary art practices and the marketing of cultural goods. In the present argument, postcolonialism is complementary to postmodernism inasmuch as it is a subtle discursive strategy that cultivates 'othering', serves as a marketing ground for contemporary art, and is co-existent with the rise of 'global art'.

1.1.4 Popular & Futurist: A Stiff and Simplified Categorization

The labels or curatorial choices that have come to rule the exhibition of so-called 'global contemporary art' since 1989 help to explain and delineate the modes of representation applied to visual art from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The defining categories or terms that have ruled those representations are 'popular' and 'futurist'. For the first of these terms, the prevailing narrative attributes it to Chéri Samba who would have coined the term to describe a prolific painting scene or production that was happening in Kinshasa after the independence, and that was "appealing to everyone" (Magnin 2015: 22). More accurately, the popularity that characterizes Congolese painting can be traced back to the early twentieth century, and to a diversely rich popular imagery

as is demonstrated by Bogumil Jewsiewicki's collection⁹ that composed a large part of the *Congo Art Works* exhibition that took place in 2016 at BOZAR (Centre for Fine Arts) in Brussels. In the exhibition catalogue, Jewsiewicki (2016: 19) contends: "my scholarly digression here is intended to show that my efforts to create a visual whole could at times be described as an archive, a library, or an image library, but not a collection", willingly detaching from the collection-driven mentality of early ethnographers or art dealers.

Also, why do artists like Chéri Samba, Chéri Chérin or Moke seem to be at the representative forefront of a genre that finds roots in earlier painting expressions, that has been embraced by many other Kinshasa-based artists (e.g. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu¹⁰ or Sim Simaro¹¹), and that allows for multiple socio-cultural readings that go beyond the DRC's independence and post-independence political and urban climate?

Congolese popular painting has been extensively featured in global representations of visual art from the DRC. The narrative initiated by the *Congo Art Works* exhibition is worth noting precisely for the way it has sought to provide art historical nuances to the popularity commonly ascribed to the genre.

Often associated to the term 'futurist', Body Isek Kingelez's city models fall naturally in an interpretative framework that relate to urbanism, to fantasy projections, to prototypes, to future aspirations. One of his models was presented at the *Demain, Kinshasa – Tomorrow, Kinshasa* exhibition in June 2016 at the *Institut Français* in Kinshasa.

⁹" Bogumil Jewsiewicki gathered a collection of 2,000 popular paintings dating back as far as the late 1960's and transferred it to the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Brussels in 2013. Jewsiewicki's collection served as the starting point for the exhibition *Congo Art Works: Popular Painting*, created by Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens " Retrieved from *Garage Gazette 2017 Issue Summer Exhibition Season* <https://garagemca.org/en/materials/1387?id=28>.

¹⁰"Tshibumba Kanda Matulu was born in 1947 in Lubumbashi, under Belgian rule. Determined to find an alternative way of educating his community, Tshibumba began to experiment with the medium of paint. His chief aim was to create a visual narrative documenting Congolese history from pre-colonial times to the present. An autodidact, Tshibumba had no formal artistic instruction. He finally established himself as a professional artist in 1969. His output was prodigious until 1981; no further works have appeared since then. It is not clear why the artist suddenly ceased production " <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/23892/lot/57/>. See also Turine (2007: 61-63).

¹¹ Sim Simaro (b. 1952) is a Congolese artist and popular painter - <https://vimeo.com/281925413>



Figure 2. (Tshilumba Mukendi 2016). Bienvenu Nanga. *Untitled* – Exhibition *Demain, Kinshasa* at the French Institute, Kinshasa.

This interpretative rhetoric stresses the imagery-like, mapping and prototyping nature of the work. It has also been applied to the work of Pume Bylex¹² to whom Filip de Boeck makes a reference in his literary portrayal of Kinshasa (De Boeck & Plissart 2014: 102), and to the work of Bienvenu Nanga¹³ (Fig. 2).

Magiciens de la Terre gave the work of Chéri Samba and Body Isek Kingelez international recognition and credit (Fig. 3). Chéri Samba's four paintings auctioned during Sotheby's inaugural sale of Modern and Contemporary African Art in May 2017 were sold for no less than £32,500. Although Chéri Samba has been the token of Congolese popular painting on the international art market, he remains critical and sarcastic about Western appropriations of 'African art', and the market he is part of. This is most visible in some of his compositions. In that sense, he exemplifies an ambiguous position that the present thesis is trying to address, namely a critical posture towards art institutions and the market while contributing or relating to these instances. This chapter will further discuss the effect of the institutionalization of 'global art' on the art market.

¹² Pume Bylex, born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1968, lives and works in Kinshasa. In his art, he combines drawings, costumes, models and furniture to create his own universe where he is simultaneously researcher, inventor of ideas and artist, conducting an almost scientific investigation into the intangible rules and processes of the world. Bylex is not interested in the everyday realities of Kinshasa, but focuses on what lies beyond the horizon of the visible (Pinther et al. 2012: 322).

¹³ Bienvenu Nanga is an active Kinshasa-based artist, sculptor and model maker - <https://vimeo.com/274428775>



Figure 3. Chéri Samba. *Little Kadogo, I am for Peace, That is Why I Like Weapons*. 2004. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection.

1.1.5 The Myth of Originality and Discovery

André Magnin, who was a consultant for the Jean Pigozzi collection¹⁴ from late 1989 to 2009, played an influential role in shaping this narrative. As early as the mid-1980s he started to travel to Africa with a sharp eye for ‘original’ visual art creations. He dedicated his exploration of the continent, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the discovery of self-taught artists and ‘authentic’ forms of art. He encountered popular painters, those artists who found inspiration in the Kinshasa urban landscape, in popular beliefs, in everyday life and in collective memory. Retelling these encounters, he states: “I was at the heart of an art without theory or exegeses” (Magnin 2015: 22); an art that has been extensively theorized since then and introduced to the art world with an emphasis on its creative resilience, social criticism, humour and urban integration. Introducing the French curator Magnin here, who will be discussed further in regard to the exhibition *Beauté Congo 1926–2015* that he curated in 2015, underscores how the foundations of

¹⁴The Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC) is a private collection created in 1989 by Italian business man, Jean Pigozzi. It includes several thousand artworks featuring paintings, sculptures, drawings, photographs, installations and videos from contemporary artists living in sub-Saharan African countries. Curated up to 2008 by André Magnin, now an independent curator and art dealer, the CAAC is regularly acquiring new pieces, adding new artists and lending works to major art institutions and museums around the world. The collection is based in Geneva and does not have a permanent exhibition venue. <http://caacart.com/>

'global art' are complicit with the myth of 'discovery', with a latent exoticism that is veiled by claims of inclusiveness and acknowledgment.

The myth of originality and discovery is still very much present in the sphere of a nomadic elite (Esche 2011). Magnin's type of involvement in importing Congolese popular painting and in the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition, followed by exhibitions around the concept 'popular' (*Un Art Populaire*, Paris, 2001, *J'aime Chéri Samba*, Paris, 2004), has the end result that local artists are not the ones exporting or telling their own experience of modernism. As much as the modern nature of their compositions is outlined and made part of the discourse around the exhibition of their work(s), their voice is still mute and mediated by what Gerardo Mosquera (1994: 133-139) refers to as a "central mediator".

1.1.6 Institutionalizing 'Global Art': A Failure

While the curator's, the consultants' and the collectors' intentions in setting up this exhibition can forever be discussed, the fact is that they have institutionalized what can be termed as 'the curatorial' approach to global cultural dynamics that were seeking redemption for art history through the salvation of Africa's uniqueness. By emphasizing the 'authenticity' and the modern remnants of African creative expressions, this curatorial trend has had the effect of channelling local practices into a comprehensive map, fostered by an obsession with defining the contours of what 'contemporary African art' is. Shifting from an ethnographic and geographic – i.e. physical – understanding of the concept, and dropping the 'African' for the 'contemporary' enquiry, postmodernists have given themselves the mission of redistributing the cards of a geopolitical order whose epistemological grounds allow for a multitude of cross-cultural and conceptual relations (Jules-Rosette & Osborn 2008). However, from this multitude, a single narrative is still able to emerge. But how? The promise of the overthrow of singularity by singularities has only reinforced the former. The *Magiciens* effect has failed. What are the reasons for such a failure, in light of the staging of the 'visually Congolese'? 'Global art' fails in its celebration of diversity, in its tight co-existence with capitalism and the development sector, and in its socio-political and critical engagement. In fact, much of the celebratory tone of *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko*, underpinned by merits of inclusiveness, hides many paradoxes.

1.1.6.1 Cultural Processes of Globalization: A Call for Contextualization

In the processes of institutionalizing 'global art', diversity is nothing but a process of diversification that pretends to give the voiceless a space of expression and recognition. The 'global art' world grants 'non-Western art' a voice, but it does not listen to it.

Globalization has reached every corner of the world in various ways. The assumption that it has induced standardization or homogeneity – as induced by the neo-flow of capitalism – or a sense of norm is a fallacious one.

Globalization processes, as imposed on large sectors of worldwide societies, are better understood through terms such as 'structural adjustment', 'development' or 'cooperation'; in sum, alibis that ensure the capital to pursue their infecting march (Kester 2011). The bare denomination 'global art' indicates the complicity of the contemporary art world with those processes. Globalization works through a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, through a monitored and speculative mechanism of adhesion, mostly at the service of global markets. Rallying the argument that "global processes ... can be read through the particular forms in which they materialize in places" (Saybasili 2011: 410), a contextual analysis of those processes is necessary.

As a general note, which I shall further develop in the second chapter, globalization has meant a greater and more flexible access to natural and material resources in the logic of a neo-liberal economy and in an increasing presence of humanitarian and development agencies – i.e. foreign dependency – in Kinshasa and the Democratic Republic of Congo at large. Those salient developments, coinciding with the decline of Mobutu Sese Seko from the 1970s onwards, which culminated in a severe crisis in the 1980s, have resulted in a country whose north-east region has been in a state of civil war for twenty-four years, with a total count of more than six million people dead; a country that cannot provide running water and electricity to its urban inhabitants; a country whose infrastructures are steadily degrading; a country with little prospect for its youth; a country whose inhabitants have long been disillusioned but whose resilience is applauded by the (art) world. Resilience is a means of survival. It is with this reality in mind that we can best look at the issue at hand.

In this context, artists and visual art practitioners live in a dynamic of dependency and constraint in which 'global art' and its market become a possibility to grow in one's practice. Global art, in its ties to capitalism and the development sector, fails to acknowledge this reality that directly affects the impetus to create.

In an essay entitled *The Hunter and the Lion: Which cultural cooperation for which perspectives in the DRC*, Professor Yoka Lye Mudaba articulates an essential lesson learned by semiologists: "the search for meaning is dependent on the context" (Mudaba 2013: 281). Studying visual arts in a Congolese context must be preceded by an understanding of the socio-economic dynamics that are at play in the very act of creation. Curatorial practices in the 'global' art world surf on those dynamics, discoursing social realities and struggles to its promotional and marketable advantage, while demonstrating a certain obliviousness to the creative impetus that fills their gallery, foundation or museum rooms. It is no secret that precariousness forces inventiveness and ingenuity, not the kind that is sufficient in itself, but that seeks to transcend one's social and artistic condition. Kinshasa-based and Congolese contemporary artists at large produce in a state of 'irreconcilable consciousness', aware that the international demand is inextricably linked to their urban and social condition yet desperately wanting to transcend it. Art produced with such a consciousness cannot merely be praised for its ingenuity and resilience. The discourses around visual art practices of the Democratic Republic of Congo are complicit with that irreconcilability when artists plead for contextual and discursive emancipation.

1.2 Congo Art Works: An Example of Critical Engagement

The global narrative reviewed in this section has merely been promoting and marketing 'Congolese visual art' through a postcolonial rhetoric that is showing signs of irrelevancy. Here, the concern is a matter of criticality. The linearity and prose of this narrative reveals investigative gaps. As Ruth Simbao (2015: 266) contends: "one needs to be cautious of using a singular date as a grand framing device for multiple complex events, *especially when other relevant events or chains of events are underplayed or even ignored*".

In order to illustrate the failure in critical engagement, I shall return to *popular* painting. This kind of qualification implies a form of painting that is inspired by the people and that speaks to the people (Baloji 2016, 0:28). In the essay that opens the catalogue of the exhibition *Beauté Congo 1926–2015* entitled '90 Years of Modern and Contemporary Art in

Congo', Chéri Samba is said to have come up with the qualification 'popular', referring to an art scene and painters that address (the) people.

In the recent exhibition *Congo Art Works* (2016), an initiative of Africa Tervuren¹⁵ held at the BOZAR Museum in Belgium, Sammy Baloji evokes a certain counter stance in the curatorial approach. The term 'naïve' has been commonly associated with the genre and with self-taught artists, another label that the contemporary art world is fond of in regard to continental African painting productions. Naïve art may well account for a pictorial style of painting or aesthetic; however, it prompts easily reductive preconceptions. In the case of Congolese popular painters, the trait could be naïve, but the intention or actual act and its social resonances were far from naivety. Popular painting has proliferated to a considerable extent under the patronage of Europeans who saw in those artists' representations a germ of evidence that, after all, there was a vibrating, vernacular and socially integrated form of art, which they went on to popularize as alluding to collective memory and local history. In the narrative that has persisted since *Magiciens de la Terre*, this memory and history is tied extensively to the effervescence and cultural bubbling up that has characterized independence and post-independence Kinshasa. However, as their paintings reveal, popular painters practising in the second half of last century were critical and very aware politically.

The counter stance adopted by *Congo Art Works* is to insist on the fact that popular painting finds origins, meaning and popularity outside the contours of that narrative. It must be understood in a broader historical context that stretches beyond social highlife, Congo's urban developments, pseudo sensuality and radicalism¹⁶. *Congo Art Works* sought to re-contextualize the genre, affirming that "popular painting did not simply emerge during the colonial era but that it actually forms part of a longer tradition" (Bambi Ceuppens 2016). Without delving into an in-depth analysis of this exhibition, I mean to highlight how rigour, and socio-political and critical engagement have not systematically been on 'global art's' agenda, if not consciously avoided for marketing purposes.

¹⁵ "Still officially called the Royal Museum for Central Africa, but better known as the Africa Museum, it cannot help but ooze colonial triumphalism, despite recent protestations of egalitarian diversity. However radically the interior may have been refashioned to reflect new attitudes to Africa, the grandeur of King Leopold II's design and the fervour of his desire to promote his imperial venture into the continent's heart still overwhelm the visitor". <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2018/12/08/the-struggle-to-tell-the-story-of-colonialism>

¹⁶ See Jewsiewicki, B. 1992. *Art Pictural Zaïrois*. Québec: Septentrion & Fabian, J. 1996. *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.



Figure 4. (Tshilumba Mukendi 2016). An Impression of the *Congo Art Works* Exhibition at BOZAR art centre, Brussels.

1.3 Representation and the Curatorial: An Obstacle to Self-Legitimization

Representation is one-sided. Whatever one claims to represent, one's account of the subject of representation is subjective. 'The curatorial', in this (cultural) global narrative, is a signifying practice (Hall 1997) that imposes objectivity upon representation. Global representations and their discursive aesthetics or strategies have cultivated the tendency to fixate the subject matter of art works. As Joaquin Barriendos affirms: "it is very easy to see how the act of representing the aesthetic voice of the non-Western world reinstalls the problem of the subaltern, the problem of having a voice in order to define our own place in the world" (Barriendos 2015). The simple act of representation is a problematic one and has had far-reaching consequences on the construction of legitimizing narratives. Suddenly, painting in the Democratic Republic of Congo was generally referred to as popular; sculpture and installations, as futurist or thrifty; and photography, as vernacular.

In such a construct, the result of a redundant curating tradition articulated around the display of popular paintings dating from the 1960s onwards and of photographs from the DRC's independence archive, not only is the audience guided in their interpretation of visual art practices in the DRC, but complications are also added to local initiatives'/artists' endeavour to legitimize their creations/productions in a 'postcolonial cultural matrix' (Van Beurden 2015). In this matrix, artists, cultural practitioners and state institutions still suffer as a result of the heritage of colonialism and dictatorship. Because of the lack of a coherent national cultural policy/vision and an over-reliance on the international culture and development sector, art productions and initiatives find it difficult to gain an artistic credibility outside that inherent to any act of creation. As a conclusion to her editor's introductory note, Sarah van Beurden (2016: 256) states that:

Quite often, postcolonial nations and states – and, by extension, their cultural institutions – struggle with legitimacy narratives. In a context where knowledge about art and culture is produced mainly in the West, and the authenticity of African cultural forms is often still legitimized by or in the West (most notably in the art market), these narratives of cultural legitimacy (and the bodies of cultural artifacts on which they are based) carry a lot of weight.

Mobutu's reign saw the campaign and implementation of a state ideology referred to as '*authenticité*' or '*zairianisation*' – authenticity or Zairianisation – in the late 1970s. In this radical political gesture, the state advocated the rejection of colonial and Western influences. Congo would be renamed Zaire and its population would reappraise traditions, which was noticeable in households and family practices. On the dissemination of this ideology, an eagerness to transcend this totalitarian context naturally pervaded the collective consciousness. Culturally, artists and their creations welcomed external influences and idioms anew (a significant development from the start of the independence movement until Mobutu's authenticity campaign) with less restraint and were keen to relate to a global sphere that somehow carried promises of acclaim and opportunities of artistic growth. This historical and cultural occurrence has nurtured the 'culture complex', as termed by Van Beurden (2016: 250-260). In a state in which cultural formations have colonial and dictatorial structures as their foundations, narratives of cultural legitimacy find it hard to escape a top-down sort of 'validating' scheme.

The curatorial approach and signifying practices that came to overrule the '*post-Magiciens*' era have created 'a space of legitimation' that affects local construction of alternative legitimizing narratives. In a letter entitled 'Communiqué from a Possible Future without Magiciens, where Magiciens never Happened' and addressed to the participants of the

'*Beyond the Magiciens Effect*' symposium in 2015, John Pepper, author of *Art and the End of Apartheid* (2009), asks:

... what is this supposed Magiciens effect in reference to? Is it about *the historiography of curating*? Is it about the marketing of artists? What about the history of art made regardless of curatorial fashions or expanding markets? Is it about major institutions in the West taking an interest in art outside the West? Is it about *gratitude*?

1.3.1 Benevolent Paternalism

Further, Pepper mentions a '*benevolent paternalism*' in relation to that exhibition. This letter, read in conjunction with the concept of the 'space of legitimation' mentioned above, discloses the problem of curatorial practices that communicate themselves as a charitable pat on the African artist's shoulder. In light of the broader argument of this thesis, legitimization, as induced by 'the curatorial', has to be challenged and reconceived as a decolonial necessity and a strategy to uphold local initiatives and artists' autonomy. The benevolence John Pepper refers to is like a mask worn under an arrogant face: remember the words of the playwright and director of *The Crows Plucked your Sinews* (2015), Hassan Mahamdallie: "Your biggest enemy is what your arrogance has rendered invisible". Benevolent paternalism is a maliciously grateful act of power that plays the card of history revision, capitalizing on 'non-Western' artists while disturbing their sense of agency. As far as visual art of the DRC has been presented through *Magiciens de la Terre* and its subsequent affiliate cultural circuits or networks, the curatorial approach has merely been discoursing this act of power. Adriano Mixinge, in an article entitled "Autonomy and Self-transcendence in Contemporary African Art: resilience, change and renewal", extends Valentin-Yves Mudimbe's point on the complementarity between discourses of power and discourses of history (1988) in stating that:

... the same tends to hold for legitimization discourses fashionable in contemporary African art, but whose references, at least in the case of Angola and, I suspect, many others, do not exactly reflect reality on the ground (Mixinge 2009: 62).

That reality is what has been rendered invisible. Mahamdallie's words echo local artists' pugnacity in their willingness to subvert this curatorial perversion – as I witnessed it through the *Kin ArtStudio*'s ideals – where Mixinge points out the heavy weight of the history of 'global curating'.

In exchanges with a fellow artist and researcher, referring to the grand narratives of the 'global art world', she states: "it unconsciously enters your mind while you are working". Then, she complicates the issue by asking: "what should my work be about?" (Ng'ok 2017, personal communication). Similarly, in a Kinshasa context, contemporary visual artists show an awareness of this 'benevolent paternalism', to which they react in different ways. On the lookout for opportunities to exhibit and market their work, they are not in a position of power. In the following chapter, I will develop the various reactionary attitudes that these artists adopt in the face of this paternalism as it plays out in Kinshasa, but for now, I am concerned with the legacy of the 'curatorial' as understood by the 'Magiciens effect'. In an age in which the 'curatorial' has overruled the terms and implications of the diffusion, reception and commodification of contemporary visual art, artists find themselves constrained to come to a compromise with it. The way in which visual art produced in the DRC or by its diaspora artists has been curated on a 'global' stage has had an inevitable effect on incentives to create. When creation and the resulting production compromise with the 'curatorial', with the lines of the grander 'global' narrative in mind, artistic agency also becomes compromised. In attempting to come up with a comprehensive scheme of 'contemporary African art', the curatorial trend of the past decades has hitherto consigned contemporary practices to their discursive, relational and in some cases conceptual potential. (Hence, 'contemporary African artworks' have turned out to be entities performative of knowledge, a knowledge whose alterations and articulations have become predictable and predetermined). Reviewing the ways in which the visual art of the DRC has been represented globally inevitably entails the questioning and reconsideration of the curatorial practice, if not the argument of its demise as a signifying practice.

1.4 Postcolonial Modes of Representation in 'Global' Contemporary Art

Magiciens de la Terre (1989), inextricably linked to the curatorship of the Jean Pigozzi collection, advanced a certain perspective of visual art practices from the DRC, and inadvertently secured rights on that 'global' narrative. I argue that it is precisely this vision that needs to be challenged, allowing African artists and practices to account for themselves. It is actually a conglomerate of actors, a network, a specific circuit (including the influence of *Magiciens*, André Magnin and the Jean Pigozzi Collection) who have been pulling the strings of this narrative and acting as 'global' gatekeepers, which leads to the relevance of 'globalism' – as a space of legitimation – within the contemporary art world. If 'global' is to be a meaningful marker in relation to contemporary art practices, it has to

acquire meaning outside its inclusive and engulfing one. It has to surpass the act of uncovering 'non-Western' artworks along the myth of originality and discovery, discoursing them with a modern Western rhetoric, and claiming to be representative of a national art history or production.

The *Magiciens* exhibition, with its revisionist claims, constituted a curating postulate and methodology that still bears its authority, in clever disguise. It established what I refer to as postcolonial modes of representation that fundamentally relied on a strategy to assimilate difference. A few years earlier, in 1984, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York had organized the exhibition "*Primitivism*" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, that attests to the hegemonic stance that Western culture had adopted in displaying the Other, which *Magiciens* explicitly sought to counter. Both exhibitions displayed works of Western and 'non-Western' artists. Thomas McEvelley notes that: "where 'Primitivism' had left the 'primitive' works anonymous and undated, *Magiciens* would treat them exactly as it treated Western pieces", so as to legitimize their position in the pantheon of contemporary artists (McEvelley 1990: 155). In order to avoid discussing the tensions that exist in any egalitarian stance and the acknowledgment of difference, we should perhaps redefine the concept of globalism without a central mediator and explore innovative ways to engage in the inter-circulation of art and the discursive practices that accompany it. The 'global art world as a space of legitimation has set a lasting trend through which 'non-Western' art creations are still acquiring a global relevance. Globalization becomes this process by which we accommodate difference through a mandate of recognition, foolishly pretending that we can frame heterogeneous forms of art according to one prism. Globalization goes hand in hand with the universalizing stretch of the modernist vision.

1.4.1 A Strategy of Thematic Thread

The 'post-*Magiciens*' period seriously undertook the appraisal of idiosyncrasies in continental contemporary art productions, yet delineating compositions and processes using the strategy of a thematic thread. In this curatorial strategy, critics, curators and cultural practitioners 'unmix' the visual elements, conditions of production and artistic influences composing an artwork. This process of isolation enhances the options of interpretative frameworks and allows for integrative curatorial possibilities (Jules-Rosette and Osborn 2008). These acts of labelling or soft categorization communicate the desire to

do away with rigid colonial modes of representation while serving the interests of an expanding 'global art world'. In this curatorial act, the irrevocable nature of globalization processes is at the forefront of the justification line.

The DRC's own experience of modernity and postmodernity, its urban landscape, its flamboyant social high life and its creative resilience have often been part of the discourses around the display of art pieces produced in the country or by Congolese artists. The consistency with which these discourses have evolved and merely repeated themselves in various 'remixed'¹⁷ forms is the problem I am concerned with. As noted above, this prevailing narrative relies on a specific institutional and art network, and discloses "the relation between French institutions and non-Western contemporary art" (Murphy 2013: 2). Then, what has been displayed and curated outside of that network, remaining in global contexts and in relation to visual art stamped 'DRC'?

1.5 Yambi

Beside the centrality and monopoly of those so-called major 'global' exhibitions, contemporary visual art from the DRC has been disseminated and presented through other networks and in other contexts. I am still concerned here with shows that have taken place outside of the DRC. While my research does not pretend to be exhaustive, it attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the circuits and channels through which international visual art institutions have given exposure to Congolese artists and visual art produced in the DRC. In 2007, while the exhibition of *Africa Remix* was ending at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the *Yambi*¹⁸ project was taking place in Belgium: an extensive cultural occasion honouring the Democratic Republic of Congo, its artists and creators. A regional and governmental Belgian public institution, *La Communauté Française*¹⁹, subsidized the project, which was curated by Roger-Pierre Turine²⁰. This great event gathered together no less than 150 artists through 322 events over two and a half months.

¹⁷Allusion to the itinerary exhibition *Africa Remix* first conceived by Jean-Hubert Martin and David Elliot, and curated by Simon Njami in which artworks of Body Isek Kingelez, Chéri Cherin, Chéri Samba and Pume were presented.

¹⁸Which means "welcome" in Lingala and Swahili.

¹⁹"The French Community exercises its powers in the Walloon provinces (except the German-speaking communes) and in Brussels" Retrieved from https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/communities/french_community.

²⁰Roger-Pierre Turine is an art critic who frequently writes for *La Libre Belgique*, a daily francophone newspaper. He is a member of the IAAC (International Association of Art Critics). He has been involved with the Dakar Biennale (Dak'Art) over the past years. He is the author of the book *Les Arts du Congo d'Hier à nos Jours – The Arts of Congo from Past to Present* (2007). The book is an integral part of the Yambi project.

Roger-Pierre Turine selected thirty-five visual artists from various disciplines (painting, photography, sculpture and performance) to offer a consistent overview of various visual art practices. The large scope of the event bears witness to the will to display the richness of the Democratic Republic of Congo's contemporary cultural and artistic expressions. *Yambi* took place within the framework of a cooperation partnership between *La Communauté Française* and the DRC. Enabled through such a partnership, the event was a real platform for the visibility of Congolese contemporary artists. The curator's artistic direction was coupled with a lateral sense of collaboration between the DRC and Belgium (Mudaba 2013) – i.e. the respective ministries of culture, cultural actors and artists from both countries. It acknowledged the work of contemporary artists like Germain Kapend and upheld the work of diaspora artists like Michele Magema and Christian Tundula. The will to present the DRC's contemporary creation, exhibiting young and dedicated practitioners for the most part working in the country's main cities, surely motivated this project. Not largely known at the time of the event, the participating visual artists found themselves on an open platform, and rightfully so. Taking place in the DRC's former colonial power, this exhibition remains referential, and influential in the way it has allowed a wider visibility for an upcoming generation of artists and their artistic visions, as well as subsequent collaborations.

Belgian public involvement with visual arts in its former colony has mostly worked through a cooperation and development scheme since the inception of the *Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles* in 1986, a cultural antenna of Belgium's cooperation project based in Kinshasa. Up to the present day, it remains quite influential in the cultural and art sector in the DRC, along with the French Institute and the recently established Goethe-Institut.

1.6 Kinshasa Stadt Der Bilder – Kinshasa City of Images 2012.

What we are proud of is the stubbornness they have in keeping a Congolese cultural substratum despite the disrespectful invasions of African identities (*Ibongo* 2012: 118).

These are the words that Prof. Joseph Ibongo, former managing director of the Institute of National Museums in Congo, uses to describe Congolese contemporary artists in the catalogue of the exhibition aforementioned in the headline of this paragraph.

Held in 2012 in Dortmund, Germany, this exhibition puts the emphasis on the country's contemporary creation. Aimé Mpane, curator of this project, proposes a reading of the selected artists' creations as "answering the silence of absurdity, madness, shame, horror, inherited guilt" (Mpane 2012: 23). He aligns with the understanding that this generation of artists – essentially practising since the turn of last century – are taking part in globalisation processes and explore a universal artistic and visual language denuded of Africanism's remnants. Hence, he puts the emphasis on the socio-political nature of the artworks presented, relegating the stubbornness of national demands.

Although the curatorial statement seems to distance itself from Congolese ascriptions, several conspicuous choices and interventions disclose a familiar representative network. Roger-Pierre Turine's rather substantial essay appears like a remixed version or a reiteration of the Yambi project's artistic contextualisation. Many of the selected artists had taken part to that earlier artistic event in Belgium, and the proposed reading of their work borrowed the narrative lines of "the new liberated and engaged generation of Congolese artists" to which I shall return in the first sections of the following chapter. Inquiring about the discourses and the representative tendencies that have framed 'global' understandings of contemporary visual art in the DRC, I notice that the insistence on the rupture with the preceding generation of Congolese artists, on a local avant-gardism that has emancipated from a conservative and technical approach of the practices, is a central node in this narrative.

Despite the proclaimed universal language that nurtures their work, the curatorial propositions that present this late generation are similarly stubborn in rooting contemporary practices in the 'Congolese'. How does one overcome the tensions between 'a Congolese cultural substratum' and a global approach of contemporary visual art in a given context? This question is relevant for both artists and curators, and by extension art critics, historians or any cultural actor that has a stake in this debate.

Titled *Kinshasa – City of Images*, the exhibition conceived Kinshasa as a repository of images of all kind(s); murals, subliminal, omnipresent, ultimately composing the city's landscape, and imprinting the social experience. This patchwork of images is actually a reality that millions of inhabitants share, nothing quite 'surreal'. The distance that removes us from the local experience seems to justify fanciful readings, qualifications that subvert reality. Of course, art and its reception/contextualisation is a matter of imagery.

Nevertheless, in the case of the Congo, and in the discursive posture towards the creative dispositions or context in which contemporary art practices take place, the surreal overtakes the real. This label has been regularly used in reference to the city of Kinshasa. In the catalogue of the exhibition, we read that: “Aimé Mpane shares the opinion that there is not anymore an organised life in Kinshasa. The city’s inhabitants and their art hover in the surreal” (Mpane 2012: 15). Such interpretations or discursive trope have the effect to locate local practices and individual experiences outside a common shared reality, a common perspective from which visual art could be better reviewed.

The programme of this event articulated around three exhibitions and film projections. *Kinshasa Days – Kinshasa Nights* was dedicated to popular painting. The paintings exhibited came from the Association of Popular Style Painters of Kinshasa which was created around Chéri Benga and Berry Matundu. The selection was refreshing, disclosing the varied representative spectrum that the style explores, from witty political positions – through subtle visual associations – to mere rural or urban depictions. The relative notoriety of the painters, the selected paintings’ provenance, and their critical undertone affirm that the genre is foremost inhabited before being consumed.

Outlining some of the different networks, institutions, exhibitions and actors that have played a pivotal role in the circulation, dissemination and promotion of visual art produced in the DRC or by artists from Congolese origin over the three last decades has two purposes. The first is to highlight the narrow, subjective and biased understanding of ‘Congolese visual art’ from an international perspective. The second, and most relevant, is to highlight the ways in which these different networks and their premises sporadically converge, hence reinforcing a polar understanding of two seemingly opposite aspects of art creation: a cooperation and development aspect, detached from the market and conceiving of art practices in a local context as social practice, and a market-driven aspect, fuelled by ‘global’ discourses of contemporary art and sustained by exhibitions, art fairs, galleries and auctions. This polar understanding is hard to reconcile for many artists of the so-called ‘Global South’, torn between their ideological and socio-political peregrinations and the need to generate the means to produce their work (Oguibe 2015). This thesis, without pretending to speak on behalf of young emerging artists, takes as an argument vantage point their experiences as witnessed in a Kinshasa context. In a time during which contemporary African arts are ‘hyped’, and a context in which contemporary art practices have been reacting against a rigid academism since the 1990s and in which

visual art is commonly misunderstood and neglected by the public powers, finding meaning and subsistence in one's practice becomes an arduous task at times.

1.7 'Global Art's' Ties to the Art Market

This brings us to 'contemporary global art's' ties to the art market. In its rise and development, 'global art' was co-existent with a growing investment interest in what had been constructed as postmodern and urban African visual culture (Poppi 2003). *Magiciens de la Terre* carries the collection-driven culture that emerged at a time in which the art market was ready to react to an attractive neo-capitalist economy in the way it presented boundless opportunities to acquire 'African' art pieces. This collectors' mentality did not alter its premises. It was driven by exotic views, and the belief in uniqueness and an 'African authenticity'. The rationales behind this expanding art market were soon to be inextricably bound with the institutional discourses and aesthetic mandate forming around 'contemporary African art'. As a matter of fact, Chéri Samba perfectly exemplifies this symbiotic, reciprocal and parallel relationship (Poppi 2003; Murphy 2013). As the narrative of Congolese popular painting was spreading into international art institutions, prices were proportionally matching this spread. How did the art market respond to those aesthetic discourses? The fact that the market picked up on this narrative further complicated the task of local productions' assertion or self-accreditation, because what sells became somehow standardized and defining, and hence subject to reproduction for those in search of recognition. Locally, 'creative integrity' was endangered, succumbing to a logic of 'cultural mercantilism'. "Cultural mercantilism ... describes the discourse of modernism that regulates the reception of cultural trade" (Tiampo 2011: 214). In this trade or transcultural exchange of artefacts, the discourse of modernisms overshadow the circulation and reception of 'non-Western art'.

Having outlined the contradictions of the 'global' narrative, I now hint at the effects that such a narrative has had on local productions and creative impulses, which I develop further in the following chapter. The issue around the rise of 'global art' is not only one of representation. 'Global art' is a *currency* to which artists relate. In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, young and emerging artists' works have been influenced by the grand narrative. Pathy Tshindele's early paintings show awareness of his predecessors' creations, following in the tradition of popular painting. Body Isek Kingelez has in one way or another influenced the work of Rigobert Nimi (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Rigobert Nimi. *La Cité des Étoiles*. 2006. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection.

Chéri Samba has opened the floor for J. P. Mika. This indicates local artists' awareness of 'global' trends; or are they just the offspring of those forerunners? Closely interacting with the *Kin ArtStudio* and the Kinshasa art scene, local artists and practitioners manifest a clear will to take part in the global debate. They plead for international exposure. But really, they just ask to be heard, they ask for the recovery of their voice in this narrative. They do not want to be spoken for.

1.8 Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko – Congo Beauty

Beauté Congo – 1926 – 2015 – Congo Kitoko is a relevant exhibition to analyze in light of the present argument for several reasons. First, it claimed with pride to offer a solid retrospective of almost 90 years of visual art in the DRC. Secondly, it bridged the early days of 'global contemporary art', as illustrated by *Magiciens*, and the latest curatorial proposition of 'an art from the Congo'. It was a critical and direct example of the heritage left by *Magiciens de la Terre*. Finally, taking these two exhibitions respectively as the prologue and the actual chapter of this influential narrative, this chapter has attempted to shed light on the discursive scenario, its actors, and its underlying affiliations, stressing the impact on its international and Congolese audience.

From a semantic standpoint, '*Beauté Congo*' – meaning Congo Beauty – puts the emphasis on the aesthetic, the beautiful, the flamboyant. The exhibition was colourful, musical and celebratory in nature. An atmosphere of grandiose expression prevailed over a critical essay, which alone was worth the visit. Then, the word 'Congo'. It alludes to the art of a prescribed territory. It is a crude misconception to think about the second largest country in the continent through an encompassing rhetoric. The artists, movements and artworks on display mostly originated from Kinshasa or Lubumbashi, two urban epicentres in the understanding of visual arts development in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Stepping into the *Fondation Cartier* in Paris, where the exhibition took place, an aisle directly led the visitor to the section dedicated to the younger generation of Congolese artists (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. (Victoire Karera Kampire 2015). Pathy Tshindele – *It's My Kings* series. I am entering the aisle dedicated to the young generation of contemporary artists at the exhibition *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* at the *Fondation Cartier*, Paris.

This first contact can be read as a curatorial stance to underline the contemporary and more recent art production in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Nonetheless, progressing into the exhibition and through the different sections, the impact of that first encounter somehow faded away, leaving room for a historicized narrative that borrowed its main lines from a modern expedition to the Congo.

Framing years of artistic production into four distinct periods: Lubaki and Djilatendo (1926), 'le Hangar' (1946), popular painters (1970s and 1980s) and the younger generation (1990s until present), *Beauté Congo* constituted a solid lexicon that lived up to the expectations of its ambitions. Not surprisingly, and as a proof of curatorial continuity, the exhibition made popular painting central: this segment occupied the main room of the *Fondation Cartier*. Nevertheless, it also reintroduced the work of an earlier generation of artists discovered and supported by early twentieth century foreigners (Georges Thiry, Gaston-Denys Périer and Pierre Romain-Desfossés). This support took place during the colonial regime, a form of support inscribed in colonial power relations, however noble those early patrons' intentions were. The content of the exhibition – at least for the three first periods mentioned above and the body of photographic work dating back to the 1950s – relies on an enterprise of discovery, exaltation and restoration. The exodus of many artworks from the Democratic Republic of Congo, whether during colonial times or during Mobutu's regime, accounts for the fact that most of the pieces on display had found ownership outside of the DRC. Popular painters, disregarded by Mobutu's cultural policy, turned to Europeans and foreigners to sell their work. Was that an omen for the way popular painting would subsequently be consumed?

At a juncture when artists lack national support and infrastructures for the circulation and commodification of their art, their creations easily become a product at the mercy of the global art market. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the development of modern art inherently overlaps with socio-economic realities (van Beurden 2015). Juxtaposing the cultural dynamics at play in 'global' representations of an art of the Congo with the socio-economic conditions at the outset of the production of the artworks that make up such representations, the intertwining between the creative motivations and the 'global' *currency* – as referred to in the previous section – becomes apparent. The following chapter will be the occasion to further expand on that interrelation.

Paying closer attention to the rhetoric in André Magnin's opening essay in the *Beauté Congo* catalogue, it is hard not to sense in his approach an exotic undertone of 'uncovering' something, laying out on paper the genesis of this project that ran parallel with his own passionate and personal journey. This journey led him to the "discovery of Congolese art's depths" (Magnin 2015: 23). Further, he develops on his astonishment of the modernity of Albert Lubaki and Djilatendo's pieces, resurfacing the artistic

achievements of the ones he conceives of as precursors; applying a modernist terminology, with a sense of *necessity and urgency*. Why does art history in relation to 'non-Western art' have to be so linear and pressing? The concepts of necessity and urgency have fuelled the production of knowledge about art from the 'global South', a restorative mission that the 'global art' sphere has thoroughly undertaken and embraced; bringing to the fore and to international knowledge works that span *Le Hangar*, Lubaki, Djilatendo, Mode Muntu, etc. seems like an attempt of revision. I seriously question the coherence and representativeness that the project cautiously defends. In his conclusion, Magnin states: "If there are no stylistic affiliations between the Lubaki moment, the Hangar moment, the popular painters' moment and the contemporary artists moment, there exists between them a common belonging to a vibrant Congo, infused with energies, from the quietest to the most volcanic". This cautious statement contextualizes the exhibited creations within "a vibrant Congo", which becomes a referential and derivative thread of knowledge. Locality, understood as territory, informs global knowledge in the ways it becomes an abstract and malleable epistemological term that refers to a place that can be derived to feed a given knowledge system or agenda. In this knowledge construction, the 'local' is merged wittingly with globalization processes and politics – through modernist terminology – depriving it of its initial ontology or agency.

The discipline of art history, as well as curatorial practice, is steadily moving from a globalized understanding of 'the local' to a localized understanding of 'the global'. In this regard, *Beauté Congo* does not follow this tendency. It exemplifies the curatorial and marketing trend that has taken over some international artistic events stamped 'contemporary African art', let alone 'African art'. This trend translates a certain obsession with locality that has moved from mere exoticism to a strategy of branding 'Africa'.

While it may be true that *Beauté Congo* has contributed to the visibility of the country's artistic and cultural production, collaborating with Congolese artists and cultural practitioners to build a consistent narrative, it has nevertheless considerably restricted the scope of its enquiry to the knowledge network it ultimately represents. It is the same story again and again, with slight changes, temporal additions, 'global' integration and the possibility to regenerate itself. But, in a post-*Magiciens* era, this regeneration capacity has to be seriously challenged. Recycling the main lines of this grand narrative cannot account for an act of representation. It is the quality of being 'global' that must be questioned and reinvented.

1.9 Readjusting the Local Prism

Moving the argument to a local, Kinshasa perspective, it is as if the 'global' qualification/marker needed to be earned, whereas globalism intrinsically characterizes creative processes and practices. 'Global contemporary art' has been perceived and assimilated as this authoritarian superstructure that acts as a space of legitimation. Now, as such, this superstructure disrupts the conceptualization of 'global'–'local' cultural relations through which *value* has become ascribed to 'non-Western' works of art. In this ascription, and considering the 'cultural complex' that colonial power relations have contributed to imbricate in a postcolonial Congolese socio-cultural context (Van Beurden 2016), the 'global' is too rapidly understood as, and reduced to, a sphere to reach. Hence, I am questioning the relevance of the concept in and from a local point of view.

That being considered, the following chapter moves away from a meta-, theoretical and problematizing understanding of global cultural dynamics in relation to art practices, and focus on the ways in which Kinshasa-based artists have related to those processes. I am arguing against the engulfing nature of the 'global' paradigm. Along with its development or expanding expression, globalization laid the foundations for acts of resistance, appropriation and derivation. In her essay "Working to Learn Together: Failure as Tactic", Judith Rodenbeck alludes to "an historical linkage both with the critique of capitalism and with urbanization" when referring to situated art practices (Rodenbeck 2011: 167). How does 'the global' manifest itself in those practices? How does urbanization in Kinshasa link with the critique of capitalism, and by extension, global capital? In a Kinshasa context, and from the perspective of the *Kin ArtStudio* and the young artists who relate to it, 'the global' is a construct and a reality. It evokes an arena, a set of cultural references that may seem quite removed while visible in the texture and unfolding of the urban fabric. The relation to that conception of the 'global' is in a stage of early negotiation.

Chapter Two: Postcolonial Frictions, God for All: A Local Contextualisation of the Problem

There is a certain wistfulness here that suggests a latent desire for something else: for an experience of the city distinct from the everyday haphazardness of the vibrant but intensely complicated districts Mingiedi²¹ calls home (Malaquais 2011: 13).

‘Global art’ discourses and curatorial practices have too often dismissed the specificity of places and contexts. The first chapter has sought to highlight this problem through a critical and limited review of the curatorial dispositions that have framed ‘Congolese (contemporary) visual art’ productions since 1989 on the so-called ‘global’ stage, a stage mostly composed of Western institutions. Moving away from a distant theoretical and discursive approach, in this chapter I shift the focus onto the manoeuvring qualities of Kinshasa-based artists and visual art initiatives, and practical and real-life strategies in a “terrain of difficulty” (Oguibe 2004), a “postcolonial cultural matrix” (Van Beurden 2016) and in a “glocal” space (Virilio 2008).

Researching contemporary visual art in the DRC, I could not only rely on the array of art discourses generated by ‘global’ exhibitions and curatorial initiatives. Kinshasa’s specificities are essential to reflect on local art initiatives’ geopolitical position and cultural scope of action. The ‘global art’ realm has been an absorbing cultural sphere whose dynamics tend to disregard local circumstances and particularities of art creation, or relate to them in a partial way. Zooming into those realities and contingencies, the language of this chapter is purposefully simple. The discursive ground of this section is a narrative and conversational one, a will to detach from the abstract and conceptual framing approach of ‘global art’s’ academic discourses.

The impetus for the development and liberation of contemporary art practices in Kinshasa significantly came from a student movement called *Librisme*. From an etymological perspective, the term finds its origin in the word ‘*liberté*’ – i.e. liberty in French. The last part of the word –*libr-isme* – connotes an ideology, a philosophy. This campaigning movement is a key happening in the history of visual arts in Kinshasa. The artistic

²¹Méga Mingiedi is a multi-media artist who explores the urban nature of Kinshasa through alternative mapping visual propositions using drawing and three-dimensional installations. His work is the subject of the essay ‘*Anti-Teleology: Re-Mapping the Imag(in)ed City*’ by Dominique Malaquais in the *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures* (2011).

statements it has made have been a source of inspiration for many until today, an original impulse which seems ever relevant. This chapter will provide an account of this movement to which Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo has contributed. *Librisme*'s local impact is considerable. It is a collective heritage that is still alive, and which today's heirs struggle to collectively handle. Socio-cultural dynamics and local circumstances that create a climate of defiance and competitiveness might in part explain such difficulty.

Hence, after elaborating on local contemporary art practices that took place from the 1990s, I will delve into the circumstances containing those developments, into the urban fabric and contingencies that characterize Kinshasa. These are an intrinsic component of visual art creation and existence in that context. Orienting our gaze on the specificities of that place is necessary in the present enquiry. Kinshasa's unsteady environment and urban adversity have spawned coping mechanisms that extend to the realm of visual art and to local artists. Their handling of those realities and art spaces or initiatives' positioning within them inform the geopolitical stance they (are able to) take in regard to the broader issue around the current cultural dynamics that regulate the production, diffusion and appreciation of 'contemporary African art'.

Finally, I will elaborate on the notions of collective and collaboration in that place and context. To do so, I will reflect on the exchanges, discussions and interactions that made up my four months stay in Kinshasa, working closely with the *Kin ArtStudio* and its associated artists. In Kinshasa, artistic collectives are indicative of a certain attitude or way to engage with that peculiar space and navigate it. That section aims at taking stock of the artistic and cultural configuration(s) and the various actors that constitute it. Based on the insights I have had through my experience, engagement and interviews, I will expand on the following question: to what extent do the local cultural constellation and visual art environment enable or restrict transversal collaborations, the autonomy and sustainability of local initiatives, and Kinshasa-based artists' *author-ity*²² (Oguiibe 2004: 13–15)? In Kinshasa, precarity and the lack of a local visual art market have nurtured defiance and distrust among the art community. Notions of collaboration, autonomy and sustainability in that particular difficult context carry great implications and future perspectives for the

²² In the essay 'Art, Identities, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art' included in *The Culture Game* (2004), Oguiibe designates *author-ity* as: " the subject's ability to self-articulate, to not only enunciate but also expatiate, to fully exercise their *author-ity* ". He purposefully hyphenates the term to distinguish it from 'authority' yet alluding to it in a critical and reconceptual way.

Kinshasa art scene's collective autonomy. The different actors that make up that community seem to progressively acknowledge those implications as many recent partnerships or collaborations at a local level testify.

In his intervention during the *Beyond the Magiciens Effect* symposium held in 2015 in Paris, Oguibe reminds us that: "practice is essentially pragmatic". With this affirmation, he critically comments on academic, intellectual and curatorial discourses' tendency to conceive art practices in the South as "a social tool" (Oguibe 2015). Similarly, the following sections seek to transcend that tendency, pointing out practical challenges, and looking out for pragmatic socio-cultural interventions that offer solutions and opportunities for the appraisal, diffusion and integration of contemporary visual art.

2.1 Emancipation of the Practices: The Librisme Movement

The year 1989 is more than a linear and chronological reference announcing a 'global' turn or a new worldwide order. It is rather a date of departure for research in the overall argument of this thesis. The first chapter has highlighted the curatorial turn *Magiciens de la Terre*. However, more relevantly in a Kinshasa context, the 1990s announced the emancipative drive, struggles and trajectory of a young generation of local artists. The present section will outline those pioneers' claims. It was during the course and development of these reactive events and initiatives – that I shall further detail – that the contemporary and geopolitical dimension of visual art in that urban context would unfold. When using the term 'contemporary' in this thesis, it inevitably relates to the ways in which contemporaneity in relation to visual art practices has been understood and appropriated by local artists and initiatives during this period, and the ways in which it manifests itself through their practices.

When I was debating the meaning and implications of being a '*contemporary* artist', with Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo one evening at the *Kin ArtStudio*, he firmly expressed his position on the question. Being a contemporary artist means being critically and socially engaged. It means complementing aesthetics with critical inquiry. Speaking from a Congo or Kinshasa standpoint, one could easily assume that the inquiry would be of a socio-political nature – considering the country's alarming political deadlock and human crisis – and in many actual artistic articulations, this is indeed the case. Nevertheless, the criticism I am concerned with in the early section of this chapter, which caused a wind of

contemporaneity to blow on visual art practices in Kinshasa, is the one referred as *librisme*. Under the influence of Francis Mampuya, important figure of the movement, Germain Kapend and Eddy Masumbuku²³, students of *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts* started to question strongly the teaching they were receiving. Witnessing how visual art practices were becoming increasingly trans-disciplinary, trans-stylistic and conceptual worldwide, they felt confined in a rigid educational environment that was still prescribing the models or influences of an older generation of Congolese painters and sculptors whose work found inspiration in a more traditional and symbolic Congolese iconography that is figurative, displaying rural scenes and landscapes with a sharp stroke and technique. At first, that critical gesture was addressed to the local, institutional and educational understanding of visual art practices. *Librisme's* assertions were expressed through experimentation in new mediums or disciplines like performance and public artworks (e.g. *Kinshasa Wenze Wenze*²⁴). The movement's practices engaged with urban realities, not through mural or pictorial representations as commonly thought, but through an integration of artistic practice in the urban fabric of the city, an aspect that I will further develop in the following section.

2.1.1 An Early Conflictual Movement

In its inception in 1997, the movement was in tense coexistence with *Les Ateliers Botembe*²⁵, founded in 1992 by Prof. Roger Botembe, fully-fledged painter and teacher at *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts* (Ngoy Ebondo 2013). Although both initiatives shared claims of reform, their visions and artistic agenda were not quite the same. Confrontations were heated and tensions lasting. *Les Ateliers Botembe* reproached adherents of *librisme* for embracing the 'new', free and conceptual dimension of the practice, irrespective of national artistic heritage and the masters' legacy. Botembe has always defended an idea of African/Congolese Renaissance, in which contemporary art practices appropriate and enter in dialogue with traditions and three-dimensional 'classical' art forms such as masks and sculptures. Conversely, *libristes* judged that it was time to shake the old patterns and

²³These three artists supported by the late art critic Célestin Badibanga Ne Mwine are often cited as the initiators of the movement (Turine 2007, Ngoy Ebondo 2013).

²⁴Kinshasa Wenze Wenze – i.e. 'Kinshasa Small Market' – was a public art installation set up by the collective *Eza Possibles* in 2003 in Kinshasa, in which old cars' bodies and scraps of all kinds turned into sculptures were exhibited on an open square in the city (Lanquetin & Malaquais 2015).

²⁵"Those studios, set up as culture and development NGOs in the municipality of Kalamu, gathered, in fact, dozens of painters with various artistic backgrounds, not only reunited for the pleasure of being together during long working hours, but also in order to know, recognize and engage critically with each other, and when the moment came, discuss the options chosen by one and another" (Turine 2007: 87).

structures, not only to remix them with third-party influences, but to literally reinvent the practice in that context (Ebondo 2013). The existence of this first confrontation indicates the clash of generations, or rather of visions, which has marked Kinshasa's visual art landscape since that time. In an article entitled *Towards an Open Approach or a Dead Letter*, Jean Kamba, poet and art critic based in Kinshasa, highlights the lasting impact of this generational dissension in the city's visual art landscape. "For a long time, the visual artists of Kinshasa have been at loggerheads, the artists of the second generation and of the third generation, mutually accusing each other" (Kamba 2016). Reflecting on the symposium "Mediating Past, Present and Futures: Dialogues with Global South Experiences"²⁶ that took place in January 2016 at *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts*, Jean Kamba notes that tensions between "masters" and *libristes* have never really disappeared. The *Librisme* movement, in addition to being the channel through which contemporary art practices would take a new turn in Kinshasa, was a *counter-institutional* gesture at its height. As a result of its emancipatory efforts, the movement has had one major effect : it has contributed to free art practices from any prescriptive canon, resulting in the emergence of new and innovative art expressions and collectives. The movement's strength was its extraordinary local appeal among young practitioners, which led to many forms and instances of appropriations of its claims.

Librisme in its early days underwent several crises, running parallel with *Les Ateliers Botembe*. Their initial impulse and vision were in danger and were subject to diversions and misappropriations. The associated members soon diverged on the direction the movement was to take, and eventually, the movement disintegrated. Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo was an observer at the forefront of the developments and tensions. In 1999, he was eighteen years old, about to enter *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts*, looking up to his elders without feeling intimidated, and with a premature community spirit. Discussing with Vitshois on that afternoon of the 1st of September 2016, I realized that he is a valuable source of information regarding those late developments. Not only an observer, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo played a pivotal role in bringing the *libristes* back into dialogue, and

²⁶"Taking place at *l'Académie des Beaux Arts* (ABA) in Kinshasa, this 4-day workshop will look at the interstices between history and art (especially from and about the Congo), with a focus on creative methodologies and shared issues around the teaching of art in the Global South. Local concerns will be highlighted through dialogues between engaged theorists, researchers, arts practitioners and educators. The project is a cross-disciplinary collaboration between Kinshasa (*l'Académie des Beaux Arts*, Democratic Republic of the Congo), Johannesburg (Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa) and São Paulo (Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Brazil)" retrieved from <https://dialoguesdusud.wordpress.com/>.

instigated a reformation that would be acknowledged as *Synergie Librisme* (Turine 2007). Committed to the *librisme* cause, since that time he has pushed the agenda of experimentation, criticality, worldwide inspiration, collaboration, and integrity.

2.1.2 Beyond Institutional Claims: Librisme's Artistic Reverberations and Performative Evolution

The movement ultimately emerged from Kinshasa's sole school of fine arts but was not limited to the confines of the institution. It was truly liberating as it opened doors for practices that were until then inconceivable. It was not only apparent through new artistic and technical dispositions. The so-called 'rebellious students' have initiated a real reflection about the meaning of visual art practices in Kinshasa; discussions that are still very relevant today. A movement has been initiated. *Librisme* has had a more far-reaching scope of influence than it may have initially intended. It announced an era in which contemporary art practices have dared to experiment, have worked towards the development of social relations and conceptual approaches, and have been emancipated from an inherited colonial academism that conceived fine art as high art or technical *prouesses* (technical feats).

The movement is characterized by its contesting and reforming nature. *Librisme* is still very much palpable in Kinshasa's artistic environment and in the spirit that underpins the vision of the *Kin ArtStudio*, and there are few contemporary visual artists based in the capital who would deny any affinity with the movement. A movement can exist in time and simultaneously defy the very notion of time. As mentioned above, the movement soon faced inner tensions that would be counter-productive to prolific artistic production under its umbrella. Nevertheless, Francis Mampuya, Eddy Masumbuku, Germain Kapend, and several other students who joined the movement or identified with it, carried on the vision in their respective practice and endeavours, ensuring its fragile continuity.

The late 1990s and early 2000s correspond to a period of political transition and hardship in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko in 1997, and the assassination of his successor Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 2001, plunged the country and the capital city into a state of instability and apathy. In 2003, a political transition was

enacted, announcing better days. That same year, the collective *Eza Possibles*²⁷ was founded; it organized the open-air exhibition *Kinshasa Wenze Wenze*. (At that time, the collective comprised twelve artists, including Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, Francis Mampuya and Pathy Tshindele. A year later, the collective was reduced by half, which again begs the question of cohesion and *collective sustainability*.) This first event of its kind in the DRC's capital was significant in the way it engaged the urban space and the audience, which in turn revealed the performative and relational potential of contemporary art practices in Kinshasa (Lanquetin & Malaquais 2015).

The potential that *Eza Possibles* seized and exploited would soon be supplemented by a partnership between the ABA (*Académie des Beaux-Arts/Academy of Fine Arts*) and the ESAD (*Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs/Graduate School of Decorative Arts*) in Strasbourg, France. This partnership offered the opportunity to almost all of the members of the collective to study for a time at the ESAD. The partnership remained in place between 2003 and 2013 and allowed around thirty students to attend the French school. This thesis takes as a research perspective the experience of young artists based in Kinshasa, hence, in relation to the overall thread of the argument, this partnership represented a breakthrough into the wider world of contemporary art practices, with a focus on performance and performative practices. It is a relevant event to pinpoint in the recent developments of visual art practices in Kinshasa, considering the influence it has had in terms of disciplinary approach and mediation, and the impact it has had on the local. In fact, from the early 2000s onwards, performance art and public interventions became *en vogue* in the Kinshasa contemporary art landscape. In addition to providing the opportunity of undertaking a short period of study abroad, this partnership has allowed the circulation of ideas between both creative poles, and the creation and reinforcement of a network. Artists such as Eddy Eketé and Androa Mindre Kolo exemplify local artists' engagement with performance art or performative acts at the turn of the century through this partnership.

The *Urban Scénos*²⁸ project initiated in 2006–2007 in Kinshasa by Jean-François Lanquetin and François Duconseille, artists and scenographers who were managing the

²⁷ That is, "*c'est possible ou tous les possibles*" – "it is possible or all possibles".

²⁸ "*Urban scénos* are a process of drawing artistic practices in a city. They open a space and a time to artists from multiple horizons during a collective residency, in immersion in an area, a specific urban context" – "The artists interact with a specific urban environment. The key entry is the 'horizontal city', the dynamics

ESAD's scenography department at that time, explored that potential, partnering with *Eza Possibles* and resting on the existing local artistic engagement with the city of Kinshasa. Jean-Christophe Lanquetin notes that: "in many regards, this partnership, along the *Urban Scénos*, has been clearly seminal for a whole generation of Congolese artists" (J-C. Lanquetin 2017, email, 6th September).

Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, who took part in this exchange programme, remembers and retells it with mixed feelings. It was certainly a mind opener, a valuable experience in one's artistic journey. Unsurprisingly, the accent was on the urban nature of Kinshasa and the relational potency of art practices in such a context. Subsequently, performance came to the fore of contemporary art practices in Kinshasa. How do we understand performance art – as inherent to Kinshasa and its artists' impulse, or as a sort of import that was facilitated by the partnership with the ESAD? The answer is to be found in the two-part nature of this question. Without discrediting this partnership, its intentions and affiliations, it is through such collaborative gestures that 'local' creation is mediated (Mosquera 1994) in the 'global' realm of contemporary visual art. This question also reveals how international collaborative efforts are inclined to partake and influence the understanding and integration of art practices in a specific context. The older generation of artists who were active and prolific during the Mobutu's regime – such as Maître (Alfred) Liyolo – see French cooperation's interventions and influence on emerging collectives at the time as neo-colonial. Even though this can be debated, stating their point of view here has the purpose to support the plurality of narratives on Congolese art history.

Public performance, as an art practice in a Kinshasa context, emerged in parallel with trendy academic discourses articulating the transient, ephemeral and informal nature of the urban in African metropolises (De Boeck & Plissart 2005, Simone 2004). This practice became an inevitable source of inspiration, and a constituent of local art practices. In turn, local artists grew aware of public performance as a strong currency on the 'global art' stage; and I would add, based on informal conversations that I have had with artists of that generation, many turned to it, foreseeing the possibilities and open doors that this practice was promising. I shall return to these issues in the third and last chapter of this thesis

produced by inhabitants: daily practices, body – ' body politics ', '« deal ', translations, theatricality, performative, game, spectral, informal..." retrieved from <http://urbanscenos.org/?portfolio=about>. Also refer to: <http://urbanscenos.org/?portfolio=kinshasa> & http://urbanscenos.org/?page_id=1732.

when addressing the challenges that come with operating as an artist in a 'postcolonial cultural matrix' – that is, issues of cultural reproduction, etc.

At a juncture in which the walls of the academy felt more confining, it was an appropriate time to address and interact with the public space and a broader audience. In a short documentary by Renaud Barret, produced by the European cultural television channel *ARTE*, and relating the Kinshasa art scene and performance acts taking place in the city, the following affirmation is audible: “using one's own body as an art medium is a choice and *comes as evident*” (Barret 2016, 02:28). Again, I believe that such a statement belongs to a larger sustained rhetoric around visual art practices in the Democratic Republic of Congo and its capital. As much as the body can be a rich medium for interacting with the urban dimension of the city, the following section looks at the reciprocity between the urban nature or realities of Kinshasa, and contemporary visual art practices as mostly observed at the *Kin ArtStudio*. How does the former influence the latter? And alternatively, how do the latter integrate the former?

2.2 Integrating the Urban Fabric

In other words, there never is a straight line between today and tomorrow in these lives; or between here and there, the possible and the impossible, success and failure, or life and death. This also means that the lines of people's lives unfold within a different kind of temporality (*De Boeck & Baloji* 2016: 76).

In the third largest urban agglomeration on the continent, *la débrouille* – resourcefulness, self-reliance or coping strategies – is rampant. This applies to any entrepreneurial, creative and generative undertaking. Hence, the urban texture of the city is characterized by informal ventures and occurrences, and a transient flow of interaction (*De Boeck & Plissart* 2005). In this environment, visual artists and cultural initiatives are not excluded. Taking as a vantage point the *Kin ArtStudio* (*KAS*), I shall start with reviewing its position within this urban context. Located in a slightly decentralized, yet popular neighbourhood called Limete when I did my research in 2016, the platform occupied – on a rental basis – a site comprising several working studios, a kitchen, an office and a bedroom/bathroom unit. Although the platform exists as a formal site, it is in an environment moulded by informal configurations to which of necessity it responds and relates through its initiatives and productions. (Accommodating this aspect of the city goes beyond coping with repeated

electricity cuts, sporadic running water and limited internet connection). Living on the *Kin ArtStudio's* rhythm for four months, I caught up with the studio's contextually relative sense of certitude and urgency. (These two concepts only apply to one's devotion, faith, determination and engagement as there are so many surrounding factors that you cannot overcome or predict). After a few weeks of involvement with the *KAS*, I soon realized that engaging with an art space operating in such an urban setting with a Cartesian mindset and perception of time and space is doomed to comprehensive discrepancies.

On entering the site where the studio is located, nothing suggests artistic activity. There are no apparent external signs that would call attention to the visibility and presence of an art space. Since its inception in 2011, the *KAS* has occupied four different spaces: two in Kinsuka, an equally decentralized but less dense and populated area along the Congo river, the aforementioned one in Limete, and, since early 2017, a 2500 m² warehouse space located in the former UTEX Africa – a former major industrial textile company in the DRC – compound, which is much more central and has better access to key facilities (such as water and electricity). Pointing out the inconspicuous situation of the *Kin ArtStudio*, I stress the non-direct relation it maintains with the public space in its daily activities. The *Kin ArtStudio* is known only to those who frequent or visit it, local artists, art students, cultural practitioners and institutions, and relatively few international actors. It confers on the space a collective strengthening and watchful sense of intimacy.

Whereas the *Kin ArtStudio* enjoys a relatively low-key popularity in Kinshasa, its founder, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, is a well-known visual artist in the capital (Fig. 7), alongside artists such as Freddy Tsimba and Maître (Alfred) Liyolo. As a matter of fact, it seems that in popular neighbourhoods everyone potentially knows him. Sitting in the studio's office, facing Vitshois, I received a call from my aunt. She exclaimed: "I am with your friend Vitshois in Lingwala, he has helped us to solve an urgent matter with my friend here, such a gentleman!" I was looking at Vitshois while receiving the news, and laughing at the fact that someone had probably impersonated him, or rather done so after being confused with him. That young man had certainly no bad intentions. On the contrary, being identified as Vitshois conferred on him influential social recognition, which he may have used to help my aunt's friend. This anecdote reveals his popularity, on which he relies to advance the *Kin ArtStudio's* interests. In a context where the cult of personality is ingrained in social perceptions and interactions (De Boeck & Plissart 2005), one remembers more easily a

person's name than that of his/her affiliated institution; hence, he is the interface, the principal referent, the entry to the art platform.



Figure 7. Tembo Advertising Campaign *Respect!* - “The Future in Our Hands” starring Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and largely visible on main avenues in Kinshasa. 2016. Courtesy of Bracongo.

The platform's relation to the urban nature of Kinshasa can be discussed in line with several qualifying adjectives (transient, ephemeral, informal, volatile, invisible, etc.) applied to the DRC's capital. In this regard, Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart's *Kinshasa: Tales of an Invisible City* (2005), as well as Filip De Boeck and Sammy Baloji's *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds* (2016), are insightful and poetic guides into the metaphysical facets of the city. Further, the urban texture of the city has been unfolding in reaction to state failure in Kinshasa. Kinshasa's urbanity bears the signs of '*la débrouille*'. Integrating the urban fabric, as an art space, means accepting the unfavourable and constraining nature of the environment for the production, diffusion, circulation and commodification of visual arts. Rather than accepting apathetically those urban conditions, integrating them implies relying on and embracing them in any creative endeavours. Confronted with deplorable urban realities, Kinshasa's inhabitants have little or no scope for political or reforming action or influence, hence, the need to come up with 'self-reliant strategies'.

2.2.1 The Kin ArtStudio: A Translation of Urban Contingencies

The studio's daily rhythm is not at odds with the pulse of the city. At the time when I was there, four artists were in residence preparing for the *Young Congo* project. Those four months were much more than a residency, inasmuch as it was a translation of urban contingencies as experienced by these artists. I was not simply observing and not only interacting with an art space. The *KAS* is a real communal and supportive space that goes beyond artistic concerns. The associated artists related to the art space as a family, a bonding and enabling site. “*On est ensemble*”: these three words, often coined as a trivial interjection in francophone Africa, have much resonance in the Kinshasa flow of interactions. Meaning “we are together”, they stress the need to rely on one another, they denote the interdependencies that bind together everyone’s fate. We are stronger united than alone. At the heart of the *Kin ArtStudio*’s guiding principles, this conviction was truly acted out, but it also has its downside. When the call for unity turns into ‘whether you are with us or against us’ polarising confrontations, the very call you are making does not hold its validity anymore.

During that period in Kinshasa, Fransix, Aristote, Serge, Nkembo, Papa José (Fig. 8), Vitshois and myself were residing on the site. We occasionally spent time at home or visiting family. The notion of a collective, which these artists are not *per se*, did not only express itself through mutual creative and conceptual inspiration: it also took meaning in its social expression, a very natural outcome in the face of urban adversity. I truly lived a familial experience, with the tussles that this implies. Thus, the establishment or formation of an art or creative space involving the collaboration of individualities in a Kinshasa context cannot be envisaged without taking on board the social, personal and familial contingencies in which everyone lives. These contingencies inform in turn the ways in which the platform functions. The *KAS* was a second home for many of the associated artists.



Figure 8. Maxence Dedry (2016) takes a portrait of Papa José at the *Kin ArtStudio*.

A sense of belonging and cohesion reigned; all were determined to succeed, facing the many hindrances that the context presents. As much as one can imagine the physical obstacles and challenges in the realization of creative and artistic projects in a city like Kinshasa, one should also acknowledge the invisible and occult nature in which social dynamics are entangled. Here, occult refers to the supernatural, to systems of belief that acknowledge life's mystical dimension, not without apprehension. Creating a parallel between “the non-transparent, speculative and volatile nature of ... forms of capital production, profit-making and wealth accumulation” in Kinshasa and the “cultural discourses and practices of the occult” (De Boeck & Baloji 2016: 254) in order to comprehend them, Filip de Boeck sees these discourses and practices as a way to negotiate the uncertainty of relative success and welfare. This was most evident in our case in the evening moments of communion that were held every evening at the studio. The studio's daily practices cannot be disassociated from the belief in a sort of invisible ‘para-reality’ that characterizes the city of Kinshasa, and reigns over the studio's objectives. However, the occult or metaphysical was not an omnipresent concern, dedication or preoccupation. It was merely acknowledged and invoked.

The studio does not maintain a yearly agenda. It carries on its projects within the accidental framework of their feasibility as the *Young Congo* project attests it. Involved in the curating of the exhibition during the first semester of 2016, I was confronted by the

fragilities on which it rested. The initial sponsorship was eventually revoked, which complicated the realisation of the project in terms of financial support and exhibition space. The selection of artists underwent several revisions. Without advancing the reasons of those adjustments, they reveal how managing a cultural project in such an urban context brings a great deal of uncertainty. Then, how does an art space accommodate those uncertainties? As I experienced it, the *KAS* and its associated artists accepted them, always moving on, until the project gets concretised. There was a sense of things being 'on hold', of active-passive waiting – remaining active, occupied, on the lookout for extra opportunities, not (being) able to determine the course of events – as nothing can ever be guaranteed. Filip de Boeck points out that: “urban living seems to consist of constant stops and starts, directed by chance and misfortune, or ‘miracle’ and ‘fate’”. Further, he adds: “people have to be always in an anticipatory mode, always on the lookout, ready to be on the go, alert and open to the opportunity any moment might offer; but without necessarily knowing if or when that moment is going to present itself or what it might bring, or what exactly that particular window of opportunity might consist of” (De Boeck & Balaji 2016: 76). This tells us about the scope of decision and foresight that the *Kin ArtStudio*'s then residents have had. This aspect constitutes an integral part of the studio's way of functioning, although it aspires to overcome it.

2.2.2 The Mobile Art Gallery

One recent and relevant project that the platform has set up and that speaks to 'the urban' is the *Mobile Art Gallery*. As the name of the project indicates, the concept is based on the idea of taking visual art outside its institutional confines to enable contemporary productions to enter into dialogue with a broader public (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. A woman glancing at the *Mobile Art Gallery* set up on *Place Commerciale* during the Connexion Kin Festival and presenting Fransix Tenda's Makambu Yamikoloyo, Kinshasa/Limete, 2015. Courtesy of the *Kin ArtStudio*.

The project has been imagined by Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo and took place for the first time in 2015 as part of the Connexion Kin Festival²⁹ of which the *KAS* was a partner. It occupied the central square of the neighbourhood Limete, and presented Fransix Tenda's work. The second edition took place in March 2016 in front of the ABA, and presented Alexandre Kyungu's work, to which I shall return.

In a context in which music, dance, and performing arts generally speaking hold the upper hand, visual arts do not fully fuel the collective imagination. In an urban reality that lacks functioning cultural and art institutions – a fact to which I shall return in relation to artists' self-positioning in this context – and hence an audience to attend exhibitions of art productions, let alone become consumers of art, the *Mobile Art Gallery* reaches out to

²⁹“The KVS (Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg – i.e. Royal Flemish Theater) launched this festival in 2009. It lasted for five days, but it already incorporated all the elements that characterise *Connexion Kin*: firmly rooted in the local scene, but at the same time open and international. That first festival was a great success, and gradually the scale increased and the reputation of the festival grew.” – “The sixth *Connexion Kin*, Kinshasa's international arts festival took place from 2 to 12 July 2015. It is emphatically a city festival: several sites in the borough of Limete were transformed into cultural venues and the central square was fitted out as the main meeting place.” – “*Connexion Kin* is a co-production by the KVS and Studios Kabako, with *Plateforme Contemporaine* as executive producer” retrieved from <http://www.kvs.be/en/focus/zesde-editie-festival-connexion-kin-kinshasa-2-tot-12-juli-2015>.

people. Performance and performing arts allow a direct and lively interaction with the public, as I have reflected earlier, when visual arts might find it more arduous.

Assembled out of wood panels and poles, the gallery is quickly set up and dismantled, which gives countless possibilities for temporary locations (Fig. 10). This project accounts for a more literal understanding of 'integrating the urban fabric' which is primordial to the *Kin ArtStudio*'s mission. The studio's local rootedness is an engagement with the urban nature of Kinshasa. Although the urban living conditions as I have briefly described them in the previous section seem hard to transcend, the city's urban constellation allows for artistic interventions that speak to that condition. The *Mobile Art Gallery* demonstrates that it is possible to undertake an exhibition project in Kinshasa, dialoguing with the urban configuration of the city, and deploying a format that allows much creative autonomy. Hence, integrating the urban fabric happens on two levels; negotiating one's position as an art space, as an artist considering the urban (social) dynamics and realities of Kinshasa, and secondly, finding local and urban relevance in the conditions that surround the diffusion and appreciation of visual arts in that context.



Figure 10. (Danny Willems 2015). Fransix Tenda and Co. setting up the *Mobile Art Gallery* during the Connexion Kin Festival, Kinshasa.

My inquiry into the specificities of Kinshasa, of the peculiar urban living conditions that characterise it has the purpose of making explicit the socio-cultural framework in which

visual arts initiatives and artists strive for pertinence. The following section will expand on this framework, taking as a standpoint the relative experience of young graduated or emerging artists based in Kinshasa, and considering the late cultural developments and relations that have shaped the local environment of visual arts practices and production since the early 2000s.

2.3 Finding Meaning in One's Practice in Kinshasa's Visual Arts (Urban) Landscape

2.3.1 An Uneasy Dichotomy

The pairing of culture (including artistic practices) with development policies and goals that evolved at the turn of the millennium has had consequences for our perception of the role of artists in nations that are deemed 'developing countries' (Lauré al-Samarai 2014: 45). It has helped to forge an understanding of the visual artist as a social worker, reinforcing the dichotomy between art as social practice or a social tool, and art as a profession and commodity, as if these two were irreconcilable (Oguibe 2015). The absence of strong cultural bodies and institutions forces one to create the conditions for the circulation and diffusion of one's work or to find them elsewhere. There is a crude reality in how local artists navigate this dichotomy. Very often in a position of cultural dependency, when it comes to raising funding, there is a reliance most of the time on Kinshasa's 'usual suspects' (*Institut Français, Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles* and *Goethe Institut*), causing artists' practice to become legitimized under a set of social and developmental compliances as set up by developmental goals or agendas. Ultimately, I believe that what a contemporary visual artist wants is visibility: visibility of his/her work and message thereof, and the ability to reach people through his/her practice.

Interviewing some of the artists taking part in the *Young Congo* project (S. Diakota, A. Mago, N. Moswala, F. Tenda, V.M. Bondo, interview 2016, March) they stressed how this project, as well as their engagement with the *Kin ArtStudio*, was actually about finding meaning in their practice, as young contemporary artists practising in Kinshasa. They were conscious of participating not only in an exhibition resulting from months of residency, but also in a building and claiming impulse that seeks to empower them. Thoughts of leaving in hope of better prospects have occupied most of the inhabitants of Kinshasa. This is also the case for some of the artists who have worked with the platform over the years.

Reinventing oneself in that context entails an ability to identify with or relate to an artistic environment, and/or a creatively enabling and supportive framework that allows for one's growth. Daring to envision a future conducive environment for the practice, dissemination and public relevance of visual arts in Kinshasa is a major preoccupation. "We took the risk pathway," says Alexandre Kyungu, Kinshasa-based artist and member of the *Vi. To.*³⁰ collective, to which I shall return in the following section (A. Kyungu 2016, interview). Although risky, unstable and insecure, the collective believes in local engagement, through civic education and the popularization of visual arts for instance: "a work that will take over generations" (G. Masky 2016, interview).

The Kinshasa-based artist cannot stop at the single act of producing if he/she conceives his/her practice as a mean of survival. He/she needs to come up with strategies and solutions to diffuse, promote and generate an income from his/her work. Here, I refer to strategies and solutions that do not involve representation by international galleries, which is the privilege of only a few. And to that end, there is no predetermined model. In her study on the formation of African artists, Rose Kirumira³¹ evokes the 'versatility of the contemporary African artist' (Kirumira 2008: 44-45), exposing the many factors, influences and negotiating terrains that impact on their identity formation as artist(s).

The context – which extends beyond Kinshasa to many parts of the continent as a whole – sees the contemporary African visual artist wearing multiple hats out of necessity rather than choice, which enhances the possibilities and scope of one's reinvention. He becomes his own funder, curator and agent. The *Kin ArtStudio*, in many instances, is responding to young artists' need to be multi-functional in this way. How do we understand the status or position of the contemporary African artist in such a precarious and unsteady context? Is she/he a professional practitioner, and if so, what do we understand by profession in this regard and context – see section 3.8? Is she/he a cultural worker, or a bearer of social responsibilities? Is his/her practice a free dedicated act? These are all pressing questions

³⁰Vi.To. stands for *Vision Totale* – i.e. Total Vision. Vi.To. is a self-proclaimed collective of former students of the ABA composed of Alexandre Kyungu, Gaël Masky and Hilary Kuyangiko Balu.

³¹ "Dr. Rose Namubiru Kirumira is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University in Uganda where she also obtained her PhD in art education. Her dissertation, "The Formation of Contemporary Visual Artists in Africa: Revisiting Residency Programmes", investigated the value of informal learning spaces in the formation of African visual artists. She also has experience in coordinating artists' activities in Uganda and has attended several artists' workshops and residencies in Zambia, Kenya, Botswana and South Africa"

<http://www.ru.ac.za/artsofafrica/latestnews/presentationreconfiguringtheomwesoboardgameperformingnarrativesofbug.html>

that need to be addressed if contemporary artists' local relevance is to find meaning. One of the *Kin ArtStudio's* missions is to professionalize the practice, to stress emerging artists' autonomy in this regard, preventing them from getting caught up in the instrumental and supplying traps of the 'global art world' and development schemes. Vitshois has always insisted on reciprocity and the need to watch out for one's interests when engaging or collaborating with international bodies or actors. As I have said, the models for reinventing oneself in order to find meaning and financial remuneration in one's practice are varied (but limited).

2.3.2 *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts : A Reference. From Colonial Heritage to Progressive Opening Up.*

Although this thesis is not an enquiry into visual arts education in Kinshasa, it can be used as evidence for embarking on the present overview of *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts* (ABA). Colonial heritage was a central actor in the field; this institution has been established in Kinshasa since 1949 and was given its present name eight years later. Its centrality owes much to the fact that it is the only school that teaches fine art in the capital city. As pointed out above, it saw the emergence of several artistic movements that have contributed to the definition of the state of contemporaneity in current practices.

In an interview the director, Henri Kalama Akulez, who was appointed in 2016, stressed the need for efforts to come up with new modules in the curriculum, notably art history, criticism and writing (H.A. Kalama 2016, interview). Achieving international standards is a priority on his agenda. The academy is more than a space for formal training; it is a meeting and referential space where the academic splendour of the institution is progressively challenged by former and actual students for whom identifying with this institution and its curriculum has proven to be difficult. Classic and rigid teaching in painting, sculpture or metalworking might still haunt students at times (although many of them assert that it did provide them with solid technical skills), but prospects look bright. Although the institution has been subject to criticisms, its long history, centrality and list of alumni make it a hub always likely to generate meaningful exchanges, projects and transformation. As a matter of fact, there are numerous students, past and present, occupying the site, creating on site, hanging out around the site – in the neighborhood of Lingwala – and ultimately claiming their relation to the institution and its potential transformation. The school presently lists seven options at higher education level:

ceramics, painting, sculpture, metal, interior design/architecture, visual communication, and lately, conservation and restoration. The curriculum has remained more or less the same over the past four decades (under different course names, with the exception of conservation and restoration, which was added to the curriculum in the academic year 2012-2013), resulting in a status quo that has been problematic for prospective students eager to become familiarized and to engage with new mediums and modes of expression such as video or performance. These are practices that are not on the curriculum and that students can be exposed to by themselves or through the school's partnerships.

2.3.3 International Cultural Cooperation: A Necessary Evil

The appointment of Henri Kalama Akulez, the symposium *Mediating Past, Present and Futures: Dialogues with Global South Experiences*, the reopening of the Goethe-Institut's liaison office in Kinshasa in 2015, and the signing of the charter EUNIC-RDC³² in May 2016 all proclaim the strengthening of international cultural cooperation. The over-reliance on the commonly called 'usual suspects', which has been often critically addressed at the *Kin ArtStudio*, is hard to challenge. The Congolese state has long relied on its international partners to support the cultural and artistic sector. With the state failing on so many levels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, one easily turns to partners able to offer funding and ensure the realization of projects. But at what cost?

Concerned about the professionalization and empowerment of contemporary visual artists on a local level, the involvement of third-party international actors as facilitators or as invited artists in cultural projects can have the effect of undermining the creativity and capacities of those already on the ground. Moreover, the thematic agenda that these institutions put forward can restrict one's artistic freedom in having to comply with it. The KAS has worked with and received support from the three institutional actors that make up the 'usual suspects'.

³²EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) is a European cultural network. Through a hundred clusters spread around the world, it "delivers collaborative transnational projects and connects connect cultures". Retrieved from <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/>. "EUNIC-RDC is the network of institutions and European cultural centres active in DRC: *le Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, l'Institut Français de Kinshasa, the Goethe-Institut, Camões IP* (Portugal), and the Spanish and Italian Embassies Cooperation. With the support of the European Union delegation, it organises a number of cultural activities in the country" .Retrieved and translated from https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/dr-congo-kinshasa/28978/kick-masterclasse-en-photographie-lancement-du-catalogue-de-photographies-%C2%AB-elle-il-%C2%BB_fr.

When I left Kinshasa in July 2016, the first workshop of the project “*Goethe Art Raum*”, an initiative of the Goethe-Institut to assist artists in the elaboration and realization of a personal project, took place. Mentored by N’Goné Fall³³ and Virginie Dupray³⁴, Nkembo Moswala and Fransix Tenda, who were working with the *Kin ArtStudio* at that time, benefited from that project. It is in the stages of elaboration, conception and reflection that the discursive ground of an artwork or project first takes shape. As argued in the first chapter, it is through discursive strategies that the ‘global art’ world assumes authority in legitimizing art works. Enabling Kinshasa-based artists to think autonomously through their projects, from conception to realization, and to account for it with *author-ity* (Oguibe, 2004), is a necessary step in the subversion of the dominant representations of art *from* the Congo.

2.3.4 On Collectivism in Kinshasa’s Current Visual Art Scene

One of the problems of post-colonial Africa is that it creates unhealthy fractions within communities that compete rather than collaborate (*Nwagbogu* 2017).

Exhibited at first through the *Mobile Art Gallery*, Alexandre Kyungu introduced me to his collective Vi.To – abbreviation for *Vision Totale* (Total Vision) – that he and two former schoolmates and friends created. Before reflecting on our exchanges and the interview I had with them, I would like to draw attention to the appearance of art collectives in the city of Kinshasa. Whether holding a space in the city or not, often practising at the intersection of various art disciplines, and whether or not publicly recognized or self-proclaimed, collectives have been proliferating in Kinshasa. They operate in different fashions. Some have a wide social action scope, organizing workshops, and performance and outreach events. Is the mandate of foreign funding initiating those activities? Or are they thought out as a constitutive part of these collectives’ cultural programmes? Some assert their ‘avant-

³³N’Goné Fall is an independent curator, art critic, and consultant in cultural engineering. She graduated from the *École Spéciale d’Architecture* in Paris, France, and was editorial director of the Paris-based contemporary African art magazine *Revue Noire* from 1994 to 2001. Fall has edited books on contemporary visual arts and photography in Africa” – “Fall was one of the curators of the African photography Biennale in Bamako, Mali, in 2001, and a guest curator at the 2002 Dakar Biennale in Senegal.” Retrieved from http://curatorsintl.org/collaborators/ngone_fall.

³⁴Virginie Dupray worked at the French Institute in London (1995-1999) as head of communication and public relationsrelation and the *Centre National de la Danse* in Paris (1999-2003), as head of marketing and communication. Since 2003, she has accompanied different artists and events in the field of dance (choreographer Nacera Belaza, Sophiatou Kossoko, Béatrice Massin) and visual arts (*Kinshasa Scénographies urbaines* 2006-07). She is the administrator of the *Studios Kabako* since 2003”. Retrieved from <http://www.princeclausfund.org/fr/network/virginie.html>.

garde' nature, innovating or radicalizing the practice of visual art, acting against the tide of expectations, drawing from the rich creative resources and realities that Kinshasa offers. Nevertheless, they all mean to empower their members, working under a common vision and impulse. None of these modes of operation are exclusionary; rather they complement each other. Art collectives have formed and existed in the history of contemporary art, but they carry out a vital socio-cultural function in Kinshasa.

Here, as I stipulated above in the case of the *KAS*, the notion of collective does not strictly account for twentieth century and Western delineations of the concept, such as in art movements like Fluxus or Guerrilla Girls. It extends to any form of association that at some point in time and place has grown conscious that gathering forces in a precarious context for the development of art practices was necessary. The formation of collectives in Kinshasa, in addition to focusing on the aesthetic and the political, and in line with the overall argument, expresses a form of activism that addresses “the more critical notion of the political, which...grounds all relations of power and discourses between artists, activists, and institutions” (Enwezor 2007: 247). As I interpret it, these collectives respond to an institutional discursive posture that still views the African artist's work along postcolonial cultural political lines, and to the cultural power relations that restrict or confine their practice. It has less to do with the establishment of an art group or the drawing up of a creative manifesto than with collective enabling. This section cannot do justice to all the existing visual and performing arts collectives in Kinshasa. I shall mention a few, following my encounters with them, their relative action in the city, and the relevance they have in light of this thesis's argument.

Before expanding on the collective Vi.To., one can hardly ignore the collective SADI, which has been quite active in the realms of performance, dance, visual arts and music through projects such as *Dimanche Akoustik* (Acoustic Sunday), or the KINACT festival³⁵, a performance art festival whose second edition took place in July 2017, and has been a consistent platform in its ability to remain active in the production and diffusion of art. Yves Sambu, Fransix Tenda, Alain Polo or TK Russell are some of the artists who have related or engaged with the collective SADI. Actually, it seems more appropriate to talk about a platform, as the term collective is too rigid and restrictive.

³⁵See <http://www.kinact.org/> for more information.

Many have seen their durability and sustainability jeopardized by the unfriendliness of Kinshasa's environment and infrastructure. Such collective initiatives or spaces are fluctuating entities, depending on available – often external – funding and the urban contingencies that I have described earlier in this chapter. This superficial and uncertain state of affairs sees artists coming in and out of these art spaces, and can generate internal conflicts. Questions around the legitimacy of (i.e. the motivations behind) their establishment, activities or artistic choices, and around the individual integrity and commitment of associated members often prompt disputes or disagreements. These can become fierce in a 'terrain of difficulty' in which one soon realizes that opportunities are scarce for rather many candidates. And here, by opportunities, I mean what the 'global art world' can provide through international cooperation grants, partnerships, workshops or other projects. Art spaces in Kinshasa and similar contexts are initially a supportive shelter that might turn silently competitive and inhospitable.

The Vi.To. collective, composed of Hilary Kuyangiko Balu, Alexandre Kyungu and Gaël Masky, have discussed with me how the introduction to international contemporary art practices through self-documentation or workshops has been the impetus to gather and reflect further on their practice in their context. This awareness seems to be a constant in the formation of art collectives in Kinshasa. "It was a shock to discover contemporary art, which appeared as a follow-up of what we had", says Gaël Masky, reflecting on the abruptness of such a discovery, considering the classical teaching dispensed at the academy (G. Masky 2016, interview).

Mobutu Sese Seko's modernist ambitions have left both material and abstract traces in the urban fabric of the city (Malaquais 2011). *La Place/Tour de L'Échangeur* in the neighbourhood of Limete is a case in point. Looming high towards the sky, this futurist building was erected in memory of Patrice Lumumba – a cynical tribute in the opinion of many – and was meant to accommodate a museum and other public leisure services. Like many of Mobutu's grandiose and extravagant projects in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it never came to completion. A central and welcoming building in the urban landscape and imagery of Kinshasa, it has been undergoing renovation and has been hosting several art events for the past three years. These are part of a state effort to reactivate the site that is part of the *Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo* (IMNC) – Institute of the National Museums of Congo. Presently, the building hosts the *Musée d'Art Contemporain et Multimédia(s)* (MACM) – Museum of Contemporary Art and Multimedia(s). To my knowledge, the holding

MediaLab³⁶, via its branch ArtLab, is in charge of the museum's management. The MACM, aware of its symbolic centrality, has hosted several exhibitions, conferences and festivals in partnership with the ABA, the Goethe-Institut and other cultural operators or actors. The synergetic potential of this venue could act as a catalyst to enhance collaboration in a dispersed visual arts scene.

³⁶ " Medialab is a Congolese holding company that aims at connecting its economic operators to the African market in general and more particularly the DRC, in allowing them to develop a success story business, in adequacy with this specific market. " » Retrieved and translated from <http://www.medialab-group.com/>.

Chapter Three: Sites & Networks for New Legitimizing Narratives

3.1 On the Need and Potential of Open Art Spaces on the Continent

Visual art spaces across the continent have multiplied since the 1990s as a response to the lack of favourable conditions for the production and diffusion of artworks and projects (Kouoh 2013). The manifold forms of organization by which they operate call for a contextual understanding of them, which the second chapter of this thesis has attempted to provide. Relating the mainstream discourses and curatorial trends that have framed an art of the Congo to a personal and contextual analysis of the *Kin ArtStudio* suggests the nature of my research. The need for these spaces can hardly be contested, whereas their relevance has been the subject of growing theoretical attention and discussion (Kouoh 2013; Kirumira 2008; Lauré Al-Samarai 2014; Nwezi et al. 2015). In this chapter, I aim to reflect on their potential as curatorial and discursive platforms in their own right, able to challenge the dominant dynamics and mechanisms of the ‘global art world’. Referring to those dynamics and mechanisms, I emphasize the problems raised in the two previous chapters, namely, the reductionist representative systems that have framed art falling outside Western parameters, the difficult and compromised position of contemporary artists operating in African contexts within the ‘global contemporary art’ establishment (Oguibe 2004), and finally, the stigmas of a lasting North–South cultural axis.

Referring to Roland Barthes’ definition of speech or language as a code of legislation (Barthes 1982: 460), Olu Oguibe insists on the fact that: “utterance, language, that which we speak or write – and, one may add, paint or sculpt – all that we produce as a body of text, as a composite of signifiers, enters the service of *power* upon coming into being” (Oguibe 2004: 13). I wish to elaborate on art spaces as potential discursive sites; curatorial platforms or spaces able to articulate their own language in relation to their practices and creations. The handling of language – the ability to speak out, and the production of discourses, as signifiers – confer power. The West’s production of knowledge about ‘contemporary African art’ is not a disinterested contribution to that field. The act of speaking out on behalf of African artists, through power relations ingrained in discursive and institutional cultural dynamics, becomes legitimizing. It becomes a process through which the ‘global art’ world ascribes value to contemporary practices that fall outside its ideological scope, thereby wanting to subdue those practices by valuing them according to its own criteria . To quote Adriano Mixinge’s rallying call: “the time has come, then, for

change and the renewal of creativity and of mechanisms and strategies that lead to legitimization” (2009: 65).

Throughout this thesis, I argue from the vantage point of the *Kin ArtStudio*, as a Kinshasa-based art space, from the one of young and emerging artists in that same context, and, finally, from my own academic and personal standpoint. These different, yet complementary, perspectives, merge around the question of visual art spaces’ relevance and potential in a central African urban context. In this chapter, and from the same complementary vantage point, I elaborate on the ways those art spaces position themselves in a postcolonial cultural matrix, and are able to take ownership of the mediation between their work – that is, the act of creation – and its presentation or diffusion.



Figure 11. (Tshilumba Mukendi 2016). *Study KAS* – Serge Diakota in front of his studio at the *Kin ArtStudio*, Kinshasa/Limete.

3.2 Ownership, Authority and Agency

Before unravelling this chapter’s main argument, it is imperative to delineate the meaning of the concepts of ownership, *author-ity* (Oguibe 2004) and agency in relation to this research. The three terms apply to whether the artist is a creative agent (in this specific context), to the work of art as a stand-alone object or entity, to the *Kin ArtStudio* as a space of cultural and knowledge production, and finally to my own role as academic writer.

These terms are surely interrelated, yet they have various implications depending on the cultural positions – individual or collective – from which they are understood, claimed or established. Within the field of visual art, the concept of ownership extends beyond the possession of material goods or cultural artifacts. In the book *Arts Under Pressure* – promoting cultural diversity in the age of globalization, Joost Smiers (2003) taps into the question of ownership. He states: “the question of ownership of the means of cultural production, distribution and promotion is the core issue in a worldwide battle to reach the largest possible audiences” (Smiers 2003: 28). In this statement, he makes clear that ownership is about controlling the means of cultural production, distribution and promotion “from creative idea to cultural consumption” (Smiers 2003: 29). Holding these means confers tremendous power: the power to dictate what is trendy and representative, and is ultimately consumed. “It is the power to select a few artists and reject the rest; and to give those who are selected massive distribution and promotion” (ibid.).

The first chapter has looked at the dominant mechanisms through which ‘Congolese visual art’ has been promoted in the ‘global contemporary art world’ through discursive strategies, focusing on two major exhibitions. In light of this question of ownership, the 2015 exhibition *Beauté Congo*, rightfully or otherwise, speaks for the hold that a cultural conglomerate, a network of cultural actors, have had with regard to contemporary art from Congo. For this exhibition, this conglomerate played within the rules of mass entertainment, or rather with an intention of mass visual consumption (140 000 visitors³⁷), partnering with *La Fondation Cartier*, a corporate foundation. Ownership is a matter of control and power. In a ‘global’ visual art culture whose systems of production and representation still capitalize on postcolonial cultural states of affairs and individual conditions, these systems need to be critically addressed.

How does one take ownership of the cultural dynamics that take place between the emergence of a creative idea and its consumption? As a visual art space based on the continent of Africa, being able to be in charge of those processes and account for them is vital. As an African artist based on the continent, at the very core of the creative act, this translates to the will not to compromise one’s *author-ity* in these processes.

³⁷ Information provided through e-mail correspondence with *La Fondation Cartier* (L. Sacramone, email, 1st March). La Fondation Cartier for contemporary art, an example of corporate patronage, is dedicated to promoting and raising public awareness of contemporary art. <https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/history-and-mission/philanthropy>

Olu Oguibe came up with the concept of *author-ity* as a way to defy and reconsider the word's very meaning, in an article entitled "Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodernism and Contemporary African Art" originally published in 1995 in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*. Oguibe was already aware of the slippery identifying terrain on which African artists, whether practising in the diaspora or on the continent, have to position themselves. This terrain induces a sort of compromising walk of fame that would legitimize them in the 'global contemporary art world', a walk that they have unconsciously assimilated in many cases. Recalling an interview between the American critic Thomas McEvilley and the painter Bakari Ouattara, born in Ivory Coast but practising in the West since the 1980s, Oguibe reveals how the artist, against his will, is subjugated to the West's gaze and exotic interpretations, and merely relegated to his otherness (2004: 10-17). What Bakari Ouattara has been deprived of is his right to self-definition. His work always stands behind him, he is perceived to be an African artist before being an artist. *Author-ity* is the ability to self-articulate as an artist, to claim authorship of one's work on one's own terms.

In the present section, elaborating on the relevance of visual art spaces in a Kinshasa and African context at large, I am more concerned with the collective scope of the concept of agency, rather than its individual connotations. In an article entitled "On that fateful journey somewhere: Afro-pessimism, Afropolitanism, and Agency", Ugochukwu-Smooth (2014) draws our attention to this distinction with regards to Afropolitanism. When he interprets Taye Selasi's Afropolitanism as centred on an individual's agency, he concurs with Achille Mbembe's extension of the concept to an "African-mediated vision of the world" (Ugochukwu-Smooth 2014: 96) that expresses itself together with globalist considerations:

Mbembe directs our attention to an African agency that is fundamental to the way these global flows are transmitted and translated on the continent. His Afropolitanism is a state of mind and also a platform on which folks on the continent engage contemporary global (cultural) flows *on their own terms*. It is obviously a positive and generous take on the subject (Ugochukwu-Smooth 2014: 97).

What is fundamental in this extract is the mediation between global flows and an African agency, a complex process in which tensions and compromises inevitably occur.

Then, I appeal to a sense of collective agency: this rescue has less to do with the radical affirmation of a collective identity and force than with the ability to situate and negotiate the access and presence of art and cultural productions within a broader global constellation (Ugochukwu-Smooth 2014: 98). Then, in regard to the present argument, one understands

agency as the ability to position oneself in global cultural networks. For open art spaces over the African continent, these instances of positioning are not ever firm or definite, but primarily negotiated and fluid.

3.3 The Kin ArtStudio: A Workshop, an Institution, a Studio?

We can partly relegate the *KAS* to the status of a workshop (Kasfir & Förster 2013). It is surely a site of artistic production that shares some patterns in common with the concept of workshop in African national art histories. To start with, there are multiple understandings of the notion of (a) workshop. From early expressions that induced formality, an emphasis on technicality, and mentorship in the learning of crafts, to contemporary expressions that are modular, temporary and mutually enriching/experienced, the notion of a workshop is not stagnant and keeps evolving along the changing dynamics and parameters that characterise African art scenes. In the case of the *KAS*, as in other and similar African contexts, the structural nature of the visual art space is hardly rigid. In response to the evolution of contemporary visual art practices in Kinshasa, their increasing social and societal implications, globalization's effect on their diffusion and reception, as well as the lack of cultural actors and institutions to regulate these practices, open art spaces as exemplified by the *KAS* have become multimodal entities that escape fixity or a single purpose.

The *Kin ArtStudio* bears the denomination 'studio'. This reveals the project's will to be a space of artistic inspiration, reflection and production first and foremost. Then, this initial purpose involves the sharing of knowledge, experiences and visions. Hence, the *KAS* came up with a four-week workshop programme; *Master Art*³⁸, and residency opportunities, creation being a constant learning process.

In a spirit of global exchanges, once an artwork is produced, one could expect institutions or third actors to take over, and insure its visibility and diffusion. In the absence of such local actors, and considering 'global art' institutions/networks' take on African productions, the *KAS* has grown aware of the importance to be able to present the creations it supports or supervises, and/or be considerably involved in their diffusion. In this respect, the *KAS* extends beyond the notion of the studio as a site of strict artistic production, meaning that

³⁸ *Master Art* gathers between ten and twenty participants, young art practitioners living in the DRC. It is an opportunity for them to develop an art project, with the support of the *KAS* and two invited established artists.

its responsibility as an open art space extends beyond mere art production.

Workshops have been increasingly regulating cultural exchanges and artistic productions in the field of visual arts over the African continent. The Triangle Workshops, including Thupelo³⁹, as well as *Kin ArtStudio's* own *Master Art* workshops, are cases in point. What they present and offer to the artist is not only training: it is also active participation, collaboration and networking opportunities. A workshop is then a temporary active and activated site of exchanges of knowledge. The variety of processes and experiences that come to constitute those spaces in which empowerment and learning take place through intense sharing are the node of decentring and reconfiguring methodologies through which innovative and alternative propositions can emerge. Since there has been a relatively small corpus of study that has looked at the relevance of these on the continent (Kirumira 2008), I extend the reflection to independent visual art spaces.

As opposed to temporary workshops, these spaces are permanent entities that occasionally enjoy the level of emulation that a workshop offers. Can we conceive of them as art institutions, as the *Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa* organized in 2012 at the Raw Company⁴⁰ suggests? I am reluctant to apply the term institution to the *Kin ArtStudio*, because it carries a formal, public, state and ideological connotation. On the other hand, it also connotes the endorsement of a responsibility, an establishment for a great and common cause, as it responds to a demand necessary to the public. Through that prism, new art institutions as they emerge in the form of visual art spaces should be instituted according to their contexts and societal and socio-cultural realities. The *Kin ArtStudio* is conscious of responding to a need, existing for the empowerment of young visual artists, and for the establishment of an interactive platform for the promotion of contemporary art made in Kinshasa, and in the DRC at large. The distancing from the notion of an institution is also motivated by the informal nature of the interactions, exchanges and networks in which the platform inscribes itself. In delineating the factors influencing African artists' formation, Rose Kirumira (2008 : 20) denotes informal networks

³⁹"Thupelo was the first ever Triangle workshop to be held in Africa. It takes place annually, and invites artists from all over the world to participate in a fourteen-day artists' workshop. The Thupelo workshop started in 1985 and has to date had more than 19 workshops" (Kirumira 2008 : 88-89).

⁴⁰RAW Material Company is a centre for art, knowledge and society. It is an initiative involved with curatorial practice, artistic education, residencies, knowledge production, and archiving of theory and criticism on art. It works to foster appreciation and growth of artistic and intellectual creativity in Africa. The programme is trans-disciplinary and is equally informed by literature, film, architecture, politics, fashion, cuisine and diaspora. http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_home?lang=en

as “ individuals or groups of individuals who use casual systems without institutional affiliation or attachment and rely upon unstructured means of information transmission and reception”, Further, based on a study by Krackhardt and Hanson (2005), Kirumira asserts the informality of new formation spaces resting on the understanding of informal networks as structures formed by “lines of communication, friendship, gossip and power (authentic, personal power) based on *trust*” (2008: 21). This insightful principle defining informal networks characterizes rightfully the KAS, and confirms its reluctance to follow the logic of institutionalism.

Although all the artists who have been evolving within the art space interact with each other, aware of a mutual learning process, they nevertheless fall under the supervision and patronage of Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo. However, this relation with the studio’s founder is far from the apprentice–master relationship that characterizes some workshops (Kasfir & Förster 2013) – mostly oriented towards the accurate passing on of skills – on the continent. Nkembo Moswala (*Kin ArtStudio* former resident) contends:

We all have different ways of perceiving things. Sharing moments together, and then trying to distinguish ourselves is difficult. Tell me who you hang out with and I will tell you who you are. Our commonalities hide our differences. When I see Aristote or Serge working, I can be easily influenced. I can start seeing in my work what is theirs, what inspired me. Hence, I turn myself away from that (Moswala 2016, interview, March).

This cautious stance against the homogeneity of style is part of the preservation of individual agency within a collective informal art platform or network.

3.4 On Independence

Many have called for independence as the ultimate solution to the cultural issues I have raised in this thesis. But what does this independence truly entail? Can it or should it ever be achieved as/for a visual art space? In an unpublished paper she presented during the first PROSPA⁴¹ workshop held in 2016 at Rhodes University, Fadzai Veronica Muchemwa, assistant curator at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, makes a crucial distinction in regard to the notion of independence. Pointing to the fact that art spaces are sites of

⁴¹Annual Publishing Workshops are hosted by the Publishing and Research of the South: Positioning Africa (PROSPA) programme, and take place in different African cities each year. The goals of the workshops are to increase and strengthen publishing in the field of the visual and performing arts of Africa, and to prepare articles for publication in relevant scholarly journals. The first workshop was held at Rhodes University in July 2016, and included participants from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa.
<http://www.ru.ac.za/artsof africa/programme/publishingworkshops/#d.en.174685>

contradiction, torn between external and global influences and local realities, she states:

This duality can represent an impediment to the survival of these initiatives. These spaces claim *intellectual and moral independence* from outside influences because the creator and the consumer are one and the same. They are however far from commanding the financial self-sufficiency that would enable them to realize programming over a long term. The magnanimous funding granted by international NGOs and organizations is not infinite and cannot be the only basis for their development (Muchemwa 2016).

First, she distinguishes an intellectual and moral independence from a financial one, which is an essential distinction. Secondly, she further specifies that claims of the former rely on the reduction of the gap between creator and consumer. Hence, art spaces achieve independence through a critical engagement that asks the artist to engage with creation, identifying with the consumer, aware of his or her audience and his or her contextual and geopolitical relevance/position. It is on these terms that art spaces should understand and foster independence.

The autonomous scope of artistic and discursive creativity that open art spaces are willing to enjoy should not prevent institutional collaborations. The criticisms aimed at the strong hold and domination that international art institutions have over discourses of 'contemporary African art' should not lead to the argument for their demise. Here, 'institutions' refers to international art museums, foundations, creative, critical and educational art platforms, and national state institutions. I am less concerned with what I have referred to as the 'usual suspects' as these are mainly contributing to the maintenance of a postcolonial state of cultural affairs that they are willing to challenge (von Ruckteschell 2013), not without conflict.

In this section, independence is actually a prerequisite in order to enter into innovative forms of collaboration. By innovative, I mean forms of collaborations that situate or frame the knowledge that they generate through visual creation and discourse in a space that alter vertical authority, hierarchy or value judgment. Forms of collaboration that rely on a mutual agreement in terms of signifying practices. Shifting the centre of discourse production in relation to contemporary visual art involves several actors in specific/local contexts. Art spaces cannot carry that mission alone. The state, the private cultural sector and education bodies are serious participants in this endeavour.

3.5 Delineate One's Own Work – Telling One's Own Story

The ability to present and curate one's work from a local perspective contributes to shifting the centre of discursive practices. Does this shift rest on the artist's shoulders? It is surely a collective effort that engages various cultural actors: critics, art historians, curators, art institutions, etc. Prior to my arrival in Kinshasa, the preparation of the catalogue for the *Young Congo* exhibition project had been under way. This element of the project was seen as crucial, in the sense that it was an opportunity to be in charge of one of the main discursive instruments of the exhibition. As soon as I arrived, we continued working on the content of the catalogue, which consisted of three introductory texts, along with artists' descriptions based on an interview and their artist's statement, which constitute part of the present research material. In light of these expatiating gestures, how can open art spaces become sites for legitimizing narratives?

The contemporaneity of visual art practices, as outlined in the second chapter, defies the traditional mask that general and poor conceptions of 'African art' expressions have applied to the creativity of the continent. Masks, statuettes, craft, self-taught, DIY⁴², or naïvety, as well as the few labels I have delineated as defining 'Congolese visual art' in the first chapter, have forged a lasting paradigm in which curatorial and institutional propositions continue to take place. Open art spaces have the potential to bring contemporary practices and discourse production outside mainstream and academic institutions (Lauré al-Samarai 2014: 64). *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) has inaugurated a 'global art' age in which curators have become the gatekeepers of exhibition narratives, giving an account of the contemporary visual art expressions of a continent. The international reverberations of those curatorial and discursive practices have handicapped African artists in their attempt at self-representation. It is imperative to challenge the principles on which major institutions set up and curate mega-exhibitions of 'contemporary African art' (Chikukwa 2011). In addition to a call for a contextual, historical and specific discursive approach, the motivations and legitimacy that underpin the retelling of one's story should be questioned. Muchemwa notes that:

If one examines exhibitions of new work by artists from Africa today organized in Europe or the United States in the past decade, it becomes apparent that in the greater number of cases artists have not played an active role in conceptualizing the presentation of their works themselves (Muchemwa 2016).

Expressing the same concern in an interrogative iteration in her doctoral thesis entitled

⁴²Abbreviation for 'Do-it-yourself'

The Formation of Contemporary Visual Artists in Africa: Revisiting Residency

Programmes, Rose Kirumira asks: “if African artists visibly contribute to global aesthetics, why are they themselves conspicuously missing in their own discussion?” (Kirumira 2008: 50).

Considering the unfamiliarity that young Kinshasa-based artists have with conceptual, analytical or research methods, giving their work a discursive weight or interpretative framework does not come easily. As they were not provided with those tools throughout their early training, the *Kin ArtStudio* has stressed this aspect of an artist’s work. After the setback that the *Young Congo* project experienced, Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo encouraged the then artists in residency to think about the presentation of their pieces and their broader meaning.

One relevant example is Alexandre Kyungu’s interactive installation for the *Young Congo* exhibition. Carving imaginary maps on wooden supports, alluding to notions of global identity through fading faces portrayed on these supports, to frontiers and immigration, he invites the audience to sit on low footstools that are constitutive of his work, and to engage with it in a very direct way. Breaking with the idea of an object and a spectator in conventional exhibitions of visual art, Kyungu’s intervention or invitation to sit down, dialogue and interact with the piece, the space, and him secondarily, allows for multiple readings and perceptions of his work. *Ebonga Sit Down, c’est notre Espace – Ebonga Sit Down, that is our Space* (2017), although quite exclamatory in its title, is a void space of presence and absence, of imagined worlds and identities. As such, it disturbs discursive and signifying practices that tend to give meaning and value according to a predisposed language or interpretative framework.





Figure 12. Alexandre Kyungu's *Ebonga Sit Down, c'est notre Espace* invites attendees to sit and interact with the piece during the exhibition *Young Congo* in 2017 in Kinshasa. Courtesy of Kin ArtStudio

My research experience and observations with the KAS have highlighted the requisite character of the platform as a site of narrative production or reimagination. Kirumira points out that: "African artists have minimal access to general discourse of national and international level which means that they cannot discuss and share existing knowledge about new developments in visual art amongst themselves". Further, she adds: "African artists are currently vulnerable to the art discourses that speak about their practice, and are not concerned about their art worlds" (Kirumira 2008). They are vulnerable to acts of intellectual interpretation that dismiss the broader context of creation. Such interpretations cannot be legitimizing, applying appreciation and valuing criteria's or principles onto art works or practices according to 'global art's agenda. Does it get down to intellectual rigor and thorough criticism? Should/Can discursive gestures towards artworks be exclusively accountable for the resulting creation? Or, is it a matter of having the necessary tools to claim and convey the *raison d'être* of one's work?

Kin ArtStudio's artists have been developing a concern to work on and refine their artistic statement and portfolio, encouraged by the platform. It could be a really tedious assignment, but it is surely a beneficial one. Most of the studio's associated artists have not been taught a writing approach or presenting methodology towards their work. The 'global' contemporary art world ecosystem operates mostly in the language of Shakespeare, which can make it quite unfriendly towards and exclusionary of francophone and Portuguese-speaking artists. As a result, in their attempt to articulate their creative vision in words, they would (consciously or not) appropriate terms inspired by mainstream discourses in the 'global contemporary art world', aware of their appeal. The negotiation that takes place in this discursive gesture is a mediation between the postcolonial

conformity or pressure that the 'global contemporary art' establishment has applied on artists of African origins (Oguibe 2004), and the desire to convey the message of their art uninfluenced by postcolonial cultural dynamics.

In this discursive effort, I argue that it is in the interest of the emergence of new global contemporary art's discursive bases that the African artist refuses to buy into the postcolonial condition that 'global art' is so fond of. It is about creating the emancipatory conditions for enabling young emerging artists to think of themselves as artists *de plein droit* – fully in their own right – and not as 'African artists', subjected to the legitimization of 'global art's centre of knowledge and discourse production. Artists practising in African contexts should in any way feel constrained to satisfy the demands of such a pedigree. Creating such conditions is increasingly the concern of visual art spaces across the continent, including the KAS.

3.6 Resisting is Not All – Ambiguities and Interstitial Spaces

It is not enough to endow one's attitude of refusal, resistance or non-participation. Talking about the contemporary African artist, Oguibe (2004: 21) asks: "Can he [sic] ignore the demand to perform and face the challenge to resist, since to resist rather than exist is the condition of the postcolonial? Must he indeed play the other?" So, resisting comes with challenges. *What are these?* Further, Oguibe's question sheds light on the inevitable points of tension that this quest for artistic agency implies. In other words, how do we reconcile the resisting and dissenting impulse behind the establishment of these spaces and their agenda with meaningful, concrete and progressive interventions?

Although the *Kin ArtStudio* takes an anti-authoritarian stance through its values and in carrying out its projects, it also advocates a form of resistance that is not to be equated with radical art or activism. The studio's interventions do not vehemently seek to overthrow the established order that governs transcultural relations or global contemporary art dynamics. Rather, it critically acknowledges local expressions of neoliberalism and neocolonialism, functions within those, and, conclusively, tries to posit its actions in the interstitial spaces that characterize them. Postcolonialism, as experienced on a local level, has rendered the conditions and webs of cultural and socio-economic relations complex, even more when entangled within/by 'the global'.

A study on non-formal vocational artistic training and professionalization in African contexts, commissioned by the Goethe-Institut of South Africa in 2011, and carried out by the Institute for Art Education (IAE) at Zurich University of the Arts, reveals the ambivalences and contradictions inherent to art developments and professionalization in African contexts. The researchers go on to further their examination of “local interstitiality”, enabling them to unveil the “power relations and constellations, structural influences, and the strategic interests of different actors on different levels” (Lauré al-Samarai 2014: 22–23). They also note that it is a dense field, composed of various and rich dynamics, cultural practices and interrelations that resist “definable parameters” or the imposition of “creating order” (ibid.). Interstitiality becomes a useful tool to comprehend and navigate the cultural and economic terrain on which open visual art spaces operate in specific contexts. What are these interstitial spaces for the *Kin ArtStudio* and its associated artists, and what scope of manoeuvring do they allow for their agency?

Emerging art spaces such as the *KAS* function in a hybrid space that takes into account the global market dynamics of the contemporary art world while criticizing it, and finding social meaning in their activities. The problem is that theorization and discourses around their practices maintain exactly the sort of distinction between the two that they seek to overcome. Theorizing these recent visual art spaces as alternative, anti-institutional or radical is another act of labelling that marginalizes them, and prevents them from being active players and cultural brokers in global realms of contemporary visual art.

3.7 Young Congo – A Common Spirit

The idea of shifting the centre of knowledge production and discursive practices in respect to contemporary visual art from the ‘South’ is *as essential as it is demanding*. During the few months that I spent working closely with the studio, the awareness of the need to present one’s work on one’s own terms was evident. The *Young Congo* enterprise has been claiming that very proposition. Throughout my stay at the *Kin ArtStudio*, there was an ever-present apprehension or fear of seeing the project being diverted, re-appropriated or jeopardized through the involvement of third parties. Vitshois has been stressing the collective ownership of this project in many aspects. *Young Congo* represents the claims of Congolese authorship, a project conceived by local actors, for a Congolese and an international audience. So, how does one understand and build on the notions of

ownership and authorship in a context of financial dependency, artistic and collaborative quarrels? Without going into the matter at length, the reasons that have caused a setback in the realization of the project and changes to the initial proposition are tied to the incapacity to solve the aforementioned question. From the six initial artists on residency for the project – including Vitshois Mwilambwe Bondo, four went on to present their work during the exhibition that finally showcased twelve artists at the end of the year 2017. These four artists (Aristote Mago, Serge Diakota, Fransix Tenda and Vitshois Mwilambwe) were joined by more established and acclaimed artists (Eddy Kamuanga, Maurice Mbikayi, Jean Katambayi and Michèle Magema), Gaël Masky and Alexandre Kyungu of the *Vi. To.* collective (Fig. 13).

An initial intention of the present thesis was to conduct a thorough investigation into attempts at *author-ity* and ownership through the overall preparation and progress of the *Young Congo* (YC) project. However, I have limited this to my observations and involvement at a given stage of the project’s conception, and will confine myself to reflecting on those two notions from that experience. In fact, the genesis of YC, and the way it finally came to realization is somehow more meaningful in the context of the present thesis than the actual exhibition. YC, from an inside perspective, has highlighted the complexities of attempting to instigate a sense of collective agency through a collective exhibition, especially when the ownership of the means of production is hardly secured.



Figure 13. *Young Congo* Exhibition Banner. 2017. Courtesy of Kin ArtStudio.

Young Congo officially took place between the 16th of September and the 15th of October 2017 in *Kin ArtStudio*'s new space in Kinshasa – former UTEX Africa compound(s). In

titling the project *Young Congo*, there was an intention to give an account of a Congolese artistic collective whose spirit is palpable.

One may ask critically if visual art spaces across the continent of Africa should ever strive to be representative of a national artistic scene in their mission. Would this not be falling into the traps of national reductionism as entrenched in postmodern discourses carried by/in 'the curatorial'? In fact, in the case of Africa, an artwork or its creator's origins have too often been at the foreground of 'global' art discourses (Oguibe 2004). In playing that discursive trope, putting a geographic and generic – at risk of sounding all-encompassing – emphasis on contemporary art productions or practices, the curatorial gave itself the duty to account for national contemporary art landscapes and histories. Is such trope as much representative, defining and confining when motivated from the inside, from local actors?

The *KAS*'s national stance, as recognizable in the *Young Congo* project's name, came up as a direct reaction to the 'global' contemporary art world's claims of accountability, and as a will to reconsider sites of/for accountable and legitimizing narratives.

Young Congo borrows its name from the Young British Artists (YBAs)⁴³. YBAs did not have strong national claims or affiliations, except that they underwent a similar artistic training in England (notably at Goldsmiths, University of London), and that they share a common vision and background. Quite interestingly, the will to open up contemporary art practices was coupled with a reflection on the exhibiting, diffusing and marketing possibilities of such practices. YBAs' opposition to conventional visual art materials, methods and processes was sustained by an undertaking spirit that was well aware of contemporary art market dynamics that it sought to influence. Similarly, *Young Congo* and the *KAS* aim at amending and impacting the ways local productions are diffused and marketed. *Young Congo*'s national connotations are well-founded inasmuch as they insist on national *author-ity*, and not representation.

⁴³ "The label Young British Artists (YBAs) is applied to a loose group of British artists who began to exhibit together in 1988 and who became known for their openness to materials and processes, shock tactics and entrepreneurial attitude...One of the features that defines the YBAs is their 'can do' entrepreneurial approach to showing and marketing their work...The era is marked by a complete openness towards the materials and processes with which art can be made, and the form that it can take." <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>

Many artists from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Arab world and the former Soviet Union lack any real markets for their work in their own countries. Many of them can work only when they go to Europe or the United States, which results in a terrible brain drain for those poorer countries. What they add to the cultural life of the rich countries may be very inspiring and enhance the quality of artistic production there, but for their own societies their absence is a loss (Smiers 2003: 127).

Well aware of that reality, Vitshois has been stressing the need to be always able to relate to a base, a hub, a nest, a family, from which one can truly give an account of a collective Congolese spirit in contemporary visual art. At the studio, what seemed to matter the most was to remain united, a sort of formal injunction to do so. This call for unity was not trivial. The fact that many Congolese visual artists and creative talents are spread around the world certainly feeds cultural diversity and exchanges, but is also an impediment to the development of local practices, and collective weight in the ability to account and self-legitimate local creations.

3.8 Professionalization's Implications

The *Kin ArtStudio* has emphasized the *professionalization* of local visual art practices and artists, that is to say local contemporary art practices' improvement, and the ability for local artists to establish their professional agency, and eventually make a livelihood from their practice. This emphasis in the studio's agenda and daily concerns arose from the observation that the growing interest for 'contemporary African art' and its institutionalization saw the manipulation of many African artists or a failure to consider their agency as artists. African artists have been reduced to a pool of creativity and 'original' art suppliers, responding to the demands of the 'global art world'. It is this reality that professionalization, as professed by the *KAS*, is reacting to. The studio's efforts in this regard have sought to bring awareness to its associated members about art institutions' pretensions to define their art, and merely utilize it for their curatorial and discursive purposes, disregarding their *author-ity* and profession.

Concepts of professionalization should avoid falling into the trap that understands these concepts as forms of standardization processes (Vidokle 2013). Professionalization can be achieved through formal education, fine art schools or Master of Fine Art programmes that have "had an unprecedented homogenizing effect on artistic practices worldwide, an effect that is now being replicated with curatorial and critical writing programs" (Vidokle 2013:

104). Most of *Kin ArtStudio*'s associated artists have followed formal training at *L'Académie des Beaux-Arts*. Although the studio does not have a training vocation, it clearly intends to acquaint emerging artists with professional global circuits and mechanisms, critical of curatorial and critical writing programmes' standardization tendencies, as demonstrated by *Beauté Congo*, yet willing to intersect the realm of worldwide contemporary visual art. Hence, professionalization is the process through which young emerging artists are equipped with the tools to navigate distorted contemporary art professional realities. Aligning to international standards in terms of equipment, digital access (to information, networks, actual debates, art material and inspiration) or research processes or facilities is a priority in professionalizing the practice, which is quite different from reproducing a common or prescribed model.

In an interview with Serge Diakota Mabilama, artist in residency for the *Young Congo* project, I enquired about his experience within the art space, and how it has been beneficial for him. "My experience here inspires me to take new directions in my work, and have a real personality" he said (S. M. Diakota 2016, interview, March). Forging one's own artistic personality and signature, avoiding standardization, might be the ethos of professionalization, albeit deaf to the postcolonial cultural expectations that govern the profession.

Professionalization is not a universal process or a goal to achieve. It is a contextual endeavour that relies greatly on the disentanglement of local visual art practices from a postcolonial matrix of knowledge production and cultural assessment. It is as much a discursive mission as a practical one. The concept of professionalization is inevitably tied to the understanding of the artist's role in a given context, as I discussed it in the second chapter. Contemporary artists from the 'Global South' have had to grapple with the pressuring and unfair expectations that the Western-driven art world has projected onto them. In a chapter entitled *Play Me the "Other": Colonialist Determinism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (2004), Olu Oguibe refers to the condition of the postcolonial artist. Africa, as a marker of origin, territoriality and otherness, becomes a condition through which the African artist is expected to exist and articulate his work. He or she is perceived as representative of an 'authentic' culture, of a collectivity that bypasses his/her individual and subjective quality.

3.8.1 Visual Art & Development Policy: A Biased Take on the Profession

Since 2001, when UNESCO issued the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, “culture” has become a central focus of development policy strategies, and “culture and development” as an evolving field of action has marked the *interface* between international cultural and development policy (Lauré al-Samarai 2014: 44).

It is at this interface that the role of the African artist has been defined and, I would argue, narrowed since the turn of the millennium. Coupled with this institutional and political vision, the ‘global’ artistic sphere has articulated the role of the contemporary African artist through academic discourses that have linked art practices to ‘social interventions/experiences’ in the backdrop of developmental⁴⁴ goals. Romanticizing the role of the African artist in those terms, as a community, development or social worker, has to be seriously challenged.

In postmodernity, the role of facilitator, mediator of social turmoil and challenges ascribed to artists practicing in African contexts has been exalted, at the service of international cooperation strategies, ‘global art’ theories, and at the expense of these artists’ own professional voice.

Open art spaces have assimilated this cooperative or ‘developmental’ mandate, through which they could ensure “a certain degree of financial stability in terms of funding periods” (Lauré al-Samarai 2014: 44), despite the fact that their objectives or goals have had relatively little to do with reducing poverty or addressing gender issues, but rather empowering creative actors and industries. I believe that open art spaces have sprung up from the urge to enable emerging artists to grow in their practice, experiment, interact in a creative way with their immediate public, gain more visibility and achieve a breakthrough as artists. This was the initial drive behind the *ArtBakery*, an artists’ initiative in Bonendale (Cameroon) founded by the late Goddy Leye, an initiative with which the *KinArtstudio* has been involved, and a source of inspiration in its early stage.

I have elaborated on visual art spaces’ challenges, manoeuvring strategies and relevance, starting with the premise that they emerged out of the observation that visual artists are often under-represented, under-valued and under-estimated in their local context as well as internationally. The postulate on which the *Kin ArtStudio* has been founded by Vitshois

⁴⁴The first proposition that appears when searching for a synonym for the term ‘developmental’ (as in cultural) is: artistic. <http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/developmental?s=t> accessed on January 10th 2017.

Mwilambwe Bondo is best summed up by Olu Oguibe's words:

There are all the ways in which artists make social interventions that have very little to do with making art as a social tool. I know artists who because they are able to make art and because they are part of the institution if you like, or the market, and because they are able to market their work, put their work in museums, or in private collections or wherever they put those works, or even auctions, and they are able to generate income, they are therefore able to go back to their communities and make practical interventions (Oguibe 2015).

During my stay at the studio, a major concern was to source funding locally, outside the main international cooperation and development institutions. It proved to be a difficult mission. Nevertheless, it never prevented the then artists to progress in their work, awaiting the opportunity to exhibit their creations. The *KAS* aims to be a platform for the local promotion and exhibition of contemporary visual artworks. Appealing to a local audience or spectatorship, local art patrons, cultural actors, resources, infrastructures and consumers will contribute to the professionalization of the practice, and will finally help to generate and convey new legitimizing narratives in regard to contemporary visual art in Kinshasa and the DRC at large.

Conclusion

What kind of collective, situated and flexible initiatives can we (re-)imagine to alter the hegemonic views that currently govern representations of contemporary visual art practices of the DRC? The argument has unfolded with this urgent question as a guiding line of reasoning. In a southern, African context, these initiatives can be in effect multimodal. This thesis, taking the *Kin ArtStudio* as a case study, has focused on the establishment of physical platforms or sites, as opposed to ephemeral, project-based interventions, in search of structural and sustainable strategies. In fact, the studio has the desire to have a long-term impact. Although because of the transient nature of Kinshasa and, consequentially, of the many cultural projects that the city has hosted, it is fundamental to imagine answers to that question that will result in lasting and effective strategies or propositions that such art platforms can put in place. The *Kin ArtStudio's* (*KAS*) concern to build up step by step, consciously, without forcing the pace of its evolutionary process, has been prevailing, as the *Young Congo* project attests. Frustrating at times, this stance is a cautious one, urging local emerging artists, cultural actors and creative forces not to sell out their talents and strengths at the first sight of a promising opportunity, which would only reinforce the authoritarian cultural schemes or power relations that postcoloniality has fostered.

The conclusions I am drawing in this section are by no means advisory or directed towards institutional and cultural policy. Rather, they are an open epilogue to my personal narrative account, that I have contextualized within existing theories and debates, to which the insights from my research have sought to contribute. The *KAS* has felt the necessity to think and move beyond any rigid form of institutionalism. The *Mobile Art Gallery* is a case in point in this regard.

However, the studio's efforts in positioning itself globally or in finding its global relevance inevitably entail partnerships and collaborations with cultural actors whose nature or affiliation is institutional. These institutions are the ABA, the European Union, the Royal Flemish Theatre, the Goethe-Institut, or the recently renovated Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, among others. Institutional bodies cannot simply be dismissed because of their intrinsic character or rootedness. However, partnerships with those bodies should enable transversal cooperation and be mutually enriching. Since its emergence in the 1980s, the very notion of 'global art' has been supported by an institutional framework

or establishment attuned with an expanding global art market. Visual art practices taking place on the outskirts of that framework would suddenly become relevant and acquire meaning through a postmodern agenda that was busier with itself than with the subject of its engagement. Ultimately, the 'Magiciens effect' consolidated the centre of legitimization of worldwide contemporary art practices. That centre exists within a network of institutions, cultural actors and brokers, and hence of various interests, which the first chapter has modestly sought to unveil in relation to contemporary visual art of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In its will to establish itself durably, to empower local emerging artists, and to create a sustainable and autonomous environment for the development of contemporary visual art practices, the *Kin ArtStudio's* relation to global art's networks as sites of legitimization of its activities and productions cannot be undermined.

The *KAS*, as it is the case for other open art platforms or spaces on the continent, has been striving to foster its autonomy, and to operate with a sense of cultural agency. Progress in altering the dominant narratives of an art of the DRC will certainly occur through minded and fruitful collaborations. In this respect, collaborations or partnerships should not be fostered in order to get closer to the (institutional) legitimizing centre of an art of the periphery, overruled by bold representative attempts or curatorial propositions. The cultural negotiation that these newly established open art spaces are undergoing is considerably concerned with the ability to shift that centre, and become active actors in legitimizing their practices or the ones they support.

In this regard, the *KAS* is a model that has not yet come to maturity, but whose engaged and resisting character has proven to be productive and necessary in the cultural re-appropriation of local contemporary art practices. Constructive endeavours might first require acts and attitudes of opposition. In section 3.6 – *Resisting is Not All – Ambiguities and Interstitial Spaces* – I ask the following question: how do we reconcile the resisting and dissenting impulse behind the establishment of these spaces and their agenda with meaningful, concrete and progressive interventions? This reconciliation, namely the complementarity between their firm engagement and the implementation of sustainable strategies, cannot occur if the platform adopts a defiant and isolating position. The *KAS*, as an independent cultural agent, functions within an existing network of cultural actors with whom it engages or collaborates. The urge to be in charge, or at least to considerably contribute to defining the nature of those engagements and collaborations was evident and prevailing from the moment I started to closely relate with the *KAS*. In fact the very notions

of agency, ownership and authority have been at the centre of the art space's claims. However, there are obviously discrepancies between these claims and the scope of action in which the KAS carries out its activities. Those discrepancies inevitably occur in attempting to relate to a global realm of contemporary art that is slowly altering its premises and dynamics. Visual art spaces as they have been emerging on the African continent over the last decades display the will to manoeuvre around the global cultural dynamics at play in the appreciation and circulation of their initiatives and productions. Striving to alleviate the discrepancies and paradoxes that postmodernism, postcolonialism and globalism in the arts have imposed on their practice, they seek to establish new audiences and partnerships, exploring and understanding their very purpose and mission.

The first chapter has offered a critical reading of those schemes, taking 'the curatorial' in relation to 'Congolese contemporary visual art' as an analytical framework, confirming the downfall of the 'Magiciens effect', and highlighting the networks, inconsistencies and realities that have continued to frame Congolese art creation. Acting as knowledge producers, the exhibitions and sites of discourse production around those contemporary practices are uncontestedly channelling our perception of a national visual art scene. Their dominating position in the current 'global contemporary art' constellation has endured due to their (Western) institutional rootedness, to vested interests in selective representations, and to a questionable Africanist expertise. As much as their views and curatorial propositions can be legitimate, their dominance has to be challenged. In a period in which continental African contemporary art productions are experiencing a burst of interest, the stakes around their representations are high. Critical of the whole enterprise behind the very notion of (postcolonial) *representation*, and acknowledging its limits, my inquiry has not only been concerned with a redirection of knowledge performativity, but also with the complexities of an enabling, transversal, participatory, yet autonomous model through which local productions and artists can find meaning, and possibly a livelihood.

The discursive potential of the platform is an opportunity that arose from my argumentative approach, and that was equally expressed and embraced by the studio although it operates quite removed from the present academic debate or given discursive arenas. Is legitimization ultimately a matter of discourse or knowledge production? I have hinted at the power that language enunciated through text – mostly in English – has in legitimizing contemporary art practices. In this respect, it is crucial to distinguish the creation process and its broader cultural meaning/implications from the resulting artwork. Once the resulting

creation is given public exposure, the *author*-ity that saw it come to completion is de facto subjected to interpretation. The extent to which it becomes interpreted, appropriated, and eventually legitimized, depends on the ways it finds public exposure and meets art criticism. The negotiation of collective and individual agency that recently established art spaces and emerging artists are undergoing entails the consideration of the platforms, venues or networks through which their creations find exposure. From a globalist perspective, those mostly rely on discourse production through text in conferring legitimacy to contemporary art practices. In a 'global art' environment still regulated through regenerating forms of institutionalism, capitalism and signifying practices, the networks and circuits through which artists, art initiatives and creations find recognition and earn credit cannot solely rest on discourse production (through text) as a way/mean of legitimization. Let alone the resulting artwork finding public exposure. Then, being able to locate and subscribe to the spaces and instances of legitimization *in* the creation process and the broader cultural meaning/implications of contemporary art practices, becomes vital in an endeavour to revert 'global art's' representative and legitimizing mechanisms.

In raising and articulating my issues around the notions of agency, ownership and legitimacy, I grew aware that these concepts' application to the *Kin ArtStudio*, as an open art space, has to be distinguished from their implications in regard to the artists, as individuals, that have been relating to the art space. This observation confirms a pressing question that my research and involvement with the *KAS* raised during my stay within that space: how do local and associated artists relate to the platform, and inversely? The answer to that question might be in essence subjective, but the capacity to define that relationship is vital in light of the inquiry that has unfolded throughout this thesis. The *KAS* would not fulfil its mission without the artists who frequent it or are associated with it, and conversely, these artists can grow and find meaning in their practice through their engagement with the *KAS*. There is an interdependency at play that affects the sense of collective endeavour, and thereof of agency.

At the time of concluding this thesis, the artists I found engaged with the *KAS* when I started my research have taken different trajectories, all progressing in their practice. Some have kept working closely with the *Kin ArtStudio*. Others have kept practising and engaging with contemporary art on the fringes of that space, never denying their sympathy with it. The *KAS* does succeed in supporting local emerging visual artists in their career. The platform serves as a springboard for emerging artists in spite of being able to

establish an unchanging collective base or a sustainable strategy towards collective agency. The collective agency as I have referred to it throughout this paper is tied to the common spirit, energy and declarations that individuals from a young generation of artists in/from the DRC are sharing. Although declarations of emancipation, *author-ity* and self-articulation are shared among many of these contemporary artists in Kinshasa, they fail to exude those declarations in one cohesive voice. In section 2.3.4 – *On Collectivism in Kinshasa's Current Visual Art Scene* – I evoke the frictions between the artists and art formations active in the capital city. Although it can be argued that such tensions are doomed to occur in a precarious context for the development of contemporary visual art, I believe that it also comes down to the natural conflict that may exist between individualities and their relation to a greater common cause, drive or collective. From a collective standpoint, efforts towards self-legitimization and representation are always in negotiation with artists' subjective understanding or apprehension of those efforts. They are also contained within an existing local art scene and its past achievements.

The art critic Jean Kamba denotes the dissensions that keep dividing different generations of Congolese visual artists. The quarrels between the young and older generation of visual artists in the DRC has certainly been counterproductive. The vindictive rupture with predecessors' artistic vision that the *librisme* movement advocated impacted the sense of collective agency in that specific context. Prof. Ibongo highlights key movements, happenings and artists in the 1970s as marking an avant-garde in the field of visual art (Ibongo 2012) that do not seem much acknowledged in 'global' accounts of contemporary art in the DRC. In those accounts, the notion of avant-garde is often related to the *librisme* movement, the urban nature of contemporary art practices and the break with thorough academism in recent practices. Technicalities and concepts seem to have fallen outside common understandings of avant-gardism in the visual arts in the DRC. Indeed, the rupture between earlier avant-gardist expressions and the one initiated in the 1990s asks questions of national coherence. If a sovereign art scene wants to build some sort of collective agency, the bridge between the past and the now needs to be solid. A case in point is the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi in Ghana, and blaxTARLINES, the contemporary art incubator and project space of the Department of Painting and Sculpture. Such an initiative reflects the will to see today's art expressions integrate and dialogue with existing and established practices and art formations. The predecessors' achievements, philosophies and political stances seem to be a strong source of inspiration, and I would further argue a legitimizing reference for

current contemporary practices in Ghana. This undeniably fosters a sense of continuity and collective force as the exhibition *Orderly Disorderly* that took place in June 2017 in Accra demonstrated (Fig. 14).



Figure 14. (Tshilumba Mukendi 2017). Impressions of the *Orderly Disorderly* Exhibition at the Museum of Science & Technology in Accra, Ghana.

Hence, open art spaces on the continent are platforms that have the potential to initiate a dialogue between different generations, movements and tactics of artists that have taken place in a shared specific context over time. Past recognised artistic achievements and postures can turn into an active legacy at the service of contemporary practices. From a national perspective, taking into consideration that national histories in Africa are different one from another, my experience in Kinshasa revealed the difficulty for current young practitioners to rely on or to be inspired by artistic formations, concepts or visions rooted in national art histories. *Librisme* seems to be the referential foundation from which contemporary practices often depart. It is one thing to be critical in a constructive way towards art forms or schools of the past, and it is another to simply reject them.

Contemporary art has the faculty to be visually critical towards past practices, but more urgently, it can aesthetically respond to them, in a spirit of dialogue. Although very resourceful, the current visual art scene in Kinshasa gives the impression of being scattered, as if everyone was personally holding the key to success and recognition, not wanting to share it. Innovation or the obsession for the new seems to be deaf to continuity. It is my conviction that if one wants to shift the legitimizing centre of contemporary art of the DRC, and alter the dominant global accounts that exhibitions such as *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* have helped to maintain, one needs to come up with an endogenous art narrative of local, regional, or national practices. That will ultimately have a federating effect on the contemporary art scene as long as all the actors that currently compose it contribute and relate to this narrative. It is certainly in part what the symposium “Mediating Past, Present and Futures: Dialogues with Global South Experiences” has sought to contribute to.

I have outlined my research question and overall argument around the notion of representation in regard to contemporary visual art practices of the DRC. I have arguably postulated from a Congolese standpoint, the one from which I have observed and experienced with the *Kin ArtStudio* during the first months of 2016. At the moment of conclusion, I ask myself: have I been reproducing the territorial assignment I have criticized in the first chapter? Is this a strategic posture in an attempt to challenge ‘global art’s’ representative and legitimizing mechanisms, or to negotiate cultural agency? Arguing in these terms has had two purposes. The first has been to critically address the ways in which particular networks, curatorial tendencies and cultural dynamics have informed general understandings or imaginaries of visual arts of the DRC. The second has been to stress the situatedness of contemporary practices as they unfold in Kinshasa, and let it then inform the notion of locality in regard to the overall argument. Taking the realities I observed in Kinshasa as an analytical point of departure, I cannot let my observations account for an art of the Congo. Such a will to be accountable for an art of a given national scene or territory is rooted in the corrupt idea of representation.

Nevertheless, in their attempts to challenge ‘global art’s’ representative and legitimizing mechanisms, the *Kin ArtStudio* and similar initiatives seem at times to stress the national or regional framework that contains those efforts and their activities, willing to respond to the ‘global’ sphere of contemporary art. Responding with such an emphasis highlights the desire to self-legitimize their creations and art forms in a cultural constellation that goes

beyond national boundaries – cf. *Young Congo*. Is such a stance productive in regard to the research question supporting this thesis?

In the first chapter, I ask the following question: how does one overcome the tensions between ‘a Congolese cultural substratum’ and a global approach of contemporary visual art in a given context? Is it finally a matter of overcoming tensions? Open art spaces on the continent are apprehending and relating to globalism in new and changing ways. Endeavours to challenge ‘global art’s’ postcolonial cultural dynamics could avoid addressing them within the same rhetoric, discourses or dynamics. Open art spaces’ challenging posture against ‘global art’s’ legitimizing mechanisms might then start with new conceptions and understandings of what is global and what it entails. It seems to me that reacting very directly to the co-opted global sphere of mega-exhibitions, institutionalism and market-driven networks can be counterproductive in attempts to establish collective and cultural agency, only reinforcing the very framework these efforts seek to challenge.

Instead of overcoming tensions, perhaps we could then suggest a process of negotiation between a Congolese cultural substratum and a global approach to contemporary visual art. This negotiation entails the ability to situate and identify local interstices – that exist in local materializations and expressions of various globalization processes – that allow for new conceptions of global situatedness. For the platform and the artists who have engaged with it, the ability to situate their activities or practices in these interstitial spaces will in turn inform their strategies towards *author-ity*, ownership and agency. At the time I was closely interacting with the *KAS*, there was a strong desire to be completely responsible for the artistic propositions or projects they were undertaking, from production to diffusion. In this specific context, Kinshasa, and visual art practices therein, interstices can be better understood as compromises or the faculty to create or perform with a relative sense of agency within a complex setting of various cultural actors and dynamics. Ownership inextricably adverts to the notion of possession, itself tied to capital and welfare. One of the first and main constraint faced by visual artists in Kinshasa is the lack of material and structural resources for the development of their practice, hence the burdening need to source and secure funding. However, calling to the manoeuvring interstices that the context permits, financial support should in any case turn into financial dependency. Agency cannot flourish from relations of dependency.

Open art spaces or platforms in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Kinshasa and on the African continent at large have the great potential to reassess these very notions – *author-ity*, ownership, agency – in light of the contemporary consciousness that seems to stream over the continent. This consciousness shows awareness of changing entanglements of today’s visual art practices in new configurations of global cultural relations. The reassessment of notions of agency entails an understanding of global art that is multiple. There are multiple constellations and networks of global contemporary art. Global art cannot solely account for the self-sufficient and self-gratifying world of biennales, triennials, art fairs, mega-exhibitions or auctions. From a local perspective, and from my observations in Kinshasa, individual and collective perceptions of global art hardly escape projections or imaginaries of some sort of promised legitimizing land. In the present argument, global art cannot be accepted as a hegemonic space of legitimation or regulation. The ways in which the *Kin ArtStudio* and similar platforms on the African continent are able to negotiate their positioning in regard to new global dynamics and constellations will in turn produce new legitimacy narratives.

As sustained throughout this thesis, the establishment of the *Kin ArtStudio* comes in part as a will to address the representative and legitimizing mechanisms that have influenced the international reception of visual art of the DRC as developed in the first chapter. Although the platform rejects the idea of acceptance and approval of its activities, practices or creations by any presumed centre of global contemporary art, it has not quite extricated itself from the ‘postcolonial cultural matrix’ Van Beurden (2016) refers to. In the struggle and attempts to come up with alternative narratives of cultural legitimacy, it is crucial to distinguish public or international recognition from instances of self-legitimation. The establishment of the *KAS* answers young and emerging artists’ call for more recognition and visibility for their practice. Whereas the intrinsic legitimacy of art practices and creations in a given context cannot be disputed, it can be conveyed and enter in dialogue with broader art worlds, formations and practices. This dialogue should not be premised on any mandate of approbation, validation or recognition, but on criticality, contemporaneity and shared experiences of global situatedness.

If colonial residues and power relations are still ingrained in worldwide cultural dynamics and visual art institutions, curation might be a fruitful space of negotiation if exercised differently from the curatorial logic and trend initiated by *Magiciens de la Terre*. Curating offers a space where one can publicly account for his or her creations or practice with

author-ity. It becomes a space where artistic agency can be mediated, and where ‘global art’s’ representative and legitimizing mechanisms can be directly challenged. Currently on show at the GRASSI Museum in Leipzig, Germany, the exhibition *Megalopolis – Stimmen Aus Kinshasa*⁴⁵ – *Megalopolis – Voices of Kinshasa* – is an example of a conducive direct intervention in the curatorial posture adopted through a collective project displaying contemporary art practices of the DRC’s capital city in a western institution. Through the principle of the “carte blanche”, the museum is willing to break with its ethnological roots, and let contemporary visual inquiries temporarily take over the institution. For this exhibition, the curators Freddy Tsimba and Eddy Ekeke, active figures in Kinshasa contemporary art scene, worked with twenty-four artists from Kinshasa, including Fransix Tenda, Serge Diakota, Hilary Balu and Jean Kamba. Covering a variety of disciplines, this exhibition aims at conveying the creative pulse, the concerns and the reflections that animate Kinshasa-based artists, making sure they shape the narratives that tell their experiences and legitimate their creations. Among those disciplines, poetry, and more generally literary interventions, are an integral part of the exhibition with the works of Jean Kamba, Hervey Ngoma or Vincent Lombume. These interventions are vital in the recovery of the discourses that surround the display of the contemporary art of Kinshasa by those who produce it. Additionally, the GRASSI Museum is the repository of one of the largest collection of worldwide artefacts in Germany, established in the eighteenth century, in the heydays of ethnology and colonial expansion. For this exhibition, the museum has released some of its Congo holdings that could then be engaged and enter in dialogue with contemporary artworks in critical ways. If alternative narratives of visual art of the DRC are to be created, it will certainly run parallel with addressing existing ones. If colonial residues and power relations are still ingrained in worldwide cultural dynamics and visual art institutions, curation might be a fruitful space of negotiation if exercised differently from the curatorial logic of ‘global art’.

This ongoing exhibition also confirms the focus on the DRC’s capital city and the urban dimension of contemporary art practices therein as was the case for *Kinshasa Stadt Der Bilder* (2012). There seems to be a thematic constancy or a deliberate focus on Kinshasa in visual art events presenting contemporary art practices of the DRC on an international stage. This is again the case in an ongoing exhibition entitled *Kinshasa Chroniques*⁴⁶ – Kinshasa Chronicles – at the *Musée International des Arts Modestes* – International

⁴⁵ <https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/megalopolis-1-stimmen-aus-kinshasa-en/>

⁴⁶ <https://miam.org/fr/les-expositions-et-evenements/actualite/article/kinshasa-chroniques>

Museum of Modest Arts – in Sète, France. Is this a relevant curatorial continuum in light of the peculiar and multi-directional urban forms of Kinshasa or another label the 'global' art world is excited about? It has become a focal area or discursive space from which new legitimacy narratives are emerging. However, this curatorial stance allowing new voices and actors to partake in global discussions of contemporary art should not evolve into a distinctive marker confining the global reception of contemporary art practices of the DRC.

The *Kin ArtStudio's* efforts are twofold and complementary. They aim at embedding contemporary visual art practices in Kinshasa while self-defining their global relevance and implications. The present thesis has tried to do justice to that complementarity, being more inclined to unveil the global (pre)dispositions that contain those efforts as the research question reveals it. Concluding this research, the question that guides it could appear misguided. The *Kin ArtStudio's* activities and positioning in networks of global contemporary art should not be motivated by a will to absolutely respond to or counter predisposed representative and legitimizing mechanisms, but to simply disregard them. It should not obey the logics of representation – as exposed in sections 1.3 and 1.4 – as they are ultimately vested in power cultural relations. In efforts towards collective agency in a Kinshasa context, the whole concept of national representation as sustained by the Venice Biennale or the curatorial trend that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s cannot act as a point of reference, model or guiding principle. If the *Kin ArtStudio* and other similar art spaces on the continent seek legitimacy in the 'global art world', it might only reinforce the 'culture complex' and the legitimizing mechanisms these spaces seek to challenge. I believe that a collective, national and federating spirit can emerge precisely because it has disregarded such considerations or the desperate need to be recognized or legitimized by a supposed centre of 'global' contemporary art. In the struggle and attempts to come up with alternative narratives of cultural legitimacy, it is crucial to distinguish public recognition from instances of (self-)legitimation, although both are intertwined.

Art spaces can become sites for legitimizing narratives if they address and define their own positionality in global networks of contemporary visual art. This entails their ability to conspicuously intervene in their relations and collaborations with global cultural actors. It entails the ability to locate their projects, the practices and creations and their support outside dominant and paternalist 'global' circuits, but rather in new global art constellations they contribute to outlining. Acknowledging the progress that the *Kin ArtStudio* has made while closing up this thesis, there is an evident will to contribute to a strategic Southernness

that allows for new partnerships and ways of thinking and situating contemporary art practices. These partnerships open possibilities to link contemporary experiences in contexts that share similar struggles and manoeuvring interstices. Serge Diakota was a resident at Nafasi Art Space in May/June 2018⁴⁷ in Dar Es-Salaam, Tanzania. In turn, in November 2018, Valerie Amani and Rebecca Corey of Nafasi Art Space were on visit at the *Kin ArtStudio*. These kinds of exchanges confirm the belief that thought-out partnerships between open art spaces that are willing to contribute to current global cultural dynamics will open up the scope for new sites for legitimizing narratives in regard to localized global art forms and practices.

⁴⁷ <http://www.nafasiartspace.org/interview-with-artist-in-residence-serge-diakota/>

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