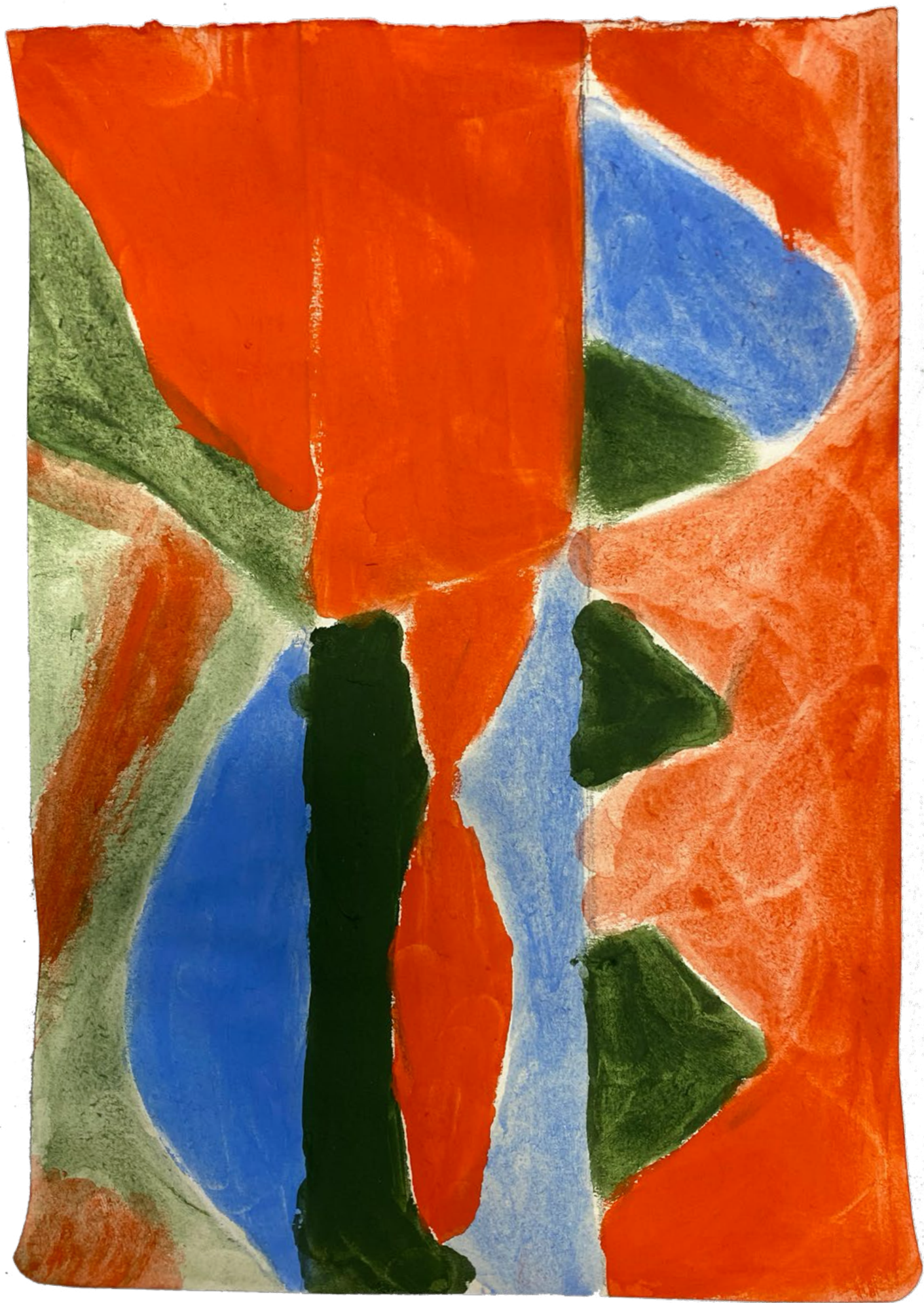












RESOURCE, CONTEXT, CONTOUR AND
SANSEVERIAS—ON THE GENESIS
OF HADASSA NGAMBA'S EXHIBITION
Phillip Van den Bossche

The train sluggishly winds its way into Brussels-Midi. On the left, only just visible, an office complex with stately sansevierias behind each window; framed together, they seem to form a lookout post. Hadassa Ngamba told me about the plant, and how, when she first arrived in Belgium, she was amazed by all the windowsills with sansevierias: “They are really everywhere. In Congo, it is an outdoor plant. Here, they are kept in pots indoors as domesticated plants. I was totally shocked. Now I’m thinking of giving them a place in my exhibition *Configuraties* (Configurations), but upside down, as part of a sculpture.” In the frame of this text, we had two lengthy conversations in her studio—siting amongst her photos and paintings and a scale model of the exhibition,—and talked about raw materials and minerals, family stories, a floor plan, the context and contour of a whole series of individual components. They turn out to be anything but disconnected but rather deeply underpin her young, multidisciplinary oeuvre and artistic research.

Meanwhile, the plant continues to haunt my mind and pops up time and again, without however becoming irritating. Quite the contrary. They breathe and grow, but also tell a colonial story. “The last plant, a sansevieria, was removed from the museum in 2013 ‘for reasons of humidity, safety and hygiene’.” Banned from a museum? The origin of the story is much older and occurred in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Between 1945 and 1983, it housed 102 individual plants, scattered across the exhibition halls. It was an idea of the then director Willem Sandberg (1897–1984). In 1946, for example, he placed a Monstera or Swiss cheese plant next to Mondriaan’s Boogie Woogie paintings. He wanted to create a connection between inside and outside, to make the museum more homely and the art more accessible, “in the hope that visitors would look more favourably on the shocking modern art”.

In the catalogue of the *moderne kunst nieuw + oud* (Modern Art Old + New) exhibition, Sandberg opens his accompanying text with prosaic comments on the mental world of fish and their landscape: “They remember earlier waterfalls, where the water ferociously carried away earth and stones, where all kinds of new foods emerged from the soil”. He then moved on to artists: “Artists depict the face of society, they do not do that haphazardly (...) the ominous character of our times frightens many, the artists build out of old and new elements the face of a new world”. He wrote this in 1955. In the same year, the Bandung Conference took place in Indonesia, where

representatives of 29 Asian and African countries squarely placed the decolonisation process on the world map. At that time, Belgium still ruled over an unimaginably vast territory in Central Africa—the independence and foundation of the Republic of Congo only occurred in 1960.

Lying around in Hadassa Ngamba’s studio is the identity card of her grandmother from the 1960s. An official entered ‘married’ in the box for occupation. It formed the inspiration of the performance *Identity Simulacra* (2020–2021) which she recently performed in Arnhem’s Sonsbeek Park. To inhabit the absence of the dominant image, or rather, to address the story from the lioness’ point of view. Yet not in the way the VRT (Flemish Radio and Television) did in 2018 when they put an audio clip from the BRT (Belgian Radio and Television) archives online: “At that time I had 7 giraffes on board, 10 elephants, 10 buffaloes, a rhinoceros *femelle*, a female, a lion, a lioness, a gorilla and a ...”.The crossing had gone smoothly, it is further stated without any contextualisation, or rather, with—as the heading reads: *Long live the zoo*. What *Identity Simulacra* is about, among other things, is not the muting, distorting or censoring of voices—to quote Saddy Choua’s important words about women’s self-image—“but about having the opportunity to think, analyse and express an opinion about what it means to have your history recorded, to be able to step outside the box”.Her grandmother, also called ‘Ngamba’, grew crops and was the daughter of the village chief. As such, she assumed several traditional roles and responsibilities. In other words, her profession was not ‘married’. “That’s when I knew,” says Hadassa Ngamba, “Je vais réparer cette erreur”. I’m going to correct this mistake.

Her performance in Arnhem, of which she is preparing a video adaptation, revolves around the concept of ‘falsification’, about the falsity and falsehood of certain imposed identities and simulated messages (of the colonisers, the Western concessionaires of raw materials, but also of the post-independence rulers who led the population up the garden path). A copy of which there is no original. During the performance, she wears the white suit of the colonial official, opens his diplomatic suitcase, containing bonds and securities. Her grandmother is her compass, their bond is marked every ten metres. She takes an oval mirror and, like the Himba women of Angola, applies otjize, a mixture of goat fat, herbs and ochre to her face. “It is indirectly about them too,” she tells me, “there is a technology underlying their aesthetics, and now they are being

sold as aesthetic ‘objects’.” Painting with a ponytail (and not the painting of it).

Merely describing the performance does not do the experience justice. Hadassa Ngamba points out that she never rehearses beforehand and that she felt quite alone in the space in Sonsbeek Park, despite the large audience present. “I made mysterious movements”, I was told later. “Conquering a mind and a space, that’s what I was all about, lighting a cigar (Corps Diplomatique) and smoking it, spreading the smoke, smoking the place out, scattering coffee around, depicting the industrial exploitation and the abuse and overturning the narrative, offering sacred time and a sacred body. And that is why the performance fits in with my ideas for the exhibition *Configurations*”.

The Matadi-Kinshasa railway line was built between 1890 and 1898. By whom and for whom, might be the ensuing question. To connect the port on the Congo River, along with Boma, a mere hundred kilometres from the ocean, to the erstwhile city of Léopoldville. It was, and still is, a crucial, strategic exploitation and transport route. Today, many colonial warehouses are empty; they are industrial ruins. Hadassa Ngamba tells of her childhood years in Bas-Congo (now Kongo Central), the town of Vivi, on the right bank of the Congo River, founded by an expedition led by Henry Morton Stanley. She played in the large, abandoned buildings, wanted to clean them up, put them back in order. That is how she explains it now. At the time, it emerged from a sense of failure, wanting to do something about the situation but not having the means to do so. Later, after studying criminology and working as a stylist, she was invited to the Lubumbashi Biennale in 2017, followed by a residency at Wiels in Brussels and a second consecutive participation in the Biennale in 2019. By that time, the cartography of Congo is already a key element in her artistic research. And that is also how she defines the use of the term ‘configurations’.

She decides to research the cartography of Bas-Congo in greater detail, to travel back to the region and to memorise the combination of all the strategic elements (political, social, economic, humanitarian) that are brought together on a map. “Everyone, all Congolese people should have this knowledge,” she says. Just like in her childhood, she visits a huge abandoned industrial workshop. And again, there is that same feeling, as the space stirs up in her the failure of her country’s economic system and her desire to do something about it. And, she remarks, “on my first visit

to the exhibition space in Strombeek, it was also as if I was that little girl standing in that warehouse again. That is when I knew for sure that I wanted to work from my childhood and engage with configurations”.

“I am going to present a number of photographs from 2018 in large format for the first time. For the photos, I had a traditional hair tail enlarged and photographed. It was a collaboration with a Ugandan photographer”. In the photographs, Hadassa Ngamba combines the shape of her braids and hairstyle with the way in which she positions herself in the landscape, with the way in which her body relates to the space. With the way a shadow on a wall interacts with the vegetation, a row of sansevierias along a building in Lubumbashi. It is a form of writing visual sentences, becoming a point in the landscape. “At the same time, I wanted to relate to the photographer, to enter into a dialogue with her: besides, she is from a country that is plundering the riches of the Congo”.

The same points and configurative elements appear in her first paintings, abstract landscapes, the map of memorised territories. A piece of cotton canvas is divided into unequal grids, partly painted in red, yellow and blue. Other ‘areas’ are coloured in with minerals ground into powder (malachite green, brown-black cassiterite, a tin oxide), coffee and chalk. Pencil lines are given route numbers, others meander like rivers. Each area has one point. She calls these early paintings *Cerveau* (brain). Speaking about *Cerveau 3* last year, she told me: “A point is a human presence. Because the capitalist world has never taken people into account. That is why I am also against concessions; the arrows indicate that there are two movements and that something new can emerge.”

In another early painting, she creates a composition with rectangles, squares and triangles. The whole becomes a collage of elements: abstract figures appear in a triangle, two eyes, hands (cut out of a piece of fabric), roman numerals, the shape of a cross, etc.... In another canvas, she experiments with semi-transparent materials and textures, branching lines and colour fields. The dualism between matter and idea is always fascinating. The source of knowledge emanates from all the senses. Hadassa Ngamba repeats experiments while at the same time linking them to critical analysis. It is far removed from a ‘Victory Boogie Woogie’, and yet, at the same time, it is not. What if her artistic research were connected with the binary-complementary principle? I formulate it as a proposal, a possible perspective and a way of looking at things. Indirectly, it is about “the improvisational ability

to see new possibilities in existing themes”.The Nigerian philosopher Sophie Bósèdé Olúwolé (1935–2018) writes that the binary-complementary principle is also found in ancient Egyptian and Igbo cosmology. Nothing is absolute: “everything, everyone, no matter how autonomous it seems to be, is connected to something else. (...) Matter and idea are interdependent; the one cannot exist without the other. The corresponding logic can be characterised by ‘and/or’ and has a specific meaning: ‘and/or-logic in the inclusive sense’. The opposites are not mutually exclusive, something can be both matter and idea at the same time.”Olúwolé argues that dualism and the specific relationship between idea and matter is one of the main characteristics of African philosophy, adding, “Complementary dualism is inseparable from mathematical, scientific, philosophical and sociological concepts and practices”.

Hadassa Ngamba built a model of, and for, her exhibition. It is a spatial collage and/or a scale model, a sculpture and/or a thinking space. The paintings and photographs are complemented with animals, a sound work (which she developed together with her brother, who is a musician and sound artist) in which her voice and the sound of water are brought together. She painted the model in different colours and surrounded it with all kinds of materials, from documents and slates to paint brushes. At the centre of the exhibition space is *La Table Sereine* (The Serene Table). “The words are from my sixth-grade French teacher. He asked us about metaphors that lie behind words. When I heard ‘the serene table’, I answered: a table around which philosophers gather to devise universal answers for the survival of the world.”, and Hadassa Ngamba continued: “Of course, at that time there was also my mother’s religious upbringing. Now I think of a table as an ideal for people, one that can stand anywhere in the world, where solutions for humanity are devised. It is a table without fixed contours; the shape is not determined aesthetically, but shaped according to an ideal image so as to facilitate reflection.

All major decisions are made around a table (the table of the Berlin Colonial Conference of 1884/85, the negotiations for the independence of the Congo). She does not want to define the serene table she has in mind, but at the same time she is willing to voice her questions about it: “Economics pertain to man, and so do the colonial lie, marketing, art, medicine, ... So, am I in the lie as well? I deal with politics in my work and explore myself in the question of the table. What is serenity to me? Smoke, water? I don’t know.” Her first ideas turned to the chemical element zirconium as the

‘raw material’ for the table, “because it is like water, like a diamond”. But the table could also be made of tracks (from the large construction site, the military grounds where the HISK in Ghent is housed, and where Hadassa Ngamba has had her studio for almost two years), combined with 166 elements made of crystal, slate and who knows, sansevierias. Or rather, one hundred and sixty ways of thinking about independence, responsibility and caretaking.

The sansevieria was shipped to our country by colonial ‘collectors’ in around 1900. The sturdy fibres were to be used as raw materials in industry. After all, (back then) we had a mission. In 2021, Bartel Van Riet declares on Radio 1 that the sansevieria with its “golden-yellow edge is our national pride “.This conclusion is based on his analysis that a certain Emile Laurent (from Gembloux, at the time probably more often referred to as *Djiblou* in Walloon) brought two cuttings from Congo in around 1900: “one for the Royal Gardens and one for the National Botanic Garden in Meise”. And in the plant garden, a variety was created that was commercialised quite quickly. According to the journalist, the “mother plant” is still in ... “Meise”. He makes no mention of the nature of the expeditions and the role of the colonial officials at the time.

Olúwolé terms the social metaphor associated with an ‘and/or logic in an inclusive sense’ humanism. In a 2013 interview, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–2021) put it like this: “‘What is to be done?’ is no longer really the question for us; rather, first of all: ‘What kind of doing?’ What do we want to talk about? (...) We now need to think of man more than ‘humanly’, if I may say so. More or differently. Besides, we need to think about man in a world that he has largely transformed, notably through energy needs. (...) We must re-identify ‘man’, ... but perhaps first re-identify identity!”. Plants breathe and grow, old and new, knowledge and (human) experience. There exist now *Configurations* in which they are intertwined, each as two sides of the same dialogue. It starts with an idea and an exhibition as tools. This is followed by ...

Marrakech/Ostend, 2021

1. Roos van der Lint, “De laatste sanseveria”, in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 26 August 2021, nr. 34, 47.
2. Sander Becker, “Tot de jaren zeventig stond het Stedelijk vol met kamerplanten”, in *Trouw*, 15 May 2019, consulted on 2 September 2021, <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/tot-de-jaren-zeventig-stond-het-stedelijk-museum-vol-met-kamerplanten>
3. Willem Sandberg, *woord vooraf*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1955, 9.
4. Ibid.
5. Alexander Verstraete, “Unieke geluidsopname opgedoken in VRT-archief: boot met dieren uit Congo voor de Zoo komt aan in Antwerpen”, consulted on 2 September 2021, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/02/19/uniek--geluidsopname-over-aankomst-1e-boot-met-dieren-uit-congo/>
6. Saddie Choua, “De strijd om onszelf te kunnen zijn”, in *De Standaard*, Saturday 21, Sunday 22 August 2021, 64.
7. Phillip Van den Bossche, “In gesprek met Hadassa Ngamba”, in *HART*, nr. 207, 7 October 2020, 30.
8. Sophie Bósèdé Olúwolé, *Socrates en Òrúnmilà Wat we van Afrikaanse filosofie kunnen leren*. Utrecht: Uitgeverij Ten Have, 2017 (second edition), 88.
9. Ibid., 87.
10. Ibid., 86.
11. Bartel Van Riet, “De Sansevieria met goudgele rand is onze nationale trots”, consulted on 8 September 2021, <https://radio1.be/bartel-van-riet-de-sansevieria-met-goudgele-rand-onze-nationale-trots#podium19>
12. “Jean-Luc Nancy: ‘Communism means conceiving being-in-common’”, consulted on 8 September 2021, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5150-jean-luc-nancy-communism-means-conceiving-being-in-common>

De : Hadassa Ngamba <hadassa.congo@gmail.com>
Date : mar. 25 mai 2021 à 02:40
Objet : Re: Exposition CC Strombeek
À : Charlotte Crevits <charlotte.crevits@ccstrombeek.be>
CC : Lieze Eneman <lieze.eneman@ccstrombeek.be>

Bonjour Charlotte,

Je reviens vers toi avec quelques détails supplémentaires sur mon travail.

L’espace de mon exposition (HALL C) fera partie des œuvres que je produirai pour le solo show.

Car lorsque j’étais avec toi dans la HALL C mercredi dernier, l’espace s’inscrivait dans la même attitude architecturale du lieu ou j’ai résidé avec ma mère et mon petit frère. C’était entre mes 8–12 ans, 2001–2025 dans l’enceinte de COMUELE BOMA (c’était la Société coloniale Commerciale et Minière de Uele BOMA) et au même lieu se trouve le Baobab Stanley (c’est endroit Henry Morton Stanley, Émissaire de Léopold 2, journaliste, explorateur dans le Royaume-Kongo 1879–1884) à séjourner. Lesdits lieux sont bilatéraux avec le Port de Boma c’est dans la ville de BOMA au Kongo-Centrale.

Le 4 ans où j’ai vécu à COMUELE dans la ville de BOMA, j’ai passé tout mon temps hors engagement scolaire à jouer aux restes de cette architecture industrielle démolie par les crises politiques et économiques post-coloniale, j’ai osée à organiser cet espace détruit par les pillages de septembre 1991, rêver avec cette architecture échouée et réfléchir au corps de ces lieux répertoriant des souvenirs coloniales.

Cette expérience m’a laissé un sentiment d’échec car je n’avais que la Forme devant mes yeux et j’ai manqué la Matière, ce qui empêchait la poursuite de mes opérations de la conquête des dits lieux.

En terme mathématique, je savais qu’on me dictait une fraction et dans mon Cerveau j’avais calqué l’espace en tirant la barre de fraction sans savoir le numérateur et le dénominateur l’équation des opérations fractionnaires. C’était une dictée...

Dans mes photographies NKETU-TUNGU les mouvements de la tresse traditionnelle surdimensionnée renvoient aux vecteurs, aux tirées de la barre de la fraction sur lesquels on pourrait effectuer des opérations. J’avais donc à l’esprit la relation générale entre les deux termes, le numérateur et le dénominateur, quoique je ne connaissais ni l’un ni l’autre, je connaissais la Forme sans la Matière.

Or dans la performance NKETU-TUNGU j’ai voulue créer l’agrainage entre moi (portant la tresse traditionnelle surdimensionnée) en la rencontre du public.

LA TABLE SEREINE est ma conception d’un outil philosophique qui

traiterait de la matière mythique et éthique dans les concessions conjoncturelles et structurelles de mon Cerveau.

CERVEAU 4 (octobre 2021 j’aurais 4 ans en tant que artiste et donc l’œuvre CERVEAU le numéro 4)

The annual series of paintings entitled “Cerveau” (Brain) refers to the relationship between thought and cartography, our body and the earth, as well as investigation and investment. Differently from the strategized tracing of geopolitical maps, I take the freedom to construct rather irregular organic grids aiming to symbolically reclaim space and undermine the benchmarks of conquest and domination that define the configurations of DRC to this day.

La résolution optique des boules disco dans l’espace d’exposition (HALL C sous terre) renvoie aux mirages d’images infinies, à l’épanouissement de ces images et aux processus d’évanouissement... Une projection mouvementée...

Bien cordialement,
H.Ngamba

CONSENSUS EN MINEUR
Pour Hadassa Ngamba

Ce qui m’intéresse dans le travail d’Hadassa Ngamba, c’est le sens perpétuel du dialogue qu’elle donne à son travail. un dialogue qui n’est pas une forme de négociation politique ou économique et qui ne se limite pas à une interaction ou à un échange, mais qui pose plutôt une possibilité d’apport poétique de chacun à ce qui peut qui peut être la vie : un ensemble de perceptions singulières pour un consensus.

Ma composition pour cette exposition emprunte cette démarche et tente de la verbaliser à travers une installation sonore qui conditionne le visiteur à faire partie de l’œuvre. Les mots, les chuchotements et les sons de placement du visiteur sont captés par les microphones puis diffusés par les haut-parleurs en harmonie avec une bande sonore basé sur le son de l’eau qui coule dans la salle de l’exposition(réel), renvoient le visiteur à un exercice d’auto réflexion, confrontant ainsi la responsabilité de soi. C’est le sens du dialogue « la conscience de sa propre contribution à l’histoire du monde ».

David Shongo









HADASSA NGAMBA
Configurations

CC Strombeek, Grimbergen
23.10—15.12.2021

