

10 Performing the “Mask”

Kongo Astronauts (Eléonore Hellio and Michel Ekeba) on postcolonial entanglements—A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Emilie Magnin and Valerian Maly. Introduction by Jacob Badcock

Writing in “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” Kodwo Eshun asks us to “imagine a team of African archaeologists from the future [...] excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking disks are identifiable as belonging to our present.”¹ Kongo Astronauts, an artist collective founded in 2013 by the Kinshasa-based artists Eléonore Hellio and Michel Ekeba, are the image of the Afrofuturist archeologist *par excellence*. Kongo Astronauts are perhaps best known for their images of travel—the lone astronaut, dressed in a metallic suit plastered with digital detritus made from minerals mined in Democratic Republic of the Congo and subsequently returned to it in the form of technological waste. The costume painfully explicates the crises of extractive capitalism and environmental racism. Kongo Astronauts’ multi-media practice includes photography, film, sculpture and performance, and engages with Kinshasa’s alternative cultural network. In their creative practice, both the urban postcolonial pandemonium and the forces that have shaped the artists’ immediate environment are intertwined with a critical lens, through which they assess human condition in contemporary Congo. Kongo Astronauts’ work eludes easy classification: it is both ephemeral (their walks thought the urban landscape of Kinshasa) and tangibly material (the astronaut’s suit). Their works respond to place and site and are processual and unstable. Although pointedly contemporary, Kongo Astronauts’ performances speak to the *longue durée* history of rare-earth mineral extraction in West and West-Central Africa. Understanding this history goes some way to demonstrating the significance of their work for exploring postcolonial Congolese identity. Within the precolonial Kongo Kingdom (to which the Astronauts’ name refers), precious and semi-precious metals such as copper and gold held spiritual, ritual and religious value as well as economic value. For example, copper manillas were used as currency, in the ritual performance and for the production of artworks. By contrast, the “calculative rationality” of the accumulation of African metals by European colonizers purely for their economic value created a divergence in access to capital, which underpins the continued European exploitation of African mineral resources today (for instance, in the indiscriminate mining of Congolese cobalt for the production of lithium-ion

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batteries for use in mobile phones, laptops and electric vehicles).² Kongo Astronauts' work points to this economic divergence while also demonstrating an almost-utopic resistance to "the psychic ghettos that cover multiple post-colonial realities."³ Their reconstitution of technological waste represents not only the physical conservation of and care for metals, but also the conservation of and care for a *metaphysical* Congolese relationship to metals which understands them as possessing more than economic value. Perhaps the most patent and enduring symbol of this Congolese metaphysics is the medieval symbol of the Kongo cosmogram, an ideographic representation of Congolese beliefs about the interconnection of the physical and the spiritual world. The Kongo cosmogram takes the form of a spiral divided by a straight line: in simple terms, the cosmogram represents the threshold between the worlds of the living and the dead, signifying a belief in the circularity and eternity of Being. This is a cosmology that seems to be retained by the Kongo Astronauts in their treatment of "dead" media. In their own words, Kongo Astronauts' works "manifest in the inter-zones of digital globalisation, where past, future, and present collide with the politics of intimacy and the realities of urban and rural life."⁴ They conceive of their work as "polysemous fiction[s]" that allow us to "take a multidimensional look at different forms of exile and survival tactics."⁵ The conservation of precolonial Congolese values and beliefs under the weight of colonial and neo-colonial economies of instrumental value seems to be one such "survival tactic." Once again, the image of the African astronaut-archeologist comes to mind. Eshun describes how, "sifting patiently through the rubble" of our present, the archeologist-astronaut would be "struck by how much Afro-diasporic subjectivity in the twentieth [and the twenty-first] century constituted itself through the cultural project of recovery." In the age of the astronaut-archeologist, writes Eshun, "memory is never lost. Only the art of forgetting."⁶

Hanna B. Hölling, Emilie Magnin and Valerian Maly met Kongo Astronauts to discuss the postcolonial entanglements in which their Afrofuturist "project of recovery" is situated and how they think about the continuity of materials and meanings, and performance and practice: How do astronaut-archeologists remember?

Hanna Hölling: Eléonore and Michel, it's such a pleasure to be able to speak with you. We are excited to explore the ideas underpinning the creative practice of Kongo Astronauts, particularly those relating to life, afterlife and the preservation of your oeuvre. To begin, could you tell us how your collective came together, as well as whether the arrival of the astronauts has already occurred, or is still in progress?

Kongo Astronauts/Eléonore Hellio: The history of Kongo Astronauts is associated with various layers of my prior experience with a Congolese network of artists that emerged in DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo] in the beginning of 2000. Faustin Linyekula, then an up-and-coming choreographer and dancer, is the first person I met from DRC.⁷ I invited him to collaborate on several collective performances using videosonic systems to connect different spaces. At the time, I was teaching at HEAR, the Strasbourg school of art, in the experimental group I had co-created, called "out-of-format art." In 2006, I

was invited for the first time to Kinshasa to participate in “Scenographies Urbaines,” initiated locally by “Eza Possible,” a collective of students from the School of Arts of Kinshasa, who had invited artists from the continent and from Europe to open up the academic program of their school to new practices. They were protesting the unacceptance of transdisciplinarity and artmaking involving mixed media, video, performance or installation. For instance, the students created large-scale installations from cars that had been burned during conflicts in Kinshasa and accompanied that with spontaneous performances. This action led to a partnership between the art school in Strasbourg and the School of Arts of Kinshasa, which enabled about 60 Congolese and French teachers and students to travel back and forth between the two countries. This unique project, in which I was deeply involved, enabled the sharing of knowledge and cultivation of otherness in the foreground of historical frictions and postcolonialities. This exchange opened up a new creative era—if not a movement—between Kinshasa and Strasbourg. Issues concerning decolonization were addressed in both schools, probably for the first time. In 2008, when I continued teaching both in France and in DRC, I co-founded a collective called MOWOSO. “Mowoso” signifies the sound made by the wind through the leaves of a tree. Bebson Elemba (aka Bebson de la Rue), who is a prolific artist and musician from Ngwaka, a very rough neighborhood in Kinshasa, was a key person in this project.⁸ MOWOSO can be seen as the continuity of Bebson’s informal school of the arts (and life), “Ghetto KoTa OKoLa,” which means literally “GeT In-GrOw Up!”, through which so many artists, dancers and musicians got inspired. To me, it was a continuity of “out-of-format art.” MOWOSO didn’t last long but remains embodied in three important moments: the making of a film titled *Ground Overground Underground* (2010),⁹ the showing of that film at Afropolis, a 2010 exhibition on African cities curated by Christian Hanussek and Kerstin Pinther, and a text on the failure of MOWOSO, authored by Dominique Malaquais, which I asked her to write.¹⁰

Around 2012, I met Michel Ekeba and we both participated in a residency at the Wits School of Arts in Johannesburg. Day and night we walked the South African city, having engaging discussions with people involved in the fight against Apartheid. During the day, Michel dressed like a robot and we would ask people to imagine the Johannesburg of the future. When back in Kinshasa, I was asked to be associate artistic director for an internet and cable TV launch that was organized in a very fancy location with a swimming pool. It was a job. Michel and I decided that he would create an astronaut costume with a tiny camera on his helmet that would broadcast his interaction with the audience... This story is told in the book *Écologies du smartphone* (2022).¹¹

Shortly thereafter, I needed to return to France, while Michel continued to study at the School of Arts of Kinshasa and began to be plagued by boredom. So, he decided to wear the astronaut costume, and, in an almost nostalgic way, walk in the costume through Kinshasa. He sought a new space for him to exist in, a space within this costume. He quickly found that the costume attracted people, and started to use it to meet new people, and thus to continue his

artistic work in this way. At the beginning his walks were spontaneous and did not follow any strategy, but soon, they became a tactic of survival.

Shouldering his heavy suit built with old computer parts, Michel, the astronaut, carried an awareness of the suit's entangled material politics—these very minerals make many contemporary technologies work yet simultaneously fuel much of the violent conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, not to mention ecological disasters. Michel's performance allowed him to transmute this negative and violent energy, linked to the extraction of precious minerals such as coltan,¹² into a human energy. The astronaut's performance is a way to reclaim the extracted energy and to claim life over these materials. The performance also serves to attract attention and empower himself in this megalopolis, in which one can feel overwhelmed, out of place, in exile. The suit of the astronaut was a way out of this hostile environment—hostile not only in this present moment but also across time, including the colonial era and the later dictatorships. So, Kongo Astronauts think through and deal with the unbearable and reflect what has been happening in the minds of people across the country.

When Michel commenced his walks in the streets, these served as means not only to encounter ordinary people but also to interact with travelers. With his suit on, he would emerge like an alien in the neighborhood where some Europeans—often artists, producers, and curators—came to hang out. He would activate what we call *matolo*—a way to engage people, draw their attention, and perhaps even get invited for lunch, or be given a beer or a pack of cigarettes. It was an opportunity to exchange ideas about the world. Unlike many Westerners, Congolese rarely get opportunities to travel, let alone the necessary clearances. It is difficult to get a visa out of Congo. Michel, a victim of economic inequality like most of the population in Congo, dreamt of *Mikili*, which means “other worlds” in Lingala—the Western world, which is, in people's minds, imagined and idealized, with lasting consequences for Congolese society.

HH: Could you tell us more about the meaning of *matolo*?

Kongo Astronauts/Michel Ekeba: The basis of our survival tactics—which also have an artistic function—is to overcome socio-political difficulties, to harmonize with the system without advocating for it or doing it silently. “Matolo” is to ask for support intelligently, without making it appear that you are asking. But there are different categories of *matolo*: You can write a letter to associations or companies; you can ask the family to support a project; and kids on the streets do *matolo* by flattering someone. *Matolo* can be automatic: you just look into someone's eyes, and they understand. It's the connection, the energy, the person you're meeting and the atmosphere you're in. *Matolo* is practiced by rich people, too. “Mind” is something related to *matolo*, it is an evolving concept often used by artists. But unlike *matolo*, *mind* requires reflection, it is not spontaneous. I have to consider, “What am I going to do to get this?” It always starts with a reflection that leads to solutions that can be intellectual, physical, or psychological solutions, and that includes a sense of expediency, which is widespread in Kinshasa and in Congo. There is also a void, there is a suspense. It's the connections, it's the interactions between the

person asking and the person receiving. This is also an art form. It's thinking in harmony with your body, your mind and your energy to achieve a thoughtful project, a materialized thought. It's putting your reflective thoughts into action.

KA/EH: In our work together as Kongo Astronauts, we question the many impacts of mining the earth and beyond, on these quests for mining infinity endlessly. Thinkers, artists, innovators from Africa have to propose their vision of the future and not only be consumers or, worse, casualties, as was and is so often the case. The performance of the astronaut is also a way to adapt to a globalized, fast-changing world, and to find an equilibrium between resistance and assimilation. Lastly, the astronaut's performances address the Earth's condition and ecology. They demonstrate the obscene gaps between the North and the South.

The figure of the astronaut can be seen as a contemporary mask. In Congolese traditions, the mask is conceived as a school for sharing knowledge and experience. The mask thus questions the current political, social, and economic status quo in Congolese society, and it questions Congolese identity. However, it is important to realize that the term "identity" is not used in day-to-day discussions—the self-reflection that this notion requires is mainly centered around the interaction with the Western world.

HH: Who are "Kongo Astronauts" and how many are they?

KA/ME: Kongo Astronauts are comprised of multiple personalities. It's us, Bebson, and other passengers—people who needed some guidance, such as, sometimes, young artists for whom our collective has been a rite of passage. So there are multiple selves, and we don't represent any permanent position. We navigate within many contradictions. We have systemic, evolving personae that sometimes reflect personal psychosocial conditions, and sometimes the politics of our intimate lives, which we try to connect to a wider societal context. We are made up of our different selves and are of different genders, origins and social backgrounds.

Valerian Maly: Eléonore, is your personal story of coming to Kinshasa also the story of the creation of the collective, Kongo Astronauts?

KA/EH: Kongo Astronauts was a state of "mind." Bebson, who might be hailed as the John Cage of Kinshasa, has been a key person in Kongo Astronauts. Like us, he blended art and life. Michel spends a lot of time with Bebson and sometimes stays overnight at his house. I too have listened to him for days, speaking in metaphors and proverbs, continuously reinventing language through shared intelligence, by mixing French, English, Lingala and the coded language "Langila." Through Bebson, we have established strong alliances with local art, dance and music, and there are further associations with the emergence of hip hop, rap, ragamuffin and what we call urban music today in Kinshasa.¹³ These synergies started to contaminate other artists, who similarly started to build costumes and walk around the city. The KINACT festival and other collectives are the manifestation of this.

Emilie Magnin: I'm interested in the idea of the "collective self" and the "contamination" of other people—the impact the astronaut has on others.

KA/ME: At the beginning, we organized several performances without expecting anything in return. That dispersed the work. The work was a commitment as well as an amusement and a contribution. And then things changed. The work took on a form—thanks to people like you, curators and researchers—it started to have a meaning that I myself had not perceived initially. And that opened other doors for reflection. I think that’s why we’re here. The idea of the “mind” is related to the idea of “contamination.”

KA/EH: Kongo Astronauts’ performances and our ideas inspired other artists who were searching for a form of expression, so they often used our visibility and the attention created around our performances. This spawned debates: What is it that we are doing? How are our performances linked to ancestral practices? How are they linked to contemporary performances and the art market?

Filmmakers and photographers arrived in Kinshasa eager to take photographs of Kongo Astronauts; clips were produced for different media. For Michel, while I was in France, it was a way of survival and development of the concept. But at a certain moment, the filming and video recording got out of our hands, and thus we decided to produce our own films and photography. At times, people would film Michel and fail to inform him or ask permission. The work become mediated without us having any agency or control over it. Many would fail to acknowledge Kongo Astronauts. When I would draw attention to the fact that this persona was a co-creation based on a collective experience and vision, many Europeans were reluctant to acknowledge that a white person was involved, arguing that the work wouldn’t sell as well. It’s another form of paradoxical discrimination—discrimination against a white person by another white person. Many Europeans who come to Kinshasa often behave as explorers who are discovering art emerging out of chaos, out of nothing. This is problematic because it overlooks our own background in art education and a rich tradition of ancestral and artistic practice here. Furthermore, Kongo Astronauts is like an underground network that connects the roots of different trees, each with its own voice and perception, autonomous but sharing the multiple splinters of the world within its many levels of entanglement.

HH: How did you approach the filmmaking and documenting of Kongo Astronauts’ performances?

KA/EH: In my early years in Kinshasa I felt like a voyeur and was uncomfortable with filming people. Later, I began to carry the camera everywhere I went, and have since filmed numerous performances, people and spaces. Initially, the main subject of my filming was Bebson, because he touched me, and we spent a lot of time together as friends. At times, Bebson wanted to be filmed; at times, I filmed the spontaneous performances that emerged because we were sitting in his ghetto while it was raining, and we were bored. People joined in, Bebson would start to do some chores or cleaning or make deals with neighbors, and I simply filmed what was happening.

HH: Let’s discuss the astronaut’s performance and attire, specifically their suit. What materials are used to make it, and what is the experience of wearing it like?

KA/ME: The costume is very heavy. When I walk, jump and climb, I'm sweating—it can be 30, 40, 50 degrees inside the costume. During one evening of performance, I often lose 5 to 10 kilograms. It's a great challenge to control the movement and the pain. So, I drink alcohol, and enter a state of trance. And for me that's what gives meaning to the performance: there is pain, there is the cry of someone, and there is my resistance to it.

KA/EH: The performance involves hard, physical work performed under the heat of the sun. Michel is often stimulated to the extent that he enters a state of altered consciousness. In it, he transcends the heaviness both of the suit and of the social conditions. The performance has a spiritual meaning for Michel. He sees it as a type of ritual which might be associated, even if remotely, with traditional rite of passage ceremonies. I see it as a way to balance senses of resilience and resistance.

Also, the suit constrains the astronaut's vision. As the astronaut walks through the street of a village or through a forest, he's almost like a blind person. Often, it is the sound of the city or the forest that the astronaut connects with. His vision becomes internal. The suit is also acoustically rich. When the astronaut walks around, the costume produces a lot of noise, which is combined with the sound of Michel's breath. This affects his interactions with people he encounters. Some of these people ask him questions, some simply follow him.

KA/ME: The performances have rarely taken place in art spaces, but often in the streets of Kinshasa. I adapt my presence to who is there to interact with me; performing at an art event with rich people is not the same as being in one of the neighborhoods of my city.

EM: Could you tell us about the condition the costumes are in after they have been used in performance, and are the costumes preserved in their physical form?

KA/ME: Because the costume is used in a performance, it often falls apart and even gets damaged. It depends on the environment, the actions and the movements that you're going to make in the performance. If I perform for the elite, the upper crust, it's all about appearance and beauty, in an exaggerated way that is almost provocative. I'm not going to jump on the tables and break my suit, you know. I'm adapting, I'm changing the atmosphere according to the context of the audience. But in the context of a street performance, I might jump into dirty puddles, disrupt traffic or let myself fall off the bank of a river. I challenge my body until the suit almost completely breaks apart.

KA/EH: A river where you almost drowned! While the idea of restoring the same suit endlessly interested us at first, we kept on adding new parts to the suits, replacing the parts that got damaged in the course of the performance. We make the suit shine and "alive" again. Interestingly, it is often only the external parts that get replaced or are polished, but the inner part of the suit keeps the patina and the traces of use—the sweat and blood from the abrasions that emerged while performing in it.

HH: I'm intrigued by the notion of the audience in the astronaut's performances. You mentioned that when Michel wears the suit, he elicits reactions and people tend to follow him. However, I'm curious if you have a particular

audience in mind, or if the notion of an audience, within the context of your work's openness, is superfluous?

KA/EH: Initially, the astronaut performed at a VIP event in Kinshasa for which I had also proposed other artists. Followed by spontaneous performances in the streets where he did what he usually does: walks in the city, talks with people, finds places, has a drink. Perhaps he also makes deals, because that's also how people survive in Kinshasa. You go out and you hope to get lucky and find something that will materialize as a day job. Most artists *vivent au taux du jour* ([literally "live by the day's rate"]).

The audience depends on where the performance takes place—it is often passers-by, workers or local inhabitants. There have been instances where the astronaut's actions have seemed a performance for himself, a surpassing of himself. In this context, it's also interesting to think about other artists as audience, too. Kongo Astronauts is also an artist's artist giving living testimony of past, present and future.

VM: Could you tell us a little bit more about the costume, who is involved in its fabrication?

KA/EH: Michel and I make the astronaut's costumes. Sometimes, Bebson and other artists collaborate with us in our creation by providing interesting found materials. But Michel really is the master of the costume. In the beginning of our collaboration, he created the first one and then several subsequent ones. My role was to propose a concept relating to our many discussions and make suggestions on details. I often intervene on the helmets. So far, there have been several different costumes, approximately six or seven. It is difficult to tell because sometimes, as I said, we reconstruct a damaged costume, or construct a new one using pieces of the former one. One could say that there is no fixed materiality to the costume; the costume evolves with time and use.

EM: Do you and Michel wish to preserve these costumes for the future? It's a tricky question since it seems that the very logic beyond the function of the astronaut's costume is to subject it to wear and tear, to the use in the action it is designed to co-perform. Asking this question, I'm obviously implying here a Western notion of conservation, in which preservation is often associated with the upkeep of the material integrity of a work. What would be the alternative way of preserving the costume, and how could the costume be remembered? And, finally, is the costume "collectible," in the Western sense?

KA/EH: Some years back, after discovering that one of our suits had sold on the secondary market without our consent, we contemplated for the first time sales of costumes that had not been used in performance. Our preference, however, is for the costume to have a life, to take part in performance, with which it is inextricably bound, before it ends up on display. On the other hand, of course, we cannot escape the fact that bringing these costumes to the art market will help us survive and continue our work, so it's an ongoing dilemma. To be radical in Kinshasa is a luxury that Michel, I, and others cannot afford. We also followed the advice of our friend, the French scholar Dominique Malaquais, with whom we have had an intensive relationship and who has

followed our work for several years.¹⁴ She recommended that, rather than working freestyle, we find a gallery who would represent our work. We established a collaboration with New York-based Axis Gallery, with whom our friend Sammy Baloji, an established Congolese artist, has had a fruitful relationship. We started our collaboration with Axis Gallery just at the beginning of the pandemic, so things were slowed down by the global lockdown. Since working with Axis, we've opened up to preserving our work in an object-form. Particular costumes have been presented in art exhibition contexts, including *Entrelacs/Interlaced*, honoring Dominique Malaquais, at Cité internationale des arts in Paris, and in our first solo exhibition in the United States, as well as at international art fairs, and have been acquired by art collections.

We have thought about the fate of our costumes a lot. After the performance, we could choose to leave them as they are—a relic from the performance that could potentially be sold. Michel and I have discussed it extensively, and we understand that the costume needs to be a sort of warning light that continues to shine and travels on to different spaces.

VM: Could you elaborate on the aspect of film and photographs being modes of preserving the astronaut's performances? What are potential other ways of preservation, remembrance or afterlife of your performances that you envision?

KA/EH: I would say there are several ways. One is our relationship with Dominique and the network of researchers that write about our work, and that have in a way used our work in research. For us, this relationship with the research world has been very interesting and important because the questions and the constant interviews help us define ourselves. Discussing with scholars directs us to various aspects of our work because they formulate questions that we wouldn't have considered ourselves. We often don't have time for this kind of thinking or are overwhelmed by the strategies of sheer survival. It's been stimulating for us to maintain this exchange and to share knowledge across borders, and to have our work preserved and remembered through research.

Photography accompanies our performance and filmmaking but it's important to underscore that it isn't the most important aspect of our work in comparison to performance and film; photography helps us understand what we do, to delve into our psyche, to frame a reality that escapes us, to leave a trace. It also helps us to share what we do in an immediate way because it crosses continents very easily, much faster than text, films and performance. We started photographing because we were tired of people photographing our work and making money off of it. We were determined to make it our own. Our photography was met with great interest. We often take photographs on the sites where our performances and films happen. A further layer of meaning was added by the photocollages we produced.

At times, text offers another layer through which our work is preserved. Both Michel and I write. These are different forms of intertextuality, sometimes theoretical, sometimes poetic. Sometimes our texts express the overlap of languages in DRC and their translatability. We try to contextualize the spoken, street language—French and Congolese local formulations—in order to understand them.

The films, too, are a very important way of preserving our performance. Sometimes, performances are made in order to be filmed, sometimes their duration extends the recording time. The films are important because they often involve other artists and people. We rarely hire people in the sense of casting them but rather work with people we know well, with whom we've shared moments of our lives, or with people who want to collaborate with us.

For us who live in and with the city and not in a protective tower, the city is very important. Life here is an ongoing performance. We have plenty of intense interactions. Here, we speak to each other in taxis, in buses, in the market, and everyone negotiates their rights and interests all the time. This negotiation can take a subtle form but it also can be seductive, flattering or confrontational. Of course, there are administrative rules but everything is negotiable, so one negotiates all the time. The people I collaborate with in my films are people who have built tactics of survival that are based on these ongoing negotiations.

HH: I appreciate how you have touched upon the subject of preservation. In connection with this topic, I would like to revisit the subject of costumes for a moment. It seems that the act of remaking or regenerating the costumes can also be viewed as a form of care for your practice—a preservation that is not just limited to maintaining the initial materials, but is also linked with the preservation of the form, and with the performance of this form. Additionally, the costumes embody pressing environmental issues since they are collages, repositories and assemblages of discarded material—the waste products extracted from the digestive system of technological progress. As symbols of extractive capitalism and environmental violence, the electronic waste—the “dead media”—are now given new life and are carried into the world, engulfing Michel's body. Yet, this body is triumphant, rather than subjugated. The physical composition of the astronaut's costume is a manifestation of the circulation of matter: The components of old electronics created from materials excavated from Africa's mineral-rich grounds, transformed into consumer electronic for the pleasures of the Western world, and then brought back to their origins as a toxic “gift.” Although discarded here, they have not been forgotten—picked up and recirculated into the secondhand market of electronic parts. The costume, therefore, is not only a radical mode of preservation, but also an invocation of the ongoing “mattering” of matter, in the political, economic and social sense.

KA/ME: The electronic parts, the circuit boards of the Kongo Astronaut's suit are sold in bulk at the market. I buy them there, I don't pick them up because you can't find them. There is a market of resellers of electronic parts where you can buy diodes and all the other small parts used to repair stuff, all in good condition. Kongo Astronauts' work addresses the exploitation and conservation of minerals and ores in Congo. By creating the suits in gold and silver, we make a link to these natural resources and all the wealth that exists in the country. There is an unlimited connection between matter and creation. An old phone comes back to the place from which the resources originated. To create a costume is to participate in the never-ending process of extraction, exploitation, fabrication, destruction, reconstruction, transformation...



Figure 10.1 Kongo Astronauts, *Untitled [-5]*, 2021, Series: SCrashed_Capital.exe. Fine art Baryta paper. Courtesy: Kongo Astronauts and Axis Gallery.

KA/EH: This practice of using recycled materials is also characteristic of DRC. As an example, having grown up in Mbandaka, in the equatorial region of Congo, Bebson is very knowledgeable about traditional musical instruments used in that region. When he moved to the capital, he didn't have access to these instruments, but he had their sounds and shapes in his memory. He didn't have the money to buy modern instruments imported from Europe, America or Asia. So street children supplied him with found materials gathered in the streets—broken objects like kitchen utensils, electronic toys, sound systems, car parts, etcetera. Bebson mastered the DIY philosophy and recreated all the sounds he grew up with, including the wind blowing between the trees in the forest or the hatching of a thousand caterpillars... mixing it with new sounds made of industrial waste.

But Bebson doesn't keep things, he feels he needs to continuously rebuild the world and reconfigure his dreams. If something breaks, he makes something else. He doesn't emphasize preservation. His idea of preservation is embodied in the school that he created in the neighborhood: "If you don't have money, create an instrument with whatever you have at hand." It's an ongoing bricolage. And Bebson's creations are difficult to preserve since they are made with whatever is at hand at the given time and last a limited time. I feel a very strong affinity with Bebson, but maybe for you it's different, Michel?

KA/ME: Well, Bebson inspired many artists, and I was inspired by Bebson in the way he makes things out of anything. But I wanted to keep, not destroy what I had built. Like a musician, who is inspired, and who takes a melody and

changes it. Bebson is a part of us, a spirit to which we dance. For me, Kongo Astronauts has allowed me to reconstruct myself. In it, I preserve the gems of my land. The costume allows me to preserve the knowledge and to preserve who I am. It's a form of identity.

HH: Does the costume preserve a longer tradition, or does it link to ancestral practice?

KA/EH: The reason why the movement of creating costumes in Kinshasa took off is because the Congolese understand the role of the costume as a vehicle during ritual events—such as the birth of a baby or someone's death. This history is deeply rooted, despite being forcefully shut off during the colonial era, and later re-encouraged under the promotion of the concept of “authenticity” espoused by Mobutu's dictatorship.¹⁵ Historical traditions have also been shut off by the church who claims to this day that these practices are sorcery or “fetish.” For us it is also a way to address decolonization issues. Somewhere, deep down, Bebson, Michel, and others have found ways to re-enact ancestral practices, using the materials they have at their disposal. Despite the suppression of culture, mineral extraction and the dumping of Western garbage on Congolese grounds, the artists reappropriate these materials and make them visible on their bodies—they transform them into aesthetic embodiments to not only question the impact of globalization but also as a way to unlock memory, to heal, reclaim and reinvent their lives.



Figure 10.2 Kongo Astronauts, *The jungle is my church 1*, 2015. Series: Lusanga “ex:Leverville.” Fine art Baryta paper. Courtesy: Kongo Astronauts and Axis Gallery.



Figure 10.3 Kongo Astronauts, *Aisle of Dreams*, 2019. Series: *After Schengen*. Fine art Baryta paper. Courtesy: Kongo Astronauts and Axis Gallery.

HH: That’s an incredibly powerful act. I am curious, do you find that wearing the suit connects to traditional Congolese culture and rituals? Could the ritual you perform be interpreted as a continuation of a much older tradition? Is this mode of expression a form of invention or reinvention of the past?

KA/ME: Yes, indeed, my putting on the suit and going out to walk the streets is a form of ritual. I often think of Zebola in my performances. Zebola is a traditional African possession ritual to heal mental illnesses. Another link with the past is the “K” in our name, Kongo Astronauts, which links us with the historic Kongo Kingdom. And even in the design of the Astronauts’ masks, there is a touch of tradition: they remind us of the function of African masks, updated for our current time. The performances of Kongo Astronauts today in the city reveal a history and richness that you can see only in the eyes of onlookers. I believe that when people look at the costume of Kongo Astronauts, it represents for them a mirror of a forgotten society, it represents a mirror of what they are but they cannot grasp. It is like someone who sees himself in a mirror, who does not recognize that it is him, yet it is. The costume is also inspired by traditional sculptures that had a psychological or protective function—a function that gives hope and protects and also immortalizes something. The sculpture can be both static and in motion.

KA/EH: All these costumes that have been appearing in the urban fabric of Kinshasa assess potential new social functions in the continuity of precolonial art—to teach, to protect and to immortalize.

HH: Continuing our discussion on the topic of transmission, you previously suggested that the astronaut can be perceived both as a contemporary mask and as a means of sharing knowledge and experience. On another occasion, you see individuals such as Bebson are engaged with hip-hop and urban culture which rely on oral transmission. Can you expand on this further and explain how the astronaut figure is able to transmit knowledge through this form of borrowing?

KA/EH: Bebson is set up in his neighborhood, he has always lived in the same house. Most people interested in performance visit his house, some of them staying all day long and watching how he builds instruments and costumes. Sometimes he wears costumes and does spontaneous performances with those visitors. He helped many individuals who wished to become artists, and many artists who were conflicted about studying at the School of Arts or simply did not have the financial means to do so.

In these informal meetings of his “Ghetto GeT In-GrOw Up!”, lots of things take place through emulation. No master classes are provided, no lectures given. These informal gatherings accompany youths during their search for a meaningful activity in a context of extended unemployment. The visitors to Bebson’s house are encouraged to recall individual or collective memories, to research the stories and knowledge of their families, and they receive support in translating these stories and knowledge into their work. All this is organic, it is a form of human ecology. We worked in the same frame of mind with our space walker.

As for our films, they are not written in advance, anyone who is involved can influence the course of the film during the shooting. The films are often created in extensive timeframes that are sometimes shown unfinished and have evolving versions as life takes them over. They are almost endlessly remixable. The writing and rewriting take place during editing when a vision starts to emerge portraying the processes, improvisation and interactions that occurred during filming, the understanding and unfolding of intimate relationships with people and space and the capacity to integrate polysemy into something powerful that evolves at the pace of our understanding.

Though we have not focused on the preservation of our own creative works, what is preserved is a transmission of knowledge, a continuity of practice, enacted using an additive process of assemblage created from garbage—cross-temporal masks—which manifest in the creations of others. Bebson, *Kongo Astronauts* and a few others like Pisco Crane from “Fulu Miziki” or Eddy Ekete from “Ndaku, la vie est belle” engage people with these costumes, they communicate how to employ costumes to express their personal, social, economic, environmental concerns, and how to harness the use of garbage to demonstrate problems arising from Congo’s violent histories and troubled present.

This conversation was conducted in January and March 2022 in English and French. Editorial assistance: Electra Maria Letizia D’Emilio. We thank Gabriella Nugent and Lisa Brittan for their support in realizing the conversation.

Notes

- 1 Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287–302.
- 2 The macroeconomics of European capital accumulation through the importation of Congolese copper is spelled out in Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to The Age of Revolution* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), see chapter 5, "The Kingdom of Kongo: From Majesty to Revolt."
- 3 "Kongo Astronauts," Axis Gallery website, <https://axis.gallery/kongo-astronauts-bio-cv>, accessed February 14, 2022.
- 4 "Kongo Astronauts," Axis Gallery website.
- 5 "Kongo Astronauts," Axis Gallery website.
- 6 Eshun, "Further Considerations."
- 7 Faustin Linyekula is a Congolese dancer and choreographer of contemporary dance whose works often address the experience of war, fear and economic collapse.
- 8 Bebson Elemba's musical performance concludes Kongo Astronaut's film *Transpatial Incidents*, directed by Éléonore Hellio, 2010/2020.
- 9 MOWOSO, "Ground/Overground/Underground," <https://chimurengachronic.co.za/ground-overground-underground>, accessed March 5, 2022.
- 10 Dominique Malaquais, "On the Urban Condition at the Edge of the Twenty-first-century: Time, Space and Art in Question," *Social Dynamics* 44, no. 3 (2018): 425–437.
- 11 Laurence Allard, Alexandre Monnin and Nicolas Nova, *Écologies du smartphone* (Lormont: Le Bord de l'eau, 2022).
- 12 Coltan is a rare raw material, a dull black metallic ore from which the elements niobium and tantalum are extracted. Coltan is indispensable to the production of mobile phones, and the DRC is the world's second-largest supplier of this mineral. Coltan mines are often located in the conflict zones, and workers are subject to human rights abuses. Since January 2021, the European Union requires companies to ensure that so-called "conflict minerals" are sourced responsibly.
- 13 Raggamuffin, often abbreviated as ragga, is a subgenre of dancehall and reggae music in which sampling plays a prominent role. The instrumentals primarily consist of electronic music.
- 14 The research for this interview was informed by Dominique Malaquais's writings. See, for instance, Malaquais, "Kongo Astronauts Embedded Collective," *Multitudes* 77, no. 4 (2019): 20–26 and "Anti-Pathos," *African Arts* 53, no. 3 (2020): 1–7.
- 15 Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga (1930–97) was a Congolese politician and president of the DRC who pursued a recourse to traditional values.

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