

ART

Monthly

No. 481 November 2024 £7 €8 \$9

Working Together

Suzanne Lacy interviewed by Larne Abse Gogarty

Ruin Fever

Marcus Verhagen

Repatriation v Replication

Tom Snow

Sammy Baloji

Profile by Elizabeth Fullerton

Profile

Sammy Baloji

Born in the mineral rich province of Katanga in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and currently based in Lubumbashi and Brussels, Sammy Baloji finds that the violent legacies of Belgian colonialism in the past continue to haunt the present in the form of multinational corporate extractivism and exploitation.

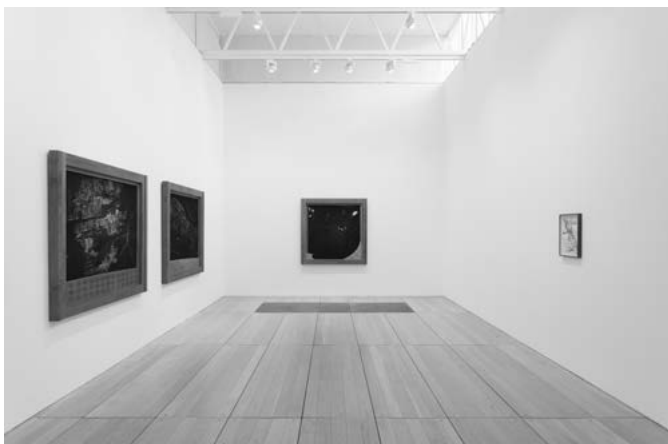
The Latin word *aequare* means to make equal, compare or make even. In his 2023 film *Aequare: The Future that Never Was*, Sammy Baloji sets up a comparison between the Democratic Republic of the Congo's colonial past and its present day through the juxtaposition of propagandistic clips of a climate study centre established under Belgian rule and contemporary footage of its dilapidated successor. The film, part of the artist's solo exhibition at Goldsmiths CCA, emphasises contrast, yes, but there is no making equal. The colonial segments focus on the town of Yangambi and show neat houses surrounded by landscaped gardens, immaculate greenhouses, researchers in gleaming laboratories and rows of clerks busily recording data. Then the view today: idle machines, abandoned corridors, shelves crammed with dog-eared documents, plant specimens languishing in dusty vitrines and a handful of workers still making notes beneath a colossal map of Belgian Congo. In one devastating sequence, towering trees from the world's second largest rainforest are felled to a soundtrack of triumphant classical music amid talk of taming and civilisation. First screened at the 2023 Venice Architecture Biennale, where Baloji's three-part presentation received a special mention, *Aequare* poignantly demonstrates the inexorable hubris of the colonisers, who, in the name of progress – for which read profit – insisted that their agricultural and climate experiments would benefit all, but has instead left behind a land ravaged by monoculture and deforestation.

The juxtaposition of the colonial past with the present is a frequent trope in Baloji's work; it highlights not just the conspicuous inequity between oppressor and oppressed, plunderer and plundered, but that these histories continue to impact lives today, perpetuated by a system that has not yet been dismantled. Baloji has experienced the pervasive influence of extractivism from growing up in the mineral-rich Katanga province, where economic and social life was organised around industrial mining. First controlled by the Belgians before the state, it is now in the hands of competing foreign companies. Since the early 2000s, Baloji has built his practice around documenting the DRC's histories and forgotten narratives – initially through photography – to better understand how the present shapes the future.

Tellingly, Baloji, who is based between Lubumbashi and Brussels, did not learn about his country's colonial past at school. It was only after his university studies while working as a photographer at the French Institute in Lubumbashi that he began to collaborate with architects and scientists who were exploring the DRC's colonial heritage through its buildings and industry. Gaining access to colonial archives, he discovered how cities in the DRC were planned around ideas of racial segregation (as seen in *Aequare*), ostensibly on grounds of sanitation, and observed that those divisions persisted after independence in 1960, only with racial



Aequare: The Future that Never Was, 2023, video



installation view, Goldsmiths CCA, London



installation view, Goldsmiths CCA, London



Aequare: The Future that Never Was, 2023, video

hierarchies replaced by economic ones. Through these archives he also understood the violence of photography as a pernicious colonial tool utilised to other and exploit.

Born out of his findings, Baloji's startling series 'Mémoire', 2006, presents a montage of colonial archival images with his own contemporary photographs of industrial sites around Lubumbashi. Black-and-white archival images of labourers, some chained together by their necks, others in crisp uniforms or naked and marked by white lettering, are set against coloured backdrops of hulking ruins of machinery, slag heaps and denuded Martian-looking terrain, as if revenants troubling the collective memory in the present. Scholars have proposed different methods of approaching visual evidence of black subjection; for example, decolonising the photographic image, according to the scholar Mark Sealy, is 'an act of unburdening it from the assumed, normative, hegemonic, colonial conditions present, consciously or unconsciously, in the moment of its original making and in its readings and displays'. Thus, by fusing the contexts of the anthropological images in 'Mémoire', Baloji could perhaps be seen as liberating his subjects from their static confines into a more fluid and hopeful temporality.

Drawing connections across timeframes, whose distinctions Baloji regards as artificial, the artist is interested in synthesis and hybridity as methodologies. A collaborator by nature, he co-founded the Lubumbashi Biennale in 2008 with the 'Picha' collective of artists and cultural producers, helping to foster new critical artistic discourses across disciplines, traditions and knowledge systems.

In his current show at Goldsmiths CCA he does this eloquently in a multi-layered presentation that traces the threads that link uranium to a 'Great Game'-type contest during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the United States sought access to the mineral: Congo being one of the world's largest suppliers. (Indeed, uranium from Shinkolobwe mine in Katanga produced the atomic bombs that the US would drop on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.) Baloji's 15-panel screenprint installation *Shinkolobwe's Abstraction*, 2022, references this geopolitics in a wall of red and yellow overlapping crystalline forms, Baloji having abstracted the colours and geology of uranium, and superimposed them over a black-and-white image of a gigantic mushroom cloud. Vitrines display material relating to interventionist activities from across the political spectrum: redacted 'Top Secret' correspondence between Washington and Brussels; the CIA's mobilisation of Abstract Expressionism as a cultural weapon; pamphlets documenting Congolese student decolonial activism.

A new series of five photographic prints layered on abstract grounds, *Triga Mark III*, extends this investigation - part of a conversation between Baloji and the historian Pedro Monaville about the globalised nature of the student revolts in the 1960s. Three of the works incorporate fragmentary stills from a 1961 Russian documentary about the western-backed assassination of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, and two further images feature pro-socialist student revolutionaries, encapsulating their sense of agency and hope. Baloji's presentation complicates and widens our understanding of student movements around the world as they constructed new identities and rejected paternalistic meddling in newly independent nations.

A turning point in the artist's practice came during his 2008 residency at the above-mentioned ethno-

graphic museum in Tervuren where he was shocked by the way colonial-era labels oriented voyeuristic readings of photographs he encountered in the archives. From this point onwards his work became more provocative, seeking to shift this gaze by bringing other voices into the narrative. In 2010, Baloji and the historian Maarten Couttenier produced the series 'Congo Far West; Retracing Charles Lemaire's expedition' in which they retraced this notorious 1898 expedition to Katanga, gleaning testimonies from locals of their memories of this traumatic event that had been passed down through their families. Struggling with the vexed history of photography, a medium so bound up in the (mis)representation of Africa's inhabitants, Baloji has increasingly moved into sculpture, installation and film as a way of forging a visual language capable of reframing histories and generating new perspectives.

One way he has done this is with his series of copper bas-relief sculptures 'Société Secrètes', 2015, which draws on the pre-colonial Congolese tradition of body scarification. Baloji abstracts and recontextualises the otherwise objectifying archival photographs of scarification patterns found in the Tervuren Museum's collection, reclaiming scarification as an important part of the country's identity and community that has otherwise been suppressed by colonial and Christian authorities. Similarly, his series of bronze plates *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth, Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Century*, 2017, replicates motifs from raffia palm fibres that highly skilled weavers produced for monarchs in pre-colonial times. Part of Baloji's research project *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*, 2017-, the sculptures were inspired by the 2015 exhibition 'Kongo: Power and Majesty' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

One of these sculptures also features at Goldsmiths CCA, alongside the powerful 2017 film installation *Tales of the Copper Cross Garden: Episode I*, originally made for Documenta 14. The film charts the processes of copper wire production at the mining giant Gécamines, accompanied by a haunting mix of folkloric and religious song (by the copper cross choir). This syncretic music, created to promote evangelisation of the population, underscores the Catholic church's integral role in the colonial project, government, church and economy having formed a 'holy trinity' under Belgian rule. Workers silently carry out their tasks like automata, programmed by colonial rulers long before the factory was nationalised. Baloji overlays the scenes of labour with quotations by the philosopher and poet Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, reflecting on his father's internalisation of colonial values and the 'capitalist choreography of profitability and competition' - which we observe played out before us in the factory. 'All memory', Mudimbe ponders, 'is part of life and of a history in movement and therefore of its omissions. Far from opposing each other, then, it is clear that "African" memories - ancient and colonial - rather complement each other'. It almost feels as if Baloji could have voiced the same sentiments.

Sammy Baloji's exhibition at Goldsmiths CCA, London continues to 12 January.

Elizabeth Fullerton is a London-based art writer and critic.