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On the urban condition at the edge of the twenty-first-century: time, space and art in question

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, Mowoso, an artists' collective based in the Democratic Republic of Congo and France, initiated a project titled *Ground Overground Underground* (*GOU*). An experimental work manifesting in video, photography, prose, installation and ephemeral architecture, *GOU* addresses the movement of bodies and imaginaries between cities of Africa and Europe. Focusing on the travels of one man between Kinshasa and Paris, it considers the damage, political, economic and psychological, that attends such movement. Left unfinished, *GOU* was Mowoso's final undertaking; several unsuccessful attempts to complete it resulted in the collective's demise. Here, I ponder the reasons for this. *GOU*'s failure to come to fruition and, eventually, the collective's disbandment, I postulate, were linked to the subject the artists sought to tackle: the twenty-first-century urban condition. The violence visited by the late capitalist present on city dwellers in the global South and, in particular, on those who would claim a right to intercontinental mobility in our increasingly globalised world, caused tensions within the collective. From these arose questions regarding the nature of time and its relation to urban space, and disagreements on the form, the meaning and, ultimately, the purpose and viability of both the work of art and art itself.

First Words

When we speak about the impact of art on cities, and vice versa, what we put forth for discussion are usually successes. As scholars, curators, artists and activists interested in the potential of such an impact, we tend to highlight what works. With this essay, I want to propose a different entry point. I seek to explore, and if possible to account for, a failure. My interest is in two intertwined aspects of this failure: its internal mechanics – how the object of my inquiry broke down – and the *raison d'être* for this breakdown: why things fell apart. The failed object on which I focus is an experimental artwork titled *Ground Overground Underground* (*GOU* for short). A mix of video, photography, prose, installation and ephemeral architecture, *GOU* was initiated in 2009 by a now defunct artists' collective called Mowoso (2007–2011). As failures go, *GOU* is spectacular. From the point of view of an art historian concerned with intersections between art, cities and political and economic violence, conceptually it is exceptionally rich.

While, in places, it suffers from the artists' use of less-than-optimal recording devices, overall it is visually and acoustically stunning.

Why focus on a failure and why on this one in particular? Why, too, do so in the present context? *GOU* fell apart, I will argue, because of the subject that it sought, and which this special issue of *Social Dynamics* seeks to address: the urban condition at the edge of the twenty-first century. The work was foiled by the very practices with which it meant to engage. The reasons for this, I will attempt to show, are linked to questions of structural violence inherent to late capitalism. They are a function of a state of affairs that makes cities extraordinarily difficult places to live and to navigate for the over-whelming majority of the planet's urban dwellers and they are a function, simulta-neously, of the endurance (Simone 2014) of cities and their inhabitants in the face of this state of affairs. Paradoxically, *GOU*, as a failed endeavour, speaks to these questions far more effectively than if it had succeeded. Thus, my interest and the pages that follow.

A Story of Failure

GOU manifests in several ways. It takes the form of: a series of images accompanied by blocks of text presented online and in print[1] (Figures 1–4); 10 roughly edited video shorts; one long video made up of parts of these shorts; a one-off sculptural installation
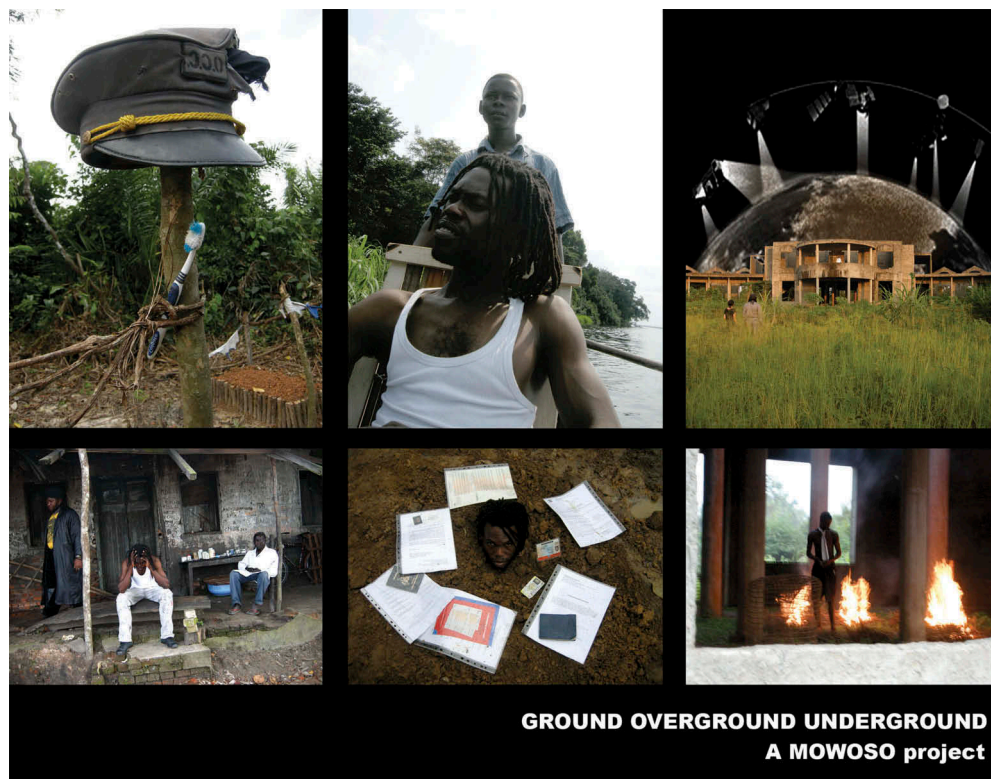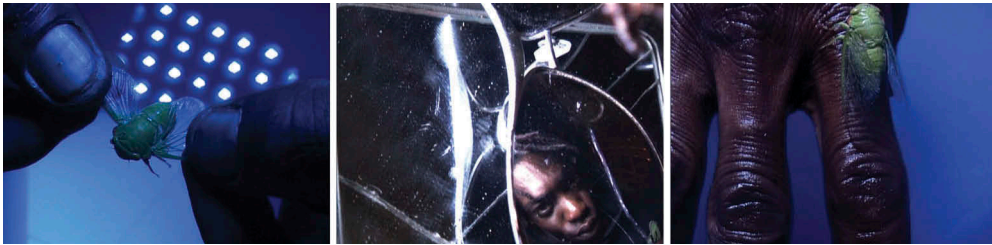

Figure 1. Print teaser for *GOU*. ©Mowoso, 2010.

Figure 2. Digital collage of *GOU* stills. ©Mowoso, 2010.

Figure 3. Digital collage of *GOU* stills. ©Mowoso, 2010.

Figure 4. Digital collage of *GOU* stills. ©Mowoso, 2010.

designed to project and view the long video; and a brief description, published on a website, of how all of this is meant to fit together formally.[2]

In its various iterations, *GOU* follows a protagonist, acted by Mowoso co-founder Dicoco Boketshu Bokungu, as he moves from Mbandaka, a city located on the Equator in Western Democratic Republic of Congo, to Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, and a third city called Mikili. His voyage is both physical and psychic. Involving multiple rites of passage that catapult Bokungu into a constellation of past and future moments, it culminates in a tunnel-like drop through a cosmic rabbit hole that lands him on the streets of Mikili. Mikili is, in fact, Paris. To Congolese readers, this will be self-evident. In Lingala, the *lingua franca* of much of Western Congo, *mokili* means "world." *Mikili*, a derivative, references urban Europe generally speaking and, in particular, the French capital, understood as an ideal world that one dreams of reaching, an imagined place of ease, style and, most importantly "modernity" (Gondola 1999b, 29; Trapido 2011, 205). The related term *mikiliste* describes men and women who buy into this imaginary: a

vision of Paris the self-styled *belle*, in opposition to Kin La *poubelle* ("Kin[shasa] the trashcan"), a description of the Congolese capital common in *mikiliste* circles.[3]

The path travelled by Bokungu the protagonist of *GOU* parallels that of Bokungu the co-founder of Mowoso. Like the fictional character, in the course of making *GOU* the real filmmaker moved to Mikili. The 10 shorts that come together in the long video, the rites of passage that appear in these shorts, and the photographs of both that have been reproduced online and in print[4] were filmed, acted and shot during a time when Bokungu, with the help of Mowoso co-founder Eléonore Hellio, a French national and his partner at the time, was jumping through the endless series of hoops that formal immigration from Congo to France entails. This was no happenstance. The idea, jointly devised by Hellio and Bokungu, was to document the travails of those who would leave one continent for the other and the violence visited on them by a late capitalist system determined to make such movement between Africa and Europe as difficult as possible for all but the most privileged.[5]

Produced in France, the long-film and installation versions attest to the insidious effects of this violence. By the time the editing process was ready to begin, Hellio and Bokungu were at irremediable odds. They could not agree on how – or even on whether – the footage was to be made into a coherent whole. The process of getting Bokungu from Congo to France had proven so discombobulating from an eco-nomic, a bureaucratic and a psychological point of view that what had seemed coherent to both no longer held any sense for either. The plan had been that *GOU*, once made into an exhibitable object, would be shown in a range of different venues. Bokungu would make a name for himself in the reputational economy of the art world and Hellio, already well established in the field, would acquire further visibility. In the event, no such thing occurred. Faced with the fact that commercial video production garners more money and immediate attention than long-term art projects, Bokungu, strapped for cash and recognition in a "host" country deter-mined to deny him both, opted for the former. At the time, he was the one in the duo with the editing skills and so *GOU* fell by the wayside. Hellio, meanwhile, was having increasing doubts as to whether she was interested in putting her name to the project at all. This was so not because she wanted to distance herself from the undertaking, but as a result, rather, of a growing determination to think of herself as an artist without an oeuvre – one whose creations, because they have no identifiable author or spectator, are able to escape the art world's definitions of what constitutes both art and value. To be an artist without an oeuvre is not, of course, to refrain from producing art. Rather, as theorist Stephen Wright has contended (Wright 2006, 2008, 2013;), it is to produce art that is not readily recognised as such. Artistic practices that fly under the art-world radar, making themselves deliberately un-exhibitable, he argues, carry infinitely greater political heft than ones that overtly claim their status as art. Exercises in "stealth," they are able to worm their way into the everyday and, in the process, have the potential to subvert the status quo. An avid reader of Wright at the time, Hellio was increasingly coming to align her practice with his theory. *GOU*, as it had been thought of up to that point, however, was eminently recognisable as art. Hellio was in a quandary. And so, as she laboured to make sense of her position, the project fell by the wayside on her end as well.

That the long-video and installation version were, in the end, made – in late 2010 – was more as a result of duress than a concerted decision by the two artists. A major exhibition focusing on intersections between art and urbanism in Africa's largest cities, *Afropolis: Stadt, Medien, Kunst*, was in preparation in Germany.[6] Approached by the organisers to recommend artists whose work might be included in the show, the curatorial platform that had funded *GOU* suggested Mowoso.[7] For a mix of professional and personal reasons, the artists felt beholden to the funders and so Bokungu and Hellio got down to work. In 10 days' time, they developed the long video and, in tandem with architect-activist Julien Beller, co-founder of the Exyzt collective,[8] they designed the means to project and display it: a massive contraption, part sculpture, part viewing booth and model spacecraft (Figure 5).

For the exhibition's purposes and from the point of view of the funders, the installation was a success. Not so for the artists. As an object, it was less than either had hoped for and as a collaboration it was a dismal failure. Indeed, in retrospect it marked the end of Mowoso.[9] No further projects were undertaken and, shortly, the collective's blog, produced by Hellio and arguably its most original venture, went offline. In pursuit of the *mikiliste* dream, Bokungu turned full-time to music video editing. Hellio, in a reverse *mikiliste* move, left France for Congo, where she currently lives and continues to wrestle with the concept of an art without oeuvre.

Following its hasty edit for the German exhibition, *GOU* was left to lie fallow. Sporadically, since then, there has been talk by one or the other party of remixing it. Nothing, however, has materialised. In the following pages, I consider why a satisfactory and final edit proved impossible.

Time and Space in Question

Arguably, *GOU* cannot be finished because it is the work of two people who do not share the same vision of time and its relation to space. For one half of Mowoso, Bokungu, the story told by *GOU* was, initially, a linear one: the idea was to follow the movement (physical as well as existential) of one man from point A to point B. The trajectory – from A to B, Congo to France, and Kin-la-poubelle to Mikili-la-belle – was one of progress. One was leaving one place behind in favour of another, where things would be not only different, but also, and more importantly, better. Movement through space was synonymous with improvement and – here lies the key – with movement through time. Kin was the past and Mikili the future. The narrative was fundamentally teleological. For the other half of Mowoso, the very notion of teleology was (and remains very much) suspect. As a basic matter, the idea that things are more "advanced" in France than in Congo – that one might belong to the future and the other to the past, whether on an individual or a societal level – makes little sense to Hellio. Nor, in spite of a long-standing interest in Afrofuturist fictions and forms, would she argue that the contrary is true. In her view, such linear readings of the present are beside the point. Past and future – and, by logical inference, present – are nothing more (or less) than coordinates on a Möbius strip shot through with impossible-to-predict wormholes. A and B, in this conception of things, are neither beginning nor end points. They are imaginaries rather than places, potential occurrences rather than defined physical spaces, that happen along the way, and the way itself is a

Figure 5. *GOU* as displayed in the context of the *Afropolis* exhibition at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (Cologne) – installation view, November 2011. Photo ©Christian Hanussek.

dreamscape on which linear time has little purchase. This approach to time and space is not far removed from that of philosopher Michel Serres who has famously likened the time-space continuum to a crumpled tissue. When the tissue lies flat, you can mark points on it and measure the distance between them. Some will be close to one another

and others far away. Now crumple the tissue. Points that had been far away become close, and vice versa. Such, says Serres, is time. It is rarely linear and almost never lets itself be measured in terms of fixed distances: "Time bends and twists; it is best compared to the dance of flames in a blaze: lying flat here, vertical there, mobile and unexpected" (Serres 1994, 89, 92–93, my translation).

Presented as precedes, the difference in take between Bokungu and Hellio appears fairly straightforward. Bokungu's point of view, to borrow terminology from theorist and activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi, is futurist: it originates in a quintessentially modernist belief that "notwithstanding the darkness of the present, the future will be bright" (Berardi 2011, 18). Hellio's stance, in contrast – here again via Berardi – belongs to a post-future dispensation: one in which the utopian imagination of the modern age has made way for dystopian foreclosure. If the future comes to pass, the argument goes, it will likely not be bright – not, that is, if we insist on thinking progress as we have over the past two and a half centuries (19–25).

What, at first blush, seems a clear-cut difference in points of view, however, on closer examination proves much more complicated. Consider the subject matter of *GOU*: the urban practice(s) of *mikilisme*. What Hellio knows (or thinks she understands) of the concept, when the planning of *GOU* begins, stems principally from Bokungu. He is, at this point, her main instructor, or more properly her knowledge-broker, in the matter. The positions they occupy as a result of this state of affairs – he as "teacher," she as "student" – are, as is commonly the case in such relationships, fraught. The more Hellio learns from Bokungu about the quest for Mikili, the more she doubts the reasonableness of its premise. Contemporaneous readings in the general field of postcolonialism – Achille Mbembe, notably (in particular his work on the aesthetics of vulgarity [Mbembe 2000, chapter 3]), but also a return to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* ([1961] 1991) – significantly impact her gaze in this regard. Distraught by what she is coming to consider as the slippery slope of the phenomenon – alienation by another name, she fears – Hellio turns to theory. Her counterpart, facing parallel, if altogether different, doubts – what, *practically*, does the future in Mikili hold? – charges full-tilt into pragmatism. The result is a clash and gradually *GOU* grinds to a halt. Ultimately, however, the two responses overlap: they emerge as extensions of one another, one possible only because of the existence of the other.

Mikilisme may look like a one-way project – movement from point A to point B and from one (initial) to another (theoretically more enviable) station in life, as we have seen – but, in fact, it is nothing of the kind. For one thing, it is not dependent on spatial (dis)placement alone. Its foundational moment is a voyage from urban Africa to urban Europe, but, as anthropologist Didier Gondola (1999a, 1999b) and sociologist Justin-Daniel Gandoulou (2000) each shows in his work on the intimately related phenomenon of SAPE,[10] this voyage is not necessarily physical. It can also be a matter of the imagination alone: a fictive claim that one has travelled and, to bolster this claim, the construction of a new identity – the adoption of novel vocabularies of word, gesture, dress and so on. Where actual movement is the approach elected, canonical representations of space (such as provided by Michelin maps or guidebooks) are of little use. As any *mikiliste* will tell you, Paris may be Paris, but in places – the Château Rouge and Gare du Nord neighbourhoods, in particular – it is first and foremost Kinshasa. In both instances, where travel is feigned and where it actually takes place, movement back and

forth is key: the ultimate goal is to show (off) in one place what takes place in the other. To fully account for one's success – to fully inhabit one's identity as a *mikiliste* – one must be able not only to travel from Kinshasa to Paris, but also to return to Kin to tell the tale and, looping back around, to tell *that* tale back in Mikili in person and, ideally, online (via Facebook and Instagram) or on TV shows watched in Kinshasa (Trapido 2011, 205) and recorded/streamed for viewing in Paris.

What all of this means in practical terms is that, at most times, one is (at the very least) in two places at once. The practices of *sapeurs* – men and women, most of whom would describe themselves as *mikilistes*[11] – who construct identities for themselves around a "cult of appearance" (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000, 3) centred on the acquisition and the highly theatrical display of *couture* clothing – are emblematic of this. The act of striking a pose in combinations of designer wear bought, traded, sold and resold in cities across the globe (Paris, of course, but also Milan, Tokyo, London, Brussels and, increasingly, Guangzhou) is one of deliberate displacement. The body thus transformed is an incarnation of urban translocality. One is of – and most relevantly *in* – this place and that place at one and the same time.

Hellio's fascination for wormholes is not far. Indeed, *mikilisme*, as ethos and aesthetic, might well be seen as an embodiment of the time-and-space-as-Möbius-strip model that she holds dear. That such slippages as envisaged by her may speak in a precise way to the *mikiliste* experience is suggested by a text penned by Bokungu in 2010, at the time the artists were editing the long-film version of *GOU*:

> This is the second imaginary journey, even as the first is already underway all the time every day … I … bathe where my image is reflected in a mirror of water behind which hides the negative of a shadow of another me … in an empty screen that refuses to (re) broadcast. (Hellio and Boketshu 2012, 63, my translation)[12]

One year into the process of effecting Bokungu's move to Paris, it seems, time and space had become equally slippery for the co-founders of Mowoso.[13]

On the Violence of the Urban In-Between

What at first appeared to be two irreconcilable stances – two radically different takes on time and space – instead turn out to converge in significant respects. But if indeed this is so, what then? Are we faced, simply, with a (productive) failure – Bokungu and Hellio having somehow slipped by one another without ever finding common ground? Or did they in fact succeed in meeting, in which case the question becomes: why did the common ground they encountered prove so elusive to articulate as a matter of form?

The root cause, I would suggest, is *mikilisme* itself or, more properly, a contemporary, global form of being-in-the-city of which it may be seen to constitute a paradigm.[14] Arjun Appadurai's well-known concept of ethnoscapes proves of use, here, as an entry point.

> By *ethnoscape* I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and individuals … This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work and leisure, as well as birth, residence and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move, or the fantasies of wanting to move. (Appadurai 1998, 33–34)

Penned in the 1990s, these words speak in remarkably prescient terms to our current condition. They point to a world in which, for vast swaths of the population, the experience of urban life is one not of long-term rootedness, but of movement between cities (Malaquais 2006), in quest of forms of wellbeing (freedom from physical and economic harm, freedom to imagine and to dream) that depend on the right to *eschew* stability. Underlying this quest is a demand – commonly met with violence, as the current refugee crisis in Europe shows – to partake in the much-vaunted mobility afforded by our increasingly globalised world. It is not, however, a "simple" will to (ex) change one location for another. Rather, it is a claim to equal rights of *in-stability*, the goal, more often than not, being to keep moving in an attempt to acquire in multiple places simultaneously the social, economic and political capital to lead viable lives.

This claim, arguably, stands at the very core of *mikilisme*. The quest for Mikili, in other words, is not an isolated phenomenon. I do not mean by this the quest to reach the cities of Europe. These cities (Paris or Brussels or London, all of which, as we saw concerning SAPE, figure prominently in the *mikiliste* project) are not meant to be final destinations; they are intended to be visited repeatedly, if possible, and often in an immersive, long-term fashion, but rarely are they construed as places to settle permanently. They, like Kinshasa itself, are stops – or, more properly, points of impact – along the way, leveraged for what they can offer in the more expansive undertaking of building lives defined by circulation: by what transpires in the in-between.[15]

The strength of *GOU*, conceptually, lies in the fact that it focuses not on places but on movement between them. Scenes were staged in Mbandaka, Kinshasa and Paris, but the narrative "action" does not occur there. Instead, it unfolds in a psychic third space – in a state of being – that has little anchoring in physical geography. This third space speaks hauntingly to the form of being-in-the-city that I have sought to articulate above. From this standpoint, *GOU*'s failure lies not in its conception, but in its form.

Earlier on, having concluded that the artists had in fact found common ground, I queried why this commonality had proven so elusive to express as a matter of form. A more productive question might have been: why attempt such an expression in the first place? Might it be that the problem with *GOU* lies not with failing to finish the project, but rather with trying to do so: with seeking to make *GOU* into an exhibitable object?

I mentioned earlier that Bokungu's *GOU* voyage involves multiple rites of passage that catapult him into a constellation of past and future moments. These rites, in which Bokungu's part is acted by several different people,[16] are the focus of the 10 video shorts. Each rite is a discrete performance that was staged once for the camera. Introducing the camera, however, posed a significant problem. By making the performances available for viewing through the process of filming, Hellio and Bokungu were freezing time, making teleological constituent elements whose very subject matter – leaps and bounds across place and time – called for an anti-teleology (Malaquais 2011c): a refusal of linearity. Well aware that there was a contradiction at hand, Hellio and Bokungu developed a protocol that seemed reasonable, because fluid, but that nonetheless proved too rigid. They brought together parts of the 10 shorts into a single film – the long exhibition version – that was intended to be *one of many*. The idea was that there would be as many films as there were possible permutations of the shorts. Teleology would go out the window. While this had struck the artists as a viable approach,[17] in the end they found it unsatisfactory. In retrospect, Hellio explained and

Bokungu (though initially reticent) agreed, the simple fact of editing the first long version and exhibiting it brought the project to a stop, because all (putative) further versions by definition became responses to this first one – that is, to the narrative it laid out.

Images, writes art historian Georges Didi-Huberman (2000), are montages of different temporalities, symptoms that rip through the normal course of things. In this light, *GOU*, as image, or more properly as a montage of images, proved significantly less effective than the artists had hoped. Had the 10 blocks been left alone or, better still, not filmed at all – had they been allowed to stand as one-off, un-recorded performances – the tale told would arguably have proved more faithful and, as a result, more satisfactory for Hellio and Bokungu. The account of *mikilisme* proposed would have come closer to the phenomenon as experienced by the pair. It would have spoken explicitly, because in a wholly untethered fashion, to a form of unmooring that, for a significant proportion of the earth's population, characterises the contemporary, late capitalist urban condition.

On Failing to Succeed (Words in Closing)

GOU proved a restive object, impossible to pin down and, as a result, in all likelihood, it will never be exhibited again. This prompts a final question: what if *GOU* has in fact, not failed? The type of unmooring to which, I have argued, the work speaks is the product of a global economic and political system that thrives on violence – violence done to the many (largely in the global South) in defence of the interests of the few. At the same time, as anthropologists Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000) have shown in regard to *mikilisme* itself, such unmooring is unruly and, as a result of this, holds within itself the seeds of a counter-hegemonic discourse.[18] *GOU*'s intractableness is arguably a product of this dual state of affairs. The creative process from which it originated fell prey to the violence of the system it sought to account for. At the same time, the failed object began fighting back. The attempt to make it legible constituted a form of policing against which it structurally rebelled. That the project stalled as a result speaks to its inherent power. By this light, *GOU* reads as a striking success.

Notes

1. http://sparck.org/work-in-progress. Accessed January 5, 2018; Mowoso (2011).
2. http://sparck.org/about-gou. Accessed January 5, 2018.
3. The literature on Congolese engagement with Europe and, more particularly, Paris in the context of *mikilisme* and related phenomena – notably SAPE (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elégantes), or *sapologie* – is very rich. A short list of key texts includes: Gandoulou (2000), Gondola (1999a, 1999b), Hanneken (2015 [chapter 4]), MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000), Thomas (2003), Tonda (2013), Trapido (2011).
4. In addition to the photographs reproduced in Mowoso (2011) (see Footnote 2), print images of *GOU* appear in Hellio and Boketshu (2012, 56, 64, 109, 113), Malaquais (Malaquais 2011a, 334, 336, 338, 2011b, 52, 53, 54), Malaquais and Diallo (2013, 258–259), Pinther, Förster and Hanussek (2010, 258–259).
5. The word "violence," in relation to late capitalism, is used here and throughout these pages to speak of both physical and psychic harm. It references such phenomena as the decimation of lives, communities and landscapes caused by the rush for raw materials in countries across the

global South (a matter of urgent concern in Congo (see Mowoso 2011, 183; Tsubaka 23 2010); the deaths of thousands upon thousands seeking, by land and sea, to enter fortress Europe; the appalling conditions, en route and upon arrival, encountered by those who survive the voyage; the police harassment, bureaucratic nightmares and daily iniquities faced, in cities across the globe, by men, women and children classified as (im)migrants. More broadly, the reference is to extreme concentrations of wealth borne of and fuelling all of the above.

6. The exhibition was previewed in Nairobi (Goethe-Institut, May 22–June 4, 2010), then opened in Cologne (Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, November 2, 2010 to March 13, 2011) and travelled, in abridged form, to Bayreuth (Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth, April 21–September 4, 2011). A German and an English language catalogue were published (Pinther, Förster, and Hanussek 2010, 2012).

7. SPARCK (Space for Pan-African Research, Creation and Knowledge), http://www.sparck.org. The author is co-Director of SPARCK.

8. http://www.exyzt.org. Accessed January 5, 2018.

9. Hellio and Bokungu both refer to GOU as un échec. French–English dictionaries offer several translations of this word: "failure," the most common, but also "setback," "defeat" and "misfiring." For the pair, GOU was a setback because Mowoso had invested significant hope in it; its most ambitious undertaking to date, it was meant both to cement the collective's identity and to pave the way for other, larger and better funded ventures. Initially thought to be temporary, in the artists' eyes the setback turned into a defeat when it led to Mowoso's disbandment. "Misfire" is translated by most dictionaries as rater (also "to miss," "bungle," "muff" or "fluff") and foirer (a colloquial version of rater). Both are terms that the makers of GOU have used at various points in discussing the project with me. A third translation is échouer, the verb from which the noun échec is derived. In addition to signifying "to fail," échouer means "to run aground." Thus the expression un navire échoué ("a beached or stranded vessel"). While this use of the term échec/échoué did not come up in conversations with the artists, it is worth underscoring for it highlights an important aspect of the collective: its abiding interest in Afrofuturism (Mowoso 2011, 183). Sci-fi inspired images of and references to space ships, satellites, meteorites, astronomers, time travel and out of body experiences pepper the collective's work (Mowoso 2011, 183, 189, 190–191; Hellio and Boketshu 2012; Tsuba 2010, 190). Flight, a related trope, is common as well, but just as common are allusions to dropping, falling and crash-landing (Hellio and Boketshu 2012, 59–63 and 111–114; Mowoso 2011, 194). In this setting, a vision of GOU as an entity that misfired seems apposite.

10. See Footnote 3.

11. While most sapeurs would describe themselves as mikilistes, not all mikilistes are sapeurs.

12. The original reads: "C'est le deuxième voyage imaginaire, pendant que le premier est en cours déjà toujours tous les jours … Je continue toujours à prendre le bain où mon image se reflète dans le miroir de l'eau derrière lequel se cache l'ombre négative d'un autre moi-même … dans un écran vide sans rediffusion."

13. Arguably, this was not an entirely new phenomenon for Bokungu: when he and Hellio first met, he defined himself as a sapeur. He had not yet undertaken physical travel to Mikili, but, as a matter of the imagination, had visited on numerous occasions.

14. Such an approach to the mikiliste project, which sees in it a paradigm for thinking in more global terms about modes of being-in-the-city today, departs from readings of the phenomenon that tend to highlight its specificity. While I can think of no author writing seriously on the subject who would divorce mikilisme from larger, global concerns, there has been a tendency in the literature, notably as regards the phenomenon of SAPE, to present it in terms that foreground its idiosyncrasies. This, I argue, is reductive. That said, my intent is emphatically not to suggest that mikilisme lacks particularity. I am keenly aware that its history and its contemporary iterations are also deeply enmeshed in the political, economic and historical contexts of both the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville (see, notably, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000).

15. Building on Filip de Boeck's compelling reading of Kinshasa in his work with artist Sammy Baloji, one might propose an understanding of Paris, London, Brussels and Kinshasa itself, in this context, as akin to acupuncture points. People, objects and, most importantly, imaginaries, much like energy in a body, move in, through, past and around the nodes that they constitute, along a multitude of constantly shifting paths – paths that are activated by an (impermanent) insertion into the node (see De Boeck and Baloji 2016, 77–79; De Boeck and Simone 2015).

16. Among these actors are Bokungu's brother, composer and musician Bebson Elemba (AKA Bebson de la Rue), and performance artist Antoine Mofilinga.

17. The approach made perfect sense within the larger framework of the project. The latter was set out by Hellio and Bokungu as follows: "Ground/Overground/Underground is a project built in, around and through a range of different space- and time-states that exist as both separate and conjoined entities – *as blocks that can be assembled and disassembled at will*. The project allows Mowoso to experiment with an open system of networked creation: to develop work and research processes that result in *multiple forms*, each of which can be presented in different place- and time-scapes" (Mowoso 2011, 183 – emphasis and translation mine).

18. Of the *sapeur*-traders with whom they worked over the course of several years in the 1990s, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga (2000, 3) write the following: "They are individuals who refuse to abide by the constraints of the global power structure … They contest the institutions and norms of both African and European society which frustrate their aspirations … They resist the hegemony and control of the large-scale entities dominating the global scene." This reading, it should be noted, is not shared by all (see, notably, Hanneken 2015; Tonda 2013).

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Disclosure statement

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