

PRESS RELEASE
EXHIBITION
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STYLE CONGO

Heritage & Heresy

17.03.23 — 03.09.23

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Culture — Architecture

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Rue de l'Ermitage 55
Brussels 1050

CIVA Rue de l'Ermitage 55, 1050 Brussels

Opening: March 16, 2023, 7:00 p.m.

Exhibition: March 17, 2023 – September 3, 2023

Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy explores the politics of cultural representation and appropriation through both contemporary artistic and architectural interventions and historic materials from CIVA's collections. **Curated by Sammy Baloji, Silvia Franceschini, Nikolaus Hirsch, and Estelle Lecaille**, the exhibition chronicles the representation of Congo in international and colonial expositions held between 1885 and 1958, using Art Nouveau as its anchor point.

The Belgian movement—in its time also called “Style Congo”—coincided with King Leopold II's exploitation of Congo and reflects a widespread fascination with “exotic” materials and forms. As total artworks, the pavilions of international and colonial expositions illustrate the synthesis of the arts to which modernism aspired, not only through architectural form and applied arts, but also by merging the stage and collection, setting a precedent for displays in ethnographic museums. Through their enthralling constructions and beguiling references—each utopian in their own way—the pavilions communicated a twofold idea: Congo as a lucrative African colony and as a creative field for Belgian artists and architects. Through a display of both authenticity and progress, they served as a platform for cultural propaganda and economic exchange.

Contemporary artistic and architectural positions in the exhibition question canonical histories and the colonial roots of this heritage, and with it the perception of buildings that became icons of Belgian culture. By examining marks of colonization in the city of Brussels and in the Congolese urban landscape, they propose a decolonial resignification of private and public spaces, seeking to rewrite the margins of history into the center.

In the middle of the exhibition is *Congolisation* (2023), by Brussels-based architecture studio **Traumnovelle**, an installation that highlights how Belgian architects appropriated and borrowed from Congolese material culture and nature through a timeline of the depictions of Congo in international expositions. In a display that recalls that of archival storage, a selection of historic materials (mostly from CIVA's collections) is organized in a nonlinear chronology, proposing a possible alternative future.



Extract from: *Le Livre d'or de l'Exposition universelle et internationale Bruxelles 1935*, éd. Bruxelles, CIVA Collections, Brussels – Photo Doods, L'Epi, A. Martin, Pévenage, E. Sergysels, Underwood.

Encircling Traumnovelle's installation, artworks by **Judith Barry**, **Rossella Biscotti**, and **Ruth Sacks** create additional links to different historical pavilions. In her sculptural work *The Unmade Pavilion* (2022), Sacks references Victor Horta's unrealized pavilion for the 1900 Paris Exposition; while Biscotti's work, *Congo Congo Bruxelles Brussel* (2007), examines the colonial topography of the Brussels International Exposition of 1935 by juxtaposing the Congo pavilion and the pavilion of the city of Brussels. Another pavilion, designed by Paul Hankar for the Brussels International Exposition in Tervuren in 1897, is evoked in Barry's video installation, *The Work of the Forest* (1992), which addresses European colonialism in Africa as an engine for wealth accumulation in Belgium.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren and its exhibition displays are the subject of **Peggy Buth**'s work, *Desire in Representation - Tervuren* (2006-2008). Her photographs show the spatial museological rearrangements while the museum grapples with how to represent the cultural legacy of Belgian Congo.



Peggy Buth, *Monument*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist and the FRAC Alsace Collection, France. Photo Mathieu Bertola - exhibition «Incubus» at FRAC Alsace



Judith Barry, *Work Of The Forest*, 1992. Installation at the Berardo Museum, Lisbon, Portugal.
Courtesy of the artist and le Fonds pour l'Architecture, Brussels.

The links between colonialism and Art Nouveau is explored by **Chrystel Mukeba** through a series of newly commissioned photographic portraits of Afro-descendant Belgians in some of Brussel's most iconic Art Nouveau buildings, such as the Horta Museum and Hôtel Van Eetvelde. By suggesting a symbolic reappropriation of this difficult heritage, the work poses a question: To whom does this heritage belong today?

Historical inheritance is also legible in the polyphonic installation of **ayoh kré Duchâtelet**, *Ornaments and Crimes* (2023), where audio and drawings incorporating both fiction and documentary in a futuristic dystopia are spatialized in a "hearing room," questioning the relationship between justice, power, and colonial history.

Environmental and raw material exploitation is explored in works by **Daniela Ortiz** as well as by **Johan Lagae** and **Paoletta Holst**. Ortiz's paintings series, *The Rebellion of the Roots* (2021), looks into the origins of botanical gardens and greenhouses built for international expositions in the nineteenth century. Lagae and Holst's video installation investigates the work of Edmond Leplae, the first director of the agriculture department of the Belgian Ministry of the Colonies, who traveled through various tropics to make a case for the colonizer's house as the key instrument for a *mise en valeur* (exploitation) of the colony.

Finally, **Jean Katambayi Mukendi** designed a site-specific installation that probes the economic, urban, industrial and architectural development promised by the 1931 International Exposition in Elisabethville (Lubumbashi). Through the prism of deep disillusionment, he stages various objects of scrap animated by light bulbs, symbolizing the fairy electricity that did not give birth to the anticipated miracle.

With contributions by Judith Barry, Rossella Biscotti, Peggy Buth, ayoh kré Duchâtelet, Jean Katambayi Mukendi, Johan Lagae and Paoletta Holst, Chrystel Mukeba, Daniela Ortiz, Ruth Sacks, and Traumnovelle.

With selected works by Ernest Acker, Alfred Bastien, Victor Bourgeois, Joseph Caluwaers, Albéric Collin, Jacques Cury, Pierre de Vacleroy, Arthur Dupagne, Jean-Jules Eggericx, Paul Hankar, Georges Hobé, Victor Horta, Henry Lacoste, Fernand Leroy, Edmond Leplae, Paul Mathieu, René Pechère, Fernand Petit, René Schoentjes, Gustave Serrurier-Bovy, Henry Van de Velde.



Chrystel Mukeba, *Agnès Kena Maison Horta*, 2022, Courtesy of the artist

Public Program

The public program is a collaboration between CIVA, KANAL – Centre Pompidou, La Cambre, and Brussels 2030.

21 March

Sandrine Colard: Bodys Isek Kingelez's "Extreme Maquettes": A Creole Envisioning of Decolonial Monuments

29 March

Decolonizing Public Space

Françoise Vergès with Alexandre Chevalier, Georgina Dibua, Salomé Ysebart, Yasmina Zian (members of the working group Vers la Décolonization de l'espace public en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale), Sammy Baloji, Phillip Van Den Bossche, Eric Van Hove.

25 April

Debora Silverman: Style Congo, "Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness"? Reflections on Reclaiming Belgium's Imperial Modernism

25 May

Whose Heritage? Unsettling Archives and Collections

In collaboration with Som●m●e Of Us.

With: Sepake Angiama (Iniva London), Lotte Arndt (Technische Universität Berlin), Clémentine Deliss, Jessica De Abreu (Black Archives Amsterdam), Samia Henni (Cornell University), Jonelle Twum (Black Archives Sweden), Hannah Ishmael (Black Cultural Archives, UK)

30 June

Congo Independence Day

Decolonial Tour with François Makanga and performance by Yannis Majestikos

31 August

Book launch of Style Congo: Heritage and Heresy (published by CIVA and Spector Books)

Date to be confirmed

Book launch of Ruth Sacks, Congo Style: From Belgian Art Nouveau to African Independence (published by the University of Michigan Press)

Other speakers of the public program include David Adjaye, Jorge Otero Pailos and Mabel O. Wilson.

In parallel to the exhibition and publication, CIVA and e-flux architecture will present the essay series *Appropriation*.

Artistic Director: Nikolaus Hirsch

Secretary General: Jeremy Uhr

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An exhibition organized by CIVA and Twenty Nine Studio. In collaboration with KANAL – Centre Pompidou, in the framework of Living Traces.

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