Beads, Pixels, and *Nkisi*: Contemporary Kinois Art and Reconfigurations of the Virtual

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Abstract: In the 2016 Abiola Lecture, Mbembe argued that "the plasticity of digital forms speaks powerfully to the plasticity of African precolonial cultures and to ancient ways of working with representation and mediation, of folding reality." In her commentary, Pype tries to understand what "speaking powerfully to" can mean. She first situates the Abiola Lecture within a wide range of exciting and ongoing scholarship that attempts to understand social transformations on the continent since the ubiquitous uptake of the mobile phone, and its most recent incarnation, the smartphone. She then analyzes the aesthetics of artistic projects by Alexandre Kyungu, Yves Sambu, and Hilaire Kuyangiko Balu, where wooden doors, tattoos, beads, saliva, and nails correlate with the Internet, pixels, and keys of keyboards and remote controls. Finally, Pype asks to whom the congruence between the aesthetics of a "precolonial" Congo and the digital speaks. In a society where "the past" is quickly demonized, though expats and the commercial and political elite pay thousands of dollars for the discussed art works, Pype argues that this congruence might be one more manifestation of capitalism's cannibalization of a stereotypical image of "Africa."

Résumé: Dans la conférence d'Abiola 2016, Mbembe a soutenu que «la plasticité des formes numériques parle puissamment à la plasticité des cultures précoloniales africaines et aux anciennes manières de travailler avec la représentation et la médiation, de plier la réalité». Dans son commentaire, Pype essaie de comprendre ce que «parler avec puissance» peut signifier. Elle situe d'abord la conférence dans un large

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This text comments on the 2016 Abiola Lecture "Knowledge Futures and the State of the Humanities," delivered by Achille Mbembe, and is part of a special Forum for the *African Studies Review*, which I am curating along with Sasha Newell. I would like to refer the reader to our introduction for a reflection on the various strands of the Abiola Lecture and our commentaries.

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éventail de recherches scientifiques qui tentent de comprendre les transformations sociales sur le continent depuis l'adoption du téléphone mobile et de sa dernière incarnation, le smartphone. Elle analyse ensuite l'esthétique des projets artistiques d'Alexandre Kyungu, Yves Sambu et Hilaire Kuyangiko Balu, où les portes en bois, les tatouages, les perles, la salive et les ongles sont en corrélation avec Internet, les pixels et les touches des claviers et des télécommandes. Enfin, Pype demande à qui parle la congruence entre l'esthétique d'un Congo «précolonial» et le numérique. Dans une société où «le passé» est rapidement diabolisé les expatriés et l'élite commerciale et politique paient des milliers de dollars pour les œuvres d'art discutées. Pype soutient que cette congruence pourrait être une manifestation de plus de la cannibalisation par le capitalisme d'une image stéréotypée de «l'Afrique ».

Resumo: Na Lição de Abiola que proferiu em 2016, Achille Mbembe defendeu que "a plasticidade dos meios digitais tem forte relação com a plasticidade das culturas africanas pré-coloniais e com métodos antigos de trabalhar a representação e a mediação e de interpretar a realidade". Nesta sua análise, Pype procura esclarecer o que pode significar "ter forte relação". Em primeiro lugar, a autora enquadra a Lição de Abiola numa conjunto mais vasto da entusiasmante produção académica atualmente em curso, a qual se propõe interpretar as transformações sociais que têm ocorrido no continente africano desde que a utilização dos telemóveis de generalizou, e desde que ganhou terreno a sua mais recente encarnação: os *smartphones.* Depois, analisa a dimensão estética dos projetos artísticos de Alexandre Kyungu, Yves Sambu e Hilaire Kuyangiko Balu, nos quais portas de madeira, tatuagens, missangas, saliva e unhas se relacionam com a internet, píxeis e teclas de teclados e controlos remotos. Por fim, Pype questiona-se sobre a quem se dirigirá a correlação entre a estética de um Congo "pré-colonial" e o mundo digital. Numa sociedade onde "o passado" é facilmente diabolizado, ainda que os expatriados e as elites económicas e políticas paguem milhares de dólares pelas referidas obras de arte, Pype defende que esta correlação pode ser mais uma manifestação da canibalização capitalista de uma imagem estereotipada de "África".

Key Words: connectivity; digitalization; Achille Mbembe; Africa; Kinshasa; Alexandre Kyungu; Yves Sambu; Hilary Kuyangiko Balu

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One of the striking observations in Achille Mbembe's Abiola Lecture is that "the plasticity of digital forms speaks powerfully to the plasticity of African precolonial cultures and to ancient ways of working with representation and mediation, of folding reality." This authoritative statement overhauls the widely accepted argument that digitalization on the continent will disrupt African cultures.[1]

Mbembe is not the first to recognize similarities between African material culture and modern digital connectivity. Several scholars and artists have remarked on the agreement of social and material features of assumed African "customs" and digital operationality. In particular, contemporary artists in Kinshasa (a site where I have carried out social research for more than fifteen years) play with a similar perspective, and this commentary introduces three Congolese artists and their engagement with the digital.

Before moving on, I want to contextualize these opening reflections within the overall argument of Mbembe's Abiola Lecture. Mbembe invites us to consider the digitalization of society from an Africanist perspective. In particular, he is interested in new forms of knowledge in a global Africa where capitalism and technological transformations morph sociality and introduce new interactions between the human and the non-human (or the "extra-human," see our introduction). Mbembe thus enjoins scholars who have been taking digital cultures and electronic modernity in global society seriously, and rightly asks the larger Africanist community to acknowledge transformations the digital infrastructures are (potentially) generating in terms of epistemology and representation. In this Abiola Lecture, Mbembe remarks on three major changes that have occurred with the democratization of the mobile phone:

(1) "[The mobile phone] has become a portable storage (*grenier*) of all kinds of knowledges and a crucial device that has changed the way people speak, act and write, communicate, remember, imagine who they are and how they relate to themselves, to others and to the world at large";
(2) "The introduction of the mobile phone has also been a major aesthetic and affect-laden event"; and
(3) "The biggest impact of the mobile phone—and of digital technologies more broadly—has been at the level of the imaginary. The interaction between humans and screens has intensified, and with it, the experience of life and the world as cinema—the cinematic nature of life."

Key themes here are: knowledges; relating to selves, to others, and to the world at large; aesthetic and affect-laden events; and the imaginary. These undergird Mbembe's observations of how notions of the person, alterity, and lifeworlds are transformed through the gradually increased accessibility and usage of the smartphone on the African continent. Some numbers may be helpful here. In 2018, the Pew Research Center reported that for countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Senegal, and South Africa, the percentage of adults using mobile phones in 2017 varied between 91 percent in South Africa and 75 percent in Tanzania.[2] The usage of smartphones in these countries ranged between 51 percent in South Africa and 13 percent in Tanzania. The statistics from Tanzania are not insignificant, as in 2013, there were no reported smartphone users in Tanzania (compared to 33 percent in South Africa).[3]

Mbembe's observations are in line with a wide range of research in the social sciences. For more than a decade, anthropologists and sociologists have been exploring how national communities, love and romance, and inter-generational encounters on the continent are shaped by/morphing digital environments (de Bruijn et al. 2009; de Bruijn & Van Dijk 2012). For example, Victoria Bernal (2014) studied how Eritreans in the diaspora co-construct political culture in the larger Eritrean community; while Julie-Soleil Archambault (2017) dissects the performance of respect and respectability in Inhambane's complex economy of transparency and dissimulation. Modalities of mourning and burying have changed through the usage of mobile phones, as Richard Vokes' (2018) ethnography of funerary practices in Bugamba South-County (southwest Uganda) evidences. Through mobile communication, relatives and friends living further away are quickly informed about deaths, and they often request that the burial be postponed until they are able to travel to the mourning site. In Nigerian Calabar, mobile phone interactions with strangers ("contacts") have changed courting and dating practices, allowing young girls to initiate conversations with strangers (Gilbert 2018). I have studied how mobile phones in postcolonial Kinshasa are embedded within political agendas of autocratic rulers and citizens, who are utilizing the device in order to enforce their power, to comply with those in power, or to resist political abuse (Pype 2016a). Kinshasa's religious worlds also speak out about the digitalization of society, and new categories of femininity, such as the Blackberry Girls, are the topic of debates in Pentecostal circles (2016b). These and other digital encounters are readily interpreted within a Pentecostal moralizing discourse, which acknowledges that connectivity to social and spiritual others can also be established through digital infrastructures.[4]

In recent years, the annual conference of the African Studies Association has hosted several panels on the political, economic, and social dialectics with digitalization in Africa. We can expect much more research as digital creativity (e.g., in terms of app design, and the creation of smart cities) is taking off on the continent. Mbembe's Abiola Lecture further legitimates this field of analytical inquiry and provides some exciting new routes for attention and reflection. Most of these have already been addressed in the introduction to this Forum, so they will not be repeated here. Rather, I will limit myself to that one particular line of reasoning in the 2016 Abiola Lecture with which I opened this commentary, the fact that "the plasticity of digital forms speaks to the plasticity of African precolonial cultures and ancient ways of representing and mediating reality." Mbembe added that the fact of being surrounded by all kinds of devices, "dream machines and ubiquitous technologies—cell phones, the Web, videos, and films," has led to a new "Afropolitan aesthetic sensibility (which) we still need to map and properly study."

For the purpose of this Forum, I want to think through the assumed dialogue between "precolonial thinking" and digital worlds, by relating this to contemporary aesthetics. I will mainly look into the forms, or aesthetics, of this dialogue, and will end this reflection with a question about to whom this dialogue appeals. The reflections below derive from formal and informal conversations with Alexandre Kyungu, Yves Sambu, and Hilaire Kuyangiko Balu, three artists living and working in Kinshasa (Kyungu, August 2016; Sambu, July-August 2017, August 2018; Balu, August 2018), who are part of my ongoing research on technology cultures in contemporary urban DR Congo.[5]

"Speaking to"

It is challenging to understand concretely how Mbembe sees the convergences between digitality and "African precolonial cultures and ancient ways." The verb which Mbembe uses, "speak to," is nebulous. The Oxford English Dictionary (2019, online edition) describes "to speak to" as "to speak to a person; to address some topic or issue verbally; to indicate or signal some topic or issue." Given the conversational idiom, I prefer "dialogue" in the remaining of this commentary because it evokes the idea of two different voices coming together in one conversation, though both remain distinct from one another even when they are engaging in a conversation.

Another question raised by the quote is: what kind of image of "tradition" and "culture" is Mbembe producing here? Anthropologists approach any statement about "African culture" and "African tradition" as a discursive gesture, embedded in a particular political, economic or social agenda (Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983; Wright 1994). The next two paragraphs in the Abiola Lecture describe Mbembe's understanding of "African cultures":

> African precolonial cultures were obsessed by the interrogation concerning the boundaries of life. As evidenced by their myths, oral literatures and cosmogonies, among the most important human queries were those concerning the world beyond human perceptibility, visibility and consciousness. The time of objects was not unlike the time of humans. Objects were not seen as static entities. Rather, they were like flexible living beings endowed with original and at times occult, magical and even therapeutic properties.
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> Things and objects, the animal and organic worlds were also repositories of energy, vitality and virtuality and as such, they constantly invited wonder and enchantment.
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> Tools, technical objects and artifacts facilitated the capacity for human cognition and language. They belonged to the world of interfaces and as such, served as the linchpin to transgress existing boundaries so as to access the Universe's infinite horizons. With human beings and other living entities, they entertained a relationship of reciprocal causation. This is what early anthropologists mistook for "animism."

"African precolonial cultures" are described as replete with various forms of life. Vitality and virtuality (a concept that speaks to digital life as well, see our introduction) were contained in things and objects. Human cognition and language were enhanced by tools and artifacts. The latter were "interfaces," which allowed humans (and assumingly non-humans) to transgress boundaries of knowledge, time, and space. Mbembe warns us that we should not consider this as "animistic" thinking—as anthropologists mistakenly did. Rather, these "African precolonial cultures" were lifeworlds with numerous agencies, possibilities, and apertures.

Regarding "precolonial African ways of knowing," Mbembe draws extensively on Jane Guyer's 1996 article, "Traditions of Invention," in which she masterfully subverted the familiar phrase "invention of tradition"

(Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983, see above) in order to critique a modern system of knowledge that constantly builds further on previously acquired knowledge ("legacies of knowledge"), and that understands "tradition" as "repetition." For Guyer (1996:2), equatorial societies "were, in their own way, information societies." Mbembe is inspired by Guyer's observation that equatorial knowledge was not "specialist" in the sense of a closed esoteric system with its classifications and propositions, nor was it "controlled and monopolized by a small cadre of experts or a secret society hierarchy."

Guyer's description of social life and knowledge distribution resonates with contemporary IT aesthetics: "Knowledge was conceptualized as an open repertoire and unbounded vista." Such an evocation of African lifeworlds reminds me of the classic Microsoft Windows XP desktop background (since 2001): the green meadows and never-ending, almost perfect, blue sky of Sonoma County. Microsoft called the photograph "bliss"—the word itself evokes something spiritual as well. I do not want to get lost in reflections on Microsoft's political ambitions with "bliss," a photograph billions of people have seen. Yet, the name itself, just like the aesthetics of the photograph, opens up interesting windows of reflection. Could it be in a similar radical openness that Mbembe sees the convergence between his version of "African precolonial minds" and "digitality"?

Of Motherboards, Fractals, and Interfaces

In the Africanist library, we find a handful of efforts to connect digitality with so-called "African aesthetics." Art historians Mary Nooter Roberts (1996) and Allen Roberts (Nooter Roberts & Roberts 1996) and the cybernetics specialist Ron Eglash (1999) all remarked on formal similarities between mathematics and computers and African cultural expressivity. Nooter Roberts and Roberts have highlighted parallels between the "motherboard" and the memory system *lukasa*, used among the Luba ethnic group in DR Congo. *Lukasa* is a wooden assemblage of beads, metal, shells, and incisions with a geometrical design. The particular configuration of these objects on the wooden board resembles the configuration of the central processor, memory controllers, and interface connectors of a computer motherboard. But the analogy goes beyond formal resemblance. The *lukasa* assemblage constitutes a "geometry of ideas" (Nooter Roberts & Roberts 1996:31); it contains a structure of thought and information distribution. The objects and the patterns of Luba art speak a particular language; they are morphemes, which produce a particular kind of "artificial memory." The cognitive structures in these mnemonic bodies/devices are artificial because the patterns as such do not have an immediate relationship to the communicated content (Nooter Roberts & Roberts 1996:86). As there is no figural or metonymic connection between the bead and the referent, one can argue that the *lukasa* is based on digital coding. Single beads represent individuals, groups of beads represent royal courts, and larger bead arrangements depict sacred forests (Eglash 1999:166). By touching the wooden plate, on which beads, metals, and shells are arranged in such a way that they embody "multiple levels of information simultaneously" (Nooter Roberts & Roberts 1996:26, caption figure 5), the user can associate events, places, and names in the past. These pieces are mnemonic devices that in particular draw on the plurality of forms and colors of the beads. The arrangements of the beads and the geometrical patterns found on the back of the *lukasa* thus form "cognitive cuing structures" that constitute mnemonics (Nooter Roberts & Roberts 1996:31). Elaine Sullivan, a former student of Nooter Roberts, mentioned in an email conversation how, a few years ago, Nooter Roberts updated her comparison by using an iPhone: "Touch an app, it opens up to a new meaning, but swipe the home screen, and a new app is in that same space."[6]

Eglash (1999) has identified recursive patterns and "feedback loops" in African textiles, artistic design, and architecture. He has observed that patterns in kinship, political structures in villages, as well as in woven cloth and braided hair, were recursive (fractal), and identical to recursivity in nature (as in the branches of trees which produce their own branches, or cells in human lungs which are composed of similar configurations of cells, and again and again), as well as to the recursivity IT developers use when designing computer systems. In other words, the computational world depends, so Eglash argues, on similar patterns of recursivity as one can find in cultural and social organizations in sub-Saharan Africa. Fascinatingly, recently Eglash and Ellen Foster (2017) have argued that even the organization and growth of so-called maker spaces in Accra occurs according to similar logics of recursivity. If we want to follow Eglash, recursivity then becomes one major trope in the analytical attention to set up a dialogue between computational thinking and African aesthetics.

Mbembe introduced a second trope in the Abiola Lecture, that of the "interface":

> Tools, technical objects and artifacts facilitated the capacity for human cognition and language. They belonged to the world of interfaces and as such, served as the linchpin to transgress existing boundaries so as to access the Universe's infinite horizons. With human beings and other living entities, they entertained a relationship of reciprocal causation. This is what early anthropologists mistook for "animism."

Interfaces, such as language, rituals, tools, and monies are necessarily mobilized in order to establish a particular connection. The "interface" seems to be a crucial concept for exploring digitally-induced sociality and cultural work. Familiar tools and technical objects of connectivity are bridges, cars, roads, and telephone lines (de Bruijn & Van Dijk 2012:7), but also people (hunters, colonizers, tourists, and activists) and animals (totem animals, buffalos, and mosquitoes) (Mavhunga 2014), or the wireless infrastructures of radio and telephone communication (Pype 2016c).

Whereas Mbembe does not mention Nooter Roberts's and Eglash's writings on the motherboard and on fractals, he draws explicitly on Jane Guyer's article on the traditions of invention (1996), and implicitly on her writings on the interface (which he does not reference). In the introduction to the edited volume *Money Matters* (1994) and in her monograph *Marginal Gains* (2004), Guyer approaches currency as an interface, a tool that connects communities, or in her words, "a point of meeting where difference was maintained, albeit on changing bases and with changing terms" (1994:8). Guyer's attention is directed to both regional currencies and to new types of monies that were introduced with colonialism. One of Guyer's most fascinating observations is that African monies are far more complex, compared to colonial currencies, which seem to be simpler. African monies, so Guyer (1994:2) indicates, served far more special purposes, and were multiple, operating in econo-logical zones. The sheer existence of different kinds of African monies indicates that multiple econo-logical realms required interfaces. This in turn brought a particular kind of instability, which was upheld by these different zones. Yet, this chronic instability should not be perceived in terms of crisis. Rather, as Guyer (1994:5) wrote: "Africans' long and complex experience with currency change has actually honed their skills at rapid adjustment to maintain the crucial equivalences of social life." In a similar vein, the interface is the space where "key dynamics originate" (Guyer 2004:6).

While Guyer (1994, 2004) seemed to be more interested in the economic transactions occurring at and facilitated by money-as-interface, Mbembe draws our attention to new forms of *knowledge* and of *being* that emerge at the interface of African cultures and the digital. Exciting questions to ask are: Which kinds of tools, technical objects, and artifacts act/are allowed to act as interfaces in contemporary African lifeworlds? What do contemporary interfaces, designed by African/Africa-based entrepreneurs, innovators, and users look like? Do we observe the emergence of new assemblages of interfaces? And, crucially, how do occult virtualities and digital virtualities combine? The latter question goes to the heart of the dialogic dimension of Mbembe's observation regarding digitality and so-called African culture.

In the remainder of this commentary, I will explore the different kinds of interfaces that are brought together by three of Kinshasa's contemporary artists and relate how these artists have assembled material and symbols of both the digital and of "Congolese tradition." The interfaces they select come both from digital worlds and from distinct domains of Congolese society (sometimes from "the past"), and these artists make these literally speak together in order to address contemporary society.

Incisions, Digital Itineraries, and Hyperlinks: Alexandre Kyungu (°1992) – *l'homme universel* (the universal man)

Images available on this website: https://africanah.org/alexandre-kyungu-dr-congo-2/

Alexandre Kyungu, a young man in his late 20s, is rapidly attracting notice because of his recent artistic work on and with doors. Kyungu experiments with the door as canvas in order to express his vision for the future.

He collects wooden doors which are not used anymore and engraves them with cutter knives until city maps appear on them, copied from Google maps, pinpoints included (cities such as New York, Saint Petersburg, etc.) In the end, the etchings show female faces. In its complete form, the artistic work "*l'homme universel*" is a combination of ten to eleven of these engraved doors, standing in a circle, facing one another. In this way, the doors—which symbolize openings on various levels—represent encounters.

Kyungu wants to favor meetings and interactions. He regrets that there are hardly any "good" encounters in Kinshasa (and the world in general), and, therefore, wants to activate various kinds of interfaces: the door, digital mapping, the human face, and incisions. Each of these represent for Kyungu a point of contact, generating new possibilities for "good" encounters.

Kyungu uses the almost banal form of "*la porte,*" the door, which in the Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa) urban architecture refers to a house, a living space. In a compound, the number of renters is identified by the number of "doors," and everybody understands what is meant if one says an address and adds, for example, "*deuxième porte*" ("second door"). Using "doors," Kyungu evokes the cohabitation in the compounds (French Sg. *parcelle*) in Kinshasa.

Apart from being a fundamental locator, the *porte* closes, and thus produces barriers, but it does so in an ambiguous sense. If opened, a door allows for encounters. An open door even invites (to have a peek, or to enter). It is to this positive possibility of the door that Kyungu wants to draw our attention. And he pushes the metaphor of the door as an entry into intimacy even further. By drawing faces on the doors, Kyungu evokes access to individuals and their souls.

The digital mapping acquires multiple meanings in this context. First of all, the global has acquired a particular significance for the local. Insofar as Google Maps references techno-sociality in the Global North, Kyungu positions this exogenous form of "being in the world" right into Kinshasa's intimate spaces, the *parcelle* (living compound). Digital images are mobilized as a critique of urban cohabitation. This is related to the social meanings of the street (in Lingala *nzela, balalabala, boulevard, prince* etc., as a space of chance encounters) in the Kinois social imagination.

Second, customs and traditions are evoked; this is how Kyungu himself makes sense of these engravings of the streets and the pinpoints. During an interview at his home in Kinshasa, Kyungu compared the engraved streets to tattoos (Lingala Sg., *nzoloku*), as these are drawn on girls' faces when they undergo initiation rituals as well as on men and women during healing practices. In this interpretative frame, Google Maps resemble scars drawn during customary initiation and healing rituals. Tattoos—as expressions of ritual events—are interesting here: the tattoo/scar is not only a physical imprint (material imprint, literally in the flesh) yet it has also an immediate connection with the invisible, as scars are indexes of past events (initiation rituals have transformed, and scarification is hardly done during these ceremonies). But there is more. During healing rituals, scars are filled with herbs or powder. The scars thus are entrances, gates to enter into new worlds, "doors" in which connections with virtual worlds (the spiritual) are produced and enabled.

In this re-evaluation of the scar, Kyungu, who has only known urban life, is revaluing a key element of ritual life that has obtained ambiguous connotations in contemporary society due to the devaluation (and diabolization) of *bakoko,* things of the ancestors and customs. Both the internet and the customary realm of healing and initiation rituals are foreign, virtual to him.[7] Yet, he combines them to imagine new, "better" social futures on the continent.

By producing assemblages of images of the digital, matter of the domestic space (the door), and symbols of rituals (as in the engravings, referring to ritual tattoos), Kyungu mixes local and transnational worlds, religion, and digital culture. He integrates the electronic into African contemporary realities in order to remedy a strained urban sociality. Images of electronic technology are appropriated, embraced, and literally brought into one and the same symbolic space with "African tradition" in order to transform the urban present.

Cowrie Shells and Pixels: Yves Sambu (°1980) – *Enigme* (Enigma)

Images available on this website:
https://vimeo.com/290625675?fbclid=IwAR251qMzvjNqTq8gp0_TDCGxv-BKW9MQmha7Rm1qPUfBmQeSod3pWCN7eN4

The second project I want to discuss is the work "*énigme*" by Yves Sambu, who is best known for his work with new designs of textiles and with SAPEURS (a subculture in DR Congo and the Republic of Congo, cultivating clothes as a religion).[8] In the frame of a larger multimedia project called *Enigme,* Sambu produced an image of Simon Kimbangu, the prophet of the lower Congo who is the founder of one of Africa's largest indigenous Christian churches, *Eglise du Jésus-Christ sur la terre par son envoyé spécial Simon Kimbangu.* Although not a Kimbanguist himself, Sambu shares with Kimbangu membership by birth in the Kongo ethnic group.

Even more than Kyungu does, Sambu plays with the porous boundaries between art, religion, and the virtual. He deliberately integrates, confronts, and engages the various spheres of life, provoking experiences of wonder and enchantment through a weaving of things such as cowrie shells. Cowrie shells, or *mayaka,* were a part of the monies that Guyer describes in her study of currencies as interfaces. However, in Sambu's installation, the cowrie shells are resignified, operating as an interface with spiritual powers.

Part of the *Enigme* art project is an image of Simon Kimbangu, an image of more than 2 meters high, and 1.8 meters wide, with a total weight of 17kg. The image is not a print on paper or plastic or another canvas. Rather, the artistic work is a composition of small cowrie shells, collected for their shades of gray and woven together, thus constituting a heavy curtain, literally a screen of cowrie shells. These *mayaka* are well known in African art history because of the masks and ritual adornments that are made with these shells.

Sambu uses these materials for two reasons. First, as *mayaka* are used in rituals of power, these objects contribute to the production of power and influence. The beads are laden with spiritual forces. Sambu does not doubt that the curtain is powerful. The story of the origin of this curtain has invested mystical powers in the art object: The cowrie shells were collected in Mbanza-Ngungu, the home area of Simon Kimbangu, and thus are physical containers of ancestral land. The curtain was woven by the "*bakoko*" (people who cultivate Kongo cultural heritage), of whom most live in Bumbu and Selembao (two municipalities in Kinshasa). Recovering objects from the ancestral lands, Sambu speculates on the living force of the *mayaka* and intends for the vitality of these objects to have an impact on the spectators. It was with much pride that Sambu related a story about an exhibit of the curtain in Switzerland in 2017. Congolese visitors fell into a trance upon seeing the curtain. The visitors were touched by the power of the assemblage, by the image of Simon Kimbangu, and by the vitality of the beads. In the moment of contemplation, the curtain is a living thing, animated by visual, material, and representational structures working upon each other.

Second, for Sambu, the woven beads resemble pixels. As Sambu recounted to me in an interview, "If you zoom in on a picture on your phone, you can sometimes zoom in so deeply that you actually see pixels, but you have lost the whole image. You've lost that coherent perspective." It is exactly this experience of losing control and a sense of unity that Sambu tries to evoke with the Simon Kimbangu curtain. Close to the art object, you only see the beads. When stepping further away, you can see what the beads actually mean in their collectivity, and how these literally weave into one powerful large image. This is a compelling and even potent evocation of the acknowledgement that knowledge is plural and fragmented, and that the desire for control and coherence is—although human—only an illusion. Here, Sambu's words align with Mbembe's attention to plurality of knowledge systems, to the importance of "African objects" to acknowledge, provoke, and appreciate the distribution of knowledge, and to the de-centering of the human in the making of worlds. *Enigme* connects materially and sensually the religious invisible, ancestral realms, the enigmatic, and the digital/virtual.

The title "*énigme*" is meaningful (and is also part of the title of the third artwork discussed below), and Sambu thus draws our attention to the difficulty of "knowing." Very much like the enigmatic, the digital allows only partial entrance into a world that goes beyond the human and also beyond human cognition. In this respect, Sambu understands the digital and the enigmatic (which is here the space of the ancestral) as realms of potentiality that are yet always uncontainable by an individual. Once the enigmatic or the virtual begins to represent something, it loses its power, so Sambu holds. The curtain is most powerful when the interplay between the beads/pixels and the overall picture is manipulated. A constant zooming in and out, thus provoking a dynamic relationship between parts and the whole, activates the potentiality of access to the enigma/the virtual. The cowrie shells-as-pixels, two analogous interfaces, enable access to virtual worlds.

Nkisi: Hilary Kuyangiko Balu (°1992)– *cybernkisi* ("digital power objects")

Images available on this PDF of the WITS catalogue, catalogue of the exhibition ANCIENS DIEUX , NOUVELLES ÉNIGMES / OLD GODS, NEW ENIGMAS, THE POINT OF ORDER, 1- 8 NOVEMBER 2018: https://soc.kuleuven.be/fsw/english/files/WITS-Catalogue-V5.pdf

Access to knowledge, and in particular the politics of knowledge production, is even more central in Hilary Kuyangiko Balu's work. He revisits the well-known ethnographic objects of the *nkisi*, power objects that occupy a primordial role in the Africanist literature and that make up many ethnographic museum collections. These objects are inherently related to Kongo political and spiritual cultures (McGaffey 1988, 1993). Balu, himself of Kongo ethnic origin but born and raised in Kinshasa, recovers ideas, objects, and forms from the Kongo universe. This conscious repurposing of Kongo materials is inspired by a profound frustration with seventeenth-century writings about the *nkisi* objects. Balu holds (and this idea appears also in Guyer's article *Traditions of Invention*, 1996) that expertise of the spiritual was distributed between various experts; he expects that the European ethnographers who composed the earliest writings about *nkisi* objects did never fully understand or learn what these *nkisi* were all about.

Balu brings the virtual and the spiritual together by assembling parts of digital devices into the form of a *nkisi*. For Balu, *la sorcellerie* is not necessarily to be understood in terms of magic, but rather in terms of knowledge. Here, Balu is also very much on a par with Mbembe's argument about multiple forms of knowledge ("pluriversal knowledge" in our introduction). For Balu, the *nkisi* and the *nganga* possessed and activated occult knowledges, just like the internet user and the internet give access to knowledge by engaging with the virtual: "Just like nowadays, we visit cybercafés to consult the internet to find solutions for our problems, so did people in the past visit *nganga* when one had a problem," Balu explained to me. In addition, while the digital world draws on codes that only a certain group of experts master (the ITers), so did the *nganga* speak in coded, secret language.

That does not mean that Balu attempts to "save" the *nganga*'s esoteric knowledge. Rather, he wants to fabricate an object that will do the same work as the *nganga*, to connect the material world with the invisible. As such, one of Balu's works contains a computer inhabited by a spirit, with which the art visitor can communicate via a headset. The latter is a spectacular assemblage of a virtual reality mask covered with raffia and beads (materials of customary ritual objects) and positioned in metal constructions evoking an interplanetary constellation. Other *cybernkisi* are more "classic," statues that have the same shape as the more familiar *nkisi* objects.

In all these different *cybernkisi,* Balu explicitly draws attention to the parallels between the activation of the occult and the virtual. Keys of keyboards and nails of the *fetish* enable people to communicate with (spiritual) others. In "the village," or in "ancient times," licking the nail and expressing a wish established a connection with the spirit that inhabits the *nkisi,* while knocking the nail into the statuette resembled typing questions, dreams, and desires on a keyboard and screen.

All in all, Balu's project evinces a critique on the political economy of global digital society; the nails embeddded in the *nkisi* symbolize social conflicts. In Balu's interpretation of customary judicial systems, these nails represent the *victims* of the autocratic chiefs, who could reign over the life and death of their subjects. In similar fashion, so Balu contends, computer keyboards are symbols of capitalist exploitation. The keyboards symbolize the profit, capitalism, and complicity of contemporary politicians in the global coltan trade.

Balu's critique of capitalism is probably best illustrated in the extraordinary work of art *Nkisi Mousse, un corps au jardin brutal* ("*Nkisi Mouse, a body in a brutal garden*"). Again playing with the form of the *nkisi statuette,* Balu uses the figure of Mickey Mouse, that global icon of U.S. society, beautifully adorned with cheap and shiny hair accessories. By planting Mickey Mouse's head on a *nkisi* statue, Balu wants to visualize who is in power over Congolese lifeworlds; capital and African leaders are complicit here. Mickey Mouse, as a symbol of global capitalism, connotes suffering and blood despite his associations with entertainment. Yet, so Balu argues, *Nkisi Mousse* is—as the name of the artwork suggests—planted in a "brutal" garden. Balu imagines this garden ("the world") as a space inhabited by the victims of American capitalism, ranging from the dead bodies of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs to the suffering of Congolese under Joseph Kabila's regime. It is in particular during Joseph Kabila's rule that the Congolese government has become complicit in the extraction of uranium and coltan. Both minerals are known to be fundamental for "digital modernity," though their value does not benefit the Congolese, as Balu wants to convey. He adds glittery and shiny *fantaisies* (hair accessories) that Congolese women can buy for less than USD1 on local markets. There is an incidental connotation to the word *fantaisies,* insofar as the word used in Kinshasa to indicate shiny hair clips and other forms to adorn the hair evokes fantasy, the "unreal." Balu thus not only produces a "beautiful" work, but he also evokes the bedazzlement (fully in line with Tonda 2015) provoked by American popular culture, capitalism and the multinational companies, and by African rulers. The *fantaisies* have transformed the *nkisi,* which initially engender fear and awe, into a seductive technology, one that hides the hideous machinations underneath the plastic and sheen. The *Nkisi Mousse* cradles, yes, but above all it bedazzles, produces illusions.

Concluding Reflections

I began this commentary by quoting a key sentence from Mbembe's Abiola Lecture, which draws our attention to a possible conversation between assumed "African precolonial societies" and the modern digital realm. I found it important to situate the Abiola Lecture within a wide range of exciting and ongoing scholarship that attempts to understand social transformations on the continent since the almost universal adoption of the mobile phone, and its most recent incarnation, the smartphone. As mentioned, scholars such as Nooter Roberts and Eglash have been quick to note some material and operational similarities between computational logics on the one hand and memory cultures, social organization, and aesthetics in several sub-Saharan African societies on the other hand. The Abiola Lecture furthers these observations about convergence, congruence, and agreement between the digital realm and so-called "African precolonial cultures."

For this commentary, I have mainly focused on Mbembe's reference to "the interface," which might have been inspired by Guyer's elaboration of monies as interfaces (1994, 2004). It was in particular my familiarity with the artworks of three different contemporary artists in Kinshasa that compelled me to write this commentary. I noticed how these three, each in their own way, integrated different kinds of interfaces in their work, time and again picking up elements of what they see as crucial in "Congolese culture," and which they consider able to "speak to" contemporary society. In these three artistic projects, doors, tattoos, beads, saliva, and nails correlate with the Internet, pixels, and keys of keyboards and remote controls.

By looking at these three different though interrelated constellations of things and objects through which artists try to "transgress the boundaries of life," as Mbembe would have it, we have learned, first and foremost, how objects and things from high-tech worlds are easily connected with local cosmologies. Here, virtualities are recomposed. It is striking that human connection, or connectivity, and the possibility of connecting different worlds, of interaction, are central in each of these works. Kyungu, Sambu, and Balu are actively looking for new forms of interacting with social and spiritual others and are thus imagining new modalities of interactivity. These particular configurations each express—just as any other "invention of tradition"—the artists' attempts to understand their contemporary lifeworld in a very specific, local fashion. Tattoos reference initiation and healing rituals, the beads evoke prophets and their healing powers, while the nails speak to healing rituals within Kongo worlds.

Kyungu, Sambu, and Balu are crafting a particular image of "Congolese culture" by selecting iconic images of Congolese history and literally putting these "Congolese" objects and images together with emblems and images of electronic, digital cultures. These artists thus go further than Mbembe, according to whom "the plasticity of digital forms speaks to the plasticity of African precolonial cultures"; rather, they show that "digital forms speak *with"* icons and images of "Congolese tradition."

All three works of art "speak to" material, capitalist, and technological changes, and they propose new assemblages in order to transform negative structures of feeling: (1) a frustration about urban socialization, characterized by a loss of thick, meaningful relationships (Kyungu); (2) a search for more spirituality, for deeper connection with the powers of the earth, with its ancestral powers (Sambu); and (3) a sensation of alienation, a search for a renewed integration of different worlds (Balu). Each in their own ways, Kyungu, Sambu, and Balu communicate an aesthetically poignant criticism of contemporary urban life in the Global South. Exhibiting varying degrees of digitality, each experiments with new modes of inhabiting an increasingly interconnected world, repositioning the human subject therein.

I want to close this commentary with some open-ended reflections on these artists' *publics*. To whom do these art works and their imaginations of a congruence between "tradition" and the digital matter? Who is finding value and meaning in these constellations? In sofar their audience and clientele are predominantly the expat community, and to a lesser extent a local political and commercial elite, it seems that their occult-digital assemblages speak to the world of the international arts scene. Most of my interlocutors in Kinshasa, who do not belong to these privileged circles, mock these works of the contemporary artistic scene, and sometimes even insult the artists, accuse them of *kindoki* (sorcery and witchcraft) exactly because of their manipulation of these boundary transgressing objects (the *nzoloku*, the beads, the *nkisi*). For many in Kinshasa, after all, the scars, the cowrie shells, and the *nkisi* evoke a "tradition," even a "demonic tradition," a virtual reality from which many Kinois want to distance themselves.

This depreciation of the artistic possibilities raises some important questions, which cannot be answered here, but which open up new analytical ground: Is Pentecostalism, which has produced a demonic image of the *nkisi* objects, of Simon Kimbangu, and of non-Christian healing cultures, not contesting the multiple modes of representation and mediation that Mbembe and Guyer, and Kyungu, Sambu, and Balu acknowledge? Is Pentecostals' primacy of the Holy Spirit as the one and only mediator between the here and there, the then and now, the "ignorant" and "those who know," not a suppression of the vitality, multiplicity, and endless possibility that the digital and African cultures harness?[9] And if so, what are the possibilities for an African Pentecostal digital culture?

Despite the contested reactions from the larger Kinois society, all three artists have quickly become significant players in the international art scene. Kyungu and Balu both presented works at the "Kinshasa 2050: Digital City" exhibit organized by the German cultural center (Goethe Institut) in May 2017; Kyungu has been invited to the University of Calabria and the Museum of Cosenza (2018) and was a Pro-Helvetia artist in residence in Basel (Switzerland). The Wits Fine Art showed a wide range of Balu's works in November 2018 as part of his one-month residency at the Wits Art Museum. These were also displayed at the Grassi Museum Leipzig (December 2018 through March 2019). Since 2012, Sambu has presented solo exhibitions at the Schauspielhaus in Graz (Austria), during the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival in Fribourg (Switzerland), and at the Royal Flemish Theater in Brussels. Sambu has also participated in group exhibitions at Brass in Brussels, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the Museum of Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Dortmund, and the Transmediale Festival in Berlin, among many others. So, all in all, we should ask, who appreciates, values, and promotes (symbolically and financially) the dialogue between the "plasticity of digital forms" and the "ancient ways of working with representation and mediation, of folding reality" (see above)? Who applauds, embraces, and even exploits this commonality? And, who rejects it? Insofar as artists such as Kyungu, Sambu, and Balu are earning thousands of dollars among Kinshasa's expat and political elite circles and in the international arts centers of Basel, Leipzig, and New York, *because* they exploit the congruity of "ancient, precolonial African cultures" with the digital imagination, we can ask ourselves, is capitalism cannibalizing "Africa" once again? These artworks build new collective worlds that span transnational communities and that are bound via capital; however, these new communities are as "virtual" (in van Binsbergen's sense, i.e., disconnected, see our introduction) for the majority of Kinshasa's population as "precolonial Africa."

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Notes

1. “Disruption” is a key trope in tech optimistic thinking and writing. It is based on the concept of “disruptive innovation,” which is found in economics and means that new markets and value networks are created, perhaps even displacing other markets.
2. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/interactives/technology-use-in-africa-mobile-phones/ last accessed on December 20 2019.
3. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/interactives/technology-use-in-africa-smartphones/ last accessed on December 20 2019.
4. In previous research (Pype 2017), in particular when studying the entanglements of technology and religion among Branhamist communities in Kinshasa (a particular type of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity), I have called for attention to the modality of connectivity, the possibility of being connected, of being able to establish and consolidate ties with Others, social and spiritual

others. Obviously, these connections can only happen through the work of connectors and interfaces.

5. Funding for this research was offered by the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (G.A005.14N Odysseus grant, and ERC-Runner Up Budget).
6. Email conversation, July 20, 2019.
7. In their fine-grained analysis of the semiotics of Luba art, Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts (1996:111) draw a fascinating connection between physical scars, beads, and the sculpted patterns on the backs of the *lukasa* memory boards.
8. SAPEURs are members of the "Société d'Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes" (SAPE), or *society of pleasure seeking* (ambiance) *and elegant people"*. Justin-Daniel Gandoulou (1989a, 1989b) has authored two monographs about the movement. SAPEURS cultivate designer clothes and could be called the dandies of Brazzaville and Kinshasa.
9. See Stroeken (2017) for a discussion of "the witchcraft simplex," i.e., the reduction of multiplicity in globalized Pentecostalism.