

“I am a designer, an architect, a sculptor, engineer, artist,” said Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948–2015). In the late 1970s in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), which was rapidly redefining itself following independence from Belgium, Kingelez began making intricately constructed sculptures of miniature buildings and cities. Eliding the boundaries between artistic categories, they embody his dreams for his country, his continent, and the world. These “extreme maquettes,” as he called them, present models for a more harmonious society of the future and offer optimistic alternatives to his experience of city life in Kinshasa, where urban planning and infrastructure were often unable to keep pace with exponential growth and development.

Kingelez’s vibrant, audacious sculptures were created from an incredible range of everyday materials and found objects—colored paper, commercial packaging, plastic, soda cans, and bottle caps—all meticulously transformed and arranged. While he didn’t travel outside of Zaire until 1989, Kingelez was deeply attuned to international affairs, and his work addressed health crises, shifting geopolitical alliances, and global locations, from Canada to Japan. Kinshasa’s layered architectural history was also a source of inspiration, and he referenced its colonial-era Art Deco buildings and the ambitious structures erected post-Independence. Infusing these diverse concerns with his inventive vision, Kingelez explored the multivalent realities and potentials of the contemporary city, proposing, in his own words, a “better, more peaceful world.”

Organized by Sarah Suzuki, Curator, with Hillary Reder, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art. Exhibition design is produced in collaboration with the artist Carsten Höller.

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For a playlist inspired by Kingelez’s milieu in Kinshasa, go to mo.ma/kingelez-spotify or mo.ma/kingelez-apple.

#KingelezCityDreams

Kingelez’s sculptures are complex amalgamations of materials. In place of medium lines for each work, we have compiled a list of materials definitively identified by conservators and curators thus far, roughly organized from most to least prevalent:

Paper (including colored paper, printed paper, wrapping paper and tissue paper); corrugated cardboard, paperboard, and printed commercial packaging; wood; acrylic and plastic; aluminum and metallic foil and cardboard; rubber foam, Styrofoam, and foamcore; ink, pencil, colored pencil, crayon, marker, and paint (paint pen, gouache, and poster paint); adhesive, tape (colored tape and metallic tape), and stickers; fabric, yarn, string, thread, and twine; beads (paper, wood, and plastic); balls (plastic, foam, and thread-wrapped); paper and plastic straws; copper wire, coated wire, and metal grommets; toothpicks, pins (including map pins, pushpins, and thumbtacks), and nails; aluminum cans, plastic bottles, and bottle caps; and mirrors, 35mm plastic slide mounts, ballpoint-pen shafts, circuit-board diodes, and electric lights.

Many of the titles are given here in French. Kingelez’s poetic, idiosyncratic, and often playful phrasing and spelling make their spirit difficult to capture in translation, and, in most cases, the titles are those written directly on the works by the artist himself. Kingelez also often included a hand-applied medallion that comprises his signature, the precise date he made the work, and an inventory number.