

The Museum of Modern Art

THE FIRST RETROSPECTIVE OF BODYS ISEK KINGELEZ FEATURES THE CONGOLESE ARTIST'S VISIONS FOR CITIES OF A PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS FUTURE

Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams

May 26, 2018–January 1, 2019

Floor Three, The Philip Johnson Galleries

Press Preview: Tuesday, May 22, 9:30-11:30 a.m., with remarks to follow

#KingelezCityDreams

NEW YORK, April 30, 2018—Spanning the three-decade career of visionary Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948–2015), The Museum of Modern Art presents ***Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams***, featuring more than 30 of the artist's "extreme maquettes," as he called them, in which he transformed paper, commercial packaging, and other everyday materials into dazzling, intricate sculptures that suggest utopian possibilities for global urban sites. On view from May 26, 2018, through January 1, 2019, *City Dreams* is the artist's first retrospective and the first substantial monographic presentation of his work in the US. The exhibition includes works from each of the key periods of his career, from early sculptures that take the shape of civic buildings, public monuments, and national pavilions, to spectacular, expansive cities, to futuristic late works, which incorporate increasingly unorthodox materials. *Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams* is organized by Sarah Suzuki, Curator, with Hillary Reder, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition design is produced in collaboration with the artist Carsten Höller.

Kingelez was previously featured in the MoMA exhibition *Projects 59: Architecture as Metaphor* (1997), and while his work has long been featured in major international exhibitions, this is the first opportunity in New York to explore the full breadth of his career. More than 30 works will be on view, including many rarely seen works from both public and private collections.

Born in the agricultural village of Kimbembele-Ihunga, in what was then Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), he moved in 1970 to the city of Kinshasa, the capital of the newly independent country, which had been renamed Zaire. Kingelez first started making art in the late 1970s, finding himself compelled to get his hands on "scissors, a Gillette razor, and some glue and paper." Based on the technical mastery demonstrated by his earliest works, he was hired as a restorer of traditional objects at the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaire (now the Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo) in Kinshasa, a post he held for six years until he devoted himself full-time to his own art making.

Before he began making art, and after finishing his university studies, Kingelez taught secondary school in Kinshasa at a time when education of the young generation was a top priority for the nascent nation of Zaire. One of the earliest sculptures in the exhibition, *Maryland University USA* (c. 1980), suggests the high value that Kingelez placed on education, and its representation of an American campus also demonstrates his strikingly international perspective from the outset.

While he didn't travel outside of his home country until 1989, Kingelez was highly attuned to world events and deeply concerned with social issues. This focus can be seen in several works in the exhibition that directly addressed the realities of his time and his global perspective. *The Scientific Center of Hospitalisation the SIDA* (1991) references the AIDS crisis; *Palais d'Hirochima* (1991) addresses the condition of postwar Japan; and *U.N.* (1995) attests to the United Nations' peacekeeping efforts and the artist's own sense of civic responsibility.

Kingelez also referenced contemporary architecture, including the Grande Arche de la Défense in Paris, whose hollow armature Kingelez emulated in *Bel Atlas* (1989) after seeing the monument the year it was inaugurated. Other structures akin to national pavilions suggest a local specificity—the log cabin-inspired form of *Canada Dry* (1991), for example, and the nod to Dutch gables in *Belle Hollandaise* (1991). Kingelez also reimaged sites he knew well. Marking an increase in scale and ambition, the complex, multi-building cityscape *Kimbembele Ihunga* (1994) is a futuristic version of artist's rural hometown, complete with a stadium, shopping center, railway station, and skyscrapers.

One of the latest works in the exhibition, *Nippon Tower* (2005), exemplifies the increasingly idiosyncratic approach characteristic of the artist's later production. Comprised of a plastic Smint box, packaging from a milk carton, BIC razor blades, lightbulb boxes, and a playfully shaped plastic spoon, this work could perhaps be understood as a portrait of the artist through objects and brands he used—or at least suggests what he had on hand in the studio at the time. With its soaring form constructed of translucent and blue plastic, Kingelez characterized this work with the words he pasted to its base: “super elegant.”

In his largest cityscape, *Ville Fantôme* (1996), Kingelez imagined a city in which doctors and police are not needed. “It's a peaceful city where everybody is free,” he said, “It's a city that breathes nothing but joy, the beauty of life. It's a melting pot of all races in the world. Here you live in a paradise, just like heaven.” With his signature transformation of carefully selected papers and other materials such as battery packages, Kingelez creates a vision of paradise with elements of earthly reality. While his ideas for the city are grand, he also provides infrastructure for public welfare, including such amenities as a power plant, a post office, and plenty of public parking.

An artist of tremendous and enduring vision, Kingelez believed that “without a model, you are nowhere. A nation that can't make models is a nation that doesn't understand things, a nation that doesn't live,” and his sculptures of imagined buildings and cities reflected his dreams for his country, his continent, and the world. An optimistic alternative to his own experience of urban life in Kinshasa, which grew exponentially and organically with urban planning and

infrastructure often unable to keep in step, his work explores urgent questions around how communities and societies function, urban growth, economic inequity, and the rehabilitative power of architecture—issues that resonate profoundly today.

City Dreams includes an interactive virtual-reality experience of *Ville Fantoîme* developed by Third Pillar, which allows visitors to virtually traverse Kingelez’s imagined city. This feature presents a unique opportunity to explore the incredible proliferation of detail that characterizes the artist’s work and gain new perspectives into its complexity and scale. The exhibition also features Dirk Dumon’s 2003 documentary, *Kingelez: Kinshasa, une ville repensée (Kingelez: Kinshasa, A City Rethought)*, which offers insights into Kingelez’s life, process, and ethos.

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PUBLICATION:

This exhibition is accompanied by a scholarly catalogue edited by Sarah Suzuki, with texts by architect David Adjaye, photographer Sammy Baloji, art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu, and Suzuki, as well as an interview with André Magnin. Featuring stunning new photography of Kingelez’s work, this serves as the most comprehensive volume on the artist to date. 144 pages, 90 color illustrations. Hardcover, \$35. ISBN: 978-1-63345-054-7. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at MoMA stores and online at store.moma.org. Distributed to the trade through ARTBOOK/D.A.P. in the United States and Canada. Distributed outside the United State and Canada by Thames & Hudson.

EXHIBITION HASHTAG:

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Press Contacts: Sara Beth Walsh, (212) 708-9747 or sarabeth_walsh@moma.org
Olivia Oramas, (212) 404-6400 or olivia_oramas@moma.org

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