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Dancing with Smoke

Géraldine Tobe in Conversation with Z.S. Strother and Toma Muteba Luntumbue

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In honor of Mujinga Tanga Angélique

It is striking how the language of trauma is circulating across the social spectrum in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The source is probably NGOs concerned with public health and human rights, although Toma Muteba Luntumbue intuits that people begin to speak of trauma when they have been denied a source of consolation.¹ In addition to the unresolved psychological wounds left from colonial occupation, Congolese have experienced an unrelenting litany of massacres in the past few decades, such as the Kamwina Nsapu rebellion (2016–2019), that receive no public acknowledgement, no national day of mourning. Grief must always be driven inwards.² Artist Géraldine Tobe, inspired by her grandmother, Mujinga Tanga Angélique, to believe that art can serve society, takes trauma as her subject, as in her wide-ranging 2024 exhibition *Création Sans Visages. Sur les traces des oubliés (Without Faces: On the Track of the Forgotten)*, which challenged her audience in Kinshasa to remember all those rendered invisible to power—including enslaved Congolese sent across the Atlantic (Fig. 1).

Tobe's career has been building steadily since 2015. In addition to European residencies, which have proved important to many Congolese contemporary artists, Tobe has been able to travel to an unusual degree in Africa, including formative experiences in Ouidah (Republic of Bénin) and Antananarivo (Madagascar). In 2020, her work created a splash at the Jinan Biennale in China where it was exhibited near the pavilions of Xu Bing and Song Dong (Tobe and de Wolf 2022: 69–73).³

Tobe will say that she turned to figuration in order to

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engage viewers in philosophical, moral reflection. She revels in exhibitions as she prefers to work in suites of images that open the space of the canvas into the room. She makes her viewers confront suffering but there is no cheap pathos here. Her subjects are too active—they look out, look across, look down, and sometimes challenge us directly. The artist knows her anatomy and her ability to depict people that one can imagine meeting on the street is matchless. Few artists show such tenderness to the ravages of age and impoverishment (Fig. 2). And yet, she does not work with models. Instead, it is almost as though she conceives of the body as a collage to be assembled from fragments. The suffering on display spurs viewers to search for a narrative but the artist effectively thwarts any sense of resolution. There is something that prevents us from tying up the story: a missing face, a body in fragments, the mysterious universe composed according to its own personal vocabulary (or “individual mythology” as Harald Szeemann would have worded it), in this case, involving the portentous arrival of a crow and a plethora of insects (Szeemann 2018 [1972]).⁴

Her images fascinate because they often verge on the grotesque (Fig. 3). However, this is not the “grotesque realism” celebrated by Mikhail Bakhtin, who insisted that in carnival the drunken, defecating, farting, guffawing bodies of the folk are “not individualized” as they incarnate “the people who are continually growing and renewed” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 18–19). Instead, Tobe decries the separation of individuals from the human community. What is repellent are the acts of rejection—figures who have lost their faces (identities) (Fig. 3) or the ferocity of the mighty hell bent on exterminating the weak from the face of the earth (Fig. 11). Tobe's technique with its restricted palette works in tandem with the fragmentation of bodies to invite reflection on the troubling distanciation of modern society.

As she relates in the conversation that follows, Tobe received a rigorous classical education at Kinshasa's respected Academy of Fine Arts and struggled to find her own path. Finally, in an act of autoiconoclasm, she burned all of her paintings in 2012 and was inspired to create her own medium involving the manipulation of smoke on canvas. Elsewhere, she has said that watching the bonfire triggered



1 Installation view of Géraldine Tobe, *Création Sans Visages. Sur les traces des oubliés*, curated by Yacouba Konaté, February 8–March 2, 2024, Institut français, Kinshasa, DRC. Photo: Jeanpy Kabongo

childhood memories and that interacting with the dance of smoke allowed her to “recuperate” part of herself, which she could then open to others. She begins by making stencils directly from her own drawings; alternatively, she may print out a photograph from her archival research in large format and cut out the desired image.⁵ Given the richness of the tonal gradations, it would be easy to mistake her compositions in reproduction for charcoal drawings (Fig. 3). Instead, she affixes paper stencils to the surface of the canvas and mounts it overhead. Then with a small, hand-held kerosene lamp, she reaches overhead to pass the flame across the surface, also moving in and out. The stencils will be peeled off at different stages in the process in order to vary the depth of the shading. She will also sometimes make use of pencil-like wands to shift the position of the stencils as she works in order to create a fine boundary line or to channel the smoke toward or away from a particular area. Tobe may apply collage elements or use a small gouge to create a white line by removing some of the surface of the smoke left on the canvas (Fig. 4). In the end, the artist sprays the image with a fixative. The result yields a surprisingly

complex textured surface that suits the phantasmagoric apparitions of her imagination (Fig. 5). Depending on their frames of reference, viewers may struggle to find analogies in the history of art, reaching for figures as different as Hieronymous Bosch, Barthélémy Tuguo, or the Cuban printmaker Belkis Ayón.

Like El Anatsui, who also invented his own medium (in his case, using bottle-tops), Tobe’s technique is always experimental and evolving. Whereas many art historians think of a medium as a mode of creative expression determined by its materials (as in the “medium of oil painting”), Anatsui draws on the vocabulary of “microbiology, where the medium is ‘that which enables.’ A medium is an enabling environment which allows it to grow. It’s not just the materials but live media which form or cause ideas to grow.”⁶ For Tobe, the dance of the smoke enables meditations on transience, death, social justice. Her figures are never fixed but always in a process of transmutation, “evaporating” before our eyes (de Wolf 2022: 94–95). One of her mentors, Prof. Jean Kambayi Bwatshia, interprets her work in the *Kalunga Series* (Figs. 6–7) as inviting the viewer to “dive into the psyche” and to discover oneself as always in the state of becoming, at one with the divine (Bwatshia 2022: 16–17).⁷

Ironically, as more Congolese travel in the Global South, they are often inspired to renewed interest in their own past. Jeanpy Kabongo realized how detached he was from his own culture only while studying digital filmmaking in India when fellow students asked him to teach them something



2 Géraldine Tobe
Untitled (2024)
 Smoke on canvas; 120 cm x 140 cm
 Photo: Jeanpy Kabongo

about Congolese art history.⁸ This experience inspired him to research Kuba textile designs. He and Tobe plan to open a discussion space in Kinshasa where people are invited to examine the reasoning and values of the past and what might be selectively incorporated into contemporary life.

Tobe is particularly concerned that the manner with which missionaries (re)introduced Christianity during the colonial era has led to a situation in which Congolese pastors today of evangelical churches (*églises de reveil*) reject all ties to indigenous spirituality as “satanic.” Her grandmother, her older brother, and she herself were harmed by these attitudes and Tobe believes that Congolese need to reconcile themselves with their past in order to move forward. Other artists are looking with new openness to historical Congolese spiritual leaders such as Kimpa Vita and Simon Kimbangu, who inspired powerful resistance movements.

Géraldine Tobe spoke with Z.S. Strother on June 27, 2023 about her creative mission. Readers will be struck by how often fire is referenced in this exchange. Although Tobe acknowledges her autobiographical inspiration, Henri Kalama Akulez, director of the Academy of Fine Arts of Kinshasa, recognizes that Tobe’s art aspires to purge the

collective memory of Congolese, which has too long been relegated to private, voiceless repression. As he writes, the smoke makes visible the “‘toxic life experience’ of a society in which the traumas of painful histories are intertwined with every individual’s personal quest for self-knowledge” (Akulez 2022, translated by ZSS).

Z.S. Strother: Géraldine, welcome.

Géraldine Tobe: Thank you, Zoë.

ZSS: I recommend that everyone read the excellent catalogue for your exhibition *Kalunga* in Brussels [Tobe and de Wolf 2022]. I appreciate that you invited artists to comment on your work and I found the approach of Lhola Amira inspirational. I would like to follow their model. They begin by asking how are you: Are your bones strong and your lungs healthy? They write that “we find ourselves wondering about your wellbeing ... [and] what scars you are holding” because there is “always the shadow in your work that



3 Géraldine Tobe
Untitled (2024)
Smoke on canvas; 140 cm x 120 cm
Photo: Jeanpy Kabongo



pulls us closer” (Amira 2022). You gaze into the fire, into the smoke, but how do you fortify yourself to take up this charge? What do you do to be strong?

GT: If I can answer this question, I would say that first of all ... I am stronger mentally, than physically. When people compare me to my work, I appear fragile to them and yet my work strikes them as ...

ZSS: Courageous

GT: Courageous.

ZSS: That’s what we’re asking: how do you keep strong?

GT: How do I keep strong? I’m going to digress—I think this is linked to my upbringing. I was born into a family of five children. I’m the fourth. My mother became a widow at a young age. Her husband died when she was around 23–25 years old. Imagine a young woman left a widow. She suddenly had to stand up to the rest of the world to protect her children. As a consequence, my mother is a very strong woman. I take her as an example. So every time I find myself in a critical situation, I always tell myself that I can find a means to transform this problem, this worry, into a source of inspiration that will make me strong.

I give an example from 2015, I was giving a performance dedicated to the women priests who existed in ancestral society, the women who were healers. Commonly they are called “Mama Ndona” or “Mama Mbikudi” [in Tshiluba]. And today these women no longer exist because of the strong presence of evangelical churches [*églises de reveil*]. So, what happened? Through recklessness—because we are human—my clothes caught fire in the middle of the performance and I sustained burns over my entire body.

ZSS: [Gasp!] How awful!

4 Géraldine Tobe
“And God Created Woman...” (panel 1 of a triptych)
 (2018)
 Smoke on canvas and collage; 160 cm x 120 cm
 Photo: screencapture Ba Nkishi (film directed by
 Jeanpy Kabongo), courtesy of Visual Media Center,
 Department of Art History and Archaeology,
 Columbia University

GT: Yes! Yes! It took an entire year to convalesce because my entire back, the back of my arm, it all caught fire. For a year, Zoë, I slept on my stomach because I didn’t know how to sit up or move. I was badly burned, so much so that some of my nerves were even damaged. I no longer felt anything because everything was burned. It was a very traumatic experience.

At the same time, I was very weak, Zoë, very weak. I was at the end of my strength and I could no longer fight. I even had difficulty breathing, each breath made my flesh hurt ... I wanted to die because it was really too much, I couldn’t bear it ... And I would say that I was on the verge of death when a very close friend told me: “Géraldine, you can’t give up. You can’t wish for death because you don’t know how many people you will sacrifice if you do. Fight for the people who count on you.” And it’s thanks to the words of this friend [that I thought] about my brother who is mentally handicapped because I was the one who took care of him. My biggest fear was that he wouldn’t have anyone to take care of him and that he could end up on the street. Voilà. That was my biggest fear. I told myself: if I don’t want to fight for myself, I will still do it for the people who count on me.

ZSS: I understand that you’ve learned the following lessons from the traumas that you and your mother experienced:



5 Detail of Figure 4, Géraldine Tobe, “*And God Created Woman...*”
C. EO.1953.74.5011-1, collection RMCA Tervuren
Photo: J. Van de Vyver, CC-BY 4.0

The image incorporates a collaged photo of a resin mask attributed to Lunda artists in DRC by Albert Maesen in 1955.

One must open oneself to others, one must accept their help, and finally one must take responsibility for others.

GT: Mmm. Yes. That’s it.

ZSS: You were burned [all over your body]. And now you work with fire.

GT: [Laughs] Yes.

ZSS: You did not renounce working with fire after this accident. Many say that Freud was fascinated by the repetitive nature of trauma, [i.e., how the “experience of a trauma repeats itself” in the dreams or flashbacks of survivors (Caruth 1996: 2, 59)]. Now you have developed this extraordinary technique through which you use fire and smoke. How should we understand that? Because I must say that many Americans [who survived what you have experienced] would be angry. They would be angry with their family, with their society, with destiny.

GT: Mmmm.

ZSS: And yet, I do not sense any anger in you ... except perhaps a trace of anger with Christianity.

GT: I will explain, Zoë. I do not have the nature of someone who blames others. That’s not for me. What would that serve? Because, from my personal experience, I understood

that every time you blame someone else [for your problems], you make them responsible for you. You see? And staying in a position where you play the role of the victim will prevent you from going further. This is why I don’t accuse anyone else. On the contrary, I fight to do all that I can for myself. So I won’t say that I am angry with religion, with Christianity. [However, what] I would like or propose as a contemporary artist is that the faithful, the Christians, keep an open mind.

I give an example. When I was young, I was one of those accused of being “witch children” [*enfants sorciers*].⁹ It was like a tidal wave when the revivalist churches appeared. Almost every family had children who were accused of being witches. You see, Zoë—that experience is what made me who I am today. I’m not saying that I agree with this practice. But it made me grow; it changed me. So who am I to take a radical position in relation to what the population thinks is a good form of spirituality? All that I can ask of Christians is to have an open mind. I was in [the Republic of] Benin during the Vudu festival. The Beninese Minister of Tourism and Culture, the person who paid for the trip, he explained it all to me very well. He is Catholic, but he clings to the spirituality of his ancestors. This is something that we no longer find here in Kinshasa, in Congo. For us, being a Christian requires a form of alienation from the spirituality of one’s ancestors ...

This image [Figs. 4–5] is part of a series that I made during my residency at the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale (Tervuren). [She recounts learning from historians at the museum in 2018 about the missionaries in Bas-Congo and the role they played in separating people from their ancestral heritage.] This is why, in my humble opinion, I think that if missionaries wish to do sincere work, it would be to repudiate the discourse that pushed our



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ancestors to renounce their spirituality. That would be an honest and profound act.

ZSS: How do we/you connect these deep thoughts with your work? First, let's begin, with your mysterious technique. How long does it take to make such a complex work?

GT: [a little breath ...] Starting with the design, the idea. It depends. There are some that take longer, but generally at least a month or a month and a half. But there are also other creations that are so stubborn. There is another aspect, Zoë, that must be taken into account. When I work with smoke, I wouldn't say that I have the idea worked out from the beginning. I know I'm going to do this or that but when I get to the stage where I mount the canvas [over my head], and I begin working, it's the creation that creates itself. Even I don't know what it's going to be like. I have a vague idea, but the end result is not up to me to decide. It's the smoke, it's the oxygen entering the room ...

ZSS: There's always something unexpected?

GT: Well, I won't say "something unexpected." But it's like a spirit. I don't control it. I can't hold the smoke [in my hand]; it is free, it has its own nature. It reveals itself according to its moods. So it's like a spirit in that way. So when I create, I don't stand still, but I am much more flexible so that I can follow the dance of smoke. [Laughs ...]

ZSS: And why aren't you afraid, after what you have experienced? What if the paper stencils that you use caught fire?

6 Installation view of Géraldine Tobe, *Kalunga: Vous n'êtes pas prêt pour ça*, curated by Hans de Wolf, November 16, 2022–January 15, 2023, Lever House, now ISIB, Engineering School of Vrije Universiteit, Brussels.
Photo: Jean Costyn; courtesy of Hans de Wolf

GT: I calculate. I have a technique that guides me. When I use paper stencils, I quickly pass the flame over the surface, if not the paper will catch fire. So, Zoë, uh ... You know that the astronauts took a lot of risks when they went to the moon?

ZSS: Yes ...

GT: So why didn't they give up? [Laughs ...]

ZSS: Because they didn't think anything would happen to them! This is what confounds me. It's different once it's happened to you. For example, I was in a serious auto accident. Today, I drive in cars [because I must] but I am cautious.

GT: What is certain is that I would not like to relive what I experienced and I would not wish it on anyone. I try to be careful.

ZSS: Okay. Maybe this is a related question or maybe not. What has been your strongest experience of aesthetic emotion?

GT: Me, if I can answer this question, it's that my experience



7 Géraldine Tobe
Basantu (Saints), Kalunga Series (2022)
 Smoke on canvas and acrylic paint; dimensions variable
 From *Kalunga: Vous n'êtes pas prêt pour ça*,
 curated by Hans de Wolf, November 16,
 2022–January 15, 2023, Lever House, now
 ISIB, Engineering School of Vrije Universiteit,
 Brussels
 Photo: Jean Costyn; courtesy of Hans de Wolf

with fire, yes, it's an experience that shook up my work a lot. If you observe the evolution of my work, before my accident and after my accident, [you can still recognize] Géraldine, but afterwards I turned to the human figure because this experience allowed me to recognize how fragile life is. And in my artistic approach, the notion of aesthetics is present but it is not in the foreground. What is in the foreground is the message, the content, the narration that accompanies this creation. After that, the aesthetics will follow.

So if I [think about when] I have been moved by a form of aesthetic emotion, I recall that in 2015, during my residency in Belgium, I went to see an exhibition at the Musée des Arts Contemporains au Grand-Hornu. It was my first time to see the work of Christian Boltanski. Certainly when I arrived [in Belgium], I visited a lot of galleries, and exhibitions, but it was Boltanski's exhibition that shook me from head to toe, through the narration, the message, the installation. It was a shock. I felt as though Christian began to haunt me! So this was the exhibition that stuck in my head. And to this

day, I still remember it. In 2015, I was much younger but I said to myself: "If I ever have the opportunity to make exhibitions, I would like would like to have this kind of impact on people."¹⁰ [Laughs]

ZSS: You sent me some images from your exhibition *Kalunga*, including *Vanity of Vanities* [Fig. 8]. Is this a funeral pyre? How courageous to imagine your own death!

GT: [She explains that it represents a body laid out at a wake, her grandmother's body with the face of the artist, surrounded by seven compositions.]

[Laughs] Here in the middle, I depicted a story that my grandmother told me when I was still little. She explained that when she was still a child in the countryside, if someone died, as there was no morgue, no freezer to preserve the corpse, then the adults built a pyre, they set a fire, but not a fire to consume the body, but a fire to help the body to eject its fat. It was a way of preserving the body in order to allow neighbors to travel from distant communities for the wake. Fire [in this case] is an element that purifies the body.

So here is my representation; I am the one sleeping there [Fig. 9]. But in another dimension, Zoë, I'm not the one sleeping there. It's a way of representing my grandmother [Mujinga Tanga Angélique] through me. May she rest in peace. I know that if she were here, she would be ecstatic because it was important to her that at least one of her grandchildren should honor their ancestors. Why? Because my entire family is Christian! For her children and some of her grandchildren, ancestral education is forbidden. It



8 Géraldine Tobe

Installation view, *Vanity of Vanities, All is Vanity* (2022)

From *Kalunga: Vous n'êtes pas prêt pour ça*, Curator: Hans de Wolf, November 16, 2022–January 15, 2023, Lever House, now ISIB, Engineering School of Vrije Universiteit, Brussels.

Photo: Jean Costyn; courtesy of Hans de Wolf

9 Detail of Figure 8, Géraldine Tobe, installation view, *Vanity of Vanities, All is Vanity* (2022)

Photo: Jean Costyn; courtesy of Hans de Wolf



cannot be talked about because it is considered satanic. And as for me, I was always a weird child. If you forbade me to go somewhere, that's where I was going to go [Laughing ...]. I don't know, Zoë, but I always felt something pulling me to go to that old lady. And when I took refuge at her feet, I looked up at her and said: "Grandmother, teach me, educate

me, because I know that you no longer have many years left on this earth."

I didn't experience colonization, Zoë. I am a child who was born in the '90s. But I am shaped by my experience with my grandmother. So here I wanted to represent her. I have also displayed some of her personal effects. When we arrived



10 Géraldine Tobe
Kalunga Series (2022)
Smoke on canvas; 170 cm x 130 cm
Photo: Babeth Albert; courtesy of Hans de Wolf



11 Géraldine Tobe
Kingdom of the Wretched (plate 2 of diptych)
 (2022)
 Smoke on canvas; 155 cm x 200 cm
 Photo: Jeanpy Kabongo

12 Detail of Figure 11, Géraldine Tobe,
Kingdom of the Wretched (2022). The mathe-
 matical formulas visible enable the artist to
 guide her kerosene lamp and its smoke.



in Kinshasa, she attended the Protestant church. So she had her wrapper here that she wore every Sunday to go to church, on which was written: “*mokristu azali mwinda.*” So there you have it. That is to say: “The Christian is the light.”

ZSS: And what about these seven compositions that surround the installation with bodies rising, falling? Some of the decapitated heads are peaceful [Fig. 10] while others are grimacing and screaming.



13 Patients work with the encouragement of Géraldine Tobe (in brown) and the staff of the Art Therapy Workshop, June 19, 2023. Psychiatric Hospital, Centre Neuro-Psycho Pathologique (CNPP), University of Kinshasa. (The faces of the patients have been blurred for reasons of privacy.) The workshop was founded in 2019 and is supported by the NGO, Loboko ya sanza (LOSO).
Photo: Z.S. Strother

GT: When I was at school, there was our art history teacher who told us about the *Last Judgment* of Michelangelo. And Zoë, at that time, I was particularly moved by the power of his imagination. Moreover, when I was at the Academy, I learned anatomy and how to draw figures in motion. So in this work I entitled *Vanity of Vanities* [the installation takes the shape of a spiral] and I place myself inside of the circle.

Yes, I make works that have a narrative, that carry a message. But in the same way that these works will convey messages to the public who view them, I also must let myself be taught by what I have done.

ZSS: You're a member of the audience.

GT: That's it, I'm part of the audience. So here is the work. [Through the compositions surrounding the body], I simply wanted to remind others and myself that whatever we do, no matter [our profession], no matter how many trips we take, no matter [how much we earn], we all will end up leaving it all behind us one day. The world is made like this; we are born to die. Life [has meaning] because death walks alongside.

So when the moment comes, what attitude should we have? This is why, Zoë, I love doing this work. Yes! I'm not doing it for myself, but I'm doing it to be an example for others. This [perspective] explains the different attitudes of these different people who surround [the body at the wake]. There are those who are prepared, who accept it: "There you go, I've had my chance. Now I have to make room for the new generation." But the others don't want to [die], they hang on.

ZSS: Often, the design of an exhibition results from a dialogue between the curator and artist. Did you choose the seven images?

GT: Oh, yes! When I was designing this work, I planned on three images on one side, three on the other, and one at the end. All seven are part of the *Vanity of Vanities*. And the heads that detach show that only time remains the master of everything. We all pass away.

ZSS: [Looking closely] There are little eagles' heads in the figures! [Fig. 10]

GT: There are always eagles, good!

ZSS: What does the eagle signify for you? Is it death because it's a fierce predator? Is it liberty because it can fly anywhere it pleases? What is it for you?

GT: The eagle for me signifies freedom. This is the freedom to think, to create, to transcend what you were taught in school. How did I come to work with the eagle? Because there is an adage, it's like a myth ... Professor Kambay Buantsha tells it very well. The eagle in Tshiluba is called *tshikololo*. There was a female eagle looking for a place to give birth. But every community rejected her until one chief in a tiny village found her a spot where she could take shelter. After she gave birth, the land became fertile and the community prospered.

So, Zoë, I identified myself with this story fifteen or twenty years ago. When I finished at the Academy [of Fine Arts in 2012], I painted and painted. [I found it difficult to break free from my] classical education. I said to myself, "Okay, I'm going to destroy the master [*détruire le maître*] and rebuild afterwards." And I used fire. I burned all my paintings and that's how I got the idea, the inspiration to work with fire and smoke. So it's as if the souls of the canvases that I had burned were *reincarnated* in another form.

ZSS: We should also speak of your work as an activist. What about this [Fig. 11]? [An executioner precipitates himself on another figure, as heads fly through the air. The viewer feels the sharp edge of the axe, the lift of the executioner's chest as he summons every iota of his prodigious strength to strike his feeble quarry. His fury is maniacal, unstoppable (Fig. 12). Nonetheless, although well-muscled above, the killer's legs begin to decompose, covered by eagles' heads, just as one sees in the legs of the victim and in the dissolving mound of heads below.]

GT: So. [Laughs] Yes! What must be added is that in my practice, I draw inspiration from what is happening in my society and throughout the world. I called this work "the damned," "the wretched." In this work, there are two parts. There is a struggle on one side and, on this canvas, there is someone who is so strong, who attacks another who is on the point of death. And there are always the eagle [heads].

ZSS: To say that the figures are free?

GT: I use the eagle as an element to construct the body of my subjects. Voilà. And here, note also the observers, the people who watch. They know that things are not right and that they have the power to do something, but they don't. They just remain calmly observing. So, right in the corner here, Zoë, there are the angels. And these "angels," they're also watching. And why did I represent them? It really [speaks to the] Congolese spirit. That is to say: you have been treated unfairly, one of your family has been crushed or he

has been killed by someone powerful, and even if you go to court, the one who has wronged you will win the case [because of his social position]. This is when everyone returns to Kalunga, the supreme being, for consolation: "If the court system is incapable of defending us, Kalunga will do so one day." It's an expression of hope.

ZSS: Toma also sent some questions. He is interested in your work at the psychiatric hospital. Do you attribute an artistic value to everything produced by the patients and if not, why not? [Fig. 13]

GT: Yes, I do! By the way, Mental Handicap Project is a project that we are doing in collaboration with the hospital [at the University of Kinshasa], and the project is accompanied by psychologists, psychiatrists, artists, and professors who are interested in this form of activity. It is first and foremost an occupational workshop. We want to provide therapy. But we also try to identify some patients who express the desire to learn to paint and to make painting a profession. For example, you remember the patient who sees himself as an artist—he is right because everything he does is very beautiful.

ZSS: But for the others, who don't have the same educational background?

GT: Initially, we began with a painting and drawing workshop. But when we have more resources, we will add other kinds of workshops because there are patients who would like to learn how to sew and there are also those who wish to make music.

ZSS: Toma also asks where do you see yourself in five years' time?

GT: That's a difficult question to answer [Laughs ...]. What is true, I will always be an artist and I will always continue to work with patients so long as I live.

ZSS: Since we speak of the future, you mentioned the other day your concern with global injustice. For example, you mentioned the tragic case of George Stinney, the 14-year old wrongfully executed in the US in 1944. [Because of the internet,] do you think that Congolese, or Africans more generally, feel more community with Blacks across the world because of their shared experiences with injustice?

GT: Yes! I have been working on that with my project called *Sans visage* ("Without a face") (Figs. 1–3). What do I mean by "Without a face"? It's all the people who live in the shadow of others, who are marginalized and [whose contributions are not acknowledged]. Slavery today has changed form; it has become modern. Maybe we find ourselves in positions in which we are enslaved ... Maybe! [Laughs]. I like giving myself freedom [to think about questions like this].

ZSS: We opened with Lhola Amira. Let us close with their prayer: "We have asked your ancestors to hold you still and steady" (Amira 2022).

GT: Ah, let me add a parenthesis. At the beginning, I sought to reconnect with the spirituality of my ancestors. It was my personal project. It was only [during my residency] at Tervuren in 2019 when I had the idea of making it a collective project by inviting others to join me.

Lhola Amira is one of twelve or thirteen artists who were invited to work on the project, *Spirit of the Ancestors*. Lhola shares their body with their ancestor—they are double. They also work as an exhibition curator, when they are known by the name Kanizile Mbongwa. In fact yesterday I had a very long meeting with Kani on Zoom. So when she is a curator, she is Kanizile Mbongwa. When she goes into a

trance, at that moment, it is her ancestor Lhola Amira who enters the body and speaks.

ZSS: Oh! They wrote as an ancestor.

GT: Yes, that's it. So I wanted you to know that it is not Kani but the ancestor who speaks [Laughs].

ZSS: Thank you!

Notes

Transcribed by Mitango Kilenge Mireille and translated from the French by Z.S. Strother. This conversation from June 27, 2023 has been abridged and edited for clarity. The exchange in Kinshasa was inspired by a meeting organized by Toma Muteba Luntumbue with Tobe, Jeanpy Kabongo, and Strother on June 10, 2023. After Luntumbue's departure, Strother conducted the interview, but the two have closely collaborated on its presentation.

Z.S. Strother thanks Jeanpy Kabongo, Elisabeth L. Cameron, Rosalyn Deutsche, Christof Kurz, Hans de Wolf, Jean Costyn, Mamadou Dia, and Julie Francal-Saadi, who all made critical interventions.

1 The arts community in the United States and Europe may be most familiar with the discourse on trauma as it is framed by psychoanalytically informed literary critics such as Cathy Caruth (1996). However, training in trauma and its proper treatment play essential roles in the application for funding of contemporary NGOs dedicated to public health and human rights. For an eye-opening critique of the assumption that trauma is a “universal experience” see Lewis (2013, 2019), who worked with Tibetan refugees of political violence. Lewis's interlocutors employed a radically different approach towards suffering through Buddhist mind training and her findings caution that the adoption of the term “trauma” in DRC should not ipso facto imply that the approach to mental health will be the same. In this regard, there is much to be learned from Géraldine Tobe's drive to explore the relationship between Congolese spirituality, art, and other practices of psychosocial healing. I am grateful to medical anthropologist Lesley A. Sharp for insights into the importance of trauma in international NGO missions.

2 In a parallel situation, prominent Igbo intellectuals such as Okwui Enwezor (Detheridge 2003: 110) and Chinua Achebe (2012) have argued that the silence in Nigeria surrounding the Biafran Civil War (1967–1970), the refusal to remember the million or more who died, contributes to the country's failure to build a cohesive nation.

3 Among other awards, Tobe received in 2016 the Grand Prize in the Culture au Salon d'art contemporain de Ségou, in Mali; exhibited in the 5ème Biennale de Lubumbashi (Rencontres Picha) (2017) and 13ème édition de la Biennale de l'art africain contemporain de Dakar (Dak'Art 2018). In 2019, she was selected to help decorate the nose cone of a new satellite launch vehicle for EUMETSAT, advertised as the first (reproduction of an) African work of art to be sent into space in late 2022 (<https://www.eumetsat.int/three-artists-create-contemporary-art-be-launched-space>) (downloaded July 1, 2024). Her work was also featured prominently in the exhibition *The True Size of Africa*, at the Völklinger Hütte World Heritage Site, 2024–2025, in Völklingen, Germany.

4 Strother thanks Julie Francal-Saadi for prolonged conversations about Tobe's work and for placing it in conversation with Szeemann and the artists of Documenta V.

The insects in Tobe's works are a good example of how her individual mythology evolves with its social context. While they generally symbolize “the unwanted” (*les indésirables*), she capitalizes on the repugnance and fear that many people feel about insects to prod her viewers to analyze how they themselves react towards those represented, whether they be the poor, the disabled, enslaved Congolese, or coal miners exploited by German politicians (Tobe, email with Strother, December 21, 2024). The surreal multiplication of insects in Figs. 2–3 prod the viewer to slow down and to question the significance of what is represented, with the heart as well as the mind. Tobe's word choice “*les indésirables*” may also pun on *Les misérables*, the title of Victor Hugo's classic novel, which is sometimes translated as “The Dispossessed” or “The Outsiders.”

5 Géraldine Tobe, email to Strother, December 21, 2024.

6 El Anatsui, personal communication with Strother, New York, 2013.

7 Although recognized as a name for the Supreme Being, students of Central African art history will be most familiar with *kalunga* as the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead in cosmograms articulating a theology of reincarnation (Fu-Kiau 1969; see especially Thompson 1981).

8 Jeanpy Kabongo, personal communication with Strother, Kinshasa, June 10, 2023.

9 Tobe and her older brother were forced to undergo an exorcism, during which they were seated at the center of a circle of candles and forced to spend the night in a windowless room saturated with incense.

10 Boltanski inspired Tobe to think of an exhibition as an integrative work of art. The monumental Christian Boltanski exhibition, *La Salle des pendus* at the Musée des Arts Contemporains au Grand-Hornu (March 14–Aug. 16, 2015) placed in dialogue the Grand-Hornu Registers honoring miners who had lost their lives in the coal mines of the region with a number of installations made from clothing, which the artist associates with death and loss. (<https://www.mac-s.be/fr/expositions/christian-boltanski>). Tobe's visceral response to Boltanski's work before her own terrible accident shows that she was already sensitive to the pain of life's transience. Boltanski has said: “To me, each person is unique and extremely fragile. Our memory fades ... The contrast between the importance of one life, and how quickly it is forgotten once it no longer exists, it's something that truly alarms me.” (<https://masterpiecesmnba.blogspot.com/2017/03/les-registres-de-grand-hornu-by.html>)

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