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M HKA

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Jean Katambayi Mukendi

Circuits

Edited by Johannes Muselaers, Stéphane Symons,
Anne-Claire Schmitz, Emma Enderby

THE KU LEUVEN A.R.T.S.S. SERIES

*“We must necessarily think of science as art
if we expect to derive any kind of wholeness from it.”*

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

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FOREWORD

Johannes Muselaers, Stéphane Symons, Anne-Claire Schmitz, and Emma Enderby

Jean Katambayi Mukendi. Circuits is the first comprehensive monograph dedicated to the work of visual artist Jean Katambayi Mukendi (b. 1974, Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo). Conceived as a companion to his solo exhibition *RATIO*, organized by KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin and M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp in 2026, the book is co-published by both institutions and initiated by the KU Leuven Committee for Contemporary Art.

Circuits brings together contributions from academics and curators who have long engaged with Katambayi's work, alongside personal writings by the artist and his inner circle. By integrating these viewpoints, the book both highlights the poetics of Katambayi's practices and situates his work within the broader contexts of contemporary art history and theory, African thought, and the cultural landscape of historical and present-day Lubumbashi. This multifocal perspective illuminates the full breadth of his artistic oeuvre – spanning drawing, installation, and performance – and provides the conceptual and contextual framework for the exhibitions in Berlin and Antwerp.

In her opening essay, 'The Power Objects of Jean Katambayi Mukendi,' curator and scholar Sandrine Colard contextualizes Katambayi's work within the broader realm of global contemporary art. Colard links his artistic approach to strands of African conceptualism that emphasize the ritual function of objects, arguing that his improvised constructions draw on the Congolese *nkisi* tradition. Like these 'power figures,' she explains, Katambayi's objects and installations aim to restore energetic, social, and economic balance while offering incisive commentaries on the realities of postcolonial Congo.

Colard's opening essay is followed by a conversation between Katambayi and curators Emma Enderby (KW) and Anne-Claire Schmitz (MHKA), which elaborates on the ideas behind the *RATIO* exhibition. Katambayi reflects on the dual meanings of the title, the hybrid 'art machines' he created specifically for the show, and his role as a producer navigating complex systems of power.

By framing his own contribution, 'I hope you're doing well,' as unsent letters to Katambayi, curator, critic, and former gallerist Simon Delobel captures the immediacy of personal exchange. The format becomes a vehicle for an intimate reflection on the central themes animating Katambayi's practice, while also offering rare insight into the artist's

working processes and the histories behind a curated selection of his works.

In her essay 'Reinventing the Sun: Energy, Junction, Limit in the Work of Jean Katambayi Mukendi,' philosopher and writer Nadia Yala Kisukidi explores the conceptual and material dimensions of Katambayi's practice. The essay highlights his engagement with local and global energy systems, ecological and geopolitical concerns, and the inventive use of mathematics (and *mathematicae congolenses*) as a tool for connection and junction. By situating his work within these frameworks, Kisukidi illuminates how Katambayi negotiates survival, perception, and aesthetic experience in a world of scarcity and excess.

Academics Johannes Muselaers and Stéphane Symons deepen the art-historical perspective by examining Katambayi's drawings in detail. In their text, 'Circuits,' they treat these drawings as epistemological and critical instruments that probe and expose the material foundations of otherwise abstract scientific and technological systems. Extending this analysis to Katambayi's installations and performances, the essay situates his practice within a broad intellectual and artistic lineage. Muselaers and Symons draw connections to late-medieval and early-modern figures such as Giotto and Leonardo da Vinci, while also engaging with Karl Marx's critique of commodity fetishism and Hubert Damisch's aesthetics of drawing.

The essay by Muselaers and Symons is followed by a conversation between the artist and Picha member Alexandre Mulongo. Focusing on the social and artistic dynamics of Picha – the Lubumbashi-based artistic platform that Katambayi chairs – this dialogue emphasizes Katambayi's collaborative ethos and his engagement with the local art scene, a particularly significant aspect given the limited artistic resources and formal institutions in the region.

This personal perspective is followed by an emotionally resonant account from the artist's sister, Julie Mukendi. In 'Memories of a Shared Life,' she offers a window into their family history, linking Katambayi's early artistic and scientific experiments to their lives' entanglement with the industrial and social realities of the Gécamines mining company.

In 'Images Invent Themselves' and 'Sinuette' – the former written as a report for a residency at WIELS, Brussels – the artist cultivates a distinctive literary voice and reflects on the evolution of his practice, moving from mathematical and metaphysical perspectives toward its material manifestations.

THE POWER OBJECTS OF JEAN KATAMBAYI MUKENDI

Sandrine Colard

Zaire, Haut-Shaba Province, city of Lubumbashi, circa 1985. Five children surround their mother for an open-air photographic portrait in postcolonial Congo (FIG. 01). Closest to her right stands the artist Jean Katambayi Mukendi as a young teenage boy, dressed in all white. Among



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the printed motifs, the words 'anniversary' (*anniversaire*) and 'mine' can hardly be deciphered in the folds and creases of his mother's *pagne*. The group poses on the family's plot in the workers' camp of Gécamines, the powerful company that succeeded the colonial Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, the copper mine at the origin of Lubumbashi. In the background is a glimpse of the roof of the house where Katambayi still resides next to his studio, as well as of a pylon and a streetlamp – markers of the town's electrification and the elec-

trical circuitry that would become an obsessive motif and medium in his practice. Hidden from view behind the family but dominating the whole city, the terril of the mine stands as a towering monument to the waste of extraction, as does its chimney, blowing fumes into the air and into the lungs of the city's inhabitants. The artist was born, raised, and educated in an African womb of colonial capitalism and the Black Anthropocene, where the mining company's reach went well beyond a day of work, regulating aspects of social and family life, until it crept into mothers' daily apparel. In what the artist calls this 'plasmatic' image,¹ one perceives how the intimacy of his blood-tied family with the geologically powered, industrial society of his birth defined Katambayi's artistic cradle – a cradle with subterranean global ramifications. Equally important, as time washed out the colors of this photograph and nationalization precipitated deindustrialization, Katambayi developed, within his dismantling environment, the grammar of his geopoetics of Congo – and of Africa in the world.

An African Conceptualism Born in Zaïre

Katambayi was born in 1974, shortly after Mobutu Sese Seko (1930–1997) had launched Zairianisation, also known as the Authenticité campaign. A cultural ideology that strove to free the country from lingering colonial traces, it was also implemented, in a large part, to mask the growing signs of state failure and hardening authoritarianism. Katambayi came of age under the long tenure and crepuscule of Mobutu's dictatorship (1965–97), when the arts were requisitioned to propagandize his undivided power. Most famously, extravagant performances called *animations culturelles* (cultural animations), broadcast on national television, choreographed celebratory dances and songs of praise. Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019) situated the emergence of African conceptualism within the postcolonial artistic scenes of the 1970s as confronted with the rise of such repressive regimes.² Made up of a heterogeneous ensemble of artists rather than a continental movement, African conceptual art, as he saw it, embodied tactics of subterfuge in the absence of free speech. For instance, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Senegalese collective Laboratoire Agit'Art focused on process, experimentation, transience, and audience participation rather than on the production and aesthetics of objects, in response to the muzzling of political opposition by President Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001). Enwezor also cites South African artists such as Willem Boshoff (1951), Malcolm Payne (1946), and Kendell Geers (1968), who privileged an elusive language of unknowability, ephemeral performance, or the subversion of museum institutions that rejected materiality under apartheid.

Katambayi emerged as an heir to these singular lineages of African conceptualism in his profoundly elaborate and poetic postulations, often giving his works the form of prototypes made from fragile, recycled materials rather than that of 'fine art.' The subjects of these works largely arise from highlighting – and attempting to solve – the dramatic consequences of (neo-)colonialism and global capitalism, which have long rendered life in Congo profoundly unsustainable. Growing up under Mobutu's regime, Katambayi witnessed indirect critiques of the Zaïrian state primarily through urban painting and the so-called *inakale* (*tout est calé*, or 'everything is stuck') motif. Habitually hung in the living rooms of the city where he was born, the *inakale* paintings presented variations on a single theme: a person caught between a crocodile and a lion, trying to escape by climbing a tree, only to find a snake perched high in its branches and discover that the tree trunk had started to be sawn. Represented in popular painting as an allegory of the inescapable hardships faced by the Congolese – under a corrupt elite, neocolonial domination, and a dictator – the subtle critique found a conceptual expression in Katambayi's work in post-Mobutist society. Drawing upon his training in electricity and mathematics, as well as his fascination with numbers, the artist obliquely addresses the many undemocratic



shortcomings of today's Democratic Republic of Congo and its collusion with global governance through mathematical enigmas or equations to be solved, or through wiring systems to be repaired or optimized.

The Electric *Nkisi*

From the onset, electricity, light, and energy transmissions have been core notions in Katambayi's practice. Raised in the Gécamines camp with an electrician father, the artist was irremediably marked by the automation and the heavy machinery of the mining society. Working days were rhythmized by a programmed siren's blast, and homes were endowed with electricity as part of a regulatory system structuring the daily life of the salaried middle class – a privilege earned through the heavy labor, locally called *kazi*, of Congolese workers. This access to electrification, which had previously been reserved for European enclaves during the colonial period, served as

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one of the most powerful symbols of modernity and colonial civilizational 'progress.' Katambayi's 2021 installation *MM/Afrolampe* (P. 126-127) embodies the primordial triumvirate – home, mineral, and electric circuitry – at the foundation of his work. Entitled with the initials MM for *ma maison* (my house), this small-scale replica of Katambayi's childhood home is stripped down to its essential structure. On the framework of the house hangs the registration number of the artist's original home, marking its place in the camp's streets. Through the dense zigzagging of copper wires that form the walls, a gigantic Edison-style light bulb hangs from the ceiling. This single, disproportionate object – a sculptural *Afrolampe* – forms the heart of the installation. As an excellent electrical conductor, the copper structure of the artwork symbolically allows for the fluid circulation of current, making the bulb's filaments shine brightly.

The production and conduction of energy, and its role in sustaining the home – literally holding it together in *MM/Afrolampe* – constitutes the overarching exploration through which Katambayi examines Congolese society and its relationship to the wider world. Fluctuating like the waves of a seismograph, the availability of light and electricity serves as both a material and symbolic indicator of the historical and social vicissitudes of his country. Most emblematic in the postcolonial DRC is the national burden of power outages – the infamous *délestage* (load shedding) – that looms as an omnipresent obstacle in the daily lives of the artist's fellow citizens. The infrastructure's state of disrepair, combined with the rapacious demands of multinational companies operating in the country, means that even the most basic energy needs of the Congolese are constantly trampled. In spite of the immense hydroelectric resources of the DRC, its inhabitants are routinely plunged into darkness and

barred in their daily efforts, their dignity bargained to the highest bidder: power cuts are literally and metaphorically short-circuiting the lives of Congolese citizens. Katambayi's artistic vocabulary, centered on electricity, was forged in the crucible of the dismantling infrastructure and economic decline of his native town and its industries. Revealingly, a 2016 piece is entitled *Gécaruines* (P. 100), a pun on the company's name 'Gécamines' and the word 'ruins.' Subsequently, he deploys electricity the way that art historian Delinda Collier (1973) described it in colonial African times, as 'a metric of citizenship.'³ The light bulb – the single motif in the ongoing *Afrolampe* series initiated in 2016 – serves as such a standard meter: the primary unit and lens through which Katambayi represents the world. The social and civic downgrading associated with the deprivation of electric light is spectacularly on view in Katambayi's 2023 installation *Au-dedans des murs* (Inside the Walls) (FIG. 03). This large mural displays a myriad of dazzling light bulbs, interspersed with objects and archival materials from the 1931 International Exposition in Elizabethville – present-day Lubumbashi. Held in the name of progress in the colonial model city of what was then Belgian Congo, Katambayi criticizes how the exhibition failed to deliver its promises to a region that today still lacks basic access to energy.

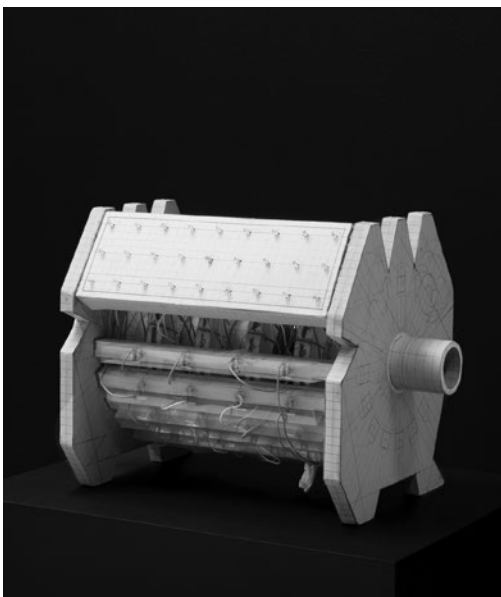
In the most primary sense, then, Katambayi's wired structures are 'power objects.' They carry electric energy that can animate or light up, putting right the hassle of life in the DRC, nationally canonized as *tracasseries*. In the historical sense of Congo, these works are re-materializations of *nkisi* – the famous Kongo power figures – because their spiritual purpose is to correct the wrongs of DRC society and the global connivances at their roots, by endowing a sculptural receptacle with



charged matter: here, the electric current. For centuries, *nkisis* or *nkisi nkondis* have fascinated for the striking visual qualities they present and for the ‘fetish’ aura they have acquired in the West. They are carved wooden sculptures that house spirit forces, which a ritual specialist (*nganga*) can activate by filling it with powerful substances (*bilongo*), ranging from soil and seeds to saliva. Hit by a nail or a blade by the *nganga* for every invocation, the *nkisi* have the power to heal, protect, pacify, or punish on behalf of an individual or a community. The sculpture *Voyant* (2015) (P. 101) bears a striking resemblance to a *nkisi*, whether intended by the artist or not. One of the rare anthropomorphic works by Katambayi, this larger-than-life robot is inspired by the Korea-imported automated machines regulating urban traffic in Congo. The transparent abdomen of the robot made of a plastic grid reveals the internal electric cable work, the same way *nkisis* are integrated with mirrors behind which their powerful substances are locked. Placed in the streets to help fluidify the chaotic traffic of Congo’s cities like Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, these robots’ very position at intersections connects them to a locus traditionally auspicious to the presence of spirits. Katambayi’s other non-statuesque pieces are ‘power structures’ more than ‘power figures,’ and he embraces the roles of sculptor, the *nkisi*’s solicitor and activator. Each of his pieces usually tackles an issue that plagues Congo and the world, in which shape is subordinate to that first idea. Building its circuitry, Katambayi then uses electricity to balance or repair that trouble.

The early works *Lester* (2011) (FIG. 04) and *Trotation* (1992–2011) (P. 104) are examples of how Katambayi’s works address issues from cosmic to earthly local proportions, using electricity as a medium. The word ‘lester’ is the antonym of *délester* and alludes to the load-shedding situations discussed above. *Lester* is an assemblage of cardboard cutouts, painted in green, yellow, and orange, which Katambayi shaped into a form that

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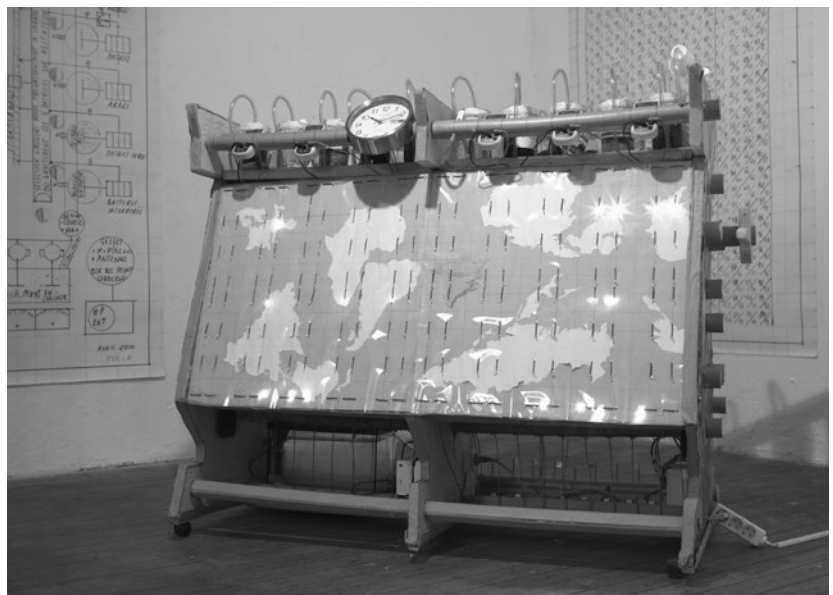
has been described as an electric switchboard. Above all, however, its compact shape resembles the ubiquitous generators that are indispensable to every home that can afford it in Congo, filling in for the deficiencies of the public system. With built-in wires and an LED lamp, *Lester* is literally ‘charged’ with the energy to solve one of the most pervasive problems in the DRC; it is its antidote. With *Trotation*, Katambayi injects that same energy into a project of even greater magnitude, seeking no less than to equilibrate the imbalance between northern and southern hemispheres. Covered with pieces torn from geographical world maps, a rotating table supports a globe made of three imbricated wheels gyrating in different directions. *Trotation* invents a third rotation movement for planet earth, one that adds itself to the revolution around the sun and the spinning of the planet on its

axis. Powered by electricity and flashing lights, this intervention reestablishes 'equality before the sun' for Africans, in that it allows for the reduction of the longer distance that the people living near the equator – among them, the Congolese – have to travel compared to those at the poles, in the process of a full rotation.

In these twenty-first-century reinterpretations of the *nkisi*, the artist inscribes his works in a much earlier tradition of African conceptualism, anchored in Central Africa's ritualistic sculpture and animism. The preeminence of the idea, or the object's mission, over its form is a basic tenet of classical African sculpture. In his meditation on the origins of conceptualism on the continent, Enwezor reminds:

It bears remarking that African objects were never ends in themselves, nor did they acquire any form of autonomy as sculpture through their objecthood. While in Western art, the cycle of art is completed in the aesthetic realm of display, in African traditions this finale is achieved through a desublimation strategy that perpetually displaces the object and places greater significance on non visual codes and performative actions, particularly through linguistic puns and aphoristic utterances. By repeatedly making contingent the status of the object as an autonomous signifier, the artwork functions within a fluid system of exchanges and relationships among object, artist, and audience.⁵

Katambayi's use and display of mathematical sequences like Fibonacci's; the poetic and often enigmatic prose with which he accompanies his works; the performative component that can be attributed to his artistic demonstrations (he was known for turning his quotidian bus rides in Lubumbashi into moments of performative engagements about

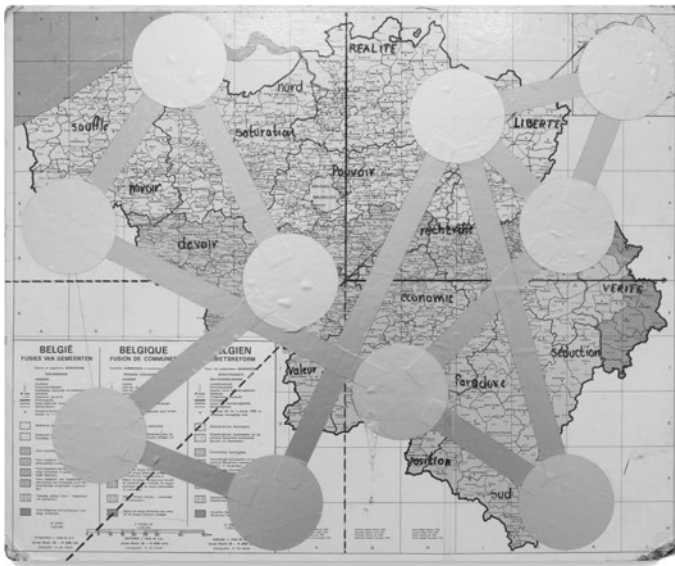


his work with fellow travelers); his riddled titles; the often didactic and scientific nature of his assemblages; his works' proximity 'to *technē* or *ars* rather than to art' – all make his practice bridge the local and global, past and contemporary strands of conceptual art, until the fragility of the material that he uses.⁶

The paper and cardboard from which Katambayi usually assembles his works is not a default medium. At odds with the sovereign notion of conservation in Western art, the material instability of 'cellulose', as he prefers to call it, is meaningful in its very transience. Often crediting his artistic vocation to drawing on office scrap papers brought back home by his mother, there is a rummaging gesture at the heart of Katambayi's practice that finds its origins in growing up with the mine's bureaucratic and industrial remnants at hand, from its declassified administrative papers to the mineral refuse of its garbage heaps.⁷ Conceptually, this lack of concern with permanence is rooted in the acceptance of the infinite cycle of transformation of things, cardboard itself being made of reused paper pulps and other materials, and recyclable ad lib. Ephemerality, or at least the possibility of ephemerality, is an idea firmly grounded in conceptual art's dematerialization, but contingency is also a common principle in African sculptures' traditions and particularly of *nkisi*, with the decay of its organic matters – wood for the sculpture, vegetal or corporeal substance for the *bilongo* – a mode of its power release. In Katambayi's piece *Écoson* (2010) (FIG. 05), an elaborate and intricately wired, algorithmically numbered cardboard piece of more than a meter high, the presence of jars containing organic matters finishes to inscribe the artist's approach in the tradition of the *nkisi*. Filled with fruit, water, and sweet potatoes, the jars act as 'ecoconductors,' in the words of Collier, making the piece 'alive' but also perishable.⁸ This is not to say that disintegration is the finality of Katambayi's pieces, but that the contemplation of their finitude is a way to consider their efficiency and, therefore, the end of the predicament that made them necessary in the first place. As contemporary *nkisi*, as a means to an end, as a solution brought to a problem, their hypothetical disappearance is in fact the promise of a wish granted.

Against Geological Determinism

In 2016, Katambayi produced a collage entitled *Gateaumium* (2016) (FIG. 06), showing a geographical map of Belgium, the former colonial metropole of Congo. The adopted coloring delimits the three linguistic regions of the country – French-, Dutch-, and German-speaking – but the names of the provinces have been changed to terms such as 'value,' 'seduction,' 'saturation,' 'economy,' and 'power.' They all belong to the semantic realm of the mineral lust that Belgium and the West in general have shown for Congo's resources for more than a century, and the title is a Dadaist-style pun about it. The 'magnificent cake' (*magnifique gâteau*)



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is the infamous exclamation used by the notorious King Leopold II about his appetite for acquiring what would become his private fiefdom between 1885 and 1908: the Congo Free State. Combined with the suffix *-ium*, reminiscent of minerals' names commonly having Latin endings, *Gateaumium* is an indictment of the uninterrupted 'libidinal economy of geology' that has cracked down in the region for more than a century.⁹ The network of silver balls plastered on the map refers to the similar-looking Atomium monument

in Brussels. A 'tribute' to the splitting of the atom that tragically made possible the first nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is from the Congolese mine of Shinkolobwe that the Manhattan Project's uranium was sourced. In a second, prismatic map entitled *Commerce Angulaire* (2016) (FIG. 7), Katambayi once again distorts language through a Surrealist slip-of-the-tongue title. Ringing like *commerce triangulaire* (triangular trade), it designates the shape formed by the slave-trade sea routes, traced between Africa, Europe, and the Americas from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. A multitude of small triangles cut from world maps like trigonal crystals are systematically arranged into a larger geometric form. Within it, a black line highlights another internal shape that looks like a laser-cut stone.

Subverting the most enduring tool of imperial conquest and colonial knowledge production – the map – Katambayi alludes to the continuity between the commerce of enslaved Black bodies and the minerals and rare earth materials that make the flesh of contemporary global capitalism; between the millions of dead Africans at the bottom of the ocean, and those suffering and perishing in the Congolese mines of cobalt, coltan, and lithium today. When he joined the collective project *On-Trade-Off* (OTO) (2018–24),¹⁰ Katambayi turned toward the renewable, so-called green energy rush of lithium, remapping what Kathryn Yusoff (1974) has called an 'insurgent geology.'¹¹ In the OTO project presentation, the social, ecological, economic, and political phenomena around lithium and coltan is described as showing

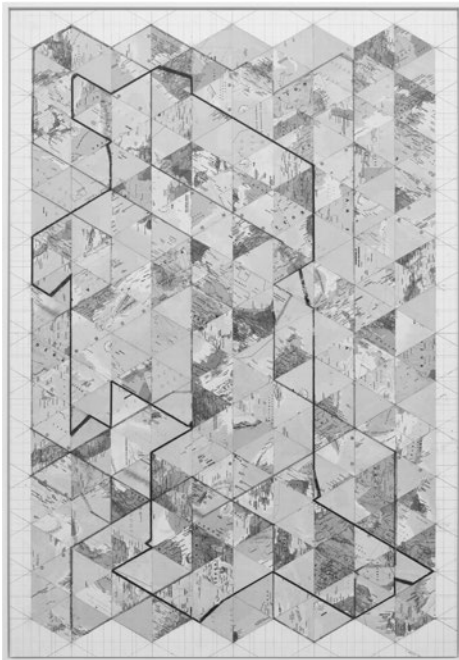
striking similarities with production chains as we have known them since the start of triangular trade in the 16th century: inhumane labor during the exploitation and extraction processes; a perpetuated economic imbalance

to maintain economic growth; uninformed end-consumers that are unaware of both the devastating production chain that led to their purchased wholesale goods, as much as their afterlife in the sense of a lacking recycling scheme.¹²

The shiny battery and body shell of electric cars share the same glossy surfaces as the *pacotilles* (tacky and shiny goods) exchanged for Black human lives during slavery.

In his cocreated *Charging Tesla Crash, a speculation* (2019) (P. 96-97) with Sammy Baloji (1978) and Daddy Tshikaya (1986), Katambayi built a handmade one-to-one model of a Tesla model in copper wire, using a well-known weaving technique inspired by miniature wire car toys made by children in the DRC. Pushing to its apex the conceptual notion of art as a scientific experiment, *Charging Tesla Crash* staged a spectacular performance held at the 2019 Lubumbashi Biennale. Created in collaboration with the artist Marjolijn Dijkman (1978), the experiment consisted of charging millions of volts into the copper car, using a handcrafted Tesla coil. Spectators could feel an extreme tension growing as the performance unfolded. The deafening sound of the increasing voltage and the vibrations felt throughout the body and the ground gave the moment the sensation of a dramatic rite. The injection of high-voltage electricity into the object created a lightening that did not have any result other than that of a symbolic, immobile crash, as if burned by the experiment, making this utmost symbol of techno-fascism nil. In this moment, the city of Lubumbashi and its mine, the 'natal moment of the Anthropocene,' also became the theater for its crash.¹³ In this country too often described as a stage for the end of the world, here the end also provoked a liberation.

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A 2017 work by Katambayi is entitled in Dutch, *In het begin was er het begin* (FIG. 12), in the enigmatic vein dear to the artist. Black letters emerging from a black background translate as 'in the beginning, there was a beginning.' This reminder that there is always a new start possible connects finitude to the potential for a future, a conviction shared by Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) in one of his most beautiful verses from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939):

I must begin.
Begin what?
The only thing in the world
that's worth beginning:
The End of the World, no less.¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, personal communication about this photograph, August 30, 2025.
- 2 Okwui Enwezor, 'Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism,' in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origins, 1950s–1980s*, ed. Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 108–19.
- 3 Delinda Collier, *Media Primitivism: Technological Art in Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
- 4 Collier, *Media Primitivism*, 155.
- 5 Enwezor, 'Where, What, Who, When,' 110.
- 6 Collier, *Media Primitivism*, 155
- 7 Simon Delobel, 'Jean Katambayi Mukendi and the Search for the Smallest Common Denominator,' in *Attempts to Read the World Differently: Three Exhibitions in Five Acts* (The Hague: Stroom Den Haag, 2016), 38.
- 8 Collier, *Media Primitivism*, 156.
- 9 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 7.
- 10 The artistic research project was initiated by the artists Marjolijn Dijkman and Maarten Vanden Eynde (1977) from Enough Room for Space, and included artists and scholars Alexis Destoop (1971), Pélagie Gbaguidi (1965), Femke Herregraven (1982), Katambayi, Musasa (1950), Alain Nsenga (1986), Georges Senga (1981), Pamela Tulizo (1990), Sammy Baloji, Daddy Tshikaya, Oulimata Gueye (1980), Lotte Arndt (1982), Dorine Mokha (1990), and Gulda El Magambo (1985).
- 11 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 22.
- 12 On-Trade-Off proposal document sent to the author, 2019, 3.
- 13 Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 6.
- 14 Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (London: Penguin, 1969), 60.

RATIO

Jean Katambayi Mukendi, Emma Enderby, and Anne-Claire Schmitz in conversation

EMMA ENDERBY (EE) You chose *RATIO* as the title of the exhibition we worked on together. Can you tell us what that term means to you?

JEAN KATAMBAYI MUKENDI (JKM) Ratio is a relationship between two elements. Today, many kinds of relationships are at play. We can speak of the North-South relationship, the economic relationship, the balance of power, but also, possibly, of support – the relationship of backing or care. I place all of these dynamics into the word *ratio*, which also reveals the letters A and I – artificial and intelligence.

ANNE-CLAIRE SCHMITZ (ACS) Contemporary society is governed and dominated by data, created and fueled by humans and now beginning to control how we will use – and even produce – new data in the future. Where do you position yourself within this vast field of data?

JKM It bothers me to see that the Global South still plays the role of *raw material*. This means that other powers use us to tip the scales in their favor and that in all of this, as an African, I am not expected to produce, only to receive. I'm supposed to be content with being the supplier of raw materials and the receiver of ideas and technologies. From my point of view, a *receptacle society* is a frozen one. I cannot control all the systems in command – the bank, the Church, or resource extraction – but I understand them, and that allows me to be active and to play a mediating role. I would even say that, as an artist, I choose to become a producer. My production leans toward fiction and moves between the future and the past, but it can absolutely contribute to the world's discourse on intelligence.

acs What's interesting in your work is that it materializes a sense of memory, logic, perception, and execution that exists simultaneously in subjectivity and objectivity. This unique coexistence seems to be the very essence of your practice.

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JKM That's absolutely right.

acs I'd like to go further with that idea, because your practice truly finds its strength in a logic of association and resonance: utopian, philosophical, pragmatic, mathematical...

JKM Pragmatism and utopianism always work together. It's a wheel of resonances. And that's what artistic practice is.



acs The works presented in the exhibition are hybrid sculptures inspired by the fields of aviation, agriculture and the military, as well as large-scale paintings and a series of A1-format drawings. It's clear that these works address very current topics.

JKM They are machines of today, tied to a constant preaching of fear around war, agriculture, cryptocurrency, nuclear energy ... Between the artificial

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and the natural, what do we choose? Between ecology and destruction, what do we choose? I try to keep my distance from standardized narratives and give myself the duty to understand, examine, and question through artistic *détournement*. I propose a duality: the ratio.

EE Your 'art machines' have a speculative dimension. How do you see them entering into dialogue with current technological innovations like AI, robotics, or green energy?

JKM My machines say that everything is still to be done and that there is always a breach. They shake and disturb the supremacy that irritates the world. They open a field of possibilities.

My idea as an artist is to *hack* machines – to insert myself into the ratio.

I place myself in the position of the manufacturer.

In an analog, modest, utopian way, with my own thought and natural intelligence, I find my place in the world's great procession.

EE Could you expand further on the idea of hacking as an artistic strategy?

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JKM When I was a child and my parents brought home a new device – a radio, for instance – I already enjoyed taking it apart and turning it into something new. I was never attracted to simply using a device. What drives me is going beyond the idea contained in an existing object.

That's why drawing is so interesting to me. It's a pure material that allows me to start from almost nothing and make a new idea emerge.

acs Your machines are, by nature, hybrid. They don't contain just one idea, but several simultaneously. Can you speak to this concept of multiple identities?

JKM By introducing the idea of *grafting* and of *cyborging*, I want to ask whether we can switch the roles of things.

A battle tank, once the war is over – couldn't it become an agricultural machine? And all those planes flying overhead – couldn't they charge batteries as they fly and deliver something to the villagers below? It's about multiplying functions.

Everything is too *mono*, and that's our problem with ecology.

When I make sculptures, I invite movement, light, sound ... I try to combine multiple aspects in order to conceptualize an idea and give the illusion of functionality. One of the definitions of contemporary art is recycling. So I'm always there, planning, thinking, recycling, redistributing, reorienting things.

EE Do you think your practice imagines scenarios for the future, or is it mostly a critique of present failures?

JKM It's both. I'm fascinated by humanity and by what's happening around me. But while being fascinated, I remain critical of procedures, systems, and institutions. I'm interested in the future of both the possible and the impossible. For me, the added value is *critique* – done with respect for others.

acs Over time, you have developed a specific and precise artistic language and gesture, using your preferred materials: recycled materials and basic hardware-store supplies (metal cables, adhesive tapes, cardboard tubes, paper, glues ...). It would be interesting to hear how you name the expertise you've developed.

JKM In the past, my work has been described as generative and conceptual.

In reality, I am often searching for the barrier – or let's say the limit – that stands between a principle and myself. For a piece to retain all its strength, all its energy, there are spatiotemporal criteria, and there is the energetic criterion. I understand a piece's strength in relation to time, space, and the energy I spend researching it. This desire to go further – to go *beyond* that barrier – that is what I use.

That's the skill I have.

acs Your training as an electrician, your passion for technology, mechanics, and geometry have clearly influenced your artistic practice. But it also seems to me that your relationship to language – and the fact that you live in a permanent state of translation – is just as foundational and shapes your art. Do you agree?

JKM That's true. I was raised with my mother's language, Tshiluba from central Congo; with the Swahili of Lubumbashi, which is a *hacked* Swahili as it comes from Tanzania and the Arab world; with a bit of Lingala heard here and there; and with French, reserved for



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education. My wife, meanwhile, comes from a village where yet another language is spoken.

I am constantly forced to translate and reflect on words. As a result, communication is difficult; it's not easy to know what truly runs in your DNA.

Over time I've become very attentive to semantics, and it's true that it plays a big role in my work. It's another skill. I can solve riddles very quickly, and it's become a joy for me to navigate linguistic galaxies. I consider it a very powerful tool.

ACS I sense that you are critical of oral tradition and the way it can sometimes be romanticized. In fact, it's interesting to note that your work is not oral at all. On the contrary, it leans toward transcription and writing.

JKM Yes, it's a kind of mockery. In Congo, there is little to no investment in written tradition. I have often thought it would be interesting to open an archiving company here.

That's why I spend so much time materializing a spirit of organization, transcription, archiving...

My work is driven by that. Parallel to my practice, I create preparatory notebooks that are the physical archive of time and of the path leading to a project. I have more than twenty of them. They contain all kinds of notes and administrative or private documents that make it possible to retrace periods of life: ratio calculations, visa applications, plane tickets, receipts ...

EE Do the cities where you exhibit – in this case Berlin and Antwerp – influence your production? Beyond the practical and logistical necessity of producing on-site, do these places also affect the way you think and construct your works?

JKM The location has a deeply fundamental influence on my production. When I encounter a place, I also think about its reality: its people, its history, and the possible added value of the work.

EE Returning to Lubumbashi, I'm curious how your work is perceived locally, at home.

JKM To most observers, it is seen as extrastratospheric, quite far from the artistic practices commonly found here.

In that sense, it can play the mediating role I mentioned before: the one that pulls toward another sphere and presents other logics, closer to recycling.

EE To what extent have you been influenced by Congolese artists such as Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948–2015) or Rigobert Nimi (1965), with whom you share strong artistic and conceptual affinities?

JKM I wouldn't say I was influenced by them. I only met Kingelez and Nimi 'on the road.' In Lubumbashi, there is a certain Désiré Lumuna (1967) who is very expressive. He trained at the School of Fine Arts in Lubumbashi and speaks about astrophysics. He builds mechanisms that physically work, with cardboard. These are points of encounter, similarities, but I only met these two artists along the way, and rather late. That said, an important family of thought was created thanks to, and around, Atelier Picha and the Lubumbashi Biennale. It created emulation and a collaborative environment, helping professionalize artists and promote them internationally within ecosystems that support their practices.

ACS Are there other artistic influences you'd like to mention?

JKM I greatly appreciate the work of the artist Panamarenko (1940–2019). I visited his studio and saw, as with all the greats, the commitment, the joy of dedicating one's life to this, far from money, far from everything.

ACS The commitment of an artist's life.

JKM Yes – that's where I am.

.....
Transcription of a conversation that took place on Thursday, September 4, 2025, between the artist Jean Katambayi Mukendi and exhibition curators Emma Enderby and Anne-Claire Schmitz.
.....

I HOPE YOU'RE DOING WELL

Simon Delobel

For Jean Katambayi Mukendi, with gratitude and admiration

Antwerp, May 13, 2025

Dear Jean,

I was asked – ‘given my long-standing commitment to you and your oeuvre’ – to write a piece for a publication on your work. Four thousand words, preferably in English ...

I decided to accept.

In memory of the hours spent talking in the car between 2016 and 2020, when our conversations gently unfolded your universe, at a time when the trampoline gallery I directed in Antwerp still had a voice in the dissemination of your work.

But, above all, because this publication will live freely online. That openness touches me deeply, carrying me back to those moments when, long before you became one of the rising stars of the contemporary art circuit (and now the subject of academic study!), you conversed with your fellow citizens on the buses and trains of Lubumbashi. Philosopher, pedagogue, educator – you played a stimulating role, without filter or mediation, in an artistic gesture deeply rooted in reality, which reminded me of Emmanuel Botalatala (1951) in Kinshasa. Twenty years your senior yet, like you, self-taught, Botalatala – known as the ‘Minister of Garbage’ (*Ministre des poubelles*) because of the origins of some of the materials used in his assemblages – creates works meant to instigate a dialogue with his contemporaries about his view of current events and about Congo’s place in a globalized world.

I don’t know if I will meet the expectations of the editors, who ask for a ‘historico-artistic and theoretical analysis of your major works.’ That is not what I will offer them. Instead, they will find a series of letters you will never receive (for they are never to be sent), in which I will speak of you as one speaks to a friend, guided less by the wish to write finely than by the need to speak truthfully.

These letters I will write in French, our shared tongue – the one you wield with rare mischief, weaving it through your work like a poetic thread.

I know no one else who can summon so many neologisms, so many startling images and fertile turns of language.

See you soon (I hope you are well).

Simon

PS I also refuse to write an academic text: I would not be able to include the anecdotes that pass through me and that, confronted with the flood of texts generated by artificial intelligence, remain for me the tangible proof of a humanity still at work.

Ghent, May 28, 2025

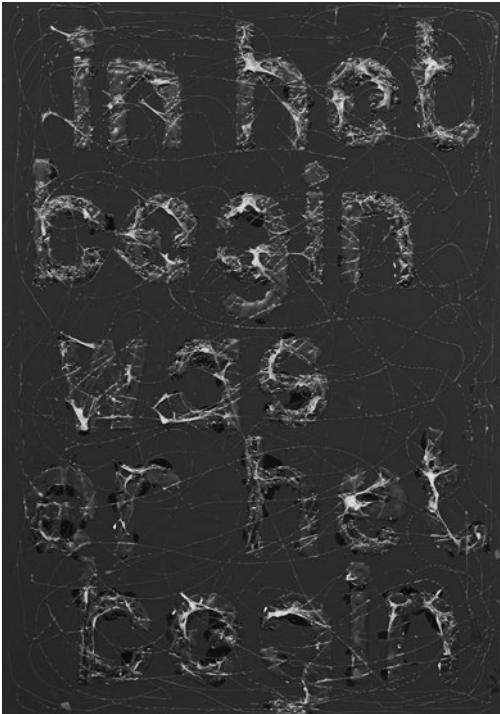
Dear Jean,

'At the beginning was the beginning.'

Do you recall that tautological truth you once pronounced, later rendered into Dutch (*In het begin was er het begin*) (FIG. 12), before inscribing it in white glue upon a vast sheet of black paper during your residency at Stroom in The Hague in 2016?

I return to it often. That phrase, at once unsettling and foundational, reveals so much about your relationship with language, with circularity, and with origin as the engine of thought.

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In my view, any serious monograph on you should give text a central role – not merely as commentary, but as the very raw material of your work.

Should a future publication on your practice take shape with fewer time constraints and stretch beyond the 152 pages (that I just noticed on the KU Leuven website) allotted to this one, I hope it might embrace fragments of those invisible works that are your residency reports.

These documents (often over a hundred pages of texts and photographs) are indispensable for tracing the depth of your reasoning, the evolution of your thought, and the winding paths that bring your pieces into material form. Without them, a vital dimension of your work is always absent: the mental labor, the thought in progress, the unfolding of time.

In such a publication, it would also be fitting – to remain faithful to the spirit and economy of your practice – to include images of the works produced at the close of your residencies, crafted from the very remnants of your activities. ‘Trash works,’ in the noblest sense. Works that often never had the chance to be shown alongside the more polished pieces, and which, all too frequently, no longer exist at all.

I am thinking, for instance, of that remarkable model you created at WIELS, built from all the waste gathered during your residency: a ‘trash’ rendition of the cities imagined by your compatriot Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948–2015). Bram Borloo (1976) attempted to preserve it in his studio in Hoboken, but for lack of space, it survived there for only two years.

‘Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything transforms.’ To speak of these lost works is to grant them a continued existence. It is also to highlight the enduring indifference, in parts of the Western art world, toward a truly poor art – one for which cellulose (as you delight in calling paper) still holds less value than bronze.

Let me also add that I still cannot fathom how *Yllux* (2012) (P. 81) and *Simultium* (2009) (P. 79), two of your most seminal works, exhibited at numerous biennials, galleries, and museums, have not yet been acquired by certain museum institutions. Does the fragility of these assemblages of cardboard, colored papers, and electrical components put off curators and conservators?

Yours,

(I continue to hope that you are well.)

Simon

Davanod, July 7, 2025

Dear Jean,

One of the prevailing currents in the art world today is biography (or, worse, hagiography): explaining works through the life story of their creator, thereby adding fuel to the mill of identity-driven narratives.

It is hardly new, if one recalls Giorgio Vasari’s (1511–1574) *Lives of the Artists* (1550). Do you know the story of Giotto di Bondone (ca. 1267–1335), the young Italian shepherd, whom a papal envoy, tasked with recruiting the finest artists to adorn St. Peter’s Basilica, asked to demonstrate his skill? Giotto, without a word, took a brush dipped in red paint and, drew an absolutely perfect circle.

I have seen you draw perfect circles as well, using improvised compasses fashioned from two sticks, a screw, tape, a nail, and a pen ... And when I read certain accounts of your life, I cannot help but imagine you as a contemporary Giotto, endowed with natural genius and impeccable technical intuition, capable of persuading without a hint of embellishment.

The internet is full of interviews and articles (such as the one on the WIELS website) that trace your childhood fascination with the workings of contemporary societies. They note that your father, an electrician, provided your first technical instincts and know-how, while your mother, employed by Gécamines, supplied the paper and cardboard for your earliest creations. Since these details have been widely discussed elsewhere, I will not linger here on the influence of Gécamines' buildings, machines, and past activities on your work: the *Cristallite* collage (2016), the *Gécaruines* model (2016) (P. 100), or *The Concentrator* machine (2022) (P. 74-75).

Another prominent trend in contemporary approaches to art is the tendency to subject it to moral judgment, often under the sway of humanist ideals such as universal equality and social justice. I have just finished reading Rosanna McLaughlin's pamphlet *Against Morality* (2025), in which she develops a meditation on 'liberal realism.' She champions the autonomy of art in the face of ethical demands, while remaining open to a multiplicity of forms, voices, and perspectives – including those that might be deemed morally contentious.

In December 2019, just before the COVID-19 epidemic, we christened the monograph published by the gallery +23243493810761811553964 (a playful intertwining of our two phone numbers) *BANORANCIT*, on the occasion of your solo exhibition at the Neue Galerie im Höhmannhaus in Augsburg. Composed of the prefixes of certain fruits, *BANORANCIT* was the pseudonym you had chosen when entering the art scene: a projection of a fruit-processing enterprise, but also a tribute to the maternal figure who praised the virtues of fruit to children.

Do you remember our conversation in Augsburg about the Drei Mohren Hotel (Hotel of the Three Moors), a centuries-old institution (opened in 1495!) whose facade bears three sculptures of 'moors'? The organizers of your exhibition asked for your thoughts on the debate over their removal, framed as a measure against racist prejudice. I will never forget your response. While acknowledging that Europe cannot escape its responsibility for the tragedies of colonial history, you also felt it was fair to recognize certain benefits (scientific and technological) that Europe may have brought to Africa. A few months later, in 2020, the Drei Mohren was renamed Hotel Maximilian's ...

I like to see your work as proof of your independence of mind, of your desire to push the viewer to think for themselves, to question their certainties in order to (let's be utopian!) resolve existing conflicts and build bridges between generations, without ever lapsing into moralizing.

I am delighted to know you are well.

Simon

Davanod, July 10, 2025

Dear Jean,

I've just finished another book by an author I greatly admire, Michel Thévoz (1936). A connoisseur of 'art brut' and 'outsider art', he returns to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1908–2009) famed distinction, set down in *The Savage Mind* (1962), between the bricoleur and the engineer.

Where the bricoleur leans on concrete thought, working with materials and tools already at hand (often heterogeneous), adapting, improvising, and combining according to circumstances and associative logic, the engineer relies on abstract thought: he conceives ex nihilo, plans according to scientific or technical rules and standards, following a deductive and linear logic.

I wonder which of these two categories you would like to see yourself in. Knowing you, I can imagine you would speak instead of a pendulum's swing between them (just as, with *Trotation* (P. 104) – now in the MHKA collection – you added a third movement to the two existing motions of the earth: its turning upon itself and its orbit around the sun).

Since I must speak of your works, two drawings come to mind that, for me, hold a special place in your graphic practice and reflect your capacity as a 'solutioner' (a term the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* presents as a contested neologism, yet one I prefer to 'solver' or 'resolver').

The first is *Cristallampe* (2016) (P. 87), acquired by Duro Olowu. A screw-in bulb with a multifaceted glass envelope, optimizing the refraction of light emitted by the filament, *Cristallampe* provides a technological response to the recurring problems of imported bulbs in Congo – issues you cataloged in the very first series of *Afrolampes* (bayonet, screw-in, incandescent, halogen, compact fluorescent, LED, etc.).

The second, presented in 2022 at Z33 in Hasselt, is *M13* (2019) (P. 107). Here you depict a bolt with a thirteen-sided head, born of your imagination after a visit to the Manono-Kitolo mine in Tanganyika Province – a site from which thousands of tons of cassiterite and tin were extracted

between 1915 and the 1980s, and which today stirs the appetite of international companies for its vast reserves of lithium. In an interview, you described *M13* as an imaginary bolt, belonging to no standardized system (least of all the 'M' system!), yet standing as a symbol of durability.

In each of these two drawings, an extravagant – yet more than welcome – dose of optimism!

With affection, and hoping you are well,

Simon

Antwerp, July 21, 2025

Dear Jean,

It is the Belgian National Day. A day of rest, which I seize to write to you and to reflect on the conditions under which your works are born – an aspect, in my eyes, far too often overlooked by contemporary criticism when assessing visual art.

Each time you arrived for a residency in Europe, I watched you work day and night on the creation of new pieces. Every spare minute, when not given over to meetings, was devoted to producing works meant to stay in Europe – free from the burdens of transport and customs complications from Congo.

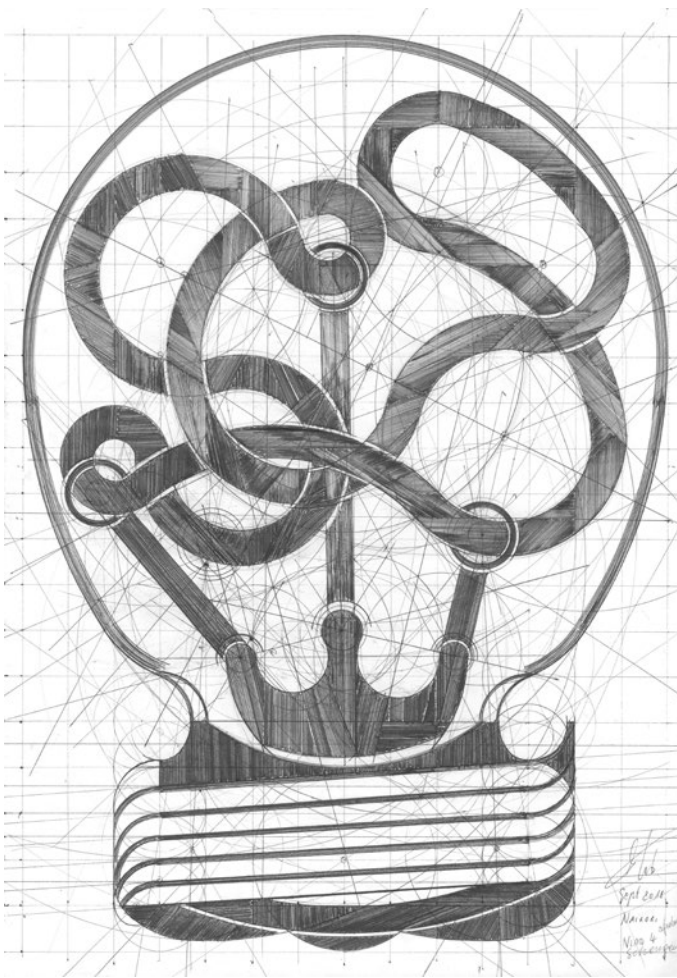
The victims of this intensity? Your family, your children, of course. The family you leave behind for weeks or even months, yet never forget (I think of the gifts, carefully chosen at Pêle-Mêle, to bring back home).

And your sleep... intoxicated by work, I saw you more than once stagger at the end of a residency. Yet always with a smile, proud of all you had accomplished. You are a work monster, a beast of burden driving itself onward.

I no longer recall who defined 'cool' as that which appears simple yet conceals an invisible labor. That is precisely it. Your works are cool. They seem natural, their existence self-evident. And yet behind them: such energy poured in, such focus, such rigor!

I hope you too are finding some rest and that you are well.

Simon



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ADDENDUM

Hardly had I finished this letter when a message arrived from Tim Wouters, telling me that the series of ten *Visafrolampes* (FIG. 13) – drawn in Nairobi in 2018 while you awaited a visa to Europe (hence their name) – has just been acquired by Frac MÉCA in Bordeaux.

Wonderful news! I had always hoped that this series, on A3 sheets, might remain whole – unlike others: those shown during your solo exhibitions *On ne sait pas où on va* (2016) (PP. 84-87), and *intemporal* (2017) (PP. 88-91) in trampoline, the one shown at *Établissement d'en face* (2019) (PP. 92-95), or the forty-piece series, aptly titled *Quarantaine* (2020) (PP. 108-111), sent to New York during the pandemic for your first solo exhibition at Ramiken.

I imagine this sale will bring you some financial relief, and I cannot help but recall Bram Borloo's advice during *On ne sait pas où on va*: he urged you to produce two-dimensional works, betting that collectors would be more inclined to invest in such formats than in assemblages. As for me, I had warned you of the risk that your drawings might gradually vanish,

given the dubious ink quality of the felt-tip pens, in the short or medium term. You laughed, likening the possible futility of the collector's fate – deprived of his image – to the very real, almost daily struggle of your millions of fellow citizens, forced to dispel darkness with candles when power cuts rendered their bulbs useless.

The *Afrolampes* have since become realms of endless visual play, where your imagination runs free. They have also become the most stable source of income for you and your family – a fact that brings me joy.

Ah! Can you confirm what you once told me during the setup of the trampoline exhibition? That the *Afrolampes* drawn in the Northern Hemisphere have the socket at the top, while those drawn in the Southern Hemisphere have it at the bottom?

Ghent, July 27, 2025

Dear Jean,

Today, the Israeli army announced a 'tactical pause' in its operations in Gaza, daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., to 'facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.' A cynical truce in a war that drags on without end.

And here comes to mind *marsphairlines* (2016) (PP. 102-103), one of your most instinctive responses to the shocks of current events, in this case the attacks of March 22, 2016, in Brussels. I don't know whether it is appropriate to associate this sculpture with those so-called major works that I was asked to comment on, but I want to set aside a special place for it in this epistolary monologue.

Made from a gray MDF board found in the street near WIELS, where you were then in residence, the sculpture evokes the tail of an airplane. You traced a mathematical formula on it with a marker, accompanied by the logo of a fictional airline: Marsphairlines. A transporter at once terrestrial and interplanetary, hovering between utopia and reality.

In the days following the attacks, when your return home was still uncertain, you shared with me your astonishment at the relatively few incidents of this kind on European soil, given the vast chasm between privileged populations and those condemned to extreme precarity. These acts of violence struck you not as aberrations, but as symptoms: tragic and brutal reminders, inflicted by the most deprived to assert that they still existed.

A few months earlier, in an interview for *Art in Africa*, you were already reflecting on these matters with your characteristic wisdom: 'All conflicts, from local skirmishes to widespread wars, have a reason for being and

show that we need the other to prove that love still exists. The day love disappears forever, the silence of death will reign.'

Marsphairlines embodies this: the fruit of the brutal and absurd coexistence of a world where the ultrarich indulge their fantasies of escape to Mars, while the ultrapoor endure the slow, daily collapse of the Earth. A modest work in form, but powerful in symbolic charge: a vessel improvised from waste, launched on an uncertain trajectory, between anger, irony, and lucidity.

One should also mention *Onderhandeling* (Negotiation) (2019) (P. 105), your machine acquired by Jacques Verhaegen, a kinetic enactment of the all-too-often pitiful spectacle of nation-states within institutions like the UN. With its large steering wheel activating motors that, in utter chaos within a plexiglass cube, send polystyrene balls covered with the flags of all nations flying about, it verges on hilarity – on the absurd. And I cannot help but think of the choreography, as graceful as it is grotesque, of Adenoid Hynkel in Chaplin's (1889–1977) *The Great Dictator* (1940), performing a narcissistic waltz with the world, a fragile balloon turned plaything of his delusions of omnipotence.

Jean, however mad our world may be, I hope you are well.

Simon

Davanod, August 2, 2025

Dear Jean,

I've just arrived in the Jura, following the winding backroads to avoid the tolls. Time is money ... and when money is scarce, the leisure of a vacation becomes a wealth doubled.

Along the way, reflecting on my exaggerated dependence on Google Maps, I recalled the stress we felt at the thought of arriving on time at the Facebook offices in Brussels to complete the mural commissioned to adorn their stairwell.

I also imagined you, alongside Jonas Dehnen (1992), cutting thousands of diamonds in exponentially varying sizes from dozens of road maps and outdated city plans, scavenged from Pêle-Mêle Lemonnier or the Oxfam store, to paste them across the two floors of the Facebook building near the Royal Palace – thus giving birth to *Networks* (2019) (PP. 128-129).

By skirting taxes, controlling the flow of information, and shaping social behaviors on a global scale, tech giants act as private superpowers, beyond any real counterweight. True black holes absorbing colossal

energy: that is how I read the two large black-and-white circles at the center of each floor of your composition.

I have always thought of *Networks* as a meta version of your collage *Commerce angulaire* (2016) (FIG. 07), now in the MuZEE collection. Back then, you cut identical diamonds from a world map and recomposed a map where the most distant points (Romania and Bolivia, for example) touched each other in improbable proximity. In doing so, you made visible the connections made possible by new communication technologies.

History repeats itself, we know, yet always in new forms and often on unforeseen scales. From the maritime triangular trade linking Europe, Africa, and America have succeeded new exchanges, bearing even more insidious forms of exploitation and colonialism, where the suffering of the individual reaches unprecedented heights.

Again and always, I hope you are well.

Simon

PS I still have that large canvas map of Belgium's mineral resources from the 1930s, which I bought for you from an antique dealer in Antwerp. Let me know if you'd like to make something of it...

Ghent, August 17, 2025

Hello Jean,

It's Saturday, laundry day. I've just emptied the small coins from my pockets into a jar, which I regularly tip into a bucket in the cellar where all the one-, two-, and five-cent coins accumulate – the very coins you had gone to fetch at the National Bank of Belgium for your sculpture *Tire-lire* (2019) (P. 98). Its plexiglass structure unfortunately broke under the excessive weight of these thousands of coins (forty kilograms!).

What a bitter paradox: these metal objects, covered with a thin layer of copper from the mines of your homeland! Here, no one wants them. No one uses them. In your country, there are only banknotes ...

I think of your large double-sided sculpture *Congo Coin* (2020) (P. 99), which the diplomatic pouch enabled to be repatriated at no cost to Sammy Baloji's (1978) studio, right after the Lubumbashi Biennale where you first presented it – and which now belongs to the National Bank of Belgium (a superb twist of fate). Evoking the cupronickel and the three layers of nickel and brass found in two-euro coins, this sculpture – made of cardboard, gold and silver paper, nails, and copper wires – depicts on its obverse a mermaid accompanied by the text 'congo coin visa free.'

One might regret that it was damaged during its disassembly and now bears a nasty gash along the edge. Yet doesn't this scar add to the work's charm, evoking the clipping of past centuries, when the edges of precious metal coins (gold or silver) were scraped or filed to resell the material or mint counterfeit money?

Money may not bring happiness, but it contributes to it: I hope your bank account is doing well.

Simon

Ghent, August 21, 2025

Dear Jean,

I am sorry to hear that Souleymane Bachir Diagne (1955) will not be able to contribute to the monograph with a text on the connection between your practice and mathematics. A reflection on your relationship with numbers would be a valuable addition to a publication on your work.

These numbers – I've watched you draw them from the fabric of everyday life (dates, street numbers, postal codes, marker references...) to combine, to manipulate, to coax them into revealing what you wished them to say. This often unfolded in performances that, sadly, were all too seldom documented (such as the performances opening your exhibitions *On ne sait pas où on va*, trampoline, Antwerp, 2016; *Attempts to Read the World (Differently)*, Stroom, The Hague, 2017; and *Onderhandeling, Établissement d'en Face*, Brussels, 2019). By giving numbers a voice, you became the one capable of distilling meaning – even truth – from what at first appeared to be nothing more than a chaos of data. There was something magical in this, almost virtuoso: a quality echoed in the epiphany of the *Afrolampes*, within the seemingly tangled web of underlying lines... Or in the work of the statistician who, through relentless accumulation and analysis, ultimately unveils the true nature of flows.

And then there is the matter of algorithms, of those invisible formulas that underpin entire systems and, at times, haunt your thoughts.

So tell me: have you ever counted the number of vowels and consonants in the sentence *J'espère que tu vas bien*? And what truths were you able to draw from it?

Simon

Dear Jean,

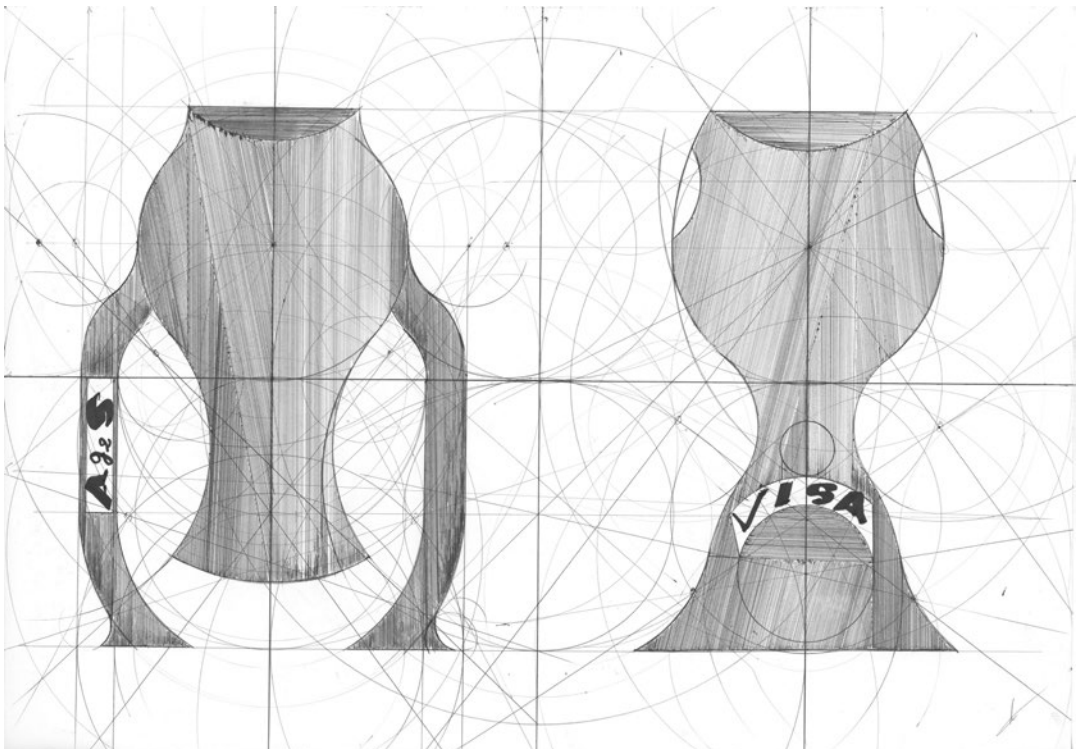
The deadline for submitting my text is drawing near, and I suspect I've already overstepped the word limit (*pas op!*). If I've set aside certain works or aspects of your practice, it is in the hope of illuminating others – less apparent, less expected.

The creation of your works so often calls for the solitude of the studio. Yet, when I think of you, I see you first at the center of a dense, inextricable network. Closest to you is family; around them, a circle friends; farther still, those you call 'passengers,' like me ...

In 2019, I received a crumpled package, entirely sealed with brown plastic tape. Inside lay a forty-page A3 sketchbook, filled with ballpoint drawings of paired containers. (FIG. 14) We later produced it as a facsimile edition. On the back cover were handwritten annotations: molecular formulas, words (VISA, IMF, education, art, Valuta, cobalt, KITENDI, Oui We Will, jamais, Tout Droit ...), and, alongside them, a string of enigmatic initials. It took me some time to realize they belonged to the people who inhabit your world. They will recognize themselves.

It brings to mind a photograph from the report of your residency at Stroom. A sheet appears, brimming with marker inscriptions: a veritable

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maelstrom of first names, of all those who, at one time or another, reached out to you – and whom you, in turn, acknowledge with gratitude.

Tell me, Jean. What place does this drawing hold in your multifaceted practice? Document? Full-fledged work of art?

I hope to see you soon, to hear your answer, and, above all, to be sure that you're doing well.

Simon

REINVENTING THE SUN ENERGY, JUNCTION, LIMIT IN THE WORK OF JEAN KATAMBAYI MUKENDI

Nadia Yala Kisukidi

'Make room for contemplative hope.'¹

Among the dense texts accompanying Jean Katambayi Mukendi's artworks and installations, one word returns, a word rather neglected in our time: 'contemplation.' Where one might expect commitment and action (shouldn't concrete hope be above all what sets us in motion?), what instead organizes Katambayi's creative process is attentiveness, a sensitive or intellectual focus directed toward an object. In the history of ancient Greek thought, the term, central in Plato's philosophy, derives from the Greek *theoria*, which does not describe the sensory gaze turned toward physical realities, but rather the orientation of the mind's gaze toward eternal and perfect forms. Whether spiritual or sensory, the condition of all contemplation is light: whether it be the real sun illuminating nature or the radiance of the Good, the perfect form illuminating all other intelligible realities, as Plato writes in *Republic VI*. There is no contemplation without light – the artist Katambayi could well make this claim his own. What sounds like a truism is not one, for the nature of 'light' in this work is anything but obvious: a glow does not always illuminate; one must also consider what becomes of contemplation once light sources are black. Katambayi opens a perceptual space that, in fact, charts a path of hope: darkness does not restrict the spectrum of the visible, as is often believed; it has multiple meanings, physical, metaphysical, and political, inscribed within an energy economy that points equally toward 'crisis' (degradation, shortage) and 'dazzlement' (beauty, excess), to borrow two terms used by Katambayi to describe the glow emitted by his *Afrolampes*.

The different dimensions of Katambayi's oeuvre (machinic sculptures, drawn black light bulbs, manifesto texts, series of numbers, and performed mental calculations) unfold within an energy economy that organizes the ways energy (mechanical, chemical, thermal, electric, nuclear, or luminous) is produced, consumed, distributed, exchanged, spent, or preserved, in order to contemplate the universe not from the detached, celestial viewpoint of Sirius, but from the terrestrial, localized perspective of Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This text is devoted to the organization of that economy and to how Katambayi's works navigate it, obstruct it, or expand it.

Noise and Silence of Machines

At the *Kinkwele* exhibition at Hangar Picha in Lubumbashi in 2016, Katambayi presented a series of machine-sculptures made from salvaged materials: cardboard, wire, electrical components, plastic. There is the total machine, a kind of model of the factory (collage of recovered materials on wood) – *Gécamines* (2015). And there are machines detached from the system in which they are embedded: *Simultium* (2010, recycled in 2016) (P. 79), *Combineur* (2012), and *L'analyseur moteur générateur, Julia* (2009, recycled in 2016).

A machine is a device that uses a source of energy (electricity, human or animal power) to perform work. But Katambayi's machines are above all machines of connection, like the *combineur* (combinator machine), which enables various combinations of electrical circuits. To link, to switch energies, to transport them. An *analyseur moteur générateur* (motor generator analyzer) is an instrument that assesses the proper functioning of electric motors and generators.

These machines do have a function: not to produce immediately usable material objects, but to display the conditions under which energy properly circulates – or the fact of its presence. Energy in itself is never 'sick'; however, it may become scarce, and the ability to produce it, use it, or ensure its proper circulation is not always guaranteed. Katambayi's machines are made of cardboard; they expose mute components and make no sound. One must imagine the *Gécamines* factory model as silent. *Gécamines*, the Société Générale des Carrières et des Mines, founded in 1972, successor to the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, established by the Belgians in the early twentieth century in colonized Congo, was created to exploit the mineral reserves of the Haut-Katanga region.

The silence of Katambayi's machines and factory model could instantly be read politically. It could, in a rather conventional manner, testify to the 'North-South divide,' as the artist himself points out in a 2017 text, distinguishing two types of energy economies – one of abundance, the other of scarcity:

In Europe, water, electricity, and gas flow almost without interruption into most houses, including in rural areas. Europe, one might say, is small in surface area. But the maintenance of infrastructure on land, at sea, in the air, underground and even in space far surpasses in scope and power the African apparatus.²

The silence of the machines would thus be that of shortage, or of constant breakdown, the sign of a geopolitics of malfunction. The 'African' energy system dysfunctions, while the circuits traversing the North reliably deliver current and illuminate European evenings. Katambayi's *Gécamines* model-sculpture of 2015 transforms in another exhibition setting, becoming *Gécaruines* in 2016 (P. 100).

Yet, while Katambayi's work may indeed invite such political interpretations, these are not central, or, rather, they must not be repeated too literally. The unfortunate metaphor of the 'dark continent,' coined by the explorer Henry Morton Stanley (1841–1904), whose fame is tied to King Leopold II's (1835–1909) colonial ambitions and the creation of the Congo Free State, has no place here: Africa is not plunged into darkness. What is being shown is neither night nor the savagery of impossible light. For a machine that does not function, it is first of all an entire acoustic system at a standstill, no longer shattering our eardrums, and thus able to become an object for a contemplative gaze. What must be seen are the arrangements of wires, mechanisms, gears, measurements, calculations set into motion by the intensity of the energy that drives them, which they, in turn, transform. Each sculpture traces an industrial and technical imprint of nature's functioning. Breakdown or stoppage displays the regularity of the laws governing the world of artifacts, living and inert alike. What is replayed is a classic mimesis, one might say, in a ternary mode: art imitates technology, which imitates nature. But Katambayi's creative model, though it invokes contemplation, does not stem from *imitation*. It whistles, it blows, it squeaks – when it is not interrupted. His model is intensive, whether qualitative or quantitative, bearing witness to the power, weakness, or force of energies at work in art, technology, life, nature.

These are immense energy-spending machines, all connected to one another, that one discovers as soon as one accepts to contemplate the universe from the perspective of Lubumbashi, with its extractive enterprises and its energy transformers, intentionally brought to a halt by the artist, not by a failing state. The interruption of the technical network, represented by the immobility of Katambayi's sculptures, allows one to imagine games of intensification, dissipation, and energetic imbalance, proposing a new metaphysical interpretation of the second law of thermodynamics, the principle of entropy – thermodynamics being 'that branch of physics which deals with exchanges between various forms of energy, with states and properties of matter, with phase transformations, and with transport phenomena.'³ The philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) had already noted in 1907 that this second law (Carnot's principle) is 'the most metaphysical of all physical laws,' in that it shows, without formula, without convention, 'the direction in which the world is moving'⁴: creative instability and mutability dissolving into the stability of a world that has exhausted all its energy. Energy expenditure has a limit; it is not infinite. And that is precisely what a halted machine testifies to. Because

it has run out of fuel, or because it is broken down – and breakdown is not always accidental; it also results from wear. The halted sculpture of a machine therefore testifies to a physical truth – that of exhaustion. A battery charges and discharges, just as ‘each individual sleeps and wakes,’ writes Katambayi.⁵

In the *Écoson* installation (FIG. 05), created during a residency at the École Supérieure d’Art in Aix-en-Provence and presented at the *Signals from the South* exhibition at the Pixelache Festival in Helsinki, Finland, in 2011, the machine is restarted. It implements a light and sound system. *Écoson* is ‘an artistic and electrical representation of the complex relationships between nature and technology within our ecosystem,’ writes Nathalie Aubret in the preface to the ‘*Écoson*’ text accompanying the work: twenty jars containing organic matter are connected by tubes and electrical wires to two transformer complexes linking the jars to diodes, in indefinite combinations.⁶ ‘These connections between natural and technological elements,’ she adds, ‘generate various sounds, as well as light signals on an entirely reconfigured “world-map.”’ The entire apparatus analyzes the energetic modalities of survival, in spite of inevitable processes of degradation. At the heart of Katambayi’s energetic economy, the ecological question finds its own formulation. It is a matter of imagining systems of survival, or even ‘trans-vival’ (*transvie*) – that is, forms of conviviality between different human, organic, technological, aesthetic entities – at the very core of ruin. The eco-political problem cannot be read exclusively through the North-South divide, because it is one shared by the entire planet, though at different degrees of intensity, acceleration, or delay. From physical principles, one may therefore reread more finely – that is, at a cosmic level – the geopolitics of energy production and expenditure. Ecological thought thus requires identifying the potentials for survival within spaces subjected to ‘spectacular degradation’⁷ – the desert being, for example, one of the most extreme forms of extinction. The *Écoson* installation thus becomes, reinscribed within an ecosystem confronted with the degradation of its own energy, a vast machine for ‘projecting the future by inscribing survival in sound and light.’⁸

Mathematicae congolenses

Katambayi’s aesthetic devices are accompanied by numerous, very dense texts. They form small metaphysical treatises, where language, often playing with itself, untangles the relations between arts, sciences, technology, and the world. One must therefore take into account, alongside numbers, the particular phenomenon of the *letter*. Letters participate in the deployment of a singular energy: that of the word. Not in a religious sense (the Word of God), but in a cognitive sense (forging thought through language). The word possesses its own energetic intensity: the ‘economy of the word’ makes it possible to develop ‘better

turns of communication,' explains Katambayi in 'Sinuette.'⁹ Consolidating them requires the birth of a science: 'grammathematics' – that is, research on the mathematics of grammar, which should eventually enable the creation of software that optimizes 'formulation, pronunciation, aesthetics,' etc.¹⁰

But beyond the word and writing, it is numbers, in the form of mathematical series and calculations, that hold a unique place in the artist's work, and which lead a life independent of text and letter. As is well known, Katambayi received training as an electrician and mathematician, a training that nourishes his aesthetic systems. Mathematics appear in the works themselves (*Calcul mental*, 2016 (FIG. 02); *marsphairlines*, 2016) (PP. 102-103); they are the subject as performances, but, above all, they are the condition of all contemplation – again demonstrating a very particular vision of knowledge and art.

In seventeenth-century Europe, philosopher-mathematicians René Descartes (1596–1650) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) defined the framework of a general science: *mathesis universalis* (universal mathematics). In Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), universal mathematics is that universal science of order and measure, where the mathematical method, foundation of all sciences, allows for the rational unification of reality. It is reason that organizes knowledge and grants access to truth.

One might thus be tempted to interpret the aesthetic presence of mathematics and number in Katambayi along the lines of modern European rationalism, aiming to illuminate the logical structure of the world by the light of reason. But this does not hold. For Katambayi's techno-energetic universe is filled with black lights (*Afrolampes*) and shadows. Moreover, what is shown is not harmony – in the sense of perfect coordination among elements of the universe – but rather modalities of survival in a system doomed to the inevitable dissipation of energies.

Katambayi's mathematics might thus be better understood in resonance with the Congolese mathematics of writer Jean Bofane (1954).¹¹ But their meaning must be reversed. Bofane's novel *Mathématiques congolaises* is a political tragicomedy in which the term *mathematics* is equivocal: it refers just as much to rationality, logic, and the creation of algorithms and formulas as it does to political manipulation through calculation and profit. Mathematics in Bofane has two faces: science, sometimes placed at the service of power. But power is precisely not the question in Katambayi. Not from a refusal to think the political, but because it is necessary to reestablish *connections* between the different elements of the world (art, nature, technology), whose effective contemplation is always somehow obstructed by political authority. After all, the political world, understood as a technology of power, feels threatened by scholars and artists, whose lives, partly dedicated to contemplation,

do not fear truth. Moreover, politics tends to dismiss what is vital for all humans: the need for beauty, a need that arises from pure sentimentality according to political technicians.

It is the artist's own description of the *Écoson* device that allows us to understand the beauty of connections, of rapprochements: 'The fact of seeing various materials brought together in jars, isolated from their natural or industrial processes, grants the feeling of containing the universe in its beauty.'¹² *Bringing together* isolated materials – this is precisely what the techno-machinic *Écoson* device materially enacts. The various algorithmic combinations produced in mathematical language operate this art of approximate rapprochement between organic matter and diodes, ultimately producing sound and light. Beauty arises from what survives, from what remains.

Mathematics thus provide the symbolic formulas that enable combinations, allow new wirings, and initiate links between disparate entities. They are living sciences, modeling not the static structures that forge cosmic harmony, but rather the multiplicity and heterogeneity of forms that constitute the convivial assemblage of the universe's elements (natural, technical, aesthetic). The art of mathematics does better than politics, in that it accomplishes what politics, failing, does not: establishing connections, composing links, combining difference.

Mathematics, then, is the art of junctions. Katambayi's philosophical treatises, which accompany his works, offer a precise definition of junction: 'Junction [and] rapprochement have nuances. A junction may be made to obtain a whole, or to leave spaces of camouflage. Between the two movements, there is a plastic margin of manipulation.'¹³ To combine, to join, is to produce unified totalities or to sketch zones of shadow – that is, all the elements that remain outside the apparatus of relations. And art, supported by a mathematical vision of the world, makes us sensitive to these totalities that form or dissolve, and to the vastness of the shadow zones excluded from the formation of wholes. The text 'Sinuette,' written in 2017, proposes a definition of junctions, tangents, secants, and framing. It is accompanied by numerous black-and-white drawings, made with ruler and compass, composed of curved and linear geometrical forms. They depict various modes of interlacing, of joining. There are knots of the mind – for instance, composing torment, linked to poor calculations, to the complex statistical combination of probability, certainty, and error. Or processes of metamorphosis, which undermine the principle of identity ($A=A$) where the same becomes other, and the one becomes multiple, like a bird that, in the drawing, splits or appears in triplicate. Geopolitical phenomena or migration, as well, involve constantly revisiting the drawings giving way to administrative, natural, or imagined borders, which in the minds of those who move do not always bear the names of countries, nor appear on maps.

The geometry of drawing – as the spatial expression of numbers and their operations – thus gives mathematical language its strongest aesthetic form in Katambayi's work. Like tracing paper, making visible the way the variegated world may be connected.

Correcting the Night

Katambayi's work draws on a poetics in which nature, technology, mathematics, and life are intertwined or resonate with one another. It is true that one could dwell on absence, failure, and fragility. The *Afrolampes* series, over a hundred black-and-white drawings of light bulbs that have been a recurring part of his work for the past decade, carry with them the story of the deficiencies in the electrical system that powers the Democratic Republic of Congo. The practice of load shedding, managed by the national electricity company (Société Nationale d'Électricité), which cannot meet the country's energy demands, aims to prevent the collapse of the power supply system. It simultaneously reflects poor infrastructure and a lack of profitability. This reveals a stark internal divide in the DRC: the abundance of a mineral-rich land contrasted with the poverty in which daily life unfolds.

The bulb is in black, the faucet doesn't provide water. This depicts the current situation in fragile economies, where young girls and boys supplement households in search of water and other means of survival with all the consequences that entails.¹⁴

In the 2024 film *Tongo Saa*, Congolese artist and filmmaker Nelson Makengo (1990) wanders through Kinshasa at night, confronted by power outages. But what the camera quickly reveals is that the night is never total. In fact, a truly pitch-black urban night does not exist. What we begin to notice is the diversity of light sources: car headlights, phone screens, flashlights, the dim dawn that precedes sunrise. Darkness is not unreadable or impenetrable. On the contrary, it is punctured by glimmers.

It is within this poetic framework that we should understand Katambayi's *Afrolampes*. They do not evoke a one-dimensional tale of opacity and misery. Instead, they aim to reveal a secret, the secret of black light that flows just as much through the streets of Kinshasa and Lubumbashi. This secret carries a cosmological interpretation:

Electricity is used [...] to illuminate. The sun does this during the day and hands over to the moon at night, but this is not sufficient, depending on how the world's infrastructures [define] its functioning. During sunlight one can even see multiple types of lamps through atmospheric reflection.¹⁵

Electric systems are thus put in competition with celestial bodies. And human productivity consists of multiplying artifacts in order not to be limited by the constraints of the created world and the body. So that there are no longer boundaries between night and day, sleep and wakefulness, muscular energy, mechanical activity – and, why not, divine energy. Yet Katambayi reminds us of the hubris of such a dream: it is impossible to understand the universe without acknowledging its limits, its finitude. The human competition with the sun, the moon, and the stars has already been lost.

In the poem 'Soleil Gris' (Gray sun), the writer G. Tchicaya U' Tam'si (1931–1988) who, born in Congo-Brazzaville, supported Lumumba's dreams of liberation and the struggle for an independent Congo, writes:

Avec l'aide de quel visage
Réinventer le soleil ?
Quel corps prendre en guise
De correctif à la nuit ?¹⁶

Katambayi's bulbs, 'erected like heads,'¹⁷ thus form a gallery of portraits, faces that enact, as the poet Tchicaya suggests, the countless reinventions of the sun from the ground up. Solar energy, in the form of radiation, makes life on earth possible. The suns reinvented by humans, Katambayi for his part suggests, serve a far more limited function: not to create life, but to ensure survival, despite the natural tendency of all organized systems to collapse into disorder and energy dissipation.

Soleil cou coupé ('solar throat slashed'), wrote Césaire,¹⁸ echoing Apollinaire – a sun cut off by a power outage. The *Afrolampes* are thus these bodies, drawn in pen and marker on paper, that soften or correct the facts of the night. Like fantastic figures, made from humble materials, visiting human gatherings during endless vigils in anticipation of the dawn.

Katambayi's bulbs, in fact, light up all planetary cities (Lubumbashi, Kinshasa, New York ...) – whether with real or imaginary light. In the 2023 exhibition *10⁹ City* at Ramiken Gallery in New York, *Covid-Afrolampes* (PP. 108-111) displayed on the walls surrounded cubes placed on the floor or suspended, a giant robot named *Gigator* (P. 133), a colorful tower *Deep Space* (PP. 132), and faced a mural *Doors* (PP. 134-135), forming connections between insects, machines, animals, organic matter, subway doors, and various forms of energy shaping urban life. Katambayi's city, reconstructed in the gallery space, is not a city of Afrofuturism: the use of precious materials like cobalt in some works reminds us of the extractive practices that have turned the DRC into a vast reservoir of raw materials for the entire planet. Moreover, the robot is not, or is no longer, a science-fictional creature. Police robots regulate traffic in Kinshasa. Many technical devices enhance the human body (prosthetics,

implants, transplants, etc.) or serve as everyday assistants. Thus, the robot no longer represents the future. In Katambayi's urban apparatus, it embodies, almost comically, the principle of limitation. The *Gigator*, a giant robot ('giga'), whose power is measured at 10^9 (i.e., in billions), is placed at the center of *10⁹ City* like a devouring authority. Yet the energy that powers both the robot and the giga-city depends on the indefinite extraction of resources from the earth – that is, on exhaustion. In the metropolis, despite the constant noise and activity, the looming horizon is one of breakdown, of impending failure, of systems grinding to a halt. So what survives when all activity ceases – when the suns reinvented by humans are never enough? Stillness. Slowness. The slow rhythm of matter. The inability to perceive or confront the reality of nonbeing – because nonbeing does not exist. As an artist-metaphysician, Katambayi resolves centuries of tortured speculation in one bold move: one must not confuse deprivation or insufficiency with nothingness; above all, one must remain attentive to the imperceptible, to the faint signals of energy still circulating in the system, even at low intensity.

Notes

- 1 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, 'Écoson,' unpublished manuscript, 2011.
- 2 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, 'For-fait,' unpublished manuscript, 2017.
- 3 'Thermodynamics,' accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/lexicographie/thermodynamique>.
- 4 Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 244.
- 5 Katambayi, 'Écoson.'
- 6 Nathalie Aubret, in Katambayi, 'Écoson.'
- 7 Katambayi, 'Écoson.'
- 8 Katambayi, 'Écoson.'
- 9 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, 'Sinuette,' unpublished manuscript, 2017.
- 10 Katambayi, 'Sinuette.'
- 11 Inkoli Jean Bofane, *Mathématiques congolaises* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2008).
- 12 Katambayi, 'Écoson.'
- 13 Katambayi, 'Sinuette.'
- 14 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, 'Lire et lire,' unpublished manuscript.
- 15 Katambayi, 'For-fait.'
- 16 G. Tchicaya U Tam'Si, 'Soleil gris,' in *Œuvres complètes I: J'étais nu pour le premier baiser de ma mère* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2013), 524.
- 17 Katambayi, 'For-fait.'
- 18 Aimé Césaire, 'Soleil Cou Coupé,' in *Œuvres complètes: La poésie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994).

CIRCUITS

Johannes Muselaers and Stéphane Symons

I

Interlocking copper wires form a sphere. It floats from the ceiling, high above our heads, and waits there patiently. It preys on movement, with two eyes peering out from its cracks and a small light bulb in its core. Not until someone enters the room does the sphere light up. *Sphère* (2016) (P. 82, 83), a work by Jean Katambayi Mukendi, suggests that geometric figures, lines, and circles are strange creatures. The copper sphere gives the impression of ascending to higher realms, but it depends on physical activity to come alive. Without such activity, the wires of *Sphère* are barely distinguishable from an odd piece of handicraft.

The lighting up of the copper-wire sphere suddenly makes visible what geometers conceal behind the pure lines of their controlled, abstract figures. It is the same well-kept secret as that of the global economy: that circuits, whether geometric or economic, owe their existence to processes that are materially and physically grounded. Without a world of raw materials, natural elements, machines, and objects, there is no circuit, just as there can be no circuit without human beings, who shape the movements between these elements – and are shaped by them in turn. The science that Katambayi inaugurates through references to geometry and electronics is a science of these closed systems. In this context, the machines he builds and the drawings he makes serve, first and foremost, an epistemological function: they produce knowledge. They are instruments that render visible the material and physical processes underpinning our geopolitical, economic, scientific, and social circuits in an era that increasingly disregards the materiality and physicality of our world. It is within this same epistemological capacity that their critical potential resides. By exposing material and bodily circuits, Katambayi's machines and drawings force the ideological, political, and economic mechanisms of oppression and exploitation into the foreground. They reveal that the emphasis on both the artificial and the immaterial is a short circuit and risks causing one: that these technologies are built upon the suppression of the closed circuit between humans and the world and that therein lies the danger of a global short circuit.

II

Since the beginning of his experiments, Katambayi's drawings have taken up this epistemological and critical task. At first, they did so in a supporting capacity. They were conceived as preliminary designs for the electronic circuits of devices such as *Simultium* (2009) (P. 76, 77) and *Yllux* (2012) (P. 80), before being assigned a more autonomous function from 2016 onward. During a residency that year, Katambayi began work on his *Afrolampes*, a series of drawings using ballpoint pen and acrylic marker centered around the motif of the lamp. *Afrolampe #1* set the tone (P. 84). The work depicts an upside-down light bulb, whose precisely drawn screw cap at the top contrasts with a multitude of dynamic lines at the center of the drawing. This contrast between clearly articulated, geometric forms and swirling markings is characteristic of all subsequent drawings in Katambayi's series. Even when he later integrates figures such as insects, numbers, and skulls, their dynamic lines remain entangled with geometric forms through the motif of the lamp. The lamp, 'a clichéd symbol of epiphany and ingenious innovation,' is therefore not merely the antithesis of Mukendi's critical project, writes Chloe Wyma in *Artforum*.¹ Above all, it functions as a framework for his exploratory lines and facilitates the search for the ever-unexpected figures that emerge from the darkness of his markings. In this way, the lamp provides the framework for the epistemological and critical investigation into the erratic circuits that make its illumination possible in the first place. 'In Mukendi's hands [the lamp] ceases to operate as a source of illumination and transparency and instead becomes a conduit that allows us to ponder the obscurity of the Gordian networks we plug into every day.'²

Construction Cloud

Despite its prominent role, the lamp motif does not constitute the fundamental principle of Katambayi's drawing practice. Strictly speaking, the artist does not draw a lamp; rather, his *Afrolampes* emerge from the repetition of an unexpected geometric form: the circle. In the background of his drawings from 2017 onward, such as the *Afrolampes* from the *Lubumbashi Series* (2017) (PP. 88-91), a multitude of circles even appears, setting the rhythm for the earliest stages of these works. Before the invention of the lamp, however, the mathematical figure of the circle symbolized the infallibility of human knowledge. According to Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the rebirth of the arts was only truly realized when Giotto (ca. 1267–1337) emerged as an artist capable of expressing the transcendent perfection of the circle on paper. Vasari provides proof of this in *Le Vite* (1550), through an anecdote about Pope Benedict IX, who, having heard rumors of the painter's talent, sent an envoy to witness a demonstration of his skill:

Giotto, who was a most courteous man, took a sheet of paper and a brush dipped in red, pressed his arm to his side to make

a compass of it, and with a turn of his hand made a circle so even in its shape and outline that it was a marvel to behold. [...] The courtier, thinking he was being ridiculed, replied: “Am I to have no other drawing than this one?” “It’s more than sufficient,” answered Giotto, “Send it along with the others and you will see whether or not it will be understood.”³

With Giotto’s drawn circle as proof of his mastery, Vasari thus underlines the status of the circle, and its standard, within the visual arts: as the pinnacle of human cognitive ability, its execution demands complete control over the drawing hand. The manual activity of the artist must submit to the mind so that it may approximate the artist’s conception of the ideal circle. Even Giotto turned his arm into a compass so that, unimpeded by unforeseen emotions, physical restlessness, or fantasies, he could draw the perfect circle.

The compass, a real one this time, also guides the emergence of Katambayi’s circles. With the help of the instrument, his drawing begins with a few tentative movements. In doing so, he keeps Giotto’s spiritualized ideals at a safe distance. Rather than focusing on an ideal form, the artist concentrates on the manual creation of his circles, paying attention to the placement and repositioning of the compass point. The fluid movement with which the Florentine painter lifted the circle from its sensory foundation gives way here to an exploratory navigation of the paper. Katambayi shifts his compass, positions the instrument, draws a circle, and tentatively searches for a new point of placement – emphasizing the material genesis of his circles and the crucial role of his hand in the process, rather than concealing it. His use of the compass thus stands in stark contrast to that of Giotto: it is not the drawing hand that is subjected to the observing eye; rather, this optical watchdog bends to Katambayi’s physicality. All later forms that he will introduce in the drawing stem from this sensorimotor process and the use of a device, however simple (which, as we will see, form the core of his installations and performances as well). This starting point of his drawing practice marks the first instance of Katambayi’s epistemological and critical project. His inquiry into the materiality of economic, political, and social circuits begins with the material origin of the *Afrolampes* themselves: in the interplay of a hand and a compass.

This lively interplay gradually results in dynamic underdrawings. Large circles that divide the paper into various zones precede increasingly smaller circles that begin on the contours of their predecessors. In *Afrolampes* such as *Edison* (P. 93) and *Éclipse* (2019) (P. 92), this method leads to an unprecedented culmination of shapes in various sizes and pressures. The confused tangle that gradually emerges further sharpens the contrast between Giotto and Katambayi. The circles in the *Afrolampes* are not incarnations of a suprasensory abstraction. His drawing practice is miles away from the well-known conception of geometric drawing by

Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who wrote that ‘the geometer who draws his figures on the board produces thereby factually existing lines on the factually existing board, but his experiencing of the product, qua experiencing, no more grounds his geometrical seeing of essences and eidetic thinking than does his physical producing.’⁴ Katambayi’s circles, to the contrary, are precisely repeated but varying iterations that continually refer back to their tactile origin. In fact, together these circles form a closed circuit: a circuit that primarily arose in the sensorimotor dynamics between hand and compass, without the intervention of a ‘geometrical gaze.’

In the essay ‘Sinuette,’ Katambayi describes the closed circuit of his drawings as a ‘construction cloud’ (*nuage de construction*). The reference to the cloud is well chosen: the whimsical web of circles on the underlying layer of his drawings indeed resembles a shimmering chaos of ice crystal cloud formations. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) mused on a similar visual richness. In his treatise, he notes: ‘I have in the past seen clouds and wall stains which have inspired me to beautiful inventions of many things.’⁵ However, this inspirational power does not lie in the abstractions or spiritualized meanings that clouds might suggest; for Da Vinci, it derives from the dynamic, material structure of things. He further observes that ‘these stains, while wholly in themselves deprived of perfection in any part, did not lack perfection in regard to their movements or actions.’⁶ It was therefore the material properties of the different parts of clouds and stains that inspired him, rather than the recognition of an ideal-typical face, object, or landscape. Consequently, in this process, neither da Vinci’s imagination nor fantasy – much less his cognitive faculties – occupied a central role; instead, it was the internal dynamics of these stimuli themselves that moved him toward images through their surprising constellations and points of contact. His clouds, too, thus functioned as construction clouds: as bundles of stimuli that, relying on the material properties of things in the world, elicited the gradual genesis of an image. It is no different for Katambayi. Once his construction cloud is in place, two-third of the drawing process is done and his eye gradually awakens: ‘Around two-third of the way through, in terms of time and energy, every creation seems ephemeral; many artists abandon their works at this stage. The challenge is to make good use of this phase of decompression. Once the stage of doubt is passed, the work almost creates itself. It pulls you along.’⁷

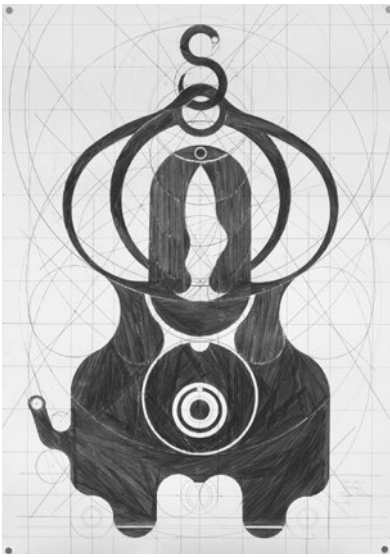
Tangent

Even in the second phase of Katambayi’s drawing process, no form is in sight. When the construction cloud ‘pulls’ the artist, he only distinguishes basic relationships between individual circles, which he accentuates with ballpoint pen on the underdrawing of the circle labyrinth. These relationships are not formal analogies or figurative patterns, but intersections between circles and their tangents – that is, the points where

their contours touch each other: *le frottement des arcs* (the rubbing of the arcs). The tangent is a strange kind of point in this respect. Usually, the geometric point functions as the start or end point of a line, or as a building block of a figure: the point fixes and partly determines the position and meaning of a recognizable shape. The tangent in Katambayi's drawings, by contrast, marks a surprising connection between two nonfigurative circles: it does not fix anything or bring figures together into an organic or recognizable gestalt, but rather injects unforeseen movement and liveliness due to the differences between the shapes it connects. Because of this quality, the tangent forms a disjunctive, not a synthetic, principle. This becomes especially clear in the *Afrolampe Sturm-lanterne* (2021) (FIG. 15). Katambayi traced the rounded notches at the base figure using the tangents between circles in his construction cloud. Where one circle always remains visible, the other is hidden behind ballpoint pen marks, with their tangent as the place where the contour of the figure takes a turn. These movements occur frequently in Katambayi's *Afrolampes*. As if the tangent provides lines with thrust, moments of reversal, undulation, and twisting appear in its vicinity. But not in a void: this recurring phenomenon traces back to the disjunctive character of the tangent. Due to the difference between the manual power of its circles, it contains an energetic and modulating potential, which Katambayi deliberately uses to drive and modulate his ballpoint pen tip.

The marking of the tangent is therefore crucial in his artistic-drawing investigation into the prerequisites of a closed and material energetic circuit. In this process, he draws inspiration from the electrical circuits that have fascinated him since childhood. By focusing on the energetic and modulating capacity of the tangent, he follows, among others, in the footsteps of Alessandro Volta (1745–1827). Like the artist, the inventor of the electric battery assumed that electricity moves through the interplay between different materials. In addition to the closed nature of their circuit, the difference in their conductive capacity was therefore deemed essential. Later, Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) further expanded this principle. As the founder of alternating current, he promoted a system under Volta's conditions that could transport electricity over long distances. Once again, the voltage difference between the materials of the alternating current circuit proved essential, just as Katambayi's tangent derives its power from the contrasts between his circles. It is here that the artistic line becomes subject to differences in direction and speed, leading it to undulate, turn, or twist. The artist therefore does not exploit his cloud of drawing; on the contrary: the cloud pulls him in, as he noted earlier. He himself partakes in his construction cloud, which both drives and modulates the trajectory of his line.

This creation of the line has important consequences for his drawing method. As long as Katambayi moves his ballpoint pen between points of energy and modulation, the power of the construction cloud remains inexhaustible. The tangents of this drawing web thus operate according



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to a very different logic than the points that delimit a line segment. The tangent is not a pathing of a single line (which as a 'connector' covers the shortest distance between two points), but moves multiple lines into 'revolution, translation, dilation, parabolas, hyperbolas, ellipses, straight lines, parallels, points, sequences, static, dynamic, recurrence, accumulation, and traces,' without exhausting its capacity.⁸ As long as circles touch each other – and Katambayi moves within their closed circuit – their power remains intact.

Pentimento

After the thrust and modulation of Katambayi's line, the third phase of his drawing process begins when a silhouette emerges from his line work. Within the accentuated line, around the zone of the light bulb, the contours of a screw (*M13 (Métrique 13)*, 2021) (P. 107), a faucet (*Covid Afrolampe*

XXIX Standard, 2020) (P. 109), scissors (*Afrolamp Umbilical*, 2021) (P. 119), a body part (*Afrolampe Vaxin 236*, 2020) (P. 111), or an abstract figure (*Afrolamp Œil*, 2024) (P. 122) appear. Naturally, the power of these sometimes banal motifs does not lie in the objects they depict. Even when they explicitly refer to economic circuits, the *Afrolampes* derive their expressive power above all from the process of their graphic formation. On the one hand, this formation can be traced back to the dynamics between the circles of the construction cloud and the manual genesis of Mukendi's lines. 'Forms and gestures,' he writes, 'associate and dissociate in nature to give rise to other forms.'⁹ On the other hand, there is the silhouette itself. Once Katambayi begins to observe such a form emerging from the construction cloud, it marks the starting point of a third intervention. This time, with acrylic marker, he carefully shades the figure of this silhouette within the contours of the accentuated line.

This intervention is paradoxical. Katambayi shades a figure, even though the circles from the underdrawing showed no recognizable motifs. As a result of the dynamic between his hand and the compass, these circles merely provide the conditions of possibility for an energetic circuit. The figure he shades using this circuit can therefore, pace Giotto, never be the expression of the circles of the construction cloud: it does not, strictly speaking, emerge from them, but through them. It is a new material reality rather than an illustration of a spiritual model or ideal type, so the consumer objects evoked in this process contrast with their artistic genesis. Lamps, faucets, and screws usually serve as examples of the standardization and uniformity of the modern world. In contrast to the material foundation of Katambayi's drawing art, they illustrate a world that wants to transcend the limitations of matter and physicality and to flatten out differences. But it is precisely in this tension, between the motifs of the *Afrolampes* and their physical origin, that these works find their critical power. After all, the creative potential of the construction

cloud remains perceptible in the completed drawings. In *Afrolampes* such as *Sans Fil* (P. 121) and *Ndjekele* (2024) (P. 123), its inexhausted energy vibrates in the background of the shaded silhouette, which, in contrast to the light ballpoint cloud, appears as the dark shadow of a tool or device. Katambayi's lamps, faucets, or screws are thus not clearly delineated motifs. They rather resemble the negation of the consumer objects to which they refer, as if the artist both erases and distinguishes them.

In art historical jargon, these shadings take on the role of *pentimenti*: corrections of artistic anomalies (the word '*pentimento*' comes from *pentire*, Italian for 'to repent'). Since the Italian Renaissance, these corrections have had a special status. They do not simply fix a flaw but are irregularities themselves – infractions of the content and formal continuity of a work of art. Especially in drawing, where *pentimenti* are not overpaintings but remain visible as shading, crossing out, or erasing, these corrections appear, according to Hubert Damisch (1928–2017), as a 'second fault': 'Repentance is a second fault. And is it not indeed a fault, a fault against the rules, a fault against good taste, a fault against plausibility, a fault against the truth of the drawing.'¹⁰ With his shadings, Katambayi in any case dispenses with 'good taste' (*le bon goût*). The stylistic feel of consumer capitalism is forever lost in his *pentimenti*, which do not make errors invisible but reveal the form of the consumer object itself as an anomaly to be corrected. The reason for this is obvious in light of the material circuits he exposes. According to the logic of the construction cloud, the shaded objects are but one possible outcome of the energy and modulation processes of this drawing web, where behind every motif lies a multitude of other possibilities. The anomaly of the consumer object thus does not lie in its material origin, but in its capacity to appear in a dematerialized and isolated manner. In the first chapter of *Das Kapital* (1867), Karl Marx (1818–1883) speaks of the so-called commodity fetish or *Warenfetisch*. When a commodity becomes autonomous, it denies the closed circuit of bodies and raw materials, of material conditions and social relations that constitute its essential condition of existence. With the *pentimenti* of his drawings, Katambayi suggests an alternative model. He presents a circuit in which products are no longer separated from their material conditions, but are constantly reconnected to – and reshaped by – their transforming substratum.

III

Sculptural installations and performances continue the epistemological and critical project of Katambayi's *Afrolampes*. Early in his oeuvre, his mobile world model *Trotation* (1992–2011) (P. 104) already visualized geopolitical and economic systems, as well as alternative circuits. The sculpture simulates two well-known movements. Using rotating disks, it shows the earth's orbit around the sun and its rotation around its vertical axis. The addition of a third movement – this time around its diagonal

axes – breaks with this binarity and ‘thus re-establishes equilibrium,’ as one gallery text once noted.¹¹ Through this movement or ‘trotation,’ Katambayi seeks a new balance ‘to rectify the imbalance between the northern and southern hemispheres.’¹² This balance between North and South is also central in *Congo Coin* (2019) (p. 99). The circular drawing, with a diameter of 180 cm, addresses a paradox of globalization: the DRC, one of the world’s largest copper exporters, does not have its own copper coins. Katambayi’s symbolic monetary unit thus acts as a restitutive gesture, but also highlights an undeniable injustice. Featuring a Congolese mermaid as a heraldic motif, it draws attention to the country’s mineral wealth and calls for reflection on how these resources are used in international monetary systems. The awareness that Western prosperity depends on raw materials from the Global South leads to the heart of contemporary extractive capitalism: through the appropriation of material wealth, which sidelines rightful owners, the current world economy operates as a short circuit.

Katambayi’s critique of extractive capitalism and the short circuit it relies on led to the key work *The Concentrator* (2022) (pp. 74-75). This installation takes its name from one of the ‘gods-machines’ in the mining company of Gécamines.¹³ ‘I never saw it myself,’ writes the artist, ‘but its name fired my imagination. It is something that concentrates, but what does it concentrate? It is actually a machine that has to separate the minerals from the residue and various impurities.’¹⁴ The machine in his hometown was an instrument of extraction. From its contact with the Congolese earth, it retained only raw materials, separating ‘pure’ minerals from ‘impure’ residue. At first glance, Katambayi’s machine seems to have a similar function. In the cylindrical structure of *The Concentrator*, he assembled knowledge in its purest form: little balls inscribed with references to chemical elements are combined with cut-out portraits of prominent intellectuals, researchers, and politicians. But something is missing. Unlike the ‘gods-machine’ of Gécamines, and in continuation of Katambayi’s construction cloud, the alternative machine forms a closed circuit. It cannot separate the ‘pure’ from the ‘useless residue’ because it has neither an opening nor an exit. Nothing enters or leaves, which means it flouts the logic of purity and exploitation in extractive capitalism. The energy production of *The Concentrator* relies on a different process. Movable by a lever system at the ends of the cylinder, it depends both on physical activity and on the brief encounters between its components when it starts to turn. Human activity thus forms the condition for the different materials of the machine (wood, plastic, and paper) to constitute an operational system. Only when we exchange a purely visual experience of the artwork for an active embodiment – when we leave this short circuit for an embodied place in the closed circuit between human, machine, and its material components – does it produce energy.

As an alternative to the material exploitation highlighted by *The Concentrator*, the call for an open and dematerialized world grows ever

louder today. The narrative goes that fossil-free, universally accessible energy will save the planet, that energy from the sun, water, and wind will break the circuit of earthly raw materials. For some, this world of 'abundance' is already within reach. *Abundance* (2025), the bestseller by Ezra Klein (1984) and Derek Thompson (1986), puts it bluntly:

Our breakthroughs in energy are [...] mythic. After thousands of years of scientific discovery and technological progress, we have figured out how to turn the most elemental functions of nature – the sun's light, the wind, the heat beneath the earth – into a swarm of electrons that can run our machines and power our lives.¹⁵

The analysis of these and other ecomodernists is simple: with the right economic investments and political decisions, innovative technology will grant us access to inexhaustible amounts of energy without significant downsides. Their mantras are 'scarcity is a choice' and 'electrify everything.' *Charging Tesla Crash: A Speculation*, Katambayi's performance together with Sammy Baloji (1978), Marjolijn Dijkman (1978), and Daddy Tshikaya (1986) (pp. 96-97), put this desire for abundance in a critical light. The form of this work is familiar to car enthusiasts: it is a Tesla Model S, this time made of copper wire, which the artists electrified during the 2019 Lubumbashi Biennale. The result of this performance – an electric car as a threatening lightning bolt – unmasked the fetish of immaterial and infinitely renewable energy as a fantasy, especially where the production of electric cars and artificial intelligence involves the exploitation of rare minerals like lithium, nickel, and cobalt. In their continued dependence on such African mineral wealth, these new industries reproduce centuries-old colonial patterns of exploitation and inequality. In this context, the political scientist Ben Radley coined the term 'green imperialism' to indicate

the dismantling of Congolese sovereign ownership and control over its natural resource wealth (not only low-carbon metals, but also water and sunlight) and establishing open access to the Congolese economy, so as to advance the green economic agendas of hegemonic powers.¹⁶

This is clearly reproducing 'a model of national development that historically has delivered little by way of material improvements for most of the population.'¹⁷ In *Charging Tesla Crash*, the circuits of our dematerialized production and consumption chains therefore prove to be not as immaterial and sustainable as they appear. They exact a toll both ecologically and socially, through the plundering of resources, disruption of nature, and exploitation of precarious labor.

Where *The Concentrator* critiques the short circuit of our fossil fuels, *Charging Tesla Crash* does the same for the consumption logic of our renewable energy. The critical capacity of these works extends to their

very material components. Consumption revolves around the depletion of energy and matter. When a good is consumed, it disappears: no trace remains of the original matter. This disappearance, in turn, results in renewed desire, making the endless logic of consumption inseparably linked to destruction: having more ultimately means always having less, with an exhausted earth and social inequality as inevitable and irreparable byproducts. In his installations and performances, Katambayi works with this residual material. *The Concentrator*, like the imaginary power plants *Simultium* (2009) (P. 79) and *Yllux* (2012) (P. 81), is made from found waste, while *Charging Tesla Crash* is executed in recycled copper. The artist puts these materials back to work. Their circuit is closed, allowing the possibility of a truly inexhaustible, nonconsumable energy to come to life: energy generated from the indivisible remnants of the world, which continuously sustains itself through their mutual differences. For Katambayi, this circuit holds a model for a new global organization, without a dichotomy between energy and residue.

Yet the heartbeat of Katambayi's oeuvre is not utopian in nature. His performances, installations, and drawings are not a *Vor-Schein* (Ernst Bloch) of a completely different world and have little to do with the widely praised Afrofuturism. They are too firmly rooted in society as it exists today and the planet in its current material condition. Katambayi is not concerned with rejecting society or the planet, nor with devising an alternative reality, but with finding a new use for the world as we know it. Central to this is the artistic exploration of the material circuits that today have become unused or misused in the flow of raw materials and goods: not to reject them, but to place them in a new channel and transform them into uninterrupted circuits. Only from this search for alternative circuits can the so-called Mukendi Sequence be truly understood. It took years for the artist to shape this sequence of numbers, whose prime numbers serve as guidelines for the proportions of his installations and drawings. He based the sequence on the square of six. The first prime number, the number one, is followed by $7 (1 + 6^2)$, $19 (7 + 6^3)$, $37 (19 + 6^4)$, and so on, to infinity. As he did with the circles in his *Afrolampes*, Katambayi develops this mathematical system to carve out a unique position vis-à-vis a well-known geometric-artistic paradigm. The sequence draws on his fascination with the Fibonacci Sequence, which for centuries has imposed a mathematical law on both artistic and biological harmony. The question of whether Katambayi aims for such an ordering logic is therefore inevitable, though the answer is obvious: the idiosyncratic number sequence is not a transcendental blueprint for a new world, for it is not a given. It cannot be separated from the performances in which the artist writes one number after another with chalk on a blackboard or markers on a window. Like the circles from the *Afrolampes*, the sequence requires its continual reiteration and exists only by virtue of its concrete markings. In this way, it forms a template: a material instrument embedded in the circuit it helps establish – not the manifestation of an eternal, unchanging harmony. Time and again, and with the utmost precision, Katambayi turns

to the sequence to calculate the differences between circles, shapes, and materials for the next step in his drawing or sculptural process. With each new prime number, a new link in the chain arises, a new tangent, a new energy that in turn propels and modulates our gaze, body, and thinking. From this, the sequence emerges as an activating principle, for both the artist and ourselves. It activates, as the transformative framework of his critical-epistemological project, new lines of inquiry in his search for alternative circuits between people, things, and continents when short-circuiting threatens. And it teaches us, in the propulsion and modulation we undergo, that the survival of these closed circuits does not rely on the short circuit of a distanced consumption, but on a labor of material transformation. For Katambayi, the artwork and the world are not images, but labor: ‘the image of work against the work of the image’ (*l’image de l’œuvre contre l’œuvre de l’image*).¹⁸

Notes

- 1 Chloe Wyma, ‘Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Ramiken #7,’ *Artforum*, March 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/events/jean-katambayi-mukendi-248091/>
- 2 Wyma, ‘Jean Katambayi Mukendi.’
- 3 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22.
- 4 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol 1, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 16.
- 5 Leonardo Da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting: An Anthology of Writings by Leonardo Da Vinci; With a Selection of Documents Relating to His Career as an Artist*, ed. Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 222.
- 6 Da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*, 222.
- 7 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, ‘Les images s’inventent,’ unpublished manuscript, 2016.
- 8 Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2008), 74–77; Wyma, ‘Jean Katambayi Mukendi.’
- 9 Jean Katambayi Mukendi, ‘Les images s’inventent,’ unpublished manuscript, 2016.
- 10 Hubert Damisch, *La ruse du tableau: La peinture ou ce qu’il en reste* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), 24.
- 11 ‘Trotation,’ M HKA Ensembles, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://ensembles.org/items/13104>.
- 12 ‘Trotation.’
- 13 Ils Huygens, ‘A Conversation with Jean Katambayi Mukendi,’ *z33 Magazine*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.z33.be/en/2022/07/20/a-conversation-with-jean-katambayi-mukendi/>.
- 14 Ils Huygens, ‘A Conversation with Jean Katambayi Mukendi.’
- 15 Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2025), 128.
- 16 Ben Radley, ‘Green Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Quest for National Development in the Congo,’ *Review of African Political Economy* (2023) 50, no. 177/178: 325.
- 17 Radley, ‘Green Imperialism.’
- 18 Katambayi, ‘Les images s’inventent.’

PICHA- LUBUMBASHI

Jean Katambayi Mukendi and Alexandre Mulongo Finkelstein in conversation

Photographs by Julien De Bock

Jean Katambayi Mukendi, who are you?

This question calls to mind the peculiar habit some have of speaking about themselves in the third person – a trait of children and of those who wield power. I find myself somewhere between the two.

I am a child born into a family of five. One day, amid my artistic wanderings, I had to calculate the average birth year of my siblings: 1969, 1970, 1974, 1977, and 1980 for the youngest. Curiously, the average came to 1974: the year of my birth. Chance or not, I cannot say. In statistics, I embody both the mean and the median. Does this hold significance? Perhaps. I have always sought to mediate between the greater and the lesser. This impulse has continued to shape my path through society.

My parents migrated from the central to the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, from Kasai Province to the city of Lubumbashi, where technical schools were thriving. My father found his place at the vast Gécamines company, first as a foreman and later as an electrician. I grew up within the mining context, next to a steelworks in Camp Gécamines, surrounded by the regimented rhythms of a planned town. The wailing siren, the school, cafeteria, and leisure activities – everything followed a strict schedule. In the

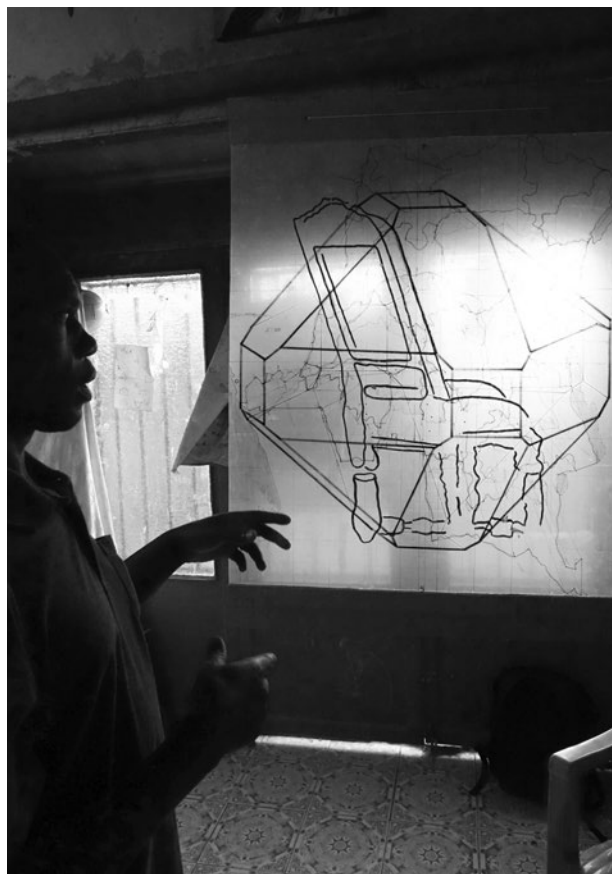
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1980s, the imposing presence of the Catholic Church was particularly significant; it was almost the only institution that offered a Christian education. Even as a child, I was already anxious and wary, watching things fall apart and rightly wondering what backup energies existed for all of this. My parents separated early; I was young, yet I managed to maintain a certain clarity in observing society – from the post-independence golden era to the economic and social collapse of my country. Even the railways, a great symbol of the republic that had enabled my parents' migration southeast, began to falter. There were no policies in place to sustain work.

My education was fragmented, lacking a clear trajectory. There was a certain resistance, perhaps born of what I witnessed or of my own intellect. I attended primary school at Changwe Yetu, a Gécamines institution. As a bright student, I progressed to a technical secondary school. All the boys in our family attended the same school our father had. Our sister pursued electronics elsewhere after a scientific track. At the higher education level, during my mathematics studies, my academic pursuits were little more than a palliative – a way to meet curricular requirements. Having an academic record was important to integrate into society, yet there was no clear goal beyond earning a certificate. Everything was tied to Gécamines and the railway company SNCC; even the school programs were dictated by these parent companies.

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How did you come to art?

I appreciate the phrasing of the question: “How did you come to art?” Even amid scarcity, art schools exist in Congo: the School of Fine Arts in Lubumbashi and the Academy of Fine Arts in the capital, Kinshasa. I am among those who entered the world of art without attending these institutions, a path that creates a conflict of trades, as more and more people enter professions without formal training. Everything seems to shift in this direction; specialization is disappearing. Even at university, there are only faculties such as medicine, law, and perhaps a few others that resist easy classification.

Fortunately, within each individual reside various moods, skills, and disciplines – though in varying degrees. It takes just one day for

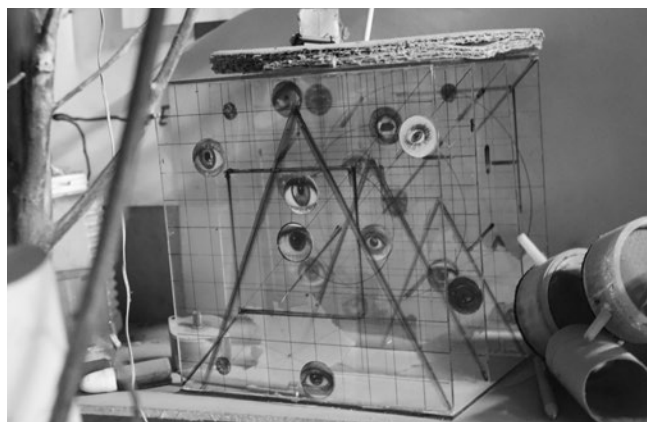
a particular trait to emerge, and, in that moment, one can begin to cultivate it. Chance also plays its part. One person may excel in one domain while another impresses in a different way. Consider two painters, two sculptors, or two photographers: one may stand out more as an artist because of their mood, method, or style. I belong to what people call 'born artists,' a form of atavism traceable in ancestral DNA and history. It only took one day of beginning to express myself in a conceptual or generative way, of engaging with society and the cultural centers where it all started, for people to sense that there was something different – a kind of vocation, an energy being released. That is how I gradually came to art: through encounters, information, and acceptance within the artistic ecosystem.

What role does the city of Lubumbashi and its history play in your practice?

As I mentioned, my parents were internal migrants. I could have been born elsewhere in the country, which would have made for a very different story. Maybe not necessarily in personality, but in my approach and content. At one point, I began to take an interest in geography and history, as a way of reflecting on the importance of these subjects and criticizing the way they were taught.

As I became increasingly immersed in art, I came to understand the significance of Lubumbashi's history and geography. The city lies, if I am correct, at seventeen degrees south and twenty-three degrees east, with long dry seasons and moderate rainy seasons, though these patterns are now shifting with climate change. From the outset, Lubumbashi has been a city of intellectuals, shaped by its industrial and academic culture and inhabited by people eager to test their knowledge. It also carried a certain sense of modesty. This means that practices you might commonly find elsewhere in the world, or in other Congolese cities, are not necessarily found in Lubumbashi. Artists often discuss this: modesty and intellectualism were the two defining characteristics of the city. I regret that metropolitan influences sometimes erode the city's administrative and educational foundations, yet I remain confident in preserving its soul.

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Materially and technically, Lubumbashi is the mining capital: the copper capital that fueled the national economy, embodied by the large Gécamines company. We had ready access to office materials – staplers, stencils, and typewriters – which, in a sense, paved the way for a more conceptual approach. I recall my older brother staying out late, crafting cars from copper wire, while our mother repeatedly called him

home. During holidays, we held competitions building these cars. Today, he is a mechanic and a renowned teacher in Lubumbashi. I, on the other hand, resisted purely mechanical practice. I didn't want to work hard; I wanted to work smart. I speak of it now, but I have been applying this principle for a long time. For me, it's essential to combine mechanical practice with intelligence: together they form something organic that leads to functionality. I hold a critical view of everything digital that tends to discard mechanical fundamentals. The two must go hand in hand.

Picha is a collective of actors in the arts sector, founded in Lubumbashi in 2008. It organizes the Lubumbashi Biennale as well as activities related to support, research, hosting, and dissemination in the artistic field. When one belongs to an organization like Picha, how are personal and collective interests balanced in its activities?

This question touches all artists: how to balance private and collective activities. The nature of an artist is to work freelance; they operate independently, even when affiliated with an organizational structure. Picha is a collective model that, from the start, allows for balance. There are three levels: personal work, relationship to the community, and collective activities. I'm not speaking for all collectives or art centers, but Picha enables one to combine all of these while still leaving room for personal space. We are a team that shares the tasks among ourselves.

In the sphere of the artist, balance is something that must be actively sought; it does not arise spontaneously. I cannot precisely explain how I search for this balance, but it largely depends on certain behaviors or philosophical approaches that can offer some guidance. One must practice selflessness and effective stress management. It is important not to expend energy on efforts that do not serve everyone. Too often, the differences in choices go unnoticed. Both implosion and explosion are ever-present threats for artists. Ultimately, this holds true for everyone: mismanagement of emotions, affairs, or minimal income poses a serious risk to an artistic career. Additionally, there is the question of defining human relationships.

Explain your artistic approach.

My artistic approach follows general didactic principles. It is defined by a few key concepts: induction and deduction, analysis and synthesis. In general, these are terms anyone can use to explain a process, but there are specific nuances that I can try to highlight. In a broader sense, I had a drive to provide answers through evolution, revolution, and devolution. It was a form of complexity sparked by the importation of machines, spare parts, and office supplies in cardboard packaging by Gécamines. The human-machine duality brought both evolution and antagonism to their coexistence. We inherited this situation through the passing on of progress and direct contact with machines. A mixture of repulsion and reconditioning

prompted me to make use of what was available. Like many children, I dismantled household appliances to uncover the technology within. It was a way of understanding these elements in their fundamental nature. That same feeling occasionally drives me even now. In recent years, I have developed the *Afrolampe* concept. Electricity is now scarce, though it was once plentiful. How do telecommunication companies and TV distribution networks operate without electricity? Their billing should reflect load rather than time. Today, the discussion is about acquiring materials and recycling for artistic work. Cardboard boxes that once served as packaging become containers, inside which I construct new mechanisms using wire, mathematics, and physics. Over time, with limited access to recyclable materials, observation of society becomes essential. Society provides countless inputs – entry points that function as media. I readily discover materials for my practice through interactions with my social environment, both in Lubumbashi and internationally. Personally, I engage in internal brainstorming before discussing my projects with others. Unfortunately, political and doctrinal influences often produce very rigid thinking. This situation is not unique to Lubumbashi; I observe that mainstream media frequently convey the views of only a handful of individuals.

How does your creative process unfold?

In the creative process, there is an element – I don't know if it is the same for all artists – a critical point to reach where time, energy, and space intersect in a kind of perfect complexity of work. This is how I developed the 'two-thirds theory.' When you reach two-thirds of the process of your work, the remaining third flows naturally. You feel as if the work executes itself. This allows you to determine whether the critical point has been reached. If I achieve it, I am confident that a stranger will appreciate my work. Conversely, if not, a sense of abandonment takes over. This is how many artists have abandoned their

projects. I experienced this myself; I had not prepared to withstand the energetic weight required by the work for its own realization. This was the conclusion of the Mukendi sequence, a numerical sequence selecting prime numbers and secondary numbers, the latter being multiples of the former, as in 169 (13×13). I worked on it extensively,

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developing it into a personal theory, while being fascinated by the Fibonacci sequence.

You work with flat surfaces (2D) and volumes (3D). How do you choose the dimensions for your creations?

Yes, I work in both 2D and 3D. To decide which to use, there are several parameters: space, the interest of the work, and available resources. At first, an artist dreams of creating gigantic objects for the sake of demonstration, but then questions of feasibility arise. Forty years ago, I created *Déchets Nucléaires* (Nuclear Waste), a work made of multiple sheets of cut paper. I struggled to store all the elements in the two-room apartment we lived in. This is how I began creating works designed to be assembled. Conserving these pieces is another challenge, as they require large spaces and maintenance. Today, practically, I am guided by the criteria mentioned above. At the moment, working in 3D is difficult for me; I need collaborations. Still, we always keep in mind our attraction to gigantic works, which bring a sense of pride and recognition.

In a country like the DRC, what role does artistic discourse and practice play in societal issues?

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, art and society can be described as two complementary components. I once met a professor who said that art is nothing without society. To him, it was a trivial truth: you cannot speak of art without society. The third component is the artist. At present, because I am not entirely dependent on society, I still have the opportunity to express opinions. For example, when administrative or educational systems falter, I can subtly intervene. As artists, our task is to lift our heads, to prevent people from remaining confined within rigid frameworks.

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You are president of Picha, organizing the Lubumbashi Biennale. What does this event represent in your country's artistic landscape?

Among our activities, we organize the Picha Workshops and the Lubumbashi Biennale. Between editions of the biennale, we support young artists in their projects following a selection process initiated by a call for applications.

The Lubumbashi Biennale, established in 2008, is the oldest contemporary art biennale in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It opens the country to artistic practices that were once the prestige of certain cities around the world. In Central Africa, it is a source of pride to see an association of artists take on the challenge of organizing such an event. The resonance of this biennale has extended beyond national borders. We have succeeded in bringing artists together and generating public interest through exhibitions and artistic installations, meetings and exchanges, and public screenings.

We also run a workshop in Makwacha, along Kasumbalesa Road, 45 kilometers from Lubumbashi. This is a solidarity project with the women of the village, who seasonally paint their homes with natural pigments. This collaboration focuses on screen printing and sewing.

During your travels, you discovered the concept of the FabLab – a space equipped and open to artists, professionals, amateurs, students, and entrepreneurs to create their projects, following the principle: Learn, make, share, and repeat. What made you interested in bringing this concept to Lubumbashi?

The FabLab, or Fabrication Laboratory, is a striking example of contemporary art bridging the gap between industry and craftsmanship. I first encountered this concept at the art school in Aix-en-Provence, where I met a professor from the United States who taught Processing, a programming language tailored for artists. Later, in Marseille, I met researchers and enthusiasts of FabLab, creativity, and interactivity. Many FabLabs have emerged around the world, with the 3D printer becoming their primary tool.

At Picha, our team attempted to establish a FabLab. The FabLab brings together people from all backgrounds and disciplines. It is a space

for socializing, development, and interaction. I focused on preserving the core idea without getting too caught up in using computer equipment, even if it meant blending with the machine. Maintaining a sense of balance is important to me. Throughout it all, I kept the desire to pass knowledge on to younger generations. In our case, we were far enough along that support from a FabLab elsewhere in the world could have helped us complete the final phase. We hope to return one day so that younger generations can build on this foundation.

What are your artistic prospects for the coming years?

My entire journey has been in preparation for the artistic commitment I now embrace. My time in teaching, in commerce (as a store operator), and in other professions all hinted at an artistic life as the ultimate destination. It's like removing the gangue from ore and revealing the core – that's what it feels like. I am now fully immersed, as if in the bath after the refining process. To persist in an artistic practice requires unwavering commitment. Everything depends on maintaining a delicate balance. It doesn't work for everyone; I consider myself very fortunate. I wouldn't advise anyone to follow my exact path. Everyone must find their own way, and together, as the Belgians say, "unity is strength."

How do you envision the future of artistic and cultural life in your city?

I see more and more young people finding their footing. In the end, it's the outcome that matters. I notice a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment. Whether in the arts or elsewhere, everyone must find their place. We're already seeing rising figures proudly stepping into the spotlight. I hope they will invest themselves over the long term in Lubumbashi's artistic scene. Artistic engagement is crucial – it serves as a counterbalance to political and economic structures and to established consumer societies. Fortunately, there are still young people ready to take over and assert themselves in this approach. I see things stabilizing in Lubumbashi through these artistic commitments.

MEMORIES OF A SHARED LIFE

Julie Mukendi

I am Julie Mukendi, the elder sister of Jean Katambayi Mukendi. We grew up side by side in the mining camp of the Gécamines. A 150-meter-high chimney, always belching smoke, stood as a symbol of the company's vitality. On the horizon, the trash heaps, rising 75 meters high, stood as stark monuments to the labor of the copper and cobalt plant workers. A colonial siren regulated the daily life of every household in the camp, and everywhere the industrial guards in green uniforms embodied the company's authority. Both our parents (FIG. 23) worked for Gémanices: our mother as an office employee and highly skilled typist, and our father as a medium-voltage electrical technician. Yet Jean never knew him in that role, for life had already taken another path. Our parents had separated, and it was our mother who raised us on her own.

The first thing that struck me was the care and anticipation surrounding Jean's birth. Our parents awaited him with such excitement that our mother, even while pregnant, traveled to Zambia to buy his layette. It was a sign that Jean was destined to be someone remarkable. At three, he had a dream he would later recount – a dream that came true when he vanished for nearly five hours before being found. At five, he suffered a terrifying accident: his head was trampled by a crowd watching a fight between neighbors. The ordeal left him with a severe stroke that could have paralyzed him for life, had it not been for our mother's watchful care. Jean loved playing football as a defender. He was well liked among

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his peers, very helpful, and an excellent student. Yet he always found moments to invent, twisting wires into machines of his own design. Unsurprisingly, he chose to study electricity in secondary school, following in our father's footsteps. We were living through the 1980s and 1990s, a time when both our family and the nation faced growing instability. Daily life was filled with hardship: shortages of food and essential goods, scarcity of school supplies, and constant power outages.

All these elements fed Jean's critical awareness and creativity. He scavenged cardboard brought home by our mother and tools left behind by our father to invent electric machines, guided entirely by his imagination – and occasionally even practical for daily use. From my perspective as his older sister, I remember Jean as a child, holding his so-called *Omo* cardboard measuring device in one hand and his disco display – salvaged from an old watch – in the other, utterly absorbed in wiring the electrical circuit of our house in Lubumbashi, in the Gécamines housing estate, following a meticulously drawn schematic. His eyes, fixed on the wires, revealed his fascination with their mystery. While others saw simple cables or car moldings made of wire, he saw puzzles to solve, systems to manipulate, and worlds to reveal. Electricity thus became his language, one he would later express in his work in poetic, technical, sociopolitical, philosophical, and metaphysical ways.

Being his sister is like living beside a volcano of ideas. It is learning to see the world differently. Jean is not simply an artist: he is a revealer, capable of anticipating reality and the present rather than merely reflecting them. Every discarded object becomes a spark for a new idea so that even simple cardboard transforms into intricate electrical circuits, etched with grooves and strung with exposed wires. Because he does not merely copy – he transforms: to survive, to play, and to imagine an Africa that grafts its identity onto the tree of global art and science without considering itself inferior. In his eyes, Africa is a laboratory of original ideas, a place of subtle transformation where art becomes a catalyst for change and a tool for repairing memory, injustices, and broken systems. His works, nourished by this context, unsettle dominant technologies and the promises of progress, interrogating society, technology, ecology, and colonial memory, while proposing an alternative modernity: humbler, more attentive, and vibrantly alive.

As children, we lived with scarcity, compelled to tinker each day because of our lack of access to commercial goods. But Jean went further: he transformed this tinkering into an imagination of rare intensity. He revolutionized what already existed, making objects and electricity speak in ways their original creators had never intended.

IMAGES INVENT THEMSELVES

Jean Katambayi Mukendi

IMAG-IN

Images invent themselves

- Faces, different horizons may reveal affinities: the approaches to creation vary through silhouettes.
- The trick of the title and its alternatives: the ideal title is one syllable. It can just as well be a book, as long as it allows the flow to circulate between the observer and nature and back again.
- Error. Or rather: trial and error, the key to creation. The painter does not trust their brush. Scratch, the printer behaves the same way.
- Diversion: what one thinks one is showing, what one intends to show, what one can show, what one believes one is showing.
- The image of the work vs. the work of the image: modern and contemporary. Black and white. Fate and fantasy. Facticity and power.
- A project: the star seeks its galaxy – Matos, closed-door day. There are many tricks. The goal is to reconcile the recipe of the 'didactic conflict.' Grasp the favorable points within the 'E.T.É.' system.
- Numerology: numerical coincidences – or coincidences of another kind – can confirm the course or recourse of the work. The sixth sense and availability come into play.
- Diversion, animation, photography, and the painting of chance: no. Chance for the sake of chance! Every act inscribed in the relationship to the human is a human act, bearing the design-destiny tandem.

APPROACH

The oeuvre is the life of the artist; the artwork is a pretext for the work – everything feeds into it. The relationship to nature, to destiny, or to design is a fundamental factor in creation.

There is a need to ask the question: is there a necessity, or is it simply to lay the foundation for another question?

Defining the question is a key stage, as it provides a path for the process and the means to be activated for creation. It is at this stage that one must discover how to communicate with the transmitting universe. It is important to align yourself with the elements of transmission – those you yourself define, sometimes by chance. They can verify elements found in nature. For example, you may find that your work has already begun elsewhere, or even appeared on television, while you believed you were conceiving it from scratch. This is a good sign.

Note things down if possible, using various signs. Exchange and discuss, sometimes without announcing the approach – or sometimes making it explicit. It depends on where the energies lie.

Weigh the cost of production and see how to divert the medium, or keep it in writing, or integrate it as part of another process.

Skillfully navigate the point of no return during creation. This is a concept in itself. Around two-third of the way through, in terms of time and energy, every creation seems ephemeral; many artists abandon their works at this stage. The challenge is to make good use of this phase of decompression. Once the stage of doubt has passed, the work almost creates itself. It pulls you along.

When does a work begin to live? Do we envision the result at the beginning, at the end, or along the way? Works whose energy lines have been well placed pose no problems. Sometimes it is important to involve a third person for critique – someone outside both your inner and outer selves.

The celebration of the work: it transmits energies, crosses generations, and is beautiful to behold. More often than not, the artist who becomes fully immersed in their outer self loses touch with the moments of creation.

..... This text was originally written as the foreword to the residency report
..... for Katambayi's 2016 residency at WIELS in Brussels.

SINUETTE

Jean Katambayi Mukendi

Forms and gestures combine and separate in nature to give rise to other forms. The cycle is perpetual and carries with it sensations, emotions, and transformations.

Junction: A junction is the meeting of subtle nuances. It can be formed to create a unified whole or to leave spaces for concealment. Between these two movements lies a plastic margin, open to manipulation.

Construction cloud or construction lines: Construction lines can be of several kinds: from Monge's theorem and plane geometry to convergent perspective, artists have devised particular constructions for expressive purposes. In this work, the focus is on tangent arcs, which may share the same radius, arise from different radii, or come from complementary ones.

Adjusting the junction: It is desirable for the silhouette to be directly discernible within the construction cloud. If it is an arbitrary image, the question does not arise: one simply constructs it. But if the form is oriented, arcs must be added to refine its shape. This is why it is important to include as many arcs as possible within the canvas.

Tangent and secant: This concept both parallels and complements the idea of a junction. Arcs may be joined by the direct collision of their directions or by their gentle friction. Both approaches serve the intended outcome. Art based on tangential extension follows a natural principle: few movements in nature occur without a continuous, tangential flow. It is this continuity that imbues the body with energy and aesthetic harmony. To extend a circular arc tangentially with a second arc of the same radius or a different radius, it is sufficient to place the center of the extending arc on the line passing through the center of the first arc.

Managing framing: The idea of framing a drawing or figure has shifted over time. The focus was often central, in both theme and form. Since the concept of the center is open to interpretation, the objective remains anchored at its core, even if plane geometry seems to contradict the intended form. Regardless of approach, the artist is always tasked with guiding the boundaries of their frame. This management can shape occupancy, scale, perception, discretion, and subtlety.

Colors: Color is the expression of light in its classical definition. This is why a baby's eye is struck by color, having spent a long time in an

environment presumed to be dark – or, better yet, with eyes closed. Consequently, color is an emotion of sight. Color can send positive signals to the nervous system for one purpose or another. Color is self-sufficient – that is, it can find a pretext at any time and under any circumstance. It is for the purposes of creation, ideology, or normalization that color is defined. In any case, color remains indisputably beautiful, akin to a people, a language, a stone, or the sky.

Genre, evolution, equation, species, mode: all of this requires time, yet time is inalienable.

These are the questions the world asks in the present moment: is the human species aesthetically complete, or does it require augmentation? Different schools of thought answer this question in different ways. For some, it is an aesthetic worth defending, one that can be refined. For others, improvement can be deliberately provoked and achieved for a purpose. Are we fixed, or does our system follow an evolutionary current? Later, we will turn to the major existentialist schools of thought that have grappled with this question. For now, it is the populist debate that interests us, insofar as it reflects what has been understood, through doctrinal or philosophical platforms that circulate ideas. This suggests that, beyond the limited access to reading among the African masses due to the vast imbalance of the global economy, there are also those entrusted with transmission who shape perspectives for a variety of reasons, not least ignorance.

The solar system is a fixed program for some and represents evolution for others. At this pace, it becomes clear why, for instance, African political systems are a morass, marked by rigid intransigence with no breach. Yet a breach is what allows humanity to emerge. For there is a certain alignment to be achieved when one seeks to reach optimal restorative energies: the individual aligned within, the collective aligned with society, and all aligned with nature. This is the perfect line, although it is difficult to attain due to philosophical conflicts of all kinds that torment the individual. The essential task is to reduce gaps in alignment. This practice demands sacrifice – the spark our systems require. Only then can engagement and routine follow.

..... This text was originally written as the foreword to *Sinnette*,
..... an analysis by Katambayi of his *Afrolampe* drawings.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Fig. 00

Portrait of Jean Katambayi Mukendi at his home in Lubumbashi, with one of his children and *Pylone 53*, September 2013
Photo by Sammy Baloji

Fig. 01

Katambayi with his mother and some of his siblings at his birthday party at the Gécamines workers' camp, ca. 1985.
From left to right: Eva Kabongo Madioono, Julie Musau, Marcel Kabongo, Sidonie Manyonga, Jean Katambayi, and Bernard Musakai Kangombe
Photographer unknown

Fig. 02

Calcul mental, 2016, Felt-tip pen and marker pen on hardboard, 76 × 37 cm
Collection Brande-Luyten, Belgium
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis

Fig. 03

Au dedans des murs, 2023, Mixed media installation including archives from the MRAC—Royal Museum for Central Africa Collection and the National Archives of Belgium, 190 × 320 × 39 cm
Installation view of the exhibition *Style Congo*, CIVA, Brussel, 2023
Photo by Philip Dujardin

Fig. 04

Lester, 2011, Pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, cardboard, electric wires, LED lamps and plastic, 30 × 50 × 50 cm
Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Seer*, Kohta, Helsinki, 2022
Collection De Vleeschouwer-Pieters, Belgium
Photo by Jussi Tiainen

Fig. 05

Écoson, 2010, Cardboard, clock, electrical wires, jars, LED lamps, multimeters, paper, and plastic, 150 × 200 × 80 cm

Fig. 06

Commerce angulaire, 2016, Marker pen, ballpoint pen, pencil, and collage on paper, 118 × 83 cm
Collection Mu.ZEE, Ostend
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis

Fig. 07

Gateaumium, 2016, Marker pen and collage on found map and hardboard, 70 × 85.5 cm
Collection Mu.ZEE, Ostend
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis

Fig. 08

mukendi kabongo Air hybrid Wings RDC26FG, 2025, Bicycle rims, canvas, and wood, 293 × 129 × 1010 cm
Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, co-produced with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2026
Photo by Frank Sperling

Fig. 09

Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, co-produced with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2026
Photo by Frank Sperling

Fig. 10

Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, co-produced with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2026
Photo by Frank Sperling

Fig. 11

Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, co-produced with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2026
Photo by Frank Sperling

Fig. 12

In het begin was er het begin, 2017, Glue on paper, 100 × 70 cm
Private collection, Antwerp
Photo by Isabelle Arthuis

Fig. 13

Visa Afrolampe Nairobi, 2018, Ballpoint pen on paper, 42 × 29.7 cm
Collection Frac MÉCA, Bordeaux
Photo by Simon Delobel

Fig. 14

Visafrolampe, 2018, Ballpoint pen and marker pen on paper, 29.7 × 42 cm
Photo by Simon Delobel

Fig. 15

Afrolampe Sturmlanterne, March 2021, Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm
Photo by Cedric Mussano

Fig. 16

Katambayi at the gate leading to his house and studio in Lubumbashi, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 17

Katambayi in front of the drawing *Cristal* (2015) in his studio in Lubumbashi, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 18

The work *Miroir* (2016) in Katambayi's studio in Lubumbashi, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 19

A component for a sculptural work in Katambayi's studio in Lubumbashi, surrounded by administrative documents and the belongings of the building's owner, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 20

Katambayi and his daughter Johanne in his studio in Lubumbashi, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 21

Visitors looking at Katambayi's work *Naufrage* during *Future Genealogies: Tales from the Equatorian Line*, Lubumbashi Biennial, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 22

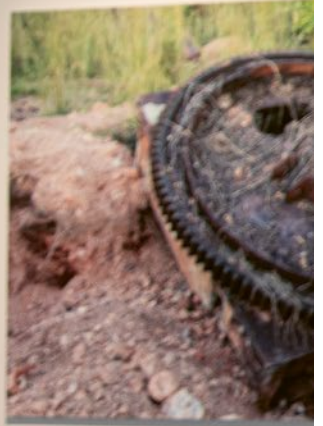
The performance *Tesla Crash (A Speculation)* by Sammy Baloji, Marjolijn Dijkman, Katambayi and Daddy Tshikaya during *Future Genealogies: Tales from the Equatorian Line*, Lubumbashi Biennial, 2019
Photo by Julien De Bock

Fig. 23

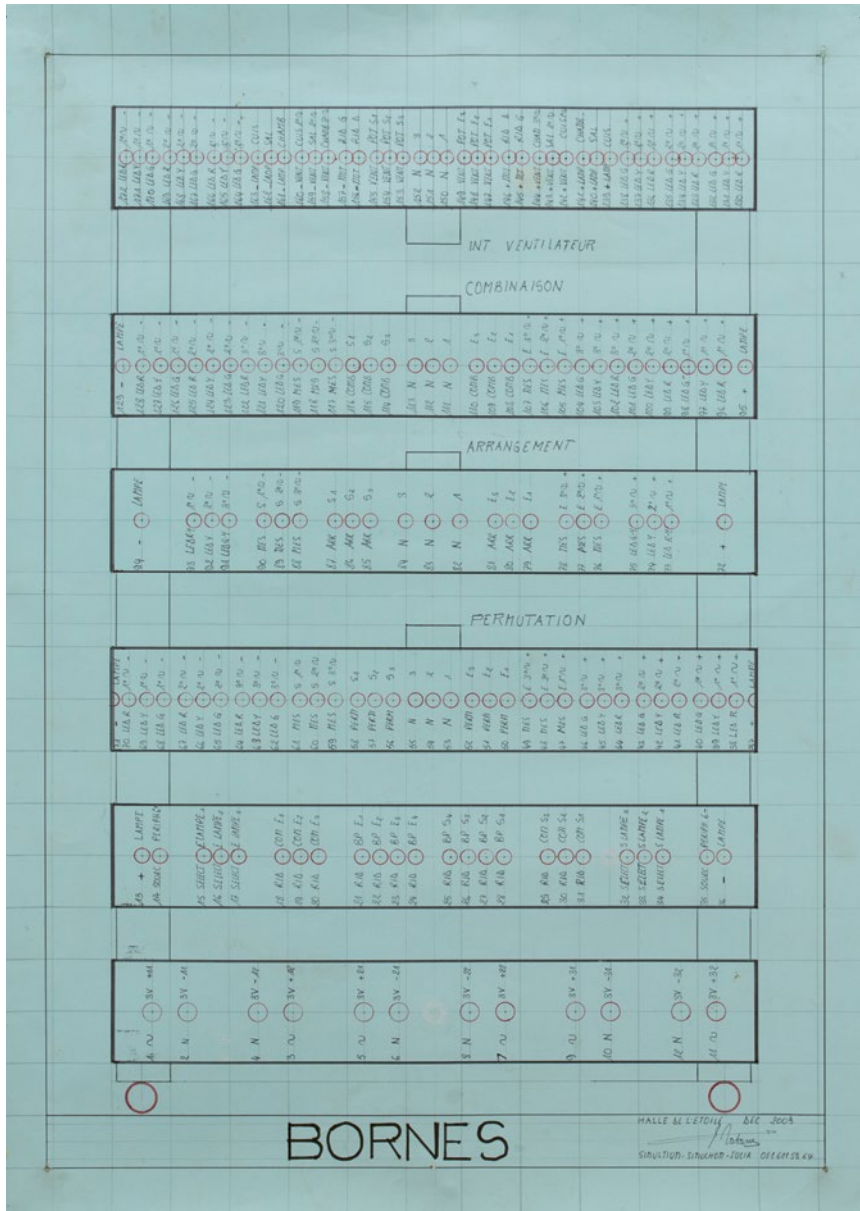
Katambayi's parents, Sidonie Manyonga and Marcelin Muana Mukendi, ca. 1974.
Photographer unknown

Works

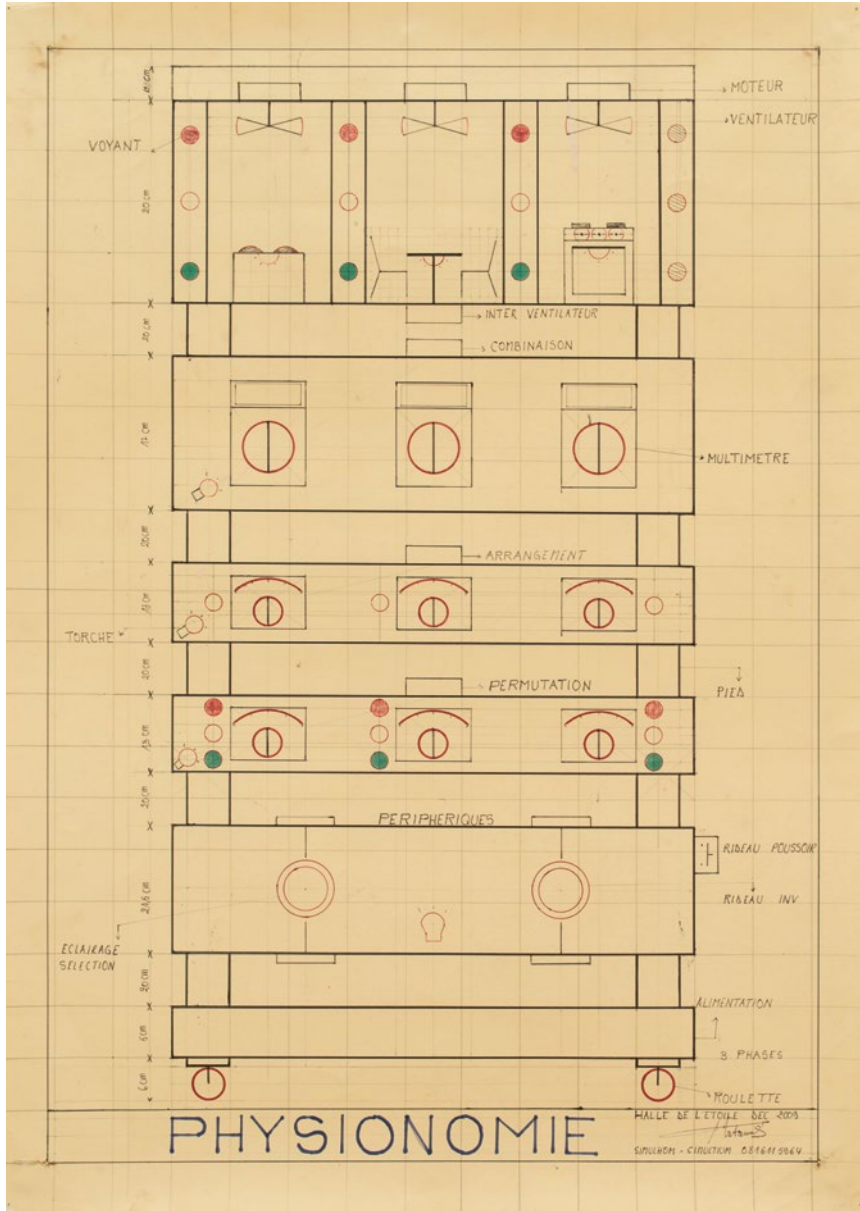




The Concentrator, 2022, Mixed media installation, 200 x 350 x 120 cm



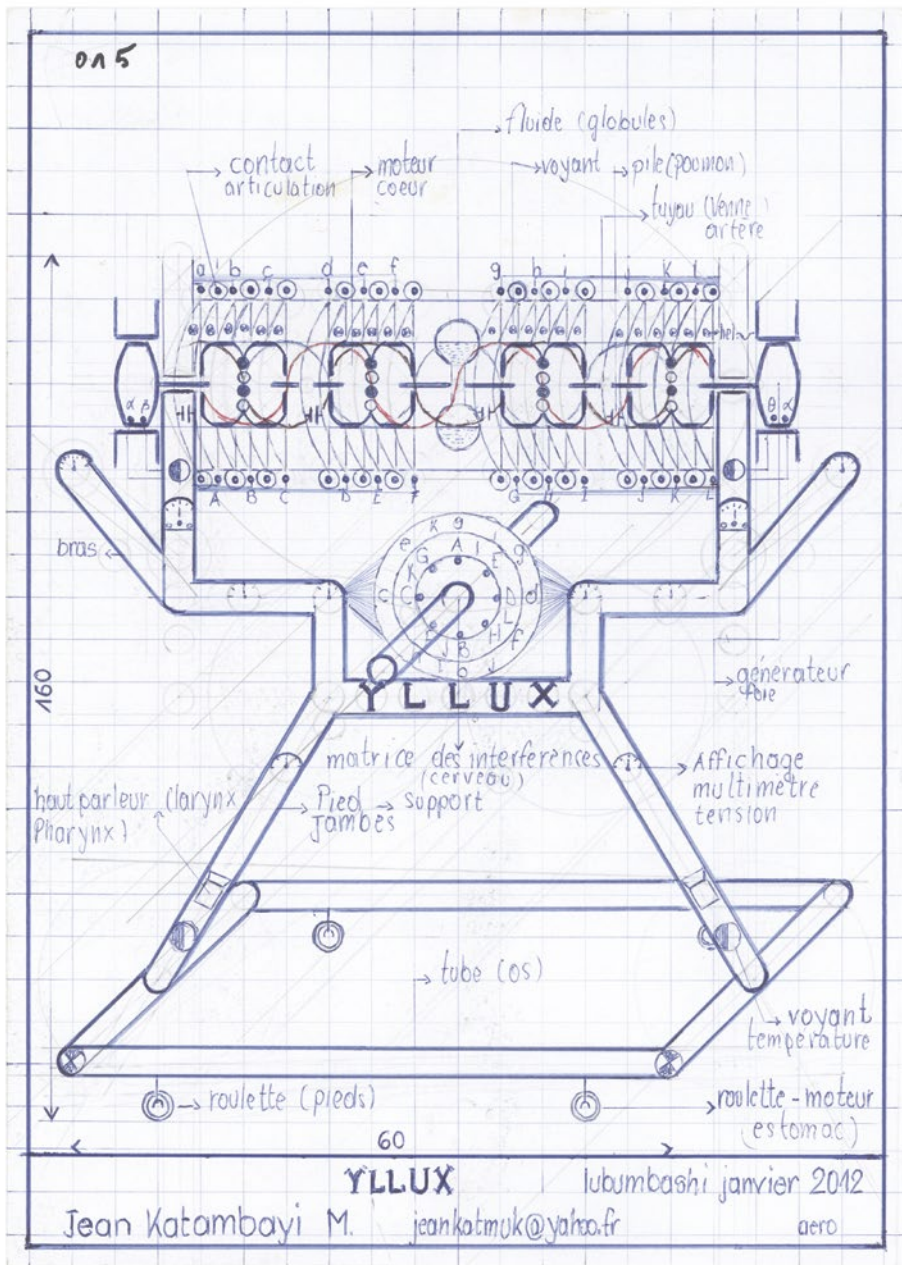
Bornes (Simulhom-Simultium), 2009, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 70 x 50 cm



Physionomie (Simulhom-Simultium), 2009, Ballpoint pen, felt-tip pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 70 x 50 cm



Simultium, 2009, Batteries, cardboard, electrical wires, multimeters, plastic, and plastic wheels, 179 × 50 × 51 cm



Yllux, 2012, Ballpoint pen and pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm



Yllux, 2012, Pen on paper, batteries, cardboard, electrical wires, and plastic wheels, 100 x 120 x 90 cm





Sphère, 2016, Ballpoint pen on paper, cardboard, copper, lamp, mirrors, motion detector, paper, plastic, rope, tape, and wood, 95 x 95 x 140 cm



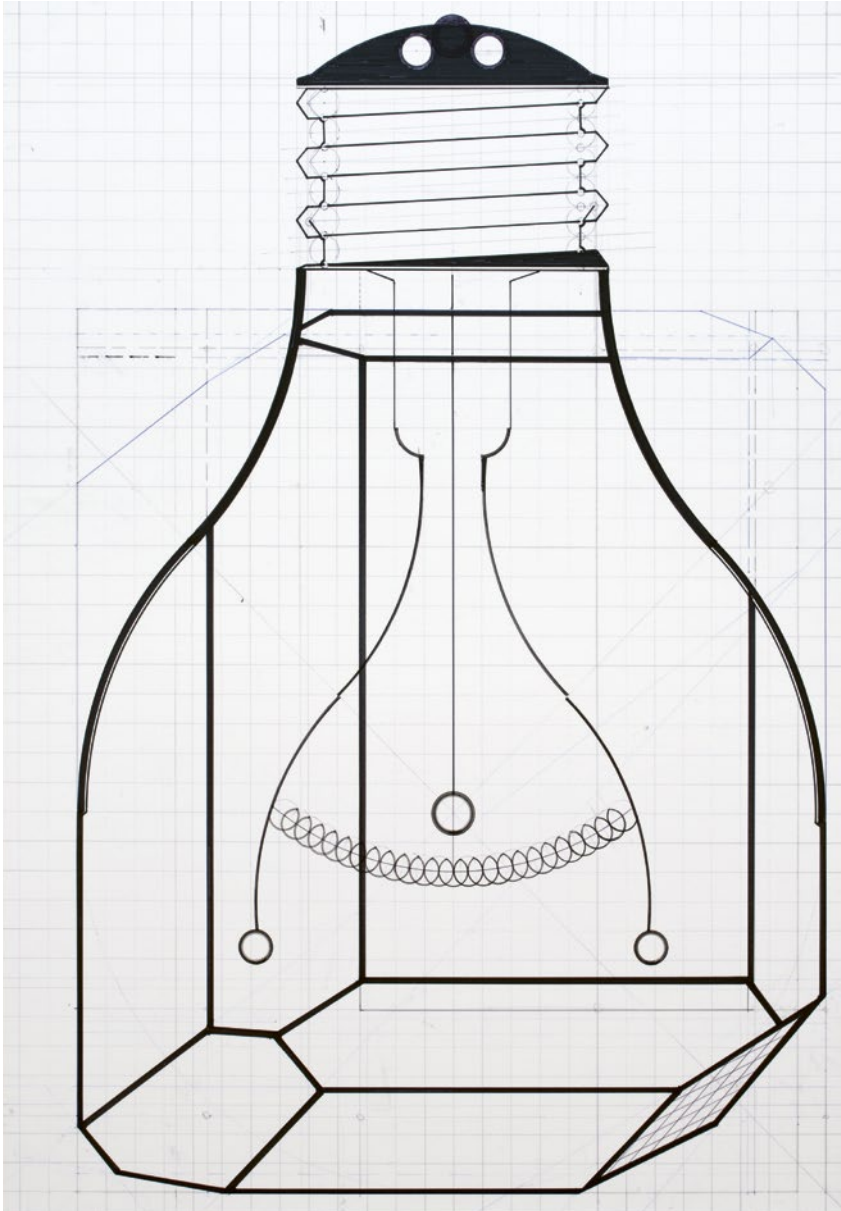
Arolampe #1, 2016, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 83 × 58.6 cm



Afolampe #2, 2016, Ballpoint pen and pencil on paper, 83 × 58.6 cm



Afolampe #3, 2016, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 83 × 58.6 cm



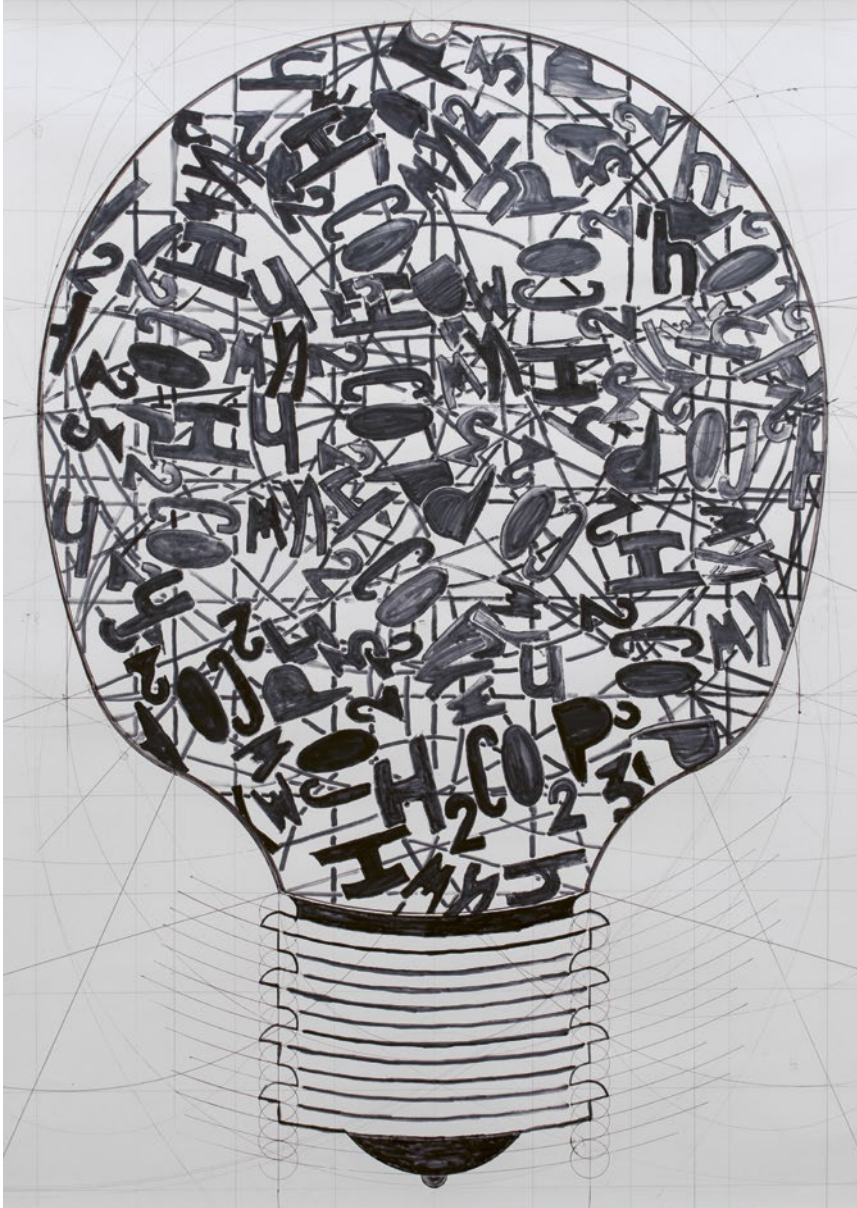
Cristallampe, 2016, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 83 × 58.6 cm



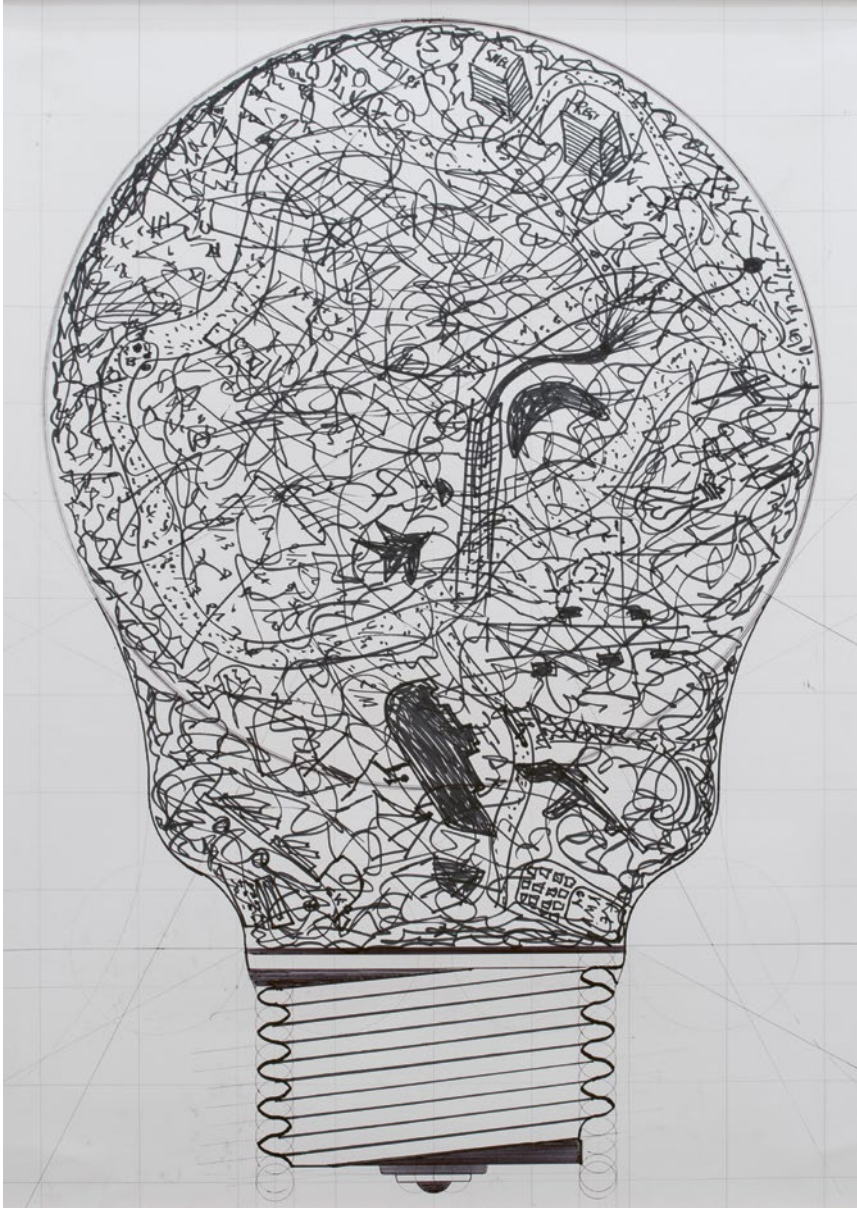
Afolampe (Lubumbashi Series), 2017, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 100 x 70 cm



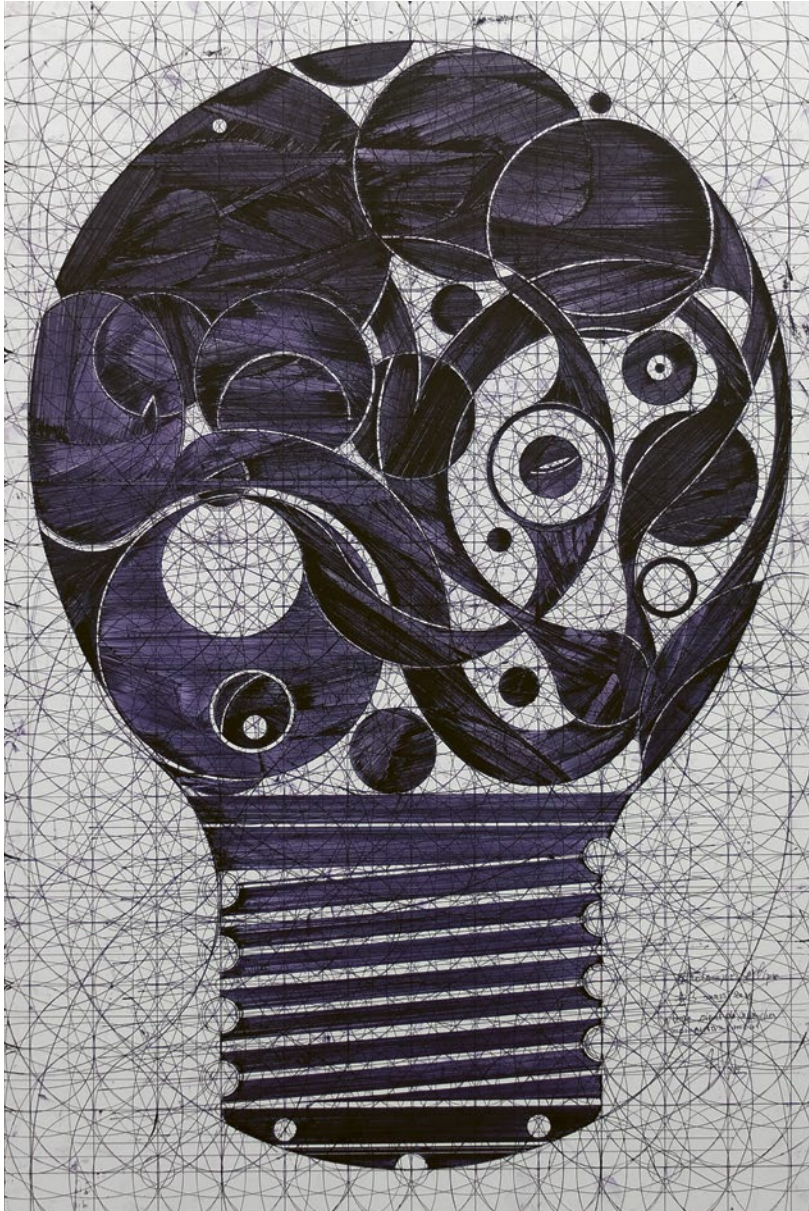
Afrolampe (Lubumbashi Series), 2017, Ballpoint pen and pencil on paper, 100 × 70 cm



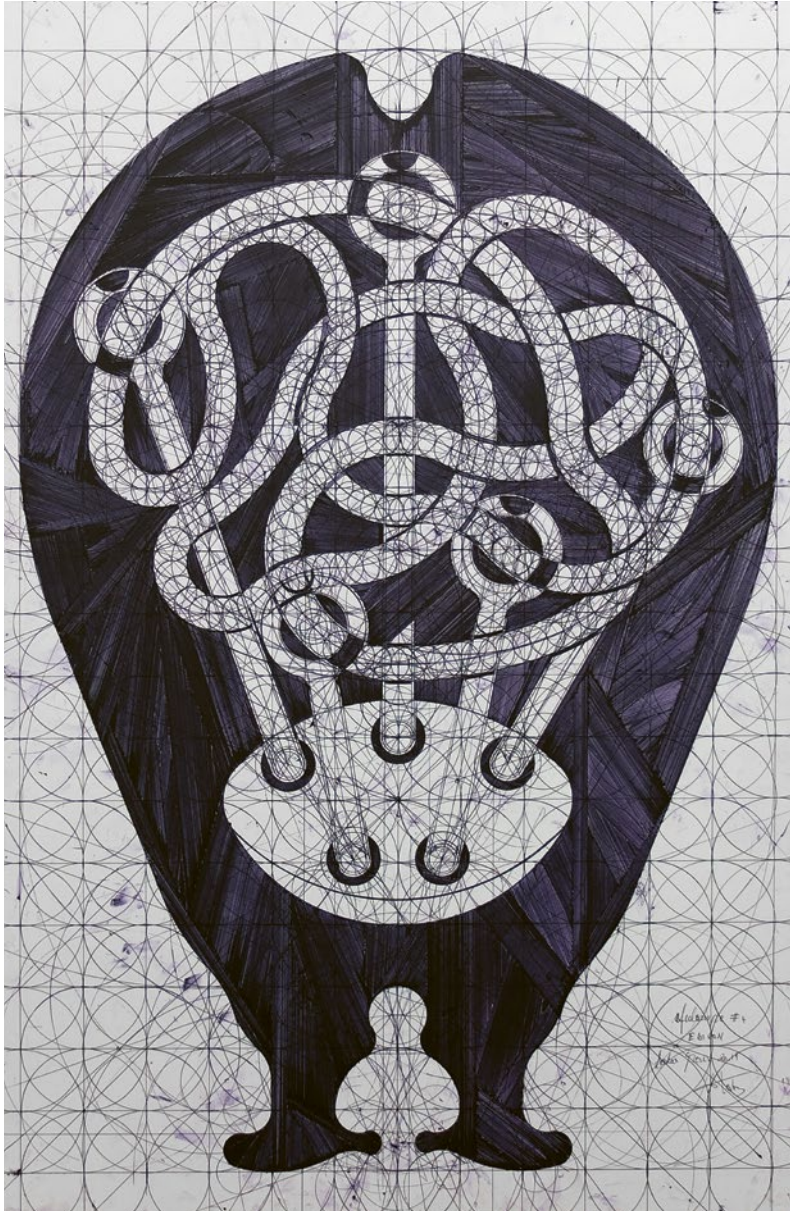
Afolampe (Lubumbashi Series), 2017, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afrolampe (Lubumbashi Series), 2017, Ballpoint pen, marker pen, and pencil on paper, 100 × 70 cm



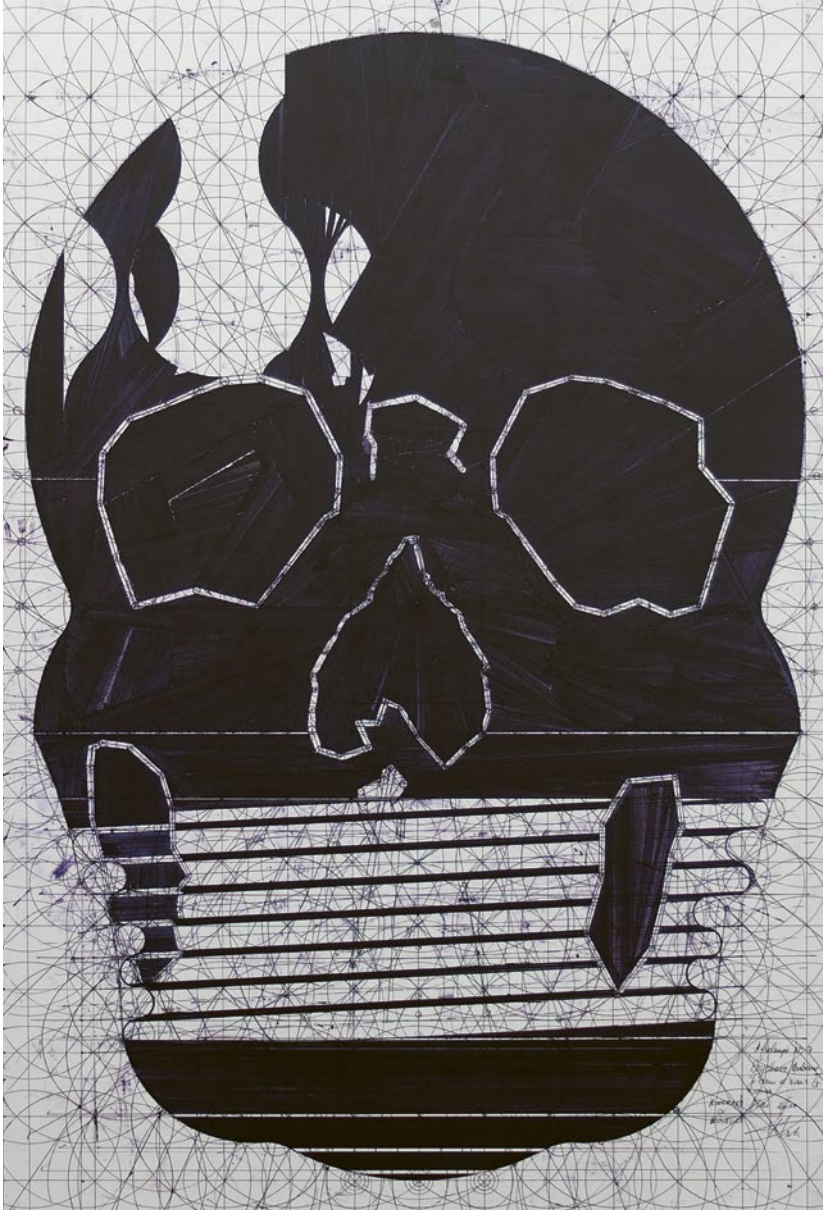
Afrolampe #3 Éclipse (La terre vient de se pencher momentanément), March 2019, Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



Afolampe #4 Edison, March 2019 (Dakar), Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afolampe #5 Signature, April 2019 (Dakar), Ballpoint pen and marker pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afrolampe #7 (Je viens d'avoir le visa), May 2019 (Kinshasa and Brussels), Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm





Sammy Baloji, Mukendi, Marjolijn Dijkman, and Daddy Tshikaya, *Tesla Crash, A Speculation*, 2019,
Performance electrifying a copper wire replica of a Tesla Model S, 400 x 180 x 141 cm



Tire-lire, 2019, Table with 40 kilograms of copper euro coins, 50 x 50 x 5.5 cm



Congo Coin, 2019, Marker pen, copper wire, gold paper, and silver paper on cardboard, 180 x 180 x 13 cm



Gécaruines, 2016, Marker pen on paper, beer crates, cardboard, glue, MDF dust, plastic, and tape, 159 × 72 × 96 cm



Voyant, 2015, Cardboard, electrical wires, motors, paper, plastic foil, and styrofoam, 360 x 120 x 90 cm





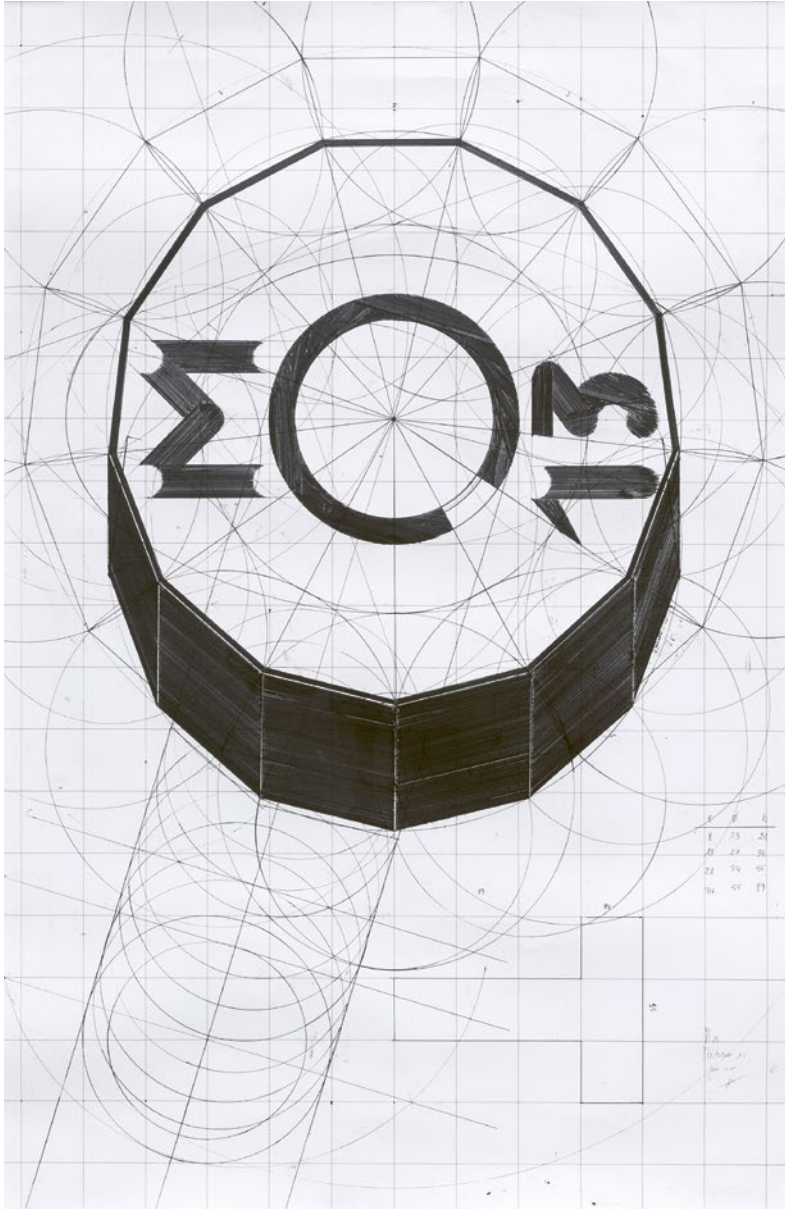
marsphairlines, 2016, Marker pen on painted hardboard, 93 × 85 × 68 cm



Trotation, 2011, Cardboard, copper, electrical wires, electronics, motors, paper, plastic bottle, LED lamps, screws and wheels, 100 x 90 x 90 cm



Onderhandeling, 2019, Cardboard, copper, electrical wires, LED lamps, motors, paper, ping pong balls, plexiglass, and wheels, 161 × 116 × 99 cm



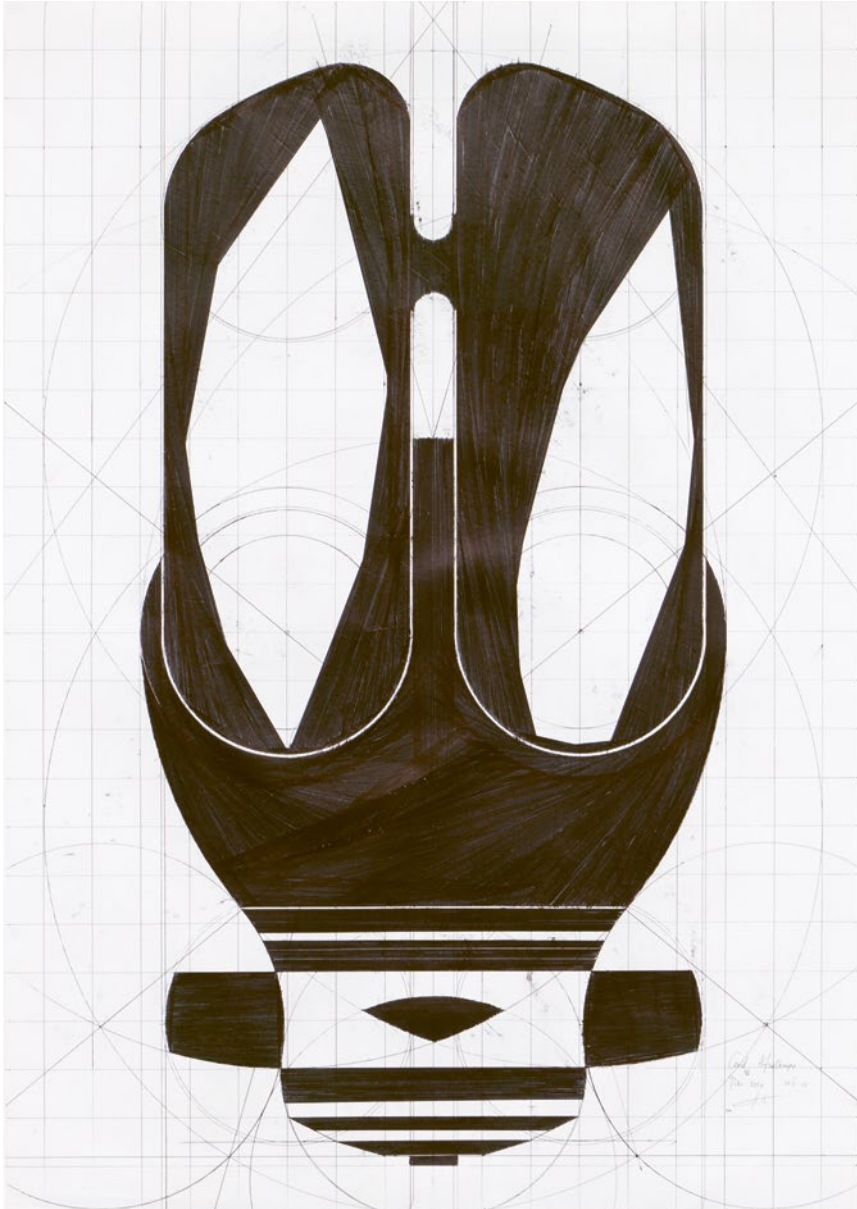
M13 (*Métrieque 13*), June 2019, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



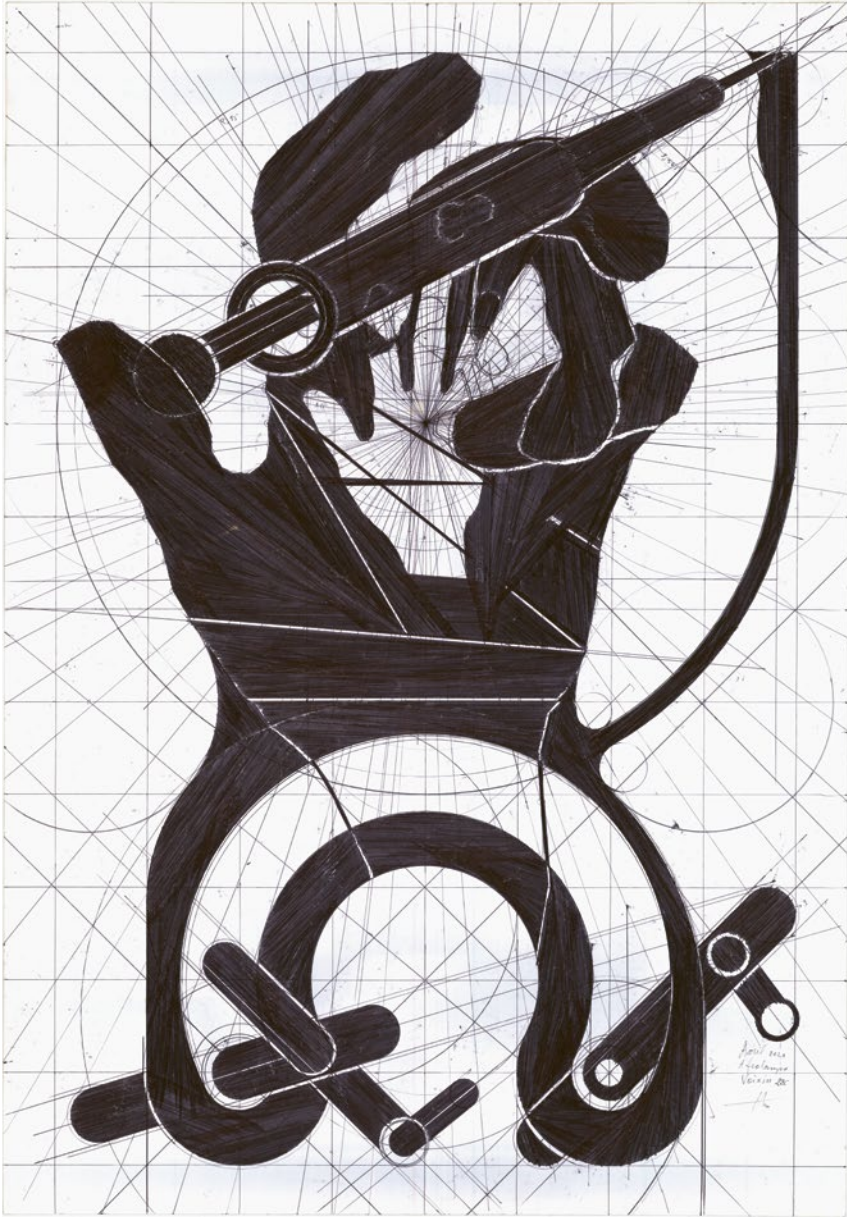
Covid Afrolampe, May 2020 00h00, Ballpoint pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



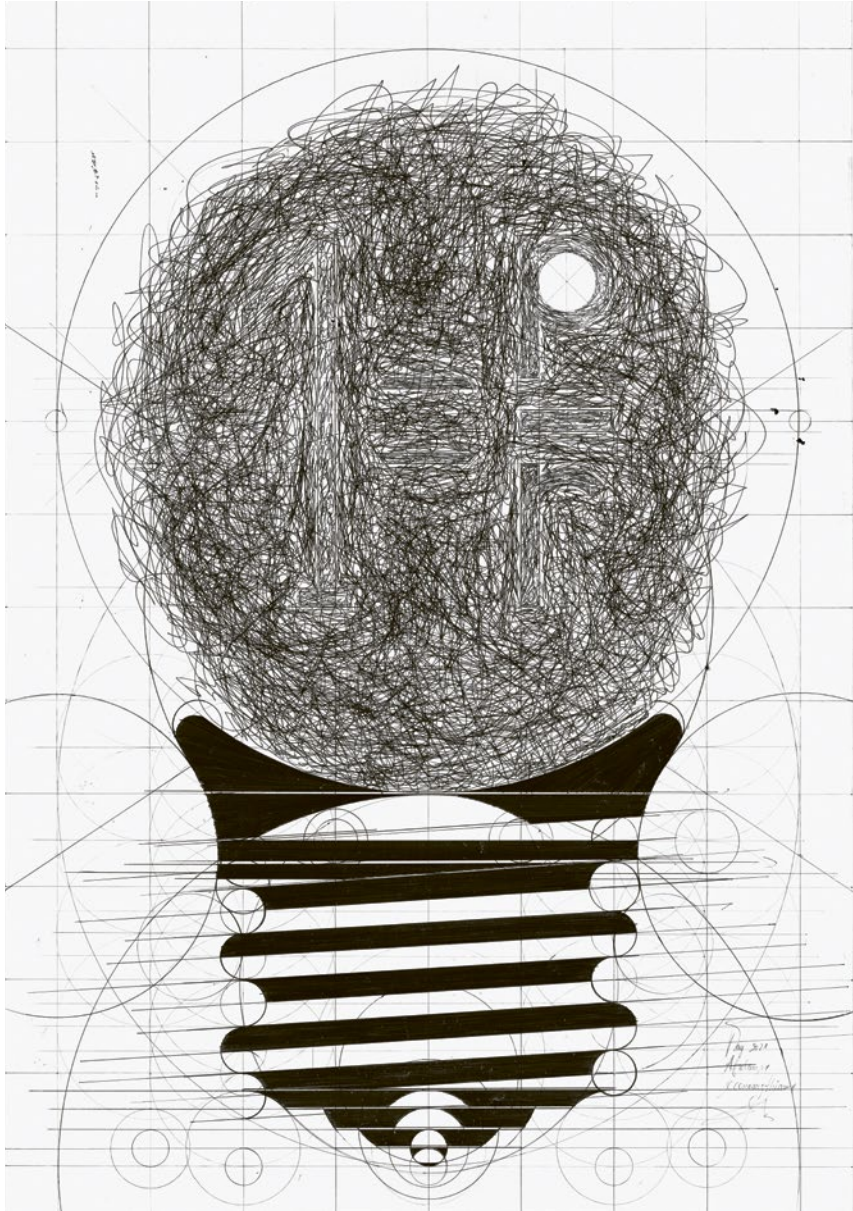
Covid Afrolampe XXIX Standard, May 2020 2h30, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



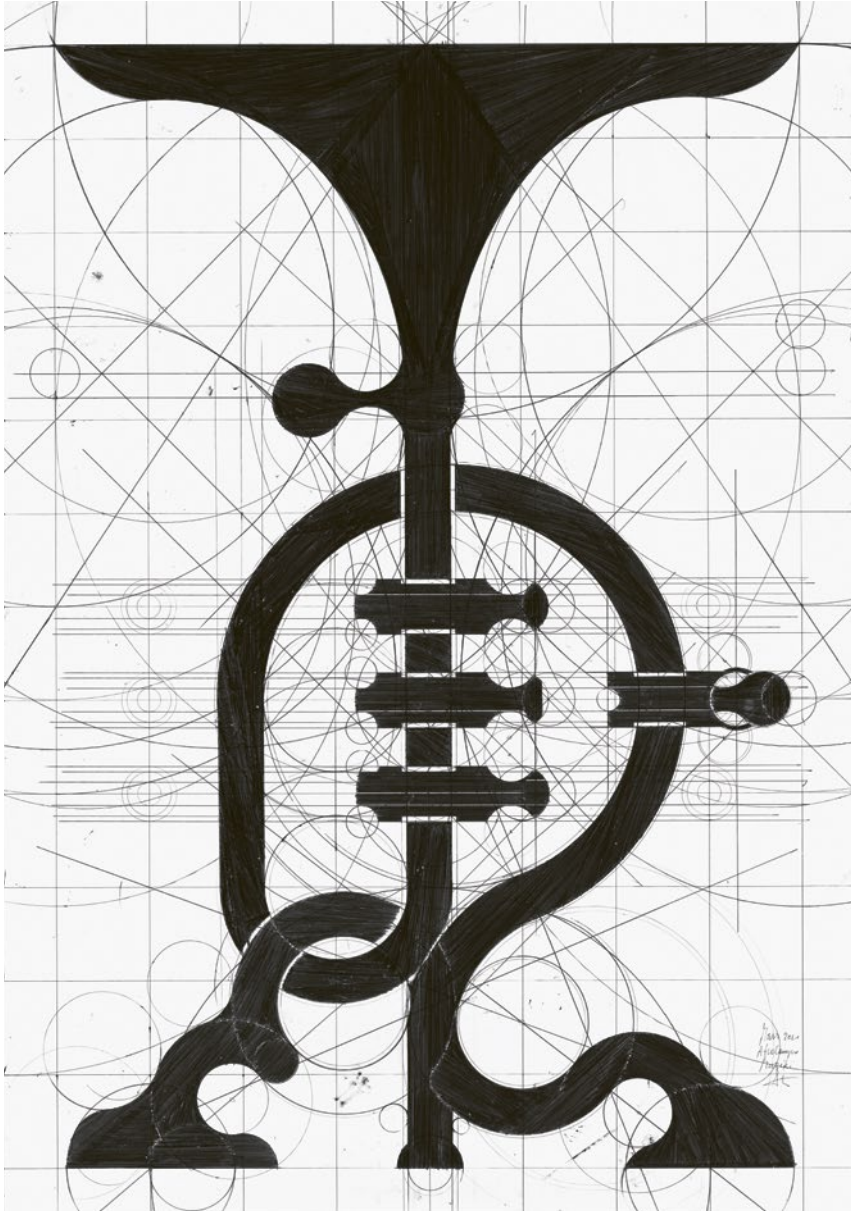
Covid Afrolampe, May 2020 01h05, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



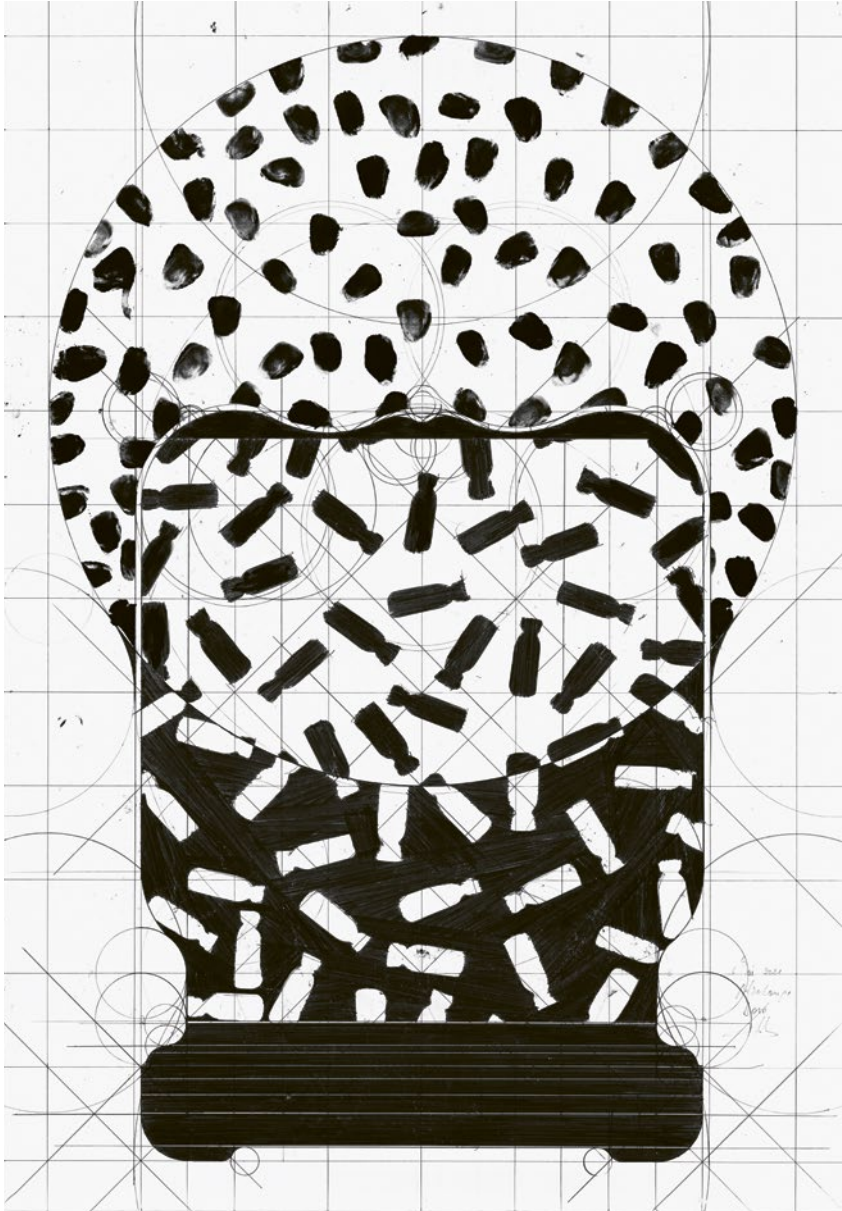
Afrolampe Vaxin 236, April 2020, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 75 cm



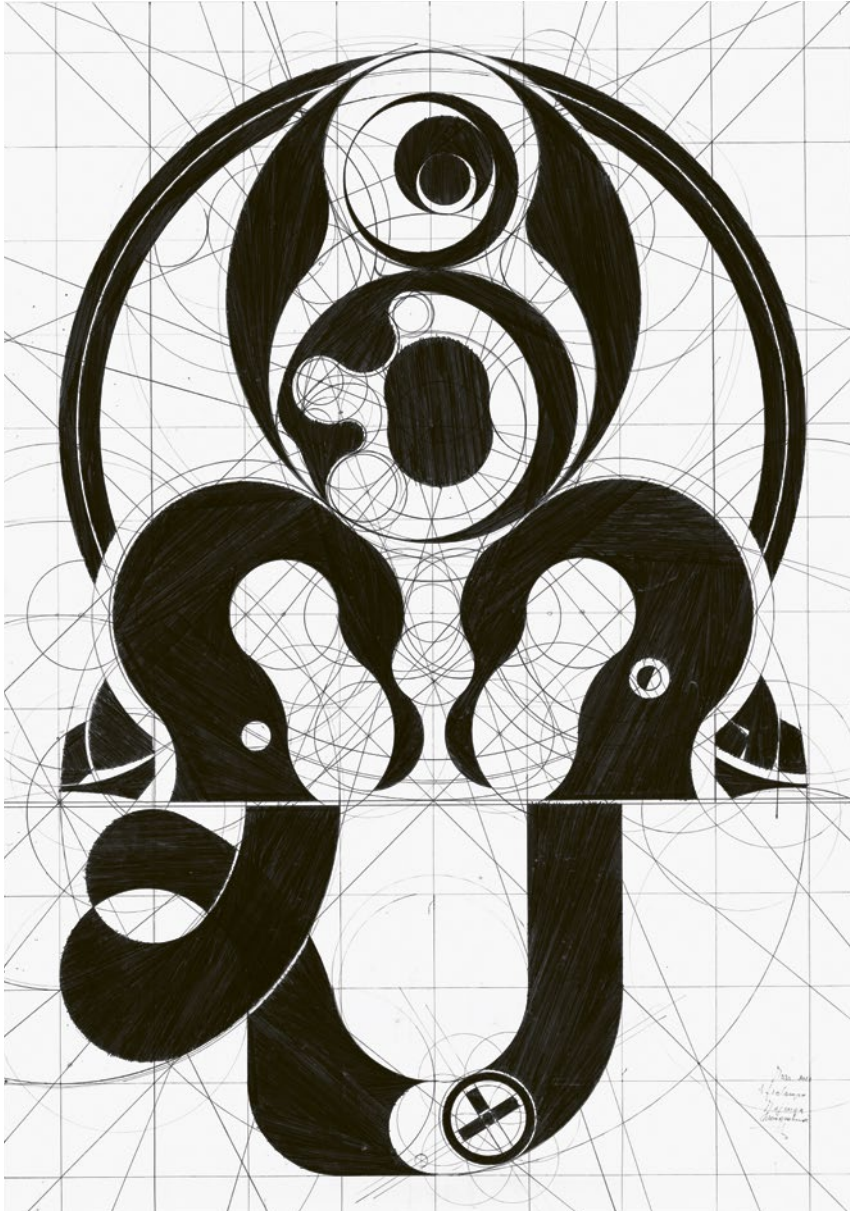
Arolampe Économythisme, May 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



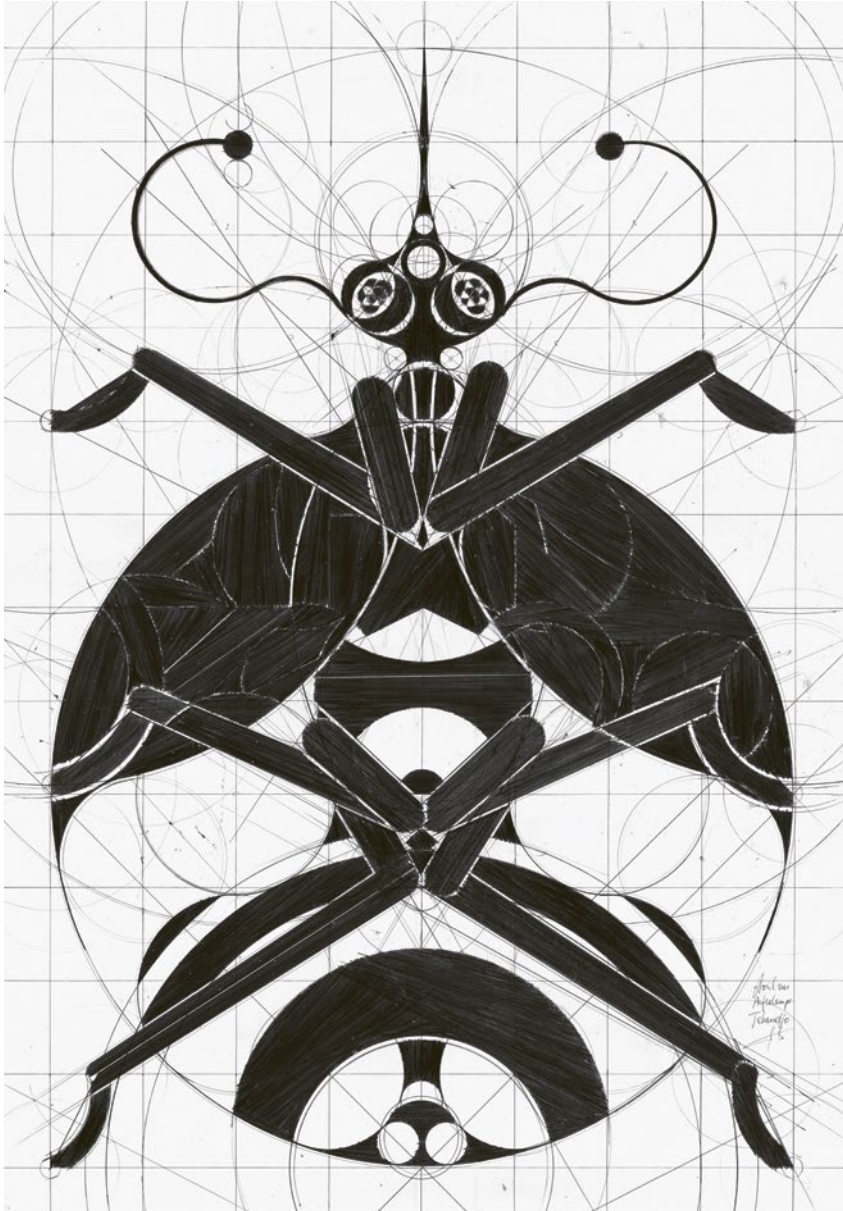
Afrolampe Muziki, March 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



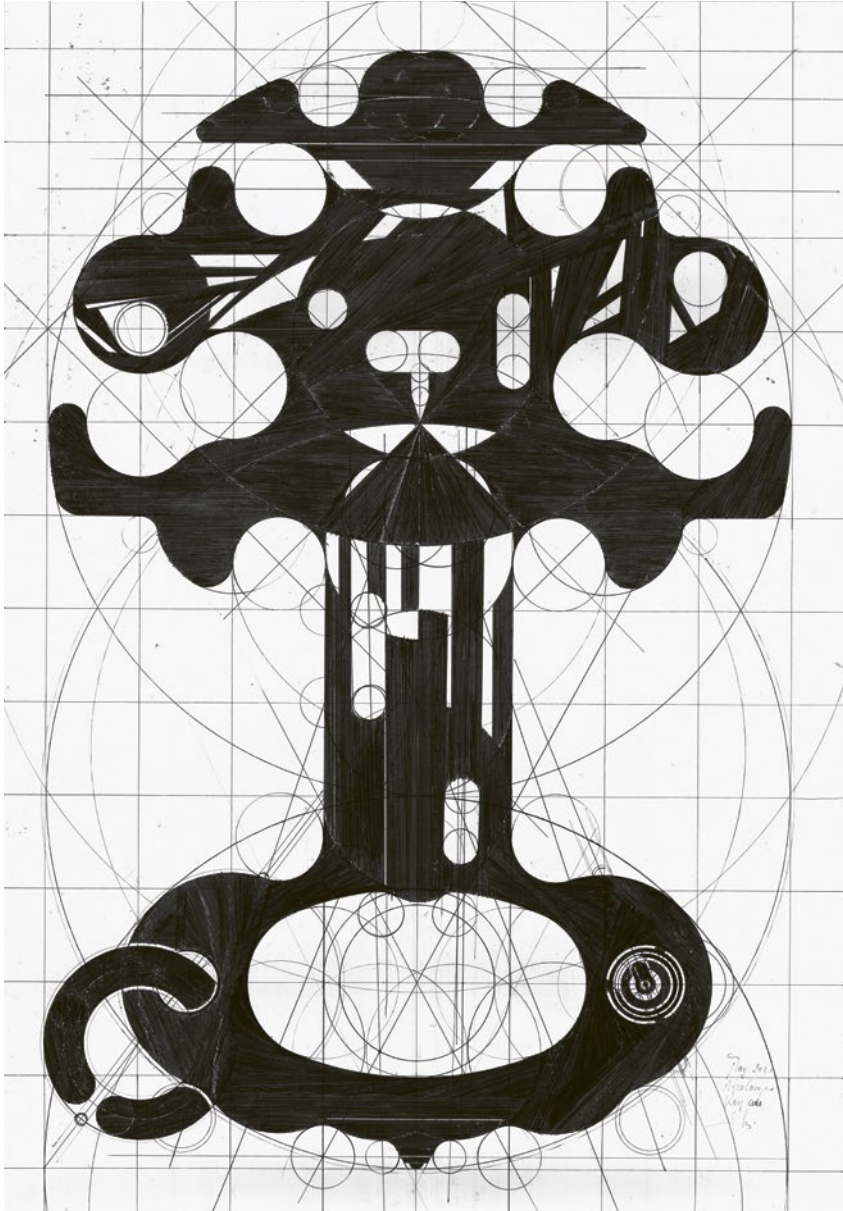
Afolampe Dose, May 6, 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



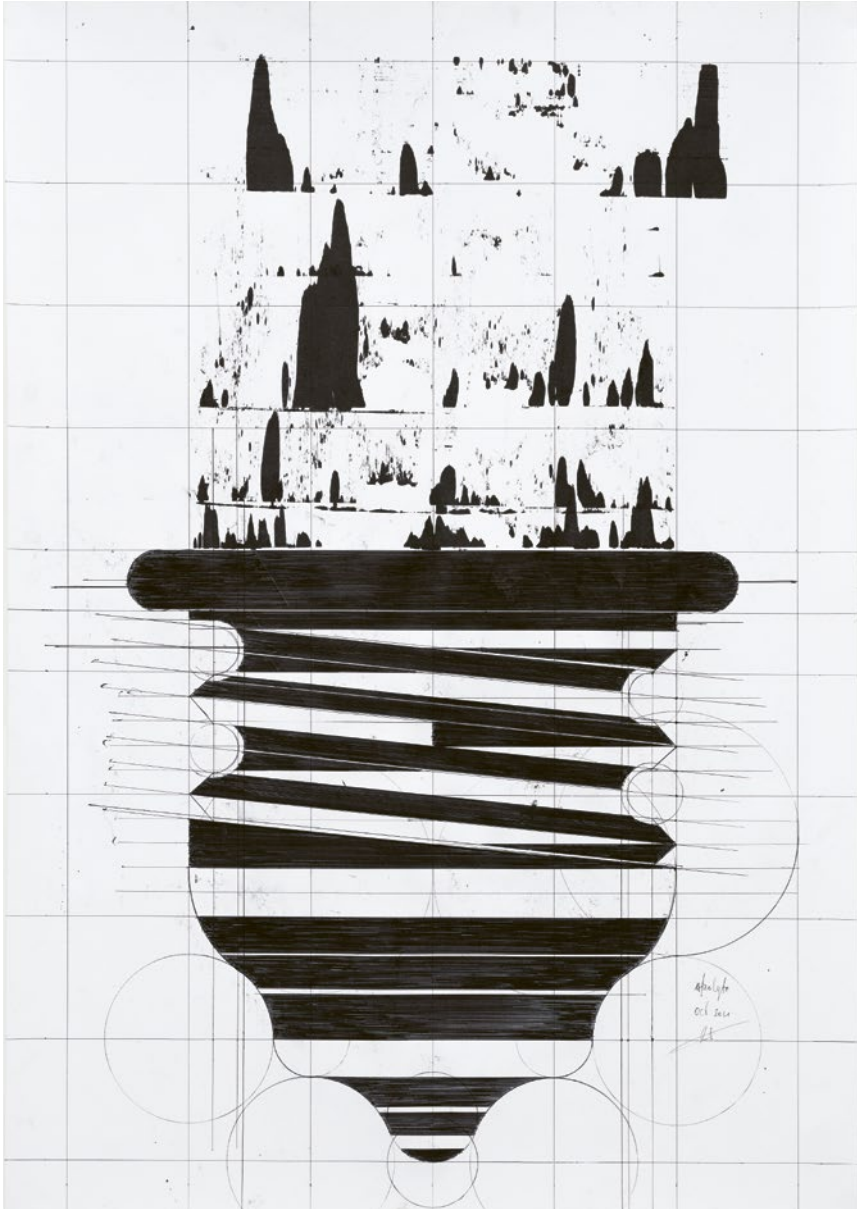
Afrolampe Mujinga Chromosonic, March 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afrolampe Tshandjo, April 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



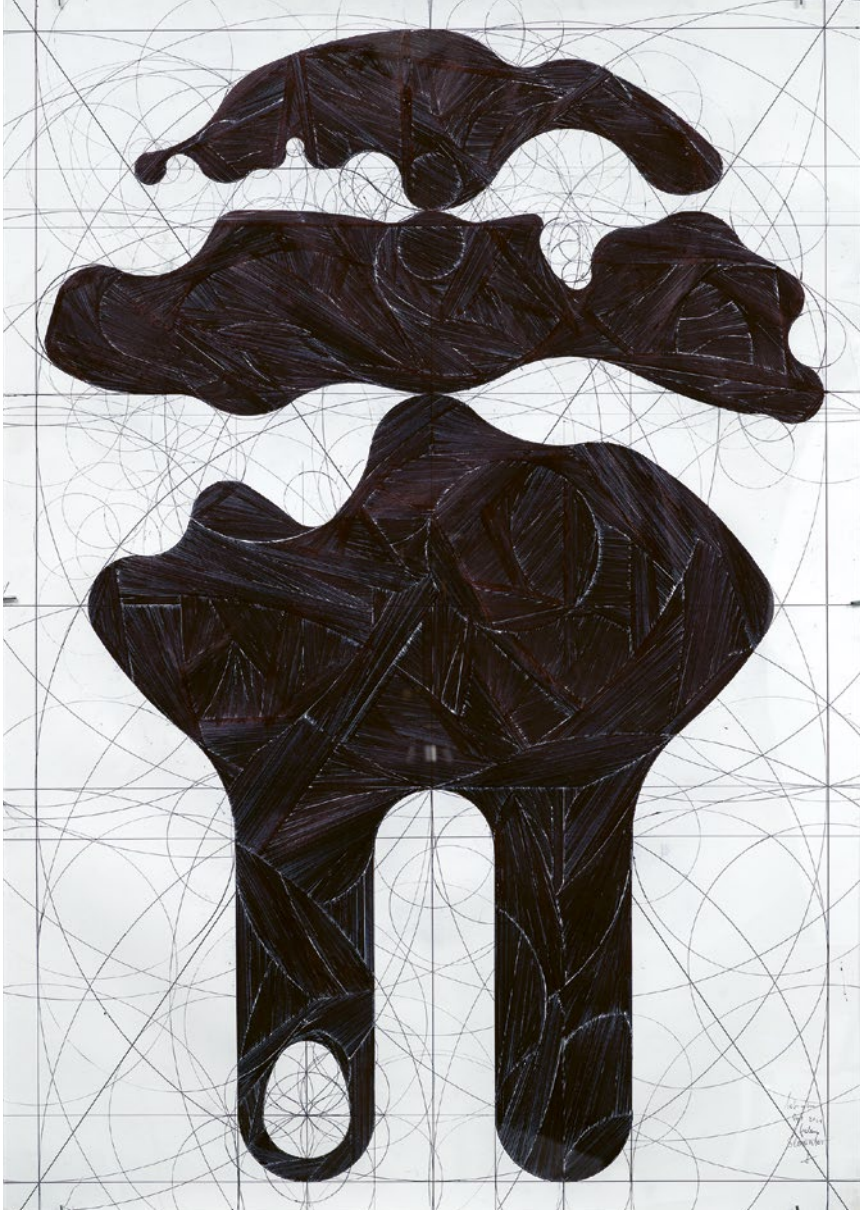
Afrolampe Key Code, May 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



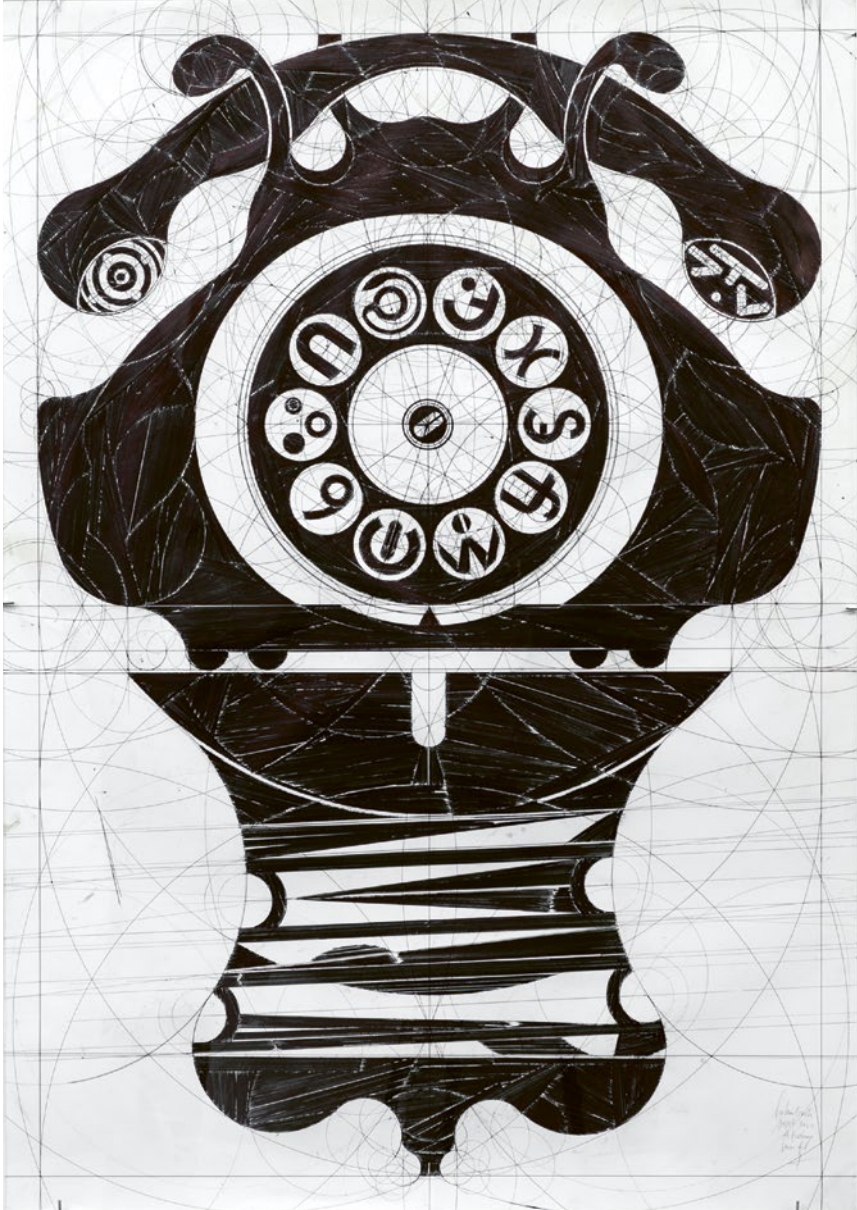
Afrolyte, October 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afolamp Umbilical, October 2021, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Arolamp Gladiator, September 2024, Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



Afrolamp Sans Fil, September 2024 (Lubumbashi), Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



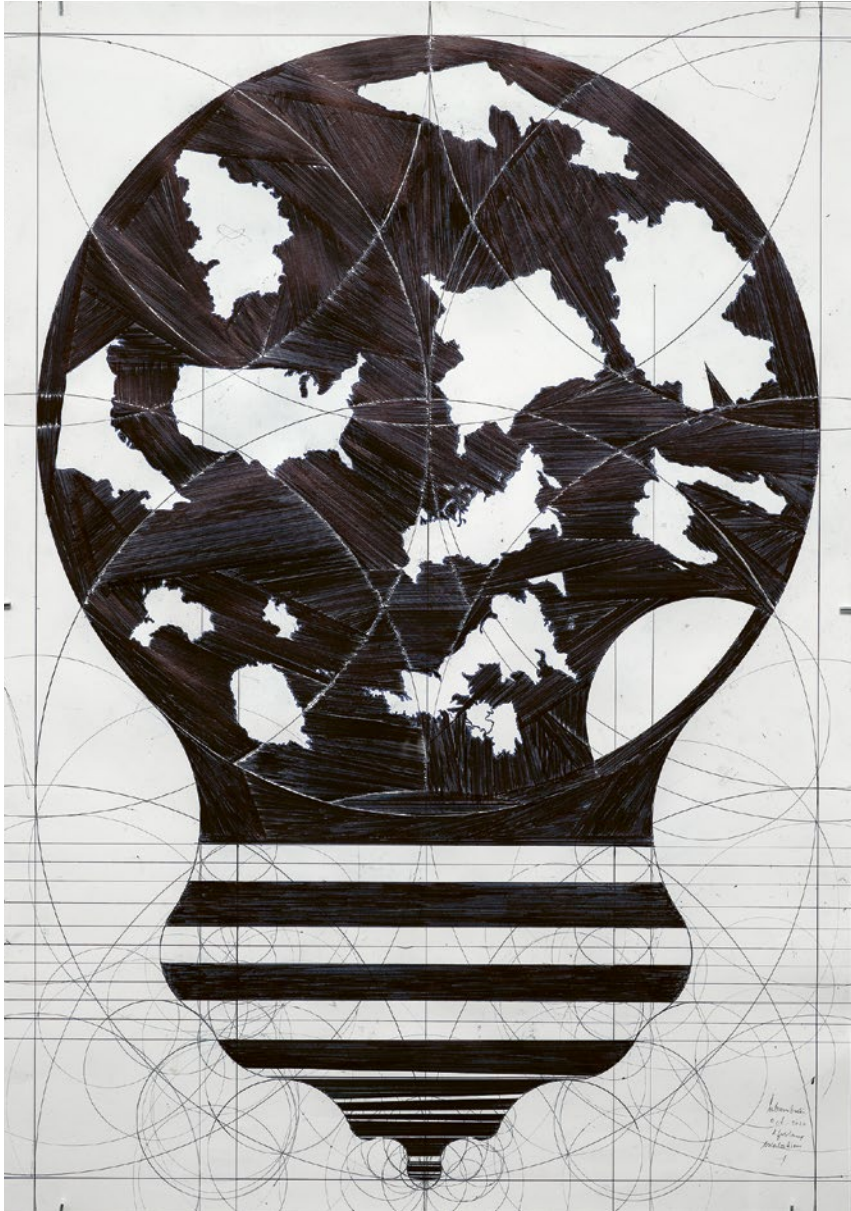
Afrolamp *Æil*, September 2024 (Lubumbashi), Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



Afroled Ndjekele, October 2024 (Lubumbashi), Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afolamp Hybridé, September 2024 (Lubumbashi), Ballpoint pen, acrylic pen and felt-tip pen on paper, 100 x 70 cm



Afrolamp Escalation, October 2024 (Lubumbashi), Ballpoint pen and acrylic pen on paper, 100 × 70 cm



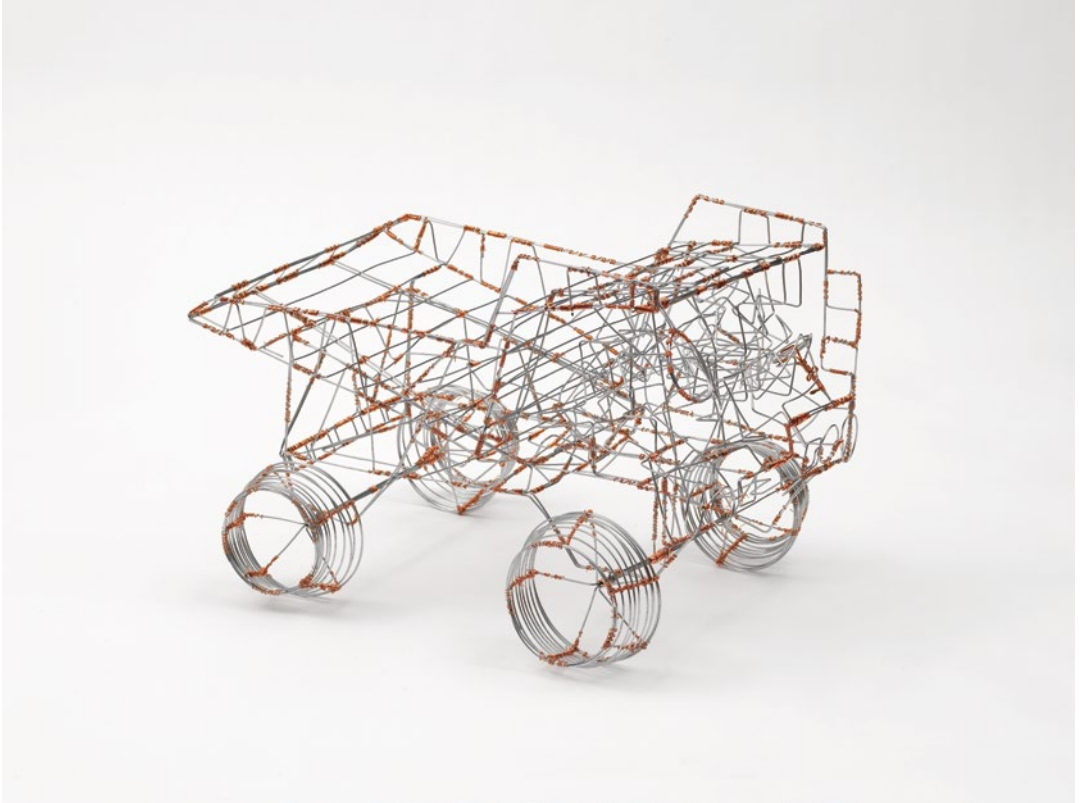


MM / Afrolampe, 2021, Mixed media installation, 400 x 240 x 250 cm





Networks, 2019, Acrylic paint, pencil and collage on wall, Two times 250 x 500 cm



Truck, 2023, Copper and steel wire, 74 × 51 × 51 cm



Trash TV, 2022, Marker on cardboard, found objects, and truck windshield, 130 × 90 × 25 cm



Deep Space, 2023, Acrylic paint, composite fiber pipe, glass, polyester film, steel hardware, and vinyl casters, 374 × 145 × 173 cm



Gigator, 2023, Acrylic paint, acrylic sheeting, electrical wiring, copper wire, foam core, glue, LEDs, paper, pen, ping pong balls, reconfigured electronic blower, steel hardware, vinyl casters, and wood, 343 x 153 x 102 cm

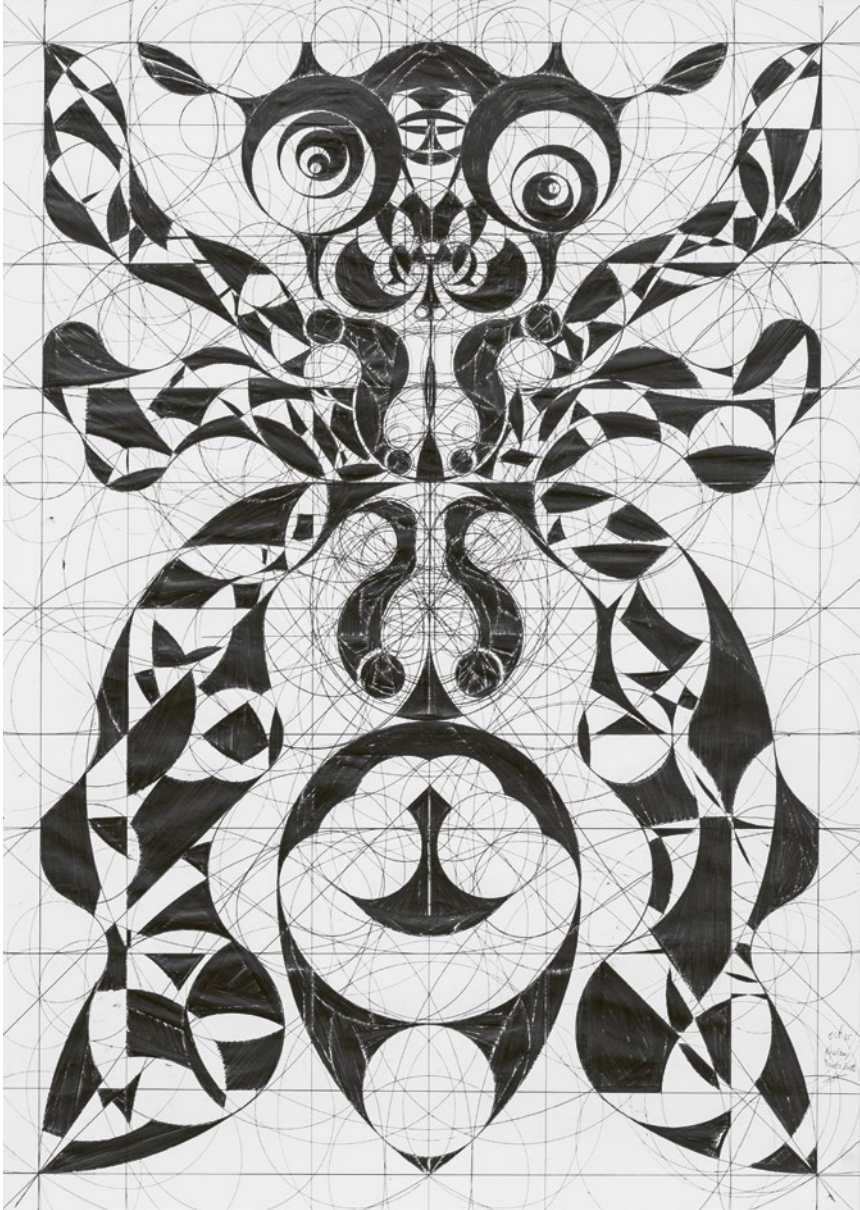




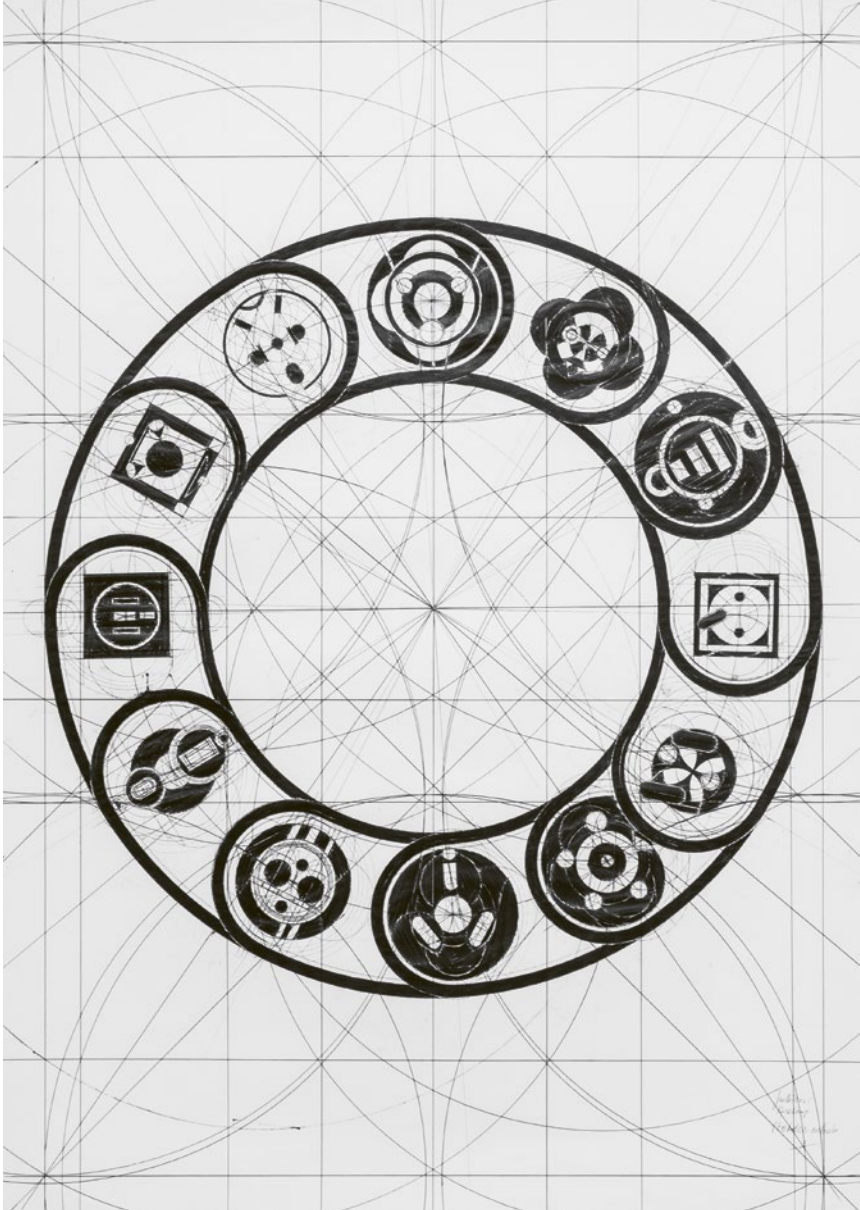
Doors, 2023, Acrylic paint, ballpoint pen and marker pen on paper, 272 x 1072 cm



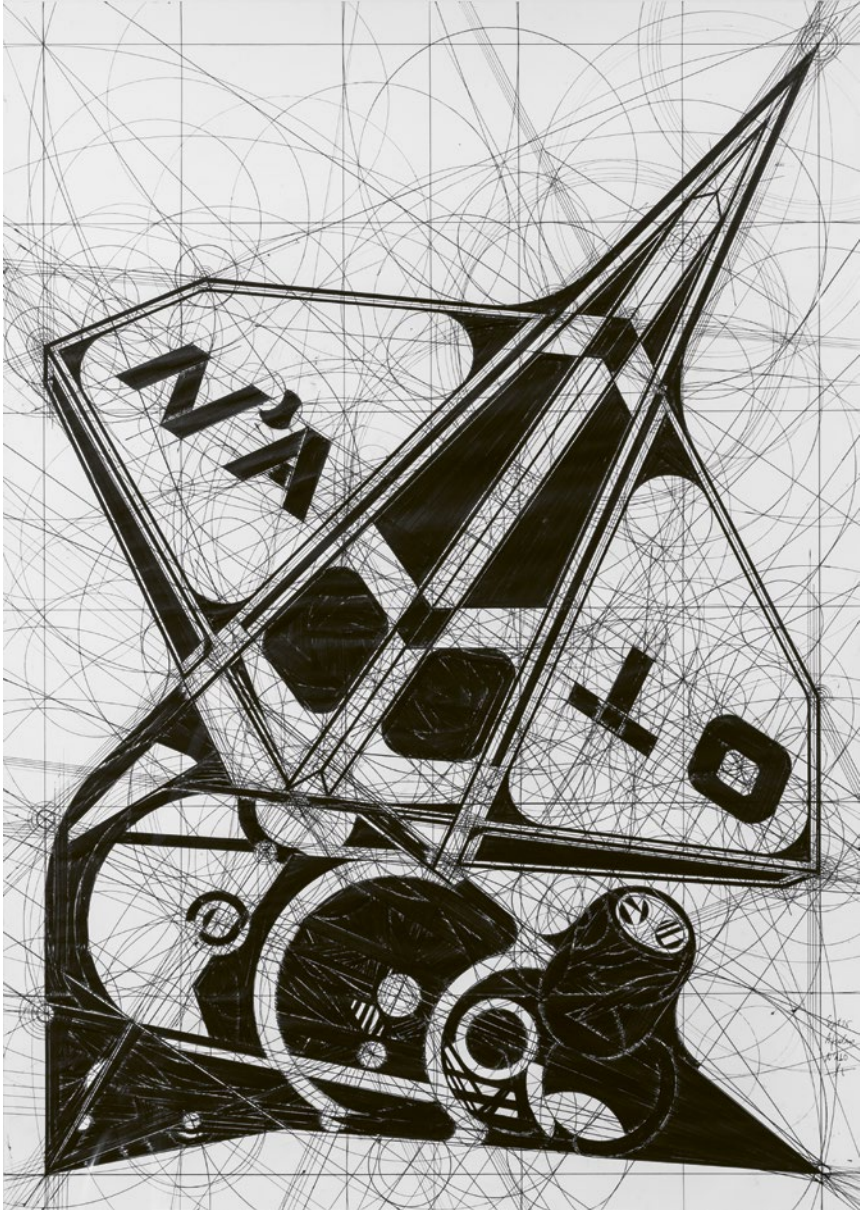
Afrolamp Münze, May 2025 18h00, Ballpoint pen on paper, 85.9 × 60.8 cm



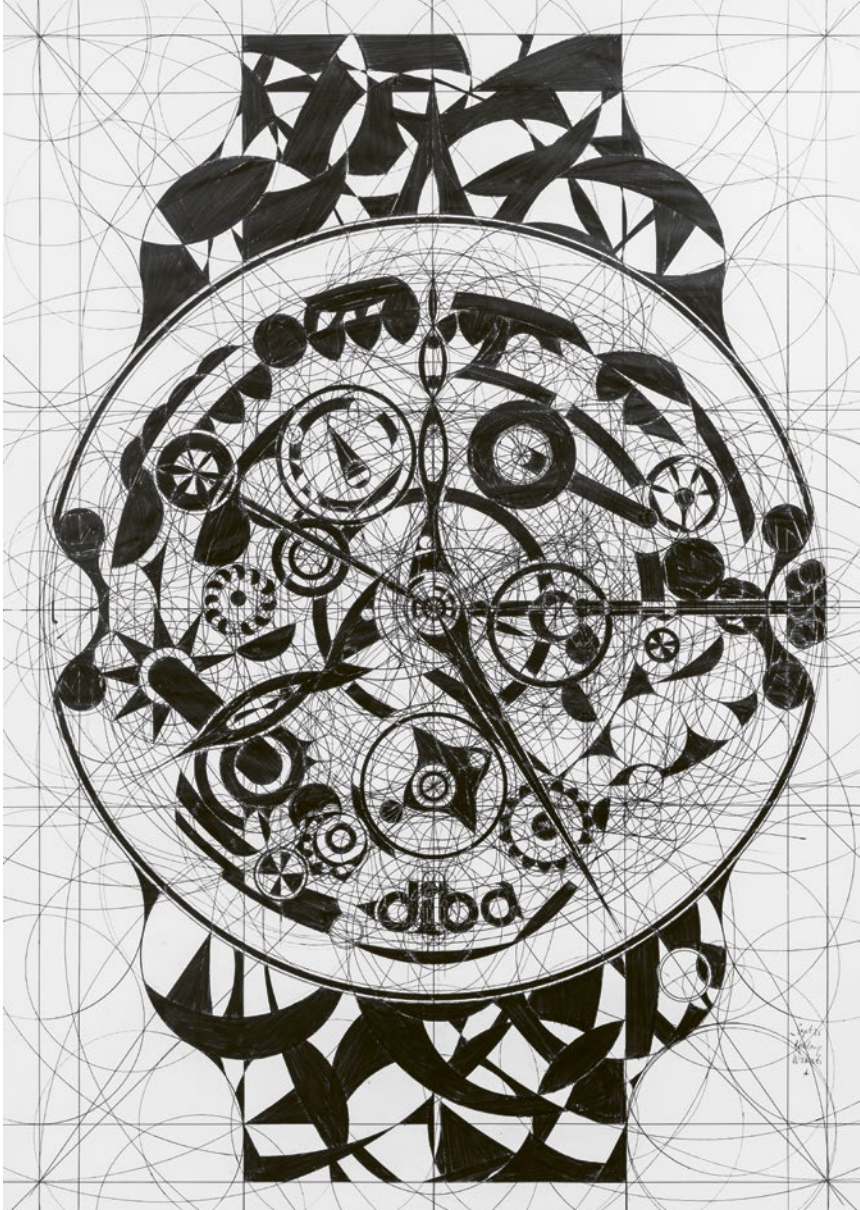
Afolamp Mamba Muntu, October 2025, Ballpoint pen on paper, 85.9 × 60.8 cm



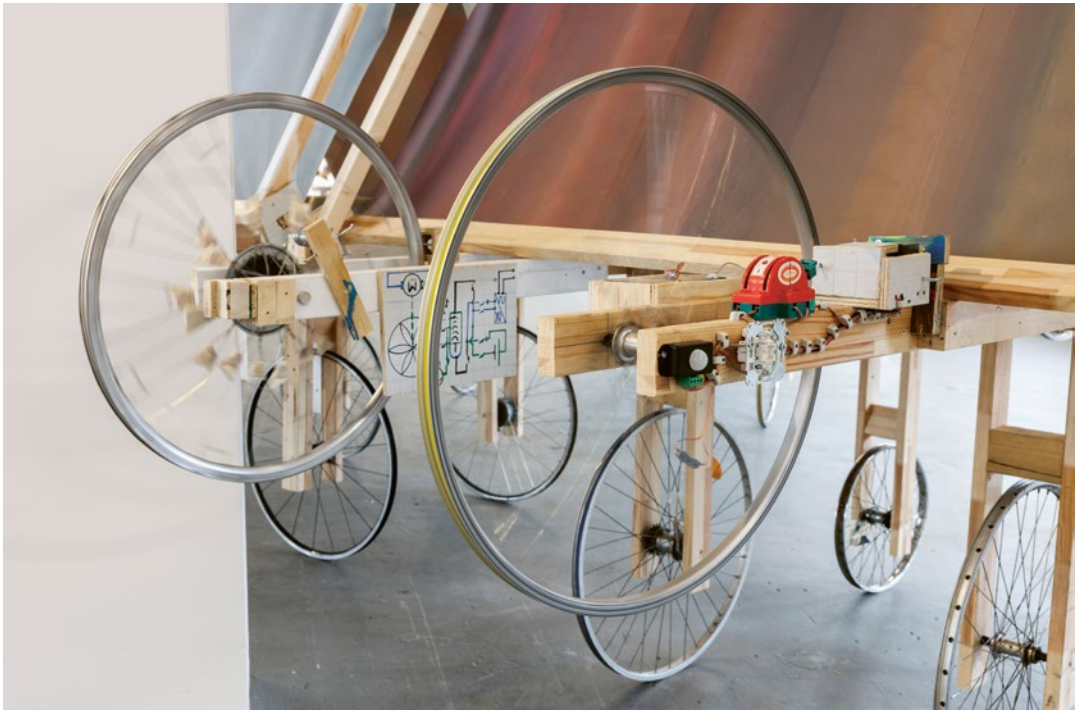
Afrolamp Steckdosenleiste, July 2025, Ballpoint pen on paper, 85.9 × 60.8 cm



Afrolamp N'ATO, September 2025, Ballpoint pen on paper, 85.9 × 60.8 cm



Afolamp Wakati, September 2025, Ballpoint pen on paper, 85.9 × 60.8 cm





mukendi kabongo Air hybrid Wings RDC26FG, 2025, Bicycle rims, canvas, and wood, 293 x 1290 x 1010 cm



Satellite, 2025, Bicycle rims, LED light strip, and wood, 247 x 64 cm



Muya, 2025, Bicycle rims and wood, 235 x 162 x 145 cm



Vita, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 300 × 639 cm



Divina, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 300 x 639 cm

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

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Collection KU Leuven, Leuven
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Photo by Simon Delobel

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Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Seer*, Kohta, Helsinki, 2022
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Image of the performance during the exhibition *Future Genealogies: Tales from the Equatorial Line*, Lubumbashi Biennial, Lubumbashi, 2019
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Collection Banque Nationale de Belgique, Brussels
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Photo by Wouters Gallery

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Photo by Dario Lasagni

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Installation view of the exhibition *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, co-produced with M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2026
Photo by Frank Sperling

BIOGRAPHY

SOLO SHOWS

2026

- **Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, DE**
- **Jean Katambayi Mukendi: RATIO, M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, BE**

2024

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Délestage*, Micki Meng Gallery, Paris, FR

2023

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: 10⁹ City*, Ramiken, New York, US

2022

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: flow*, Waldburger Wouters, Brussels, BE
- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Seer*, Kunsthalle Kohta, Helsinki, FI
- *RE-FLEX*, Salts, Basel, CH

2020

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Quarantaine*, Ramiken, New York, US

2019

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi*, Neue Galerie im Höhmannhaus, Augsburg, DE
- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Onderhandeling*, Établissement d'en face, Brussels, BE

2018

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: Mère Terre*, trampoline, Antwerp, BE

2017

- *Attempts to Read the World Differently – 3 Exhibitions in 5 Acts: Jean Katambayi Mukendi*, Stroom, The Hague, NL
- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: intemporal*, trampoline, Antwerp, BE

2016

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi: On ne sait pas où on va*, trampoline, Antwerp, BE
- *Uncertainty Scenarios: Jean Katambayi Mukendi*, Enough Room for Space, Brussels, BE

2011

- *Signals from the South: Jean Katambayi Mukendi*, Mymälä2, Helsinki, FI

2009

- *Ecoson*, Galerie de l'Ecole Supérieure d'Art d'Aix-en-Provence, Aix-en-Provence, FR

GROUP SHOWS

2025

- *The Gatherers*, MoMA PS1, New York, US
- **The Geopolitics of Infrastructure: Contemporary Perspectives, M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, BE**

- *Jean Katambayi Mukendi & Zandile Tshabalala*, Wouters Sablon, Brussels, BE
- *There Is a Crack in Everything*, Jewish Museum of Belgium, Brussels, BE
- *... to leave a space in which the din of war might die down*, NS-Dokuzentrum, Munich, DE

2024

- *Energies*, Swiss Institute, New York, US
- *Manifesta 15 Biennial*, Barcelona, ES
- *New Technologies: Matthias Groebel & Jean Katambayi Mukendi*, DREI Gallery, Cologne, DE
- *Sculpture et parasites #2: Ébouage et orpillage*, Botanique, Brussels, BE
- *Speed Equals Distance over Time*, Border Buda, Brussels, BE
- *Vibranium*, Congolese Pavilion, Venice Biennial, Venice, IT

2023

- *Archipel #1: La Primavera*, Platform 6a by Deweer, Otegem, BE
- *Averard*, Ramiken, Averard Hotel, London, UK
- *Moon Juice*, Waldburger Wouters, Brussels, BE
- *Postcard from Brussels*, Pinksummer Gallery, Genoa, IT
- *Zurich Biennial*, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich, CH

2022

- *Charging Myths*, On-Trade-Off, Z33, Hasselt, BE
- *Drawing in the Continuous Present*, Drawing Center, New York, US
- *No Linear F*cking Time*, BAK, Utrecht, NL
- *Resourceful Utopia: Through Devious Water & Regenerative Energy*, Congolese Pavilion, Milan Triennial, Milan, IT

2021

- *389*, Ramiken, New York, US
- *Congoville: Contemporary Artists Tracing Colonial Tracks*, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp, BE
- *'You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet'*, Centre Pompidou-Metz, FR

2020

- *'You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet'*, Taipei Biennial, Taipei, TW

2019

- *Finishing Line*, Waldburger Wouters, Brussels, BE
- *Future Genealogies: Tales from the Equatorian Line*, Lubumbashi Biennial

2018

- *Flow of Forms / Forms of Flow: Design Histories between Africa and Europe*, Museum für Völkerkunde, Hamburg, DE

- *The Hum Comes from the Stumuch*, Gladstone Gallery, Brussels, BE

2017

- */haɪə en (nu)/*, trampoline, Antwerp, BE
- **A Temporary Futures Institute, M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, BE**
- *Eblouissements*, Lubumbashi Biennial, Lubumbashi, DRC
- *Flow of Forms / Forms of Flow: Design Histories between Africa and Europe*, Kulturstiftung des Bundes, Halle an der Saale, DE
- *Spurensicherung*, Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam, NL

2016

- *2050: A Brief History of the Future*, Palazzo Reale, Milan, IT
- *Kinkwelele: Jean Katambayi Mukendi & Daddy Tshikaya*, Hangar Picha, Lubumbashi, DRC

2015

- *2050: A Brief History of the Future*, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels, BE
- *Between the Idea and Experience*, Havana Biennial, Havana, CU
- *Le Bord des Mondes*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR
- **MAONO: Visie-missie-creatie, M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, BE**
- *Rare Earth*, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, AT
- *Réalités filantes*, Lubumbashi Biennial, Lubumbashi, DRC

2014

- *Dak'Art: Biennial of Contemporary African Art*, Dakar, SN
- *Full House: 100 artists / 15 Years of Shows and Inventory at Aeroplastics Contemporary*, Aeroplastics Contemporary, Brussels, BE
- *Kinshasa Biennial*, Kinshasa, DRC

2013

- *Digitale Afrique: Exposition Digitale*, Planète Emergences, Marseille, FR

2012

- *The Aspiration Factory*, Aeroplastics Contemporary, Brussels, BE

2010

- *Festival Afropixel #2*, Dakar, SN
- *Mal au pixel #5: Festival des cultures open source*, Association Artkillart, Paris, FR

2009

- *Périefériques*, CAN – Centre d'Art Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, CH

KW Institute for Contemporary Art Berlin

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition
 Jean Katambayi Mukendi – RATIO

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 KW Institute for Contemporary Art
 Curators: Emma Enderby & Linda Franken

6 June – 29 September 2026
 M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art
 Curator: Anne-Claire Schmitz

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M HKA

M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp

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Jean Katambayi Mukendi. Circuits is the first comprehensive monograph dedicated to the Congolese artist, published on the occasion of his solo exhibition *RATIO* at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, and M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp. Spanning his career from its inception to the present, the volume combines richly illustrated pages with insightful texts that situate Katambayi's work within contemporary art history, African thought, and the cultural context of present-day Lubumbashi. It includes interviews, two texts written by the artist, and a multidisciplinary exploration of his installations, performances, and drawings.

This book is published in partnership with the Contemporary Art Committee KU Leuven, KW, and M HKA.

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