Art = Knowledge

Catherina Wilson

Speech at the opening of Sapin Makengele's MBOKA'SIKA exhibition

9 April 2018

In the Connecting In Times of Duress project, we have grown to embrace different expressions of art: slam, painting, drawing, blogging. This does not mean that we view art as an object of study, or as an aesthetic compliment, an accessory to academic research. On the contrary, we have tried to look at art in two ways:

1. As a method of data collection
2. As knowledge in and of itself

There have been several efforts to open the doors of the university in order to allow art in, or conversely, to take the university out to the streets. One of my favourite examples is the inspiring work of the British sociologist Nirmal Puwar, who calls on scholars to 'Curate Sociology'.[i] Today, thanks to the ASC, and Marieke van Winden in particular, the doors of the university opened to receive Sapin Makengele's work.

Sapin is a self-taught artist from Kinshasa (DRC). Instead of sharing with you his biography, I would like to highlight how he has been working actively with researchers since 2010, first as a fixer and an assistant, but soon as something more than that. I would argue that, slowly but surely, he turned himself into a researcher.

To begin with, his interest in history, specifically Congolese history, did not start in 2010. In fact, Sapin, as many youngsters in Zaïre at the time, grew up with a radio prominently placed in the house, listening to the melodious rumba notes of the *anciens succès* from the 50s, 60s, and 70s. He learned a lot about history through these songs, and it was these songs that first triggered his curiosity. In 2010, he met the historian Pedro Monaville, at that time a PhD student of Nancy Hunt. This encounter further opened the door to history and not only did Sapin assist Pedro, but he carried out research with him, interviewed people and worked, together with Ccil Michel, a Belgian filmmaker, on a documentary entitled "Les Fantômes de Lovanium".

I will not go into this documentary now; in fact, we presented it here in 2015, and you can borrow it from the library. I do want to point out, however, that the paintings used and made during the documentary are part of this exhibition.

In 2014, I met Sapin, serendipitously, as it always goes during fieldwork, while doing research in Kinshasa. In fact, I had known his art long before. My mother first encouraged me, in 2007, to visit a Congolese exhibition in the small village of Oud-Turnhout in Belgium, where Sapin's works hung. A couple of years later, his works returned to Turnhout (as we all know African art is not stopped at borders, unlike the African artists who produce it), where his work was part of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence programme. Thanks to Gi Mateusen, some paintings on display there are part of the exhibition here too. My personal favourite is "Désolation le rêve des autres", a satirical representation of the decay of the public service since the 1960s.

Inspired by Sapin's work, his knowledge of Kinshasa, the documentary "Les Fantômes de Lovanium", and, last but not least, by Mirjam de Bruijn's open-mindedness and encouragement, Sapin and I managed to carry out our first project of co-creation: a painting performance in Northern Congo. I previously presented this collaboration at the ASC in 2016, and I would just like to point out that the painting in question is also exhibited here.

It was during this week of painting performances that I started to grasp that art was indeed a research tool; but, more importantly, I understood that, through his brushstrokes, Sapin was, in essence, doing something very similar to what I was doing as a researcher, i.e. collecting data and transforming it into knowledge. In this sense, art is not only related to method, but also to epistemology and to the creation of knowledge, which, in turn, cannot be separated from power, different hierarchies of knowledge, and what we academics and researchers allow into knowledge.

As researchers, we are at a threshold, a position from which to reflect upon how to include different types of knowledge. A good example of this is the detail rich, almost nauseating, almost two-metre-long drawing entitled "Congo 1960-1965"; I would say the highlight of the exhibition. This drawing is, again, the result of a process of co-creation, where Sapin worked with two Master's students from the Institute for History. Their conversations and exchanges resulted in this drawing.

In sum, I want to invite all of you, through this exhibition, to read Sapin's paintings and drawings as you would read articles, book chapters, and blogs, looking for references and contexts. In fact, I would like to take it a step further, I want to challenge you to read the exhibition as a book.

[i] Puwar, Nirmal, and Sanjay Sharma. 2012. "Curating Sociology." The Sociological Review 60 (1_suppl):40–63. See also: Wilson, Catherina. 2017. "Curating Anthropology: Reflections on the 'Living under Duress' EXPO." Rumours on the Ubangui. 2017. http://rumoursontheubangui.tumblr.com/post/167749326652/curating-anthropology-reflections-on-the-living.