**Curatorial statement on Congoville
by Sandrine Colard**

Situated in the harbor city of Antwerp, the Middelheim Museum’s site comprises a park shared with what used to be the Colonial College. The exhibition Congoville exploits the museum’s double anchorage into the imperial history of Belgium—implanted in a town that was the treshold and receptacle of the colonial enterprise, and steeped in a training ground for imperial spirit—in order to deconstruct the present but also imagine the future of post-colonial cities of Europe. Through the eyes of African and African-descendant contemporary artists, the highly diverse population of Antwerp and beyond is invited to embark on a journey to dismantle an imperial story still uncritically glorified in Belgium, and at the same time, to imagine the transformation of the country’s urban space into a genuinely shared space. Made public in 1910, the Middelheim Park is one of the numerous cradles of the city *flâneur* in Europe. Created as a green extension of Antwerp’s city promenade just two years after Belgium officially became an imperial nation, the birth of the site was also synchronous with that of the newborn Belgian colonialist. The enrichment made possible by extraction in the Congo, and the colonial mythologies that gave birth to monuments and the ideas that they stand for, have imprinted our cityscape. Congoville is the name of the archeology of that urban stratum, but also of its reclaiming and democratization by African and African-descendant artists.

Conceived as a walk through the Middelheim, the exhibition takes the black *flâneur* and *flâneuse* as a guiding principle. It makes these colonial traces the object of *their* gaze and offers to artists to convert a field of action where imperialism was taught into a springboard for its unlearning. The colonial stigmas that continue to afflict Belgian society—the racism, violence, and discriminations that pervade it—are the afterlives of an unprocessed past. Since 2020, the unprecedented resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement in the country has galvanized the long-standing work of local, decolonial activists. The toppling downs of colonial statues, but also, the extraordinary mobilization and massive protests against racism in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, are manifestations of a profound desire to heal the wounds of colonial history.

In one of her recent writings, author Zadie Smith asked, “What do we want history to do to us?” By opposition to the constant evasion of the uncomfortable questions posed by the Congo and Belgium’s “shared heritage,” this exhibition seeks to ask the following: When we give up historical awareness toward cities, buildings, and monuments’ imperial genesis for the sake of preserving bricks and stones, what are we surrendering morally? When we give up critical resistance and allow detrimental representations to go unchallenged, which part of our cities’ inhabitants do we choose to exclude? Yet, as important, how can we transition from this anxiety-ridden and abdicating sort of post-imperial society to the embracing and welcoming kind? The exhibition seeks to explore how Congoville can cease being the colonial soil of an ever-growing resentful or fractured society, to become the flag of a commonly dreamed future.

**Sandrine Colard** is a Belgian-Congolese curator, researcher and writer, based in New York City and Brussels. She is a doctor of African art history (Ph.D. Columbia University), and her past curatorial projects include The Expanded Subject: New Perspectives in Photographic Portraiture from Africa (co-curator, Wallach Art Gallery, New York, 2016); The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture. Photographs from The Walther Collection (Ryerson Image Center, Toronto, 2019); and Multiple Transmissions: Art in the Afropolitan Age (Wiels, Brussels, 2019). In 2019, she was the artistic director of the 6th edition of the Lubumbashi Biennale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Currently an assistant professor of art history at Rutgers University (USA), Colard is also an international lecturer (MoMA, EHESS, Tate Modern, European Parliament, Bozar …) and the author of multiple publications. Based on research conducted in Belgium and the DRC, her current book project examines the history of photography in the colonial Congo (1885-1960) and has been supported by several fellowships.