

Press text

Congoville. Contemporary artists tracing colonial tracks

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Both the Middelheim Museum and the University of Antwerp are situated where the Colonial College was founded in 1920. More than one hundred years later, the Middelheim Museum confronts and examines the traces of the (post) colonial history of the site. It does so by bringing together new historical research with contemporary artistic views.

Guest Curator Sandrine Colard uses Congoville as a collective name for physical and mental vestiges of the colonial past in Belgium. These traces are often hidden in plain sight and continue to have a conscious or unconscious effect in today's society. They include street names, monuments, and built patrimony; colonial myths and the mentalities that these nurtured, the African presence and the experiences borne by people of African descent. Certainly the Middelheim site, as a former focus point of colonial education, is part of this unseen city. For the exhibition, 15 internationally renowned artists, in the role of 'black flâneurs', take the visitor on a walk in the park. They guide us in a quest to revisit the past and transform the public space into a truly shared one; they present new and different perspectives of a history that is too often told from a single perspective. Together with Leuven University Press, Middelheim Museum is publishing an exhibition catalogue in which, alongside interviews with the artists, numerous authors, academics and experts zoom in and out on the project.

Curator: Sandrine Colard (BE/US)

Artists: Sammy Baloji (BE/DRC), Bodys Isek Kingelez (DRC), Maurice Mbikayi (DRC), Jean Katambayi (DRC), KinAct Collective (RDC/FR/NL/BE), Simone Leigh (US), Hank Willis Thomas (US), Zahia Rahmani (ALG), Ibrahim Mahama (GH), Ângela Ferreira (PT/MZ/SA), Kapwani Kiwanga (CAN), Sven Augustijnen (BE), Pascale Marthine Tayou (CAM/BE), Elisabetta Benassi (IT), Pélagie Gbaguidi (BEN).

"The artists not only make visible the traces of the colonial past, interwoven with those of the Middelheim site. They charge the site, moreover, with new meanings and new possibilities."
(Nabilla Ait Daoud, Alderman of Culture of the city of Antwerp, 2020)

15 Artists on a decolonial walk

With *Congoville* the Middelheim Museum presents a large indoor and outdoor exhibition containing 30 artworks, including 12 new artist commissions and 18 loans from international

collections. Some works have travelled the world and are shown for the first time in Belgium. All artists who participate in *Congoville* are African and African descendants, or have developed over the years a long-standing practice and first-hand knowledge about the postcolonial history of the Congo and Belgium.

“Today, as a free and an open air art museum, the Middelheim has the democratic potential to invite diverse visitors to look at colonial and postcolonial history through the eyes of black flâneurs of the world, and to transform Congoville from being a creation of colonial exploitation to a map for a future postcolonial utopia.” (Sandrine Colard, curator Congoville, 2020)

The artists were invited to reflect on the colonial past of Belgium through the prism of the Middelheim site and its visible and invisible colonial traces. All these traces together define ‘Congoville’. Acting as flâneurs and park-dwellers the artists don’t only question and take possession of past traces, but also project new forms of urban and social commonality and commemoration.

The projects of Pélagie Gbaguidi or Ibrahim Mahama engage directly with the **shared history of Colonial College ‘Middelheim’** (the museum and the school share the same name). Undoubtedly the eyecatchers of the exhibition is the monumental new façade work of Mahama, partly covering (the history of) the Colonial College. Also other internationally renowned artists like Ângela Ferreira and Kapwani Kiwanga’s work is inspired on Colonial architecture and has a great impact, both visually and conceptually on the Middelheim Site. There is a particular interesting joyful richness in the materiality that is used by the Congolese artists in this exhibition. From precious and colourful cardboard (Kingelez), living grandmothers plants and bombshells (Sammy Baloji), used computer elements (KinAct Colective, Maurice Mbikayi) to copper wire and electricity (Jean Katambayi). The tactility of the work is a seduction into a shared history, too often told from one perspective.

A lot of works embrace a **multitude of stories** and connect in different ways to history and each other: e.g. the relation to the indépendance of the Belgian colonised territories and its legacy today in the work of Kapwani Kiwanga, Ângela Ferreira and Sven Augustijnen. Also larger topics, beyond the Belgian colonial endeavour, like emancipation or freedom ‘at large’ is present in the work of Pascale Marthine Tayou, Zahia Rahmani. The artists go beyond questioning colonial traces and some works respond to the possibility of depicting a renewed shared and communal public space (Sammy Baloji, Hank Willis Thomas, Simone Leigh, Elisabetta Benassi).

All projects seek to reverse the role of the art park as a former training ground for colonial college students, and to take the visitor on a temporal and decolonial walk guided by the gaze of Congolese, South African, Nigerian, and African-American artists, among others.

Congoville invites artists to reimagine the Middelheim terrain as a renewed historical and public space.

Healing and rethinking colonial legacies

With the Congoville project, the Middelheim Museum is thus explicitly stepping outside its strict, geographical borders and addresses openly a past that, now more than ever, needs to be shared more widely and critically processed. Becoming historically aware is crucial for a contemporary, diverse city where more than 50% of its inhabitants has an immigrant background. This exhibition fits in a broader development of the museum towards a greater plurality of voices and more inclusion. After all, the museum strives to be an open place: a museum of today, where we actively continue to work on an inclusive institution with a clear stance against discrimination, exclusion and racism. This exhibition is a first step to render visible where we find ourselves in a landscape full of colonial traces, as well as to contemplate our relationship to this city and its history. In doing so, the Congoville project itself becomes a polyphonic archive upon which we will keep reflecting and continue to unlock for the coming generations.

Middelheim and the Colonial College

In the vernacular, the name 'Middelheim' covers many meanings: it is a historic park, an open-air museum, a university campus, a jazz festival,.... For all these entities their colonial past seems condemned to oblivion. This amnesia is part of a bigger Belgian (and European) atavism that avoids to address the colonial history, its painful effects and afterlives. In order to start fathoming the museum's quiet coloniality, the Congoville project specifically took the uncomfortable neighbourly relationship between the Middelheim Museum and the former Colonial College (now in use by the Antwerp University). This starting point is questioning the broader concept of 'Middelheim' and its loaded history. What exactly is the colonial history of Middelheim? For Whom is it visible? How to understand it? What to do with it?

Sandrine Colard and Congoville

Invited by the Middelheim Museum, independent historian Bas De Roo produced the first historical research on the Colonial College and its vision. Active at the time of the museum's creation, but dormant since the 1960 Congolese independence, the Colonial College had the mission to train the administrative colonial "elite" sent to the Belgian Congo. In the hands of Belgian-Congolese art historian Sandrine Colard, the research of De Roo led to the development of the concept of *Congoville and an exhibition project*. With an expertise in colonial and post-colonial visual culture, Colard explicitly investigates the elements that shape the current vision of the Congo and African and African diasporic people in Belgium. Congoville is, according to her description, an omnipresent yet unseen city whose aftereffects still impact us on a daily basis like a shadow sowing inequality. Congoville is this half-submerged metropolis spread throughout Belgium, but this specific exhibition is

conceived as a site-responsive project from an Antwerp perspective. Colard invited artists to mark out a number of trails across the landscape that interweave the museum with the former Colonial College.

Antwerp and the flâneur

The harbor city of Antwerp has been the threshold of the Congolese colony. Ships sailed off carrying imperial ideas, tools and weapons, minds and people, and colonizers marked their taking of Central African spaces by renaming them. Across the sea, Leopoldville, Stanleyville, Elisabethville and more, became celebrations of submission to conquering figures and urban outgrowths of the metropole. At the same time, an unnamed stratum grew out of the Belgian soil, propelled by the wealth amassed and the history unfolding in the Congo. In Belgium this economic boom fed King Léopold II's building ambitions resulting in a 'modernization of cities' with urban expansion and remodelling of cities like Ostend and Brussels. Also in Antwerp, the creation of the Middelheim as a public park in 1910 occurred 'just' 2 years after Belgium officially became an imperial nation. As a green extension of Antwerp's city strolls, the Middelheim Park is representative of the birthplace of the Western urban *flâneur* taking possession of the modern city. The emblematic *flâneur* was a critical and aesthetic spectator but also a participant to the urban and imperial culture, consuming through his walks the new décor offered to him. Historically occupied by a white and male perspective, Sandrine Colard invited the artists of Congoville to adopt the stance of *black flâneurs*, posing their gaze on the contemporary public space of Antwerp and the Middelheim park, and the historical traces embedded in it.