

Seko Na Seko (*Forever*)

François Mutamba Tshibwabwa

In his work, François Mutamba Tshibwabwa (also called Nada Tshibwabwa) engages with waste from the industrialized world in relation to planetary precarity. Especially interested in mobile phone waste, he explores society's failings to think about our inability to bring new things to life as compared with how much waste we produce.

Tshibwabwa's project is an invitation to think about the *temporality of care*, how caring for the future is inextricably bound to what we do in the present, and, moreover, how the past, including its objects and ancestral knowledge, can provide inspiration for us to imagine and fashion different, better futures. His message around the notion of care, then, is not one of lamentation but one of (artistic) actions, rooted in traditions, some of which are at risk of being lost today.

Between February and May of 2022, Tshibwabwa was an artist in residence at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, Belgium). Working with the museum's collections of Luluwa culture, he explored the role that art and knowledge from his ancestors can play in addressing our current ecological crisis.

Bua tshiyi ditunga dietu. Kadiena di chintuluka tii nimpidiewu? Katshia pa bankambwa too ni lelu? Mwa dianvita wani nga kengi nibanewe. Tshiakumune mandelena. Chantez, chantez. On m'avait dit, ne partez pas dans la forêt. Pillez le maïs. Et le manioc. Ah! Mwa dianvita wani nga kengi nibanawe.

Fig 1: Performance by Nada Tshibwabwa. The picture was taken in the museum in April 2022 by Elsa Westreicher.



These are parts of the lyrics of a song that my grandfather wrote in the 1950s. It's not easy to determine the exact time, but he must have recorded the piece some time before independence. This song was part of my upbringing, as my mother as well as my siblings sang it often. He mentions the daily life in and with his environment, but underneath it runs a current that addresses power relations, resistance, and resilience. During my residency at RMCA (Royal Museum for Central Africa), it was what I experienced and found in the museum that set off my desire to work with the fragmented memories that I have of this song and to reinterpret it with three musicians I met in Brussels (Diego Higuera [guitar], Francis Kappé [drums], Lezin Mpoutou [likembe]). We played it live at the TAKING CARE workshop at RMCA, next to a painting and a series of masks that I had also created during the residency.

Being at RMCA for three months was an important experience. Having access to the archives and being allowed to stay for a good amount of time was a privilege I would like more artists from the D. R. Congo and elsewhere to have – not least because much of what we can find and sense there is directly related to us and adds to the stories and memories we have. I say privilege, because so far, we are denied this right of access in general terms.

Starting from my practice to work with debris of mobile phones, questions around the exploitation of resources and communication that I often translate into costumes, masks, or sculptures, my perspective in the collection was specifically geared towards artefacts that talk about the relation between people and their

environment as well as the spiritual dimension between both. I was also interested in the collection of raw materials that directly relate to the mobile phones I use in my work. The performance with *Homme Tshombo* and *Mwasi Tshombo* (cellphone man and woman) that we organized at the RMCA on 10 April 2022 aimed at many things at once and speaks to the idea of relating: I wanted to create links of communication with the objects and raw materials, but also with the public and the invisible, meaning a spiritual dimension that is also present in the way things inspire me. I wanted to put forward the representation of a woman and a man to go beyond differences, in the sense that I see life as symbiotic and double, as a kind of wedding. I am myself a twin, so this doubling always plays a role for me, even though my sister died at birth.

I also created a large format painting, which is a reflection and brings together symbols and visual metaphors that I was confronted with in the museum as well as those that I had brought with me. All different creations I made during the residency are actually part of the questions outlined above, they are linked.

As we know, an artist doesn't work like a scientist. We come in with different needs and different questions, different ways of working and interpreting what we find. The museum and the collection, despite showing many forms of art, still form a scientific space, which we artists automatically challenge. I think many questions as to how artists are meant to come into this space remain unanswered. As RMCA has no designated working spaces for artists beyond musicians, its walls are limited. **A continued cooperation with a space that is used to accommodate artists and that could provide necessary infrastructure for creating works would be helpful.** Personally, knowing some artists from Brussels and the Congolese diaspora helped me access some such spaces without the direct support of RMCA, but the museum could give more forethought to these kinds of collaborations. I also admit that working with the archive is no easy task and continued assistance and indications would have been helpful – many interesting aspects have probably escaped me and keywords that seemed rather obvious led to no results in the cataloguing system. The question of access is a continued issue and to actually dig into the collection profoundly would require a designated assistant or collaborator who learns to understand the artists' paths as well.

Apart from that, the museum might want to consider how works that are created during the residencies might be shown to the public beyond one-day events. Maybe there could be a designated space that is accessible for temporary displays that converse with the permanent collection. It would allow the questions of the residency and the overall project to reach a wider public.

I thank the museum and the staff for having found solutions that worked for me; for having introduced me to some great external creators, like the musicians I worked with as well as the film team Federico Arie and Armand Bayala. Many thanks go to Jacky Maniacky, Isabelle Van Loo, Muriel Garsou, Christine Bluard, Françoise

Deppe, François Makanga, Salome Ysebaert, Rémy Jadinon, Gabristo. I am glad to know that an online exhibition of the masks will be created on the website. I am also extremely honoured that the mask *Tonga* from the series *La face cachée du coltan* (2018 – ongoing) was acquired for the permanent collection.

As for me, upon returning to Kinshasa, I shared some of the experiences as well as the film. It was made during the residency and given a public screening in Matonge, at Studio Mwano, a gathering space I recently created, as well as in the village of Sao on the Bateke Plateau, where my second base is found. Since then, Homme Tshombo has also taken to the streets again and has been part of the sixth edition of KINACT – Rencontre Internationale des Artistes Performeurs.

Translation into English: Elsa Westreicher