

## '(Pas) Mon pays' and 'The Copy'

Bie Michels

Contour Biennale is one of the most easily recognizable, large-scale exhibition platforms in Belgium: a unique initiative engaging with local and international artists who focus on the moving image and its wider representation in installations, sound and performance. The 9th edition of Contour will take on a whole new form. The projects presented during Contour Biennale 9: *Coltan as Cotton* are inspired by and relate to the city of Mechelen, its inhabitants and, more broadly, Belgium's recent colonial history.

For this occasion Bie Michels was asked to make new work related to Mechelen and her own history. She was born and raised in Congo, in a house on the campus of the current University of Kinshasa (former 'Lovanium', the first university in the country, 1954-1971). As the title indicates, '(Pas) Mon Pays, Part I and II', is in two parts. The first talks about a colonial monument in Mechelen and Michels' efforts to decolonize this statue with a group of Belgian citizens with Congolese roots. The second shows the artist's visit to Congo. '(Pas) Mon Pays' is based on her personal history, as an attempt to let the past encounter the present and see further into the future of the postcolonial situation, in both Congo and Mechelen.

### Part I

In Mechelen, the colonial monument by Lode Eyckermans in the Schuttersvest pays homage to 31 "pioneers who died for the civilization in Congo" as it is inscribed on the statue. One of them is Van Kerckhoven, who was a notoriously cruel commander during the reign of king Leopold II of Belgium. The statue is very intriguing, with two stylized Congolese heads, a male and a female, as a Janus image. It aestheticises what is problematically called the "African race" and thus could be seen as a tribute to it. However, this is in stark contrast to the inscription on the plinth, since the inscriptions only tells one side of the story, the Belgian one. Confronted with this, Michels asked the sculptor Raf Vergauwen to make a scaled-down copy of the monument. She collaborated with a group of Belgian citizens with Congolese roots living in Mechelen and the surrounding area\* on a proposal for a new inscription for this copy. In June 2019, after several months of meetings and working sessions, the group introduced this new inscription to the mayor of Mechelen, with the proposition to also place this text near the original statue. This text discusses both sides of history and focuses on the word 'civilization', as well as acknowledging the impact of Belgian rule on Congo. Although critical, this inscription expresses a positive view of the future, a society of equality and respect. A few weeks before their visit, another new text was installed by the Mayor's council, one that the group feels is too limited in its – exclusively historical – message. The group also confronted the Mayor with the lack of participation by citizens of Mechelen in the placement of this new text.

The copy and the process, as well as the meetings and the visit, are the subject of Part I of Michels' film. 'The Copy', which include the copy of the statue and the proposal of a new text can also be seen in the exhibition area of Contour 19.

### Part II

For Part II of the film, Michels went back to the campus of the University of Kinshasa (former Lovanium) for the first time since she left it at the age of nine. She visited the house where she grew up, the university buildings, her old school, the church, the swimming pool and the city of Kinshasa. Along with the filmmakers Paul Shemisi and Nisar Saleh from Kinshasa, she made a video report of her encounters with several people. In the film, her personal history, in the form of old photos and memories, is confronted with the actual reality. This offers her the opportunity to explore the reality of the present and the future. Among many encounters, Michels meets the family now living in her childhood home, professors and students of the departments of history and artificial intelligence, a slam poet, people in the street and so on. The text 'Civiliser le Congo Belge: de la coercition à la persuasion' by the Congolese historian Sindani

Kiangu was an important source of inspiration for her questions about the influences of colonization on today's civilisation.

\* Lieven Miguel Kandolo, Anne Wetsi Mpoma, Georgine Dibua, Jessy Ohanu, Michel Witanga, Joël Ndombe, Nadia Nsayi, Rina Rabau, Stella Okemwa, Don Pandzou, Floribert Beloko, Michel Mongambo and Sarah Bekambo.

The inscription proposed by the group:

THE COLONISATION OF CONGO  
LED TO A SHOCK  
IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY.  
IN THE NAME OF CIVILISATION,  
ATROCITIES WERE COMMITTED,  
VILLAGES WERE BURNED DOWN,  
KINGDOMS DISAPPEARED.

THE COLONISATION CUT CONGO APART FROM ITS HISTORY,  
CONTRIBUTED TO THE PROSPERITY OF BELGIUM  
AND WEAKENED CONGOLESE SOCIETY.

THE WORD CIVILISATION SIGNIFIES RESPECT,  
EQUALITY AND DIALOGUE,  
IN RELATION TO A COMMON FUTURE.

THIS NEW INSCRIPTION  
RESTORES AND PAYS HOMAGE  
TO THE MILLIONS OF VICTIMS AND HEROES  
OF THE COLONIAL TIME,  
THOSE WHO ARE KNOWN AND LESS KNOWN.

BAKOKO NA BISO:  
NGAKAPI  
BOALI  
WOTO-A-MBENGA  
LUSINGA IWA NG'OMBE  
KASONGO NYEMBO  
SIMON KIMBANGU  
PAUL PANDA FARNANA  
PATRICE LUMUMBA  
JOSEPH MALULA  
PAUL LOMAMI-TSHIBAMBA

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Some members of the group signed and published a letter about this in The Standaard on 26 June 2019