

# Everyone in New York will be talking about this artist soon

By Sebastian Smee May 23



Bodys Isek Kingelez's "Stars Palme Bouygues," from 1989. (Van Lierde collection/Vincent Everarts Photography Brussels)

NEW YORK — A poignant utopian impulse informs the art of Bodys Isek Kingelez, the great African artist whom I suspect all of New York will be talking about this summer. Kingelez died in 2015 at 66. He made models of buildings, which he sometimes extended into elaborate cityscapes, both fantastical and familiar, with stadiums, train stations, hotels, banks and embassies — but never homes.

Both the models and the cityscapes take up a lot of real estate. But they're basically works on paper. That explains why the Museum of Modern Art's marvelous Kingelez exhibition — an overview of his work that opens Saturday — was assembled by Sarah Suzuki, a curator in the museum's department of drawings and prints, with Hillary Reder, a curatorial assistant.

With strenuous precision and an almost dandyish finesse, Kingelez constructed his works out of cut colored paper, printed paper, wrapping paper and tissue, as well as paperboard, corrugated cardboard, aluminum foil, wood and plastic foam. He decorated them with colored pencil, ink, crayon, paint and marker. Among the other materials he used: tape, yarn, straws, beads, toothpicks, beer cans, bottle caps and slide mounts. Conservators, weep!



Kingelez outside his home in Kinshasa in Congo in 2014. (Fred Casco/Courtesy of André Magnin)

Visually, two things make Kingelez's models so distinctive. The architectural forms, although inspired by familiar models, diverge — sometimes spectacularly — from anything one has seen before. Then there is the sheer beauty of their surfaces. Kingelez's neat way with calligraphy and signage plays its part here, but it is his color palette — vibrant combinations of blue and pink, turquoise and apricot, pink and pale mint — that creates their entrancing, otherworldly effect.

After seeing the meticulous inventions Kingelez made from these humble materials, the temptation is to assume that he was some kind of outsider artist: self-taught, unhooked from the mainstream, out on a limb. But from which limb on which tree would one make such a judgment? If Kingelez were an outsider — outside what?

In fact, like so many stars of the art world in Europe and America, Kingelez *was* essentially self-taught. But he also was a university graduate who studied economics and industrial design, and spoke five languages.

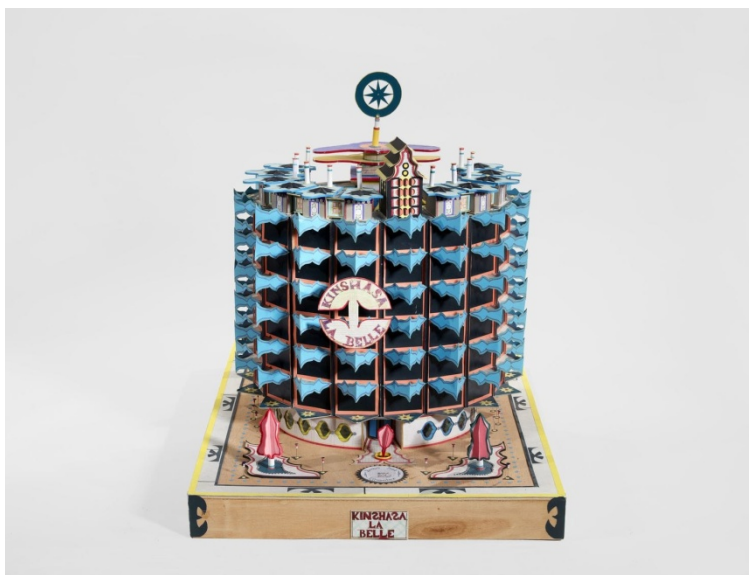
Kingelez was born in 1948 in a village called Kimbembe-Ihunga in what is now Congo. He named his first cityscape after Kimbembe-Ihunga, although what he envisaged bears no relation to his actual birthplace. He was the eldest of nine children. His parents were farm laborers.

In 1970, when he was 22, Kingelez moved to the capital, Kinshasa. Ten years earlier, after a drawn-out struggle, Congo had achieved independence from Belgium. Under King Leopold II, the Belgians had systematically killed, terrorized and starved the Congolese population during a decades-long effort to enrich itself by extracting ivory, wild rubber and hardwoods from a territory 75 times larger than Belgium.

Independence quickly soured. Patrice Lumumba, the new republic's first democratically elected prime minister, was arrested and killed by rivals led by the military chief Mobutu Sese Seko. Mobutu renamed first the capital, Kinshasa (from Leopoldville), then the nation, Zaire. The moniker he gave himself — Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Za Banga — can be translated as “the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake.”

Kingelez began making his models in the early 1980s, when Mobutu's dictatorial reign was beginning to unravel. He found work as a restorer in a museum. Kinshasa, the only city he had known for almost 20 years, was rapidly expanding. Outwardly, it was chaotic. But there was hidden order. And there was still hope.

Mobutu advocated a policy of adherence to what he called *authenticité*, or cultural authenticity. But he combined this with a program of modernization. The two values were not inconsistent — at least not in Mobutu's mind — and he pursued an ostentatiously expensive building program, both in Kinshasa and his home town, Gbadolite.



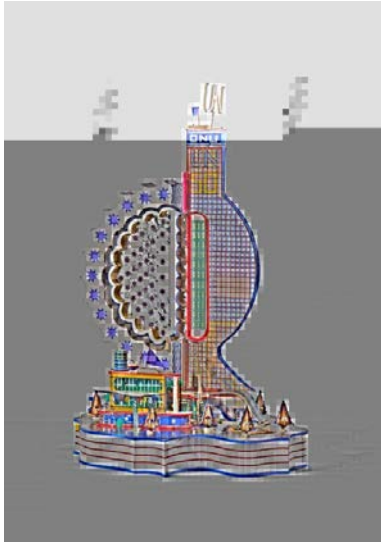
Kingelez's “Kinshasa la Belle,” from 1991, one of the models inspired by his home. (Bodys Isek Kingelez/Maurice Aeschimann/Courtesy of CAAC — The Pigozzi Collection)

Kingelez's early work reflected all of this. He drew on the architectural examples around him: Art Deco buildings of the colonial era; Kinshasa's eye-catching “Tour de l'Échangeur,” intended to be one of the tallest buildings in Africa but left unfinished; and the strange “shadow city” of Nsele, a luxury resort in the suburbs built under Mobutu to showcase Zaire to visiting dignitaries.

Kingelez was still barely known in Kinshasa. But in 1989, he was included in “Magiciens de la Terre,” a mold-breaking exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in Paris. Challenging biases built in to the Western art world, the show dared to put contemporary indigenous artists from Africa, the Americas, the Pacific and Asia on the same footing as big names from Europe and America.

One of the curators, André Magnin, had visited Kingelez in Kinshasa. Impressed, he commissioned new work and invited Kingelez to Paris to make it. In the end, Kingelez had six sculptures in the show, which catapulted him to art world fame.

He now traveled widely, and inevitably, his growing awareness of architecture and his wider perspective on politics influenced his sensibility, although the look of his work changed little. He made models inspired by the United Nations during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia; a hospital for AIDS patients at a peak of the African AIDS epidemic; and, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a fantastic cityscape called “New Manhattan (Manhattan City 3021.)” (The latter is not in the MoMA show.)



Kingelez’s “U.N.,” from 1995. (Bodys Isek Kingelez/Maurice Aeschimann/Courtesy CAAC — The Pigozzi Collection)

Kingelez’s own name appears prominently in different forms on many of his models. Intensely jealous, he believed himself a misunderstood genius and, in his own words, an “enlightened artist of new horizons,” “a man of high moral fiber,” a “prophet of African art” and an inventor whose creations “you could go on admiring . . . endlessly.”

He was right — about the last part, anyway.

Most of the international shows in which Kingelez was included during these years were group exhibitions; it was rare to see more than one or two of his works. That’s why the MoMA show, which features more than 30 of his pieces — as well as a virtual-reality offering that takes us deep into his best-known cityscape, “Ville Fantôme” — is so special.

There is something almost excruciating about the way Kingelez’s models enfold playful utopian optimism in an aura of blank desolation. In the exhibition catalogue, the architect David Adjaye describes a Kingelez cityscape as “less a city than a representation of a hyper-condition that, if it were to become a reality, would drive us mad.” That feels about right.

Among American artists, one could make comparisons to Chris Burden’s “Metropolis II,” the fastidious, decorative, but unrelievedly lonely aesthetic of the illustrator Chris Ware, or to the pathos in the utopian visions of Russian emigres Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/everyone-in-new-york-will-be-talking-about-this-artist-soon/2018/05/23/ce665f46-5db5-11e8-9ee3-49d6d4814c4c\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.a028aa8cc1b5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/everyone-in-new-york-will-be-talking-about-this-artist-soon/2018/05/23/ce665f46-5db5-11e8-9ee3-49d6d4814c4c_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a028aa8cc1b5)