Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko's Reverse Appropriation as Counter Discourse of African Art

Alison Kearney

Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko (b. 1992, Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]) is an emerging contemporary Congolese artist of Kongo descent (a group of people who live in parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and surrounding regions). Based in Kinshasa, Kuyangiko combines referents to contemporary global popular culture with icons from his Kongolese heritage in his artworks.[1] After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Kinshasa in 2014, Kuyangiko worked as an apprentice in carpentry workshops in order to learn Congolese wood carving techniques (ASAP 2019). Kuyangiko's geopolitical situation as a young, *kinois* (resident of Kinshasa), Kongolese artist and his diverse learning experiences influence his artmaking practice. In his approach to mixing cultural referents, Kuyangiko builds on the legacies of established contemporary artists like Steve Bandoma and Freddy Tsimba, who make use of historical and contemporary cultural referents to explore the contemporary living conditions, and the dire state of the DRC after the rulers of the second republic's complicity with the pillaging of the DRCs mineral wealth, with no economic benefits to the Congolese peoples (Jewsiewicki 2016). These contemporary *kinois* artists build on the legacies of their modernist predecessors like Cheri Samba, who achieved international acclaim for his representations of urban life, politics, and gender relationships in Kinshasa in the 1970s and 1980s (Ceuppens 2022).

Kuyangiko is among a group of young, urban Congolese artists who have formed artists' collectives and work together to critically interrogate the intersection between Congolese and global cultural practices through their artmaking. For example, Kuyangiko collaborated with fellow *kinois* artists Alexandre Kyungu and Gaël Kusa Kusa Maski to cofound Vision Totale (Vi.To) in 2016 (Mukendi 2020). Kuyangiko is also a member of KAS (Kin Art Studio) and has collaborated with Waza Centre d'art de Lubumbashi, through which he participated in an artist's residency in Johannesburg, South Africa (Witter 2018). In the economically impoverished DRC, sharing resources and access to international artist networks is not only essential for building a career in the arts, it is also a means by which artists can mobilize for social change. As Mukendi (2020) points out, working as part of a collective is a means by which these artists "can help raise local and African voices in the strive for cultural change and social justice." The artists in the collective share "an uncompromising will to question, unveil, and reimagine our human global condition and its sociocultural rootedness." Working without a specific manifesto, the Vi.To artists share an interest in making contemporary art that resonates with *kinois* lived experiences and raises local African voices. Maski (quoted in Mukendi 2020) states, "we should question ourselves as people creating a new world in which the tensions we experience today should not exist." Maski goes on to explain that underlying their vision is the desire to expose and subvert the enduring colonization of the Congolese imagination. Echoing Maski's political awareness, Kuyangiko (2019a) has stated that his artworks comment on "the erosion of Kongolese cultures in the wake of colonialism." In another artist's statement, Kuyangiko adds that his artworks enable exploration of his "biological and spiritual, artistic and scientific" heritage, by creating "opportunities to celebrate the rich legacy left by those who came before" (Kuyangiko 2019b: 13).

Building on my previous research on how objects acquire different meanings as they move from everyday practices in to the field of art (Kearney 2021),[2] my interest in Kuyangiko's artworks focuses on how his use of found elements from diverse cultural origins contributes to discourses of African art. In this paper, I investigate what meanings emerge from the manner in which Kuyangiko combines elements of global cultures with Kongolese culture in his artwork, and how the resultant artworks challenge established discourses of African art. Having situated the artist and his works within the contemporary *kinois* community of artists who criticize the impact of globalization on Congolese heritage, in what follows, I visually analyze a selection of Kuyangiko's artworks to demonstrate that, by combining diverse cultural icons,

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1 Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko (DRC, b. 1992)
Nkisi Mangaaka Fait Face à Hulk, au Terme de nos Accords/Nkisi Mangaaka Faces Hulk, at the End of our Agreements (2018)
Assembly of wood, plastic toy, nails, cloth, silicone; 45 cm x 16 cm
Standard Bank African Collection (Wits Art Museum).
Photo: Mark Lewis; image reproduced courtesy of Wits Art Museum

Kuyangiko has created a pantheon of new, contemporary Kongolese power figures. I suggest that Kuyangiko challenges the injustice of rhetorics of African art that celebrate African artworks as a source of inspiration for modernist artists, while simultaneously denying African artists' modernity. I conclude that Kuyangiko's methods of assemblage can be understood as acts of reverse appropriation, that achieve the self-definition and contemporaneity denied African artists by modernist rhetorics of African art.

Reinventing *Minkisi*

To create *Nkisi Mangaaka Fait Face à Hulk, au Terme de nos Accords/Nkisi Mangaaka Faces Hulk, at the End of our Agreements* (2018) (Fig. 1), Kuyangiko combined elements of a Kongolese spiritual figure with elements of American popular culture. The lower half of the figure consists of a pair of carved wooden legs with blocklike hands resting on their hips. It appears that the figure has been cut in half, with the hands being sawn off from the arms and the rest of the torso. The hands frame a carved, ovoid, protruding belly that has pieces of mirror stuck on it. Cloth and silicone have been used to join the truncated wooden legs to the torso of a plastic toy figurine of Marvel comic character Hulk, with characteristic rippling muscles, menacing expression, and raised arms. There is a bright orange and black plastic butterfly conspicuously attached to the left arm. Nails and other metal bits have been driven into the sculpture's rectangular feet and waist which bare traces of a brown substance that was smeared onto them.

While it appears to be a found object, the artist hand–carved the bottom half of the sculpture to look like a specific type of *nkisi*. *Minkisi* (pl.) are containers of powerful spirit forces made by different communities in central Africa, who regard *minkisi* as intermediaries to the spirit realm. *Minksi* are thought of as empty vessels for the spirit they hold until powerful substances, referred to as *bilongo*, are applied to or placed inside the sculpture (MacGaffey 1988: 192). *Minkisi* powers are activated by a healer or diviner, referred to as a *nganga* (sg.) (Biebuyck and Harreman 1995). *Banganga* (pl.) are tasked with protecting their clients by deploying *minkisi*

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2 Double-faced *nkisi* (front view)
Artist unrecorded; Songye (Central African Republic); date unrecorded
Assembly of wood and other materials; 45 cm x 16 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum)
Photo: Mark Lewis; image reproduced courtesy of Wits Art Museum

to identify and punish those who are enacting misfortune on them (LaGamma 2015a: 34). Jewsiewicki (2016) points out that the *nkisi* is one part of a series of actions, including singing, narrativizing, and the performance of specific rites linked to the spirit being summoned, and the purpose to which *minkisi* are called. As such, *minkisi* take a form that relates to the task that they are made to perform (Biebuyck and Harreman 1995; MacGaffey 1988). Since their form relates to the function *minkisi* are called to perform, MacGaffey (1988: 190) suggests that the visually "metaphorical components express social relations in the present, mediated by the *nkisi*, and the kind of effect that it is expected to produce." For example, the *Double Faced Nkisi* (Figs. 2–3) can be likened to a time machine, connecting past, present, and future. Beyond time, this *nkisi* simultaneously looks towards the past, future, mortal, and sprit realms.

Minkisi minkondi (pl. of *n'kondi*) are a type of *nkisi*, thought of as hunters, indicated by the word *n'kondi*, meaning "to hunt" (LaGamma 2015a: 35). Among the tasks *minkisi minkondi* perform are ensuring that trade and other kinds of agreements are upheld, avenging a victim of wrongdoing, or protecting the user from malice (LaGamma 2008; 2015a). LaGamma (2015a: 83) points out that "*minkisi minkondi* were credited with assisting regional chiefs to address a range of concerns to maintain public order." An *nkisi n'kondi Mangaaka* (Fig. 4), which Kuyangiko references in the title of his sculpture, contains Mangaaka, a spirit La Gamma (2008: 209) describes as "the most powerful force imaginable," in which the hunter is allied with Mangaaka for protection "against acts of treachery and to prevent rivals from challenging their rights to self–determination." Mangaaka could be summoned in order to guarantee agreements, protect the users from rivals, to pass judgment, to see the past and future, and to avenge wrongdoing (LaGamma 2008: 203). *Minkisi minkondi Mangaaka* customarily have aggressive expressions, standing with their arms on their hips and legs akimbo to represent their power. They have a protruding belly, or *mooyo* (Fig. 5), which symbolizes that Mangaaka can combat evil magic (LaGamma 2008: 205). Mirrors and other reflective materials are attached to *minkisi minkondi*, serving as metaphorical eyes, enabling them to see that which is hidden, such as the past or future, or the spirit realm (Biebuyck and Herreman 1995: 248). MacGaffey (1988) interprets the kaolin clay that is frequently found on *minkisi minkondi* as a metaphor for the clairvoyance conferred on *banganga* during the activation of the *bilongo*, because the clay is found in river beds and water is thought of as a conduit to the spirit realm.

Just as the form of *minkisi* relates to their function, so the activation may change depending on the type of *nkisi*, and the purpose or which it is used: insults might be shouted at it, or nails and other bits of hardware knocked into them, as is the case with *minkisi minkondi*. Theorists have speculated that driving nails and other hardware into *minkisi minkondi* figures was influenced by Christian images of St. Sebastian and Christ on the cross (Fig. 6), which circulated in the Kongo region as early as the fifteenth century, when Portuguese merchants started trading along the west coast of Africa. LaGamma (2015a: 37) suggests "it is more likely, however, that these Western representations were not prototypes but rather images that reinforced local forms of expression." Jewsiewicki (2016) points out that the bits of hardware added to *minkisi minkondi* can be thought of as carriers of memories, because each is a relic from an event or persons linked to the tasks the *minkisi minkondi* are asked to perform, adding

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3 Double-faced *nkisi* (side view)
Artist unrecorded; Songye (Central African Republic); date unrecorded
Assembly of wood and other materials; 45 cm x 16 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum)
Photo: Mark Lewis. Image reproduced courtesy of Wits Art Museum

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potency to the *minkisi minkondi*. Not only does the hardware and the *bilongo* used to activate the *minkisi minkondi* contribute to their powers, they make the *minkisi minkondi* appear menacing, as can be seen in the detail view of the nails driven into the *Mangaaka Power Figure* (Fig. 7). With each activation, additional hardware is accumulated, meaning that *minkisi minkondi* will change over time (Biebuyck and Herreman 1995; Kearney 2021).

Gathering the power of Mangaaka and Hulk

Kuyangiko's *Nkisi Mangaaka Fait Face à Hulk* (2018) (Fig. 1) shares many formal characteristics with *minkisi minkonde Mangaaka* (Fig. 4), from the stance to the mirror on the *mooyo*, the nails and traces of substance smeared on the legs. The white paint that formally unifies the disparate elements of Kuyangiko's sculpture can be understood as a visual simulation of the kaolin clay that confers clairvoyance on *banganga*. Hulk's menacing grimace is akin to the foreboding expression found on *minkisi minkondi*; their appearances are intended to strike fear in the enemy. Both are also heroic figures in the communities they serve: Hulk is a fictional superhero, who uses his strength to avenge wrongdoing, and Mangaaka is an avenging spirit with godlike powers. Although made as a sculpture to be exhibited in an art gallery, the nails and residue on the legs suggest that Kuyangiko's *Nkisi Mangaaka Fait Face à Hulk* (2018) has been activated. Kuyangiko (2018: 13) states that in this sculpture, each nail represents a "failed transaction," specifically, the failure of the *minkisi minkondi* created during colonial expansion to protect the Kongolese from colonial exploitation. For Kuyangiko (2019a), these failed transactions expose what he describes as "the violence done to African civilizations by colonialism and neocolonialism." Kuyangiko expresses his concern that colonial violence continues today in the form of globalization, signified in his work by references to American comics, movies, television, and the mass-produced plastic toys he uses in his artworks (Kuyangiko 2019b: 18).

In this work Kuyangiko allies himself to the two most powerful forces of contemporary Kinshasa: the power of Mangaaka and the power of the Hulk. Considering that *minkisi minkondi* take the form of the task they are invoked to perform in conjunction with Kuyangiko's concern for the eradication of Kongolese culture in the wake of globalization, Kuyangiko's merging of Hulk with Mangaaka can be interpreted as an attempt to protect Kongolese culture (represented by Mangakaa) from the globalized culture that Hulk represents. The sculpture, as the title also suggests, is thus a visual representation of Kongolese culture having to face global popular culture. This reading is affirmed by Kuyangiko's (2019b) artist's statement, in the catalogue for his 2019 exhibition titled *Dieux, Nouvelles Énigmes/Old Gods, New Deities,* at the Point of Order Gallery, Wits University. The artist states that his contemporary *minkisi* represent the "reformulation of ancient Kongo divinities" which are "mutated by the politics of industrialized societies characterized by the domination of the imaginary world of consumerism" (Kuyangiko 2019b: 18). The imagery of consumerism is signified by the Marvel, DC, and Disney characters Kuyangiko uses. As well as positing a critique of the homogenization of cultures as a result of globalization, the merging of these avengers tells new stories for both Mangaaka and Hulk.

By combining these disparate avengers into one *nkisi n'kondi*, Kuyangiko has collapsed the dichotomy that each hero formerly represented, creating one new hero. In

4 Mangaaka power figure *(nkisi n'kondi),* Kongo artist and *nganga*, Yombe group; second half of the 19th century; DRC Wood, iron, resin, ceramic, plant fiber, textile, pigment; 118 cm x 49.5 cm x 39.4 cm The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Open access.

5 Detail of Mangaaka power figure *(nkisi n'kondi)* in Figure 4, showing the protruding *mooyo*

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popular culture, the hero represents morality, since they uphold what are regarded as good values, while their combatting evil. Fendler posits that

> [the] hero is the embodiment of a fundamental moral value, which usually can be summarized in the narrative pattern of a fight between good and evil forces during which the hero overcomes the evil and therewith guarantees the survival of the good characters, the prevailing moral values, and the established system (2018: 91).

Fendler prompts us to question who needs heroes and why? He suggests that returning to worship past heroes in the present is an aspect of mythologizing, which "links the mythical hero to contemporary tasks so that he has to face new adventures in contemporary or future epochs" (Fendler 2018: 91). In the process, the past hero is reinvented and made relevant in the present.

6 Cross with Saint Anthony of Padua
Kongo artist, Kongo group, 16th–18th century (pendant figure); 19th century (cross); DRC
Solid cast brass, lead-tin alloy sheet, wood; 32.4 cm x 18.4 cm x 3.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum, New York, gift of Ernst Anspach, 1999. Open access.

7 Detail of Mangaaka power figure *(nkisi n'kondi)* in Figure 4, showing the nails and hardware.

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Taking up Fendler's call to questioning, I wonder: What is the significance of joining these avenging heroes for our thinking about contemporary African art, beyond the need the artist argues that his act of joining Mangaaka to Hulk fills? First, extending Fendler's idea of the reinvention of the past hero in the present makes sense for interpreting Kuyangiko's contemporary *minkisi*, as Kuyangiko (2019b: 18) states that, for him, each new *nkisi* he creates represents "an ancient divine object that is confronted with new contemporary myths exploring in the universe of Marvel comics, Disney and others." In addition, Kuyangiko's *Nkisi Mangaaka Fait Face à Hulk* (2018) reinscribes Mangaaka in the present, reaffirming the significance of *minkisi* in contemporary Kongolese culture. Significantly in the process, Hulk is reinvented as a Kongolese power figure. Kuyangiko's reinvention of Hulk in an African context is an inversion of the historical avant-garde's appropriation of African art and iconography, for example when Picasso appropriated African masks to denote "African-ness" and connotations of the primitive and the dangerous in contrast to Western civilization in works like *Les Demoiselles d' Avignon* (1907). Gikandi (2003: 456) suggests that Picasso's invocation of Africa as wild, dangerous, and terrifying (mostly conveyed through Picasso's statements during interviews), were calculated to "serve his purpose at crucial moments in his struggle with established conventions of Western art." For Picasso, courting the so-called primitive other enabled a visual demonstration of his rejection of Western conventions. Gikandi (2003: 462) points out "that once this task had been accomplished, the other needed to be evacuated from the scene" so that the avant-garde artists could enter the realms of so-called high art. Gikandi (2003) argues that it is precisely because the arts of Africa and Oceania were used as "props" in the avant-garde challenging of art, that it was possible for exhibitions like William Rubin's *Primitivism in the 20th Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1984, to illogically propose that the discovery of African and Oceanic art enabled the initiation of Modernism yet simultaneously claim that works by African and Oceanic artists were not modern.

Sentiments such as those Gikandi (2003) critiques are

8 Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko (DRC, b. 1992)
Nkisi Mousse, un Corps dans le Jardin Brutal (Nkisi Mouse, A Body in the Brutal Garden)
(2018), front view
Assembly of wood, beads, plastic toys, silicone; 45 cm x 16 cm
Photo: Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko

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apparent historically in Modernist historians and theorists of African art, who paradoxically undermine African art when trying to argue for the value of African art within Western art history. For example, in his discussion of why the West should value African art, Danto (1988) suggested that the West should value African art because Picasso, one of the most revered Modern artists, was influenced by African art. Although his argument was meant to exalt African art, Danto was not sufficiently critical of the colonial context in which Picasso encountered African art, nor of Picasso's disregard of the specificities of the African art he appropriated. Recognizing that different sets of cultural practices are at play within Western and African art-making traditions, McEvilley (1988), in the same volume, pointed out that when the West designates objects as "Art" that were not thought of as art by their makers, it is meant as a compliment. McEvilley wrote,

> one thing we mean when we call something art is to confer honor on it … but its meaning speaks about us, not about the objects themselves … the fact that we designate something as art means that it is art for us; but says nothing about what it is in itself or for other people (1988: 202).

Despite McEvilley's awareness that constructions of value say more about the author than the thing, and his intention to honor the artworks, the construction of African art as "other" remains at the core of these attempts to define the value of African art for Western art history. My critique of Danto and McEvilley is ironically similar to that levelled by McEvilley (1984) against William Rubin regarding the *Primitivism* exhibition, wherein works by artists regarded as "modern masters" were juxtaposed with African artworks to demonstrate the influence of African art on Modernist art. McEvilley (1984: 60) critiqued Rubin for pretending "to confront the Third World while really coopting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority."

Notwithstanding his earlier critique of Rubin and his later seemingly self-reflexive account of the limits of Western categories of art to name material culture from different

9 Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko (DRC, b. 1992)
Nkisi Mousse, un Corps dans le Jardin Brutal (Nkisi Mouse, A Body in the Brutal Garden) (2018), back view
Assembly of wood, beads, plastic toys, silicone; 45 cm x 16 cm
Photo: Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko

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communities, McEvilley (1988) overlooks the conceit in thinking of the term “art” as a compliment. Even when considered “art” in exhibitions such as Rubin’s (1984) and their attendant discourses, African artworks were discussed in relation to Western artworks in order to justify the self–proclaimed superiority of Western art. As such, within Modernist art discourses of the African art, agency was given to the Western artists who had the genius, creativity, and good fortune to recognize the beauty, exoticism, and wild freedom of African material culture. Modernist accounts of African art presented a world order whereby, as Oguibe (1999: 20) points out, “within the scheme of their relationship with the West, it is forbidden that African artists should possess the power of self–definition.” The ostensibly sincere appreciation for African art in Danto’s (1988) and McEvilley’s (1988) arguments masks the derision underlying the idea that African art has value in relation or, as in Picasso’s case, in service to the Western canon.

Mixing Cultural Referents

Kuyangiko incorporates diverse referents to global culture in his series of contemporary *minkisi*. In *Nkisi Mousse, un Corps dans le Jardin Brutal (Nkisi Mouse, A Body in the Brutal Garden;* 2018) (Figs. 8–9), a carved, wooden Mickey Mouse head that has been painted white is affixed to a torso which shares some characteristics of *minkisi minkonde,* like the position of the legs and the protruding belly. In addition to the painted Mickey Mouse head, *Nkisi Mousse* deviates from other *minkisi minkondi* in that there are two rectangular *mooyo* instead of the customary single ovoid one. The back and part of the right leg are covered in plastic beads, glued on in bright floral patterns which appear to be spreading, lichen-like, to cover the figure. Arranged as they are, these beaded flowers evoke a decorative, pretty garden and also remind me of the use of beads by many communities across Africa to embellish special garments and adorn artworks.

That the beads and other embellishments cover only a portion of the figure, the chips partially carved out of the legs and torso and only the head painted white while the rest of the sculpture retains its wooden finish, creates the visual effect

10 Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko (DRC, b. 1992)
Nkisi Buddha (2018), front view
Assembly of wood, beads, matches; dimensions variable
Photo: Hilaire Balu Kuyangiko

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of a transformation in progress. The sculpture appears unfinished, evoking the ways in which *minkisi* change over time as they are part of social practices. The rectangular shapes of the two *mooyo* are reminiscent of television monitors: the primary source of many children's encounters with Mickey Mouse. These allusions to childhood are more sinister given Pype's (2021) persuasive reading of this work. Pype posits that the beads in this work relate to the fantasy of a better future, promised by postcolonial governments in the DRC after the 1960s war of independence. For Pype, the flowers resemble the pretty clips that *kinois* women wear in their hair, dystopic in that, although they sparkle, the clips are ultimately made of plastic. Although the beads on the clips appear like jewels, they are fake and valueless. Similarly, the plastic beads that Kuyangiko has used to decorate *Nkisi Mousse* are of little value; the flowers they create are fake. Pype argues that these beads symbolize the lies that Congolese people have been told by successive governments who inadequately try to cover up the truth of how America (symbolized by Mickey Mouse), and by extension global capitalism, controls African leaders. She suggests that the "brutal garden" to which the title refers "is that of global economics, occupied by the victims of American capitalism, among them, the Congolese suffering under Joseph Kabila's regime" (Pype 2021: 35).

Plastic toy limbs and plastic butterflies emerge here and there from the bed of beads. Butterflies recur in Kuyangiko's works. Among different communities in sub-Saharan Africa, including peoples of the DRC, butterflies connote growth, transformation, and renewal and are linked to the spirit realm and living ancestors through their ability to metamorphosize

(Van Huis 2019). Similarly, in Daoist writing, butterflies symbolize resilience, triumph, renewal, and rebirth because of their life cycle, their processes of transformation, and the use of their cocoons to produce silk (Wilson 2021). In Western art traditions, butterflies symbolize the soul, change, death and later resurrection; they were associated with Psyche, the Greek Goddess of the soul by Aristotle (ca. 350 BCE), who described the cocoons as tomblike, and "the butterfly emerging was like the *anima* (soul) fluttering free from the prison of the corpse after death" (Wilson 2021). In seventeenth-century Dutch *Vanitas* paintings, butterflies are reminders of the transitory luxuries of life and the inevitability of death. Wilson (2021) posits that in recent times, butterflies have been used to signify climate change because of their sensitivity to shifts in temperature in their environments, making them "uniquely attuned to global warming." Representations of butterflies could also allude to popularist interpretations of "the butterfly effect," a concept from chaos theory first proposed by Edward Lorenz in the mid 1960s (Vernon 2017: 130). Within chaos theory, the concept relates to understanding how, during the transference of energy, power grows exponentially and becomes increasingly difficult to predict. In popular culture, the idea of the "butterfly effect" is used to "emphasize the outsized significance of minute occurrences" (Vernon 2017: 130). The concept is frequently explained using Lorenz's question: "Does the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?" Understood metaphorically, our actions have far-reaching consequences beyond our control. The multivalences of butterflies offer a way into interpreting this work. First, Kuyangiko's use of a symbol of resilience and rebirth could be understood as a gesture of hope and a metaphor for the rebirth of Kongolese culture through his reinvention of past Kongolese power figures in his contemporary African pantheon. The butterflies could also be a symbolic warning against the systematic acculturation that was part of the colonial project: Like the butterfly effect, the smallest act of adopting Western culture can lead to a catastrophic erasure of Kongolese cultural practices. Inversely, joining Hulk and Mickey Mouse to *minkisi minkondi* could signify hope in the potential of a small gesture of incorporating American iconography into a Kongolese power figure to center African culture by turning these iconic American figures into *minkisi*.

Kuyangiko does not limit his appropriation to elements of American popular culture. In *Nkisi Buddha* (2018) (Fig. 10), another new god in Kuyangiko's contemporary pantheon, what appears to be a yet-unactivated *nkisi n'kondi* (distinguished by the legs, torso, belly, position of the arms, and lack of nails and *bilongo*) is joined at the neck to a carved, wooden, upside-down Buddha figure. Joined as they are, the headless figures create an uncanny hourglass shape. A mane of unlit matches conceals the join, visually evocative of the protruding nails and other bits customarily found on *minkisi*. The unused, incendiary devices, menacingly close to the wood of the sculptures, symbolize latent power, potential destruction. The matches are beautiful and threatening, reminding us of the ever-present possibilities of change. Looking at the matches around *Nkisi Buddha's* neck, I cannot help thinking of Malcolm Browne's iconic 1963 photograph of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc burning himself to death in an act of protest in Saigon (Browne 1963).

The figures that comprise *Nkisi Buddha* are literally and metaphorically turned on their heads; a potent visual reminder of how the world is in disorder when even pacifists enact self-immolation. The carved black Buddha, ensconced in spray-painted silver robes, attached to a seemingly unactivated *nkisi,* look as if two tourist mementos have been stuck together: ironically, handmade replicas—new, and therefore unused and inauthentic. Kasfir (1992) outlines and critiques the cult of authenticity, which refers to the construction that African artworks must have been "used" in ritual practices and bear the traces of that use in order to be considered "authentic." In making visual references to discourses of the authenticity of African art such as those reported in Shelton's (1976) article "Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art," Kuyangiko challenges the problematic idea that African artworks are valued only in so far as they are "genuine." Roy Sieber said of the problem of fake African art,

> First, one needs to know what is genuine in order to discern what is not. For purposes of African art studies, I suggest that the term "genuine" be reserved for that great majority of works made by traditional artists and used in a traditional context (Sieber, cited in Sheton 1976: 22).

The insistence that African artworks meet criteria of authenticity as defined by the West in order to be valued as African art by Western art historians and museum workers further robbed African artists of the agency of self-determination and agency to make art for sale and blocked African artists' legitimate entrance into the Modernist canon.

The Power of Reverse Appropriation

Transformation is important in Kuyangiko's pantheon of contemporary *minkisi*. Kuyangiko has partly transformed the found figures to create his sculptural assemblages; even in their new form, the parts that make up the whole are still recognizable. The iconic cultural heroes that Kuyangiko has brought together have undergone a transformation in order to harness their powers in their original contexts. They symbolically could enact transformations on wrongdoers in their new states as *nkisi*, if activated. Through inscribing recognizable, global cultural icons with Kongolese meaning, Kuyangiko enacts the agency that Oguibe (1999) argued was previously denied African artists. Furthermore, in making global cultural icons African, Kuyangiko reverses the direction of appropriation with regards Africa and the West. His strategy is one of "reverse appropriation," a term used in postcolonial literary studies (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002), and by Olu Oguibe (2002) discussing nationalism and the work of Nigerian artist Aina Onabolu (1882–1963).

Kuyangiko adopts reverse appropriation as a strategy to make art that critiques the discourses of African art proposed by Western Modernism. Kuyangiko's reverse appropriation is like the strategies of abrogation and reverse appropriation used by postcolonial authors. Writing about postcolonial authors' subversive use of language, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002: 37) suggest that, in order to challenge power, postcolonial writers made use of "abrogation" and "appropriation." Abrogation is a form of subversion, in which the author creates a text modelled on imposed, hegemonic forms of writing, but uses their own language in place of the imperial

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language as a form of "writing back" to the colonizer. This form of cultural subversion is evident in how the Rt. Hon. Dr. Louise Simone Bennett-Coverley (known as Miss Lou OM, OJ, MBE), uses Jamaican patois in poems that use English literary rhyming traditions to challenge colonial rhetorics of the inferiority of the colonized. For example, in "Colonization in Reverse" (1966) Miss Lou OM, OJ, MBE appropriates a classical ballad quatrain with an A–B–C–B rhyme scheme, customarily used to tell the stories of heroes—for example Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1798) "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Poetry Foundation 2023)—to tell the (mock) ballad of the unintended consequences of making Jamaicans citizens of England. An extract of three verses from her "Colonization in Reverse" (1966) reads:

> *What a islan! What a people!*
> *Man an woman, old an young*
> *Jusa pack dem bag an baggage*
> *An tun history upside dung! …*
>
> *Oonoo see how life is funny,*
> *Oonoo see de tunabout,*
> *Jamaica live fe box bread*
> *Outa English people mout.*
> *For wen dem catch a Englan,*
> *An start play dem different role,*
> *Some will settle down to work*
> *An some will settle fe de dole.*

Through abrogation, the colonial language is denied control of the means of communication. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002: 37) describe abrogation as "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words."

As with other forms of subversion through parody, the writers must mold the abrogated text so that the appropriated "language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 38). As political strategy, reverse appropriation's powerful rebelliousness is in how the colonized peoples (characterized as "other" and therefore inferior), turn the imperial language into a weapon for political subversion (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 45). Through reverse appropriation, the status quo is also reversed; the center becomes the other.

> Postcolonial writing abrogates the privileged centrality of "English" by using language to signify difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood. It does this by employing language variance, the "part" of a wider cultural whole, which assists in the work of language seizure whilst being neither transmuted nor overwhelmed by its adopted vehicle (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002: 50).

In turning Hulk, Mickey Mouse, and Bhudda into *minkisi*, yet leaving enough of their original forms apparent that we recognize the characters and understand how they have been transformed, Kuyangiko utilizes language variance to turn Western discourses of African art "upside dung."

Conclusion

Many of the issues that Kuyangiko engages with through his art-making are not new: issues of agency, of value, authenticity, and cultural appropriation have long been part of discourse of African art. Kuyangiko's contribution to the discussion is in the way he reengages these discussions from an African artists' point of view. His work is metatextual. Although there are different power relationships and political intentions at play in these examples, Kuyangiko's reverse appropriation is not unlike the historic and neo-avant-gardes' attempts to interrogate Western art discourses from within. When Picasso and other Modernists appropriated African art, as Gikandi (2003) points out, they made sure to maintain enough connection to the masters who came before them that their dissent was apparent, yet their artworks were not completely unrecognizable as art. In the process, their position as the new masters, in relation to the previous masters, was cemented. However, while the Western avant-garde were appropriating African art to affirm their modernity in relation to Africa, Kuyangiko's contemporary reverse appropriation of iconic figures from other cultures affirms Congolese contemporaneity and laments the erasure of cultural difference in the wake of globalization.

Kuyangiko's methods are ironic, since the act of combining global referents with Congolese icons could be interpreted as the kind of rupture from Congolese tradition that the artist critiques. Herein is the stickiness of abrogation and appropriation as subversive tools: as with parody, there is a danger of reproducing that which is critiqued because of the necessary mimicry that is involved. My hedging resonates with Schneider's (2006: 223) suggestion that "in the process of appropriation, the other's practices are copied and made part of one's own practices." In other words, the act of appropriation necessarily involves a kind of enculturation, and there is a danger that, in the process of reverse appropriation, as with parody, hegemonic ideas are reinforced rather than critiqued. It is because of the mimicry involved that Schneider (2006: 223) characterizes appropriation as border crossing, in which the act of appropriation exposes the idea of "bounded culture" as itself mythological. Although, in his stated aim to reinvigorate Kongolese culture, Kuyangiko is at risk of a pastoral harkening back to an essentialized, untrue idea of precolonial Kongolese culture, he avoids reproducing that which he intends to critique through retaining recognition of the global cultural elements and the Kongolese *minkisi* in his new pantheon. Although the elements remain recognizable, they have all been transformed, in form, context, and power relationships—visual metaphors for the processes of movement and change of global culture.

Through Kuyangiko's border crossing, new meanings are attached to Hulk, Mickey Mouse, Buddha, and Mangaaka. The artworks in Kuyangiko's contemporary Kongolese pantheon can be understood as acts of reverse appropriation, which break with narratives of African art that value African art only in service to, or as inspiration for Western masters. Kuyangiko, and his contemporary *kinois* peers, reaffirm a central position for contemporary Congolese art within global art, and also remind audiences that Congolese art is not isolated or stagnant. Theirs is a meta-analytical understanding of the value of African art within the global contemporary

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artworld, like the African Modernist artists who came before them. This meta-analytical view takes up the agency of self-determination that Oguibe (1999) laments was historically denied African artists, who were not thought of as modern, or contemporary, or even as artists in the art historical cannon. Kiyangiko's sculpture disrupts neocolonial constructions of African identity, while also critiquing the homogenization of culture in the wake of globalization and commenting on the status of African art in the art museum. Although, by his own admission, Kuyangiko is critical of the erosion of Congolese cultural practices by the influx of Americana, his artworks demonstrate the potentially innovative, creative, inspiring possibilities when cultures collide.

Notes

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1 The Kongo are a group of people who live in what is today northern Angola and the western parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), including Kinshasa. The term "Congolese" refers to citizens of the DRC, Kuyangiko's country of birth. Kuyangiko is a contemporary Congolese artist of Kongo descent, who lives and works in Kinshasa. For more on the region and the different communities who reside there, see LaGamma (2015a).

2 I have previously written about Kuyangiko's artwork in a book chapter titled "Materiality and Meaning" (Kearney 2021). Using one work from the Wits Art Museum's collection as a case study, I focused on the changing significance of the found elements that Kuyangiko uses in his sculptural assemblages. Drawing on social anthropological theories of the social life of things (Kopytoff 1986), I explored how the meaning and value of materials and objects change as they move from everyday social practices into the field of art. Whereas my aim in this article is to demonstrate how Kuyangiko's use of diverse cultural referents can be understood as reverse appropriation, that challenge discourses of African art that deny African artists their contemporaneity.

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