From Camera to Canvas: The Case of Patrice Lumumba and Congolese Popular Painting

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<FIG. 1 ABOUT HERE>

Friday, December 2, 1960 was the final time that Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was ever seen by the camera. He was assassinated on January 17, 1961. In one of the photographs that records his last public appearance, Lumumba is forced to face the photographers and cameramen. His head is raised by a soldier who grabs him by the hair, while another twists his arm. Tousled in appearance, Lumumba's short-sleeved shirt appears wrinkled and stained, a far cry from the composure and the suits of the young statesman seen in other photographs from the same era. His signature glasses and charismatic smile are gone. After several years in the limelight as the leader of the Congolese independence movement, this appearance represents one of the only times that Lumumba seemed to want to turn away from the camera.

On December 2, shortly after 5 p.m., Lumumba arrived on an Air Congo DC-3 at Ndjili, the airport for Kinshasa, the Congo's capital city, where photographers and journalists were waiting on the tarmac. He had been arrested on the orders of Colonel Joseph Mobutu while attempting to escape from his residence in Kinshasa to Kisangani, his political stronghold. After gaining independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960, the Congo entered a period of protracted turbulence known as the "Congo crisis" (1960–65) in which the government was plagued by political infighting as well as the pressures of foreign influence in the context of the Cold War. The crisis ended in 1965 when the country fell under the rule of Mobutu who established a dictatorship that endured until 1997. From Ndjili, Lumumba was transferred in the back of a lorry alongside two associates, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito, to the Binza paratroop camp and again paraded for the press. Images and newsreel footage of the punishment inflicted on Lumumba at the airport and the Binza camp were disseminated around the world; they are today available online through a simple keyword search.[1] The crowds were told to taunt the young statesman who was forced to eat a transcript of a recent statement in

which he declared that he was the head of the country's legitimate government. The following day, December 3, 1960, Lumumba was sent with Mpolo and Okito to Campy Hardy in Thysville (today Mbanza-Ngungu) where they were detained. On January 17, 1961, the group was transferred to Lubumbashi; they were driven to its outskirts and executed by a firing squad. The succession of events chronicled here that led to the assassination was only constructed in 1999 thanks to Ludo De Witte's study, *De Moord op Lumumba* (*The Assassination of Lumumba*), which acknowledged the complicity of both the Belgian and American governments.[2] Directly after the events in the Congo, there was speculation as to what had happened to Lumumba. His death was announced three weeks after it had occurred over Katangan radio on February 13.[3] The broadcast alleged that Lumumba was killed by enraged villagers three days after escaping from Kolatey prison farm.[4] The circumstance around the arrest photographs and the assassination created a kind of mythology around Lumumba.[5]

<FIG. 2 ABOUT HERE>

If the photographs that surround the arrest capture the final time that Lumumba was ever seen by the camera, the events thereafter are frequently envisioned by Congolese popular painting. There is little research around photography's entanglements with other arts across the continent.[6] Mediums are often treated as separate fields of enquiry. The tradition of Congolese popular painting emerged in Lubumbashi and Kinshasa in the 1960s and 70s after the end of Belgian colonial rule. Thousands of paintings (many of them narrative or popular retellings of history) were produced by self-taught or apprenticed artists and sold to a local audience. Clients were after subjects with a wide appeal, showing scenes of which they were already aware.[7] Exemplary of this trend is the Lubumbashi born artist, Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu, who started to work on a History of Zaire series in the early 1970s. In 1996, the anthropologist Johannes Fabian published an account of Tshibumba's series.[8] He had befriended Tshibumba in 1973 and sponsored the series with the support from several expatriate colleagues over the course of

1973–74.[9] In *Calvaire d'Afrique* (c. 1970–73), Tshibumba rendered Lumumba's transfer to Lubumbashi in January 1961 after having been imprisoned at Camp Hardy in Thysville since December. There is a control tower visible in the background as well as a Sabena airplane while a smokestack suggests the ongoing work of the Belgian mining company Union Minière du Haut Katanga. Lumumba's hands are tied behind his back with rope. He is accompanied by agents of the Sûreté and soldiers from the Katangese gendarmes. There are several versions of this exact same scene painted by Tshibumba in both colour and black and white. In conversation with Fabian while working on the series, the artist explained:

> One in color, the other not. It's like the photographs your wife took of me. She said she would photograph me in color as well as in black and white. And that's how I did it, in color and in black and white.[10]

Tshibumba's comment seems to convey the affinity of Congolese popular painting with photography. This article examines Congolese popular painting as a post-photographic phenomenon and contends that it takes over from the camera in capturing Lumumba after the arrest. For example, Tshibumba's *Calvaire d'Afrique* turns to the arrival of Lumumba in Lubumbashi, an event that occurred after the final arrest photographs were taken. Notably, Lumumba is pictured by the artist in a white tank top, suggesting the dishevelment seen in the photographs. This outfit was a significant change for the young *évolué*, the title given to educated Congolese who were sufficiently "Europeanized" in terms of customs and style; their visual signifiers were that of the suit, tie, and shirt.[11] In a photograph of the artist painting from 1973, Tshibumba appears acutely aware of photographic culture. A black and white illustrated newspaper article is turned toward the camera, while in the background, there appears a collection of photographs, varying from passport photos to shots of Mobutu, tacked onto the wall. Passport photographs were deployed to validate one's official identity as, since the start

of the 1970s, the state had required each individual to carry a photo identity card.[12] These photographs were also provided by clients who wanted to commission a painted portrait, as a painting was cheaper than a photographic enlargement.[13] Furthermore, it is as if the black and white and colored versions of Tshibumba's work attempted to enter the sphere of photography through which events in the country had been chronicled since the "Congo atrocities" captured by Alice Seeley Harris in the early twentieth-century. Seeley Harris's photographs of Congolese with severed arms were shown around the world in a campaign against human rights abuses in King Leopold II's Congo Free State. This emphasis on photography was continued by the photographic service of the Belgian Congo's colonial information agency, InforCongo (1950–1960), which attested to advancements in the colony for a local and worldwide audience. Images were similarly central to several journals started in the Belgian Congo. For example, *Nos Images*, the Congolese equivalent to *Life* magazine that circulated widely from 1946 onwards, was a predominantly visual publication filled with large format photographs spanning entire pages.[14] Bearing this in mind, painting perhaps provided a site for imaging what might have happened to Lumumba whereas photography, at this moment in the Congo, was still largely tied to the idea of recording actual events.

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The entanglement of Congolese popular painting with photography is exemplified in the case of Lumumba. In *Lumumba Arriving in Elisabethville* (c. 1970s), Burozi, the Likasi artist who had taught Tshibumba, turns to an earlier instance in the same event seen in *Calvaire d'Afrique*.[15] He renders Lumumba, Mpolo and Okito as they disembark in Lubumbashi from an airplane emblazoned with the words "AIR CONGO C-B" and a Belgian flag. The three men, each dressed in a white tank top, descend the staircase led by a bespectacled Lumumba. Interestingly, Burozi chose to add three white photographers dressed in black suits to the scene.

Two appear to the side of the three men while another appears on the top of the staircase, capturing their descent. From the top of the stairs, the photographer angles the camera toward the viewer. However, these events, like the one seen in Tshibumba's *Calvaire d'Afrique*, were actually characterized by a complete omission of photography as they occurred after the final arrest photographs were taken. Nonetheless, the painting speaks to the omnipresence of the camera around Lumumba in the lead up to independence from Belgium and the days of the "Congo crisis." For Lumumba was acutely conscious of appearance and the significance that photographs carried. The scene rendered by Burozi suggests the sea of cameras edited out of the many iconic photographs. This same circus of photographers was conveyed by the director Raoul Peck in the eponymously titled film on Lumumba from 2000 in which famous photographs were theatrically staged for the story. As Peck specified: "Familiar scenes from the photographs and newsreels have also had an emotional force for me. Their dramatic impact is intact."[16] The legend of Lumumba as told by Peck is based on photographs and captured like the photographs.[17] Images of the arrival at Ndjili and Lumumba's subsequent torment are restaged by Peck. To open the scene, Lumumba steps off an airplane and silently stares at a group of stationary journalists as if acknowledging the act's original shape in a still photograph. Here, in *Lumumba*, the other side of the photographs are seen, the sea of cameras and exclamations shouted by the sizable crowd. Captured from a close up angle just like the images and newsreel footage, Lumumba is subsequently forced to eat a transcript of a recent speech. Memories of Lumumba are accordingly substantiated or even created through photographs.

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Following on from Lumumba's arrival in Lubumbashi, the assassination itself was depicted by Congolese popular painting. In the 1970s, Burozi executed a work entitled *Bodies of Lumumba, Mpolo and Okito* which conveyed three corpses situated in a woodland setting

and watched over by a solider with a gun. There is a sense of self-conscious continuity created in the painting with photojournalism. One takes over where the other ends and even travels back in time to events that escaped the camera's eye, from the assassination of Msiri, the King of Katanga, by Leopold's army in 1891 to the strike at Union Minière in 1941.[18] Painting is employed as a continuation of the photojournalism that comprised the era. There is seemingly a collapse that occurs as the camera and canvas come to share in the same operation through their collation of an archive around Lumumba. Moreover, there is an attempt in the paintings that convey Lumumba after the arrest to restore the young *évolué* from the tousled appearance seen in the photographs from December 1960. In *Bodies of Lumumba, Mpolo and Okito*, as in the other paintings that depict the group's arrival in Lubumbashi, Lumumba appears without any wounds. The final collection of photographs is suddenly an object to ameliorate and surpass.

Furthermore, the tradition of Congolese popular painting is itself indebted to photographic culture, a thread often only acknowledged by existent scholarship (largely written by anthropologists) in a couple of sentences.[19] Newspaper photographs, as suggested in the image of Tshibumba painting, were the sources for many of the artist's paintings based on Lumumba.[20] They are, to some extent, conserved from the corrosion seen in tropical climates and propagated in other shapes. Tshibumba's turn to photography is also observed by Erin Haney who argued of the paintings that "their compositions rely on the artist's sense of history," a statement which is left somewhat vague.[21] History in the Congo and the era of Lumumba, as argued above, is largely informed by the photographic, while the compositions themselves contradict Haney's claim. In *Discours du 4 janvier 1959, Les Martyrs de l'Indépendance* (c. 1970–73), for example, a portrait is coupled with a history style painting of Lumumba leading the Congolese with the country's flag. The portrait is suggestive of an often-circulated photograph of Lumumba. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the two paintings as one

is evocative of an editorial layout that would set photographs side by side alongside text or even the double page spread characteristic of photo magazines like *Life*. Tshibumba's works were also annotated, similar to those of the Kinshasa-based Chéri Samba who borrowed from the world of comics; the texts guided the audience on their engagement with the visual. These texts seem to operate in similar ways to the photographic caption, which accompanied the typical circulation of Lumumba's image.[22] The omnipresence of photography continues even in paintings without an identifiable source photograph. In a painting by Tshibumba entitled *La Mort historique de Lumumba, Mpolo et Okito* (c. 1970–73), the body of Lumumba is shown lying on the grass alongside that of Mpolo and Okito.[23] The angle from which Lumumba is rendered creates the impression of a photographic sensibility as if Tshibumba had also laid on the ground to capture the scene. This same kind of sensibility is also observed by Haney in the work of Samba whose subjects often appear as if they were suddenly stopped mid-activity by the camera.[24]

Congolese popular painting developed when photography was a well-established tradition in the country.[25] However, the existent photography traditions in the Congo were already entwined with the conventions of Western painting. In 1960, Lumumba's political party, Mouvement National Congolais-Lumumba, distributed a photograph of him dressed in his habitual suit and tie. He stands with a globe that turns Africa toward the camera, evoking the continent's purported ascendancy in this same era as the world is physically held by Lumumba. The significance of props had long been associated with painted portraiture. This addition of the globe, for example, extends all the way back to the German artist Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). In the 1970s, Burozi created both black and white and color paintings entitled *Lumumba, Master of the World* based on interpretations of this photograph. In a black and white version, Lumumba appears against a white wall like the subject of a studio photograph. The color version appends two red curtains on either side of

Lumumba as if evocative of a theatre or even classical portrait painting in which drapes often provided a backdrop. His shadow is cast to the left in both paintings, suggesting a light source beyond the edge of the work. Flat in effect, the black and white version of *Lumumba, Master of the World* suggests the softly faded edges of a well-worn photograph. Commercial studio photography as well as painterly conventions endure and are, above all, enmeshed in Congolese popular painting.

<FIG. 7 ABOUT HERE>

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Photography appears to have had an effect on the conception of an artwork in Congolese popular painting. As discussed, Tshibumba and Burozi produced several copies of the same work. Though obviously influenced by sales, we could speculate that the various versions of one work speak to the countless copies of the photograph, as already analyzed by Walter Benjamin in 1935. Benjamin had proposed that photographs dissolved the aura of original works of visual art: "Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction."[26] Uniqueness and genius are shed by the reproducibility of photographs, which perhaps effected the employment of the signature on the work in Congolese popular painting. Paintings were often signed, though these signatures carried less weight than they did in the West: they occasionally signified the artist or sometimes even the salesman or the client who had left the work to someone else.[27] These circumstances could perhaps be explained through an absence of a market for these paintings at the time. Now that a market has emerged, these signatures are of significance.[28] Of course, Benjamin could not have predicted that photographs too would become subsumed into the authorial structures of the market – and counterintuitively into the fetishization of the "original" in the market for vintage prints.

In addition to photography, there were of course other sources from which artists borrowed that are illuminated in the case of Lumumba. In Tshibumba's *La Mort historique de Lumumba, Mpolo et Okito*, three crosses appear in the background. The artist stated: "I saw that Lumumba was like the Lord Jesus. He died the same way Jesus did: between two others. And he was tied up the way Jesus was. It was just the same."[29] Christian iconography was disseminated in the Kingdom of Kongo by the Portuguese as early as the fifteenth-century.[30] However, as Bogumil Jewsiewicki wrote, "Tshibumba and other popular painters did not invent the representation of Lumumba as Christ."[31] Black Francophone writers often portrayed Lumumba as Christ, which was then translated to the visual by Tshibumba and others.[32] There were also the comic books previously cited from which Samba worked. For the "colonial contact zone" saw the appearance and intersection of various mediums that came to constitute Congolese popular painting.[33] Thus, the case of Lumumba's image exemplifies the complex entanglements that comprised traditions and technologies of representation specific to the time and space in which it was developed.

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[1] The US Ambassador to the Congo, Clare Hayes Timberlake, sent the Secretary of State, Christian Herter, a telegram asking him to stop these being disseminated as they would have an "atomic bomb" effect. Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Fenby (London: Verso, 2001), 58.

[2] Ludo De Witte, *De Moord op Lumumba* (Leuven, Belgium: Uitgeverij van Halewyck, 1999). The book was translated to English in 2001.

[3] BBC, "1961: Ex-Congo PM declared dead" (13 February 1961),

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/13/newsid_2541000/2541053.stm.

[4] Ibid.

[5] On the mobilization of Lumumba's image in the wake of the assassination, see Pierre Halen and Janos Riesz (eds.), *Patrice Lumumba entre dieu et diable: Un heros africain dans ses images* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997); Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 61-67.

[6] Erin Haney makes a similar observation. See Haney, *Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 131. A small body of scholarship has addressed the connections between photography and sculpture, see Stephen Sprague, "Yoruba Photography: How the Yoruba See Themselves," *African Arts*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1978): 52–59, 107; Olu Oguibe, "Photography and the Substance of the Image," *In/sight: African Photographers 1940 to the Present*, eds. Clare Bell et al. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 231–250; Tobias Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 39 (2001): 78–101. On the entanglement of photography and music, see Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Happy Survival!: Highlife, Photography, and the Postcolonial Condition," *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. by Tamar Garb (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; New York: Walther Collection, 2013), 228-236.

[7] Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self," *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 99–110 (99); Johannes Fabian, *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 52.

[8] Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996).

[9] The relationship between Congolese painters and European patrons has been discussed by Jean-Luc Vellut. See Vellut, "La peinture du Congo-Zaïre et la recherche de l'Afrique innocente: présentation du livre de J.A. Cornet, R. De Cnodder, I. Dierickx et W. Toebosch: 60 ans de peinture au Zaïre," *Bulletin des séances*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1990): 633-659.

[10] Fabian, *Remembering the Present*, 119.

[11] On the term *évolué*, see Karen Bouwer, *Gender and Decolonisation in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Thomas R. Kanza, *Conflict in the Congo: The Rise and Fall of Lumumba* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 12; Mutamba Makombo, *Du Congo belge au Congo indépendant, 1940-1960: Emergence des "évolués" et gènese du nationalisme* (Kinshasa: Institut de formation et d'études politiques, 1998), 49; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 48; Jean Tshonda Omasombo and Benoît Verhaegen, *Patrice Lumumba: acteur politique: de la prison aux portes du pouvoir, juillet 1956-février 1960* (Paris: Harmattan, 2005), 97.

[12] Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga: Painters, Audiences, Buyers and Sociopolitical Contexts," *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (New York: Museum for African Art, 1999), 13–27 (16).

[13] Jewsiewicki, "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self," 107.

[14] Nancy Rose Hunt, "Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics," *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 90–123 (103).

[15] Tshibumba worked as Burozi's apprentice in 1970–71. See Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga," 23.

[16] Zeitgeist Films, *Lumumba* press kit (2001), www.zeitgeistfilms.com/media/films/5/presskit.pdf.

[17] The staging of paintings in film is an often-employed technique as seen in Alexander Korda's *Rembrandt* (1936), Vincente Minnelli's biopic on Vincent van Gogh, *Lust for Life* (1970), and Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986).

[18] These historical events are rendered in Tshibumba's paintings. See Fabian, *Remembering the Present*, 43, 59.

[19] Jewsiewicki, "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self," 100, 107; Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga: Painters, Audiences, Buyers and Sociopolitical Contexts," 16; Jewsiewicki, "Congolese Memories of Lumumba: Between Cultural Hero and Humanity's Redeemer," *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art*, ed. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (New York: Museum of African Art, 1999), 73–91 (84–85). The largest case for the mobilization of photographs in Congolese popular painting has been made by Haney. See Haney, *Photography and Africa*, 149.

[20] As similarly noted by Liese Van der Watt, "Echoes of Zaire: Popular Painting from Lubumbashi, DRC," *Africa is a Country* (2 July 2015), www.africasacountry.com/2015/07/echoes-of-zaire-popular-painting-from-lubumbashi-drc-by-liese-van-der-watt/.

[21] Haney, *Photography and Africa*, 149.

[22] Jewsiewicki offers an alternative reading. He sees the image and the writing as expressing two divergent truths: "the legend reproduces the official state version, but the image signifies what is known through other channels, including rumor." He associates written text and explicit references to writing as an allusion to state control. See Jewsiewicki, "Painting in Zaire: From the Invention of the West to the Representation of Social Self," 107.

[23] The same image has been reproduced by Tshibumba under other titles, such as *Le 17 janv 1961 / Bob Denard a tué Lumumb–Mpolo–Okito*. This alternate title refers to rumours that a French soldier called Bob Denard had murdered Lumumba in cooperation with Katangese authorities. See Fabian, *Remembering the Present*, 121-122.

[24] Haney, *Photography and Africa*, 149.

[25] The court of the Merina kingdom in Madagascar is one of the few places on the continent known thus far where there was an established tradition of painted portraiture in place before the first European photographers arrived. See Haney, *Photography and Africa*, 127. On the history of photography in Congo, see N'Goné Fall (ed.), *Photographies Kinshasa* (Paris: Revue Noire, 2001).

[26] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211–244 (217).

[27] Jewsiewicki, "Popular Painting in Contemporary Katanga," 21–22.

[28] See Adriana La Lime, "Congolese Art Shines at Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary African Art Sale," *Sotheby's* (10 April 2018), https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/congolese-art-shines-at-sothebys-modern-and-contemporary-african-art-sale (accessed 8 November 2018). Ashraf Jamal offers a more scathing critique of the contemporary brokerage in African art, linking it to the colonial scramble for Africa: "Africa then and Africa now: rape and rapine." See Jamal, *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art* (Milan: Skira, 2017), 28.

[29] Fabian, *Remembering the Past*, 122.

[30] On the arrival of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo, see Cécile Fromont, "Dance, Image, Myth and Conversion in the Kingdom of Kongo, 1500–1800," *African Arts*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2011): 52–63; Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[31] Jewsiewicki, "Congolese Memories of Lumumba," 88.

[32] Marie-Jose Hoyet, "Quelques images de Patrice Lumumba dans la literature du monde noir d'expression francaise," *Patrice Lumumba entre dieu et diable: Un heros africain dans ses images*, eds. Pierre Halen and Janos Riesz (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 49–80 (53).

[33] This concept of the colonial contact zone was developed by Mary Louise Pratt. Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40.