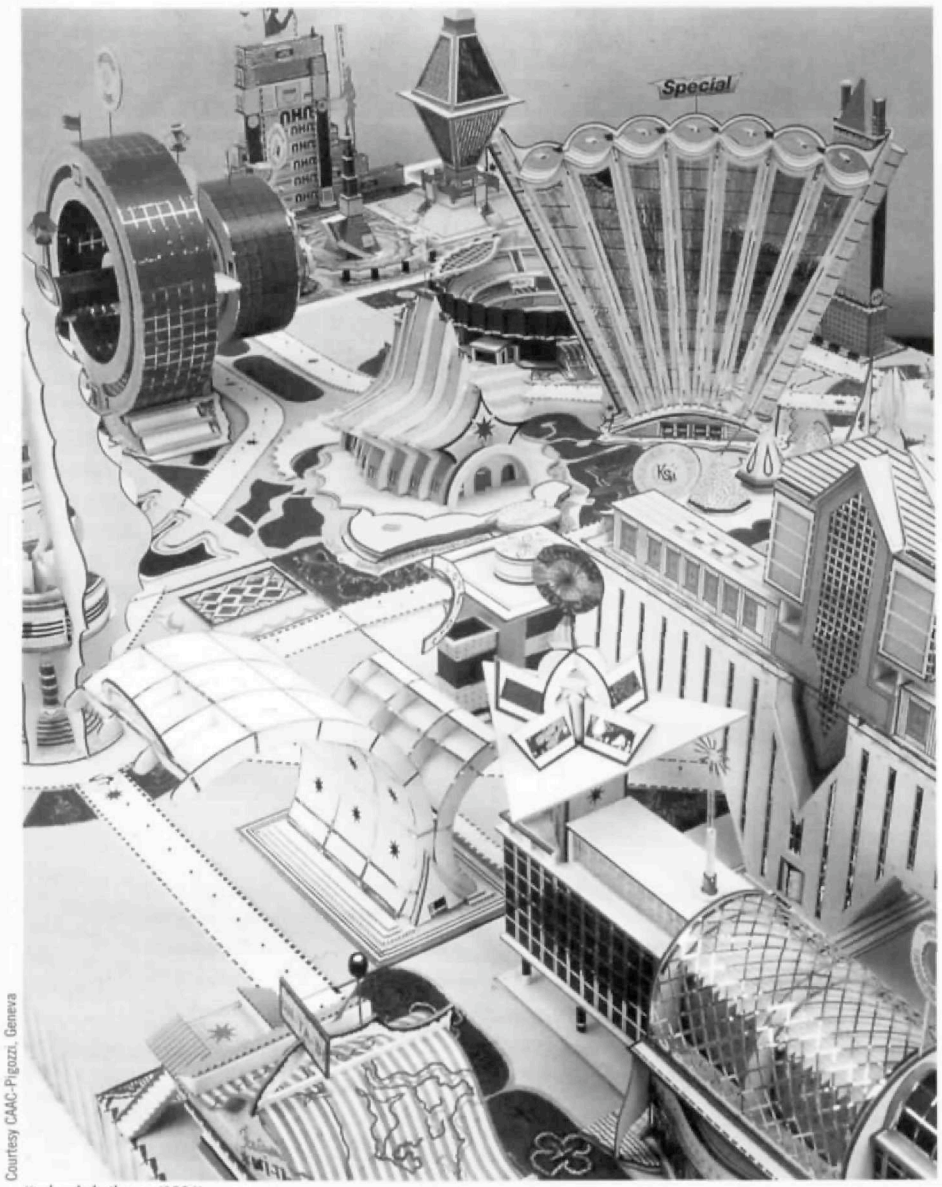


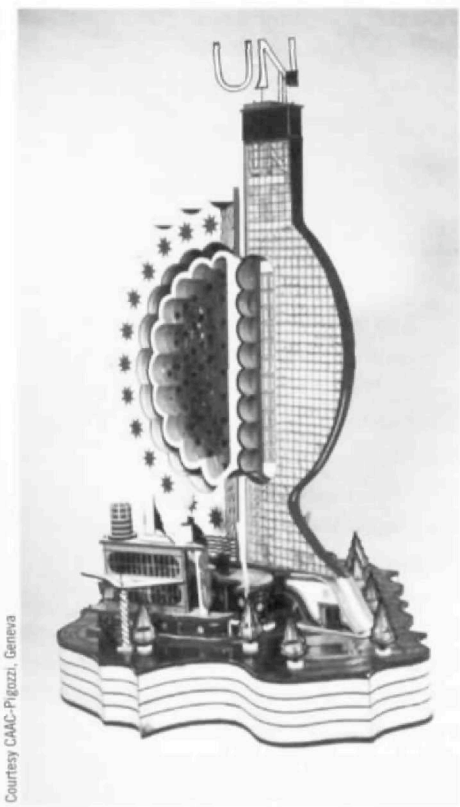
Courtesy CAAC-Pigozzi, Geneva

Kimbembele Ihunga (1994).

An African Vision

Perspectives 145: Bodys Isek Kingelez
Contemporary Arts Museum
January 29–May 1, 2005
African Art Now
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
January 29–June 5, 2005

Reviewed by Kelly Klaasmeyer



Courtesy CAAC-Pigozzi, Geneva

U.N. (1995).

If Dr. Seuss had designed Brasilia, the Brazilian capital might look something like the work of Bodys Isek Kingelez. Kingelez makes architectural models of amazing, over-the-top cities. Kingelez lives in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo's sprawling capital city of 4.5 million, a city deeply affected by the 30-year kleptocracy of President Mobutu Sésé Seko. Having lived in Kinshasa since 1970, Kingelez produces works infused with his desire to create solutions for the entire spectrum of urban problems.

Like Brasila's actual creators, urbanist Lucio Costa and architect Oscar Niemeyer, with their visions of Gesamtkunst*stadt*, Kingelez is on a mission to create an urban utopia.

Kingelez's work was a part of a Houston-wide African art extravaganza inspired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's epic exhibition "African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection." In addition to the MFAH pieces, Kingelez works from the Pigozzi collection were featured in the solo show "Perspectives 145: Bodys Isek Kingelez" at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

Kingelez uses found materials—paper, cardboard, plastic, polystyrene—to craft fantastic new worlds. Yellow boxes from UHU brand glue and empty toothpaste cartons become building blocks, while swatches of corrugated cardboard become tiled roofs. But for the most part, the origins of the materials Kingelez employs are hard to place; he breaks them down into neutral building components. Every once in a while you might notice something and think, hey, isn't that part of an oil filter?

Kimbembele Ihunga (1994), part of the MFAH exhibit, covers approximately 60 square feet. It was named after the small village where Kingelez grew up and contains a statue of the artist's father. Within Kingelez's cityscape a yellow high-rise spreads out in a "V" like a lady's fan, while another building looks something like the Sydney Opera House, but is made from concentric stars—a reference to the Congolese flag. Still another structure, a skyscraper, sports giant flying buttresses with rococo edges.

Kingelez's models are crisply constructed and his buildings use bright, light, clear colors and dynamic lines. In Kingelez's cities, roofs levitate and arc and the walls of buildings zig and zag, curve and undulate.

Kingelez's plan for the United Nations building, *U.N.* (1995), which was also at the MFAH, is a skyscraper combined with a Ferris wheel-like circular form with inverted scalloped edges dotted with purple stars. A "UN" in giant letters sits atop the building, and looks like it might be intended to rotate.

Ville Fantôme (1996), an urban vision of Kingelez's that was part of the CAM show, has shiny silver and gold skyscrapers that make New York's Chrysler Building look bland and unornamented. Gaily colored apartment blocks snake back and forth, each one unique. Kingelez has said that "a building without color is like a naked person without clothes." And even the terrain of his *Ville Fantôme* has been painted in vivid hues, breaking up and decorating the landscape.

Kingelez's models are amazing, something the artist wouldn't hesitate to tell you. He has an ego to match the grandiosity of his designs, many of which he has named after himself. In a video shown at the CAM, Kingelez states that an "artist is a small god." It's an opinion of themselves that some artists and architects with extravagant aspirations might well have, but which few would be frank enough to share.

Kingelez's ego exists in conjunction with noble goals, however. In the video Kingelez talks of plans for a "medicinal city" that would bring the world's pharmaceutical companies together to work in one place and concentrate research on curing diseases such as AIDS. In one of his models he has named a building after his favorite vitamins; another is named for ampicillen, another for Vermox, a worm medication, "because we eat things that are not medically safe."

In the CAM video Kingelez discusses his home city of Kinshasa. Speaking in front of a decaying building he laments the state of the capital, its roads, its trash, and his fellow inhabitants. Kingelez has said about his work, "I created these cities so there would be lasting peace, justice, and universal freedom. They will function like small secular states with their own political structure, and will not need policemen or an army."

The artist obviously has ambitious agendas, but they aren't that far removed from the creators of Brasilia's idealistic goals. And when you look at Kingelez's unrestrained designs for utopia, it doesn't seem so far fetched. In his cheerful, fanciful buildings gathered along eccentric avenues, poverty, strife, and decay are nonentities.

To the extent that a physical environment can affect people by shaping their attitudes, behavior, and moods, Kingelez's plans would surely yield better results than Brasilia, with its cold rationality and social egalitarianism applied so stridently that it tastes of fascism. In Brasilia, Costa planned things down to what sort of cars would be chosen for taxis, the wardrobes of bus drivers—dark grey uniforms with chevrons in company colors and a mandatory cap—and what cemeteries would look like—shallow graves with plain tombstones "without any signs of ostentation."

Kingelez's approach is far more open and far less rigid. No one would end up living in anything like the monotonous rectangular apartment blocks that became the bane of Brasilia. In Kingelez's world, everything from public structures to private housing is equally, extravagantly creative.

Educated by Catholic missionaries, Kingelez is self-taught as an artist. But perhaps self-taught isn't the right word; maybe it should be community-taught. He learned about art by growing up in a traditional village. Every day he would "watch the men making masks or working at the forge." He took those lessons and decided to make things that would envision a better way for the city in which he lived.

His designs are quirky and idiosyncratic, but then so are people. His models are collected and exhibited as artworks, but Kingelez is serious about having them realized. In his artist's statement in the CAM catalog he said, "I dream of a better, more peaceful world. When Africa's political climate cools down and acting becomes possible, I'll present my concept of modernity to the African people."

As megalomaniac plans for utopia go, Kingelez's is definitely one of the most appealing. ■