

## Fallible witnesses

Kapwani Kiwanga. *Flowers for Africa*

Caroline Hancock - August 2014

Celebrations, dedications, commemorations, condolences, tributes... all these actions, sentiments, duties are encapsulated in this artwork that is devoted to paying homage to an entire continent. *Flowers for Africa* is Kapwani Kiwanga's ongoing project which will eventually reinterpret bouquets or floral and foliage arrangements displayed during the transitions to independence (or a related historical event in Ethiopia) in the 54 countries.

As is her wont, Kiwanga launched into researching archival documentation of the official ceremonies, meetings, parades or negotiating tables that encapsulate the various orchestrations of the handovers of power in 20th century. The available visual evidence suggests the formats varied according to the departing colonial power, ranging from high diplomacy or regalia in the case of ties with the United Kingdom, to more rigid, low-key pomp and ceremony or even understatement in other situations. Hosting any event has its codes of spectacle and decorum, and the greeting ritual generally involves a display or an offering of flowers. The planning behind such gifts might appear insignificant in comparison with the gravitas of what is being marked on the occasion. Yet what is interesting to ponder upon is how interconnected the horticultural industry is with shifting global trade routes and agreements. Where were the various selected flowers coming from? Were they indigenous or flown in for the occasion, and, in that case, from where, what climate and at what expense? Answers to some of these questions are indicative of the then-current status quo, and of future commercial developments. Kiwanga collects photographs dating back 50 or 60 years that include these flower arrangements and, with the help of florists and other experts, she identifies the likely species. The decisions for her real adaptations then necessarily imply also learning about the specifics of the industry today.

The first manifestation of Kiwanga's *Flowers for Africa* project took place during her residency in Dakar, Senegal, to prepare the exhibition "Cyclicalities" curated by the collective *On The Roof* at the Galerie Le Manège in 2013. (1) The installation comprised of a vase, 70 carnations, 20 anemones, bougainvillea, three plinths and plaques which were based on archival images found at the national archives, the archives of the ministry of communication and the image library of I.F.A.N. (Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire) or African Institute of Basic Research. Initially perfectly fresh and blooming, the flowers are not specially preserved but left to run the course of their transient cycle. Rather like in the process of storytelling, the past is momentarily brought back to life for consideration, until the next occurrence. A form of ephemeral memorialising, as fallible, yet rich, as oral history or photography.

For this exhibition in the gallery Karima Célestin, "Fallible Witnesses", Kiwanga's written description of a bouquet in a photograph recording the actuality of the Federation of Mali (which became Senegal) evokes this previous incarnation of the project and develops the conceptual, yet more permanent, component. Four bouquets are reconstituted referencing planters in the background of a ducal speech in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1961, bouquets dangling in a stadium in Uganda in 1962, gladioli brandished in triumph by Benyoucef Benkhedda in Algeria in 1962, a bowl of cut flowers on a table destined for an all-important signature between Frelimo (The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) and Portugal in 1975.

Focussing in on seemingly minor details within the independence proceedings – the flowers – relates to the tradition of still life painting within history of art and the meaningful complexity of their symbolism. Indeed, one of the Senegalese bouquets was a tricolour (red, white and blue) assembled to be given to the French president Charles de Gaulle.

Another work presented in this show is Kiwanga's video *Vumbi* (2012) which was filmed on a roadside in rural Tanzania. Here she systematically cleans a vertical line on a bush covered in red dust. Flowers often equally play a key part in home-making and domestic well-being, with comforting implications despite their fragility and impermanence. Creative healing is in action.

"Culture reflects a community in motion. Culture is to the community what the flower is to a plant. A flower is very beautiful to behold. But it is the result of the roots, the trunk, the branches and the leaves. But the flower is special because it contains the seeds which are the tomorrow of that plant. A product of a dynamic past, it is pregnant with a tomorrow." Ngūgī wa Thiong'o (2)

### Notes

1. "Cyclicalities", Galerie Le Manège, Dakar, Senegal, February-March 2013. Curated by *On The Roof* (Elise Atangana, Yves Chatap, Caroline Hancock). With work by Steeve Bauras, Victor Omar Diop, Kapwani Kiwanga.

2. Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, "Speaking My Language", Address at the 2012 Sunday Times Literary Awards, 2012. Available on 17/08/14 at : <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2012/06/25/speaking-my-language-ngugi-wa-thiongos-address-at-the-2012-sunday-times-literary-awards/>