

VINCENT MEESEN TSHYELA NTENDU

PATTERNS FOR (RE)COGNITION

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ENGLISH

KIOSK presents *Patterns for (re)cognition*, a duo exhibition of the works of Belgian artist Vincent Meessen (1971, Baltimore, USA) and Congolese artist Tshyela Ntendu (circa 1890 – 1960, in Luluabourg, Belgian Congo).

For some time now, Vincent Meessen has been exploring the works carried out by André Ombredane in the Belgian Congo. This French psychologist, who was among other things responsible for introducing the Rorschach test in France, worked for about ten years in Belgium. During his archival research, Vincent Meessen came across a series of silent films documenting Ombredane's experiments carried out in the Congo, including those destined to test "the mental level of black folk".

The title *Patterns for (re)cognition* is a reference to the jargon of cognitive psychology. More specifically, it refers to tests measuring the brain's capacity to abstract and memorize, mental operations that are made possible by the recognition and identification of recurrent stimuli. Yet the parentheses around part of the title appear to suggest that repetition and recognition are precisely operations that need to be questioned.

Central to the exhibition, the modular layout developed by Vincent Meessen and architect Kris Kimpe, devises a reading of the space and the elements it contains that is both abstract and dynamic. Combined with the 16 mm film projections, paintings, and photographic folios, this exhibition layout contributes to staging a "constructivist scenario". The matrices and cubes of Ombredane's cognitive psychology can no longer be perceived as neutral forms. They appear as constructions that produce the conditions of intelligibility.

By assembling different forms that modernist autonomy carefully kept separate, *Patterns for (re)cognition* constructs a polemic and circular relationship to the concept of abstraction. Approached as one of modernity's recurrent motifs, abstraction is, to say the least, a fluctuating signifier. Artistic abstraction often aims to be formal and conceptual. From modernism's outset, it declared itself to be self-reflexive and resistant to the notion of "narrative". While proclaiming both ideal forms and a specific materiality, modernist abstraction never hid its African influences. We know, for example, that Tristan Tzara, Gustav Klimt, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, and Sophie Taeuber were great lovers, and in some case even collectors, of Kuba textiles from Congo. The astonishing fact that the abstract work of Tshyela Ntendu, the Congolese artist from the very same region has remained undiscovered and hardly acknowledged seems to point at a blind spot of colonial modernity.

Thela Tendu, whose works blur the boundaries between the fields of art, textiles and architectural ornamental motif, is better known by the name of Djilatendo. It is under this name, at any rate, that Georges Thiry, a young Belgian colonial administrator, introduced him in Europe. Tenduo was a Lulua tailor originally from what is now called Kananga (ex- Luluabourg), capital of West Kasai in Congo. In the late 1920s, he moved to the town of Ibaanc (Ibanshe) in the Kuba region. There, he sold aprons commissioned by the missionaries until Thiry noticed a painted mural on his hut in 1930. He supplied him with ink, paper and coloured paints and purchased his entire production, as he had already done several years earlier with Albert Lubaki, another modernist

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precursor. Sending the works to Belgium served both to demonstrate the modernity of these Congolese illustrators and to create a market in the mother country. They did win critical acclaim. A solo exhibition of Lubaki's work inaugurated the brand-new Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1929. In 1931, Djilatendo exhibited, among others, alongside Magritte and Delvaux at the mythical Centaure Gallery, then in Paris, Rome and Geneva. But in commercial terms, the enterprise was a flop. On his return in 1932, Thiry progressively lost contact with his two protégés and they fell back into oblivion as quickly as they had caused a sensation.

Tshelatende's work remains largely unknown to the public, and Vincent Meessen's curatorial invitation goes beyond simply assembling a series of works. Firstly, it's the first time that a selection comprising just the abstract works that Tshela tendo produced in the 1930s is presented to the public. This choice invites an epistemological exercise, whose impacts are potentially diverse and plural, as in part translates the series of "name labels" presented. This collaboration with the graphic designer and typographer Pierre Huyghebaert testifies to the some forty different spellings that Thela Tenduo used to sign his works.

In a pen stroke, Thelatedu undoes art history's classificatory regime, which posits the guarantee of modernity in a signature. Here, on the contrary, everything suggests that the artist's signature was itself "addressed" as a motif, and not for its stable and authentic character. By transcribing it in the form of labels, Ntendo's polygraphic statement is re-read as announcing later Western conceptual gestures that refuted the artist as a unified figure. So, it is ultimately of little matter that Theladeo indeed signed all his works himself. Repeated in its different spellings, the name itself becomes heterogeneous, "de-coding" both the identity-based, alphabetic order of colonial power and the anonymity of anthropological collection. Every different signature reinvents another eternally inascribable auteur.

Vincent Meessen (Baltimore, 1971) lives and works in Brussels. Solo exhibitions of his work have been held at Netwerk, Aalst; Espace Khasma, Les Lilas; the FRAC Lorraine (extra muros); and the Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam. He has recently participated in group exhibitions at the Kiasma Museum, Helsinki; CCA Wattis, San Francisco, the MOCAD, Detroit; WIELS, Brussels; and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

Tshyela Ntendu aka Djilatendo aka... (Luluabourg, c.1890 - Ibaanc, c.1960). Considered the precursor of modern art in Congo, Tendu's work is multifaceted: geometric abstraction, figurative paintings depicting his animal cosmogony and above all the encounter with colonial modernity in different fields of day-to-day life, folktale illustrations, etc. Several works have been exhibited in group exhibitions, notably at the Agneau moustique (Brussels, 1947), Horizonte 79, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin, 1979), the Center for African Art and New Museum for Contemporary Art (New York, 1991), the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren, 1992), the Setagawa Art Museum (Tokyo, 1995), the Botanique (Brussels, 2007) and the Fondation Cartier (Paris, 2012).

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Exhibition Design : Kris Kimpe and Vincent Meessen
Production : Bertien Jaekers and Pierre Huyghebaert
16mm technique : Els van Riel and Benjamin Verhoeven
Light design : Chris Pype
Translations : Steven Tallon and Melissa Thackway
Executive Producer : Katrien Reist / Jubilee
KIOSK team : Liene Aerts, Takahiro Kudo, Yourri Mishin,
Pierre Rebufy, Sam Van Ingelgem and Wim Waelput