

**ily cere-
cahier**

**the zero world
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The Zero World
Materials and the Machine

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Photographs by Sammy Baloji

It may be that the economy- every economy -with all its logical and technical aspects, ultimately boils down to just two activities: hunting and gathering, and that despite all appearances we have never really moved beyond these.

In the economies of the ancient world, hunting and gathering were not simply two types of activity intended to meet the needs of human beings. They also defined two ways of relating to oneself and to others, to nature, to objects and to other species, whether alive or not. In particular, they defined the relationship with the animal and vegetable worlds. These were perceived as external entities that were subject to the will of men and could be appropriated where they were available. People would make a compromise with them if they had to, but they did not hesitate to struggle with them where necessary and ultimately even to destroy them absolutely.

This destruction required more than just a single blow. It was a chain involving many different steps. When animals were trapped or brought down during the hunt, they were cut up after they were captured. This was a necessary process in order to transform the animal into meat, to be eaten raw or after its ordeal by fire (cooked). They were devoured, digested and excreted, completing the process of consumption.

The hunting and gathering paradigm exists beyond the primitive economy, too. At the deepest level every economy - and capitalism in particular- has preserved this primitive aspect as a driving force which is hidden but sometimes becomes more overt. Destruction

or liquidation moreover constitutes the crucial moment in this process, creating the possibility for its existence, just as the creation of tools, the invention of new organisation technologies and systems, the cycles of accumulation also do. It is the last step in the chain before the cycle -perhaps- begins again.

It has been asserted that in the ancient system of hunting and gathering, as in modern economic systems, destruction is unavoidable since it is the precondition for the reproduction of social and biological life.

When we speak of destruction or liquidation this means first of all that we are referring to a confrontation between man and materials - physical and organic materials, biological, liquid and fluid materials, human and animal materials in the form of flesh, blood and bone, as well as vegetable and mineral materials. It also means that we are thinking of a confrontation with life - human life, the life of nature, animal life and the life of the machine. Of the work needed to produce life- a work which also includes the creation of symbols, languages and meanings. Of the process by which human beings captured by the machine are themselves transformed into materials -material made from man and man made from material. Ultimately it also means that we are thinking of the processes of their decay.

The decaying of both life and materials is not the same as death. It is a kind of opening up to an extreme externality which we will call the *Zero World*.

In this Zero World, neither the material nor the life come to an absolute end. They do not become nothing. They simply move on towards something else, and in every case the end is deferred and the question of finiteness remains unanswered.

It is this Zero World that is the subject of the photographs by Sammy Baloji presented in this publication.

Drawing on the mirror procedure, the artist depicts a humanity which is both wandering and working, placed in a setting that represents not the end of the world, but more specifically the Zero World.

The Zero World is a world whose becoming is difficult to depict precisely because the time from which it takes shape can scarcely be captured using the traditional categories of past, present and future.

In this world that has fallen to pieces, with its shades of twilight, time is constantly oscillating between its different segments. Different types of exchange bring together terms that we tend to see as opposites. The past is in the present. It is not necessarily identical with it, but sometimes it is refracted by the present and sometimes it seeps into its gaps, or at other times it simply rises to the surface of time, attacking it with shades of grey, seeking to permeate it and render it illegible. The executioner is in the victim. The immobility is in the movement. The word is in the silence. The beginning is at the end and the end is in the midst. Everything, or almost everything, is entanglement, incompleteness, dilatation and contraction.

This is also a world whose own flesh and veins reveal the gouges made by the machine. Its crevices, sinkholes and tunnels. Its crater lakes. The ochre, lateritic red and copper shades of earth. The bowls, terraces and outcrops and the interplay of relief and depth.

The pungent blue of still waters, unbroken by a single wave as if already dead. The road that follows the escarpment of this lunar landscape. The ant-men, termite-men, men of lateritic red, who attack the very edge of the slope with pickaxes, plunging into those tunnels of death and, in a movement of self-burial, become one body and one colour with those tombs from which they extract minerals. They come and go like ants and termites, bearing heavy weights on their heads or backs, trudging with their bodies and their feet through the mud. On the surface there are blast furnaces and chimneys and tumuli which may be pyramids, perhaps mausoleums [burial mounds], or one inside the other.

Evidently something has been extracted from the earth and crushed here, within the bowels of the machine. The toothed machine. The large-intestine-machine. The anus-machine-that devours-and-crunches-and-digests-rock, leaving behind it the traces of its own monumental defecation.

At the same time it also leaves a tangle of iron and steel. Red bricks, deserted hangars, dismantled piece by piece and stripped by the ant-men, the termite-men. Workshops that have remained standing, stripped down to their scrap metal, similar in appearance to a field of skeletons. Huge, blind machines, rusted by the elements, isolated outcrops testifying to a decayed past which is impossible to repeat but seemingly still cannot be overcome or made to disappear.

The machine has aged, however, and has become a rag, a stump, a skeleton, a statue, a monument, a gravestone or even a ghost. Today the world of the machine that cut, punctured and extracted, has collapsed. It exists no more, except by its emptiness.

In its verticality, however, the decrepit machine continues to dominate the scene, towering over it with its bulk and continuing to leave its mark, invested with a kind of phallic, shamanic and diabolical power- the vital clue to its essentially factitious nature.

To capture this threefold power: phallic, shamanic and diabolical, the artist lifts numerous figures out from the shadows onto the scene, unwitnessed witnesses, faces serving as epitaphs of an age that is only slowly disappearing.

In this theatre of apparitions, men in chains, barefoot captives, convict labourers, porters, half-naked people, all gaze out, haggard, from the night of the slave caravans and the forced labour under the colony.

It is now their turn to speak again, on this scene which is deserted only in semblance, speaking a language and uttering words that seem to have fallen silent

But who will hear their voice? ■

Achille Mbembe (b. 1957) is a philosopher, political scientist, and public intellectual. He obtained his doctoral degree at the Université Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne) in 1989 and subsequently obtained the D.E.A. in Political Science at the Institut d'études politiques, Paris. Mbembe is a Research Professor of History and Politics at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research in Johannesburg, South Africa and a Visiting Professor in the Department of Romance Studies at the Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University. Mbembe's most important works are: *Les jeunes et l'ordre politique en Afrique noire* (L'Harmattan, 1985); *Histoire des usages de la raison en colonie* (Karthala, 1996); *Sortir de la grande nuit : Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (La Découverte, 2003); *Critique de la raison nègre* (La Découverte, 2013) and *Politiques de l'inimitié* (La Découverte, 2016). His seminal work *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Karthala, 2000) was translated into English (*On the Postcolony*) in 2001 and published by the University of California Press.

Sammy Baloji, born in 1978 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo. Lives and works in Brussels and Lubumbashi. Sammy Baloji explores the cultural, architectural and industrial heritage of the Katanga region of Congo. In order to question official versions of Belgian colonial history, he has researched widely in various museum archives – for example, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Confluences Museum, Lyon or the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. History of art and documentary photography blend with that of colonialism. His series of photomontages, of revisited albums confront his historical research with the human and economic actuality. The juxtapositions dialogue and his series, such as *Congo Far West* (2010-2011), *Kolwezi* (2012), *Mémoire* (2006), are highly charged with meaning.

notes:

ily cere- cahiers is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

the first copy of *ily cere- cahier 2* was printed in september 2023

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