

Dustsceawung (Take A good Lamp)

"It was almost too good to be true. (...) Whenever there was an acute demand for a certain material on the international market - ivory in Victorian times, rubber after the invention of the inflatable tire, copper in the full industrial and military expansion, uranium during the Cold War, coltan in times of mobile telephony - Congo turned out to have huge amounts of the desired stuff. Yet this economic history of improbable luck is also one of improbable misery."¹

The demand for Congolese minerals and organisms has consistently been a direct result of industrial developments, making the Congolese soil the birthplace of objects of desire and destruction that are actualised in other realities. The nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki contained parts of the Congo, just as every smartphone and laptop does today. These technological objects exist in all places, while Congo exists in all these technological objects.

In the dust lies the tension between luck and misfortune, a blessing which is also a curse, the moment one's earth turns into another's fantasy.

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A Dutch furniture manufacturer goes bankrupt, the contents of their warehouse, showroom, offices and factory are auctioned online. We buy everything electronic. Most of the stuff is made in China - computers, smartphones, hand tools, monitors, keyboards, hard drives... and from the other side of the supply chain, we start mining. Every object is unscrewed, unglued, separated into parts. Using hydrochloric acid (34%, activated with hydrogen peroxide), gold is recovered from plated connections. A phone still has a note taped to it with the company's internal numbers. Danny is on line 8. Whetstone is hammered into pieces and tantalum capacitors are filed out of their plastic shells. Copper and aluminium are melted down and poured in between. A new mineral appears from the burnt casting sand, the first stone to emerge as we dig ourselves to Congo.

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Look at any single thing on the continent, it always comes under the sign of the multiple: the idea of one God is totally foreign to the continent, there have always been many Gods; the forms of marriage; the forms of currencies; the social forms themselves always come under the sign of multiplicity.²

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My grandmother retrieves from her book shelves a travel guide to Congo and Ruanda-Urundi from 1958. The book gives detailed driving instructions between places and roads that don't exist anymore, across borders that since cannot be crossed, guiding through a future that never existed.

¹ Van Reybrouck, David, *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, Fourth Estate, London, 2014. Page 119.

² Africa and the Future: An Interview with Achille Mbembe - <http://africasacountry.com/africa-and-the-future-an-interview-with-achille-mbembe/>

Leave Goma past Kisenyi and take the road to Ruhengeri. At km 11, Rugerero, centre of Bugoyi, where one can see 120 'Ntore' dancers. Further, at km 14 lies the milk farm of Nyundo, and close by the old imposing catholic mission founded in 1901 as the base of the first inland diocese of Rwanda-Urundi. At the sisters of Our Lady of Africa, one can admire and order beautiful tapestries, woven by hand from banana fibres by young inland girls.

Past Nyundo lies the wide Mutura-hill, its bent roads divided in two. Turn left around km 26, 2km past the stage-hut of Mutura, towards the Bugoyi region, the richest of Rwanda. Not an inch of these grounds is neglected, tilled continuously between harvests. Take a right at the start of the tour; numerous pyrethrum plantations. Around km 32, take the small road left towards the Mutura lava-caves, shelter of the inlanders during the war of 1914-1918. Take a good lamp.

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Still waiting for papers and stamps, we get increasingly restless in this city. We start climbing the walls of the compound, knowing everything that we are here to find is so close yet so closed. While we wait for the stamps that will allow us to get out of town, we attempt to get into the comptoirs - the places in the city where the minerals arrive, are washed, sorted, weighed and packed for shipping. We are surrounded by these places, one is just down the road from the dusty, derelict hotel where we stay. But being in Goma, they are surrounded by high walls and metal gates, all activity hidden away.

We are taken into a building site to talk to a builder who is someone's brother and who knows which gates hide comptoirs. The atmosphere is as if we are making a drug deal, but he points us in the right direction and goes back to building a mansion with columns that don't even attempt to look straight.

At each gate, we are sent off with the usual stories - The boss is in a meeting come back later, There is nothing here, Yes maybe later.

We become particularly obsessed with getting into Huaying Trading, a comptoir ran by a Chinese company, and invest all our energy and frustration of not yet being in the Rubaya mine into getting access. We return four times, with a different local person each time. When the guard refuses entry saying the boss needs to approve, we pay him to "call the boss" and after a two second phone call we are let in, along with the guy who sold him the phone minutes, and two more passers-by who saw the action and decided to join. One minute this place was guarded like an army base, the next we are in with a bunch of random strangers off the street.

There is one man inside, he is old and Chinese and happy to see us. We practice our Ni Hao and Xie Xie and chat through his translation app. He shows us the sorting machines for the minerals, all dormant. They are about to close their operation. It is surreal to see this setup just in the middle of the city in between shops and NGOs, then our time is up.

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It's Sunday and not all 'officials' work so we can't go into the coltan mine yet. I suggest we take a walk out of town anyway and ask our friend negotiant if he can take us to another mine. It's afternoon and following the river, we cross creuseurs (diggers; miners would sound too professional) who are walking back home with their shovels. The mine is a gold and

tourmaline mine: a big site of land at the bottom of the hill close to the river, ripped open by hundreds of people with basic tools. I take some pictures on my film camera that did survive the journey, canon AE1: Kalashnikov of cameras. I also sprinkle the gold we mined from the computer parts on the black earth. There's a lot of interest and I hope it won't confuse future creuseurs.

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Goldfingers are cut off motherboards with pruning shears and submerged in acid overnight. Using a coffee filter, 50 mg of gold flakes is retrieved. On day 25 in East Kivu, the plastic vial opens atop an open gold mine, the particles scattered on the mud. Gold to gold dust to dust.

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The level of natural resource intensity experienced by some countries in the mid-to-late 20th century, particularly mineral-intensive countries, seems to have been historically unprecedented, at least according to the limited data available for earlier periods. Almost without exception, the resource-abundant countries have stagnated in economic growth since the early 1970s, inspiring the term, 'curse of natural resources'. Empirical studies have shown that this curse is a reasonably solid fact.³

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In the village of Liuyang in Hunan, dust from the Congolese mine is packed tightly into the bottom of a cardboard tube. Gunpowder stars are scattered on top, and sealed with a layer of black goo and a wick. The cake is wrapped in copper foil, ready to be shipped for a pyrotechnical spectacle on another continent, where the Chinese and Congolese particles will fall down from the sky and enter all our pores and cracks.

³ Sachs, Jeffrey D. & Warner, Andrew M., "The curse of natural resources", *European Economic Review*, Elsevier, vol. 45(4-6), pages 827-838, May 2001.

Image list + Captions for work images

Retour
2015
C-Type Print
75 x 75 cm

Landscape
2016
Copper, tin, nickel and gold on bronze
20 x 19 cm

H/AlCuTaAu
2014
Aluminium, copper, gold, tantalum, whetstone
12 x 7 x 6 cm

H/AlCuTaAu
2014
mine
Dimensions variable

B/NdAlTaAu
2015
Neodymium, Aluminium, Gold, Tantalum
14 x 9 x 7 cm
*** Photograph by Jens Ziehe*

B/NdAlTaAu
2015
mine
Dimensions variable
*** Photograph by Jens Ziehe*