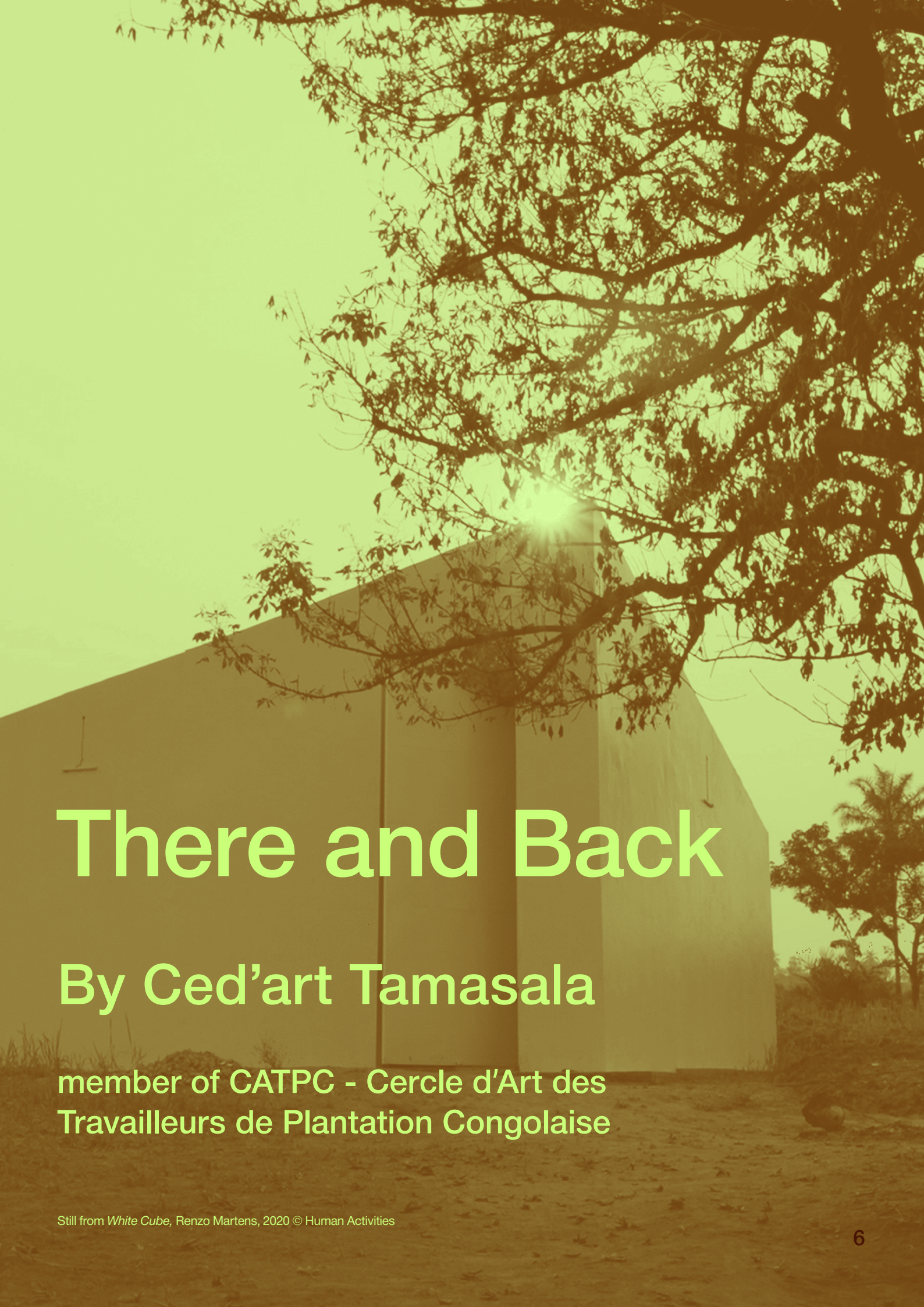




There and Back

By Ced'art Tamasala

member of CATPC - Cercle d'Art des
Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise



CATPC

CATPC – Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise is a collective of plantation workers based in Lusanga (Democratic Republic of the Congo), formerly Leverville, the first palm oil plantation established by Unilever in the Congo in 1911. Through the production and sale of critical art, CATPC generates resources to restore depleted plantation land: they have bought back nearly 400 hectares, where they develop regenerative agriculture, plant a sacred food forest, and build shared infrastructure for the benefit of their community. Their work proposes art as a means to rebuild autonomous, resilient communities and repair ecological and historical damage.



CATPC members (from left) Olele Mulela Mabamba, Huguette Kilembi, Mbuku Kimpala, Jeremie Mabilia, Jean Kawata, Irene Kanga, Ced'art Tamasala and Matthieu Kasiama, still from *White Cube*, Renzo Martens, 2020 © Human Activities

The multinational Unilever – a British–Dutch company owned by William Lever – received land concessions from the Belgian colonial government in 1911 for palm oil extraction in the Congo. From that moment on, the company cleared all natural forests to replace them with endless monocultures of oil palms. Our village, named Lusanga, became Leverville – the first plantation in the Congo – and the Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB) established a palm oil factory there. Over the years, this monoculture depleted our soil, rendering it barren and making agriculture impossible. In short, Unilever's extraction of palm oil in Lusanga devastated our people, our lands, and our history. Far removed from this reality in the Congo, the profits drawn from our lands contributed to the construction of numerous art institutions in the West.

Our community – that of CATPC, the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise – is not the only one with such a history of exploitation linked to the art world. According to our research, there are many other plantation communities across the globe which, through their involuntary labour, gave life to art institutions and museums in the West. Indeed, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum were financed through plantations in Indonesia; the Tate Modern through plantations in the Caribbean; and the Lady Lever Art Gallery through plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. The list goes on. For more than ten years, Unilever sponsored the commission programme *The Unilever Series* at Tate Modern.

Yet, despite the immense contribution of our plantation communities to art institutions, most of our communities are unaware of our role in building museums and cultural institutions. Moreover, these spaces have never made room for us. This disqualification to our detriment, on account of our status as plantation workers, is an injustice that must be denounced.

Only a selected minority is granted the privilege of entering these institutions and receiving what you call “nourishment”. What institutions offer as nourishment exists because our plantation communities have paid for it through the costly contribution of our sweat and our blood. Yet this “nourishment” remains inaccessible to our plantation communities, because the world of consumption confines us to what is expected of us: to supply products and to die slowly, in silence, in (almost) unpaid labour.

Our collective benefits from an unhealthy privilege: we have access to these institutions, while many other communities living in similar or worse conditions do not have this luxury.

So how can *all* plantation workers finally gain access to these institutions? The path taken by our collective offers a valuable direction to explore, as our shared experience has led us to a deep conviction: the privileges granted to an individual or to an exclusive minority must be shared with all and among our own – the excluded plantation communities across the world.

These unhealthy privileges, and access to funding from the art world, have enabled us to create our most important collective work: the sacred forest. The loss and disappearance of the forest and its biodiversity in Lusanga, following decades of monoculture, was a devastating blow to our communities. It is this void that we seek to fill through our art. With the income from the sale of our work, we have been able to buy back 395 hectares of land, on which we are collectively planting our sacred forest.

Post-Plantation, CATPC, Lusanga, 2017, photo: Leonard Pongo





Still from *White Cube*, Renzo Martens, 2020 © Human Activities

Planted on land once confiscated and overexploited by Unilever, this forest allows our land to heal and ensures food security for our communities. It functions as a natural and free supermarket for our community, where everyone has an equal right to harvest and gather whatever it offers: food, natural medicines, inspiration, connections, or plots of land on which to build a home or cultivate crops. Today, our joy is immense as we witness the return of plants and animals, as mushrooms and caterpillars reappear in this forest that we cultivate together, with and for our community. This unique and harmonious relationship with our land reconnects us with our ancestors and our history.

In addition, we have built our own museum in Lusanga, the White Cube, as well as a school, the Luyalu School, where we pass on our artistic, ecological, and ancestral knowledge to future generations of our community, who will take over and continue our collective work after us. Everything we gain access to through art institutions is redistributed in Lusanga. We work and share everything – from the land to the art, from the sacred forest to the harvests of the various products we cultivate together in a spirit of solidarity. We use the access to privilege that institutions offer us consciously and positively in order to act and create lasting impact in our home, in the ruins of the plantation in former Leverage.

Gradually, we are using this same point of access to build alliances with other plantation communities across the world, creating a gathering of plantation workers on a global scale. With this aim, together with my colleagues Matthieu Kasiama and Mbuku Kimpala, we established contact with and visited two plantation communities that had involuntarily financed the Van Abbemuseum and the Stedelijk Museum in the Netherlands. This journey was made possible only through our unhealthy privileges.

Our meetings and exchanges were of crucial importance for the future of our respective plantation communities. Together, we envisioned building a network of solidarity among us – communities living and working on plantations – to support one another, to share these privileges among ourselves, and to move forward together towards a future we think and build collectively. At the same time, we exchanged knowledge and experiences gathered through our collective paths, in a true spirit of sharing and friendship.

Still from CATPC on one of the plantations that funded the Stedelijk Museum, CATPC & Renzo Martens, 2024 © Human Activities





Still from *CATPC on one of the plantations that funded the Van Abbemuseum*,
CATPC & Renzo Martens, 2024 © Human Activities

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With careful measures in place, and through the responsible use of these privileges, we have been able to make our project work and continue advancing what we began eleven years ago. Our voluntary participation in systems that exclude our plantation communities has a primary aim: to open the door from within. We are convinced that these resources must be shared among all in order to cleanse them of the stain caused by the exclusion of our communities.

Our journey has taught us what institutions should not do: foster a form of dependency of plantation communities upon them. Rather, they should form alliances with our communities, working with us over the long term, with the aim of strengthening and structuring inclusive ecosystems for all our communities. In this way, institutions could engage in collective and lasting repair alongside these communities. To seek to decolonise without concrete, impactful, and sustainable action on the ground remains superficial and sterile.

Together – through collaborations on equal terms between art institutions and plantation communities that have financed them – we can move beyond the symbolic and achieve genuine repair with direct impact on our communities. This is our strongest recommendation to art institutions: exchange and sharing, grounded in trust, are the keys to establishing a true spirit of solidarity.

This is why art institutions should draw inspiration from our experience and journey and observe closely what we have achieved together with our partners in Lusanga, where monoculture destroyed our forests and our land, but where we are now restoring life through our collective effort and a shared will, expressed through conscious action in a spirit of solidarity that unites and drives us – “Luyalu”.



Palm seeds, source: Nature's Path