Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization

The 'Manifestation for the re-annexation of Belgium to Congo': Reconfiguring (Post)Colonial Space

Prologue

In December 2006 and January 2007, an ad hoc organization lead by the Brussels-based artist Laurent d'Ursel organized three events under the joint heading *Manifestation for the Re-annexation of Belgium to Congo (Manifestation pour le rattachement de la Belgique au Congo* — hereafter *The Manifestation*). The three events, each with its distinct focus, took place at three different locations. The first public one of December 2006 targeted the Leopold II statue near the Royal Gallery (Koninklijke Galerij) in Ostend and drew attention to the malicious mechanisms of imperialism and to the atrocities perpetrated during the early colonial period under Leopold II (1885-1908). The second performance of January 2007 took place at the foot of the Leopold II statue behind the Royal Palace in the city centre of Brussels and focused on aspects of inequality and miscegenation during the colonial period of the Belgian Congo (1908-1960). The third and final performance later that month consisted of a march, or rather, a ludic parade that finished in Matonge, the 'African city centre of Brussels' as urban researcher Eric Corijn calls it. The demonstration focused on post-colonial relations, migration as well as the alleged growing disaffection between the Belgian Kingdom and the Democratic Republic of Congo. That said, the two earlier events also specifically explored the continuing relevance of the two countries' shared colonial past and its continuities with the geo-political present.

The least original aspects of *The Manifestation* must be its interest in post-colonial Belgium. The Manifestation shares its (negative) fascination with Leopold II and its fixation with statues as *lieux de mémoire* of the official, often revisionist, if not completely distorted historiography of Belgium's colonial past, with numerous other organisations, projects and events. These occurred both before and after the exploits of Laurent d'Ursel and his associates. In April 2004, during the protest action by the Ostend-based anarchist collective *De Stoete Ostendenoare* (which translates as 'The intrepid inhabitant of Ostend'), the bronze sculpture group around the statue of Leopold II in Ostend was maimed: the hand of the female African figure was sawn off and later mounted on a plinth with the caption *Sikitiko* (Swahili for 'expression of remorse').[1] A year later 'severed hands' – this time made of rubber or chocolate – were again the focal point of protest in Flanders, in Diksmuide. In this case, an action group requested the removal of the statue of Baron Jacques de Dixmude (an important military henchman of Leopold II) from the town's central market place.

The protest actions by The Manifestation were followed by other actions in Brussels and the French-speaking part of Belgium. In September 2008, the writer Théophile de Giraud smeared red paint on the statue of Leopold II in Brussels. Many months before, the action group

Mémoires Coloniales was founded with the express goal of seeking public support for remembering *and* repairing (Belgian) colonial injustice and exploitation. In 2008, the latter group extended its operations from Liège to the whole of Belgium, culminating in the commemoration of the assassination of Lumumba on 17 January 2010 in Ostend. This event took the form of a march from the railway station to the maimed Leopold II statue in the company of the Belgian-Congolese Kimbanguist brass band.

While all of these protest actions on and around contested colonial heritage have a distinct temporal dimension — public history and historiography, official and subaltern memory, sometimes coupled with revision or reparation — the actions by The Manifestation also and perhaps more importantly highlight contemporary concerns in a spatial arena. As such, I would like to argue, they are a crucial complement to the historic and temporal dimensions of globalization.

One of the most appealing aspects of The Manifestation is that it proposes repartitions of the geo-political space that may appear simply absurd and provocative but actually reveal and criticize a number of spatial reorganization trends that are unfolding under globalization. I will try to demonstrate that through both its stated aim (*the re-annexation*) and its actual protest actions in Ostend and Brussels The Manifestation exposes the accepted logic of the restructuring of the post-colonial space. In its overall messages, it contradicts these trends in a grotesque way; while in its demonstrations, performances and marches, it literally goes against them. The eccentric restructuring efforts of The Manifestation unite divided spaces, build bridges, get jammed mobilities moving again – both metaphorically and physically – and thus facilitate new transnational and intra-national movements. For all these reasons, one could remark, it might have been more appropriate for these post-globalization activists to call themselves a 'movement' rather than a 'manifestation'.

Post-globalization

One of the most important dynamics of globalization, known for centuries but unfolding with unprecedented force in recent decades, is that it continually and radically restructures space – simultaneously dividing and connecting spaces and places.[2] Put simply, globalization is the result of two opposing closing and opening forces. First of all, dividing forces culminate in the creation and hierarchy of often sharply demarcated spatial entities: metropolises, leading regions, enclaves where natural resources are exploited, gated communities, slums and other ghettos. Secondly, connecting forces enable transactions between these dispersed places, even though on a global level access to both these scattered spaces (think of the gentrified neighbourhood or tax havens) and the connections (think of the electronic highway) are just as imbalanced as the hierarchy of the spaces themselves.[3] The repartitions that result from the joint articulation of these two forces give rise to new kinds of spatial configurations that may have a vast reach ('imperial'

or 'global')[4] but that may also be extremely restrictive in terms of access and composition.[5] We shall see how the idea of Belgium's re-annexation by the Congo appropriates these trends and makes them the subject of artistic manipulation and playful introspection.

Surely, one of The Manifestation's most contrarian ideas is that of annexation. As a territorial operation, annexation has lost all credibility since at least *der Anschluss*, the smooth occupation of Austria by Nazi Germany preceding World War II in the wake of which worldwide annexation-like projects such as colonization were gradually undone. It is perhaps no coincidence that we find two rare, not to say uncanny examples of re-annexation lingering in Belgian political thinking. In the minds of some *Kulturkreis* fanatics, Flanders should be part of a Greater Netherlands. On the other side of the Belgian linguistic border, one finds 'Rattachism' ('annexism') in the ideas of people and political parties such as the Rassemblement Wallonie France (http://rwf. be/) who want Wallonia — the French-speaking part of Belgium — to become the 101st French *département*. Both projects of geo-cultural fusion may perhaps appeal to the imagination, but the general trend is for the opposite, even in Belgium where regionalism has been the driving force behind successive and as yet unresolved state reforms since the 1960s. On an international level too, fragmentation is the name of the game with the partition of multinational states (e.g. the Soviet Union) and of nation states (such as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) and with the endless succession of regional affirmations. Even when the latter do not involve a claim for independence they do press for emancipation, and a certain degree of economic, political and/or cultural autonomy.[6]

Yet in spite of all this – and with a nod to it of course – The Manifestation calls for the amalgamation of the kingdom of Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In doing so, it distances itself from the trend for division, autonomy and flexibility in contemporary globalization, turning instead to union/unification and solidarity between two economically, politically and culturally very diverse areas. Stated otherwise, The Manifestation is working towards the creation of an extremely vast, multifaceted and, therefore, cumbersome entity: 'Congo-Belgium' – economically massive (with a primary sector that almost equals the tertiary one), politically complex (with a confusing plethora of sub-national and local government structures) and as far as culture is concerned exceedingly plural. In this somewhat grotesque way, The Manifestation counters fashionable fragmentation, selective access, and the flexibility of subdivision.

The reversal of these dominant globalization trends is also coupled with the reversal of the post-colonial dynamic whereby the usual internal neo-colonial hierarchy is overturned. The political consequence of Belgium's merger with the Congo is that Kinshasa would become the capital of Europe (alongside Strasbourg) and that Lingala would replace French as the *lingua franca*. In that respect, The Manifestation does not fail to point out – in what is a fine sarcastic gesture –

that the minority rights of French and Dutch speakers will be protect-
ed. These and other accompanying measures of the forthcoming annex-
ation indicate how in the ludic minds of d'Ursel and his associates,
post-globalization goes hand in hand with post-colonization.

Post-colonization

An important moment in the dynamic of current geographic fragmen-
tation is that of the decolonization which got underway in the after-
math of World War II, initiated in part by the United States and the
United Nations. The main principle of decolonization at the UN was the
'blue water' or 'salt water' thesis that was adopted in the early 1950s.
This thesis stipulates that countries separated by seas or oceans can-
not claim each other's territory. This is the formula with which the UN
de-legitimized the colonial possessions of the European countries,
albeit not without a struggle. In response to the dominant decoloniza-
tion doctrine, Belgium, in the person of the former Governor of the
Belgian Congo Ryckmans and Belgian UN diplomat Van Langenhove,
formulated a counter-proposal that is still on record as the 'Belgian the-
sis'.[7] The Belgian thesis rejected the 'salt water thesis' by claiming that
(a) colonial relations are possible between neighbouring countries/
regions/peoples *and* (b) the colonisation of 'overseas' territories is not
necessarily (more) reprehensible, discriminating or repressive than the
first one.[8] Because it was such a nasty swipe at the two superpowers
(the US and the Soviet Union), the Belgian thesis did not last long.
After all, the Americans and the Russians were in the process of getting
themselves a front garden and a backyard in which they would reign
supreme in geo-political (as well as a geo-military and geo-economic)
terms. As if opening the possibility of having the cold-war Russian and
American projects being denounced as 'colonial' was not bad enough, to
make things worse, the Belgian thesis also implied a degree of justifica-
tion of (European-style) overseas colonization which the Russians and
Americans had been condemning albeit for different ideological reasons
and practical purposes. Just maybe, the Belgian condoning of colonial-
ism could have been a rather blatant expression of the Belgian colonial
establishment's conviction that the Congo was a model colony.[9] To cut a
long story short, the Belgian thesis was both ideologically and geo-stra-
tegically misconceived. However, in due course, the Belgian thesis did
give rise to something constructive; namely, the awareness that modern
postcolonial nation-states were not a guarantee for equal citizenship
and that sections of a country's population could be oppressed within
their own country. Whether this dimension of the Belgian thesis was
motivated by the Flemish emancipation movement's contentions
against Francophone supremacy in Belgium is uncertain, but it left
some traces with regard to the global recognition of minority groups.
Eventually, the Belgian thesis provided the impetus for what is now a
very substantial UN policy on indigenous peoples.[10]

The main similarity between the Belgian thesis and The Manifes-
tation is that both go against dominant tendencies. The former went

against the Cold War appropriations in Eastern Europe (USSR) and Central America (US) as well as against 'blue water' decolonization trends in large parts of Asia and Africa. The latter, as we have seen, goes up against the relentless stream of globalization-through-localization. It remains to be seen whether something beautiful can grow out of the delusions of The Manifestation, like it did out of Van Langenhove's fanciful UN motion. Then again, if we read the proposed re-annexation of Belgium by Congo through the lens of the Belgian thesis, we end up with something like this: as long as territorial expansion is not discriminatory or oppressive there is no reason why (overseas) territories cannot join forces. But never mind that this is purely hypothetical, the question is: do these trends for territorial amalgamation and renewed transnational solidarity resurface in the artistic and playful protests of The Manifestation? As we shall see below, there is some evidence to believe that they do.

Post-regionalization

If The Manifestation exposes and explores international trends through its proposed re-annexation of Belgium by the Congo, then its protest actions in public space counter some Belgian trends, specifically those of regionalization and de-solidarization. In the process, The Manifestation mocks a number of both 'Flemish' and 'French' reflexes.

As stated, The Manifestation opened its series of demonstrations in Ostend in December 2006 in front of the statue of Leopold II. From the outset, this performance on Flemish soil inserted itself into a line of previous Flemish and, specifically, Ostend-based protest actions that I mentioned in the introduction. In response to these previous actions, Laurent d'Ursel opened his performance by 'repairing' the hand of one of the bronze African female figures with which De Stoeten Ostendenoare had made the *Sikitiko* sculpture two years earlier. This Ostend-based anarchist and derisive fellowship used this appropriation to ask official recognition for the Leopold II's crimes against humanity by trying to force the City of Ostend to spell them out on the information plaque next to the monument. This demand was not accepted: the statue was neither restored, nor was its proposed annotation revised. Thus, by revisiting the mutilated statue, Laurent d'Ursel exposed the refusal of the City of Ostend and other government bodies that deal with Belgian colonial heritage to change what is more and more widely denounced as deceitful official colonial history. On top of that, The Manifestation's intervention also sought to affiliate itself with other anti-Leopold II protest actions of recent years elsewhere in Flanders and Brussels, including in Diskmuide and Blankenberge.

At the very least, The Manifestation's Ostend-based assault on Leopold II broke with the Belgian nationalist and largely Francophone reflex of recent years to show more than average reverence for the king and his predecessors, even the more contested ones such as Leopold II. This royalist attitude stood in stark contrast to the growing anti-royalist and republican sentiments in Flanders. A good example of this is

the particularly virulent response from prominent Francophones such as then Minister for Foreign Affairs Louis Michel and historian Jean-Luc Vellut to the anti-Leopold II film *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death* by Peter Bate (UK, 2003). But that is not all. The Manifestation's protest actions can also be read as a critique of the more recent Flemish anti-colonial reflex which consists of dismissing the colonial past as a royalist or even as a 'Belgian elitist' and, therefore, largely Francophone project.

Seen in this context of Flemish-Francophone animosities concerning Belgian's colonial past, The Manifestation performance in front of the Leopold II statue behind the royal palace in Brussels, was a success in that it tried to resurface the Flemish implication in the Belgian colonial endeavour. The performance by Charlie Degotte and Dieudonné Kabongo was entitled 'Tangoya Kot Fourdoum', with *Kot Fourdoum* — a phonetic-like rendering of the Flemish swearword 'godverdomme' (goddamn) — passed off as a Lingala-Flemish creole expression. In a comment, Laurent d'Ursel underlined the religious dimension of this performance by pointing out that both of the actors had the word God in their name: an approximation of the Dutch word 'god' in Charlie Degotte and the French word for 'god' (dieu) in *Dieu*donné Kabongo. Moreover, by embedding it in a swearword, the performance adds connotations of the popular or even the vulgar to this religious element. These connotations of vulgarity evoke the well-known importance of the Flemish missionaries in the Leopoldian and Belgian colonial enterprise as well as their alleged 'grassroots' involvement with the colonized. All this can be read as not only as a parody of Francophone stereotypes about Flemish boorishness but also as an antidote to the post-colonial exit option of those Flemings who try to distance themselves from the colonial project by describing it as 'Belgian', 'royal' and/or 'Francophone'.

Finally, the third performance was a march to Matonge, and can best be characterized as a combination of a carnival parade and a protest march. Matonge is the so-called African quarter of Brussels located near the rather upmarket Porte de Namur area in Ixelles. As I have argued elsewhere, over the last decade Matonge has become a locus of African and above all Congolese public affirmation, whether cultural, social, economic or political. By locating its march and closing performance in Matonge, and, on top of that, by choosing 'Back is Beautiful' as the march's main slogan, The Manifestation frames its actions in a logic of post-colonial affirmation of the Congolese communities in Belgium.

All in all, with its three protest actions, The Manifestation successively mobilised the three 'communities' which together make up post-colonial Belgium: the Francophones, the Flemings and the Congolese. All three are situated in a joint historical trajectory from Leopold II to Joseph Kabila, and from a unitary Belgium to a regionalized composite Belgian state. In the process, The Manifestation activates, or better, mobilizes, a plethora of political-spatial connections that have

been severed or weakened by all kinds of post-colonial and post-national repartitions.

Post-mobilization

The spatial-temporal connections described above form the infrastructure for people's increased mobility. Ultimately, however, the Congo's projected re-annexation of Belgium is obviously not about spaces and time zones, re-connections and recollections, but about people – individuals and populations who take journeys and come up against old and new borders or even get entrapped by them. This was the subject of the 'Ode to Leopold II', which the Brussels-Congolese *raconteur* and performance artist Maurice Boyikasse recited in front of the Leopold II statue in Ostend. Boyikasse's intervention took the form of a parable based on an imagined encounter between the storyteller and Leopold II, in which the latter complains about the fact that in the hereafter he feels like a stateless person who does not belong anywhere, among neither the Congolese nor the Belgians. From that, Boyikasse concludes that there are not only natives and non-natives among the Belgians and Congolese, but that there is a third category, that of the parallel citizens – parallel Belgians and parallel Congolese. As Boyikasse explains during his performance and in a subsequent interview, by these he does not mean shadow citizens in the sense of illegal or undocumented migrants. Rather he uses the concept of the parallel Belgians/Congolese to raise the issue of recognition as fully-fledged citizens and, more specifically, the fact that parallel citizens are caught between two worlds, between the borders that nation states, such as Belgium and the DR Congo, erect around themselves at a certain point. Parallel citizens are those who find themselves between a rock and a hard place in this double trend of globalization-localization.

One might say that Boyikasse's diagnosis highlights the fact that the dominant dynamics of spatial fragmentation, enclaves, the hierarchy of spaces and restricted access to these spaces and the connecting routes between them produce a growing number of people who no longer belong anywhere, who become homeless as citizens. This is, I think, The Manifestation's ultimate criticism of globalization as it unfolds in relation to Belgium and the Congo, North and South, ex-colonizer and ex-colonized: while spaces are becoming smaller in the sense of more well-defined and cosier, access to these spaces is becoming increasingly selective and better secured, people increasingly fall between the cracks and become subject to a parallel set of laws that does not grant full citizenship.[11]

I hope that this essay has gone some way to prove that physically as well as metaphorically, on several levels of planning (global, national, sub-national) and in several registers (geographical, temporal, socio-economic), The Manifestation is concerned with the mobility of people, of citizens, both Congolese and Belgian. Why then, we may ask, does The Manifestation refuse to call itself a 'movement'? After all, The Manifestation sets things – fragmented spaces and blocked mobil-

ities – in motion again, thus *moving* people in various ways (physically, artistically, conceptually, etc.). Perhaps The Manifestation refuses the label of movement, because it sees itself as too ephemeral and short-lived. But surely all 'movements' are like that: they can be long or short, but they are inevitably temporary. A movement is a pain stimulus, a moment of manifest exuberant reflection, a moment of freedom. Such was The Manifestation, no more but certainly no less either.

Notes

1. Recently, Pieter De Vos made a short film on this intervention of The Stoete Ostendenoare. The short film is called Sikitiko and is freely available on the Internet: http://cas1.elis.ugent.be/avrug/erfgoed/sikitiko/sikitiko.htm

2. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Erik Swyngedouw, 'Neither Global nor Local: "Glocalization" and the Politics of Scale', in: K. Cox (ed.), *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local* (New York: Guildford Press, 1997), 137-166.

3. James Ferguson, 'Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy after Development', in: Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty (ed.), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 166-181.

4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

5. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 'Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse, and the Postcolonial State', *Social Identities* (2001) vol. 7, no. 2, 233-265; Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Achille Mbembe, 'At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa', *Public Culture* (2000) vol. 12, no. 1, 259-284.

6. Tania Li, 'Formations of Capital and Identity', in: *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 96-122; June Nash, 'Defying Deterritorialization: Autonomy Movements Against Globalization', in: J. Nash (ed.), *Social Movements: An Anthropological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 177-186; Richard Werbner, 'Challenging Minorities, Difference and Tribal Citizenship in Botswana', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (2002) vol. 28, no. 4, 671-684.

7. William Norton, 'Review of L.A.M. Petilllon "Témoignage et réflexions"', *African Historical Review* (1969) vol. 2, no. 1, 158-164; Fernand von Langenhove, *La question des aborigenes aux Nations Unies. La thèse belge* (Brussels: Académie royale des sciences coloniales. Section des sciences morales et politiques, 1954).

8. Patrick Thornberry, 'Self-Determination, Minorities, Human Rights: A Review of International Instruments', *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly* (1989) vol. 38, no. 4, 867-889.

9. Bambi Ceuppens, *Congo Made in Flanders? Koloniale Vlaamse visies op 'blank' en 'zwart' in Belgisch Congo* [Congo Made in Flanders? Flemish Colonial Visions of 'Black' and 'White' in the Belgian Congo] (Ghent: Academia Press, 2003); Bambi Ceuppens, *Tout cela ne nous va pas rendre le Congo* [It's all very well but it's not going to give us the Congo back], Lecture given at Bozar, Brussels, 2007; Marie-Benedicte Dembour, *Recalling the Belgian Congo: Conversations and Introspection* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).

10. Rhiannon Morgan, 'Advancing Indigenous Rights at the United Nations: Strategic Framing and Its Impact on the Normative Development of International Law', *Social & Legal Studies* (2004) vol. 13, no. 4, 481-500; Andrea Muehlebach, 'Making Place' at the United Nations: Indigenous Cultural Politics at the U. N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations', *Cultural Anthropology* (2001) vol. 16, no. 3, 415-448.

11. Étienne Balibar, 'Strangers as Enemies: Further Reflections on the Aporias of Transnational Citizenship', McMaster University, 2006, www.europeanstudiesalliance.org/calendar/sp07events/BalibarPaper.pdf