# DIGITAL UPRISING FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF THE CATPC WHITE CUBE IN LUSANGA

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**Abstract**

In 2017 the CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise) founded the White Cube: an art museum built on reclaimed land, intended to "restore agency, capital, and visibility to plantation communities. From there, CATPC presents a program that not merely offers the public a beautiful spectacle, but it ensures that the utmost positive impact is made – both material (economic) and immaterial (historical memory)" (CATPC website). Since then, the league has been engaged in numerous activist curatorial projects, using analogue and digital means to create a personal artistic and territorial narrative. One project stands out: a series of NFTs, created in collaboration with Dutch artist Renzo Martens, disrupting museum ownership and restitution practices. These artworks, created from images of an original wooden statue symbolizing a local uprising against belgian tax collectors, carved in the early thirties, represent a concrete way of reconnecting with the league's heritage, history and future.

Starting from this project, the paper researches the impact of digital technologies in strengthening territorial museological projects, discussing how the communitarian grounds of physical museum spaces can be empowered through digital infrastructures. Operating at the intersection between material evidence and virtual accessibility, digital cultural projects can often respond to identitarian meaning making needs, which cannot be met by analogue solutions. Opening the landscape of collective cultural production to a new version of rootedness, through the designs of marginalized and peripheral communities. Across the paper, questions of museum epistemological dominance and decolonial educational paradigms will be addressed, attempting to highlight the crucial characters of these new museological forms, emerging in the cultural field.

**Keywords: CATPC, Collective Memory, Digital Heritage, NFTs, White Cube.**

This article analyzes digital activist projects that operate as community builders with reference to heritage restitution and accessibility. Beginning from the case of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) White Cube in Lusanga, a museum space created to address the local need to restore both heritage and land after decades of colonial occupation, the research investigates the relationship between the technological specificities of virtual digital artworks and their functioning as means to repatriate heritage

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and engage local communities in the construction of new knowledge, meaning and belonging. Moving across conceptual positions and empirical research, the analysis establishes that digital artistic intervention can powerfully intervene within historically static contexts and dynamics, setting in motion restitution progress by creating new original artworks which empower participation, debate and creativity. In order to do so, the first section deals with the connection between access to heritage and identity building, addressing the important role that institutions can play in restoring the relationship between art, community and healing and presenting the case of the CATPC. In the second section, the cases and story of the Balot statue and Balot NFTs are discussed, explaining the importance that the use of NFT technology can play with reference to activist agency and empowerment. In the final section, other case studies which manifest how technologies can ignite community engagement in heritage projects are discussed. Ultimately, the article concludes that, in a world where community building is more and more a priority within the museum sector, examples from marginal and activist spaces, with reference to the use of digital technologies, can provide useful insight on how participation and belonging can be ignited.

**The CATPC in Lusanga and the community binding role of heritage**
Community building represents, today, a central theme for museum practices. As spaces which have historically been answering a desire for continuity between what was and what will be, museums face the ongoing need to engage their publics, ensuring that their programming builds a forceful relationship between people, heritage, spaces and values. As museologist Krzysztof Pomian has widely argued (1984), museums have historically exercised the function of preserving, collecting and exhibiting those objects which are deemed to represent the invisible values that a community cherishes as identifiers. The availability of these material connections, and the possibility to experience them, is a fundamental prerogative of communities' relationship with their past, through which they can build their presents and futures.

Whilst this might seem almost a given in many parts of the world, there are numerous cultural spaces where the premises for nurturing and sharing one's own cultural identity are not given, nor simple. This is the case of the White Cube, a cultural space designed pro bono by star architect Rem Koolhaas's firm OMA, built in Lusanga, formerly Leverville, a colonial town created by William Lever in the early twentieth century. This area housed a palm oil plantation, from which the capitalist multinational Unilever extracted resources for a century, until the land was fully exhausted, then sold. Lusanga is a village located a day trip away from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and it is here that the CATPC, founder of the White Cube, operates.

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The logic of the group is framed within what they call the Post-Plantation philosophy:

With the income from their art, CATPC re-appropriates this once confiscated land, and develops a new form, the Post Plantation: community-owned, inclusive, multi-species food gardens and forests. Bringing back biodiversity, restoring food security and mitigating climate change, through the regeneration of forests: these are the keys to decolonizing the plantations'(CATPC website).

The ultimate aim of the collective is to buy back 2.000 hectares of land – they have now reached 5% of their goal – and to restore it using agroforestry techniques and building ecological test gardens, in order to mitigate climate change and provide local food security (KOW Berlin website).

The connection between the exploitation of natural resources and the financing and construction of white cube museums (O'Doherty, 1976) across Europe is a direct one, the organization says: these institutions have been benefiting for centuries from forced labor and extractive practices, creating collections and wealth by looting occupied territories. In a controversial logic where military punitive missions became the occasion for the acquisition of cultural heritage, often seeing museums collecting policies and objectives influencing military strategies, and transforming heritage into capital and distribution (Sarr, Savoy, 2018: 7)(3): a system of appropriation and alienation of which museums have become inevitable archives (Eyssette, 2023).

While critiques of colonial heritage spoilage find their ideological foundations in the early nineteenth century, when the German jurist and philosopher Karl Heinrich Heydenreich first denounced heritage looting as a 'crime against humanity', deconstructing the rhetoric of the conqueror being entitled to deprive its victims of their spiritual nourishment (1798: 293), the route towards a widespread acknowledgment of the colonial atrocities concerning the plundering of heritage has been a long and difficult one. The confiscation of art objects and artifacts, which has been accompanying imperialistic endeavors since antiquity, has long remained disguised within the framework of intellectual, aesthetic and economic appropriation that for centuries has legitimized its stance (Stoler, 2008). A position which has not been fully eradicated in the 21st century, with exhibition practices and politics of display which still aim to 'memorialize the "positive" and the "civilizing" role of […] colonial enterprises'(Straus, 2008: 598-99); as Sally Price effectively denounced in her critique of the Museé du quai Branly (2007).

Nevertheless, there are a number of artistic organizations which are actively working towards the construction of cultural programmes in areas which have been deprived of

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their heritage, addressing a colonial past while nurturing local identities. The work of the CATPC, within and outside of the White Cube, operates in this direction, at the intersection between artistic, activist, political and sacred dimensions, understanding:

> artworks as cathartic vessels that absorb the pain and evil of colonialism's ongoing disaster while also acting as objects of hope and repair. CATPC defines art as a living force borne of a sacred Earth and art making as a sacred endeavor. This endeavor is central to the community's attempts to recuperate the knowledge of its ancestral lands and its desire to forge more regenerative relationships between art, culture, economy, and ecology (CATPC website).

As this extract clearly states, the activity of the center engages operatively with the construction of a shared connection with one's land, history, identity: a necessary process given the absence of historical cultural identifiers, looted during the colonial invasion (Sthan, 2023). Heritage, as mentioned, proves essential to the construction of a shared memory within communities, offering the opportunity to 'socially externalize memory, entrusting it to a material support which can then be accessed and shared'(Pinotti, 2023: 54). The consequences of colonial plundering are not only of creating an unjust distribution of access to knowledge and heritage, which become reserved 'to the inheritors of an asymmetrical history, to the benefactors of an excess of privilege and mobility'(Sarr, Savoy, 2018: 4). More importantly, they consist in depriving communities of the possibility to freely entertain a personal and identitarian relationship to one's origins (2).

The binding relationship between past, present and future, materialized through cultural heritage and actualized by the possibility to explore it, understand it, and build new artistic products within the awareness of one's historical past, is a tangible and concrete one. And it directly links to the community building possibilities that surround cultural institutions and museums, which heavily rely on their collections to create identitarian narratives which can strengthen social bonds (Pomian, 2020). Or, as in the case here addressed, need to create new artworks to relate to, in order to restore their artistic past and future. From this perspective, collections can be seen as more than historical resources, understood as technologies that allow one to operate in perspective, creating something new (Thomas, 1991). The CATPC, and the White Cube, work within this complex dynamic, addressing their colonial past, the continuous exploitation that Northern countries exercise on the global south and the need to produce and make it accessible to the local community.

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**Balot and Balot NFT, a digital undertaking**

While being involved in the production of contemporary artworks, the CATPC has also been committed to finding and retrieving missing heritage, attempting to recuperate original artworks which could contribute to heal and nurture the relationship with their local artistic and political past. This is the case of the wooden sculpture Balot, a carved wood ancestral power-figure made after the Pende revolt of 1931 by a Kwilu Pende artist (3) and initially intended as a power object to harness Belgian Colonial Officer Maximilian Balot's angry spirit, who had been killed during the revolt.

The rebellion occurred during the time Congo was a Belgian colony (between 1885 and 1960), and the statue itself was used as a force for protection against the plantation regime (Mondriaan Fund website), operating within a semantic field of independence, rebellion, violence and spirituality. The original purpose of the statue, as described, marks a strong difference with the Western signifiers customly attributed to artworks: it is an object with a cultural agency (Gell, 1998) heavily rooted in its country of origin and in a historical and spiritual instance. Evidently, the story of the sculpture and its purpose serve to highlight how ill equipped and ill purposed Western museums can be in the exhibition policies of non Western artifacts, decontextualized within a white cube aesthetic when their destiny was meant to be completely different (Wood, 2012)(4).

Today, the sculpture is located in Richmond, Virginia, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), who have owned it since 2015, where the CATPC representatives Cedart Tamasala and Matthieu Kasiama found it after a long and complicated journey, documented in the six-part documentary Plantations and Museums (2022) created in partnership with Dutch artist Renzo Martens. In the documentary Tamasala and Kasiama interview key experts on the Balot sculpture and postcolonial discourse, such as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (Brown University) and Simon Gikandi (Princeton University), through conversations which unravel the hidden relations between plantations in the south (from where profits were extracted to build museums) and the museums in the north (where art from the plantations is held and academic scholarship is funded). They discover that Herbert Weiss, archaeologist and professor at the City University of New York, was the one who sold the statue to the museum, who himself bought it originally in 1972 from an impoverished local. When at the VMFA, Tamasala and Kasima asked museum management to repatriate the artwork to the White Cube, having the means to transport, exhibit and preserve it. As their request was denied, they then asked if they could host it temporarily, to which the museum agreed. For two years, however, the museum kept postponing the shipment, without engaging in any formal agreement, despite having loaned the artwork to other Western institutions.

Moved by the need to address this situation, and to take control of the narrative and the experience surrounding the artwork, CATPC members, together with Dutch artist Renzo

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Martens, decided to mint, distribute and exhibit an edition of 300 individual Non Fungible Tokens (NFT) of the statue, treated as tangible individual artworks in terms of copyrights. As Martens stated:

> With the Balot NFT, the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League uses blockchain technology to claim back what is theirs: not just art, but land. The sculpture will later be atomized in a limited number of original NFTs for sale. Buyers get a digital rendering of the sculpture, based on photographic reproduction from the VMFA's website. Every purchase helps to ultimately unleash the powers of the sculpture and make it work for the community: sales directly buy back land, replant the forest and reintroduce biodiversity, resulting in offsetting carbon emissions and providing autonomy and food security for plantation workers in one of the most impoverished areas of the world (Renzo Martens website).

Within this experience, the characterizing elements of the CATPC cultural project clearly emerge: an organization which collectively designs artworks that directly relate to heritage, and its absence, with a clear connection to environmental and territorial needs. Interestingly enough, this becomes possible thanks to the use of a digital medium which allows the creation of new original artworks, directly related to the expropriated one. Opening a new scenario, where NFTs establish the technological domain which enables digital restitution.

While NFTs are being used by museums for other scopes, such as creating digital replicas of their collections for research and educational purposes (Bolton, 2021; Jung, 2022), or as a revenue stream (Valeonti et al, 2021; Zhao, 2023), this case distinguishes itself from customary applications. Here the technology is used by an artistic movement which directly counters museological authority, questioning the Western curatorial canon by constructing new narratives around physical objects. NFTs, instead of being tools instrumentally used by museums to foster their strategic policies, become agents of change and disruption.

The case of the CATPC seems therefore to highlight a new operational field, where digital technologies can function as counter forcers in the institutional scenario, empowering communities at the margins to regain voice and agency. Tamasala said their blockchain appropriation of the object has allowed them to 'bypass the problem and finally have the sculpture and create our world' (Brown, 2022). This empowering employment of digital technologies, which can prove functional in solving complex cultural and ownership issues (Whitaker et al., 2020), is extremely relevant when contextualized within a wider scenario where digital technologies can also be used without the same positive process and

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outcomes. It is important, when discussing these issues, to be wary that the universal understanding of 'technology as a democratization tool is problematic given that internet access is not universal, and that the digitisation of museum collections often neglects important cultural applications and meanings' (Feld, 2023: 2). As it can be the case, digital projects that advocate greater accessibility lack the procedural care and efficacy which could have wide and long lasting impacts. Moreover, as in the case of looted heritage, claims of 'digital restitution' from cultural institutions can also be disguising the lack of intention to restitute the 'physical heritage', operating more as a temporary palliative solution than an active qualitative attempt. The CATPC project, however, seems to suggest a new perspective from which to analyze digitization programmes: one that finds its answer in the agency and initiative of the artistic community involved, and also in the technological specificity of this particular experience. NFTs, by offering the possibility of creating new original artworks which are however strongly dependent and linked to the original physical work – thanks to the photographic images of which the file is made – create a unique ontological object (Chalmers, 2017). A digital entity whose virtual nature directly addresses the statute of plundered heritage: artifacts that were but are no longer, whose meaning has been obliterated and whose absence is more pressing then their presence. The Balot NFT, by claiming its agency into the cultural market and artistic scene, remarking the absence of the wooden original statue, and engaging a new community of people around its creation and fruition, suggests a new way of using digital technology within heritage community building and restitution debates. As Feld argues, 'minting an NFT (a unique, one-of-a-kind digital item), or other types of digital representations of important cultural artifacts, afford impacted communities' options to explore alternative forms of ownership when a museum denies requests for access' (2023: 1).

**Virtual ontologies and community building in digital practices**
The unique attributes identified in the previous example seem to be referable, in principle, to a variety of digital technologies. Which, thanks to their generative power of presencing images and entities, directly tackle the painful scenario they are employed in. By producing images that are too real (Baudrillard, 2004) and which risk to prevail on the reality they refer to (Virilio, 1988), these technologies seem to offer an innovative opportunity to bring back a degree of agency within the heritage debate. Especially for new generations of artists and cultural practitioners who want to address the longing towards their heritage, they offer a creative opportunity to fill a historical void. This moreover, marks a drastic shift compared to the usual terms in which the debate on virtuality has been customarily framed, focused on how these technologies appear to artificially endanger our experience of reality (Baudrillard, 2004) displacing our perception in environments which are defined by new spatial and temporal coordinates (Virilio, 1995).

Both in terms of community engagement, artistic agency and digital repatriation, digital technologies seem to, possibly, offer unique opportunities.

Another example, related to the British Museum in London, might inform this position further. In March 2023 three people – the two founders of Looty, London based digital art collective, and Egyptologist Monica Hanna – entered the museum. Without breaking any law, yet wearing plastic face masks to disguise their appearance, they scanned with two iPads and an action camera the famous Rosetta Stone, basalt icon and key to decipher ancient Egyptian. When questioned by the museum security guards, drawn to the scene by the masks and the suspicious filming, the three activists defended the legality of their actions, then left (5). As documented in the film Loot by Jasmin Sarwoko (2023), this museological heist had a clear goal: obtain sufficient scanned images to create, using cutting-edge LiDAR technology, a perfect digital replica of the artwork. The 3D image was then placed, using a geolocation based augmented reality platform, inside Fort Qaitbay, the site along Egypt's northern coast where the stone was originally found, before French forces traded it to the English and Ottoman troops by signing the 1801 Capitulation of Alexandria. The aim of this operation, the collective states, was to digitally repatriate a cultural artifact that had been unjustly plundered. Most importantly, to take control of the narrative surrounding expropriated heritage, actively producing knowledge about one's own past.

Also in this case, the use of digital technology serves a double scope. Firstly, it allows activists to operate with the heritage that is missing, producing a virtual replica of the stolen artifact, a new digital object that confronts the situation they are experiencing; an artwork which is clearly identifiable, while recording its physical counterpart. Secondly, thanks to the Return Rashid project, the Egyptian community has the chance to create a personal connection with their heritage, visiting the place where the Rosetta Stone was originally found and having the possibility to materialize it through the use of personal smartphones. It is a form of restitution which intervenes in an international dispute between governments by centering citizens' experiences, valuing their right to engage with their own story. In this case, as in the Balot case, the original communities of these artworks struggle to find funding and visas to travel to the countries where their heritage is being held and exhibited, making the digital copy a concrete solution. As addressed at the beginning of this work, accessibility to one's own historical heritage becomes a fundamental need to communities' cultural lives, one cherished and nurtured by museological institutions worldwide yet often taken away from many.

A third case study, also related to the accessibility of heritage, can offer further elements of analysis. It is the case of the Pedestal Project by the United States of America's largest

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online racial justice organization, Color of Change (6), who decided to repurpose empty pedestals around the country where confederate statues once stood with images of activists, visualized with Augmented Reality. As the project claims:

> Contentious statues have been torn down all across America, leaving behind empty pedestals in their wake. It's time to place new symbols in their stead. The Pedestal Project is born of the vision to repurpose these ill-conceived pedestals by using technology to help people choose the statues that should go upon them. Statues of people who have dedicated their lives to fighting for justice and equality (Campaign website).

The images made available for the experience portray three activists who have fought for racial justice: Alicia Garza, Chelsea Miller and the late Rep. John Lewis. Their images have been sculptured and textured to resemble bronze statues, in continuity with the formal tradition of characters placed on pedestals, yet also rupturing with the history they are protesting. Every visitor crossing one of these sites, by scanning a QR code, gets the possibility to see, up on the pedestal, a hero which represents very different values from the ones celebrated by the original confederate statues, such as democracy, justice, equality.

Again, as in the cases addressed before, there is a direct connection between the use of technology and the possibility to collectively engage communities into building their own version of history and culture. Giving people the active possibility to choose new idols to cherish as a community, which can be a powerful step towards creating identification and belonging. Whilst in this case there isn't a direct link with a specific museum, as the action occurs in the public space, the same virtuous link between collective agency, heritage and technology upholds.

As these three case studies show, digital activist projects that employ modern technologies to problematize historicised Western narratives can prove very effective in building community consensus and engagement around heritage. As Fiona Cameron advocated already in 2007, these projects prove the possibility to go beyond the cult of the replicant, which is often found in digitization projects, finding in the structural characteristics of digital media – both in terms of wider diffusion and accessibility and in terms of the virtual ontology of these technologies – a powerful mean to redirect the discussion and the experience of art.

As the three cases highlight, there can be very important differences in the ways in which projects can be designed and conducted. Which can depend on the context where they

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are being presented into – more or less institutional – or on the technologies used – that can function in different ways – but, most of all, on the creative integrity moving the artistic intervention (Bishop, 2020). What seems however common is the shared potential of digital technologies to highlight the absence of heritage while also creating a counter-narrative, which fights institutional domains and creates community and engagement.

Ultimately, these case studies seem to offer interesting insight for community building prospects, carrying lessons that from outside the museum sector can be of great value for museum professionals. They show how digital technologies can be employed to not only build true community engagement and participation, but most importantly do so through critical stances, which become visible and accessible as they are coded within the material fabric of the media employed. As such, these technologies open a whole new scenario for community building, where creativity and activism can be channeled through powerful devices and strategies, with a unique accessibility potential and the strength to create new narratives and belonging.

### Addendum: the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024

While at the time of the NFT production and release the VMFA was not strongly cooperative with the Balot loan, and even protested the illicit use of the statue's images which were taken from the museum website to create the NFT, this position drastically changed between 2023 and 2024. In April 2024, in fact, the CATPC exhibits at the Dutch Pavilion of the 60th Venice Biennale, while the original statue is loaned to the White Cube where it is showcased for the whole time of the Italian exhibition. Meanwhile, a live stream connects the two locations, showing to the European visitors in Venice the inside of the White Cube in Lusanga, and actively 'pairing a white cube in a plantation with one at the summit of the art world' (7). It appears that the American museum management has changed their minds, and no longer believes that 'unfortunately, the NFT has broken all trust between VMFA and the exhibition organizers' indulging in an unprofessional and unacceptable behavior by taking the images from the website without permission (9). While their statue is being temporarily repatriated, the Congolese collective is using the Venice space, which they identify as an 'unhealthy privilege' as a stage to protest the injustice their ancestors have suffered and which they themselves continue to endure (13).

While the Balot NFT appears to be a great accomplishment in itself, a successful project which had concrete consequences impacting social, cultural and economic aspects of the CATPC community, this last passage of the story is also important. It testifies to the more

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global and political dynamics that can be activated by digital repatriation projects, proving that activist actions can actually generate change.

## Numbered Footnotes

(1) Sarr and Savoy, in their volume The Restitution of African Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics, also elaborate on how certain disciplines, such as Anthropology and Ethnology, started positioning their scientific value in colonial undertakings, contributing to legitimize spoilages within the framework of academic knowledge. (2) As Historian Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe from the University of Benin states in the film Loot by Jasmin Sarwoko, with reference to the case of the Benin Bronzes, artworks that have been looted from the Benin Kingdom starting from the British invasion of 1897, the inacessibility of heritage has also practical consequences in the artisanal and artistic scene. Still today, in Benin there is a strong and wide tradition of casting, creating artifacts not only with bronze but ivory, wood, and many other materials. For casters, not being available to see and appreciate the history of their practice in their ancestors' work is a great deprivation. The film is accessible in the Youtube video A digital Heist Recaptures the Rosetta Stone, retrievable at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tkAb9rzH7E&t=3s accessed april 3rd.

(3) The Pende peoples are ethnic groups indigenous to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

(4) As Sarr and Savoy write in their 2018 reportage: 'In a number of African societies, statues also perish. They have a certain lifespan and are caught within a regenerative economic cycle founded on a fluid materiality and ontological identity. Certain masks are buried for several years and then reproduced so as to then renew the energetic influxes that grant them an operative power. Within a rather particular modality of the articulation of the relations between the spirit, matter, and the living, they are the depositories of flows and energetic fields that turn them into animated objects and into active forces, thus mediating between the different orders of reality. These objects are also the bearers of a reserve of the imagination as well as the material manifestation of forms of knowledge [saviors]' (p. 34).

(5) A detailed account of the event can be found on the collective's website at the following link https://www.looty.art/works/rashid accessed april 16th 2024.

(6) Information regarding Color of Change can be found on the project's website, accessible at the link https://colorofchange.org/ accessed april 17th 2024.

(7) This extract is taken from the Pavilion explanatory panels inside the Biennale.

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Renzo Martens: https://renzomartens.com/balotnft/

Campaigns of the world, Color of Change page: https://campaignsoftheworld.com/outdoor/pedestal-project-by-color-of-change/

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