I have been working in Kinshasa, DRC since 2001. Early on there, I encountered sape. There are many ways to describe sape. Few, however, can effectively capture its intense complexity and none can claim to “explain” it. It is far too rich and shifting a phenomenon for that. Broadly, then – and of necessity too broadly – a definition: what I speak of here is a set of practices involving young men and women that revolves around intersections between street fashion, haute couture, performance and “dressing up”. Sape is the art of dressing to kill.

Initially, sape had me stumped: why was it, I asked myself, that people who have exceedingly little choose to forego food in order to acquire and appear in public in costly designer clothes? Wherefore this fascination – this obsession, it seemed to me – with elegance? To what ends the competitions I witnessed between crews of sapeurs (the name that adepts of the practice give themselves)? How does this all work, for sape is more than clothes worn and

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displayed; it is also clothes exchanged, bought, sold, smuggled and (sometimes) copied: a vast economy, monetary of course, but also implicitly political, social, symbolic and emotionally deeply fraught. In an attempt to gain a foothold in the face of all these questions I began looking, asking, documenting.

In 2006, PROGR, a contemporary art centre in Bern, Switzerland, asked me to develop an exhibition. Out of conversations back and forth was born the idea of a scenography (scenography is my ambit; I am not a photographer): a series of photo shoots that would be face-to-face encounters. Sapeurs would pose, taking on with their gaze the lens of my camera, talking (back) to an audience yet to be – people who, in time, would see the photos developed and blown up. The plan was for the photos to be shown in Mikili. Mikili is a place. The name comes from the Lingala word mokili, meaning “the world”. In Kinshasa, it refers to Europe, to – so they say in the DRC – the “clean countries”, those one hopes to travel to because life there seems as if it might be better than “back home”.

The photo shoots were a stunning mix of moments: dance moves; poses inspired by fashion magazines; mirror-mirror-on-the-wall games (imitation, parody, flashes of humour, of irony) played (out) with mundele (white folks); grotesques… At the heart of it all, ebbing and flowing, were fragments of a body language, highly fluid and varied, shared across vast swathes of Kinshasa. That and a great deal of sadness, too: in the gaze, again, in gazes that, at given moments, chose emphatically not to engage.

The images born of this process are the product of a double exchange. They speak to and they speak from the context in which they came to life: the street that is the locus of each shoot and the people on the street who witness(ed) the shoot. For sape is a spectacle in Kinshasa and so each photo session turned into a party attended by many guests. In the photos themselves,
the bodies of the *sapeurs*, their clothes, presented by the wearers so that labels can be clearly read (Yves St Laurent, Gucci, Versace, Yamamoto), upstage the city, hiding (or, in any event, rendering less immediately visible) this city which many *sapeurs* claim is “dirty” (“You want to know why we *sape*?” I was told over and over again, “to stay clean (*pour rester propre*)”) – this city that so many *sapeurs* say they want to leave.

The photos, once shot, were developed, blown up close to life-size (persons shown in the shots stand at a little over 1.65 m) and shown in and around the streets where they were taken.

Since 2006, on every one of my trips to the DRC, I organise and film *sape* meets. Most are with men, but women feature as well. Without the assistance of trusted Kinois friends, these sessions would not be possible. From the very beginning, these friends too have been documenting the *sape* phenomenon and producing a body of photographic images about it. In the first photo exhibit of the *sape* project held outside the DRC – in Bern – their photos and mine appeared alongside one another. At the centre of it all – fundamental to the entirety of this project – are the guidance, gaze and generosity of Dicoco Boketshu, a musician, video and performance artist based in Kin, and Djanga Weni, also a musician (both men are members of Trionyx, a band founded by Kinois composer, performer and educator Bebson de la Rue). Also key to the undertaking are artists Androa Mindre, Freddy Mutombo and Kens Mukendi.

Sharing – conviviality – is an integral part of the project. When in Kin, as a group, Dicoco, Djanga, Androa, Freddy, Kens and I spend hours over beer and chunks of grilled meat discussing issues, styles, approaches. These comings together are essential: they make it possible for me to avoid – or, at any rate, help me keep at bay – an outsider’s gaze; they allow me to get into and to grapple with the complex skein of things. These moments when we link up are intense, rich in joy and camaraderie.
Each shoot poses a set of fundamental questions. Exchange is one. Means (of which I have few) must be found to do one, essential thing: develop the photos relatively quickly to show them to those whom they depict and, where possible, leave prints with them. I say that this is essential for a simple but sad reason: foreigners are constantly coming to Kin, photographing and going home, leaving nothing behind. What images Kinois do see of themselves, their city and the lives they live there – typically in the press and on TV – make little sense to them. They are largely negative images, images that sensationalise what the photographers represent as unadulterated misery, images that say little or nothing of actual lives lived. In reaction to this ever-so-common practice, some of the Kinois friends with whom I work have developed rich practices aimed at self-representation – at showing Kin through Kinois eyes. Thus Kens Mukendi’s photographs, which document sape competitions, and a series of images by Dicoco Boketshu which go beyond documentation into full-fledged mise-en-scène: the staging of elegant, imaginary scenes that give tangible form to fictions – to dreams – of Mikili.

I try to ensure that each sapeur with whom I work receives a small salary as well as a print of a photograph in which he appears. Oftentimes, after the fact, one finds the image in his home, framed or taped to a wall. We shoot video as well and organise showings in the city: on the street; in places where the photos were shot; at sapeurs’ houses; once, even, in a police barracks. Each presentation turns into a party, rich in narcissistic pride. Places I thought I would never be able to enter open up to me; thanks to this ongoing process I am able to go deeper into this otherwise guarded city.

In Bern, the photos were shown in a gallery (nothing on the streets, I was told: “the images are too tough…”). Clearly, a white cube is not where they belong, however; in a traditional “Northern” exhibition space, the object – the image – overshadows the process, the relationships and the exchanges that are at its heart. These are works that need to be shown in
public spaces. They call for the street. And so my friends and I decided to show them, maxi-sized, on the streets of Kinshasa, during an event entitled Urban Scenographies (an ongoing, multi-city series of artists’ residencies held across the world as the result of collaborations between ScU2, a collective I run with my friend and colleague François Duconseille, and artists’ collectives based in Douala, Cameroon (Cercle Kapsiki) Alexandria, Egypt (Gudran), Kinshasa (Eza Possibles) and, since then (and most recently) Johannesburg, with the Joubert Park Project (JPP) (http://www.eternalnetwork.org/scenographiesurbaines).

When work first began on the project, the notion had been to tape the images onto façades, billboards and such in Paris, Brussels and Tokyo (sapeurs commonly refer to themselves as “Japanese citizens” because they hold in particularly high esteem haute couture by the likes of Yohji Yamamoto and Issey Miyake). The idea was to create a face-to-face exchange, so that the photos, via their presence, might interrogate these “high-end” urban spaces where the clothes that sapeurs sport are originally sold. I do not know if this particular iteration of the project will come to pass; time will tell. One thing is certain, though: this type of approach, if implemented, will have to be confrontational – a provocation of sorts. For it seems fairly clear that these images – of Kinois sapeurs in effect highjacking the high-luxe of places that think so well of themselves – are not images that these places are particularly keen to showcase. In France, the reactions I have met are often problematic: people like what they see because they think that what they are looking at are grunge fashions shots, cool because funky and/or trashy … not a “take” I find interesting or have too much patience with. Then again, I suppose, I must take into account the fact that different people will see the photos in different ways depending on where they encounter them.

I was still grappling with the French responses when I received an invitation to show the photographs in Johannesburg, in the context of a residency sponsored by the JPP and IFAS.
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(the French Institute in South Africa). I agreed and a project developed in partnership with artists Athi Patra Ruga and Dorothée Kreutzfeldt. We decided to tape up life-sized blow-ups of the images in and around the Drill Hall in the CBD, in Yeoville, where many folks hailing from the DRC live, and in Rosebank, at the hippest mall in town, The Zone. The plan was to have a distinctively performative event.

Things got rolling fast. Photographer Lolo Veleko introduced me to the Smarteez, a group of young artists-cum-fashionistas whom she works with in Soweto. Together, we taped images on buildings, billboards, fences and other outdoor spaces. Some stayed up for weeks, others were torn down in a matter of hours. Just about everybody in the CBD and in Yeoville got it: here, there didn’t seem to be a disconnect a “what the hell is this?” factor. Sape made sense. Conversations got started, exchanges, questions...

In Rosebank, the situation was a little more complicated. It proved impossible to tape up the images anywhere in The Zone. The whole place is under 24-hour surveillance – security men and CCTV. Also – and clearly this is intentional: part of the place’s look – there are no flat, free or blank spaces onto which the images could be affixed. So, with Athi Patra Ruga, we organised a march: the Smarteez and friends bore the images aloft, like placards. Wherever we sensed a crack in the disciplinarian structure of the location, we gave it a shot: propped up an image against a wall, set it up in a shop window. It was an easy, casual march – more of a stroll, really – but it got us into trouble nonetheless. We were shown out by security. We made our way into the parking area surrounding the mall. This worked nicely, but was not quite the disappearing act that security had had in mind for us... To get into The Zone, you must first park, so the images were the first thing people coming in saw and, icing on the cake for our move, the overwhelming majority of the car park guards at The Zone are Congolese.

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left: Tresor Omeayaka « Python », « Non ending war » collective member (guerre sans fin) / Bandalungwa / Kinshasa / aug 2007

right: 1 & 2. Idem / Johannesburg / apr 2008
3. Street exhibition at the Drill Hall / Johannesburg / apr 2008
4. Street exhibition in the fashion district / Johannesburg / apr 2008

(Photographs, JcLanquetin)
As we walked among the cars, joshing with the Congolese guards, it felt as if the *sapeurs* in the images were among us, moving with us. At the same time, the fact that they were there in image and not in the flesh underscored the fact that they could not — that they cannot — move, that it was physically impossible for them to be with us *lelo awa*, as Kinshasa artist Mega Mingiendi might put it: “here, now, today”. This place, where the fashion they sport is so “in”, is “out” for the *sapeurs* whose presence and absence both haunted our performance. This — this presence/absence and this haunting — everyone saw and called out right away when, back in Kin, I showed footage of the Rosebank march. It was part and parcel of the moment in both cities.

As the end of the Joburg residency, we organised a “fashion event” in the street in front of the Drill Hall. We called the event “100th Year Wear” — a wordplay on “100 Years War”, the name of a *sapeur* crew in Kinshasa (“Guerre de 100 Ans”). (There are many different crews, a number of which use allusions to war in their names; a case in point is “Guerre Sans Fin” — “Never-Ending War”.) The event was meant to juxtapose *fashionista* moves and practices in Jozi to Kin moves and practices as seen in video and photo images of *sapeurs* shot in the DRC. What we were interested in foregrounding were the politics of sape: the body politics of it. What we were after was an understanding (or a glimpse) of ways in which individual identities are constructed and expressed through performative uses of the body as moving flesh, clothed entity and concept(s) embodied. In the process, intersections — meetings of form, ideas, words, movements — emerged that brought to the fore a notion that is coming to play an increasingly powerful role worldwide: **My Body is My Country**.

*Interested? Stay tuned…*


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(left: « Vieux Daouda » / Mont des arts / Kinshasa / dec 2006

(right: 1, 2 & 3. March in Rosebank / Johannesburg / apr 2008

4. At Daouda’s house / Kinshasa / dec 2008

(Photographs, JcLanquetin)
left: **Itchay Bessongo, « 100th year war » collective member (guerre de 100 ans)** / Bandalungwa / Kinshasa / feb 2008

right: **1,2,3&4. March in Rosebank** / Johannesburg / apr 2008

(Photographs, JcLanquetin)

left: **Alain Mouela, « 100th year war » collective president** / Bandalungwa / Kinshasa / feb 08

right: **1,2,3&4. March in Rosebank** / Johannesburg / apr 2008

(Photographs, JcLanquetin)
left: Fiction about « sape » by Dicoco Bokhetsu / Lingwala / Kinshasa / aug 2007

(Photographs, Dicoco Bokhetsu)

right: 100th YEAR W(E)AR / Fashion event: 1. The Smarteez, 2. Strangelove, 3. The dead eighties, 4. 4mat & fiends / Johannesburg / 30 apr 2008

(Photographs, JcLanquetin)

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SHOUT-OUT
... The sapeurs in the pictures:

Dicoco Boketshu, Djanga Weni, Sankhara, Petit Yannick, Vieux Dauda, Bebeto, Gervais Mavinga, Tresor Omeyaka (Python), Olivier Lunama (Boston, L’Homme à Rayon, Johnny Efoloko, Bijou Diama (Vrai Djo), Trésor Tombi (Yohji), Guelord Kanza (Japon), Arnaud Madienga (Double Impact), Chris Setchi, Franck Ngoy, Nzumbi (Youssou N’Dour), Eric Bokeke (Kenzo), Christian Tangu (Le Bourgeois), Christian Wanani (Firenze), Blaise Tayaya (Peter Kokopy), Sacré Lubamba (Yodji), Gantine et Ses Actrices, Dédé Forme (Toutankhamon), Kebere Mbondos, Foumadj, Itchay Bessongo, Patou Kourcha (Grand Père), Alain Mouela (Van Deutsch), Les musiciens de Johnny Loko...