

# la loge

Le Réduit  
by Sven Augustijnen

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As he plunged into the history of Belgium's military intervention in the Congo following the country's declaration of independence in 1960, Sven Augustijnen found his attention and interest drawn to the city of Kamina. While working on *Spectres*, a feature-length documentary from 2011 that examines Belgium's colonial past through the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, Augustijnen came across some people who put him on the trail of a national redoubt Belgium had planned to build in the province of Katanga in the 1950s.

His curiosity was stimulated by the absence of clear information and data on the topic, and by his longstanding interest in anything that has to do, whether directly or remotely, with the communist spectre that haunted Europe in the post-War years. Some preliminary research resulted in the discovery of an archive fonds, at Belgium's Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées (ACOS IS/CA), which contained information linked to the national redoubt project.

Augustijnen then set out on the massive task of documenting and analysing thousands of photos, negatives, carbon copies and various plans. These documents had never left the archive, or been studied by anyone. Thanks to the complicity of one of the archivists, Augustijnen was able to exhume the plans for a project of stunning proportions undertaken by the Belgian government: to develop a military base and a governmental city, to serve as refuge, in the city of Kamina.

*Le Réduit* retraces the history of the Kamina Base, which at first appeared as an architectural and urban materialization of the fear of a Soviet invasion, but which would go on to play a strategic role during political upheavals that destabilized Congo in the months and years that followed the declaration of independence.

The exhibition is composed of various elements: a set of photographic compositions and aerial shots of the inauguration and subsequent development of the site; a map that reveals the expanse of the project, which was to spread across a vast area of land; a text Sven Augustijnen wrote after a short trip to Kamina in June 2016, whose vividness and the succession of information incites a sort of derision; a yearbook that relates, with belief and pride, the adventures of the pioneers of the Kamina project; a map from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the sole graphic proof of the desire to build a redoubt that would include housing, administrative and general services, as well as ... a Royal Residence (!) in Kamina; a series of photos offering a quick and theatrical vision of the departure of Belgian troops; and, lastly, a selection of eleven architectural plans (selected from over 1200) that attest to the level of precision and attention to detail that went into the conception and execution of this project, which included a wide panoply of both military and civil constructions and infrastructures.

The artist's choices reveal several temporalities, discourses, and narratives. And together, these outline a journey that, although based on historical facts, tips over into fiction. Employing a strategy characteristic of his practice, Sven Augustijnen allowed himself to be guided by his interpretation, by the ghosts of history, and, even, by the emotive and personal input of some of the interlocutors he met along the way. In his turn, the artist guides us through what results: a complex reality that remains no less open and able to generate truths.

### **About the artist**

Sven Augustijnen was born in Mechelen in 1970, and he lives and works in Brussels. He has had solo shows in the following institutions, among others: The Hugh Lane, Dublin (2016); Kunsthall Trondheim, Trondheim (2015); CCS Bard & Hessel Museum of Art, Anandale-on-Hudson (2014); VOX, Centre pour l'Image contemporaine, Montréal (2013); Malmö Konsthall, Malmö (2013); Kunsthalle Bern, Bern (2011); De Appel, Amsterdam (2011); Wiels, Brussels (2011). His films, publications, and installations are often featured in group shows, among them: *The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding and Decoding*, Museo Coleção Berardo, Lisbon (2016), and *The Power Plant*, Toronto (2015); *Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future*, Tapei Biennial (2016); *Art in the Age of ... Asymmetrical Warfare*, Witte de With, Rotterdam (2015); *Europe – The Future of History*, Kunsthaus Zürich (2015); *Ce qui ne sert pas s'oublie*, CAPC, Bordeaux (2015); *Enthusiasm!*, Rencontres Picha – Biennale de Lubumbashi, Lubumbashi (2013).

Sven Augustijnen teaches at ERG (École de Recherche Graphique), in Brussels, and is regularly invited to give talks and workshops in Belgium and abroad. He is represented by the Jan Mot Gallery and is one of the founding members of the production and distribution platform August Orts.

### **Works and documents in the exhibition**

#### **Hallway and corridor**

*Le Réduit*, 2016

Text, vinyl lettering

Variable dimensions

*Towards the end of the 1940s, after two world wars had occupied Belgium's territory and exiled its government, and in the climate of fear generated by the start of the Cold War, the Belgian government decided to construct a national redoubt as a precautionary measure.*

*To this end, it set its eyes on a vast plateau in the Belgian Congo, in the northern part of the mining region of Katanga, and there proceeded to build a redoubt that would be composed of a military base equipped with the most important airfield in Africa as well as a governmental city large enough to receive and house the head of State (the King), his ministers and their respective families – in the event of a Soviet invasion. Work on the governmental city – which the local population commonly referred to as 'Cité de la Peur' (city of fear) or 'Couillonville' (dumbtown) – was abandoned in 1953, for budgetary reasons, but also because it had become impossible to keep the construction of a refuge-city of such proportions a secret. Moreover, the planning and construction of the city had already by then been outpaced by the events unfolding on the international stage:*

the Korean War, whose impending outbreak had been one of the motivations for the project, ended in the summer of 1953, after three years. The military base, for its part, was conceived and founded by Major BEM Janssens; built with extraordinary means, it was provided with all the infrastructure necessary to function autonomously.

The aerial shots by an anonymous photographer found at Belgium's Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées (ACOS IS/CA) attest to the fundamental imprint of the urban structures in the landscape, while other images taken this same year, 1953, show Major BEM Janssens, Commander of the Kamina Base from 1949 to 1954, and General Kestens, military liaison commander between the Forces métropolitaines d'Afrique and the General Gouvernor of Congo (LIMETRO), setting the first stone of one of the buildings. On this occasion, Major BEM Janssens pronounced the following words: 'Setting the first stone is always a moving gesture, moving as is any act of creation. It is also a comforting gesture, comforting as is every gesture of hope. Now, mixed into the thousands of square metres of developed site that we are adding to our assets, is our emotion, our faith, a fortifying feeling of confidence and certainty, and, also - why hide it? - pride'.

These words mark the end of Major BEM Janssens' mission at Kamina, as the following year he was named Commander in Chief of the Force publique of the Belgian Congo. Work on the military base continued after he left and was only interrupted by the declaration of an independent Congo on 30 June 1960. In the days that followed that declaration, the geographic position of the base turned out to be invaluable strategically, not only during the Belgian military intervention, but also during the repatriation of Belgian troops and civilians.

In the course of the research for Le Réduit, no images could be found relating to the historic events that took place at Kamina Base in the turbulent weeks that followed Congo's declaration of independence. The first photos found in the archive document the departure from Kamina of Major General Geysen, superior commander of the Forces métropolitaines d'Afrique (COMETRO). Some images, notably, show Moïse Tshombe, the leader of the secession of Katanga, on 30 August 1960 offering Geysen a leopard skin as a memento of their cooperation.

Lieutenant General Janssens, for his part, had already left the Congo on the night of 7 July 1960, after Patrice Lumumba, then Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, removed him from office following the incendiary declaration that Janssens had addressed to his troops: 'After independence is the same as before independence'. The words immediately sparked a mutiny that spread beyond the troops and led to riots across the country a mere five days after independence had been declared.

Shortly after Katanga seceded, on 12 July 1960 to be exact, Lumumba and President Kasa-Vubu decided to go in person to Elizabethville, the capital of the self-proclaimed State of Katanga, in an effort to reclaim control of the region. They were able to get a plane at Kamina Base, but the Belgian military and Katanga authorities did not allow them to land in Elizabethville. Six months later, Lumumba, who had in the meanwhile been stripped of his posts by Kasa-Vubu, was captured by Colonel Joseph Désiré Mobutu, Head Commander of the Congolese Army, and sent to Elizabethville, where he was assassinated on the night of 17 January 1961.

United Nations peacekeeping troops arrived to replace the Belgian troops at Kamina Base in August 1960, and they used the base to supervise the transition from colonial to independent rule in the Congo until 1963. In particular, they were responsible for repatriating the last remaining Belgian mercenaries who had supported the secession of Katanga.

Although they had left the Congo, Belgium's Metropolitan Troops used Kamina Base on two other occasions: in 1964, following the re-conquering of Stanleyville, and in 1977 and 1978, in the context of the first and second Shaba wars.

During the Angolan civil war, the base was used by the Americans, who supported Joseph Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), against the Agostinho Neto's Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which was in its turn supported by soldiers from the Soviet and Cuban armies.

Laurent Désiré Kabila and his Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) marched from the East of the country to Kinshasa in 1997 to rout Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko, who had by then been in power for 32 years. As Kabila's forces approached, the Zairean Armed Forces (FAZ) surrendered and flew the white flag over Kamina Base.

Today, going to Kamina Base via the road that leads to the general headquarters, one notices to the left a complex of new homes entirely surrounded by barbed wire. Flying alongside the flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo is the flag of the Popular Republic of China. Chinese armed forces have been training the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (FARDC), and its soldiers and officers are the ones now residing in these homes; they had been left unfinished by the Belgians in the wake of Congo's declaration of independence, and the Chinese have now completed and fitted them out. The homes contrast sharply with those on the other side of the street, as well as with the other buildings constructed on this military base inherited from Belgian colonization, buildings that bear the trace of the reversals of power and the upheavals of more than half a century of history.

translation of a text written by Sven Augustijnen  
Brussels, 15 July 2016

*General Kestens and Major BEM Janssens Set the First Stone of a Building*, 2016

Photographic composition: black-and-white baryta prints, 20x20 cm,  
from two period negatives  
Aluminium and glass frame  
45 x 69 cm

### **Temple**

*Aerial views of Kamina Base*, 2016

Period photographs transferred to 68 AdoxSilvermax slides, projector  
Kodak Ektapro 5020  
Variable dimensions

*Inspecting the Works in Progress or Completed, Te Deum at the Saint-Laurent Chapel and military parade on 21 juillet 1953*, 2016

Photographic compositions: black-and-white baryta prints, 20x20 cm,  
from fifty period negatives  
Aluminium and glass frame  
Dimensions variables

*Kamina Military Base*, ca. 1956-1958

Period plan (scale:1/5000)

Paper and ink

161 x 152 cm - 145 x 151 cm

Courtesy of the Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées  
(ACOS IS/CA)

**Basement corridor**

Plans of buildings and infrastructures of Kamina Base (1947-1960);  
from left to right:

*Preliminary draft of the Mini Golf Pavilion, 1953*

Plan no. 53/151

Tracing paper and ink

47x119 cm

*Kamina Base, Public Works Division, Construction of the Airfield,  
Façades, 1952*

Plan

Tracing paper and ink

89x95 cm

*Kamina Base, Project for a Headstone, 1953*

Plan no. 53/136

Tracing paper and ink

32x33 cm

*Belgian Armed Forces, Kamina Metropolitan Base, Public Works  
Division, Chicken Coop for the Chickens of the Natives, 1957*

Plan no. 57/59

Tracing paper and ink

32x90 cm

*Untitled (house), 1952*

Plan no. 52/14

Tracing paper and ink

82x126 cm

Courtesy of the Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées  
(ACOS IS/CA)

*Installation for the Air-Conditioning System To Dry Parachutes.  
General Scheme, 1951*

Plan J-1547

Tracing paper and ink

63x86 cm

*Belgian Congo, Ministry of National Defense, Kamina Base, Construction  
of the Headquarters, 1952*

Plan no. 52/100

Tracing paper and ink

70x120 cm

*Kamina Base, Prison, 1955*

Plan no. 55/130

Tracing paper and ink

78x126 cm

*Belgian Congo, Ministry of National Defense, Kamina Base, Public  
Works Division, Construction of 10 Homes for Europeans, House Type  
E, 1951*

Plan no. 51/8

Tracing paper and ink

90x147 cm

*Ironworks for Suspending the School Bell, 1953*

Plan

Tracing paper and ink

46x76 cm

*Kamina Base, Reception Centre, Setting Up Antennas, ca.1947-1960*

Plan

Tracing paper and ink

47x57 cm

All the plans are courtesy of the Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées (ACOS IS/CA)

### **Basement, room**

#### Display case 1:

*Most Men Have a Moment in Life when They Can Do Great Things – It's When Nothing Seems Impossible, ca. 1947-1951*

Yearbook (album + 13 plates extracted from it)

Paper, ink, photographs

37 x 30 x 5 cm

Courtesy of the Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées (ACOS IS/CA)

#### Display case 2:

*Belgian Congo, Katanga Province, District of the Haut Lomami, Kamina, Provisional Town, ca. 1951*

Plan (scale 1-45000 – Plan no. T 524 Sul.)

Paper and ink

90 x 47 cm

Courtesy of the Federal Public Services of Foreign Affairs, Belgium

#### Display case 3:

*General Geysen's Departure, 30 August 1960, 1960*

Proto Album (7 plates extracted from the album)

Paper, photographs

32 x 24 cm

Courtesy of the Centre de Documentation historique des Forces armées (ACOS IS/CA)

### **Limited edition**

#### **Sven Augustijnen**

*Major BEM Janssens and General Kestens at Work in a Hut at Kamina Base, a Portrait of King Baudouin in the Background, 2016*

Black-and-white baryta print, 15x15 cm, from a period negative

Edition of 10 + 2 AP

On the occasion of this exhibition, a limited edition is available for sale. For more information, please inquire at the reception desk.

## **Thank you**

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The team at La Loge:

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## **Opening hours**

Thursday - Friday - Saturday

12:00 to 18:00

Free entrance

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