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**Délestage Lelo Awa:
Experiments in Radical Cartography**

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Délestage Lelo Awa: Experiments in Radical Cartography

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Abstract

For some years now, scholars in a range of fields have been arguing that canonical approaches to urban space fall short when faced with cities outside the industrialized «North.» Rooted in the Modernist project and positing the Euro-American metropolis as a benchmark, these approaches favor teleological narratives of progress, relying on dichotomies – center vs. periphery, formal vs. informal, success vs. failure – that cannot effectively account for diversity. Such either/or readings of urban space have a pernicious effect that extends far beyond the realm of philosophical difference. At the hands of the IMF, the World Bank and related institutions, or deployed by state-sponsored local and regional planning bodies, they shape policy and as a result impact millions of lives, more often than not in negative ways. This paper considers a response to such narratives articulated in the oeuvre of Kinshasa-based artist Méga Mingiedi. Its focus is a series of cityscapes – drawings, collages and installations – produced between 2008 and 2010: a body of work that constitutes a radical departure from canonical techniques deployed to map and, more broadly, to define cities at the edge of the 21st century.

The strength of Mingiedi's cityscapes lies in two characteristics of his work: a staunch refusal to consider urban space from a single perspective and a fundamental ambivalence, a push-pull of simultaneous desire and recoil that puts in intimate proximity two entities that Modernist discourse on the city insists are wholly incompatible: the «jumble» of spaces born of «informal» economies and the «order» imposed by «formal planning.» These two features – a multi-positional vantage point resistant to any single linear perspective and an unwillingness to come down on either side of what the work shows to be a wholly artificial dichotomy – puts Mingiedi's readings of city space at loggerheads with officially sanctioned approaches to the city, and with current urban renewal projects in Kinshasa and DRC more widely.