



Vivek Vilasini, *Ambassadors after Hans Holbein*, 2008, photographic work, 127.4 x 168cm, FPS Foreign Affairs collection, installed at the official residence of the Belgian Ambassador in New Delhi. Photo © Vivek Vilasini

Art and Diplomacy

A trip around the world past embassies, consulates and diplomats' residences is not for everyone, never mind gaining access to all the spaces where art can be seen. The FPS Foreign Affairs' collection remains fairly hidden and works of art regularly travel to another location. Custodian and curator Ilse Dauwe joins us in conversation about art and art integrations at Belgian embassies.

No, the FPS Foreign Affairs collection is by no means boring. Last summer, the Art & Diplomacy exhibition at the Egmont Palace in Brussels was an initial presentation of contemporary art from the collection. This year's annual summer exhibition from Foreign Affairs, a varied programme at the Egmont Palace, will not take place. This is partly because there are works in progress in the building. Ilse Dauwe leads me there to a world map of Mona Hatoum. A little further down Rue des Petits Carmes, I see through the windows of the closed counters of the Legalisation Department a large sculpture by Pascale Marthine Tayou, with more art in the waiting room. Thought is being given to opening up the collection, and the web page already contains one hundred names of contemporary artists.

Christine Vuegen:

I associate art in embassies with art for embellishing buildings and offices, art as a business card, art that should not offend anyone. Isn't that true?

Ilse Dauwe: "The goal remains the furnishing of buildings and the representation of the country, but we are trying to open it up. The collection began in 1830 with the creation of Belgium and grew especially after the Second World War, when most diplomatic missions were opened. At that time, diplomats didn't change posts every four years. It's a collection of over 4,500 pieces: historical tapestries, antiques, paintings, sculptures, works on paper and other media. I've worked here for 18 years. Every year, we buy 60 to 80 works by contemporary artists, sometimes commissioned. We go for museum quality, but key works belong in a

where everyone can see them. Our task is more to show high-quality art, as well as giving young artists opportunities. A work in an embassy is a kind of Belgian recognition for artists. Sometimes, they will meet the people in whose office or embassy it ends up. We want to show off the diversity of the artistic landscape in Belgium, and in recent years we've bought work by foreign artists, for example Congolese artists for the embassy in Kinshasa. Art is also used to open dialogues and discussions." Our uniqueness is that we also work with local artists. The Netherlands, France and most other countries do not. The Belgians do build bridges, after all. The combination of Belgian and local artists in our embassies is therefore in line with the path we follow at a diplomatic level. Art and diplomacy: how do they reconcile? Diplomats practice the art of compromise, as it were, while contemporary artists are rather rebellious, critical or at least questioning. Their 'common ground' is that art is a form of communication and exploration. Works of art are also installed at the residences of heads of post: official residences for receptions and consultations. Recently, a VUB student wrote a paper about the collection. An English study on cultural diplomacy shows that the most conclusive consultation takes place face to face, including at the homes of diplomats. The study finds that art in this context shows off the underbelly of a society or a country quite a bit, which is something separate from the official line."

CV Are there any embassies that are more committed to art than others? How does it work?

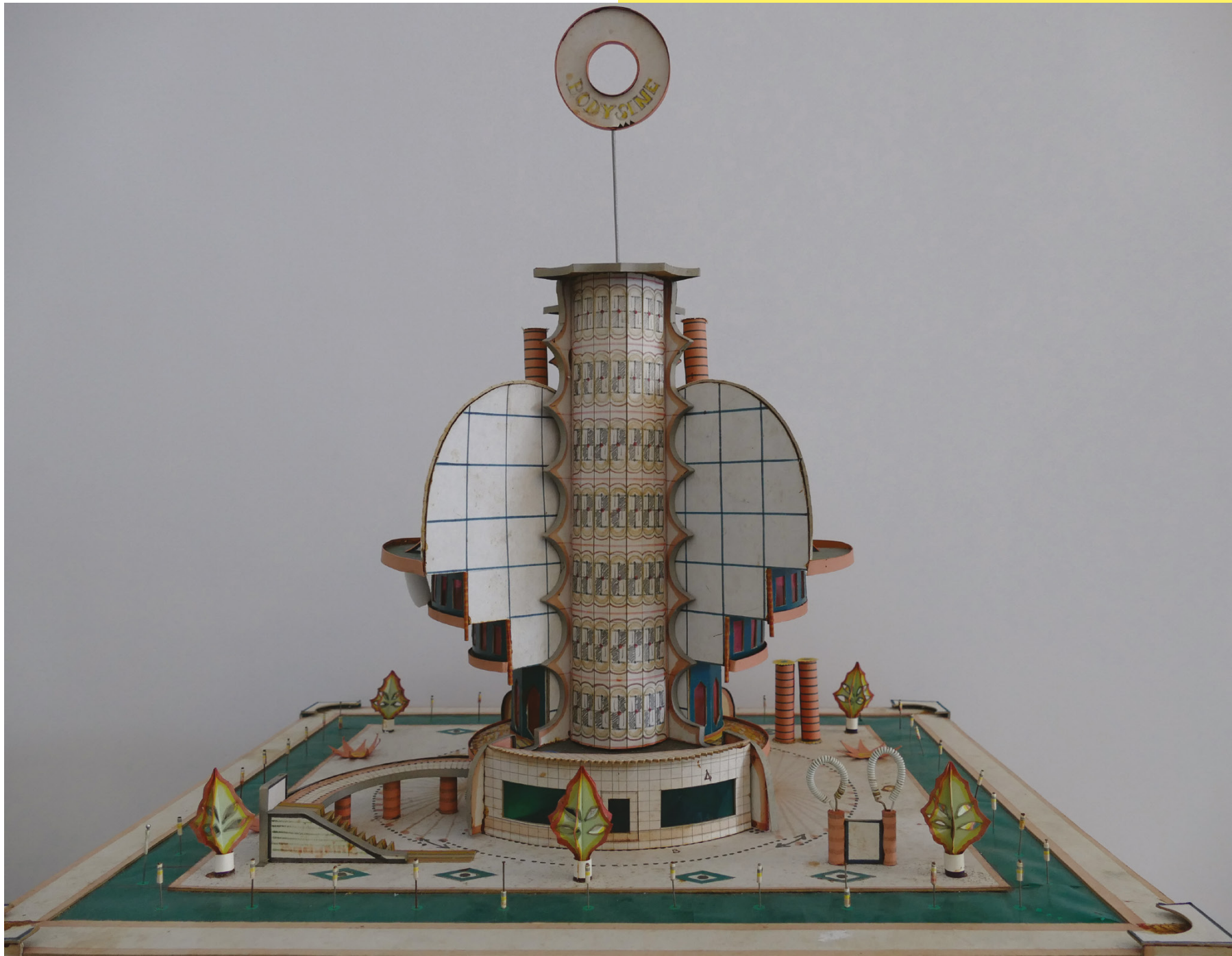
ID "For new build projects and major renovations, we start prospecting well in advance. An external advisory committee has been in place since 2013. This comprises Dirk Snauwaert of WIELS, Eva Wittocx of Museum M and Pierre-Olivier Rollin of BPS22. So it's pretty recent. I still take advice on the local art scene myself, visiting studios, museums and art

professionals at their premises. We then try to tell a more or less coherent story within the budgetary possibilities and the available locations.

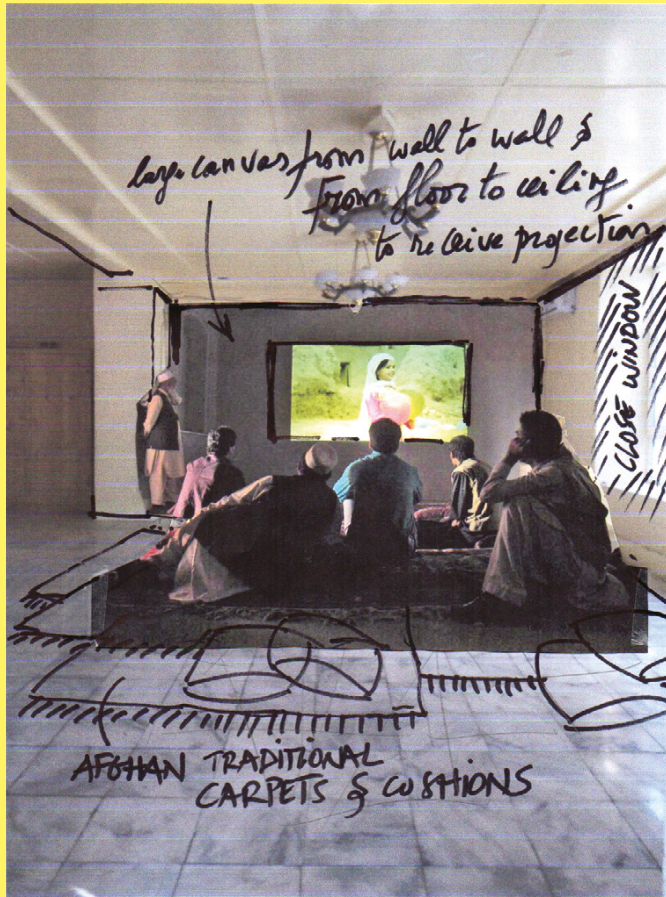
The oldest art integration project is the new embassy in Tokyo in 2010, before the external advisory committee was established. There are works by Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven, for example, that I had seen at Gallery Barbara Thumm. Tokyo and Kinshasa are the largest art integrations to date."

CV The Belgian colonial past weighs heavily in Kinshasa. What was the approach to art integration in the new build from 2018?

ID We allow differentiated votes, but topics like restoration are also mentioned. There are about forty works by twenty artists, including Sammy Baloji who is quite critical of the colonial past, mining and forced labour. He took his first steps in photography at a workshop by Marie-Françoise Plissart in Lubumbashi. Plissart made a kind of photo collage of districts in Kinshasa. There was someone who didn't see all that poverty as a depiction of Congo. Someone else, also from the Congo, loved it.



Bodus Isek Kingelez, *Design for a new Belgian embassy*, 1993, cardboard and various materials, 63 x 56 x 47cm, FPS Foreign Affairs collection, displayed at the Belgian embassy in Kinshasa. Foto © FPS Foreign Affairs



Francis Alys, sketch for the presentation of the video *Reel/Unreel* with children in Kabul, which was displayed for a week in 2014 at the official residence in Kabul. Works by Alys in the collection are the lithograph *Modern Procession* at the official residence of the Consul-General in New York and a poem on a glass wall at the embassy in Madrid. Photo © Francis Alys

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During the installation of the works, I noticed that a lot of people were happy with them and that it brought about a lot of things.” “Outside is a work in situ by Maarten Vanden Eynde, termite mounds in red brick. They refer to the Belgians having ‘a brick in their stomach’ (meaning they have a need to buy a piece of land and build their own house) and especially to the local custom of erecting a brick oven near termite mounds, because it’s good soil. A sculpture that has appeared a lot on television is Yambi by Aimé Mpane. A European and an African figure reach out to one another. The artwork poses the question of who is being hospitable to whom.”

“Design for a new Belgian embassy by the artist Bodys Isek Kingelez, who died in 2015, has been donated to the collection. He created the work in 1993. There’s a nice story to go with it (smiles). The MoMA in New York, where there was a Kingelez retrospective in 2018, asked our embassy for it. Thanks to Argos and the director of a film about Kingelez, I was able to track down the owner. As ambassador, he helped a number of Congolese artists who exhibited in Europe in the 1990s to obtain a visa. Kingelez thanked him with this model. The ambassador laughed at the time, saying: ‘This could be a design for our new embassy.’ That’s how the work got its title.

Georges Senga and JP Mika are among several other Congolese artists. We give them an equal platform.

But the art collection won’t solve certain things from the past, of course.”

CV The architecture of the embassy complex in New Delhi is very special. Can you tell me anything about that?

ID “In 1980, the Indian architect and artist Satish Gujral won the architecture competition. He was inspired by Muslim mausoleums and mosques in northern India. The complex is on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites. The renovation is in full swing, but the official residence is already prepared. Corps noir by Ann Veronica Janssens allowed us to borrow from the S.M.A.K. We will sometimes request a loan from museums or the artist, usually because a purchase is outside our budget.

In India, when people think of Ann Veronica’s wall sculpture, they immediately think of Anish Kapoor. There’s a work of his, an edition. We bought the photographic work by the Indian artist Vivek Vilasini because it’s a fine reinterpretation of *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger at the National Gallery in London. The ambassadors are now two colourful figures, two Indian Kathakali dancers. It’s a pleasant wink in the entrance hall, in front of the official royal portraits.”

CV Are there any projects or purchases that you are particularly happy to have carried out?

ID “I’m very satisfied with every project and every purchase, because it isn’t always an easy process. More small-scale integrations have been realised in Amman, Vienna and the modernist official residence in São Paulo with an installation by Aglaia Konrad. I discovered Otobong Nkanga early on. One of her works was purchased for the first time in 2012. This is *Alterscape* for the embassy in Madrid, where the theme of tourism was being worked on. She later said that we were the first public institution to buy the photo triptych. There are also two diplomatic representations in Brussels: the Permanent Representation (PR) to NATO and the PR to the European Union. At the end of last year, Adrien Tirtiaux installed the *Europe Without Borders* map in the latter room. There is a work by Marina Pinsky with a lock. This raises questions about the future of Europe and migration issues. The collection includes a bundle of historical maps and world maps, to which we add contemporary interpretations. We are currently working on integration projects in Pretoria and Rabat, and in the future Beijing.”

CV Does the line-up change when a new ambassador arrives?

ID “At those ‘curated embassies’, where the collection is put together for a certain location in the same way that a curator puts on an exhibition, there is a preference for it to stay that way for a while.

But it’s not out of the question that something will change. Our older collection also rotates. There is the annual diplomatic movement. Heads of post usually come to see if they can bring something along, something that’s in stock or that we buy. There will be a number of other focuses, but that’s okay.

Spaces are often still unused and it’s not a bad idea to re-evaluate integrations over time. It’s not a static collection. When Walter Swennen exhibited in Lisbon, one of his works hung in the embassy.

In the meantime, it has moved to the residence of the Belgian ambassador in Kinshasa. This rotation requires greater monitoring, but it provides a fresher and more dynamic look.”

<https://diplomatic.belgium.be/en/belgianartanddiplomacy>

International symposium on 29 October at the Egmont Palace in Brussels: Belgian and Dutch Embassy Buildings: Multi-Layered Projects of Representation (on architecture, interior design and art), organised by KU Leuven and TU Eindhoven with the aid of FPS Foreign Affairs. Free access after registration. www.belgianmand-dutchembassybuildings.be