



MINISTÈRE
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FONDATION DAMSO

Pavilion of the Democratic Republic of Congo

at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia

Simba Moto! Seize the Fire! Saisis le feu!

May 9 to November 22, 2026

Antico Refettorio - Scuola Grande di San Marco



PRESS RELEASE

The Democratic Republic of the Congo presents its National Pavilion *Simba Moto! Seize the Fire! Saisis le feu!* at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia.

Opening to the public on 9 May 2026, the Pavilion is officially presented by the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, through its Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, led by Her Excellency Yolande Elebe Ma Ndembo, Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, marking a historic milestone for the Congolese contemporary art scene. This participation reflects the Ministry's role in shaping a national framework for the development and international projection of Congolese culture, positioning artistic creation within a broader dynamic of cultural dialogue and global presence.

The pavilion is curated by Nadia Yala Kisukidi, alongside the MOKO Collective, a curatorial collective comprising Aimé Mpané, Jean Kamba and Johnny Leya, named after the word “moko,” meaning “unity” in Lingala, the language primarily spoken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The Pavilion adopts a deliberately collaborative model merging philosophical, artistic, poetic and architectural perspectives. Nine artists from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its

diaspora are presented in the Pavilion: Aimé Mpané, Sammy Baloji, Arlette Bashizi, Patrick Bongoy, Damso, Gosette Lubondo, Nelson Makengo, Léonard Pongo and Géraldine Tobé.

Presented across a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, photography, film and tapestry, the works embody ideas of unity, transformation and transcendence, moving from past turbulence and pain towards the creation of futures, life and hope. Among the artists, Pongo and Baloji are also among the 111 invited artists featured in the main exhibition of the 61st International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *In Minor Keys*, curated by Koyo Kouoh.

The trilingual title, in English, French, and Lingala, the latter translated by linguist Mpoke Mimpongo, reflects a vision rooted in the diverse languages, cosmologies and cultural histories of the Congo while addressing a global audience. It affirms the circulation of African ideas and dreams beyond borders and across generations.

Fire can burn and destroy, but when harnessed, as a blacksmith does, it transforms, shapes and creates. Seizing the fire in this sense serves as an imperative to bring forth a new idea of the Congo to the world and for the Congo in turn to transform through that metaphorical fire, through art and creativity.

The installation unfolds like a luminous forge where artists from Kinshasa to Goma craft new narratives to transcend present and past challenges in the Congo.

Nelson Makengo's video work *NTEMO NKENGO (State of Awakening)* (2026) reveals the city of Kinshasa at night and the river that forcefully makes its way into people's homes, awakening them like an organic, uncontrollable presence where domestic crisis transforms into a collective spiritual call.

The same sense of inner strength is echoed in Sammy Baloji's *Seeing Katharina* (2026), a tapestry made in cotton and mixed recycled yarns, reappropriating a drawing by German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), considered among the first depictions of a Black woman in Western art.

Katharina, 20 years old at the time her portrait was made, was likely an enslaved servant. In Baloji's work, inspired by Flemish tapestries, she appears as a noble woman dressed in a lavish gown, standing proudly.

A dialogue through textile continues with Léonard Pongo's *Mbanza Tapestry* (2020), which translates photographic imagery of the Democratic Republic of the Congo into a complex, woven abstraction. Developed through collaboration with specialized weavers and textile designers, the work transforms sensory experience into a layered and tactile composition.

Further references to the history of the Congo appear in Gosette Lubondo's works *Please Carry It!* (2026), drawing on family archives and matriarchal Kongo lineage to explore heritage and transmission.

In Arlette Bashizi's *The Price of Technology: A Requiem for the Mineral Body* (2023), the artist investigates the human cost of cobalt extraction in the context of the global energy transition.



Aimé Mpané's *Le souffle (The Breath)* (2026) presents sculptures animated by breath, symbolizing transformation through elemental forces.

Patrick Bongoy's *Stagnation* (2026) reflects on the condition of Congolese youth facing structural limitations despite high levels of education.

Spiritual reflection as a path to healing runs through the exhibition, notably in Géraldine Tobé's *Le chemin de la mémoire (The Way of Memory)* (2018), while Damso's *Bureau des futurs ajournés (The Office of Postponed Futures)* (2026) explores a suspended present where the future remains uncertain.

A sound installation by A.Z.A. connects the pavilion, weaving together the sounds of Kinshasa with artistic gestures and everyday life.

The Pavilion is hosted in the Refettorio Antico of the Museo Scuola Grande di San Marco in Venice, a site associated with care, healing and hospitality. It reflects a vision grounded in resilience and transformation.

In dialogue with the theme of the Biennale Arte 2026, *In Minor Keys* by Koyo Kouoh, the Pavilion embraces subtlety, improvisation and shared imagination, calling for new narratives beyond discourses of lack, pain and death.

The Pavilion is operationalized in partnership with the Damso Foundation, a philanthropic initiative launched by the Belgian Congolese artist Damso, which contributes operational and financial support in alignment with the strategic framework of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. Its primary mission is to create sustainable conditions through which artists and other actors in the cultural and creative industries can develop their practices, strengthen their visibility, and connect with their local and global audiences. Acting as a bridge across cultures, the Foundation aims to create concrete opportunities to support Congolese talents at home and abroad, with the ultimate objective of helping them live from their passion.

Curator Nadia Yala Kisukidi comments:

“For most discussions related to the Global South there is often a strong reference to the post-colonial. For this pavilion, we did not want to focus on coloniality. This does not mean we avoid the reality of colonialism or neocolonialism, but we seek to create new contemporary mythologies rooted in the Congo without being exclusively determined by its colonial past.”

The pavilion will also publish a catalogue exploring one of the exhibition's central questions: a claim for narrative sovereignty in the DRC, with contributions from Bambi Ceuppens, Charles Didier Gondola, Bruce Mateso, Sarah Van Beurden and Igor Matonda.

Beyond the Pavilion itself, this participation is part of a broader national dynamic. The recent adoption of the country's first national cultural policy since independence in 1960 driven by the Presidency of the Republic and implemented by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage establishes a structural foundation for the long-term organization, recognition and international projection of the Congolese cultural sector. The presence of the DRC in Venice marks one of its historic major expressions on the global stage.

Commissioner: Cindy Makiana

Curator: Nadia Yala Kisukidi

Exhibitors: Sammy Baloji, Arlette Bashizi, Patrick Bongoy, Damso, Gosette Lubondo, Nelson Makengo, Aimé Mpané, Léonard Pongo, Géraldine Tobé

Pre-opening: 6-8 May 2026

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Venue: Refettorio Antico - Scuola Grande di San
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Lead image: Installation view of Simba moto! Seize the fire! Saisis le feu!, Antico Refettorio – Scuola Grande di San Marco, Venice. Photo by Antoine Assumani. Courtesy the Pavilion of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.