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Sandra Mujinga

Text by Martha Kirszenbaum
Portrait by Chai Saeidi

Through her multimedia practice that spans over sculpture, video, installation, textile and music, Sandra Mujinga explores the themes of visibility and surveillance, depicting post-human and speculative realities visited by specters from our colonial history. Inspired by world-building practices found within video games, science-fiction novels and Afrofuturism, the Congolese-Norwegian artist invites us to dive into an ephemeral and ethereal world.

In her work, recurrent figures—phantoms or gate-keepers—often welcome the visitors like disturbing sentinels. The corner tent-like sculpture *Coiling* (2019), for instance, evokes a ghostly presence while assuming the role of an architectural hiding place. It is a phantom that haunts us, reminiscent of our colonial history or perhaps a survivor in the post-apocalypse, witnessing the environmental destruction. In the exhibition *Spectral Keepers*, presented at The approach in London (2021), Mujinga produced four tall hooded figures dressed in layered tulle fabric. Similarly, in the exhibition *Midnight* at Vleeshal that same year, these characters carry trunks or tentacles, and feel like guardians, gatherers and confronters. They are post-human figures and their shadows feel larger than their actual bodies as they appear as present yet invisible at the same time. For each installation, the exhibition space is flooded with an intense green light, recalling green screen technology used for video production, and immerses the viewer into an environment that feels like a nightclub or a travel dystopia. Ultimately the generic quality of this green light acts like a background superimposed with the other figures, but complexifies the relationship between the two and questions the significance of visibility. Does the bright light truly enhance the figures, or actually make them even more invisible?

Blackness, the representation of black bodies and the politics of (in)visibility lay at the core of Mujinga's practice, as she investigates the notion of presence and the political potential of absence. In that sense, the green light acts as a proxy for blackness and evokes both hypervisibility and invisibility—apparently opposing conditions that are often central to perceptions and experiences of Blackness. The question of skin color is also essential to her exploration of the invisibility of black bodies. In 2018 at Tranen, she named her exhibition *Calluses*. There she explored how different types of skin and interfaces affect the encounter between the

individual and its surroundings, presenting dark skin colors that absorb light, transparent PVC that transmits light, and synthetic leather, which is resistant and hard to penetrate. More recently, in an exhibition entitled *LACK* at Sandefjord Kunstforening (2022), Mujinga presented an ongoing series of ten photographic portraits of her sister. Based on morph images assembled after she had asked several friends and family members to share their faces through selfies, she creates a distorted assemblage of these faces through Photoshop. Here again, Mujinga uses overexposure to remedy a lack of representation, while at the same time suggesting the legacy of Black portraiture.

Evasive figures, possibly black subjects that cannot be captured or controlled in the public space, are also a persistent presence in Sandra Mujinga's body of work. For her recent installation *Closed World, Open Space* at the Munch Museum (2022), she produced three video-sculptures depicting the figure of an animated Black person with dreadlocks running through the three boxes. One can't really see the face, neither the hair that is covered up until the character finally appears with their face that has multiplied into five faces, before starting running again. Similarly, her video installation *Pervasive Light* (2021) depicts an ungraspable cloaked Black figure whose image is blurred as they walk in and out of the screens and the light. With new technologies of faced recognition and after several months spent wearing surgical masks in public spaces, our faces don't really belong to us anymore. Mujinga suggests a futuristic set-up where we could share and merge our faces in real time.

Essential to the artist's practice is her relationship to textile and fashion.

She became an artist through working with garments, and her sculptures are clothes that a body can potentially inhabit. She creates elegant and elongated pieces of synthetic leather or PVC, often based on recycled and reused fabrics. They are wearable, amorphous sculptures and, in them, bodies take the role of hangers. In her 2017 performance *Clear as Day*, ten models were walking around a courtyard wearing her garments, which were later used for the photographic series staging her sister at Sandefjord Kunstforening. For her installation for the Preis der Nationalgalerie, *Reworlding Remains* (2021), the large figures' garments were made of second-hand fabric the artist had torn and weaved, evoking a decaying or a snake's skin. Mujinga seems to be truly interested in the functionality of skin—a shell, a

protection that is being built through the elaboration of new skins with sewing fabrics, superimposing and assembling them piece by piece, and using all the leftovers she can find in the studio. These skins fall apart, they renew themselves and change color.

Finally, the use of language as a tool for expressing the personal and the political appears as a central element of Sandra Mujinga's approach. Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and raised in Norway, she carries a conflicted relationship to language—as a young Congolese child, she was bullied for her imperfect Norwegian, later she started to lose a bit of her mother tongue Lingala, while at the same time incorporating English as the main the language of her practice. The work reveals an attempt to reconcile the pieces of her plural identity through writing, reading and playing music. Performance is a key element of Mujinga's approach as it connects the dots between her installations, films, objects and music. As a music digger, she used to play live, DJ and now dedicates her music compositions to the soundtracks of her films and installations. Furthermore, her interest for writing and reading, "that is breathing" as she mentioned in an interview, feels very physical and engaging her own body. For the above-mentioned exhibition *LACK*, Sandra Mujinga wrote and read a very personal and political text, poetically drawing on the experience and the legacy of Blackness:

What if your lack, can cause the world to end?

What if your black can cause the world to end?

Being black you somehow seem to be stuck in the past, if not reminded of the past

Perhaps the future is not a thing, but another thing to make me think of my lack

To speed it up, the future, our parents follow the rules

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Installation view, 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, 2022 Photo: Roberto Marossi Courtesy: La Biennale di Venezia (pp. 190-191)
Solo Oslo, installation views, MUNCH, Oslo, 2022 Photo: Ove Kvavik Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna and The approach, London (p. 192)
Beyond the Black Atlantic, installation view, Kunstverein Hannover, 2020 Photo: Raimund Zakowski Courtesy: the National Museum, Norway (p. 193)



