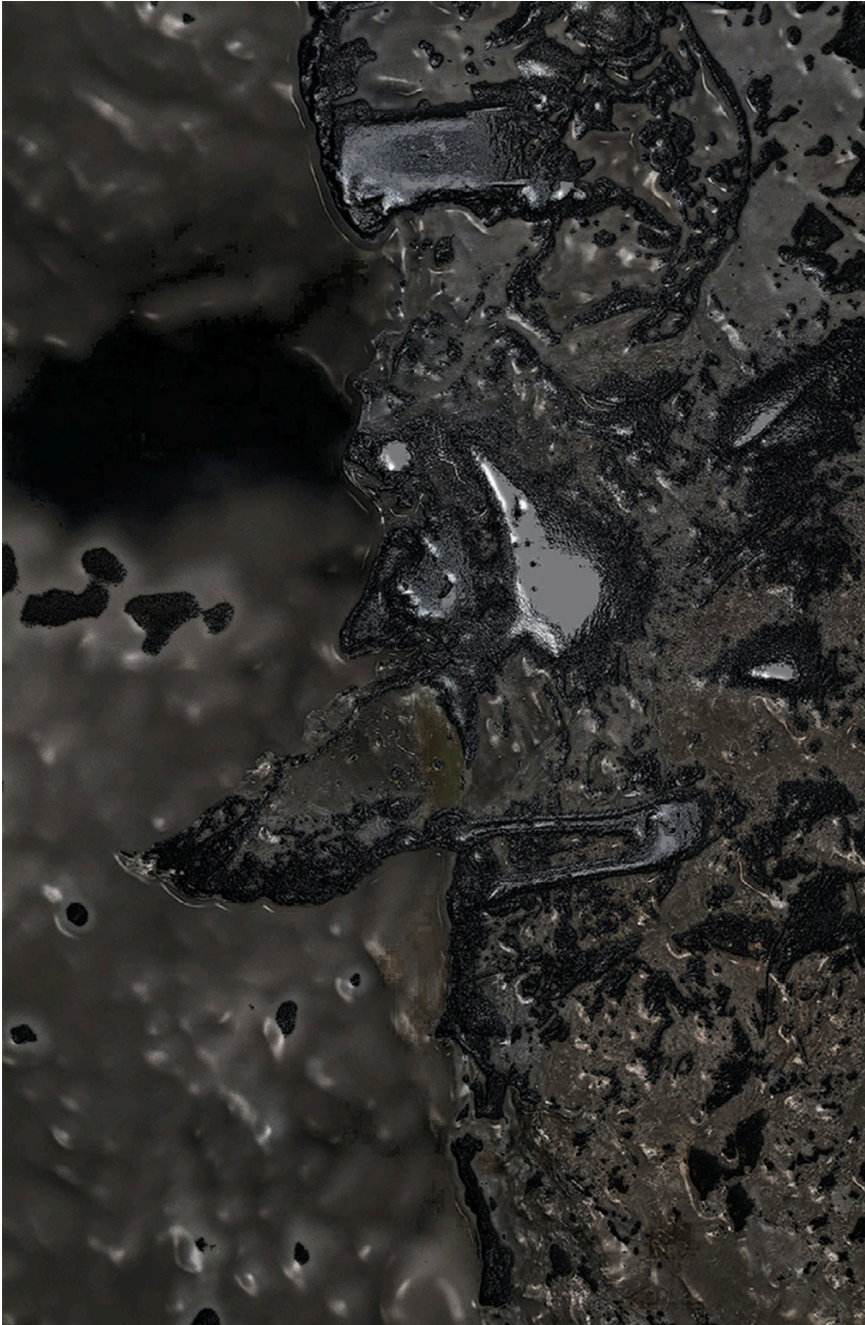


REVIEWS BERLIN

## Sandra Mujinga

Hamburger Bahnhof

By Magnus Elias Rosengarten



Sandra Mujinga, *I Build My Skin With Rocks*, 2022, HD video on LED wall, color, sound, 1 hour 28 seconds.

Sandra Mujinga's "IBMSWR: I Build My Skin With Rocks" functions as a portal into worlds beyond those prescribed by Western ideologies. The installation from which the exhibition takes its title occupies the upper half of Hamburger Bahnhof's Historische Halle with a twenty-nine-by-thirteen-foot screen that extends across the front of a huge black wooden sculpture. It shows footage of a hybrid creature that gradually morphs in free-flowing movements from humanoid to abstract and pixelated stonelike patterns. An accompanying soundscape composed by the artist fills the space with solemn acoustics. Fortified by its organ and violin arrangements, the music

conjures a sacred and ceremonial atmosphere, inviting viewers away from the often unbearable here and now into invisible realms of the deep unconscious. The combination of the richly layered composition and the colossal rectangular sculpture that extends some sixty feet into space shapes the gate to this simultaneous virtual and physical experience, reminiscent of a religious ritual.

Skin—both literal and metaphorical, as a demarcator that defines inner and outer life and protects human flesh, blood, and spirit—is a recurrent motif throughout Mujinga’s oeuvre. Above all, it poses the fundamental question of what it means to be human and whose skin can be deemed legitimate. *I Build My Skin With Rocks*, 2022, is also inspired by animal survival strategies, from bodily mutations to changes in behavioral patterns that protect them from violent human activity in their environments. Mujinga, who was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and now splits her time between Berlin and Oslo, holds a particular interest in the thick hide of the elephant. She asks how life can be bearable when modernity’s classification of the “human” is still predicated on whiteness. In other words, what metamorphic processes would be required to repudiate colonialist taxonomies and make planetary existence livable for all?

The sound-and-video sculpture’s presence surpasses modernity’s self-imposed category of the “human” as defined by its linear and coherent time lines, questionable body morphologies, binary gender norms, crude sense of beauty, and one-dimensional linguistics. Mujinga pushes toward domains of the unconscious that have been violently repressed yet remain charged with immense potency. In one of the accompanying catalogue essays, scholar and geographer Kathryn Yusoff stresses that Mujinga’s practice invites us to imagine “what the human can become, freed from the shackles of colonial earth and its prescriptive script . . . that was built on so many absented and exposed persons-coded-as-bodies, [which] necessitates the growth of new skin.” To probe such new skin requires trust, noncolonial time, playfulness, and genuine engagement with the unknown. It is no coincidence then that this powerful work is on view in a country that has been trying to grow new skin for several decades now, continually haunted by its histories of immeasurable violence and crimes against humanity. Documenta 15 was a prime recent example of that effort. Germany’s ongoing identity crisis as an immigrant nation rests on an implicit racist belief that Germanness is analogous to whiteness. Whether or not this place is truly able to perceive *I Build My Skin With Rocks* remains to be answered.