

Transforming Darkness Into a Space of Agency: Sandra Mujinga

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“In order to rise from its own ashes,
a Phoenix first must burn.”
—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 1993¹

The work of Sandra Mujinga plays with economies of visibility and opacity, negotiating questions of identity, self-representation, and surveillance. Working across film, sound, installation, performance, and sculpture, Mujinga fluidly jumps across media and formats to confuse, mix, and reallocate ideas of the body, deconstructing usual, expected mechanisms of observation and appearance. An artist, DJ, and musician, she employs each of these contingent roles to critically examine power structures, institutions, and social contexts for political negotiation.

As of this writing, the world is facing global uprisings and anti-racist protests defending the rights of black, brown, and indigenous communities against the violence and discrimination rooted in Western societies. Sandra Mujinga, a Norwegian citizen born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1989, is concerned with imagining alternatives, proposing invisibility as a survival strategy and a conceptual tool to critically observe—without being seen—our political reality. The scenarios she proposes frequently recall those portrayed in science-fiction literature—the radical work of speculative thinkers such as Octavia E. Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and N. K. Jemisin are frequent references in the artist’s work—where unexpected solutions are found in imaginary worlds where humans are not at the center.

Mujinga fluidly operates between online and physical spaces, treating the exhibition context as just one of many stages for her artistic work; others include social media, music distribution channels, and the mingling space of nightclubs. For *Throwing Voice* (2016), an installation presented as part of *Real Friends* at Oslo Kunstforening (2016), visitors encountered the model Priscilla Owusu Afriyie self-consciously posing against a green screen, a recurring technique the artist employs to deconstruct the mediation of images of black people. Avatar-like, her face distorted by filters, Afriyie’s projected figure was fragmented by twisted sheets of reflective polycarbonate that transformed her into an uncanny, almost alien being: an embodiment of our complex and hyper-mediated identities.

The three-day performance *Re-imagining Things I–III* (2018), presented as part of *Hoarse Globules* at UKS, Oslo (2018), extended Mujinga’s analysis of representation and concealment. On the first day, *Re-imagining Things I*, six models were invited to operate shifting, wobbly walls, each displaying moving, liquid, screen-saver-looking images. A live set played by the artist herself accompanied this shifting reality, mixing sound with skin care tutorials and a recorded interview with Butler. Again here, representation and identity became contingent, requiring active negotiation.

Visitors to Mujinga’s shows may find loose zoomorphic limb sculptures recalling elephant trunks or octopus tentacles scattered across the space, as in *Shawl 1–6* (*Elephant Ears*) (2016–2018), or hanging on the wall as in *Uniform*, *Mottle*, and *Disruptive* (all 2018). With widely varying tones

and surface textures, spanning from dark skin colors to transparent PVC and synthetic leather, each material choice highlights an encounter or clash between the individual and its environment. The survival strategies of animals that change their bodily features to adapt to hostile surroundings are relevant to Mujinga’s practice. In works such as *Octo Clutch/Temporary Home* (2018) and *Release* (2018), the artist expands on human-nonhuman hybrids, layering see-through images of a black body on soft, tentacular leather extensions. The jellyfish-like alien species from Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy (2019) comes to mind, as does the struggle to define the complex and destructive nature of humanity. Depicting the future from a black perspective, Mujinga employs Afrofuturism and post-human ideas, as speculative and political gaze envisioning alternative worlds at the intersection of technology, the animal, and the human.

Some of the giant hooded dark sculptures in *Nocturnal Kinship* (2018) incorporate animal limbs whilst other works feature various skin colors and textures as *Mókó* and *Libwá* (both 2019), exhibited in *Seasonal Pulses* at Croy Nielsen, Vienna (2019). As guardians, carers, perhaps warriors or oracles, their sizes willfully dominate the human scale. A faceless and intimidating group, skillfully handmade, was also part of *SONW – Shadow of New Worlds* at Bergen Kunsthall (2020), the artist’s biggest solo show to date. Employing the hoodie—an item of clothing used by police for racial profiling, but also a recent symbol of protest—as a political signifier to raise complex social and racial issues, these works ponder how visibility can be weaponized.

Flo (2019), an oversize hologram projected on a wearable textile sculpture, provokes a kind of unearthly experience. Inspired by Ann-Marie Crooks, a Jamaican American former bodybuilder known by the stage name Midnight, the work plays with the idea of a female wrestler’s body and its enhancement through technology. Here textiles, surfaces, clothing, and screens become interfaces to the world. What is hidden and represented is constantly subject to negotiation and adaptation in an ongoing power dynamic. Continuing her focus on transforming darkness into a space of agency and hiding into a productive strategy, the artist immersed her viewers in dim light, wearable camouflage sculptures, green screens, and layered images, theatrically affirming opacity as a strategy of defense against racially biased surveillance technology.

Mujinga is currently preparing for a show at Swiss Institute, New York, scheduled for 2021, in which she will further examine technologies of representation and their associated political and racial connotations. One such is deepfake, a type of artificial intelligence used to create credible hoaxes. Will we still be able to hide?

1 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

191 (Top) Sandra Mujinga, *Stretched Delays 1*, 2017. Photo: Thor Brødreskift / Bergen Kunsthall

(Bottom) Sandra Mujinga, *Stretched Delays 2*, 2017. Photo: Thor Brødreskift / Bergen Kunsthall

192 Sandra Mujinga, *Humans, On the Other Hand, Lied Easily and Often* (2–3), 2016.

Photo: Christina Leithe Hansen / Oslo Kunstforening

193 Sandra Mujinga, *Nocturnal Kinship* (detail), 2018, *Beyond the Black Atlantic* installation

view at Kunstverein Hannover, 2020. Courtesy Croy Nielsen, Vienna



