

ON OPACITY

By [Simon Wu](#) May 11, 2022 11:37am



View of Sandra Mujinga's video installation *Worldview*, 2021, at the Swiss Institute, New York. PHOTO DANIEL PEREZ/COURTESY THE APPROACH, LONDON, AND GROJ NIELSEN, VIENNA

IN SANDRA MUJINGA'S VIDEO *Worldview* (2021), a chilly pastoral scene plays for eight hours across three framed screens. Are we looking through a window? A portal? Mujinga shot the footage at the innermost part of the Norwegian fjords at Gudvangen (from the Old Norse for "a god's place near the water"), an area in the west of the country where archaeologists have uncovered pagan Norse ritual sites. I never saw any creatures in *Worldview*, but Mujinga claims that little animals scamper about in the film and, occasionally, a sea monster shows a fin or two. Mujinga, who is influenced by Afrofuturism and speculative fiction, aims to depict a space where "gods, monsters and other beings with exaggerated humanoid bodies" are moving about in broad daylight, yet are also hidden from viewers. "The co-inhabitants of this world seem not to care about the watchers," the press release accompanying the video's recent presentation at Swiss Institute in New York states, "but nonetheless, they prefer not to risk too much visibility." Visibility, here, might mean becoming vulnerable to predators who could capture, study, or ogle them without regard for their well-being. Here, time functions as a means of obfuscation. The video is so long that most viewers won't see much of it. This is a way for her subjects to exist without the tyranny of a viewer.

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In some ways, Mujinga's video aptly exercises what the Martinican writer and poet Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) called "the right to opacity." In his final collection of essays, *Philosophie de la relation* (2009), Glissant described a stance intended to preserve all the nuances of one's humanity amid forces, often colonial or imperialist, that seek to capture and flatten one's subjectivity for easy legibility or categorization. Seeds for the idea began germinating some forty years earlier, when, in the late 1940s, Glissant was formulating an alternative to negritude, an idea spearheaded by his teacher Aimé Césaire, who posited a Pan-African identity encompassing all people of African descent, including those in the diaspora. Glissant argued instead for creolization, which favored a more heterogeneous sense of culture. Though he acknowledged the importance of coalition building, he wanted to hold space for difference and nuance, as opposed to a universal sense of culture. Glissant believed adamantly in a fluid sense of identity rather than a static one.

In Manthia Diawara's film *Un monde en relation* (One World in Relation, 2009), Glissant remarks that he claimed the right to opacity as early as 1969 at a congress at the National Autonomous University of





Mexico. "As far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque," he says in the film. Underscoring opacity's importance, he adds that "a racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I don't understand." Still, for Glissant, opacity is distinct from complete incomprehensibility. "Let opacity . . . not close down in obscurantism or apartheid," he wrote in *Treatise on the Whole-World* (1997). "Let it be a celebration, not a terror." Opacity refers to preserving the right to not be understood on the terms of an oppressor. But it isn't only a means of resistance: it is also a way to preserve "that which cannot be reduced," a form of honoring the complex and untranslatable aspects of another culture.

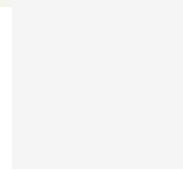
Glissant's theories first came to the attention of many in the art world in 2002, when the late curator Okwui Enwezor used his notion of "créolisation" as an organizing principle for Documenta 11. Seeking to deconstruct geographic hierarchies within global contemporary art, Enwezor used Glissant's theory to provide an organic alternative to the then dominant "margins vs. center" model. Since then, Glissant has remained a mainstay of curatorial and artistic inspiration. He's been cited by artists and thinkers as diverse and varied as Thomas Hirschhorn, the Otolith Group, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Diawara, Mujinga, and many others. Artists have interpreted his theory of opacity, both explicitly and implicitly, in various aesthetic gestures of refusal, redaction, abstraction, and obfuscation.

AS ART INSTITUTIONS increasingly wield the language of diversity and inclusion in pursuit of art by marginalized voices, Glissant's strategy has become only more necessary and relevant. Many artists are wary of the easy tokenism, exoticism, and voyeurism that often go hand-in-hand with institutional inclusivity efforts, and so are turning to opacity as a method for protecting their various subjects, or for resisting pressure to make work legible to some "universal" audience, thereby forgoing nuance.

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In art as in Photoshop, there are degrees of opacity. Glissant did not see opacity as utter illegibility, and similarly, for artists like Mujinga it does not entail a flat-out refusal. Many aesthetic translations are in fact something like a display of one's refusal, rather than an actual refusal. At its best, opacity is not about refusing to speak to some hegemonic audience entirely, and is rather about resisting the many pressures to over-accommodate viewers' limited assumptions and biases. Of course, artists involved in the aesthetics of opacity aren't magically immune from institutional tokenism and exoticism. The pursuit of opacity is rife with paradoxes and contradictions. Mujinga, Kapwani Kiwanga, [Simon Liu](#), and [American Artist](#) offer instructive examples of how artists today are grappling with this quandary.

Mujinga, who was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is based in Oslo and Berlin, dramatizes the pursuit of opacity through the metaphors of light and color. The sunlight that bathes the landscape of *Worldview* at first appears pleasant and warm, but it also threatens to expose the vulnerable. In response, Mujinga's creatures have adopted strategies to evade detection and survive, such as "nocturnality, mutability and camouflage," as the press release states. *Worldview* is a metaphor, a "meta" artwork about representation. Yet it's easy to miss opacity as the video's primary subject—the work might easily pass as a screensaver or landscape painting. The piece bears subtle traces of refusal that are perhaps more likely recognized by those who feel more kinship with the creatures than their predators.

A similar display of refusal characterizes one of American Artist's online performances, aptly titled *A Refusal* (2015–16). For the project, Artist, who is based in New York, replaced all the images on their Facebook and Instagram profiles with solid blue rectangles; they used HTML to place black bars over words and phrases, as in a redacted document. The blue color is what Artist calls "New Glory Blue," alluding to the blue of the American flag (aka Old Glory) and also a color used for signaling "error" in Microsoft systems. It's also known as the "Blue Screen of Death," because it signals when a gaming system requires a complete reboot. In American Artist's hands, the color signifies a refusal to showcase one's personal data, a kind of digital opacity. Of course, this is distinct from simply deleting one's social media accounts. This is one of the main paradoxes plaguing artists dealing with opacity: when do you draw attention to what you are refusing, and when do you simply refuse it?

Kapwani Kiwanga: *Glow #4*, 2018, wood, stucco, acrylic, steel, and LEDs, 59 by 39 by 8 inches.

PHOTO PETER HARRIS STUDIO/COURTESY MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER, CAMBRIDGE, GALERIE TANJA WAGNER, BERLIN, AND GALERIE POGGI, PARIS