

Reviews /



BY ELEANOR IVORY
WEBER

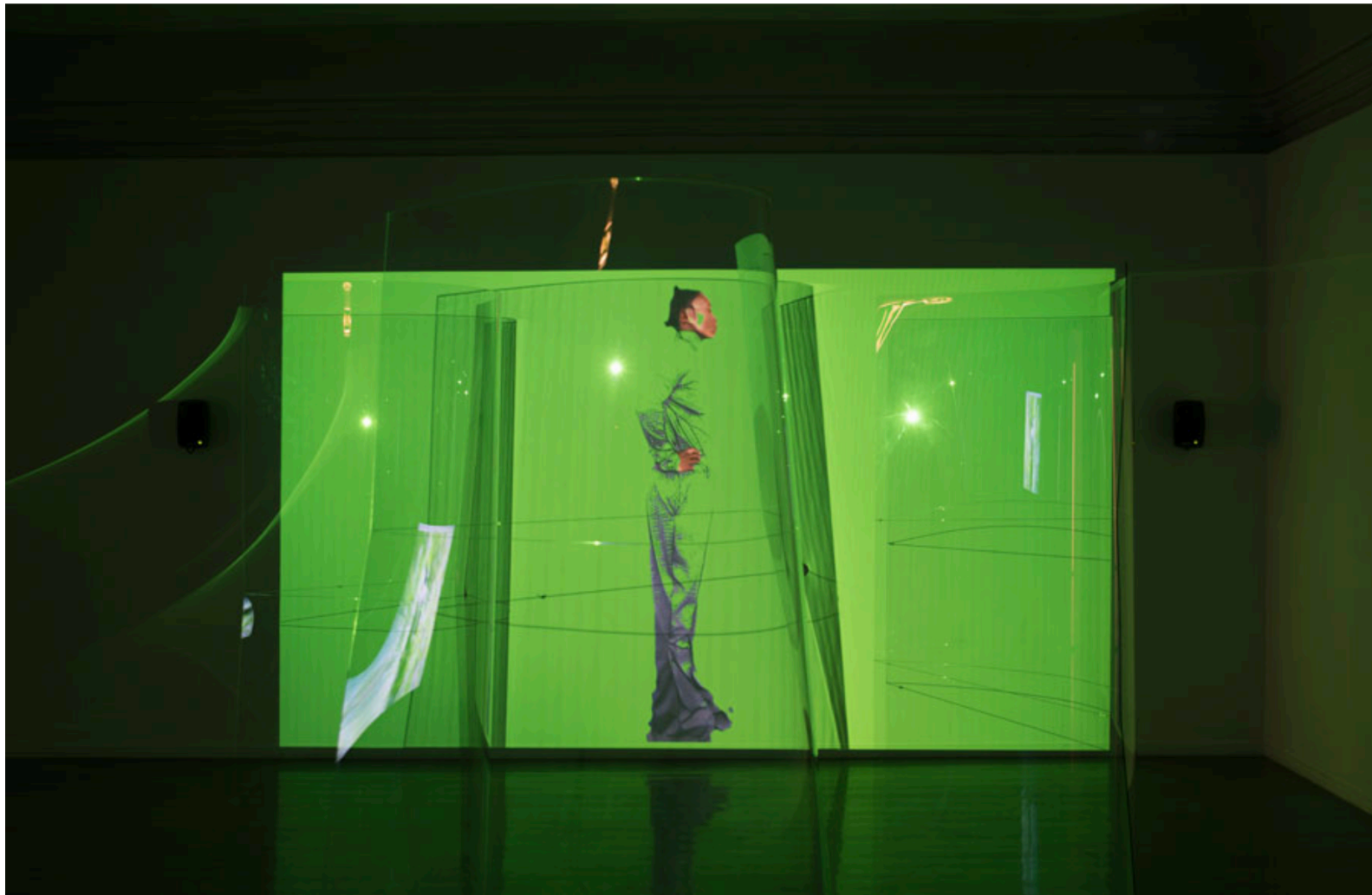
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Sandra Mujinga

Oslo Kunstforening, Oslo, Norway



Sandra Mujinga's show 'Real Friends' opens with the video installation *Throwing Voice* (all works 2016): a projection of the artist in a futuristic grey suit against a green screen, pacing, life-size, her face digitally altered by filters. Her movements are self-conscious yet powerful; she poses, turns, seems to be watching the viewer, as if on standby or testing her abilities, avatar-like: a wise sim. The projection passes through a group of clear polycarbonate sheets, each cinched with wire to create loose cylinders approximately the size of an adult human. These sculptures cause the green light to refract in shafts throughout the space. Completed by a soundtrack of chopped-up beauty tutorials, in which women explain how to create facial definition through make up, the installation exemplifies Octavia Butler's formulation, in her 1980s trilogy of novels, 'Xenogenesis' (aka 'Lilith's Brood'), of the human-non-human hybrid.



Sandra Mujinga, *Throwing Voice*,
2016, video installation, Oslo
Kunstforening. Courtesy: Oslo
Kunstforening; photograph:
Christina Leithe Hansen

This idea is explored throughout the exhibition. In the video *He Who Was Shared*, Mujinga's hand-held camera follows a ranger using a machete to make his way through the dense green foliage of Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). An electronic soundtrack samples cicadas and birds with a low, repetitive synthetic-drum that comes to dramatic climax as the man opens a clearing to reveal a gorilla. By matching the forest leaves and green-screen hues, Mujinga confuses the positions of what is real and what is constructed, invoking the instability in the categories of human, nature and technology.



Sandra Mujinga, *He Who Was Shared*, 2016, video installation, Oslo Kunstforening. Courtesy: Oslo Kunstforening; photograph: Christina Leithe Hansen

Elsewhere, in *ILYNL (It's Like You Never Left)*, the figure from *Throwing Voice* is multiplied and overlaid with fragments of mobile-phone footage and images from Snapchat. These create a plane of constant movement, without centre or certain location: cars, airports, continents, languages, weddings, swimming pools, dance clubs, empty streets, social media, emojis. Rather than flattening out experience, however, these changing landscapes expose differences – notably between the contexts of Africa and Europe – that technology cannot overwrite. In one grainy shot the artist speaks directly into her camera phone: 'It's not even ten past two and Malmö is completely empty.' The next, taken from the window of a car as it drives through the African countryside, is subtitled 'Rwanda thooo ...' Specificity is what is at stake in this new digital geography, which may collapse different times and places but never quite escapes the conditions of its production.



Sandra Mujinga,
*Humans, On the Other
Hand, Lied Easily and
Often (1-3) (detail),*
2016, colour inkjet print

In the gallery's final room, Mujinga directly references a line from the first 'Xenogenesis' book, Dawn (1987), in the title of a series of colour inkjet diptychs: *Humans, On the Other Hand, Lied Easily and Often* (1–3). Featuring close-up 'portraits' of the Virunga gorilla, these large photographs have intentionally been framed in highly reflective glass. Having emphasized the constructed and complex nature of images through her multifaceted video installations, Mujinga concludes 'Real Friends' with what are effectively documentary-style still photographs.

Blinded by the brightness of this fully lit gallery, it's easy to forget the preceding rooms' darkness and density. Is this photogenic gorilla supposed to be representative of a real, authentic self, an entity that is unconstructed? Mujinga is too clever for that. After all, this is the species at once protected by humans and *from* them, and the Virunga rangers risk their lives to protect gorillas against the threat from rebels and poachers. While in the DRC gorillas are arguably safer and better protected than many humans, in the USA the killing of the gorilla Harambe by a zookeeper in May was seen concurrently as a tragedy and necessity for human survival. Harambe now lives on in infamy as a meme. In 'Xenogenesis', despite repulsion and fear, the protagonist, Lilith, is one of the few humans to accept her new role as appointed teacher and creator of future hybrid 'constructs', as the route to her own survival.

Main image: Sandra Mujinga, Throwing Voice (detail), 2016, video installation, Oslo Kunstforening. Courtesy: Oslo Kunstforening; photograph: Christina Leithe Hansen

ELEANOR IVORY WEBER

is a freelance writer and curator living in Melbourne, Australia.