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Ato Malinda

Incommensurable Identities

The Aarhus Art Building

October 8, 2011 – January 8, 2012

Incommensurable Identities, 2011

Performance

This performance is created especially for the exhibition in the Aarhus Art Building and was performed live at the opening. The performance, which is partly improvised, is about subjection, both bodily and psychologically. Ato Malinda examines the way African women and their bodies are looked at then and now. In her performance Malinda uses both soil and red paint.

The performance is inspired by "The Hottentot Venus", the South African slave woman Saartjie Baartman, who at the beginning of the 19th century was transported to Britain to exhibit her "unusual anatomy". At carnival-like freak shows she entertained her audience by showing her large buttocks. Saartjie Baartman came to England in 1810 and died only five years later in Paris. Her skeleton, genitals and brain were then exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme until 1974, and only after much debate and legal wrangling, they were repatriated to South Africa in 2002, where she finally after 200 years was buried.

On fait ensemble, 2010

-a video poem about Mami Wata and Papai Wata

Ato Malinda appears as the water spirit Mami Wata and her alter ego Papai Wata. Mami Wata is a seductive mermaid, with pale skin and black hair. Her origin can be traced back to the ancient African river gods, the Indian snake goddess and the figureheads of European ships. Images of Mami Wata circulate in popular culture today and have references to sex, beauty, spirituality, wealth, faith, healing, etc.

Ato Malinda's performance took place in 2010 in the port city Douala in Cameroun. Dressed as Papai Wata, she wanders through the city and distributes a copy of a famous colourprint from 1926, which depicts Mami Wata as a snake goddess. The colourprint stems from Europe and the original was made by the German artist Schleisinger. The picture became a popular and well known image in Africa. Malinda moves on to the busy fish market in Yopwé on the outskirts of Douala, and the trip continues by river, deep into the quiet, unspoiled nature, where Mami Wata has her spiritual source.

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The famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” from 1921, by the African-American writer Langston Hughes (1902-1967), connects the soul and heritage of the African-American community to four great rivers in the Middle East, Africa and America. Hughes was a representative of “The Harlem Renaissance”, a movement during the 1920s and 1930s in America in which black artists and intellectuals found new ways to explore and celebrate the black experience. They celebrated the African-American culture with its history of slavery and the African cultural roots.

Prison Sex I, 2008

Over the last three years, Ato Malinda has been working with African girls and women in the fight to end the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). She believes in advocacy through art. Approximately one third of all women in Kenya are affected by FGM, even though it is forbidden by law. “Prison Sex I” is a recording of a live performance in London in 2008, where even there, FGM is practiced widely by immigrant populations. The tradition is often continued with the argument that it is a part of an African tradition.

Prison Sex II, 2008-2009

Triptych

Ato Malinda performs in front of the old Fort Jesus in Mombasa, which was one of the prominent military buildings of the colonial period. The fort was used as a base for the slave trade and later as a prison by the British Empire. In the 19th century two women were imprisoned in the fort. A former employee tells their story: One of the women was the environmentalist Mikitilili, who was imprisoned by the British for protesting the destruction of the Giriama forest. The other was a young woman, who suing for divorce, was thrown into Fort Jesus for six months before the divorce could be granted.

Ato Malinda is dressed in the African garment “kanga”. The kanga was developed in the 19th century, when Portuguese traders sold “lenco”, a square, patterned handkerchief. The story goes; a group of prominent women from Zanzibar began to sew the handkerchiefs together into larger pieces of fabric and called them “leso”. They quickly became a popular dress among women and a favoured present from men.

A leso often had a pattern of white dots, and the men renamed Leso to Kanga, the name of a noisy, sociable guinea fowl with its spotty plumage. Maybe that is why the kanga in time was added messages in Swahili with ambiguous and obscure meanings. Today the Kanga is also used to express social or political stands. Ato Malinda symbolical transfers the Kanga pattern to her face and hands, and on her Kanga it says: “Without action you will eat shit!”

The 1000 km long railway “The Uganda Railway” starts in Mombasa and reaches Kampala in Uganda. It was built by the British Empire in the late 19th century and has had major consequences for the development of Kenya. The purpose of the railway was to transport raw materials and goods out of the Uganda protectorate and with ships to Great Britain. To finance the building of the railway, the British government urged the white farmers to cultivate the fertile, central highland, and

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the European settlers created what was called “the white man’s land”. The local population was driven into reservations, and estates, plantations and ranches were built. This especially affected the Kikuyu and Masai people. Furthermore more than 100.000 acres of noble wood forests were cut down, in order to make more farmland. Kenya is today the world’s biggest producer of tea, but it has greatly affected the forest areas, which have been reduced to only 2 % of Kenya’s total area.

Untitled Series Curaçao, 2010

Curaçao is the main island in the Netherlands Antilles and is situated in the Southern Caribbean Sea. Only in 2010 Curaçao was acknowledged as an independent country within the Netherlands, but still a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The majority of the population has African roots, and their ancestors arrived on the island on Portuguese and Dutch slave ships. Today the social hierarchies of the colonial period still dominate, and the African-Curaçao population is regarded as a low status group.

Is Free Dumb, 2010

This performance took place outside the building that houses the African art collection known as Kenya National Archives, which is considered a symbol of the cultural heritage of Kenya. In the 2 by 2 meter wooden cage, Ato Malinda sat dressed in the African garment “Kanga” and read popular East African women’s magazines. The performance in its original concept was to last for three consecutive days in three different locations within Nairobi’s central business district.

The performance gathered a large crowd, who curiously asked what she was doing, if she was OK, if she was hungry, and if she was selling magazines. After half an hour the performance was interrupted by a security guard of the National Archive, who refused to acknowledge her performance as art, and also refused to accept the approval of the project, Ato Malinda had obtained from the City Council. The security guard called the police, who arrested Malinda for holding an illegal gathering. She was held in a cell for 8 hours before being released.

It did not turn out to be the performance about womens freedom and equality, she expected, but rather a confirmation that women and artists in the 21st century Kenya, still do not have freedom of speech and action. With the wordplay “freedom” and “- dumb” (mute or stupid) Ato Malinda points out that the limitations on freedom is not only about laws and regulations, but just as much about ignorance and an inherited way of thinking.