

Ato Malinda

# Incommensurable Identities

8th October 2011 - 8th January 2012



Ato Malinda: *Prison Sex II*, 2008-2009

With the exhibition title *Incommensurable Identities*, which means non-inter-measurable identities, the Kenyan performance artist Ato Malinda focuses critically on the disparate aspects of identity that she experiences in the form of oppression of women, female genital mutilation (FGM), and unequal power relations between Africa and the West. As a young African artist she examines “africinity” in a larger global context, where aspects of post-colonialism and feminism are the focal points.

Many of Ato Malinda’s performances are transformed into video poems and video installations. The video works are not only documentations of her performances, but has new layers and perspectives added to them. She thereby works in the tension zone between performance art and video art.

## *Art Nouveau as framing*

In the Aarhus Art Building, Ato Malinda has created a special interior as the setting for her artworks. Flower-filled living rooms are furnished with Bauhaus furniture and Scandinavian design, and large wall fotos are framed

by hand-painted Art Nouveau-patterns. Malinda works deliberately with style bride and culture clashes:

"Im looking at how the European art-cannon is used to explain contemporary Kenyan art. I think it's hard to express black identity independent of a Western discourse. By setting the Art Nouveau frames around the documentation of my performances, I show a parallel between the movement in the 1890s and the contemporary Nairobi art scene, where there is an artistic movement against intellectual art and performance art."

Ato Malinda

### *A female identity*

A recurrent theme in Malinda's artworks, is women's role and social status in Kenya today. In the performance *Is Free Dumb*, Malinda personifies the modern Kenyan woman, who reads women's magazines and is dressed in the traditional East African *kanga*. The performance shows the tension between tradition and modernity, and the cage, that Ato Malinda has put herself in, symbolically points to the legacy of repressive social mechanisms and constraints which women in Kenya are experiencing today.

In the video work *Prison Sex II* Malinda thematizes the relationship between freedom and marriage, and draws influence back to the British Empire's oppression of women. The inspiration for *Prison Sex II* came to Ato Malinda entirely unexpected, as she walked the streets of Mombasa. A young man accosted her, and demanded to know why she was walking alone. "Where is your husband?", he asked.

"Even in the 21st century I am still feeling the elements of the imprisonment that was felt by a woman who had to be literally imprisoned in order to gain her freedom."

Ato Malinda

Another aspect of female identity that Ato Malinda looks at is the wider tradition of female stereotyping. In the video poem *On fait ensemble*, which Malinda produced during her residency in Cameroun, she appears as the water spirit *Mami Wata*. Malinda was inspired by this mythical figure that is said to possess both good and evil powers. Malinda saw a parallel to the general stereotypical portrayal of women, in which the woman on the one hand is regarded as one who incites sexual impulses, whilst on the other hand being desired for maternal protection.

### *An identity as a performance artist*

In contemporary art, performance art is still a new and largely undiscovered media on the Kenyan art scene. Ato Malinda is one of a handful of performance artists in the East African region, and is fighting for this art form to become more accepted. She feels that many Kenyan artists hesitate to move back to Kenya, where the overall artistic concept is backward and mostly include painting, sculpture and graphic prints. In the video poem *On fait ensemble* Ato Malinda rediscovers elements from the traditional spiritual African performance tradition from before the colonial era in the form of the two figures Mami Wata and Papai Wata. *On fait ensemble* is also a story about an art form returning to Africa. One of many the colonial era has condemned as satanic.

### *A postcolonial identity*

Kenya was a British Colony until 1963, and Kenya's history, culture and identity is shaped by the unequal power relations that the colonization was an expression of. Ato Malinda's quest for a new "Africanity" is rooted in a critical meeting with the Western education system, and the dominant way of thinking, she met during her education in the USA, Malinda is inspired by newer critical post-colonial theory, which from the late 20th century has been an important contribution to examining the power structures and cultural differences, inherent in the relationship between the former colonial powers and their former colonies. The question is, how former colonized countries such as Kenya can create their own identity on their own premises.

Malinda's dream for the future consists in the creation of an African renaissance, not denying the past dominant colonial ideologies, but creating a third space questioning the interstices between Africa and the western world. Inspired by the Indian-American postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, Ato Malinda's response to a seemingly impossible assignment is to acknowledge this diversity:

"To recognize difference is also to recognize commonality in a space beyond this difference."

*Ato Malinda*

One of Bhabha's central ideas is that of "hybridity," which describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform

our understanding of cross-cultural relations. Cultures and nations, for Bhabha, do not construct themselves out of their own essence; they do so through interactions with other cultures. *In Prison Sex II* Malinda highlights a saying from a kanga which she saw on a wall in Mombasa. It read:

"Know your history, but own your culture"

### *About Ato Malinda*

Ato Malinda (b. 1981) was born in Kenya, as the daughter of a Kenyan mother and a Ugandan father. She grew up in Holland, but returned to Kenya as a teenager. After high school she moved to USA where she studied molecular biology and art history at the University of Texas in Austin. But when Ato Malinda realized that Western education had a negative impact on her self-perception, she moved back to Kenya.

She began her professional practice as a painter, and only after a brief stint in the UK, did she decide to pursue her inherent desire for performance art. Ato Malinda has exhibited in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean. She has had residency in Curaçao, Cameroun and Denmark, where she participated in the art project *NotAboutKarenBlixen*, and exhibited in connection with the *My World IMAGES*. Today she lives in Nairobi, where she also works as a curator.

The theme of the exhibition programme in 2011 is *IMAGINE* – towards an *ecoaesthetic*. *IMAGINE* suggests that art is a critical but at the same time positive, fruitful option that makes allowances for the surroundings and the environment. With this focus *IMAGINE* wants to put discussions of representation and negation issues on a back burner in favour of a more ‘healing’ aspect.

The point of departure for this year’s theme is the manifesto *Ecoaesthetics* by the artist, writer and curator Rasheed Araeen, which was published in the art and culture periodical *Third Text* in the autumn of 2009. In this text Araeen mounted a frontal assault on the modern ego and the recuperation of the avant-garde. He advocated a collective artistic imagination that would function as the way forward towards “lakes and rivers with clean water, collective farming and the planting of trees all over the world”.

The manifesto rejects – albeit in a slightly one-track masculine way – previous artistic attempts to step down from the pedestal of the bourgeoisie in favour of a collective commitment to the surroundings and the environment. While Araeen can be criticized for his slightly narrow aim of denigrating artistically committed experiments, this does not detract from the relevance of a debate that goes behind the current ‘acuteness’ one experiences today in relation to ecological and environmental issues in art.

With *IMAGINE* the Aarhus Art Building wants to take a closer look at alliances between art and sustainable development. The themes emphasize the origin of the concept of sustainability and the linkages between environmental and social problems which have been characteristic of thinking about and the development of this particular concept since the beginning of the 1970s. Through important movements that have consistently had sustainability as their primary starting point the concept has furthermore been linked conspicuously with an ethical imperative and a determined ambition to overcome inequality – understood as the concrete and symbolic construction of power relations.

The exhibitions on the programme for 2011 try to embrace this complexity in the concept of sustainability and its history from two different angles. One approach to the theme focuses on the artistic views of alternative energy. The other, which the exhibition with Ato Malinda represents, focuses on oppressive mechanisms that affect various minorities, women and environment on the existing premises of inequality and power relations.

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