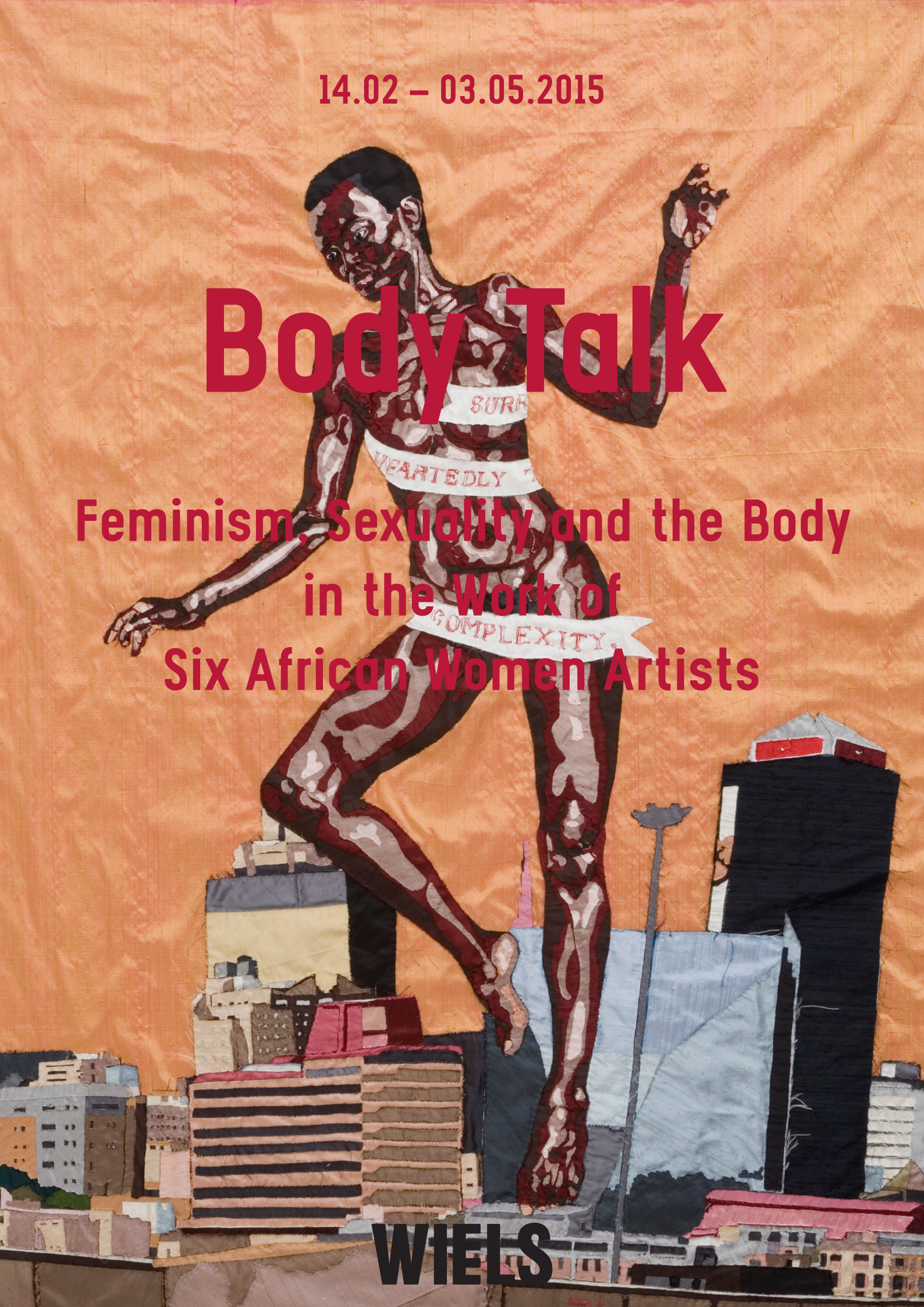


14.02 – 03.05.2015

Body Talk

Feminism, Sexuality and the Body
in the Work of
Six African Women Artists



WIELS

Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body in the Work of Six African Women Artists

WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels
14.02 – 03.05.2015

This exhibition addresses issues of feminism, sexuality and the body, as they play themselves out in the work of a generation of women artists from Africa active since the early 1990s. Bringing together artists from different parts of the continent, this group exhibition strives to define and articulate notions of feminism and sexuality in the work of women artists whose body (their own or that of others) serves as a tool, a representation or a field of investigation. In their work, the body manifests itself, whether sequentially or simultaneously, as a model, support, subject or object.

Artists:

Zoulikha Bouabdellah (b. 1977 in Moscow, Russia. Lives in Casablanca)

Marcia Kure (b. 1970 in Kano, Nigeria. Lives in Princeton, NJ)

Miriam Syowia Kyambi (b. 1979 in Nairobi, Kenya. Lives in Nairobi)

Valérie Oka (b. 1967 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Lives in Abidjan)

Tracey Rose (b. 1974 in Durban, South Africa. Lives in Durban)

Billie Zangewa (b. 1973 in Blantyre, Malawi. Lives in Johannesburg)

Curator: Koyo Kouoh, assisted by Eva Barois De Caevel (Raw Material Company, Dakar)

Coordinating Curator: Caroline Dumalin (WIELS)

In coproduction with FRAC Lorraine, Metz and Lunds Konsthall, Lund

With the support of FABA Fundacion Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte and Fondation Louis Vuitton

Front page:

Billie Zangewa, *The Rebirth of the Black Venus*, 2010

Silk tapestry, 127 x 130 cm

Private collection, France

Body Talk

In 'The Body Politic: Differences, Gender, Sexuality' (in *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*), Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu evoke the gathering of Igbo Women in 1929 in the city of Aba, in Nigeria. At this gathering, where women used their naked bodies to protest the tax policies of the British colonial administration, stands as a powerful picture of the meaningful use of the body by African women. The event at Aba is remembered as one of the first historical occurrences of a modern Nigerian women's movement, and also as an example of the postcolonial critique of colonial power.

Ever since, the existence of a specifically African – and black – feminism, together with the spread of artistic practice and the economics of art to international networks, have given shape, since the 1990s, to the development of a black feminist art. Stemming from the continent and the Diaspora, this black feminist art depicts bodies that continue a tradition of activism and freedom of speech. The aim of this exhibition is to present a survey of the issues raised by such exposed bodies.

What is an exposed – both vulnerable and exhibited – African, black female body? Is it the supreme object of patriarchal sacrifice? The sacred, stained body, transgressing the boundaries of race and gender in its staging, incorporation and incarnation (embodiment) of history? Is it all of the above?

Let us recall that this body-vehicle is inscribed in a feminism whose originary story can be traced to Egypt in 1923: the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union, led by Huda Sha'rawi, is the first African feminist movement. In the early 1980s, some people preferred to speak of Womanism, rather than Feminism, considering it 'a more inclusive feminism' defended by African-American author Alice Walker. This preference for Womanism over Feminism among some black women deserves to be mentioned: it stems from the marginalisation of women of colour in the most prevalent forms of feminism, and from the fact that African women have been disappointed by white radical feminism, which they saw as oblivious to the reality of black women. This experience of meaninglessness – and the quest for new meaning – is what can be found in the work of the artists this exhibition brings together.

The contributions by the selected artists can be seen as so many ways of rediscovering, reintegrating and reincarnating the body; and the media of contemporary art – performance, photography, video, film – are so many means and methods for how to do this. Tracey Rose, a South African artist of mixed origins (Scottish and Khoisan), uses performance to explore the pains of the post-apartheid generation. In 1997, during the second and controversial Johannesburg Biennale, she presented what she called a ‘declaration’: herself, fully nude, locked in a glass box, sitting on a TV broadcasting a naked female body in motion. She shaves her hair and then starts knitting with it. Directing itself against a passive nudity, her gesture emphasizes a need to reformulate identity. The body under glass evokes monitoring (very often, Tracey Rose’s images deliberately have the visual quality of a surveillance camera), and refers to a morbid ethnographic curiosity.

The coloured body, manhandled and under glass, hurts the eye in its voluntary disfigurement and removal of all gender-related attributes. It takes the shape both of demasculinization and defeminization. Tracey Rose’s work, like that of other contemporary women artists in Africa, also strives to continually recreate a historical and cultural identity. This can be done by referring to figures, bodies and the past, all of which the artist appropriates. This is the case in the recurring presence of Saartjie Baartman, known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ or ‘Black Venus’, an exposed and violated body-object that calls to mind both Tracey Rose’s staged photographs of her own body in the *Ciao Bella* series (2001-02), and Billie Zangewa’s sumptuous patchwork of fabrics entitled *Rebirth of the Black Venus*, 2010. Billie Zangewa’s tapestries attest, simultaneously, to an autobiographical narrative and the manifestation of a new African woman. This African woman, who ‘experienced modernity’, in the words of Yinka Shonibare MBE, had to reclaim herself: passive and submitted to the desires of men, she has become the agent of a seduction experienced as a conscious and voluntary act.

Each of the artists included in the exhibition is particular in the way she materially positions her body in a story, and in its rereading, as in a singular space within an increasingly uniform world. It is this unity of purpose in the diversity and subjectivity of forms and answers that *Body Talk* will try to uncover by exhibiting those who expose bodies, or their bodies.

Koyo Kouoh