

Real Imaginary

Ato Malinda likes to perform: that is, she wants to embody a concept in the flesh of her body. Her investigation, her ontological quest bears on identity. Such an identity could not be reduced to that of the mere individual but, rather, to a vaster and more complex whole. And from one work to the next, she asks herself about this whole and how to render it legible and fluid. She wants to make it accessible not only to herself but to those to whom she wants to tell her story. So, she constructs scenarios, possible fictions, as if, through such experimentation, she were trying to complete a puzzle of which she does not know all the pieces. She does not claim to be only an embodiment, an incarnation but also a reincarnation, a midwife of a story that has been forgotten, though she bears within herself a confused memory of it. And it is this memory that leads her to reject the universalistic illusions of the Enlightenment: that is, an intellectual view that would have it that the world could be put into an equation and thereby objectivised. Now, the underlying philosophy still governing African peoples is based essentially on being, on embodied essence rather than on existing within the abstraction of a deciphered world. The rather Christian separation between being and nature is the touchstone of this missed opportunity, this ongoing misunderstanding on which alterity is grounded. The word . that is to say, one of the first forms of language . constitutes the very revelation of being at the same time that it effects a distancing therefrom. The face I name could not correspond to the one I am, and my image in the mirror is but a visual illusion. It is something else that I can contemplate at leisure, and I can grasp the features of it that would escape my notice in ordinary times when I appear to myself only in an image of myself. This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called *the power of looking*, which, however little we might pay attention to it, may bear similarities to mystical experience: %a my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the other side of its power of looking.¹ This experience of *splitting* is at the heart of Malinda's video and performance work.

The experience of being alien to oneself is shared by all peoples who have experienced the yoke of colonisation. Yet, while those who were colonised lived this

¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 162.

of a part of themselves, they acquired, after : that is to say, to begin with, the faculty of unlearning how to look at oneself as an immutable schema defined by the gaze of the other. What comes next is valuing one's own gaze and giving it meaning, which boils down to giving oneself meaning. The violent shock of being seen, of which Jean-Paul Sartre spoke when evoking the sudden power given to formerly colonised people to look objectively at their colonisers, is to be taken in a twofold sense. Sartre underscores the act of seeing: that is to say, the capacity to judge, or at least to construct for oneself one's own opinion, as a founding feature of freedom. Yet, while this philosopher insisted on the humility with which the West thenceforth had to consider itself, he omitted mention of the fact that this violent shock also operates on the seeing subject. It is as if, in exiting from a long night of blindness, this subject would, little by little, be opening up to the world and to the magic of discovering oneself in a way the seeing subject had never envisaged for itself. To master one's own image, as the Kenyan artist has gone great lengths to do since she returned to her country after studying in the United States, is to introduce into our world voices and colours that elude the processes of globalisation and uniformisation. It is to refuse to be solely the fruit of the other's gaze and, instead, to bring out, like some kind of silent contradiction, her own version of herself, doing so in accordance with her cultural codes and her own aesthetic. It is to re-appropriate the measure of time, which, according to Merleau-Ponty

remains the same because the past is a former future and a recent present, the present an impending past and a recent future, the future a present and even a past to come; because, that is, each dimension of time is treated or aimed at as something other than itself and because, finally, there is at the core of time a gaze.²

The key word here is the word *gaze*. Let us imagine for a moment that the human being could be likened to time and that the different phases of this multiple present to which Merleau-Ponty refers would be nothing other than the essence of humanity. So, in a sort of *Eternal Return of the Same* (to borrow the famous

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), p. 422.

n, to define an object . man . that never
e envisage him. For as soon as we have frozen him,
we are already in the past and in history. How, then, is one to define the future if not as
an extrapolation of the lived instant and a projection that would hold only through the
strength of one's subjectivity, through the strength of the light shed by this gaze?
Becoming aware of the impossibility of representing the real allows one to accede to the
freedom of the creative artist. It is to penetrate into the domain of metaphor and legend.
This is undoubtedly the reason why, in a work like *On fait ensemble* (Doing it Together),
the artist projects herself into a real imaginary. *Imaginary*, because there is nothing
tangible; *real*, because, in reincarnating a living collective memory, she prolongs the
sacred experience of initiation and, in so doing, invites us to reconsider the way in which
oral memory (which, in Africa, is the ferment of history) is being threatened. For the
paradox of all tradition is that it is continuously reinterpreted, like a tongue that would
not want to die. It is to pose, in aesthetic terms, the questions of belonging and
rootedness. This nagging *Who Am I?* had led Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar
Senghor to invent *Négritude*. It is through the necessary distance bestowed by
miraculous arms (Césaire) that Malinda succeeds, through the subjectivity of her
poetry, to attain a truth that brooks no contradiction, because such a truth will never lay
claim to universality.

As a contemporary person, Malinda is beset by the need to give meaning to her
acts. It is a matter of at once deconstructing a past and inventing a future in a present
time that is subject to perpetual movement. The problem posed to her resides in the
inadequacy of existing tools. It is, therefore, a matter of her inventing herself, of creating
herself, in the primary sense of the term. It is a matter of finding a language that most
closely reflects her aspirations while, at the same time, preserving a grammar that
makes that language accessible to all human beings, whatever their history and milieu.
The sacred can no longer be the site of one's discourse, except through the reinvention
of the very notion of the sacred, now stripped of its old rags, so as no longer to be
anything but self-expression. It is the force . and the luxury . of the creative artist to be
able to be liberated from the shackles of the codes in which the artist was raised, in
order to offer a new reading of them. In order to attain its end, this reading, or this
interpretation, has to be set within a schema that would be known by all. It is the
interaction between artistic production and a given setting that gives it its full value, as



PDF Complete

Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

Signs remain deprived of sense as long as they do not enter into the surface organisation which assures the resonance of two series (two images-signs, two photographs, two tracks, etc.). But this world of sense does not yet imply unity of direction or community of organs. The latter requires a receptive apparatus capable of bringing about a successive superimposition of surface planes in accordance with another dimension. Furthermore, this world of sense, with its events-singularities, offers a neutrality which is essential to it. And this is the case, not only because it hovers over the dimensions according to which it will be arranged in order to acquire signification, manifestation, and denotation, but also because it hovers over the actualisations of its energy as potential energy, that is, the realisation of its events, which may be internal as well as external, collective as well as individual, according to the contact surface or the neutral surface-limit which transcends distances and assures the continuity on both its sides.³

So, the codes and aesthetics that are proposed necessarily have to be anchored somewhere and have to be exceedingly intelligible to those to whom they are going to be proposed, even though, inevitably, their transpositions will open the way to a basic misunderstanding. Yet there will exist no community outside this misunderstanding, whose role is to mark time. The question of *we* somewhat forgotten by the founders of African independence, is revisited by the artists who, in Africa today, are perhaps the sole individuals capable of transmitting the frictions provoked by a quest that Ernst Bloch had deemed to be of essential importance. It is this question that Deleuze broaches in other terms, with his notion of *contact surface*. The problematical complexity of *we* refers back to two notions. Again, we have this duality of being without which it is difficult to determine one's own essence: the group and the individual. The group, this *we* to which Bloch makes reference, is a set of interdependent groups that form what Deleuze calls the *contact surface* that is to say, the field of appearance. The family group, the ethnic group, the religious group, the national group, the

³Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (1990; London: Continuum Books, 2004), pp. 119-20.

forth, represent so many wholes in relation to which identity, for that is what is at issue, becomes the synthesis of these different wholes in a unique and singular actualisation. If to be is to think oneself, to borrow from René Descartes, let me add that our thought determines the way in which we appear to the world. How is one to challenge the exogenous image that threatens to engulf us within archetypes and to replace it with an endogenous image, albeit an imperfect one? This challenge, which Malinda has decided to take up, is expressed in a total way in a work like *On fait ensemble*. The question of \forall which is signified here by a modest *on* (one), the same \exists that one finds again in the expression *on est ensemble* (we are together), lies at the heart of her preoccupations and represents an enigma that seems like it does not have to have an end.

Performance, which is often transcribed onto video, authorises, perhaps better than any other medium, that very same ontological discussion. For both are media of embodiment. The image cannot exist without an embodiment, an incarnation of one nature or another. The body then becomes the site of narration: one's private, intimate body, but also the social body, the body of the other. In this method of figurative representation that Malinda has chosen, her self-staging allows her to express, in a tangible way, an emotion that no longer has anything abstract about it. The slightest landscape becomes a manner of creating a self-portrait and *takes on bodily shape*. This duality, which we have already mentioned, becomes an instrument that can be played with as much as one wants. The body thus ceases to belong to its owner, so as to become the metaphor of a \forall that it is up to the \exists to grasp. It becomes matter. Paradoxically, it is its embodiment that transforms it into an idea, as Henri-Pierre Jeudi reminds us:

Images of the body do not concern the body like some isolated entity; they arise simultaneously as images of the world. And language allows one to organise only arbitrary classifications that will make the meaning of the interpretation remain close to illusion. To a certain extent, the collision of images of the body teaches us that there is truly no language of the body. The ways in which the latter is spoken implies, already, a negation of images by the objectification of the meaning that is given to them.⁴

⁴ Henri-Pierre Jeudi, *Le corps comme objet d'art* (Paris: Armand Collin/Masson, 1998),

addresses to us a message, but the way in which the artist is going to stage it. The body, like a landscape . and this is no accident . becomes a metaphor. It becomes a blank canvas on which the artist transposes her vision of our humanity. An instrument of mediation through which the artist speaks to the other . he who gazes at the body and cannot prevent himself from describing it . the body is the first concrete element through which we are perceived. It is the seat of an ongoing conflict because through it is played out the contradictory question of perception. There is, on the one hand, the image we send to others and, on the other, the one the others perceive of us. It is an image that is inscribed within the order of appearance. Mastering this split image boils down to putting one's soul into it straightaway. This is done in order to avoid misunderstandings (*les malentendus*), or at least the suspicious regards (*des mal vus*) underpinning any first glance. We are here in the domain of representation, that is to say, in that of *being-in-the-world*. This is the domain in which we project ourselves to others as we would like to be seen, the one in which we negotiate the conditions of our humanity while avoiding the tragic trap that meant the end of Narcissus.

Going out into the world presupposes a heightened knowledge of self and of the way in which one wishes to be perceived. As soon as it becomes an agent in this negotiation, the body cannot but be an abstraction and a coded form of writing. The other . which, according to Jacques Lacan, defines us . has to go by way of the image we have of ourselves. Naturally, as Jeudi was suggesting, this image implies its own negation. That is to say, it will never attain the ideal goal aimed at by the artist. But does any ideal goal exist, except that of testifying with one's own words and one's own flesh? The question that is posed here is that of the multiplicity of images that may be envisaged. Whence the need to weigh down the body with a load that exceeds its possessor and to make it into the emblem for a certain kind of spirituality that cannot help but be politicised through a deconstruction of colonial history. After all, what then is this body that is being offered if not the re-actualised embodiment of myths and cultures stamped with the seal of contemporaneity? The body would then become the intercessor between us and a world of which we were unaware. In a sort of trance that has to lead us into an exploration of the limits of our being, we tip from animal

say, to the conscious staging of ourselves. It is in medium, that we are split a final time. Such an exercise is somewhat schizophrenic, since it presupposes a Janus-like attitude, turned at once inward and outward. It is this splitting to which Sartre is making reference in the following quotation, wherein "Black" is to be understood as "non-White" or "colonised"

"The herald of the black soul has passed through the white schools. He has learned the iron law which refuses to the oppressed all the arms which he does not steal from the oppressor. It is from the shock of the white culture that his negritude has passed from immediate existence to the state of reflection. But by the same token, he has more or less ceased to live it. In choosing to see that which he is, he has split himself in two; he no longer coincides with himself."⁵

Malinda has succeeded in no longer coinciding with herself and, thereby, in affirming the awakening of a political consciousness that could only blossom on African soil. In order to write her own history, she has appropriated for herself a sort of breviary, a book of images she adds to every day with new finds and new inventions-adaptations. She has decided to forge the tools that will allow her to produce the most faithful expression of her discourse. The act of creation is no longer the mild and gratuitous act some have wished to describe it as, but is now instead a commitment that goes beyond the mere individual and transforms the artist into the living illustration of a singularity. To create is to bring to light this ultimate duality. It is the duality of art itself:

"Aesthetics suffers from a wrenching duality. On the one hand, it designates the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience; on the other hand, it designates the theory of art as the reflection of real experience. For these meanings to be tied together, the conditions of experience in general must become conditions of real experience; in this case, the world of art would really appear as experimentation."⁶

Malinda seems to have understood that all artistic work that would not bring

18. ⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus*, trans. S. W. Allen (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963), p.

⁶Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 297-98.



*Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.*

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

Experimentation will fail to attain its goal. The stakes
of creating a singular aesthetic and of rendering that
aesthetic intelligible to all, of making it into a new matrix. This proposition would be one
that comes to refute global monotony. It is a matter, to put it in other terms, of creating a
form of contemporary art that is very, very ancient. This is a contemporaneity that draws
its sources from the mists of time and the remotest memories of human beings.

Simon Njami