

Ingrid Mwangi: performing body, projecting screen

Among the many languages – whether verbal, literary, musical or visual – in which individual identities are constituted, this essay will concentrate on a particular kind of artistic practice: body performance.

Since the 1960s, body performance has increasingly become a way to interrogate and intervene on the structures defining subjectivity as, in the act of self-display, artists enact their individuality. Women artists, in particular, have struggled to articulate themselves as subjects and as authors, rather than as objects of artistic creation. Art enables them to move towards self-narrative, in response to normative discourses enframing identity in institutional and official portraits; art is their way to resist “*provided subjectivities* in relation to the regulative power of modern social apparatuses”.¹ Body performance offers a different kind of self-portraiture, a visual autobiography, speaking or staging what is silenced and unauthorized. If, in the past, autobiography was mainly constituted by the canonical forms of memoirs, diaries, and journals, nowadays contemporary artists work on other visual modes or technologies; as Sidonie Smith remarks, they work at the interface of several autobiographical modes, including video, installation, photography as well as performance art and Web sites. These modes, though often unrecognized, mark the artists’ engagement with their ethical practice of creation.

Multimedia artist Ingrid Mwangi participates in this active production of visual texts, employing a wide range of languages and modes, such as live performance, video, installation, and photography; she also produces DVDs collecting her works and has a personal and updated web site.² She transcribes her history, memories, experiences as well as her expectations and hopes in her art works, thus staging a practice that closely recalls autobiography, or what Sidonie Smith calls ‘enacted life narrations’: “the life narrator selectively engages aspects of her lived experience through modes of personal ‘storytelling’ – narratively, imaginatively, in performance”.³ All the images Mwangi creates are deployed on two levels, personal and public; if too often autobiography has been assumed as a mirror – an unproblematic rendering of the artist’s life as all emphasis is on *bios*, the artist’s biographical history – Mwangi works intersubjectively shifting all emphasis from her own to her viewers’ biographies. Her works are centered on how spectators perceive and interact with alterity; the subject she performs thus receives the unavoidable contribution of all the other surrounding subjects, the spectators. In fact, far from being a transparent practice, textual or visual autobiography is a cultural practice reflecting on

¹ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body. Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), 4.

² Ingrid Mwangi was born in 1970 in Nairobi, Kenya, where she lived until the age of fifteen (her father was Kenyan, her mother German); she currently lives in Germany where she works with her partner Robert Hutter.

³ Sidonie Smith, *Interfaces. Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2002), 9. Smith argues that the term “autobiography”, long used with reference to the lives of “great men”, has often obscured the ways in which women have narrated themselves and their stories.

identities and requiring a constant dialogue with multiple audiences. Smith stresses that “the autobiographical subject is ... inescapably in dialogue with the culturally marked differences that inflect models of identity and underwrite the formation of autobiographical subjectivity”. As such, she continues, “autobiographical telling is performative”.⁴

⁴ Ibid.

In (re)presenting herself through different media, Mwangi questions Western representations and at the same time constructs her own oppositional aesthetics. By deploying photography, video-installation, live performance, she stages the productive vision of the world that Kaja Silverman suggests: a vision that obliges viewers to recognize themselves “precisely within those others to whom [they] could otherwise respond with revulsion and avoidance”.⁵ In doing so, Mwangi acknowledges the distorted patterns of visual appropriation, while opening up an ethical practice of viewing, uncovering the many possibilities to radically undermine the structures of normative subjectivity prescribed and imposed by Western patriarchy. Her performances destabilize dominant discourses and solicit the audience to see differently: her viewers are incessantly involved in an intense re-negotiation of identity politics.

⁵ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996), 170.

Moving between Kenya and Germany, Ingrid Mwangi explores her African and European roots. As the body is the place where these worlds converge, she places it – or parts of it: her hair, skin, and voice – at the very core of her art. Her desire is to become her own experimental subject-object; the alteration of her body provides her with the means to question the oversimplified and stereotyped ways in which race, gender and sexuality are usually visualized.

This essay will discuss such visualizations in relation to Silverman’s reading of the three Lacanian concepts constituting the field of vision: gaze, look, and screen. I will associate each term to a particular phase in Mwangi’s artistic production. The gaze will be my starting point in the first paragraph, focused as it is on the freezing and exoticising effects of a visual practice that cages the Other (whether labelled as female and/or exotic), by constructing it as a passive spectacle. I will then suggest the look is marking another moment of the artist’s production, when she turns the gaze back by addressing her look, her productive look, questioning all preassigned viewing positions and expressing – staging – her own visions, her own practices of representation and narration. The third term is the screen, intended both as the projecting surface displaying Mwangi’s art works and as the “cultural image-repertoire” that, according to Lacan, provides the visual coordinates allowing every individual to produce and apprehend others. I will thus present Mwangi’s screens as offering new coordinates and perspectives for a productive re-presentation, in an act of mutual involvement and exchange between artist and viewers.

Dark wilderness

What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects.

(Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*)

Ingrid Mwangi's *My Heart of Darkness* (2001), a dvd documenting her works from 1996 to 2001, uncovers the focus of her interest in the visual by referring, already in its title, to the metaphor of the "heart of darkness", as well as to the widespread stereotypes concerning black people created by the imperial and colonial rhetoric. The metaphor dates back to the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad, where it describes the encounter, based on exploitation and subjugation, between the white colonialists and the colonized people in the 'heart of darkness', Africa. The image substantiates the rhetoric that European colonizers created in order to conceptually articulate Africa as an empty and primitive continent to explore, conquer and civilize. *My Heart of Darkness* re-appropriates the myth of the 'dark continent' since its very beginning, when the artist's voice opens the scene by asking: "what is it that you see when you look at me? Do you see the jungle? And wild animals?". This question, related to the dominant experience of the visual, the quality of the 'beastly' images that we normally associated with discrimination and exclusion, is only the starting point of Mwangi's experiment; still, it comes back in two of her works collected in the dvd, *Wild at Heart* (1998) and *Wild Life* (1999), where Mwangi turns into the very 'beast' she imagines her public would see by looking at her.



Wild at Heart 1998. Courtesy of I. Mwangi.

In her live performance *Wild at Heart*, she exposes her audience to her own darkness and wildness; the spectators are gathered in a room, in a semicircle, while the artist stands in the middle, her eyes covered, her dreadlocks attached to the ceiling by nylon threads. Metaphorically it is as if she was chained; she moves, shakes, tries to reach her audience, inevitably falling back on her knees, restrained by the threads keeping her in an invisible cage with no walls. She screams and fights, apparently frightened like the trapped animal the spectators see on the two monitors projecting a video, which will become a separate work called *Wild Life* one year later.

This video, which has a blurred quality as if presenting images out of focus, shows a wild animal, a lion or a black panther, struggling behind the bars. In fact, behind those bars, there is the artist, moving frantically in her cage and simulating savage roars with her voice. The video effect is to force the spectators to face (the view of) a creature imprisoned behind bars, a 'wild being' that they cannot fully identify and recognize. The image is a very complex one: presenting herself on the stage and, at the same time, recording her own wildness in the video, it is as though the artist started the journey into her own 'heart of darkness' (a cage imprisoning both her 'wild heart' and her 'wild life'), while reproducing the experience she had when, as a teenager, she left Kenya for Germany. This was a time when she felt that the Europeans looking at her were confronted with a sort of threat – maybe the confrontation with the *unheimlich*, the proximity with animality. The same feeling is expressed in *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad:



Wild Life 1999. Courtesy of the author.

... you could look at a thing monstrous and free The men were – no, they were not – inhuman. Well, ... that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. ... what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.⁶

Conrad's fictitious explorers and Mwangi's spectators share the experience of a 'displacement' deriving from an invisible and ambivalent barrier, which should, at the same time, protect them from all contact and also expose them to the contact itself.

By showing her 'heart of darkness', Mwangi repropose the impossible distinction – or the disturbing similarity – between human and inhuman. She fully recreates a condition which is familiar to Western audiences: the tendency to imprison and keep at a distance what is labelled as 'exotic'. For centuries, Europeans have been fascinated by the charismatic power of exotic beings (animals and human beings, with no distinction), hence the will to possess them; nonetheless, they have also been frightened by their wild and unknowable nature, hence the necessity to cage and tame them. There is an infinite list of ethnographic exhibitions of human beings, usually from Africa, but also from the Americas and Asia, in zoos, circuses, and freak shows. Artist and writer Coco Fusco has long worked on the several encounters that led European explorers to return from their voyages with 'indigenous specimens' for scientific analysis and entertainment:

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Torino: Einaudi-Serie bilingue, 1999), 110.

⁷ Coco Fusco, “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” in *English is Broken Here. Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 41. This tradition began with Christopher Columbus who returned in 1493 with some Arawaks, one of whom was displayed at the Spanish Court for two years. On the subject, see also Marina De Chiara, *Oltre la gabbia. Ordine coloniale e arte di confine* (Roma: Meltemi, 2005).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ Silverman, *Threshold*, 198.

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1992), 117, 118.

“‘Ethnological’ displays of non-whites – which were orchestrated by impresarios but endorsed by anthropologists – confirmed popular racial stereotypes and built support for domestic and foreign policies”.⁷ In the five centuries since the discovery of Columbus, from 1492 to 1992, dozens of shows and exhibitions ‘helped’ white audiences to ‘discover’ “the non-Western sector of humanity”.⁸ According to Fusco, these are the origins of intercultural performance in the West; what is relevant here is that, if, at the time, the exhibited people did not choose to be on display, nowadays black diasporic artists choose to be on stage, forcing their white audience to deal with their own cultural identity, and to face the limits of a ‘happy multiculturalism’ which is today widely proclaimed by institutions and governments.

In this context, Ingrid Mwangi puts herself on display in order to question her viewers’ position. Her (ethnographic) exhibition is focused precisely on white subjects rather than on a non-white object. If she recreates the traditional conditions for human display, it is because she aims at subverting its very principle: during the show, the audience is on display as the focus of the spectacle is shifted; it is the artist who observes her viewers while they suddenly discover it is they who are on display.

In *Wild at Heart* and in *Wild Life*, Mwangi apparently receives the exoticising gaze of her spectators. This gaze recalls the one she received – as a woman and a black person – from Western imperial and colonial history: the position of the Other, frozen by a normative gaze that, according to Jacques Lacan, determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, constituting me as the “subject-as-spectacle” (or also as the object-as-spectacle).⁹ Focusing on its mortifying effects, Lacan remarks:

The gaze in itself not only terminates the movement, it freezes it At the moment the subject stops, suspending his gesture, he is mortified. This anti-life, anti-movement function ... is the *fascinum*, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly.¹⁰

Ingrid Mwangi presents herself as a female subject who does not stop or suspend her gesture; she recreates the ‘fascinum’ Lacan refers to for her own purposes: to solicit a reciprocal relationship with her spectators, and, at the same time, to disrupt their gaze. Even if, during *Wild at Heart*, her eyes are covered, or totally undistinguishable as in *Wild Life*, she can nonetheless turn that gaze back in an unconventional manner. She becomes the metaphorical mirror held up to the viewers, obliging them to see something different from their self-image, something other than the reassuring double – identical to the self – which should re-affirm their identitarian certainties. Lacan claims that the mirror-image is the threshold of the visible world, suggesting that identification is deeply rooted in the image – so that, by facing his/her mirror-reflection, the subject can idealize

and perform an identity based on the exclusion of what cannot be accepted, what is denied as alien. On her part, Mwangi stages a reconfigured mirror phase, which involves a different identification process meant as a dialogic engagement between the spectators and the work of art (be it a live performance or a video). Once the 'new mirror stage' has taken place, the viewers may be able to think in a critical fashion about what they do and how they perceive and apprehend others, by re-negotiating their positions.

Sidonie Smith suggests that redefining narcissistic identification processes can become "a political and performative mechanism for intervening in patriarchal social arrangements".¹¹ This redefinition is supposed to make women aware of the visual regime encoding and disciplining them, while subverting meanings and representations by reactivating them. Mwangi's art is not a repetition of cruel and useless stereotypes; it is her way of representing herself, articulating a subjectivity that does not exist as an independent entity, but is shaped in the interplay of experience, memory, and agency. As a woman artist, she controls the display of herself, intervening in the practice that makes her an object of speculation/specularization, thus questioning and re-discussing the totalizing colonial 'gaze'.

¹¹ Smith, *Interfaces*, 13. Smith also refers to Kaja Silverman's use of female narcissism for a feminist project.

Bright-dark continents

The look has never coincided with the gaze ... [it] has never possessed the mastering and constitutive functions that have traditionally been attributed to it The look has ... possessed the capacity to see otherwise from and even in contradiction to the gaze.
(Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*)

Ingrid Mwangi casts a new light on the questions of identity and ibridity as they emerge from her body. While previously paralyzed, frozen, and caged by the Western gaze confining her to a specific set of images and representations, she manages now to free herself from that gaze and to address her look to a white audience, making it what Kaja Silverman would call a "productive look". Silverman starts from her understanding of the look as the capacity to see things that the gaze cannot see, still maintaining that the look is under two kinds of pressures: the cultural pressure to apprehend the world from a preassigned viewing position, and the psychic pressure to see the world in ways that protect the ego. She thus suggests a productive look as something that "requires a constant conscious reworking of the terms under which we unconsciously look at the objects that people our visual landscape".¹² A productive vision of the world, like the one staged by Mwangi, would thus be a means to undo

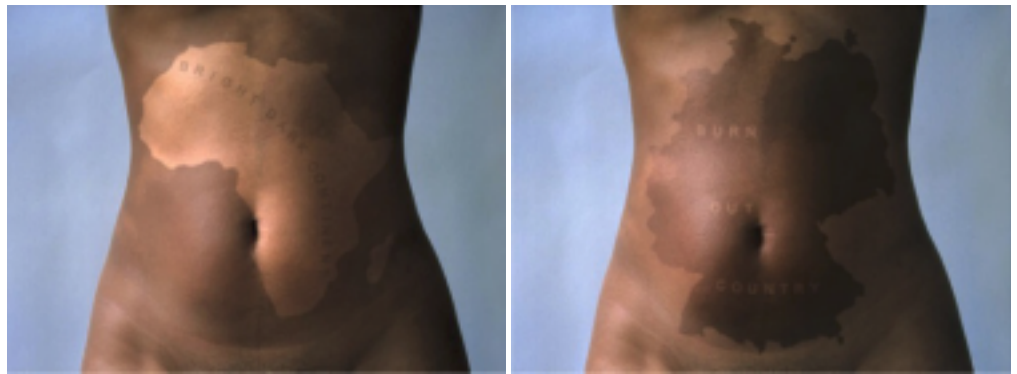
¹² Silverman, *Threshold*, 184.

the normative constructions of gender, race, or other forms of difference. Her visual texts, whether photos, videos, or live performances, are the privileged field for a displacement of the self and a re-negotiation of the relations between divergent subjects.¹³ By conjuring something new into existence, by struggling “to see the otherness of the desired self, and the familiarity of the despised other,”¹⁴ the productive look allows the artist to produce and perform her heart of darkness.

¹³ Silverman stresses the importance of such visual texts to activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies as divergent as possible from ourselves.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170.

Mwangi’s choice to proceed with the exploration of her heart of darkness also takes place through photography; in fact, her further journey into the ‘dark continent’ is narrated by the photo series *Static Drift* (2001), which are still part of the dvd *My Heart of Darkness*, but with a specific focus.



Static Drift. 2001. Courtesy of the author.

¹⁵ Jürgen Habermas quoted in Horst Gerhard Haberl, “Art is the Message”, in Berthold Schmitt and Bernd Schulz, eds., *Your Own Soul. Ingrid Mwangi*, (Saarbrücken: Kehrer, 2003), 35.

¹⁶ Similarly, Conrad’s novel seems to suggest that Western civilization is, indeed, the heart of darkness, that gradually obscures Africa. The novel’s initial and ending scenes are significantly staged in the heart of (Western) civilization, London, spreading and exporting its darkness, which stands for emptiness and wasteland.

Images of death and destruction also recur in relation to Brussels, the head-quarter of Belgian colonialism, which is defined as “a whited sepulchre” (Conrad, 24).

In one photo, she traces the borders of Africa on her stomach, re-writing its traditional definition that now reads: “bright dark continent”. In the other photo, she delineates the borders of Germany – always on her stomach – over which she writes “burn out country”. This time, it is a European country that represents darkness, providing the spectators with a “different readability of the world”.¹⁵ Nonetheless, this darkness is special: Germany is ‘burnt-out’, devastated, destroyed, a bleak and desolate waste land, at the mercy of a ‘static drift’, leading nowhere and turning it into a hollow and dying space.¹⁶ The maps of the two countries are then drawn on Mwangi’s body, like two birthmarks impressed on her skin, two blobs of colour; the artist plays with an alternation between shadow and light, brightness and darkness, manipulating the colour of her skin by applying different (darker or lighter) shades on her body. In doing so, she recalls the metaphor of the blank space, the white page waiting to be written on, in order to rewrite, in her turn, Africa as well as Germany as two territories provided with unexpected features. In particular, the ‘Africa’ mapped on Mwangi’s stomach disrupts existing geographical narrations and cultural representations with a new writing: what was once a blank space waiting to be conquered and coloured on the European maps, is now rewritten

by Mwangi with new colours inscribed in her genetic heritage.¹⁷ If the ‘chromo-soma’ etymologically stands for the ‘colour’ of the ‘body’, this inscription and re-colouring re-appropriates the ‘dark continent’ through the female body, which has so often and so violently been associated with a territory to be discovered and occupied. In the early decades of the XXth century, Freud borrowed the expression “dark continent” from the explorer John Rowlands Stanley’s description of the dark African forests – virgin, hostile and impenetrable. The psychoanalyst used the metaphor to indicate the ‘enigma’ constituted by female sexuality which caused his curiosity but also his slight (denied) embarrassment over his incomplete clinical knowledge. In *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926), Freud writes: “We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a ‘dark continent’ for psychology”.¹⁸

Moving away from these places of darkness, these ‘blank’ spaces, Mwangi’s photos work on subverting pre-defined categories, thus becoming the locus of resistance and transformation. She can see both inside and outside African and European cultures; her perspective reveals a deterritorializing and deterritorialized vision. Her body shows permeable boundaries: the two photos, placed as if in a mirror position showing the same parts of the body, with similar lines and trajectories, suggest that canonical statuses have collapsed, all anchorage – to the notions of subject and object, or to geographical boundaries – has been dislodged. In the attempt to unchain a subject in chains, Mwangi escapes the constraints of identity, travelling out of it, far from the totalizing Western eye ceaselessly proclaiming itself as the powerful “I”.

Sidonie Smith elaborates her critique of a unitary and unique self, condemned to the narrow boundaries of individuality, “the prisonhouse of singular identity”.¹⁹ She contests the metaphysical notion of the self, incapable of recognizing that “hard-edged boundaries between the self and the other are illegitimate borders of self-containment to be resisted in favor of a soaring, or floating transindividualism”.²⁰ Her concept of “transindividualism” is based on a subject that has expanded beyond the unitary core of selfhood, beyond the traditional frames imposing an essentialist and consolidated individuality. The impossibility to fix identity in the traditional categories of subject and object, self and other – the latter constituting the necessary and specular reflection of the former – implies a subverting of the practices of representation and narration.

Through art, Mwangi can enter the site of self-narratives, escaping the official frames restraining the notions of subject and identity. Her *Static Drift* photos are her scenes of writing, combining the visual and the textual, registering her personal ‘storytelling’. Her body carries her story up to a

¹⁷ Each colour marks the colonies of every European nation: red stands for UK, blue for France, green for Italy, orange represents Portugal, yellow Belgium, and purple stands for Germany.

¹⁸ “Dark Continent” in Alain de Mijolla and Thomson Gale, eds., *Int. Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, 2005. <<http://soc.enotes.com/psychoanalysis-encyclopedia/dark-continent>>

¹⁹ Smith, *Subjectivity*, 98.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p.51.

visual textuality that emerges and deploys itself as a subjectivity now presented as discursive and communicative. In the constant dialogue with her past (Africa) and her present (Germany), and, by travelling all around the world, thus meeting different audiences, Mwangi realizes what Smith calls “the discursive staging of identity”,²¹ a performative practice that, far from affirming a ‘true self’ or a stable identity, invites different subjects (artists and spectators, writers and readers) to intersect and interface one another.

The performing dark Medusa

Images are meant to render the world accessible and imaginable to man. But, even as they do so, they interpose themselves between man and the world... they become screens.

(Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*)

At the beginning of *My Heart of Darkness*, Mwangi appears wearing a mask constituted by her own dreadlocks knotted and braided over her face. Thus masked, she says, with a firm voice: “Ok everybody, attention please, this is a robbery, everybody please remain calm and nothing will happen to you, lay down on the floor ...”. Then a woman is heard screaming, there is a gun-shot, and it is Mwangi shooting, not with a gun but with a remote control. If images (whether in the form of photographs, videos, installations or live performances) can create a crisis in representation by questioning the way we apprehend alterity, then probably what happens when we look at them is (or should be) a robbery: we are robbed and deprived of some of our cultural and identitarian certainties, those reassuring certainties transmitted by an imposed order and working against an ethics of visuality.

Mwangi’s experimentations with visuality proceed with her second dvd *Within the Light*, documenting her works from 2002 to 2003. Here light takes the place previously occupied by darkness; the change is important: if in *My Heart of Darkness* Mwangi concentrates on the subject trapped by – but also resisting – the penetrating effects of the one-way gaze framing her as the ‘other’, in *Within the Light* she positions herself, with no hesitation, within her own blackness, that ‘bright dark continent’ chosen and reclaimed by her art. Moreover, her images are no longer blurred: beyond trying to be acknowledged, this time she is there, totally visible and exposed.

Her video-installation *Dressed like Queens* (2003) recovers and presents an image from African mythology. It consists of three naked female figures displayed on three colourful hand-dyed fabrics that function like screens

upon which the video is projected: the central fabric/screen shows a pregnant woman, while the two side images are projections of the artist herself telling the stories of “metaphorical queens”. The narration – a text written by Mwangi – describes the rising of these queens, moving “mighty steps into insecure future”. They have been deprived of the clothes they reclaim as their rightful property. The importance of their claim lies in the awareness that, in order to be recognized as subjects, dressing is a necessary element for performing identity. Clothes embody the codes associated with a certain definition of subjectivity and, as such, they reveal their fundamental function, contributing to the socio-cultural regulation of the body, and representing the location assigned to subjects – in this case, to Mwangi’s queens.

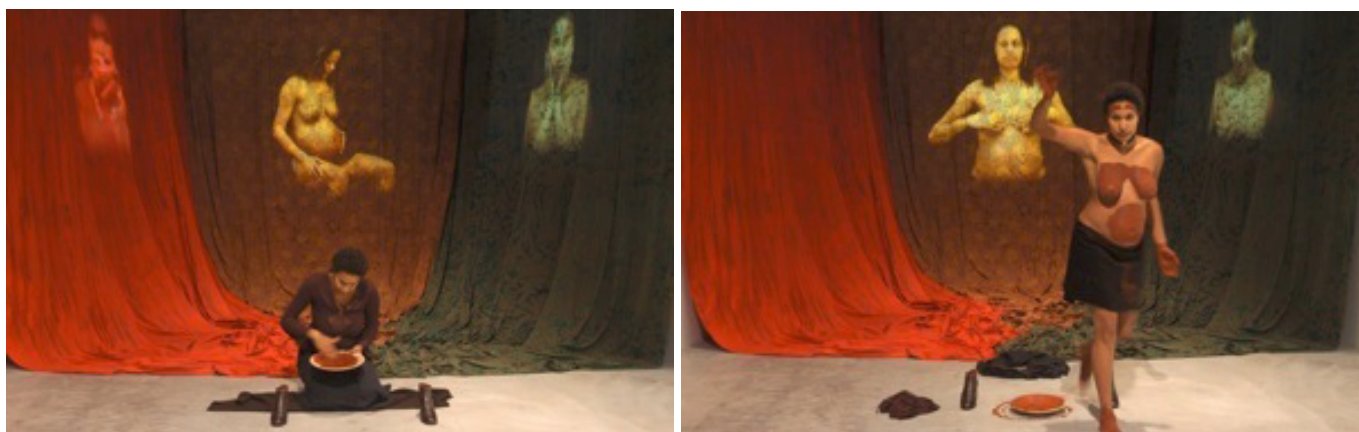
Virginia Woolf claimed that “clothes have ... more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us”.²² Clothes deeply influence and model subjects, confining them to the standards and norms prescribed by society in its attempt to normalize and conform.²³ Through clothes, a strong normativity imposes its own representations of both female and male identity, establishing boundaries which contain bodies and subjects. Mwangi’s queens are deprived of their native clothes and obliged to assume Western and patriarchal habits: they now show the ‘habit’ of nakedness – ‘habit’ in the sense both of ‘dress’ and ‘custom’, or a habit they have got used to – following the widespread practice of presenting female nudes to the male spectatorial gaze and consumption. If clothes can shape and enclose a woman, “literally and figuratively within a particular representation of female identity”,²⁴ to use Smith’s words, then nakedness too is one of the normative representations produced for her. Perhaps the clothes Mwangi’s queens reclaim are different ones, new ‘habits’ which could free them from the imposed (clothing of) oppression, from the constraints of pre-defined forms.

Mwangi’s live performance, *Reclaimed* (2003), further stresses this point, in dialogue and interaction with the video-installation *Dressed like Queens*.

²² Virginia Woolf quoted in Smith, *Subjectivity*, 93.

²³ On this subject, see Marina De Chiara, *La traccia dell’altra. Scrittura, identità e miti del femminile* (Napoli: Liguori, 2001), to which I refer for the following discussion.

²⁴ Smith, *Subjectivity*, 92-93.



Reclaimed 2003. Courtesy of the author.

²⁵ Silverman discusses a somehow similar identification relation between the male eye/gaze and the uncanny female body/genitals in Marcel Duchamp's diorama *Etant donnés*, in which a naked female body, its legs spread and one hand holding a lamp, lies diagonally in a field; the woman's head and feet are not visible as they are beyond the edges of a large opening in a brick wall through which spectators see the rest of her body. Silverman refers to Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the diorama as realizing a mirror relation between the spectators' eyes and the female genitals, through an alignment between eye and vulva. See Silverman, *Threshold*, 172.

During the performance, the video is projected behind the artist, while she slowly frees herself from her clothes, standing in front of her audience mixing red Kenyan earth with water. She undresses, showing herself completely naked, like her queens. She then goes on drawing and painting some parts of her body (her breast, stomach, face) with the red earth mixture she has prepared. By staging this kind of ritual, she offers an alternative view: nakedness – her previous dress – gives way to another dress, constituted by the red-coloured Kenyan earth, at the same time revealing and shielding her body. To a certain extent, Mwangi is wearing clothes from Africa, new 'habits' allowing her to question and overcome the boundaries and conventions imposed by her old ones (again in the sense of clothes and cultural patterns/customs). It is as if the ritual performed with the Kenyan powder could help her to proceed with her journey: she is "within the light" now, she has achieved the transition to her homeland, or perhaps she has just begun a journey configured as an unending transition between two homes, Germany and Africa. Art is a means to create a link with (a new-found) environment and culture, a way to reconcile herself with them.

The new clothes reaffirm Mwangi's space, the space of her performance, conferring it a significant power over the audience: by totally undressing, the artist hypnotizes the spectators and metaphorically petrifies them by exposing them to her body. Viewers look at her face, eyes and sex, and experience the sight of a 'Medusa image'. Within the space of the performance, they have no shield to cover their eyes and save them from the intense effects of the spectacle – in this case, of the live performance.²⁵ By showing herself naked, Mwangi identifies with Medusa in that she offers her body as something that questions the spectators' familiar visual perceptions: a disturbing black female body refusing all stereotypes and dominant forms of representation, a body that not only turns the (totalizing) gaze back, but also uses it to freeze and petrify in its turn. The story of Medusa characterizes what has been identified as the monstrously female, the symbol of power and danger and of threats to the male, patriarchal order. A horrible monster, with sparkling eyes and a gaze that petrifies those who look at her, Medusa is one of the three Gorgons, the mortal one. According to mythology, Athena orders Perseus to kill her by cutting off her head, after using his shield as a mirror to avoid her gaze: if Medusa's gaze kills, the reflection of that gaze kills Medusa.

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Visions Capitales* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998), 39; my translation.

Among the psychoanalytic accounts of the myth, Julia Kristeva underlines the ambivalence and the ambiguity of the story of Medusa: "vulva et vultus, vulva and face, two equivalent terms that the myth of Medusa joins together after thousands of years."²⁶ Kristeva is clearly referring to Freud's essay, "Medusa's Head", written in 1922, and published posthumously in 1940. Here the father of psychoanalysis states that the image of Medusa's head,

surrounded by snaky hair, evokes the female sexual organ, which is the very origin of fascination and horror. The serpents surrounding the Gorgon's head signify the absence of the penis and thus the fearful and alarming threat of castration. Here the power of horror is connected to the horror of the feminine: the woman and her sexual organ have nothing to offer a male phallic vision; she exposes a "nothing-to-be-seen" – at least nothing in the form of the male sexual organ – and this is defined by Freud as deeply uncanny.²⁷

The story of Medusa plays a fundamental role in the discussion of representation in the field of vision, as it is entirely centred around the question of seeing and being-seen. Kristeva insists on the power of the eye and gaze of Medusa to petrify, paralyse and kill: she even wonders whether the monster's gaze might be an inversion of the human – phallic and male – gaze that wants to capture the horror of the other in order to fix it and eliminate it.²⁸ In fact, Medusa is able to address the murderous gaze that is usually a male – and Western – privilege.

Focusing on the story of the Gorgon, the dangerous female monster killed by Perseus who re-establishes the (patriarchal/male) order, what emerges, on a general level, is the story of a woman whose power has been neutralized by a man who puts an end to the threat she poses. Such a visual representation is applied, every day, to the woman who, like a contemporary Gorgon, is imprisoned in this pattern, in all the images produced to define her. In this sense, 'Medusa representations' can be seen as social frames containing women within pre-established boundaries. If images do not simply represent the world, but create it and shape it, rendering it accessible to man – as Lacan suggests – it is because "instead of presenting the world to man, they re-present it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a function of the images he has produced".²⁹ In doing so, Lacan notes, images interpose themselves between man and the world, thus becoming screens, the third term Lacan uses to articulate his field of vision. Screens can be configured as what creates and projects images to which individuals conform, including all the 'Medusa images' to which women have to submit, conforming to hegemonic visual models.

Reading Lacan's account, Silverman remarks that the screen plays a fundamental role in the way individuals experience their specularly and in the way they are seen by others. In fact, screens are associated with a range of representational coordinates available at a particular historical moment and in a specific culture, coordinates appearing as the most appropriate frames through which the world can be apprehended. In Silverman's words:

the screen or cultural image-repertoire inhabits each of us What this means is that when we apprehend another person or an object, we necessarily do so

²⁷ On this subject see Luce Irigaray, *Speculum. L'altra donna*, ed. by Luisa Muraro (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989), 42. See also Lidia Curti, "Dietro lo schermo della rappresentazione" and "Madri e figlie" in *La voce dell'altra: scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcolonialismo* (Roma: Meltemi, 2006), 39-82.

²⁸ Kristeva, *Visions*, 36.

²⁹ Lacan quoted in Silverman, *Threshold*, 196,197.

³⁰ Silverman, *Threshold*, 221.

via the large, diverse, but ultimately finite range of representational coordinates which determine what and how the members of our culture see – how they process visual detail, and what meaning they give it.³⁰

³¹ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

To the extent that the screen (or “cultural image-repertoire”) inhabits everyone and determines the way in which everyone is apprehended by others, it is positioned not only between man and the world, but more significantly “inside” every person; it is the prevailing “representational grid” that determines specific viewing positions.³¹ The image of Medusa – decapitated and killed by Perseus – seems to function as a representational grid ‘dictating’ and spreading visual perceptions that are associated, almost automatically, to normative meanings. These normative meanings unconsciously lead individuals to perceive black skin or the female sex according to a specific ‘cultural image-repertoire’ or screen.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

While stressing the fundamental function of the screen in shaping individual perceptions, Silverman nonetheless distances herself from such a totalizing account of the screen and thus also focuses on another aspect of Lacan’s theorization: the “human subject’s capacity ... for ‘playing’ with the screen”.³² What appears relevant here is that, following this observation, the subject does not necessarily need to have a passive relation to the screen, as a certain degree of intervention is now possible. This paves the way to an ethical practice of viewing, encouraging spectators to recognize the performative character of their very subjectivities and identities. By watching live performances like Mwangi’s, viewers have the chance to realize how they are constituted and shaped by a series of performative acts staging cultural discourses and regimes: they see someone else staging – and questioning – what they usually stage in everyday life, through the (performative) construction of their own identities and those of others’. Faced with such visions, they are invited to collaborate in the articulation of meaning and images and are offered alternative discursive and representational practices.

Ingrid Mwangi produces her self and her body as a screen that reflects collective and individual desires and anxieties. Throughout the works of art discussed in this article, even as she stages dominant representations, she is playing with the screen, providing counter-strategies for a productive re-presentation and re-cognition. The screens projecting her videos and performances can be associated to the Lacanian screens, the cultural image-repertoires, but with a difference: they offer new and alternative representational coordinates that differ from the prevailing ones. Through her performances Mwangi suggests critical perspectives. By challenging dominant discourses, she enters the visual space of self-narrative, “investigat[ing] – invest[ing herself] in – alternative technologies of autobiography”, in Sidonie Smith’s words.³³ These new forms or technologies of autobiography involve an intersubjective exchange between

³³ Smith, *Subjectivity*, 63.

artist and viewers, writer and readers, both engaged in a re-visioning process, a re-negotiation of their positions. In this regard, works of art are mirrors/screens that do not simply reflect but unfold; they break through the mechanism of specularity – incessantly repeating the image of the same – and they manage to produce and spread multiple and disturbing images which are, themselves, *other*. The representation of the self seems to coincide with the representation of the other, in that they intersect and become almost indistinguishable in the representation of a shared visual narrative. By participating in this visual narrative, subjects perform their identities while inscribing them – both textually and visually – in their creations, in their selves. Artist and viewers are thus linked by the simultaneous performance of their subjectivities. This is a practice that goes beyond the specific performance or video-installation, as it realizes a wide network in which several subjects meet, are involved and – uncomfortably – questioned. In this perspective of performative interaction, Ingrid Mwangi's works of art are “as much about *me* as they are about her. And ... my readings as you receive them are as much about *you* as about me”.³⁴

Apart from the language in which this performative interaction develops, everyone should be aware of the unavoidable dialogue and exchange occurring between individuals and the images circulating around them. Mwangi's works play a crucial role not only in the performance of her individual identity, but more significantly in that of her viewers who will write, read and discuss her art, in an infinite series of interactive relationships between different subjects performing their identities.

³⁴ Amelia Jones “Performing the Other as Self. Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject” in Smith, *Interfaces*, 83.