

FOCUS

Sandra Mujiing

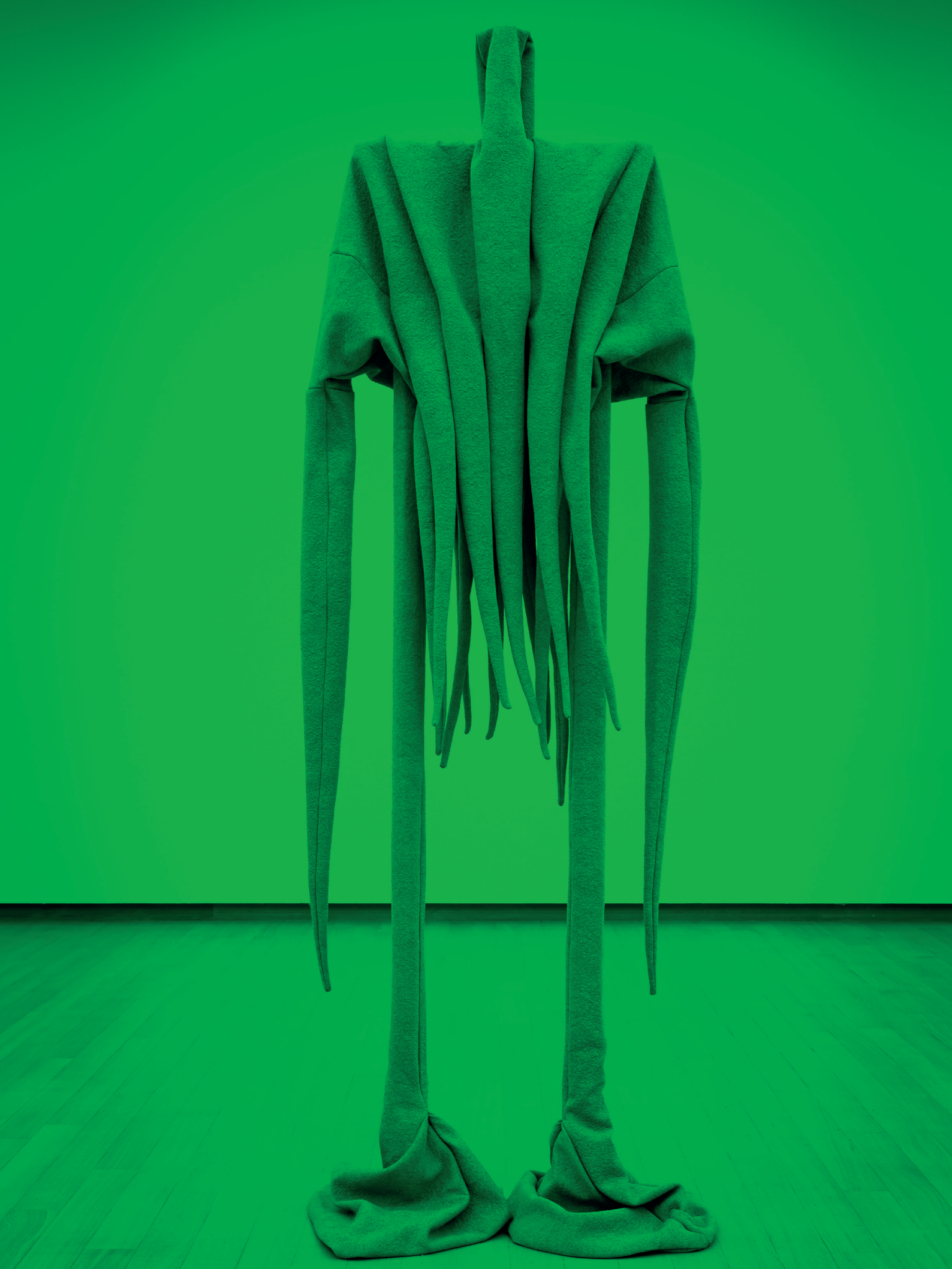
Text by
Nikita Sena Quarshie



Skin to Skin, 2025, exhibition views, Belvedere 21, Vienna Photo: Kunst-Dokumentation.com, Manuel Carreon Lopez Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna, and Belvedere 21, Vienna (pp. 286-289)



Skin to Skin, exhibition views, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Photo: Peter Tjihuis Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (pp. 290-293)





Sløyfe, installation view, Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, 2025 Photo: Malle Madsen Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna, and Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen (pp. 294, 296-297)

Artificial Optimism, installation view, Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen, 2024 Photo: Malle Madsen Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna, and Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen







Silent Flight, 2025, PoMO, Trondheim Photo: Lili Zaneta Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna, and PoMO, Trondheim



Koko 2089, 2023 Photo: Kunst-Dokumentation.com Courtesy: the artist,
Croy Nielsen Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna



Time as a Shield, installation view, Kunsthalle Basel, 2024 Photo: Philipp Hänger
Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and The Approach, London



Remember Me, 2025, 6th edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale, *For the Time Being* Photo: Kochi Biennale Foundation Courtesy: the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, The Approach, London, Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/Vienna, and Kochi Biennale Foundation (pp. 304-305) *Shared Breath 2*, 2024 PoMo Collection (p. 301 top) *Shared Breath 5*, 2024 PoMo Collection (p. 301 bottom)

SLIPPING WITH SANDRA MUJINGA

To attempt to grasp the totality of Sandra Mujinga's practice is to slip. It is to plunge into the gap between what is seen and what is not, between the fragment and the whole, the organic and the industrial, the human and the more-than, between lucid despair and flailing hope. This gap—dark, flush with friction and chaos—is the gestational site of the artist's worlding.

Peer into the cracks and we encounter green. A recurring color in Mujinga's work, it constantly mutates, evading fixed use or meaning. In *Humans, On The Other Hand, Lied Easily and Often* (2016), we connect green to nature. Three sets of photographs center a male chimpanzee surrounded by the verdant foliage of Virunga National Park, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The photographic process of "shooting," "capturing" and "exposing" is brought into tension with the endangered animal, who, by replacing the fibbing human of the title, subverts portraiture's traditional anthropocentric focus. Shown in the exhibition *Real Friends* at Oslo Kunstforening, the photographs enter dialogue with *Throwing Voice* (2016), a single-channel video in which a central figure waves self-consciously between stillness and motion. Green takes on a digital function as a chromakey—a technique used in films, photography and weather forecasts to project alternative backgrounds. Avatar-like, the model sometimes glitches against the screen, as unseen narrators share stories about their skin. Seen together, the two works play with various representations of green to reflect on strategies of disappearance while problematizing binaries between the natural and the digital, the real and the artificial.

In *SONW—Shadow of New Worlds* (2018) at the Bergen Kunsthall, visitors walk into green. The color shifts from a visual, symbolic and technical tool, to an environment that engulfs all. The ambient hue acts as the weather, as the horizon of a parallel world, and the harbinger of ones to come. Since, as Mujinga has suggested, green can also act as a metaphor for Blackness, then we might also imagine how black functions simultaneously as chroma, as a racial construct, and as a lived social reality

with political and economic consequences. We might then imagine Blackness as a dwelling place, a site of insurgency or what Hortense Spillers regards as a "critical posture" that pushes forward our collective emancipation.¹

When in 2022 Mujinga presented *IBMSWR: I Build My Skin With Rocks*, a large-scale sculptural video and sound installation, the cavernous halls of the Hamburger Bahnhof reminded her of the inside of a whale's body. When we spoke about this work, I initially misheard her, writing the word *wail* in my notes. This slip revealed my rush to reconcile the role of sound, an architectural component in Mujinga's work, with the grief and practices of mourning engendered by the multiple crises of our time.

The monumental scale of Mujinga's sculptural works is by now brilliantly engaged with and written about, particularly in how they deal with themes of invisibility, surveillance, and her use of spectacle as a camouflage. Ironically, the focus on what we see when we encounter these works underscores the warnings that she puts forward: what one sees is not always what is. Visibility does not lead to safety, power, or recognition. The dominance of the ocular can be weaponized to demarcate an Other, who, so indexed, is then excluded, dispossessed, and repressed. I want to suggest that understanding how Mujinga sculpts sound—her way of electronically configuring breath, rhythm, melody, and silence—widens the crack between the visual and what can be known, and offers us tools to dwell within this space of possibility.

In *Time as a Shield* (2024), seven distinct voices convene. A chorus, their voices pour out from five tree-like sculptures draped in upcycled fabrics—muted browns, navy, a worn yellow, and flashes of green. They call and respond to one another, eventually entangling into a polyphonic rhythm that they slip in and out of. The Rwandan philosopher Isaïe Nzeyimana considers rhythm as "a movement of a 'together,'" whereby "to develop oneself is to develop with others... where every gesture is made simultaneously with each other."² For Nzeyimana, this has social, political, and economic implications—one being the power of the collective to counter neoliberalism's

dominating rhythm. I note, when listening to a recording of Nzeyimana speaking in French, that together is a translation of "ensemble": a group of people who perform or make music collectively. The politicized ensemble, or the chorus animated by Saidiya Hartman, becomes "the vehicle for another kind of story... an incubator of possibility."³

We might think of Mujinga's installations as *ensembles*—assemblages of seemingly discordant materials (PVC, acrylic, steel), mediums (textile, sculpture, sound), and references (Black studies, science fiction, posthumanism). This mode of assembling reaches its apotheosis in *Skin to Skin* (2025), first shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, before travelling to the Belvedere 21 in Vienna. If *IBMSWR* asked what the inside of a whale sounds like, the sonic landscape in *Skin to Skin* responds. One out of the twelve speakers in the room thrums out the lung, another the heart, yet another the intestine, before melding harmoniously to unite the mammalian's body. With 55 sculptures, this is the largest grouping of Mujinga's to date. The tentacled figures echo the Oankali of Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, creatures covered in writhing tentacles that they use to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. These erotically-charged sentinels⁴ are multiplied by a mirror world. Standing in the Stedelijk's lower galleries, I, we, also become multiple. The now-familiar green hue, cycling through sunrise and sunset, puts our bodies in contact with the strange towering figures. What to do in this moment of encounter? The power of *Skin to Skin*, and of Sandra Mujinga's oeuvre, is how it pivots around the fragility of this moment.

In a period of militarized borders and fascistic states and actors, how we relate to a branded Other has genocidal, ecological, and thus existential consequences. Our ability to stay with the unknown or unfamiliar, to remain within the gap of established ideas, and to relinquish our attachment to the contained and isolated individual, becomes a necessary mode of resistance. There is risk involved here. We must dare to imagine other ways of being and living together.

There is an element of Mujinga's ensembles that I can't shake off. If installation art situates the spectator "as integral to the com-

pletion of the work," Mujinga triggers a state of crisis.⁵ Stepping into *Skin to Skin*, we are invited, temporarily, into a world that exists prior to our presence, and that will continue, unconcernedly, without us. We are not the protagonists. What we do or don't do is not central to its existence or fulfillment. This invitation, open yet disinterested, offers a final warning to us all.

1. Hortense Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," University of Waterloo English Department, Winfried Siemerling's Contemporary Critical Theory class, March 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1PTH-FCN4Gc>.

2. From a recording of Isaïe Nzeyimana played during "De-Formation: A Transformal Sketch of Rhythm and the Rest," a lecture performance delivered by artist Christian Nyampeta, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/323507801>.

3. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019).

4. Here, the use of the word "erotically" leans heavily on Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic as a scrutinizing power where one "becomes less willing to accept powerlessness."

5. Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).