

PÉLAGIE

“who decides only the tree”

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GBAGUIDI



The Missing Link. Dicolonisation Education By Mrs Smiling Stone, 2017
school desks, photographs, glassine paper sheets, drawings with
coloured pencil, microphone stand, earth and lipstick on paper, and
digital video, variable dimensions
installation view documenta 14, Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), Athens







The Missing Link. Dicolonisation Education By Mrs Smiling Stone, 2017
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“How might education contribute to
purge from consciousness that there exist no
under-beings but that the birth of a
life is a value in itself?
That every human has a right to a
cradle”



The Missing Link. Dicolonisation Education By Mrs Smiling Stone, 2017
school desks, photographs, glassine paper sheets, drawings with coloured pencil, earth and lipstick on paper, printed and painted notebooks, digital videos, music recordings, hand puppets and marionettes, broken ceramics from Kassel, and various toys, variable dimensions
installation view documenta 14, Neue Galerie, Kassel





Who decides

Loop

7070

7070



only the Tree





Eros defeated by Thanatos

*pourquoi je ne bande plus dit le vieil homme à son médecin
(why don't I get hard-ons anymore, said the old man to his doctor)*

by Simon Njami

The title of this painting – this fresco rather, given its dimensions – left me perplexed, disconcerted, curious... This led me to scrutinise the canvas down to its last detail in order to try and understand in what way the artistic project concurred with the intellectual project. Besides, was there even any intellectual project in the artist's desire to record the despair of an old man she overheard one day in the course of a medical check-up? Perhaps not. The project thus built itself, almost despite the artist. An obviousness that reveals itself in this dense, complex and complete work that encompasses all the issues of our modernity. For does not the anthropocentrism we have heard so much about already, as if it were a conceptual revolution, simply correspond to *machocentrism*, that is to say, a world essentially dominated by the white male? Of course, the lament overheard by Pélagie Gbaguidi not only questions the declining sexual capacities of an old man, but also attacks those two notions which, in Freud's view, sum up the human condition, namely the life drive and the death drive, embodied in ancient Greece by Eros and Thanatos.

The very way in which the artist has chosen to tackle her work bears witness to this tension that is several millennia old and which divides humanity in two, like her fresco, in which white (cum) dominates on the left-hand side and red (blood, perhaps menstrual blood?) dominates on the right-hand side, in almost equal proportions. The fracture is indicated by a red line, a diagonal that divides the painting in two. The left-hand space – even though it is not lacking a female presence – is the male space. The right-hand space is an organised chaos in which imps dance around and where female figures can be seen beneath the avalanche of phalluses. In

the upper right-hand corner, a female couple haloed by the sun appears to be engaged in a mysterious conversation. Returning to the 'male' part, a homunculus mask holds what appears to be a weapon pointing to the right. For me, this mysterious figure immediately brought to mind Jimi Hendrix's song 'Hey Joe':

'Hey Joe, where you goin' with that gun of your hand?
Hey Joe, I said, where you goin' with that gun in your hand? Oh
I'm goin' down to shoot my old lady
You know I caught her messin' 'round with another man, yeah
I'm goin' down to shoot my old lady
You know I caught her messin' 'round with another man
Huh, and that ain't too cool.'

These lyrics refer to the violence of frustration and the unfulfilled desire that is lacking and that contradicts itself in its very expression as it constantly swings from one extreme to the other:

'Desire is etymologically the tearing away from the fixation ("sideration") of the star, the de-sideration representing the quest for the missing star, desire always in unbalancing movement and tending towards equilibrium, a movement that leads towards the other' (Guy Decroix, *Eros et Thanatos – Quelques repères mythologiques à l'usage de la psychanalyse*, 2020).

But if it cannot be satisfied, what does desire become, if not the ticking time bomb embodied by Jimi Hendrix's Joe? Desire, in essence, is only ever directed at itself. It corresponds to a negotiation in which the other is only a frontman. The other is the mirror of our vanities. Without the other (as Lacan reminded us when he claimed that we live only through the eyes of the other), we are struck with inconsistency since the proof of our own existence is diluted in illusions that we are, perhaps, feeding. Desire thus functions as an injunction to live, an absolute to be satisfied. This absolute could even be confused with the idea of God, because God is first of all absence for those who expect Him. He symbolises what we have all lost. Like passionate love, He is a mystery and, in order to be effective, He must remain indecipherable. Desire

is like that icon castigated by the iconoclasts. It cannot be represented without incurring the wrath of divine law because behind the icons there could be nothing but a void, as Baudrillard had anticipated:

'But what happens to it when it reveals itself in icons, when it proliferates in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme instance that is simply embodied in a theology of the visible? Or does it vanish into the simulacra that alone display their pomp and their power of fascination – the visible machinery of the icons replacing the pure and intelligible Idea of God?' (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1985).

The simulacra that alone display their pomp and their power of fascination are perhaps the reason why Pélagie Gbaguidi's old man seems so desperate. Reading Baudrillard, it is easy to imagine the splendour deployed by an erect penis for anyone who has enclosed his entire life within it. 'The visible machinery of the icons' is the phallus. And as soon as the phallus is reduced to the inability to incarnate itself in a visible manifestation (the erection), it becomes a simulacrum and its purpose becomes its *raison d'être*. It is reduced to impotence. And yet, since the dawn of time, man has only expressed himself through a symbolic will to power. God represents this object of absolute love. But this power is only an idea, an illusion hidden in simulacra. What can be *seen* is always different from what *is* and therefore leads to an essential splitting in two, the very thing we have been questioning since the dawn of time. And the fundamental motor of this game of fools is called *desire* or, in Spinoza's term, *appetite*, that animal instinct that we sought to disguise in counterfeit clothes whose image conceals the purpose.

Everything is in the image, in the projection of the self. The image is an empirical construction, an artifice that feeds on our need for materiality. Jean-Paul Sartre does not argue otherwise when he states that: 'The image... is a certain way that the object has of appearing to consciousness – or, if one prefers, a certain way that consciousness has of giving itself an object' (Sartre, *L'Imagination*, 1936). According to this existentialist vision, we need to project ourselves. There is no object without a particular consciousness, that is, no desire without an object. However, for our old

man, desire (or its absence) is objectless. It is the object (sex) that replaces the object of desire (woman?). Desire is fed by the frustration of not having or no longer having.

In Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), the female character makes the male character pine for her, and he is torn between passionate love and absolute hatred. Loss, or the fear of loss, seems to be more powerful than the desire to possess and constitutes the *materia prima* in the game of desire. It can even happen, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, that it has no object: 'I was worried, distracted, dreamy; I wept, I sighed, I desired a happiness of which I had no idea and of which I nevertheless felt deprived... this fullness of life..., in the intoxication of desire, gives a foretaste of pleasure' (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions, Book III*, 1782). Thus, the lover who is faithful to Rousseau's words must live in a state of absence, of lack, in a kind of *mise en abyme* that must relate to us, without showing it, a matter that refuses itself. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, 'it happens that we prefer our desire to the object of this desire'. We are in the presence of what Sartre calls the desire to be: 'Man is fundamentally the desire to be and desire is a lack.' The object of desire, to go back to Buñuel, is necessarily obscure. But this obscurity should not be seen as having any evil charge. It is obscure, as knowledge can be. It is obscure because it does not reveal itself in broad daylight but remains in the depths of our consciousness. It evokes its mirror, which is death.

There would be no death if this desire were not self-referential, that is to say, if it did not fundamentally mask a love that is superior to all others: the love of self. The other is then reduced to a mirror that one can turn as one pleases, until one finds the perfect reflection from the angle that most faithfully expresses (in a fantasised ideal) one's own power, one's omnipotence, as it were. But the limit of this omnipotence is that it can only be experienced in relation to the other, hence its essential vanity, its ontological impossibility. Pélégie Gbaguidi launches into the funeral lament of a vanished dream: 'Love is born of desire, for it is the expression of a lack that man seeks to fill in his quest for perfection, for the reconquest of original unity. This ascetic ideal betrays a thirst for the divine in which the attraction of

the body, as a material reality, tends to access the invisible, immaterial face of God' (Gaëlle Jehanno, *Eros and Thanatos in 'Sobre héroes y tumbas' by Ernesto Sábato*, 2015).

It is indeed Eros – conceived of a God and a mortal woman, on the doorstep of the palace, who is neither inside nor outside; who expresses the game in this in-between; it is life in its perpetual renewal, in its aestheticism through the pleasure of creating and arousing amorous and sexual desire – that is at stake here, opposed to his enemy brother Thanatos (according to Guy Decroix, Thanatos, by contrast, embodies the aspiration to equilibrium, stability, satiety beyond hunger and thirst, an image of death like a perfect organism without need of its environment), what Freud called 'life drive' and 'death drive'. Can we ever separate these two sides of the same coin? That is the question raised by this work.

Pélégie has made a fresco. It is not a painting. And the first thing that came to my mind – rather iconoclastically, I agree – is *Guernica*. Compared to the artist's 'classical' work, this work exceeds the traditional limits of a canvas. Why *Guernica*? Because this work is about a massacre, a twilight, the end of something. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), Nietzsche reflected precisely on the meaning of truths that have been repeated and taught. On the stultification into which society's rules drag us, rules which we swallow like sheep, without realising that we are swallowing poison. This poison that we swallow in small, lethal doses is the foundation on which certainties are built, these crutches that prevent humans from wavering but lead them to the worst extremes, because a certainty, even if erroneous, cannot be questioned.

And it is perhaps these age-old certainties that lead the old man, in an uncontrollable burst of panic, to ask his doctor: why don't I get hard-ons anymore? The question might seem anecdotal, if it didn't sum up the *modus operandi* of a world ruled by the myth of the penis (a problematic myth, by the way, since the penis cannot be sufficient in itself, otherwise the old man would not have felt any despair). The penis is a weapon, a sceptre, the instrument through which the will to male power is expressed, or at least asserted. But the power that the male appendage is sup-

posed to symbolise is, by necessity, double-edged. And one often perishes, at least in myths (but isn't human life a collection of myths), by the weapon with which one has conquered power. Oedipus is not far off, who, having achieved what he thought was his destiny, had to gouge out his eyes to avoid facing the grim truth.

Rather than proposing to the old man, like a kindly nurse, to gouge out his eyes and mourn his now useless penis, Pélégie instead forces him to open them wider than his dilated pupils allow him to do. She forces him, and in so doing, she forces us all to face what Baldwin has called the 'obviousness' of the things we do not see. What is left after the acknowledgement of decay? Death, as *Hagakure* informs the samurai. Our samurai should commit *seppuku* and have his head (phallus) cut off, whose mystical power has evaporated. Should we see this exhibition of male genitals as a response by a female artist to Courbet's *The Origin of the World*? Are these useless phalluses not the pendant (the word is perhaps ill-chosen) to this vulva exposed for all to see? Or are we not witnessing, as I absurdly intuited, a *Guernica* of virility? *Guernica* – and I must probably open this parenthesis – is the sad result of two wills to power confronting each other in a contest of virility. I do not mean to compare the real massacre with a symbolic one, but *Guernica* is the work of men, of males, and therefore, in the end, also refers to the mythologised power of the phallus. And the phallus is an exteriority, the vagina an interiority. It is not a question (except perhaps in extreme struggles of vindication) of waving it around like a flag.

Death, therefore. While the old man thinks only of the sexual intercourse of which he will be deprived, he fails to realise that it is a matter of death. That his despair is not linked to an impotent limb, but that he cannot see the wood for the trees and that, from now on, the only road he has left to travel is the one that leads to death. Because in him, Thanatos has finally managed to get rid of Eros.



Pourquoi je ne bande plus dit le vieil homme à son médecin (why don't I get hard-ons anymore, said the old man to his doctor), 2009
acrylic and pigment on canvas, 219×615 cm





Icon in Progress: Exit, 2015
pigment, water, oil stick, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 262×152 cm



Icon in Progress: After Marron, 2015-16
acrylic and pigment on canvas, 156×249 cm









installation view *Somewhere in the World: Afrikanisch-niederösterreichische Begegnungen*,
Forum Frohner, Krems an der Donau, 2019



De-Fossilization Of The Look, Dialogue With Madonna Del Parto, 2018

series of 212 drawings

coloured charcoal and coloured pencil on paper, 29×21 cm each







Archive Something Is Wrong, 2019
mixed technique, embroidery and acrylic on cotton, 202×117.5 cm



Archive Something Is Wrong, 2019
mixed technique, embroidery and acrylic on cotton, 203×114.5 cm



Un-Masking in the Plural #Moult, 2017
pigment and mixed media on canvas, 240×240 cm

SOLO & GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 'Le jour se lève', Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (BE) (solo)
 'Charging Myths by On-Trade-Off', Z33, Hasselt (BE)
 'Traces de l'invisible', Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, Paris (FR)
 'Hibernus #1', Frans Masereel Centrum, Kasterlee (BE)
 'Rêver l'obscur', Galerie Christian Berst, Paris (FR)
- 2021 'Écrire, c'est dessiner', Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz (FR)
 '10e Triennale d'Art Contemporain d'Ottignies-Louvain-La-Neuve',
 Ottignies-Louvain-La-Neuve (BE)
 'Congoville', Middelheimmuseum, Antwerp (BE)
 'Retour: À la rencontre de l'Afrique contemporaine', L'Atelier, Nantes (FR)
 'BXL Universel II: Multipli.City', CENTRALE for contemporary art,
 Brussels (BE)
- 2020 'Berlin Biennale: The Crack Begins Within', KW Institute for Contemporary
 Art, Berlin (DE)
- 2019 '6th Biennale De Lubumbashi: Future Genealogies, Tales From The
 Equatorial Line', Museum Lubumbashi, Lubumbashi (CG)
 'Somewhere in the World: Afrikanisch-niederösterreichische
 Begegnungen', Forum Frohner, Krems an der Donau (AT)
 'I had a dream', Africa Center, New York (US)
 'Multiple Transmissions: Art in the Afropolitan Age', WIELS, Brussels (BE)
 'Festival Désir... Désirs: Décoloniser les corps', Eternal Network,
 Tours (FR)
- 2018 'Dak'Art 2018: La Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain', Dakar (SN)
 'Pélagie Gbaguidi: Disclosed Traces and Triadic Apparitions', Sulger-Buel
 Gallery, London (UK) (solo)
 'I am what I am', Ici Gallery, Paris (FR)
- 2017 'documenta 14', Kassel (DE)
 'documenta 14', Athens Conservatoire (Odeion), Athens (GR)
 'Afriques Capitales', Gare Saint Sauveur, Lille (FR)
 'El Iris de Lucy. Artistas africanas contemporáneas', CAAM – Atlantic
 Center of Modern Art, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ES)
 "'HERstory" – Des Archives Féministes (Feminist Archives)', Maison des
 Arts de Malakoff, Malakoff (FR)
- 2016 'El Mundo sans le corps', Sulger-Buel Gallery, London (UK) (solo)
 'L'Iris de Lucy: Artistes Africaines Contemporaines', Musée d'art
 contemporain de la Haute-Vienne, Rochechouart, Rochechouart (FR)
 'Dakar-Martigny: Hommage à la Biennale d'art contemporain', Le Manoir
 de la Ville de Martigny, Martigny (CH)
 'Lucy's iris. African Contemporary women artists', MUSAC –
 Contemporary Art Museum of Castilla y León, Castilla y León (ES)
- 2015 'The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Hell, Purgatory revisited by Contemporary
 African Artists', Smithsonian National Museum of African Art,
 Washington DC (US)
- 2014 'The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Hell, Purgatory Revisited by
 Contemporary African Artists', MMK, Frankfurt (DE)
- 2013 'Asyl Stadtmuseum. Afrikanische Theaterfiguren in einer künstlerischen
 Installation von Pélagie Gbaguidi und Stefanie Oberhoff', Münchner
 Stadtmuseum, Munich (DE)
 'Traces de Femmes, ici & demain', Villa des Arts de Casablanca,
 Casablanca (MA)
 'Serial Attempts: Berti, Ferreira, Gbaguidi', News of the World Gallery,
 London (UK)
- 2012 '1ere Biennale Internationale de Casablanca 2012', Casablanca (MA)
- 2011 'As it is! Ancestral Space: Translated Identities', The Mojo Gallery,
 Dubai (UAE)
- 2008 'Écouter et entendre', Galerie Kevin Conru, Brussels (BE)
 'Dak'Art 2008: La Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain', Dakar (SN)
- 2007 'Dockanema: 2e edition du Festival du film documentaire de Maputo',
 Maputo (MZ)
 'Africa plural 3+3', Casa Africa, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ES)
- 2006 'L'homme est un mystère: Exposition Art contemporain d'Afrique',
 Musée d'art et d'histoire de Saint-Brieuc, Saint-Brieuc (FR)
 'Dak'Art 2006: La Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain', Dakar (SN)
- 2004 'Dak'Art 2004: La Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain', Dakar (SN)