



I am not a lone voice.
I am not a lone voice.
I am not a lone voice.
I am many.

My whole body is an ear.
We can whisper together.

Look. Watch. Listen. Observe.
See this other and other others.
Here we are, being loud together.

Who is we?
We are.....

We are..... open.
We are..... present.
We see..... clearly.
We feel..... deeply.

We are.....

Becoming.
Becoming.
Becoming.

One

The binary is tired.
Yes/No. pfff
Black/White. pfff
Question/Answer. pfff
Male/Female. pfff
Man/Animal. pfff
Man/Nature. pfff
...

We are.....
One (Two, Three, Four, Five,...)

We are..... turning.
Inward. At last.
Turning out of.....
The white cage.
Turning out of.....
The black cage.
Turning out of.....
The lady cage.
Turning. At last.

The future is here.
Maybe, for some.
Maybe, for everybody.
Tune in. Tune out.

You can't be full volume all the time.

We are.....
One (Two, Three, Four, Five,...)

This is where I end and you begin.
This is where you end and others begin.

Tune in. Tune out.

HERE IT COMES, THE FUTURE

ANOUK DE CLERCQ
DOMINIQUE DE GROEN
SASKIA DE COSTER
PASCALE OBOLO

2 FUTURE 2 DREAMS
DOMINIQUE DE GROEN

1.

She leans against fake diamond pyramids, glittering in the burning sun

endless row of mummified futures
walled up in the oxygenless queen's chamber

she tries to capture the vanishing point between centimetres-long acrylic nails
diamond simulants cut into her bare thighs, melting sun seeps into her flesh

2.

Dream: the house is full of light and furnished elegantly, ornamented with rare and precious objects, with a view on a green city. The subject of the conversation is a referendum that is taking place right now in India. People are deciding whether the Indian Ocean can be turned into an underwater mine. It was recently discovered that the bottom of the ocean contains rare chemicals that are invaluable to the industry. Mining these toxic chemicals will inevitably poison all marine life in this area, from microorganisms, plants and fish to marine mammals. We gather around an old-fashioned television. We see live images of oil rigs, cargo ships and derricks arriving. The ocean turns black. Dead fish, jellyfish and dolphins float on the surface of the water. In a few hours' time the Galápagos Islands, which are now in the Indian Ocean, turn into a lifeless desert. 'They've created hell on Earth,' says princess Latifa of Dubai, who's sitting next to me. 'Now there's no way back.'

On my way back home I see a lorry with on the part between the cab and the body a family of guinea pigs. They look frightened. I take the two youngest guinea pigs with me. They're as small as peanuts. Under the burning sun I walk along the motorway without knowing where I'm going. The guinea pigs tremble and sink their teeth into my fingers. They bite to the bone. I regret I've taken them away from their mother. I return to the lorry, which is stuck in an endless traffic jam. I put the tiny guinea pigs back with their family. In the meantime the night has fallen. I lie down next to the guinea pigs, on the empty space between the cab and the body of the lorry. We wait together. But what for?

3.

Losing my grip

this must be going some direction, but fucked if i know

this is not the last of it, this isn't over yet, this will have consequences, this is not a chapter closed, anyway, step over it like you'd step over any dead body

any stillborn incarnation of the day
crush my bones with the grit of *that* future
use them as fertilizer for a new one

take off my hoop earrings & I'm ready to fight for the revolution
smear kilometres of freeway with my body & ready for a shining new morning

whooa, *darkness!*

had lost sight of her for a moment, saw her the last time
on the bottom of a desert, buried under dead pixels
that once portrayed a (1) future

every grain of sand, every speck of dust in the dry warm air
just a little bit too sharp to be really *real*

now she's dancing happily through the flames towards the utopia:
the utopia hidden in every dystopia

increasingly difficult to see the forest through the fires

so you knock back your drink, wish that the industrial revolution had never happened & go
on with your life

so look for strategies then, to keep the wounds open
to keep pain, anxiety, anger fresh

the exudate lubricant to drag the future
from the carcass of the eternal present

meanwhile your screen time is up by 47927313.6% the pixels reach a new state of consciousness rise up from my screen sail heavenwards and into the rusty firmament, in the light pollution smog chemtrails, they burn holes

through which the future. Finally. Can seep in.

So?

one with that which is different. Radical empathy is the only thing that will enable us to step into the future.

That's why we have to argue in favour of putting women in power. It's not that women have a monopoly on empathy, nor that every woman is empathetic. I also know men who are emphatic; it's just that often they, too, are denied positions of power. Anyway, this age requires a paradigm shift at a macro and micro level in the relationship between the sexes, classes and races, and in the relationship between people and their environment. I look up to the women politicians I mentioned with hope (Jacinda Ardern, Tsai Ing-wen and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez), because then I don't have to look at all those others.

And yes, I also like to look at Miranda July and her work. Once we had dinner together in Madrid, after a presentation in the Reina Sofia. We had a colourful conversation until late in the night. We mostly looked at photographs on her phone. She had just fallen in love and wanted to share this feeling. Her openness was disarming. So is her work.

Love,
Anouk

Dear Anouk,

I'm writing you from the Quartieri Spagnoli in the heart of this rugged place: Naples. This popular quarter is so crammed with people and so poor that I briefly realize again in how many bubbles we live—and I'm not even talking about the bubbles the Coronavirus has imposed on us. I mean how separate the lives are that we lead, and how limited our outlook is because of that. I often have the feeling that I've no idea what other groups consider important. As you put it so well, empathy is 'the highest form of imagination ... to put yourself in the place of someone else.' Like the pole you need for a jump to be able to join another group. I'd like to discuss empathy with you.

I myself live between hope and desperation when it comes to the question whether we're capable of great changes. In recent years, there's been a lot of talk about women's rights. First in limited circles. Academic and theoretical discussions these were, like they've come in waves for almost a century. Then there was #MeToo, a movement that spread on the social media and that really started off something. What I mean is this: politically correct thinking is often an academic discourse within a single bubble, and transferring the debate to the street isn't always easy. George Floyd, an unknown, not highly educated man, has done so much for large groups of people. After his death, through his death. How distressing.

Perhaps empathy is the binding element. Then perhaps it isn't.

I'm in a part of town where people are finding it so difficult to make ends meet that there's little energy left for another fight. You can't expect

people here to lose sleep over BLM. They're too busy surviving. In the countless little chapels here, there are photographs of young men who died much too young in dubious circumstances, and there are too many candles in their memory. The word Camorra is avoided, but everyone knows that the Mafia recruits in these poor neighbourhoods. To be able to resonate with the fight of other people in a different context, empathy is required.

But will empathy save us in the arts? And as human species in survival mode? Ali Smith, one of my favourite writers, is working on a tetralogy that is hot on the heels of current events. At an enviable rhythm, she's writing books about Brexit, Trump, the discourse of the extreme right on social media, the fate of migrants in the UK. Recently *Spring* was published, the third book in the series. One character asks: 'What's happened to all the good people in this country?' 'Compassion fatigue,' Richard answers. She: 'Fuck compassion fatigue. That's people walking about with dead souls.'

Are our souls dead if we don't empathize all the time?

Sometimes empathy is impotence, I'm afraid. I see children here, in the streets of Naples, begging. Of course, I give them some change. Giving them something won't hurt me — on the contrary, it'll briefly help me to get rid of my feeling of guilt. Will the money help them? I'm not so sure about that. In fact I'm perpetuating this begging. Should we forbid begging then? The ethical appeal they address at us, is too big. You could as well forbid them to look at you. There are a lot of dehumanizing tricks at our disposal in order to achieve structural improvements. The psychologist Paul Bloom wrote the book *Against Empathy*. He points to the spotlight nature of empathy: you draw attention to one thing, and therefore at the same time lots of things don't get attention. Empathy is emotional and irrational. The transformation it aspires, is often a short-lived outpouring. Empathy reveals our limits as human beings.

I just happened to glance at Dorothea Lange's most famous photograph in a magazine. Lange travelled across the US during the Great Depression and photographed this worried looking woman with three children, an iconic image of poverty in rural America. Almost everyone knows this photograph. The individual face. Another key for me: Helga Davis's face when she walks about the streets in Harlem. The face of an individual, the face of a single other. That's capable of disarming the greatest ideological quibbler.

I'm reading that the woman in Lange's iconic photograph is in fact not the mother of the three children, like everybody thinks. Does that make a difference? Sometimes I think that in art we focus too much on facts and truth and too little on truthfulness. Could Helga Davis's voice also have been

the voice of a white person who reports on white violence? Or is that impossible in your view?

I still have to/want to read Octavia Butler's book *Kindred*. Anyway, what you wrote about this book has made me think. Nostalgia is something white. The urge to return to a country of the past, where they do things differently. The future is the realm of queers.

Overheated greetings at thirty-five degrees, the words are shaking in front of my eyes,

Saskia

Cara Saskia,

Napoli. An Italian friend of mine here in Berlin always has a dangerous glow in his eyes when he talks about Naples. I was four when I first visited the town, but the only thing I remember is my fascination with the skin on the warm milk I had to drink. I also vividly remember visiting Pompeii, which perhaps explains my fascination with time travel. Later, for some time I briefly aspired to become an archaeologist: the idea to unlock the world with just a tiny shard or a stone seemed magic to me.

In the past days I've been thinking a lot about what you wrote on empathy. Could porosity be another word for empathy? I like being porous. I have to be, if I want the world to penetrate me and ferment inside me. In order that something may result that can be contemplated by others, something that can perhaps touch them. A film, a text, a phrase, a sound, a thought. I see it primarily as an instinctive way of looking, a paying attention to the world that is accompanied by a matching vibrating feeling. For it's difficult to look and see at the same time.

I used to see my body as an ear: I entered a space and took in everything and everyone there. In a conversation, sometimes the borders between my world and those of the other were pushed back, suddenly, with great clarity. I've always felt uneasy with the word surroundings. The word situates us in the centre of the world; the world then is something around us, something that implicitly turns around us. But the world isn't separate from us, it's part of us. It would be good to let this insight sink in, for nature and society could do with some more care.

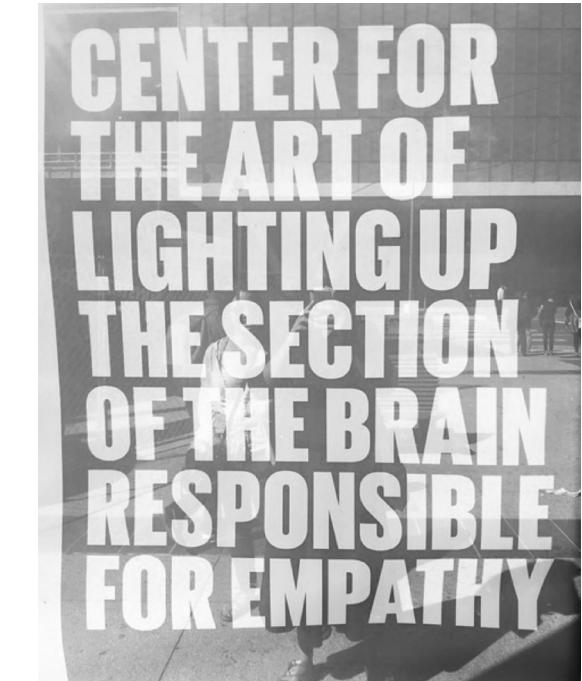
One has developed from this longing. It's an appeal to wake up, an invitation to celebrate life at different scales and to embrace complexity. The original working title was Radical Empathy for that matter. When I mentioned the title and theme to Helga Davis, an interesting conversation ensued. 'Who is this "we" you are talking about? Who identifies with what? Who is the one always ending up being the more empathetic one?' I was reminded of it when you wrote about the bubbles in which we live, and how these shape and limit our view. Sharing a view requires a tremendous amount of work, and sometimes it also requires a completely different perspective. I thought that empathy only related to feelings, imagination and openness, but you're absolutely right that it also relates to politics.

'A body with melanin is always political,' someone told me after the opening of my exhibition in Norway, where for the first time I showed *Helga Humming and One together*. The question who is allowed to speak is as important as what is being said. The urgency of the words is different when they are spoken by a black woman who launches an appeal to leave the binary thinking behind us (*One*). It's a political choice to create a monumental intimacy surrounding a black woman (*Helga Humming*), or to amplify her voice and turn it into a polyphonic soundscape (*Helga Humming and One*). Both works seek to open up a series of poetic possibilities for a different future. The past has been written from a white, male perspective; I passionately hope that more diversity will be allowed in the future.

If we want to build bridges towards the other, language is a good tool. I have so many questions about your authorship. Do you need silence to write? It seems wonderful to me to become absorbed in a thinking you then knead with your fingers into a language that not only shapes this thought, but also thinking. Or do you also write on the way, amidst the noise in Naples, for example.

Love,
Anouk

PS I came across this poster on a walk in San Francisco two years ago, just when I was thinking about making a work about empathy. It always makes me smile when in such a moment the thoughts in my head seem to link up with the world. A top day with regard to porosity.



PASCALE OBOLO IN CONVERSATION WITH ANOUK DE CLERCQ

During the summer holidays, I had withdrawn to an old house that stood somewhere forlorn in nature, to recharge my batteries. There, in this house in the Ardèche, near a river, far away from everything, I enjoyed the silence and recovered my breath. In this place I could write, meditate, rest, go for a stroll, take time to observe nature. It was Luk Lambrecht, the curator of the Cultural Centre Strombeek who introduced me to the artist Anouk De Clercq. Luk had asked me to write a text about her work for her upcoming exhibition.

Our first contact was through email; then I got to know her voice through WhatsApp, and finally I discovered her face through Skype. We then embarked on a long conversation; we exchanged photographs from the places where we had sought rest and talked about social issues.

A BUBBLE OF OXYGEN

PASCALE OBOLO I'm living in a summer house with hardly any furniture. The interior makes me think of a monastery. There's no Internet. You're cut off from the world, from all social networks. The nearest village is 30 minutes by car. I feel the need to reconnect with nature, to detox. It's something my body needs.

ANOUK DE CLERCQ It's odd that you say it's something your body needs. This is the first time I, too, hear this call of nature inside my body—very loudly, for that matter. I don't know whether it's anything to do with this strange year we've had. I really feel like planting things. I want to feel nature, be in harmony with it, be as close to it as possible. Becoming nature.

P I was born in Cameroon, in the forest. My mother was actually working in the field with my grandmother, when she gave birth to me. Nature has always been a necessity, a well-being, a force. Time and again, I feel this urge to reconnect my body with nature, to heal, to relax, to cleanse my body of all the violence it suffers in everyday life. Despite these alienated bodies resisting—as if it were the most normal thing in the world—this pollution, opposing the daily violence in our relations with the other and with public space, there comes a moment that it's too much. We need to create bubbles of oxygen to detox.

A The term 'violence' is quite appropriate. I still hadn't found the words to express the feeling you're referring to. But that's precisely it. My body craves nature, like I crave food when I haven't eaten in a long time. I feel a gigantic need to repair my body somehow, to restore balance. It becomes increasingly important to live better, with myself, with others, with everything around us.

P How should we heal ourselves from all this new evil of the 21st century? How should we respond today? We should return to the natural things, the simplest of things, so that our body can heal these invisible wounds. The wounds are hidden, you can't see them, but they pollute our bodies because of the tension they cause. It's of crucial importance that we're aware of this and that we learn to listen to our body. This is a problem we discussed in our latest issue of *Afrikadada : L'Entre Deux Monde – l'art comme arme de guérison*, art as a weapon of healing. We discussed the work of artists or artist collectives that explore the issue of healing in the domain of art through non-institutional practices that can be used to heal, practices they want to share with the public.



A It's interesting to think of a unit of people as a collective, and to treat this collective as a sick body and really look after it. I like this idea very much. You could even go further and think of the world or society in which we live as a sick body, for which we have to find rituals to heal it.

It makes me think of a book I read some two years ago that really changed me, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by Adrienne Maree Brown. She's a writer, a doula, a women's rights activist and black feminist. She teaches groups of people how to reproduce the movements of nature, how they can recreate natural or organic movements between people. The book really changed my outlook on my responsibility as a woman and as an artist. She's a member of a collective from Detroit that calls itself *Octavia's Brood* and finds inspiration in Octavia Butler's writings. I'm a big fan of Butler's books. A very timely read, indeed. I wanted to go there this year to learn more about them. I hope I'll be able to go next year.

P How can you translate your apprehension about the world in which we live into a work of art? How do you manage to translate this concern through your artistic practice? What method do you use?

A Before I created my last two videos, *Helga Humming* and *One*, I used to create other, possible worlds. I used animation techniques or techniques that didn't necessarily involve a camera. The main idea was to experiment with the medium. That was one thing. The other thing that was important to me was to create images that change your perspective, your outlook on things. To do that, I made images without a camera, that is, I used other techniques to create images. I used for example an electron microscope or LIDAR, a 3D scan technology that's also used by architects. What you then get, is not a real image, but a different view of reality. You use the imagination, you use something different. That results in a different outlook on the world. Various people have told me that this approach is actually political. The idea to work collectively, to introduce *credits* in the art world—that's a political approach, I was told. At a certain moment that was no longer sufficient for me. I'm not sure whether it was the world that had changed, or my view of the world. I felt the urgent need to act. I felt rage, I felt disappointed because of the injustices around me, because of the invisible wounds you're referring to. I felt no longer capable to transport the public to a different world. I wanted to express something, to lend a voice to things that seemed important to me, perhaps to make the world a better place or to heal. I say this in all humility of course. Perhaps I won't succeed, but at least I have to try. That changed with the video *Helga Humming*, which was commissioned by BOZAR. During a meeting that was intended to start a dialogue, I thanked them for the invitation and I asked why they had selected me. One of the men around the table answered: 'Because you're a woman.' It felt like a volcano erupting inside me, and I said to myself: 'You want a woman? I'll give you one.'



I've tried to sculpt and concentrate all female power in this work, and turn this power in poetical images. I wanted to create a work that can be interpreted in numerous ways. The difficulty in fact lies in finding a balance between poetry and politics. Creating a tremendous female power, a sort of monumental intimacy surrounding Helga Davis, the artist with whom I created the character. I'm referring to an intimate monumentality, because Vessel based his composition on Helga's inner voice. The polyphonic soundtrack was created by multiplying Helga's most intimate voice to create space. I invited Helga Davis, and she performed physically and vocally. I knew her a bit before we worked together and I appreciated her work very much. She's an honest artist with an authentic inner power. I adore her. I've learnt a lot from this artistic exchange.

P What's the place of the narrative in the video *Helga Humming*? How did you work together with the performance artist Helga Davis with regard to the script?

A The collaboration took place as a dialogue. It was Helga who chose the costume, together with Maarten Spruyt, a costume designer and scenographer with a sculptural approach to costume. I had asked him to imagine a sensitive suit of armour, elegant and feminine. He produced some silhouettes. Helga tried them and it's essentially she who chose. It was of course of the utmost importance that she felt at ease and powerful in it.

Helga is a black woman. Of course, that prompts a different reading. I was anxious, because I'm not a black woman myself. I didn't want to speak in somebody else's place, and I didn't want to tell someone else's story. That's why at the onset of the project I talked with Helga and asked her to think about the sort of strong and feminine woman we wanted to create. We talked about Power and about assuming Power in space, about controlling space. I really wanted Helga's gaze to confront the public's gaze as they enter the room. We sculpted her gaze accordingly. It was very important for me that she looks at the public, that she's not merely looked at.

This collaboration was really groundbreaking for me. I've really learned a lot while filming. The conversation we had opened lots of perspectives and afterwards we concluded that the conversation wasn't finished yet. That's why we made *One*. Our conversation is still ongoing for that matter: we'll continue working together.

P When you look at the video, you get the impression that Helga's body is a body-object. That's precisely why I wanted to know more about your collaboration and your method. Because when you look at how Helga's body is represented, you get the impression that it's a body-object. That's problematic and it raises questions. For historically, most black bodies are portrayed as such—in museums, films, ads... The bodies there are fragile because of the colour of their skin. The colour black as such announces the fragility of the body. Even without the body gesturing, moving, making a sound. The presence of the body in the public or institutional space is often depicted as a body-object. The difficulty is this: how can you transform this body-object into a producing body? How does the body free itself from the yoke in which it is locked, despite the sounds, the gestures, that emanate from this body—a body that has its own narrative that has nothing to do with the fantasies that were imposed on it without its consent.

As soon as the body appears in space, this stigmatizing projection starts. That has nothing to do with a non-racialized presentation of the female body, in which sometimes a force or fragility surfaces that is connected to the narrative that is attributed to this body. The dialogue that is established between the artist and the body that he or she depicts, raises questions. The link between on the one hand this body and on the other you and Helga, the collaboration between the two of you remains problematic. For the black body is burdened with a debt because of its representation by scientists or anthropologists. In anthropological films, black bodies are always reduced to instruments. The relation between the dominating person behind the camera and the dominated one in front of it made it possible to construct a discourse in which the black body was invariably considered inferior or it was stigmatized. The fact that in this video you made a choice that wasn't Helga's, reduces her to a silent body-object. Because furthermore it's not your body in front of the camera



and the dominating body is not at the same level as hers, the scene weakens her and denies her the power to escape the yoke of the body-object.

This holding hostage of the body's narrative and this fragility can be perceived in Helga's oeuvre. How can you burst this belittling image of Helga? I think the beginnings of an answer lie in your second collaboration with Helga. Indeed, *One* sets out to deconstruct the character you created in your first work with Helga. In *One*, the body becomes simply a human being. The issue of colour vanishes and what surfaces is the feminist issue. *One* makes the theme of intersectionality visible. What interests me above all, is the human body.

A I understand what you mean. When I showed *Helga Humming* in BOZAR, I asked them to announce the video as a project by Anouk De Clercq, in collaboration with Vessel and Helga Davis. It seemed logical and normal to mention Vessel and Helga Davis as producing bodies. What you're telling me, reminds of me of the film *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu*. After I had made *Helga Humming*, I recognized in this film a similar tension between the character who's looking and the character who's being portrayed. There's a key moment in the film when the woman being painted says to the woman who paints her: 'Me too, I'm looking at you.' I was really moved by this scene. Indeed, it's a complex relationship. That's why we essentially worked with Helga's gaze. She stares back, right into the eyes of the public. There's a power in that, isn't there? An active participation in the power dynamics within the work. In any case, Helga felt very much in power, she said.

But of course, you're quite right. The first time I showed the two works—*Helga Humming* and *One*—together, someone said: 'A body with melanin is always political.' That is more or less what you say when you refer to this fragility. In our second project, *One*, perhaps I wanted to articulate things more clearly by letting her speak, and above all I wanted to articulate my thoughts more precisely through the words. Even if it is a text that is looking for a universality that actually refers to the human body. I talked a lot with Helga about that. The working title for *One* was in fact *Radical Empathy*. Everybody was politically enchanted, except Helga, who reacted anxiously. She asked for example: 'Who is this "we" you're referring

to? Who identifies with what? And with whom? Who is this "I" you're talking about? Who's always the most empathic in the end?' But she really loved the text. She said it would be ideal if we achieved this universality. But she also said there are still too many obstacles before we get there. You should dare to face these obstacles and name them, for they exist and you'll have to confront them.

That's the sort of conversations we had. We made various versions of the texts. We talked about emotions, about gestures, about her aura during the 'song'. There's a tension between what you hear and what you see. Because there's a tension inside her body. Helga was very emotional during filming. She really wanted to incorporate everything in her body: all her wounds, the entire history of her life, the history of her family, the history of America. The questions you raise are relevant and of course I hear what you say. That's a key thing: listening and learning constantly. There's a responsibility we share, as women and as artists, especially with regard to this fragile fabric that is our society and the relations we maintain with others.

P My questions are somewhat naive. Being a black body that observes another black body, my interpretation of everything this black body introduces in this space is emotional and political. The interpretation that develops here is related to a corporeal language. There are elements I read, I see, when I put on my decolonial glasses. That results in a different reading of Helga's body, a reading you don't perceive. There's a form of translation and transmission that is at work in this corporeal narrative that I perceive as an object, despite the power Helga embodies. Especially in the first work, *Helga Humming*.

With *One*, I have a stronger sense of being confronted with a productive body. That's precisely what's interesting in the development of your collaboration. In *One*, Helga is the master of her fate and she's more politicized.

A It gives me goosebumps when you say that. There's this idea of looking in the camera. She looks at the person who sees her. It's she who chooses. She shows what she chooses to. I wanted to work with Helga, because I had seen her at a concert. I wanted to create a sort of image of female power, but I had no idea who could embody this. At this concert in Berlin, there was a festive and boisterous atmosphere, but when I saw her slowly coming on stage, with such formidable inner strength and charisma, dominating the stage and the public with her stoic gaze, I understood that she was the person I was looking for.

Unlike Helga, I've no idea what to do with my body in space, or how to use it to represent or project inner strength. I was completely thrown off-balance when I saw how everyone became silent seeing her incarnate this female power.

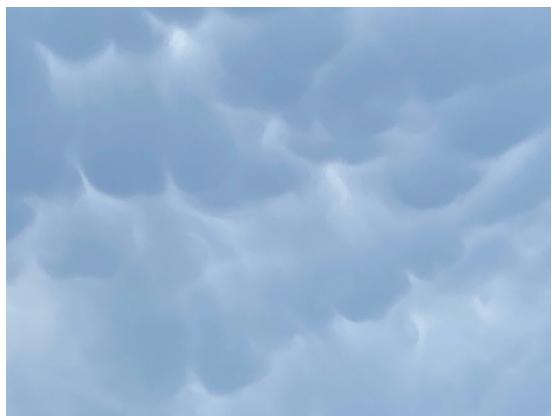
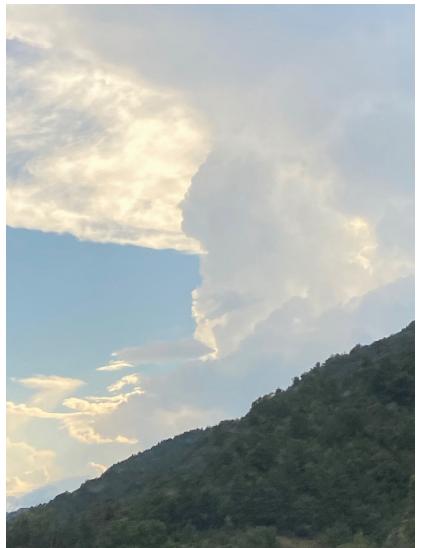
P What makes *One* so interesting, is Helga's gaze. It's not the same gaze like in *Helga Humming*. In *One*, I had the impression that her gaze pierces

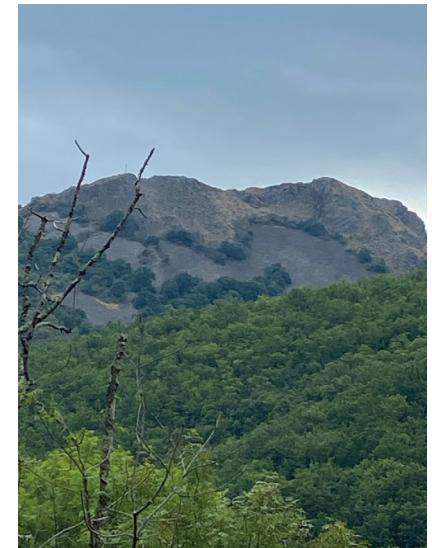
the camera. There's a sort of defiance that materializes between her gaze and the eye of the camera. There's less of this impression that you see a body-object that undergoes something. The camera attempts to register a certain image of the body, but the energy her gaze emanates and her performance and presence make the screen explode. She appropriates power while she's in front of the camera, destroys it and liberates herself from it through her gaze. That's what I find interesting in *One*.

A I made *Helga Humming* for BOZAR, after this sexist incident I mentioned. In the 49 years of my life as a woman this comment was really the last straw. For me, *Helga Humming* was in first instance a feminist gesture. It's only later that I became aware that asking a black woman to embody this character required a more profound reflection. Fortunately, I realized that and started to read more about the theme, to find out more.



P Ten or fifteen years ago, neither the public nor the institutions had any problems with this sort of work. Today the power of the narrative of the body has become so important. It's so present in public space... In today's society bodies face more and more violence. The body-objects, who used to keep silent, underwent everything and didn't say anything, but now they no longer want that somebody does the talking for them. They want to express themselves freely, without being censored. They refuse to remain silent and turn into resisting bodies. We're talking about humiliated bodies, violated bodies, bodies that are considered furniture,





PASCALE OBOLO IN GESPREK MET ANOUK DE CLERCQ

Tijdens de zomervakantie heb ik een toevlucht gezocht in een oud huis dat ergens verloren stond in de natuur, om me daar te herbronnen. Daar, in dat huis in de Ardèche, vlakbij een riviertje, ver van alles, genoot ik van de stilte en kwam ik op adem. Ik kon er schrijven, mediteren, rusten, flaneren, de tijd nemen om naar de natuur te kijken. Mijn ontmoeting met de kunstenares Anouk De Clercq kwam tot stand via Luk Lambrecht, de curator van het Cc Strombeek. Hij vroeg me om een tekst te schrijven over haar werk voor haar komende tentoonstelling. Ons eerste contact verliep via mail, daarna leerde ik haar stem kennen via WhatsApp, en ten slotte leerde ik haar gezicht kennen via Skype. Zo begonnen we een lang gesprek; we wisselden foto's uit van de plek waar we rust gingen zoeken en praatten over de maatschappelijke noden.

EEN BUBBEL ZUURSTOF

PASCALE OBOLO Ik woon in een zomerhuis waar er nauwelijks meubels in staan. Het interieur doet denken aan een klooster. Er is geen internet. Je bent er afgesneden van de wereld, van alle sociale netwerken. Het meest dichtbij dorp is 30 minuten met de auto. Ik voel de behoefte om weer aansluiting te zoeken bij de natuur, om me te ontgiften. Het is iets waar mijn lichaam behoeft aan heeft.

ANOUK DE CLERCQ Het is merkwaardig dat je zegt dat je lichaam er behoeft aan heeft. Het is de eerste keer dat ook ik binnen in mijn lichaam een roep van de natuur hoor — een erg luide roep. Het is een lichamelijke honger naar natuur. Ik weet niet of het iets te maken heeft met dat vreemde jaar dat we achter de rug hebben. Ik heb zin om dingen te planten. Ik wil de natuur voelen, met de natuur in harmonie zijn, zo dicht mogelijk. Natuur worden.



P Ik ben geboren in het woud in Kameroen, terwijl mijn moeder op het veld werkte met mijn grootmoeder. De natuur is altijd een noodzakelijkheid geweest, een welbehagen, een kracht. Ik heb er telkens weer behoefte aan om het contact tussen mijn lichaam en de natuur te herstellen, om te ontstressen, om mijn lichaam te reinigen van al het geweld uit het dagelijkse leven. Ondanks het verzet van die vervreemde lichamen die erin slagen — alsof dat de gewoonste zaak ter wereld is — om die vervuiling te weerstaan, om verzet te bieden aan het dagelijkse geweld in onze relaties met de ander en met de publieke ruimte, komt er een moment dat het toch te veel wordt. We moeten zuurstofbubbles creëren die ons ontgiften.

A De term 'geweld' gebruik je terecht. Ik heb nog steeds geen woorden gevonden om het gevoel te beschrijven waar jij het over hebt. Maar dat is precies waar het om gaat. Wat je zegt resoneert heel hard. Mijn lichaam hunkert naar de natuur zoals ik naar voedsel verlang als ik lang niet gegeten heb. Ik voel een grenzeloze behoefte om mijn lichaam te herstellen, om de balans te herstellen. Het wordt steeds belangrijker om beter te leven, met mezelf, met de anderen, met alles wat rondom ons gebeurt.

P Hoe moeten we onszelf helen van al dat nieuwe kwaad van de 21ste eeuw? Hoe moet je vandaag reageren? We moeten terugkeren naar het natuurlijke, naar de meest eenvoudige dingen, opdat het lichaam kan herstellen van onzichtbare wonderen. Het gaat om verborgen wonderen die je niet kan zien, die ons lichaam verontreinigen door de spanning die ze veroorzaken. Het is van het allergrootste belang dat we ons daarvan bewust zijn en dat we leren luisteren naar ons lichaam. Het is een kwestie die we aangeraakt hebben in ons laatste nummer van *Afrikadaa : L'Entre Deux Monde — l'art comme arme de la guérison*, de kunst als wapen om te genezen. We hebben ons gebogen over het werk van kunstenares of kunstenaarscollectieven

die de kwestie van helen onderzoeken in het domein van de kunst, door middel van niet-institutionele artistieke praktijken die bruikbaar zijn om ons te verzorgen en die ze willen delen met het publiek.

A Het is een interessant idee om een eenheid van mensen te beschouwen als een collectief en dat te behandelen als een ziek lichaam en werkelijk te verzorgen. Dat idee bevalt me heel erg. Je zou zelfs verder kunnen gaan en de wereld of de maatschappij waarin we leven beschrijven als een ziek lichaam, waarbij we dan rituelen moeten ontdekken om het te verzorgen.

Het doet me denken aan een boek dat ik twee jaar geleden gelezen heb, en dat me echt veranderd heeft: *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. De auteur is Adrienne Maree Brown. Ze is schrijfster, doula, voorvechtster van vrouwenrechten en zwarte feministe. Ze leert groepen mensen hoe ze de bewegingen van de natuur kunnen reproduceren, hoe ze natuurlijke of organische bewegingen tussen mensen kunnen recreëren. Het boek heeft echt mijn kijk veranderd op mijn verantwoordelijkheid als vrouw en als kunstenares. Ze maakt deel uit van een collectief uit Detroit dat zichzelf *Octavia's Brood* noemt en inspiratie zoekt in de teksten van Octavia Butler. Ik ben een grote fan van de boeken van die laatste. Een lectuur die net op tijd kwam. Ik was van plan om dit jaar naar Detroit te reizen om meer over *Octavia's Brood* te weten te komen. Hopelijk lukt het volgend jaar wel.

P Hoe kun je de bezorgdheid over de wereld waarin we leven vertalen in een kunstwerk? Hoe slaag je erin om via je artistieke praktijk die bezorgdheid te vertalen? Wat voor methode hanteren je?

A Voor ik mijn laatste twee video's realiseerde, *Helga Humming* en *One*, creëerde ik steeds andere werelden. Mogelijke werelden, met behulp van animatietechnieken of technieken die niet altijd te maken hebben met film. De belangrijkste idee was om te experimenteren met het medium. Dat was dus één zaak. Een andere zaak waar het mij om ging, was beelden maken die je perspectief, je kijk veranderen. Ik creëerde andere technieken om beelden te creëren, zonder gebruik te maken van een camera. Ik gebruikte bijvoorbeeld een elektronenmicroscoop of LIDAR, een 3D-scantechnologie die ook gebruikt wordt door architecten. Het resultaat is geen reële afbeelding, maar biedt een andere kijk op de werkelijkheid. Je gebruikt de verbeelding, je gebruikt iets anders. Dat betekent dat je een andere kijk krijgt op de wereld. Verschillende mensen hebben me verteld dat die benadering eigenlijk politiek is. De idee om collectief te werken, of om credits in te kunstwereld te introduceren — dat is een politieke benadering, zei men. Op een bepaald moment was dat niet genoeg. Ik weet niet of het de wereld is die veranderd is, of daarentegen mijn kijk op de wereld. Ik voelde de dringende noodzaak om te handelen. Ik voelde woede, ik voelde teleurgesteld omdat ik de onrecht dat ik rondom mij zag, de onzichtbare wonderen waarover jij het hebt. Ik voelde me niet meer in staat om een publiek naar een andere wereld mee te nemen. Ik wilde iets vertellen, een stem verlenen aan de dingen die me belangrijk leken, om misschien de wereld te verbeteren of te helpen om te helen. Dat zeg ik in alle nederigheid. Misschien lukt dat niet, maar ik moet het tenminste proberen. Dat veranderde met de video

Helga Humming, een videowerk dat me gevraagd werd door BOZAR. Tijdens een vergadering die bedoeld was om in dialoog te gaan, bedankte ik hen voor de uitnodiging en vroeg meteen waarom ze precies mij hadden uitgenodigd. Een man die ook aan tafel zat, antwoordde: 'Omdat u een vrouw bent.' Als een vulkaan die uitbarstte, dacht ik toen bij mezelf: 'Als je dan toch een vrouw wilt, zul je er een krijgen.'

Ik heb geprobeerd om al sculpterend alle vrouwelijke kracht in dit werk te concentreren en die te transformeren in poëtische beelden. Ik wou een werk creëren dat op verschillende manieren kan geïnterpreteerd worden. De moeilijkheid schuilt erin dat je een evenwicht moet vinden tussen poëzie en politiek. Een enorme vrouwelijke kracht creëren, een soort van monumentale intimiteit rond Helga Davis, de kunstenares die het personage gestalte gaf. Vooral die vrouwelijke kracht in de ruimte is belangrijk. Ik heb het over intieme monumentaliteit, omdat Vessel zich voor zijn compositie van de geluidsruimte gebaseerd heeft op de innerlijke stem van Helga. De polyfone geluidssband is tot stand gekomen door de intieme stem van Helga te verveelvoudigen om een ruimte te creëren. Ik heb Helga Davis uitgenodigd, en zij heeft een fysieke en vocale performance gebracht. Ik kende haar reeds voordien een beetje, en ik had bijzonder veel waardering voor haar werk. Het is een integere kunstenares met een authentieke innerlijke kracht. Ik vind haar geweldig. Ik heb heel veel geleerd uit deze artistieke uitwisseling.

P Welke plaats bekleedt het narratieve in de video *Helga Humming*? Hoe heb je samengewerkt met de performancekunstenares Helga Davis op het vlak van de schriftuur?

A De samenwerking kwam tot stand als een conversatie. Helga heeft zelf het kostuum uitgekozen, samen met Maarten Spruyt, een costumier en scenograaf met een sculpturale benadering van kledij. Ik had hem gevraagd om iets als een gevoelig harnas, elegant en vrouwelijk. Hij toonde enkele silhouetten, Helga heeft ze geprobeerd en het is vooral zij die een stem had in het resultaat. Het was natuurlijk extreem belangrijk dat zij zich goed en machtig voelde in dat kostuum.

Helga is een zwarte vrouw. Dat noopt uiteraard tot een andere lezing. Ik was bezorgd, want ik ben zelf geen zwarte vrouw. Ik wou niet het woord nemen in de plaats van iemand anders, en ik wou niet het verhaal van een ander vertellen in de plaats van die ander. Daarom heb ik met Helga een gesprek gehad aan het begin van het project om na te denken over het soort vrouw dat ze wilde creëren. We hebben gepraat over Macht en over de Macht nemen in de ruimte, over de ruimte controleren. Ik wou echt dat de blik van Helga de confrontatie aanging met de blik van het publiek dat de kamer binnenkomt. We hebben haar blik gesculptureerd in die context. Het was voor mij erg belangrijk dat ze de toeschouwers aankijkt en niet louter bekeken wordt.

Die samenwerking was echt grensverleggend voor mij. Ik heb heel erg veel geleerd tijdens het filmen. Het gesprek opende veel perspectieven en achteraf kwamen we tot de conclusie dat het gesprek nog niet afgelopen was. Daarom hebben we *One* gemaakt. Het gesprek is trouwens nog steeds niet ten einde: we blijven samenwerken.



