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Body Talk: feminism, sex, and Africa

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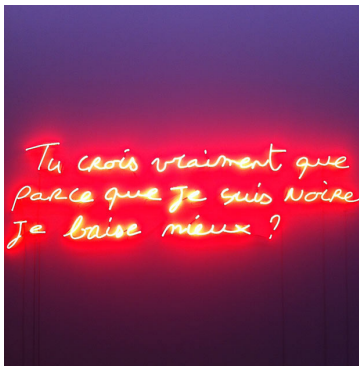
Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Marcia Kure, Miriam Syowia Kyambi, Valérie Oka, Tracey Rose, and Billie Zangewa: they are artists, they are African and, each in her own way, they tackle widespread fantasies and inequalities relating to women's bodies and sexuality. In the *Body Talk* exhibition, the body is the subject – but can also be the material of a work itself.

The message of this generation of artists is very clear: 'we are women of the world, intelligent, talented, and mistresses of our own personal and professional destinies. We are conscious of our power of seduction and we claim the right and the freedom to live our sexuality as we see fit.'" The words of Koyo Kouoh,

curator of the new exhibition at Wiels, "Body Talk". With the explicit subtitle, "Feminism, Sexuality and the Body in the Work of Six African Women Artists", it brings together six individuals of different backgrounds, ages, careers, and artistic practices, reflecting the multiplicity of situations experienced on the "dark continent". "It's a vast territory: the subject of the body and of feminism is broad; there are different trends and different interpretations," adds Kouoh. "And it is important to take the time to be aware of those different interpretations, so as not to lapse into a standardisation of the feminist debate."

Better at sex

"Feminist": when even Beyoncé appears onstage with the word behind her in large letters and quotes extracts from feminist statements in her songs ("Flawless"), it's surely a sign that the movement is back in a big way. "In the 1990s and the first decade of this century," observes Kouoh, "one had the feeling that the very idea of feminism had become something detestable for young women, that the liberation struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had sorted out lots of things, but nothing has been sorted out yet. Machismo is still a reality, sexism even more so, in Africa and elsewhere. That's one of the reasons that led me to put this exhibition together. In today's globalised cultural debate, we are always trying to smooth the rough edges and to avoid, above all, posing the real questions. These artists dare to raise some real questions – ones that might upset people, but that are important. The works of the Ivorian Valérie Oka, for example, are very direct. She has been working for some years on the sexual hierarchisation between the black woman and the Western woman and the idea that the African woman is allegedly better at sex and more sensual. Those are clichés inherited from the period of slavery and colonisation, stigmatisations of the black body – both the man's and the woman's – that has always been both a fascinating and a repulsive object and that has fed into a huge number of fantasies."



Among the works being exhibited at Wiels by the Franco-Algerian artist Zoulikha Bouabdellah are collages for which she has cut famous paintings depicting women's bodies into Eastern motifs. Some of those works are clearly orientalist, representing an artistic trend that crystallised, in representations of odalisques for example, the taste for exoticism in a certain kind of European painting, from Ingres to Renoir, via Delacroix. Zoulikha Bouabdellah was at the centre of a recent dispute about self-censorship when she withdrew – but finally presented – her *Silence*, an installation made up of prayer mats on which she had arranged high-heeled shoes, from an exhibition organised in the suburbs of Paris. "Self-censorship is, for me, the most pernicious kind of censorship, because you castrate yourself in anticipation of reactions to the work," believes Kouoh. "I always respect the artists' choice, without wanting to judge them, but I think it's a serious situation when the

climate of fear and intimidation we are experiencing today leads artists as eloquent and important as Zoulikha to do something like that.”

Hottentot Venus

In another Zoulikha Bouabdellah work in the Wiels exhibition, we see a steel spider – a tribute to the Franco-American sculptress Louise Bourgeois, the godmother of many contemporary female artists. But “Body Talk” also includes, above all, references to African model women. The Nigerian artist Marcia Kure, for example, pays tribute in an abstract textile installation to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the mother of the famous musician and political activist Fela Kuti, who herself campaigned for Nigerian women’s right to vote. There is also an evocation of Saartjie Baartman, known as “the Hottentot Venus”, who was born in what is now South Africa but was taken to Europe in the early nineteenth century to be put on show. “Saartjie Baartman has really become a point of departure for thinking about the African woman’s body,” explains Kouoh.



While the body is the subject of reflection in this exhibition, it is also, in some cases, the medium of artistic practice, as in the work of the South African artist Tracey Rose. “Tracey will create a performance for the exhibition: she will walk from Wiels to the mausoleum of the Belgian royal family, where she will bring charges against King Leopold II. Tracey takes a very confrontational approach. ‘Confrontational’ doesn’t mean ‘hostile’: it just means she is very blunt. She tries to lance the boil. That often hurts, but it’s often necessary.”