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Viviane Sassen

No words without images

Mirrors are very important to me as metaphors because they allow you to step into the other world … I was always intrigued by the other world, by something that I couldn't grasp … I think mirrors express that in a way. It's quite easy to step into the other world, which is there but simultaneously not there.

In Viviane Sassen's *Axiom GB02* (2014) the background of the rectangular image plane is filled with desert tan colour, speckled with flecks of white. Its flatness is subtly undermined by the numerous colours that make up the impression of a deep beige, colours which, although barely discernible, give away a texture that suggests sand. It undulates slightly as a flat, rectangular object pushes into its mass at an angle and is supported there.

At the top left corner of the object, where light is blocked entirely, a shadow forms a solid black triangle. Reflecting off the surface of the object, the peculiar angle of the horizon line renders sand and sky pure colour and form. Contrastingly smooth, the beige surface is sliced with light blue, where one presumes ground meets sky.

Surrounding this deceptively simple formation is a translucent green square that hovers over the background, cut open by the mirror and its shadow. Its source appears to be held at a height by two hands, knowable only by shadows tracing their shapes in the bottom right-hand corner of the image.

To attempt to relay Sassen's photography in a written or spoken form of language can only ever generate loose approximations. Words consistently fail to translate her visual syntax with the depth and fluency of her imagery.

Sorry … I'm not very good at talking about my work.

Mid-sentence, Sassen paused and apologised.

Our conversation took place via video call from Cape Town to Amsterdam, at a distance of almost 10 000km. There were failures in connection, audio drop-outs and misunderstandings, some of which were caused by the technology that facilitated our conversation,

others by the very nature of conversation itself. As I began to comprehend Sassen's proposal to step into 'another world' and pass through the permeable boundaries between an image and what lies beyond, Sassen too was finding her way through the re-presentation of her images in words.

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

Last year your body of work *Umbra* was shown as a multi-part exhibition of still and moving images, with light projections and mirrors, and accompanied by a publication with poetry. Can you start by describing your inspiration for that project and how it came into being?

Viviane Sassen:

I had got a call from the Netherlands Photo Museum in Rotterdam to say they wanted to give me an assignment, supported by a collector, and actually it was kind of carte blanche. They told me I was completely free to do whatever I wanted to do, but they were interested in me doing something new, something unexpected, or at least something that would bring me out of my comfort zone.

So it was an opportunity in a way to reflect on what you had done previously and to do something new. At what point did you fixate on the idea of exploring the shadow – the title of the show means shadow, right?

Yes, *Umbra* means shadow in Latin. When they gave me this commission, I thought, well, I cannot do something completely new; it has to be somehow linked to my previous work. And I decided to investigate the shadow because the shadow has always been a very important part of my work and I was always wondering why … I thought there must be something there, there must be a reason why I am so intrigued by the shadow. And I think it's partly because the shadow is about a kind of disclosure or not revealing a very important part of something. That has always fascinated me, the things that you can't see, the things that you can't grasp ...

At first it was irritating because I started seeing shadows everywhere; it became very obvious in a way, you know, and very literal which was not the idea. And so I thought I have to do something else in order to get into this realm and be able to make new work on a more conscious level – because I had always used the shadow on a very subconscious level in my work. I started reading a lot about the shadow, for instance Victor Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow,* which is about the shadow in art history, and there were some really amazing stories in that book which I used later. But it all became a bit too academic for me and I'm not an academic or intellectual in that sense, or an artist who works in a very conceptual way. At that point I thought, well, the only way to truly investigate these shadows is to go within, to investigate my own shadows. And then I thought I need someone to help me because there was this gap between my thoughts

and the images that I wanted to make. I decided to contact a friend of mine who is a writer and poet, Maria Barnas; she is also an artist and at the time she lived in Berlin so we started this email conversation and I asked her to write some poems about the shadow. We had previously worked on some books together and she had written about my work in a very poetic way.

So did she write the poems before you created the images?

Some of them, and some I sent her first, because I also went into my archive looking for images which contained shadows in a literal way but also in a personal, intimate or emotional way. So I sent those to her but at that point I also started writing to her about my personal shadows, my fears and longings, fantasies, my memories and ... well, basically everything that reminded me of shadows somehow. She took that material, my letters to her, and combined those texts with her own personal shadows. And so those poems are a mix of her shadows and my shadows.

Was that the first time you had gone back into your own archive to reflect and create new work?

Yes, yes it was.

And how did your reassessment of those previous works inform the new photography that you made for the project?

That's a good question. I think at some point I decided that there were numerous interpretations of shadows in my work. For instance, there was this body of work which I made when I was very young, still in art school, in 1996/7, and those were images that for me translated back to the idea of the Jungian shadow, the shadow that Carl Jung describes in his archetypes as that part of our personality that we are afraid or ashamed of, and combining also the sexual aspect of lust and the body. Back then I did a lot of pictures of nudes and self-portraits and I think at that time I was still exploring my own sexuality and having my first relationships … So that was something I thought could have a place within the show, as a separate chapter basically, and afterwards I took some more pictures to complement that story.

Could you talk a little bit about what the experience was like within the installation and some of the relationships you set up between the images and works in the space?

Yes, I'll guide you through it. The museum in Rotterdam is in a very large industrial building, and they divided it into seven different spaces. When you walked in you entered a space with a Beamer installation, with a large mirror on one side and a large wall and then on another side there was a large wall with a projection of still images that were moving past horizontally. There were a lot of landscapes and so you had the feeling that you were almost in the landscape and images kind of emerged

from the line. The mirror was not opposite but at a 90 degree angle from the installation. Once you entered this room you became part of this installation yourself, so you would cast a shadow on the wall and you would also see your own projection.

The installation format feels like a natural extension of the way in which you compose your images – there seems to be a conscious interaction between space and figure, sculpture and form, that can be played with. In the installation the viewer becomes the protagonist on a set of your devising, they walk around, and they cast shadows. What was your experience of creating shadows for the installation? Did you envisage it in the same way you might a photographic shoot or set?

Mmmhhh! I wouldn't compare it to an actual photo set but then on the other hand, now that you're saying it, maybe it is … I'm always interested in the incidental and so all of a sudden when you have things moving, light moving, and also yourself as an object taking part or becoming a part of this installation, then a lot of unexpected things happen. Also I think photography is quite limited in the way you perceive or view it, whereas with an installation like this it's more of an experience. I found this very interesting to discover. I even made this kind of soundscape in collaboration with someone as part of this experience which you could enter and walk around in …

You first published *Umbra* as a folder of prints and a booklet of poems, and you've just made a second version of the book that was designed by Irma Boom. What was your experience of thinking through the sequencing of the images the second time around?

The second time around I thought it shouldn't be so literal. In the exhibition, the installation which we were just talking about, *Totem*, is one of several installations within the show; others contain different set-ups and different work … And so I thought it would be more interesting to mix the images up a bit instead of making them into separate chapters ...

I think the first publication is much more about the poems than about the images. In the second publication it's the other way around, the poems are a bit hidden because they are in folded paper, so you can read them and you can see them but it's a bit harder. There are still these different chapters but they run through the whole book and you can kind of feel them by the way the book was designed and the paper that was used – some pictures are on matte paper and others on glossy paper including the larger series which returns several times within the book.

It's an absolutely beautiful book and I really noticed that the relationship between text and images switches mode in this book compared to the other. The text is more hidden and you have to

search for it or it reveals itself as you peel up the corner of a folded page; you know, the rhythm is different. What was the experience of thinking through that relationship between text and images and working with Irma as a designer, how did that dialogue unfold?

At first she was a bit in doubt whether we should use the poems at all – she said, well, you've done that other publication where the emphasis is much more on the poems and maybe we don't need them in this book, but I insisted that we have them and I think this was a way for her to give the poems a different place within the book.

Are there any new images in this second edition?

There are many more, for sure, because the first publication had only 11 images while the second publication contains all the images which were in the show, maybe a hundred pictures or so, plus a few extras.

I'd read that you are an avid lover of photo books and I know that you've made quite a number of books yourself. I am interested to know if that knowledge of the medium affects the way in which you take photographs. Do you think about the end presentation of the image when you're taking a photograph, and was that affected when you were making the installation because there were

so many possibilities of how it can be presented, whether it is projected or printed?

I think the medium of the photo book has always been important. When I was younger and still in art school I was always making little photo books myself in a very simple way just by going to the photo shop – this was all pre-computers and stuff – and so it has affected my work a lot, I think. I have always been interested in how images communicate together if you change their context or in the way you pair them, for instance. I think that for me a project is finished when there's a book. So I'm thinking much more in books than in exhibitions; with the installations it was a bit different and I think that was one of the reasons why I wanted to work with a new designer, someone who I admire and who I thought could make a difference. What I like about the work of Irma Boom is that all her books have this tactility, they are objects in their own right, beautiful objects, and I thought that was exactly what this project needed.

In this edition of the book, I noticed a little drawing or sketch that you'd included – it's two figures entwined, with legs and arms raised up at different angles; it's loosely shaded and above it you've written 'the other'. I feel like that simple sketch communicates quite a lot of the ideas that run through your work: there's silhouette, the shadow, and also these entwined figures and this idea of the other.

Definitely! I think all artists make self-portraits all the time in a way, well at least I do, but even if you are a very abstract painter I think that says something about you. My work has always been a way for me to deal with my own thoughts but also my fears and my longings. At some point I discovered that I make the same pictures over and over again, or at least there are certain themes in my work which keep on reappearing. One very important theme is the connection with the other, whether in terms of gender or race or whatever ... I think I've always been quite a shy person and I think I am longing for this kind of connection, this true connection with someone else. When I was younger I was always thinking about romantic love in a similar way, in terms of truly becoming one with someone else. Now I know it's not possible but I don't mind so much anymore! But yes, the other is everyone outside of myself and I think because I was partly raised in Kenya, there's also this 'other' in terms of a different … not race, but how would you say that?

Well, I think that the relationship between Europeans and Africans has been dominated by this sense of otherness and othering; an understanding of self in relation to an other ... That brings me to a question about your autonomous work that you've developed since you returned to Africa in 2001. It is possible to get stuck on this fraught history that dictates the power relationship between white Western photographers and black African subjects, and especially in the way that your subjects are usually concealed by the shadows or their visibility is heightened through your play with contrasting colours … But when one takes your whole body of work into consideration, and that includes your fashion photography, it's clear that your concerns around shadow and colour and form and this kind of framing that makes the everyday feel unusual have been there from the beginning. I wondered if you felt that your intent has shifted in any way as you've reacquainted yourself with Africa through your photography?

Yes! What you're saying brings up a lot of issues, maybe it will take too long to talk about all of them, but I do feel that I have a certain responsibility towards the people I photograph because, of course, being a white woman carrying a camera, the camera is already a tool of power, and being white in some areas of Africa is still in the eyes of some … I am very aware of the political issues that are being raised while looking at my work but it has never been my intention to make work that is political in an overt sense. I always try to go back into my own childhood and to have the same open eye and open vision towards the other as I had back then. And of course over the years things have changed, because I am not a child anymore, and while travelling through Africa many, many times I have also experienced different things … And of course I've grown and once you are aware of all the issues, the racial issues, then you can't really neglect them. I think it's something that I am struggling

with because I know that photographing black skin is surrounded by huge political debate … at the same time I don't necessarily want to be a part of that, which is difficult because a lot of people want me to take that responsibility. I cannot be that child any more, which is just, you know, taken by the beauty of it.

It's interesting you say that because it's also just that childlike innocence as well.

Yes, and it was only after I was back in Holland, and I was seven or eight years old, that my parents told me that there was something called racial discrimination, you know, based on someone's skin colour, and I was completely blown away because I didn't know that it existed. For me I always felt this longing to go back to Africa and back to where I felt I belonged. I felt part of that world although I also knew, although I was very small, that I was different from my friends and my friends were black and I was white and that was that. I don't know, that's just the way it was. It was not loaded with these political issues at all. But I do see that, in the eyes of some people, some of my work could look as if I am exoticising Africa.

I guess my question was also around the fact that lots of the devices that you use – the shadow, for example, or body paints – are things that you've been using since really early on, before you returned to Africa, and so I guess they are formal concerns that have been yours since the beginning. I was reflecting on your work in relation to the idea of photography as writing with light, and it occurred to me that at the same time you are also drawing with bodies and that in your photographs the body becomes a prop or materials and the kind of formal sculptural qualities are accentuated. Is that important to you in the work?

It is but it's more … sometimes I feel more like a sculptor than a photographer. I'm just in love with these kinds of body sculptures because for me they also express an emotion; they might seem very formal but there's not only this formal aspect to it, there's also an emotional aspect to it, at least to me. When I take pictures of these body shapes, for me there's not really a difference between the white skin and the black in that sense. If I were to go back to Africa now I would probably stage less than I did in the past. But in the early 2000s when I went back to East Africa and started taking these pictures, I think I was one of the very first – or at least I hadn't seen it anywhere before – to stage my pictures. At that time I was trying to show a very personal and different view on Africa, my own personal experiences, my childhood experiences in Kenya, because I think back then I only knew the pictures of *National Geographic* or the black and white grainy pictures of famine and, you know, hunger and disease and all these kind of stereotypical images of Africa … And at some point in my subconscious I was thinking,

well, if you go to Africa you have to be at some level a documentary photographer. And then, when I went back to the places of my childhood and the villages, suddenly it made a click in my mind that I could also stage my pictures and make them personal.

In *Umbra* especially, there seems to be this exploration of very simple things, geometry, pattern, colour, and this kind of spectrum between an opacity and translucence, and there are always these very simple devices that shift our perception but only far enough so that we see something new and I guess that's the relationship between reality and the staged. Another device that you used throughout *Umbra* is the mirror, and I wondered if you could talk about the significance of mirrors as props or as metaphor in your work?

Mirrors are very important to me as metaphors because they allow you to step into the other world. From a very young age onwards I was always intrigued by the other world, by something that I couldn't grasp. I have always had very vivid dreams at night and if I would wake up I would remember my dreams and write them down; even as a child I was always very captivated by my dreams. For me it has always been a world that is equally important to my daily life and I think mirrors express that in a way. It's quite easy to step into the other world, which is there but simultaneously not there.

So they are almost like gateways?

Yes, they are.

Beautiful!

Going back to Holland from Kenya when I was young, Kenya was everything I knew, because I was two when I went there and I was five or six when I went back to Holland. So everything I knew was Kenya and when we went to Holland, I had never been to Holland, and I had a feeling that I was shut off from my real life, that I was trapped in this parallel universe and I couldn't go back to where I belonged – which was Kenya, at least in my eyes.

Is there anything you would like to share about the project that we haven't discussed already?

Well, lately I have been more and more aware of the whole racial debate, because there's been such a presence, you know, of the idea of the other and of xenophobia; there's so much in the media about refugees and people feeling not welcome. And I feel that I have the urge to say something about that in my work while at the same time I always try to avoid these kinds of political questions. I think people questioning my work and my integrity is a good thing, it keeps me sharp, and it also allows me to think in different ways or to experience and to see my work in a different light. That doesn't mean

that the work I've done in the past is wrong because I think it came from another space, it came from my own childhood memories that were coloured in a different way. For instance, the shadows that you referred to earlier in my work and hiding the faces – it's something that I do realise is a very strong symbol but it was always my intention, even back then, to show … I was always hoping that those shadows function as a mirror so people could reflect on themselves and look upon their own preconceived ideas about the other. Obviously a lot of people don't see those images in that way – but that's something to learn from as well.

This conversation took place via Skype at Stevenson, Cape Town, and the artist's studio, Amsterdam, on 9 November 2015

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Nicholas Hlobo