

Katrin and Felicitas WOELGER

GHANA DOSSIER

Katrin and Felicitas Woelger have been working together as a duo since 2014. Both are also active as individual artists - together they regularly develop performative sequences and interventions that they visualise in the form of performances, videos or photographs.

PERFOCRAZE INTERNATIONAL ARTIST RESIDENCY, APRADE, KUMASI, GHANA

The residence is located just outside Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city.



Hassan Issah's studio

Va-bene Elikem Fiatsi, aka CrazinisT ArtisT has founded the residency. She lives and works there with her family and several assistants.

The assistants who were present in January 2021 were:

- Martin Toloku, sculptor and performance artist, working with wood and sometimes termites;
- Mawuenja Amudzi, media artist;
- Edward Onsoh, photographer and painter.

From January to July they receive international artists at the residency.

The guests are accommodated in double rooms. Cooking is done by Ghanaian teams or - on weekends - voluntarily by the guests. The artists stay for at least one month.

In January 2021, eight foreign artists were supposed to come, but due to the Covid situation, only one other artist from out of town was present, apart from my daughter Felicitas and me:

- Amina Gimba, a Nigerian painter and illustrator.

The residency is decidedly LGBTQ - friendly, although homosexuality is still forbidden in Ghana.

Disability is not forbidden, but it is considered a curse.

INTENTION

We had planned to be on the road a lot, to be visible.

I had taken a lot of research papers on walking, performance, situationists with me.

Felicitas took sketchbooks and pastelchalks.

ON SITE

The tropical climate made things difficult. It was very hot, staying outside during lunchtime was almost impossible. On the second day, we went for a short walk in the neighbourhood at four o'clock in the afternoon, and on the third day Felicitas lay in bed with a sunstroke. One evening we went for a walk, a neighbour was watching us and called "the family" to tell us not to do it, it was not supposed to be safe. That left only mornings to go out.

We visited local museums:

The Manhyia Palace Museum: the old residence of Otumfuo Agyeman Prempeh I and Otumfuo Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, the thirteenth and fourteenth Kings of Asante;

The Kumasi Fort - Ghana Armed Forces Museum: Large collection of pictures, guns, flags, and other relics detailing the history of the armed forces in Ghana from English colonialism in late 1800's to the present.

We went to various markets and neighbourhoods. Mostly we took the local minibuses, often we went back by (private) taxi due to the heat and fragile health of my daughter.

The city contains many brutalist houses in concrete, surrounded by green banana trees, very red earth and bright light, with plastic and textile waste everywhere that seems to grow out of the ground.

Together with Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi and the assistants we visited KNUST - the Kumasi Art University - one of the best known or the most famous in the country, located between the residence and the city centre, and the studios of:

- Ulla Deventer;
- Samuel Kortey Baah;
- Hassan Issah.

LECTURE

A lecture about our work took place on 6th January in the courtyard of the Residency.

perfocraze_international

Join us tonight 7:00pm GMT for a presentation by Katrin Woelger on her artistic journey, performance practice and her collaboration with Felicitas.

Katrin @anafagri and Felicitas work as multidisciplinary artists whose performance questions the realities of human experiences, relationships, the family, otherness and self assertion of a society.

Their interactive installations and performances as a duo explore and investigate the need for equal protection, human rights, equal rights for physically challenged, people with disabilities and impairments.

#crazinistartiststudio #perfocrazeinternationalartistresidency #performanceart

VISIBILITY & OTHERISM

About 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, of whom 2-4% experience significant difficulties in functioning (according to WHO 2021).

Felicitas and I have been working together since 2014, starting with performing a status quo.

A status quo of our life as mother and daughter and our experience as individual artists. Once a year as a sequel, mostly performing. Every two years we go on a residency to evaluate and to expand our perspectives.

Our collaboration started under my direction and developed into a fully equivalent work.

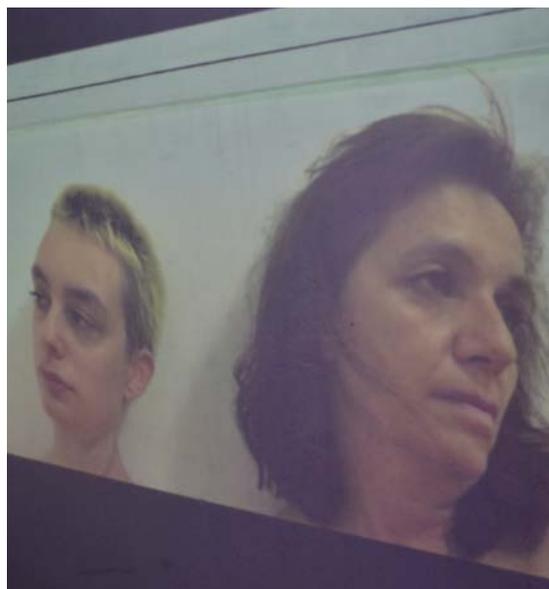
Visibility and otherism are basics. We question intellectualisation and theoretic research as well as we are constructing it (see: N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought. The power of the cognitive nonconscious*,

The University of Chicago press 2017).

We aim to raise the visibility of people with special needs outside the "outsider art – bubble."

The health or psychological condition of an artist should not play a role in the evaluation of his/her art, especially it should not override the perception.

People with special abilities are often marginalised. With good intentions and sometimes with compassion they are left in the victim role. Victimisation also plays a role in the former colonised places. I was amazed at how present the topic of colonialism still is. In our case we had a "clash of victims." Who needs more attention, more understanding?



PRIVILEGE

I feel/felt that the opportunity to travel to Ghana at this time in this constellation was a great privilege. In the century before last it was extraordinary for women to travel so far alone; today it is extraordinary for people with special needs to do so, or to visit an artistic residency. But Privilege is also a very sensitive issue in a place where Europeans were privileged per se.

CHALLENGE

We could not be overlooked, we stood out because of our skin colour, which for some meant the representatives of a rich global north, for others we were the descendants of the oppressors. People who are supposed to give. But we were a woman with a disability and an older woman, her mother, both at the bottom of the hierarchy.

The fact that we were therefore impossible to categorise led to invisibility. One day, in front of "China Mall" a global supermarket, Felicitas had an epileptic seizure, and all of a sudden we were totally invisible. It was as if we had vanished. The same thing happened another time at another place.

STUDIO

Since our plan to walk every day was not feasible, we planned a classical performance in front of an audience. We spent the next few weeks gathering materials, ideas and inputs for the performance. These inputs, conversations and other communicative tools of preparation proved rather difficult. It was clear from the start that one can move freely and work anywhere in the residence, the walled house and courtyard. We had to learn that there are cultural differences there, too. I had asked to be allowed to set up a table or something in the courtyard in front of the house, which we could then consider our workplace. Somehow that did not work out. We were offered several times to work in the back of the house, where it was also supposed to be shady, but that seemed too hidden to me, it was also more cramped and above all stuffier than in the big courtyard. We kept trying to use the space and work outside, but as soon as I left something lying around - and my materials were broken glass, old plastic, a wire, an old can or something similar - the things were gone again, although I pointed it out several times. For Felicitas, a table - even a temporary one - would simply have been ergonomically better. She drew on her knees. At some point, we took one of the small tables/stools that were available and then worked in the room, which meant that we were less visible again, but could work more concentrated.

BEAUTIES AND BEASTS

The unusual, extreme, almost 24-hour continuous proximity of mother and daughter - intensified by frequent stays in the room - clearly also led to tensions and both our beasts sometimes came out. Aesthetics/beauty played a role again and again in conversations and observations.

During one of these "room hours" we sat next to each other on the bed. We looked at each other, Felicitas began to make faces and I to answer. This reminded me of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's heads and I filmed us. This resulted in a series of short videos over the following days. The grimacings has been reduced quite quickly. We set ourselves the task of achieving the greatest possible reduction. The glare of the (daylight) lamp, flickering through the fan, which in turn made a noise that reminded of distant heartbeats, provided the background. One of the videos was shown at the "Love Feast".

RELIGION

There are churches everywhere, at least three in every street, you see a lot of preachers, gospel songs are constantly being sung somewhere around. The country is supplied by missionaries by evangelical churches. This is one of the reasons for discrimination against LGBTQ Communities.

HIERARCHY

The society in Ghana, as we experienced it, was very hierarchical. Also in the residence. The owner Va-Bene Elikem Fiatsi, who had been a pastor before becoming an artist, is on top as the boss, then the family, the assistants and the guests. The roles were there, assigned or crystallised over the course of the four weeks.

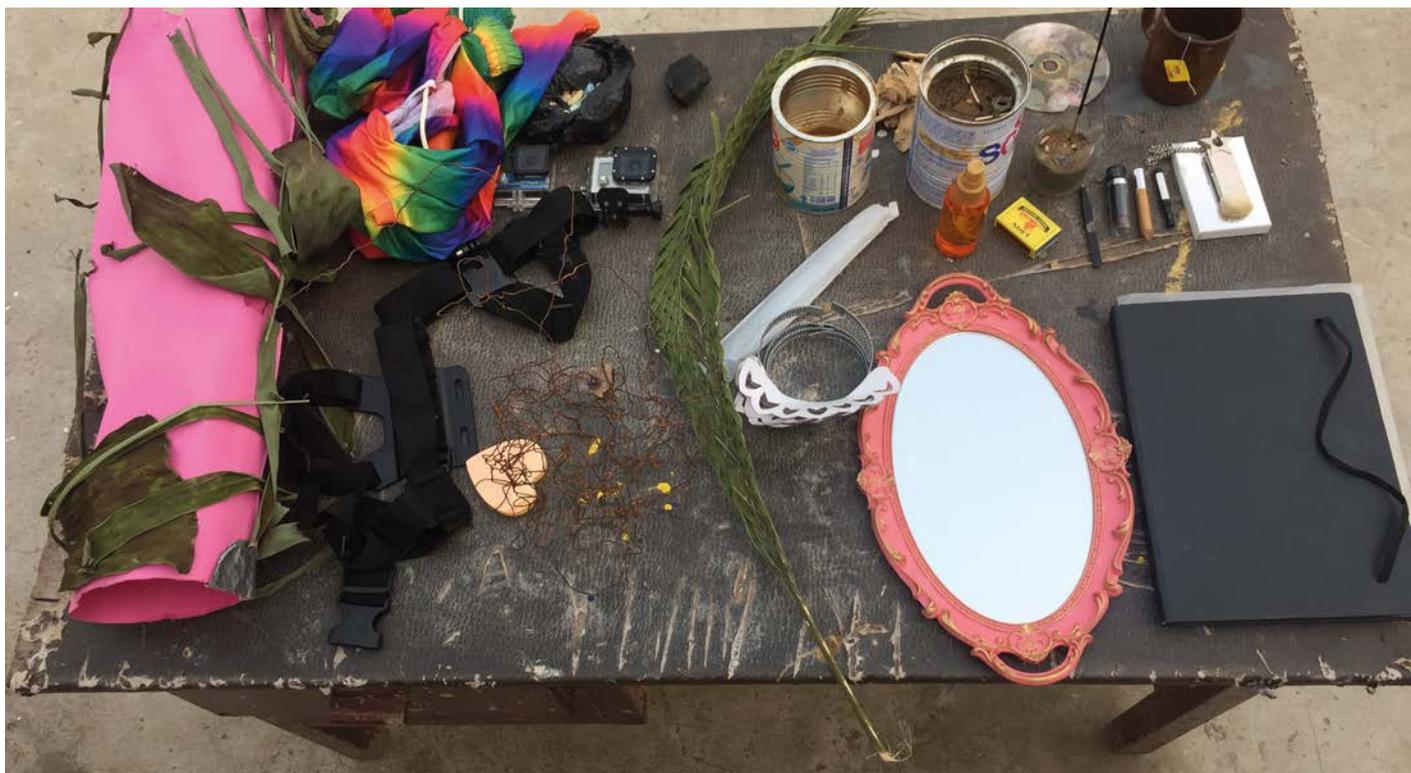
MAMA

At some point I had the impression, that I was only perceived as a mother. Most conversations with me revolved around being a mother as an artist or the well-being of my daughter. Mother as a theme was also present through the resident family with two mothers and the two murals that Amina painted on the walls depicting mothers. We addressed the issue by choosing it as the topic for our performance.

QUEEN

"Crown" and "many people" was another starting point. Many people we saw were wearing something on their heads: goods, huge bowls, headdresses. In the museum we saw the different kings and queens, life-size figures or photos.





We found the leaves Felicitas chose to use in the surroundings.
For me, the starting point and goal was the visibility and expansion of space, directing the gaze to below, above and outside, twisting hierarchies, giving up power.





INSTALLATION & PERFORMANCE

23. 1.2021, c. 45 minutes

Material:

Chalk, milk-like liquid, metal, mirror, paper, leaves, plastic, metal leaf, scissors, incense, hair

Actions:

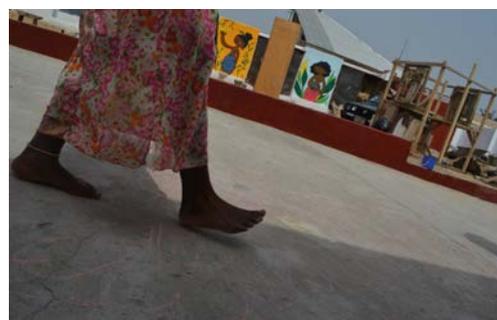
Lying, standing, looking, sitting, asking, having hair cut, burning, singing, speaking, climbing, shouting

Not knowing how the festival would go, we trusted the organisers. In hindsight, we would have changed both the timing and the exact location. As far as the documentation was concerned, I would have done things differently. I had offered to hire one of the assistants as a photographer, which they had refused. They would document everything with two cameras anyway. I shouldn't worry, they always do that. Besides, everything would be broadcast live via facebook and instagram, and I could have these recordings afterwards, too.

On 23 January and the days before, the community was very nervous about the many guests. There was cooking, building a bar, cleaning up, bringing tables and chairs, it looked different every day. For me, who always works site and time specific, this meant daily concept changes.

The place designated for our performance was between the house and the space reserved for the audience. Nobody told us that there was a kind of stage set up on the other side and the audience was oriented towards it.

Felicitas' installation consisted of painting the whole area - about 50m² - with hearts. I had gilded patches of paint on the floor and prepared dripping white liquid for the performance, which was supposed to be frozen but wasn't - someone had had to move something around....



Performance (at the residency) by Martin Toloku





An artwork by Hassan Issah



At 5:30 PM, the proposed start, none of the guests were there yet and the team was fully occupied with preparations. Should we start? We started slowly with our actions. I lay down on the floor and Felicitas stood like a statue facing the entrance, we slipped into a "durational performance", without consultation, to start slowly and then increase the rhythm, involving people as they came. The audience was arriving. There were intense moments, when a neighbour, at my and Felicitas' request, cut my hair with the - previously gold-plated - scissors with great force and verve, or when I stood at the top of the water tower and pulled my jacket over my head. The discussed ending would be when I climbed up to the water tower and shouted loudly "Mama" (meaning "grandmother" or "queen" in Ewe according to the colleagues) and ended by welcoming the audience with "Love, Peace and Happiness." There was a wide range of reactions - from enthusiastic to anger or disregard. Unfortunately the organisers had forgotten the end - there was a lot of excitement or they thought that the Durational was the actual performance? There is hardly any documentation. Allegedly, the files were all deleted by mistake.

The way the festival continued, with a stage and very long speeches, the performance could very well have taken place later in the midst of it and the audience. Above all, we would have achieved even more visibility because - the later it got - more and more guests came and then there were also the speeches. But maybe that would have distracted from the original topic: the recognition of the LGBTQ community. And again it was maybe a clash of victims.



ACCRA

Two days after the performance we left for Accra, the capital of Ghana. Accra is an international city on the coast. We visited touristic sites and galleries before leaving back to Europe.

The residency was made possible by a grant from the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Public Service and Sport and the cultural department of the province of Styria.

Katrin Woelger, 2021-03-09

Photo-credits: Katrin Woelger, Valikem Fiatsi, PerfocrazE International Artist Residency

 Bundesministerium
Kunst, Kultur,
öffentlicher Dienst und Sport