

**DIRECTION,**

**DIRECTION**



**NDAYÉ KOUAGOU**

**I LOVE**

**AND LOVE**

"If you were looking for direction, this is definitely not the place" – spell the billboard-sized words on the gallery walls. The message doesn't sound reassuring, yet it offers a warning, suggesting that there could be more to it than a standstill. Conundrums and contradictions are typical in Ndayé's work. Encountering his texts (orally recited in one of his live or video performances and embedded in sculptures and installations) can feel like a riddle to be solved.

My first encounter with Ndayé was five years ago. I had recently moved to a new city and did not know many people. Ndayé and I started talking while queuing for a drink, but when it was time to order, he revealed that he didn't want anything. I was confused. Was he queuing for the sake of it? Over time, things became clear: it was to start a conversation.

I speak of Ndayé, 'the real person', to tell of Ndayé, 'the artist', 'the performer', because the distinction between self, actor, and character is almost indistinguishable in his practice. In his videos, usually less than ten minutes long, a single character - always acted by Ndayé, speaking in a dubbed female voice with subtitles - starts spiralling monologues from something seemingly small, like a coin, to tackle big subjects, such as power, belief, and freedom. With off-kilter wordplay and double entendres, 'the character' introduces questions without giving clear answers. He strives for transparency and yet incites doubt. Means appear to have no ends. Or, at least, not immediately.

In the exhibition, an invitation to look further - and across various dimensions - is the video a coin is a coin. Candidly speaking into the camera, the artist wishes to clear a misunderstanding and offer advice. He points out what has not worked: 'looking at two sides of the same coin is not exactly looking elsewhere'; how difficult it is 'to change'; and how powerful 'change' is. Is he a motivational speaker? An influencer? A preacher? An actor? But most of all: is he for real?

Impersonating a figure that could emerge from the news and entertainment, Ndayé performs a specific kind of wayfinding. The artist prompts the question of movement and triggers spatial interrogation, not so much about where one is going, but where one stands – how one 'looks' and sees things. The video questions the position of viewers and their inherent biases. One way in which it does this is via

dubbing. Speaking in 'standard English', the orator may be more credible and trustworthy, making the message 'universal'. Another is via clothing: the character wears a blazer and tie, which point to formality. Yet, the garments are off-sized and deconstructed. He also wears flashy eyeshadow and one earring only. In the studio where he moves, the unconcealed tripods and backgrounds point to a dissolution of boundaries: between what's on stage and behind the scenes, inner and societal, truthful and constructed.

By playing a double of himself and remixing visual and cultural traits, Ndayé moves through various linguistic and aesthetic codes, showing how he can be one and many. He seems to enact what art historian Claire Lambert-Beatty names 'parafictions' – those narrative ploys whereby artists perform other versions of themselves, which confound cultural desires to order, categorise and 'make sense' of complex narratives. These strategies, Lambert-Beatty explains, 'train us in skepticism and doubt, but also, oddly, in belief'. To change course when confronted by a system that claims order and binaries, Ndayé embraces a parafictional persona where self and character merge into multiplicity. He morphs and shapeshifts. He changes his outfits and posture. He goes nowhere and anywhere, blurry and unbound.

Ndayé knows that language controls and captures. Like his visual appearance, his speech oscillates between layers of clarity and opacity, irony and seriousness, wanting to pin down meaning and establish concrete truths while counteracting the necessities of uncertainty. A coin is just a coin - but also a catalyst for conversation. 'Change' is action but also a tool, a metaphor to switch viewpoints.

Like the artist says in his video: orality is vital. Even if there isn't a clear direction or a plot, but feelings and intricate thoughts, Ndayé showed me (in a bar one night and consistently in his work) that to get lost in words is to find multiple ways. It's about the dialogue and entering the room where one can be. The many dimensions a person can inhabit.

Giulia Civardi

**let me**

**explain.**





Ndayé Kouagou, *A coin is a coin*, 2022

If you were looking for direction this is definitely not the place, look elsewhere. Do you look elsewhere? I mean the real elsewhere, because I kind of know you, I have seen you looking at a coin, you've looked at one side and then the other, and for the more meticulous of you, you've looked at each side twice. Looking at two sides of the same coin is not exactly looking elsewhere. I know, shocking! I'm sorry you've been lied to all your life (also it's not the only lie in your life, but I'll come back to the other one another time), so what does it mean to look elsewhere? Maybe looking at another coin? That can be a beginning, but definitely not the end of the road, you're only planning on looking at coins, all your life? Really, one coin, then next one, then the next? See how at first it felt like looking elsewhere when you moved from your first coin to the second, and now it doesn't anymore? Yes, after all a coin is a coin. So why did you feel like you were looking elsewhere after changing coins the first time? The answer is easy, that was the feeling of change, but always changing in the same way ends up not feeling like change anymore.

Yes, all this was about change! I mean is there anything more powerful and frightening than change? Maybe fear itself, but that's also for another conversation. Change is key, key to where though? Key to a place of change! I'm sorry if I got you confused (I promise it was not on purpose, no, not this time). Let me explain: the goal was to look somewhere else, and we concluded that to succeed in this goal you needed to change, and then we understood that changing was a constant movement, an always changing movement. That's the true power of change, change is the key, and the door and also the space. If you're more spiritual you can rephrase and say: change is the true power, I personally will not say that, as I grew up in a space where spirituality is mocked, yes, my mom didn't like churches!

Wow, all this from just looking at a coin? Damn, now I understand why they say money is powerful.



## BONUS PART:

You really want more? From me? Damn what's wrong with you?

You know some things are easier to write than to say, like eichhörnchen (a squirrel in german), so here I am writing.

I know I just said that some things are easier to write than to say, but I do believe that for some messages saying them out loud is the only true way, I do believe in the power of "oralité".

These two are not the only contradictions going on in my life right now, my problem is that; I love to love and love to hate, try to live a life full of these two and you'll struggle with choosing sides, and god knows, sometimes you have to choose sides. What? You believed you'll be able to stay in the middle all your life? Nope girl, that's not possible, you'll have to choose sides, so choose wisely. Don't worry the world is well done, so the choice will not be as complicated as you can imagine, the choice will usually be made simple by some sort of powerful magic, the choice will usually be between, left and right, up and down, good and bad, chocolate and vanilla, airbnb and hotel, apple and android, port and starboard, See? not that difficult, I'm sure you had an answer for all of them, without even having to think, what a beautiful world we live in, right? Right? I know.



**TO LOVE**

**TO HATE**

**SUNDY**