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To Illuminate History, an Artist Turns Out the Lights

At the New Museum, Kapwani Kiwanga explores light as a form of surveillance, from 18th-century “lantern laws” to the N.Y.P.D.’s 21st-century strategies.

By **Aruna D’Souza**

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When you first alight on the fourth floor of the New Museum, where the Canadian-born, Paris-based artist Kapwani Kiwanga has her first solo museum exhibition in New York, it may take you a second to realize what’s different. But start to walk around the soaring gallery of “Off-Grid” and it will dawn on you: there is no familiar electrical brightness here, only whatever light streams through distant windows.

Massimiliano Gioni, the museum’s artistic director, began discussing the idea for an exhibition with Kiwanga in January 2021. It was to include a commissioned work that would be developed over the following year and a half. But from the very beginning, one thing was certain, Gioni said in a recent conversation: “Removing the lights was probably the first decision she made.”

Kiwanga’s photography, film, installation and sculpture is research-driven and intensely concerned with the materials she uses. This installation consists of a beaded curtain that hangs from the gallery’s 24-foot ceiling, running perpendicular to a succession of tall, wedge-shaped mirrors across a long, deep purple wall — a subtle, shifting play of reflection and refraction.



In “Cloak,” a beaded curtain hangs from the gallery’s ceiling, running perpendicular to a succession of tall mirrors across a long, deep purple wall. Its simple geometries belie its complexity. Dario Lasagni/New Museum

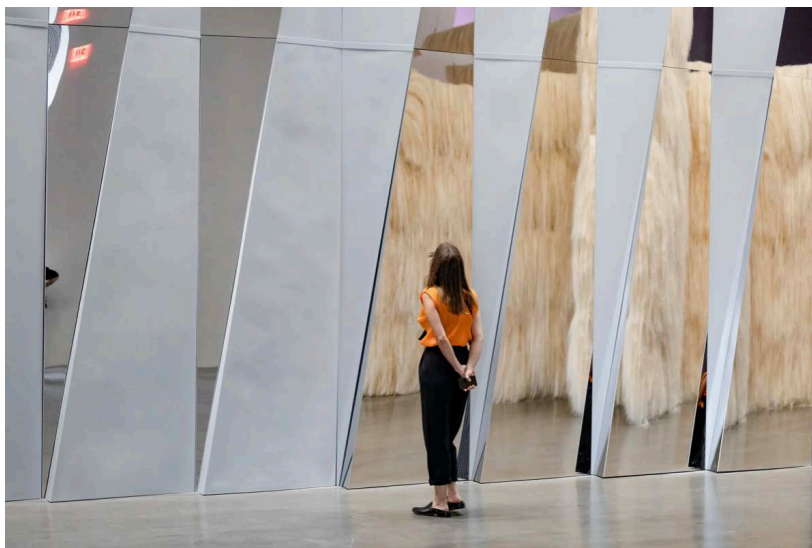
Having worked in experimental filmmaking before becoming an artist, she has often played with ideas of transparency and opacity. But for “Cloak,” the newly commissioned work, the material she chose to explore was light itself — which brings with it physical, historical, sociological and ethical dimensions.

Kiwanga’s interest in light is equally connected to her investigations into colonial American history — in particular, 18th-century “lantern laws” in New York and other parts of New England that mandated that enslaved Black, mixed-race and Indigenous people as young as age 14 carry lanterns with them at night so they could be watched, and anyone without one could be arrested. The scholar Simone Browne, whose book “Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness” was a cornerstone of Kiwanga’s research, considers the laws to be a precursor for more recent stop-and-frisk approaches to policing.

The history Browne traces allowed Kiwanga to “think about light and all the different ways that it’s used and how it can be weaponized,” she said in a recent Zoom call from Paris.

She had explored this history of forced illumination in a 2019 exhibition, “Safe Passage,” at the M.I.T. List Center, focusing on artificial light. Now, in New York, she comes at things from a perspective rooted in a new sense of place. “I started asking, ‘What is the contemporary technology that connects to those lantern laws?’ And the floodlights used by the N.Y.P.D. in public space, in spaces that are deemed to need more light — more surveillance — really fit in with that.”

The high-intensity mobile floodlights to which Kiwanga refers were introduced in 2014 by then-Mayor Bill de Blasio to reduce crime; 150 of them were set up outside public housing developments in predominantly low-income communities of color. The practice has been criticized by some residents for the machinery’s brightness, noise and relentlessness, and was the subject of a 2021 documentary short, “Omnipresence.” It continues to be used under the administration of Mayor Eric Adams, a spokesperson for the New York Police Department confirmed.



Left, the steel panels of “Cloak” are sprayed with pulverized aluminum reflectors used in police floodlights. A viewer peers into the mirrors, which reflect “Maya-Bantu,” a 2019 work with sisal by the artist. Liz Ligon/New Museum

In addition to avoiding artificial illumination, Kiwanga’s strategy included upending the function of one of these police floodlights — short-circuiting its usefulness as an object of surveillance. With the assistance of the New Museum, she purchased one from the same manufacturer that supplies them to the Police Department.

“What was so interesting to me, was the idea of taking the aluminum from the floodlights, which is used to reflect and augment the light, and completely inverting its intended effect and making it opaque,” Kiwanga said.

With the artist in Paris, Gioni and his colleagues, including the curatorial assistant Madeline Weisburg; the museum’s director of exhibitions management, David Hollely; and a team of preparators began searching for methods to extract the aluminum from the floodlight’s reflectors. “Those were cut down and melted, made into ingots, then made into a wire that goes into a special spray gun that transforms aluminum into paint,” Gioni said. The resulting gray paint was sprayed on the beaded curtain and triangular panels that are interjected between the mirrors. The paint is matte and light-absorbing.

Putting the museum to work in the process of planning and fabricating the work was partly the result of the limitations imposed by Covid-19 travel restrictions, and partly Kiwanga's working method. "The studio for her is not always a manufacturing place, it's a thinking place," he says.



Kapwani Kiwanga set out to "think about light and all the different ways that it's used and how it can be weaponized," she said. via Kapwani Kiwanga and Goodman Gallery; Manuel Braun

Though the show is about the history of light as surveillance, Kiwanga is interested, too, in the ways that people evade being seen. The title "Off-Grid" alludes to this: The term suggests living off the electrical grid, but also, says the artist, becoming invisible or going rogue. The curtain of "Cloak" is semitransparent — it allows vision and blocks it at the same time, and, if people step behind it, functions as a sort of hiding place.

The exhibition also includes a 2019 sculpture titled "Maya-Bantu." The work, composed of metal rods hung from the ceiling and covered in strands of sisal which bristle and glow in the light, also invokes aspects of a colonial past. The artist first became interested in the material after seeing large-scale plantations in Tanzania. The crop is native to Central America; it was brought to the region by German colonizers, and exploited as an important cash crop. In "Maya-Bantu," Kiwanga says, sisal is in a not-yet-fixed state: "It's not a rug or a rope or anything yet, but it's no longer a plant. It's just this raw material — a question of possibility."

The riskiness of Kiwanga's decision to work only with natural light will become more apparent as daylight wanes, when visitors face darkness in the galleries. For now, says Carol Fassler, a security guard at the New Museum, the darkness is only an issue during the last 45 minutes or so of the museum's Thursday night viewing time. Visitors are confused at first, Fassler says, but that adds a dimension to the work.

"As it got dark, people started asking questions about why there were no lights, so I got to tell them about the history of the lantern laws," Fassler said. "It's as if, as it got darker, the whole thing was shining a light on her ideas."

Kapwani Kiwanga: Off-Grid

Through Oct. 16, the New Museum, 235 Bowery, Manhattan; 212-219-1222; newmuseum.org.