

The Black Body and the Activist Archive: Contemporary South African Visual Art and the Politics of Queer Knowledge.

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This paper reflects on the work of young black South African artists Zanele Muholi (b. 1972), Nicholas Hlobo (b. 1975), and Nandipha Mntambo (b. 1982), considering their contributions to debates about gender and sexual identity, ‘African-ness’, and representations of the black body. How, I will ask, are their particular forms of cultural production ‘sites’ of—and how do they provide occasions for—new critical and theoretical explorations of the idea of the archive?

Muholi is well known for her intimate photographic portraits of black lesbians. She is interested in the politics of visibility, and regards herself primarily as an activist seeking to present positive images of queer black life. Mntambo has become known for provocative photographs, performances and objects that interrogate representations of the black female body: she has moulded cowhide to her own naked form, and had herself photographed as a matador. Hlobo makes sculpture from wood, rubber, lace, and ribbon. Often monumental and frequently involving an element of performance, his works repeatedly explore suggestive commonalities between queer performativity and aspects of traditional amaXhosa practice.

All three artists appear regularly in group shows of ‘South African’ work and have won local and international prizes. Focusing selectively on significant exhibitions, prizes, or controversies in relation to each, I will consider the effects of different institutional or curatorial practices, modes of validation, and strategies of self-dramatisation and identification to ask how their work exploits, interrogates, or engages with its presentation as ‘South African’ (and its sometimes-contested status as ‘African’)? How does it intervene in the fields of local gender politics, pan-African anxieties about queer activism, and in the global art market? What are its theoretical pay-offs for questions about what ‘African’ ‘archives’ that engage with (or *are*) ‘cultural productions’ might look like, and how they might be read against the grain?