

The Black Body and the Activist Archive: Contemporary South African visual art and the politics of queer knowledge.

Andrew van der Vlies

This essay reflects on the work of two young black South African artists: photographer Zanele Muholi, born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban, and Nicholas Hlobo, born in Cape Town in 1975, whose work encompasses sculpture, mixed-media paper-based work, and performance. Both are well known in South African art circles for their engagement with gender and sexuality, specifically lesbian and gay experience. Their work, produced in very different media, intervenes in the fields of local gender politics, South African anxieties about the body politic (and the biopolitics of the body), as well as pan-African anxieties about queer activism.

Provocative from the outset, Muholi prefers the term *activist* to ‘artist’.ⁱ The primary concern of her photographic projects is, in her own words, to present “positive imagery of black queers (especially lesbians) in South African society and beyond”,ⁱⁱ This she has done in a number of solo and group exhibitions in South Africa and, since 2006, in group exhibitions internationally—in 2011 alone, her work could be seen in shows in London, Liverpool, Rome, Basel, Ulm, and San Francisco.ⁱⁱⁱ As a visual activist concerned, too, to step outside the gallery space, she co-founded the “Forum for the Empowerment of Women” in 2002 to aid black lesbians, especially in the South Africa’s poor black ‘townships’, where they are routinely the victims of sexual violence.^{iv} Hlobo, born in Cape Town and resident in Johannesburg,^v has achieved international art-world visibility for his paper works and especially his sculptural objects made from rubber (often inner-tubes), fabric (including ribbon and lace), and found objects including wood, soap, and colonial-era furniture.^{vi} His work explores male same-sex desire and the suggestive commonalities between gay performativity and aspects of traditional rural Xhosa youth culture, while also drawing attention to the syncretism of all supposedly autochthonous cultures. “In my works I talk about myself,” he insists, “my entire South African heritage. I’m not just Xhosa—in my genealogy there is diversity”.^{vii} Hlobo has had a number of solo shows in South Africa, residencies in the Netherlands and USA, significant project features at the ICA in Boston, Tate Modern in London, and the Liverpool and Venice Biennales, and won significant prizes: most recently, a Rolex Visual Arts Protégé award, allowing him to work under the mentorship of Anish Kapoor during 2010 and 2011.^{viii}

Both, by virtue of their ascent to the status of leading practitioners in South Africa with increasingly international reputations, provide fascinating examples of bodies of work that ‘archive’ and, to the extent that their work has found its way into gallery spaces and into collections, might be said to *be* ‘archived’. I want to suggest something about the way in which their deployment of visual vocabularies that test the very limits of representation (and of the ‘representable’), their interrogation of ways of seeing, and their deployment—and subversion—of ‘tradition’ (in content, and form) in particularly queer ways, suggest theoretical pay-offs for invoking questions about what ‘African’ ‘archives’ that engage with or are ‘cultural productions’ might look like, and how they might be read against the grain.

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I am not posting my paper in full, as it is to be considered for a publication arising from the panel (Panel 33, convenors Maria Olausson and Grace Musila). Anyone wishing to prepare for my paper may wish, in preparation, to download the following images, which

are amongst several that are discussed at length in the full version of this essay, and which will be discussed briefly in the paper delivered on 16 June.

By Zanele Muholi:

- “Aftermath” (2004)
<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/aftermath.htm>>.^{ix}
- “Ordeal” (2003) <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/ordeal.htm>>.^x
- “Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg 2007”
<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/being6.htm>>.

By Nicholas Hlobo:

- “Ndiyafuna” (2006)
<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/ndiyafuna.htm>>
- “Umthubi” (2006) <<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/umthubi.htm>>
- “Phulaphulani” (2008)
<<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/hlobo/phulaphulani.htm>>

Comments and queries welcome.

Andrew van der Vlies

a.vandervlies@qmul.ac.uk

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ⁱ “Zanele Muholi”, in Sue Williamson, ed., *South African Art Now* (New York: Collins Design, 2009), 130. For additional biographical information, see Joost Bosland, ed., *Disguise: The Art of Attracting and Deflecting Attention* (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2008), 92.

ⁱⁱ Zanele Muholi, on *Faces and Phases*, an exhibition in London 24 June to 1 August 2010. See “ZANELE MUHOLI: FACES AND PHASES”, *Fred Gallery*, online <<http://www.fred-london.com/index.php?mode=exhibitions&id=68>>, accessed 4 June 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the *Figures and Fictions* exhibition of contemporary South African photography at London’s V&A Museum (12 April to 17 July), Officine Fotografiche, Rome (27 April to 31 May), the *Look 11 Photography Festival* in Liverpool (13 May to 26 June), Art Basel (in June), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (3 July to 16 October), and the Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm/Burlafingen, Germany (11 June through May 2012). See information on the Stevenson website <<http://www.stevenson.info/artists/muholi.html>> (accessed 28 May 2011).

^{iv} “Zanele Muholi”, in Williamson, ed., *South African Art Now*, 130.

^v Biography in *Nicholas Hlobo: Standard Bank Young Artist Award 2009*, ed. Sophie Perryer (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2009), 105.

^{vi} See Sue Williamson, “Art and Life in South Africa 1968 to 2008”, in Williamson, ed., *South African Art Now*, 23-27; 25.

^{vii} Nicholas Hlobo, quoted in *Nicholas Hlobo: Izele*, ed. Sophie Perryer (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson, 2006), 4.

^{viii} Online information from Hlobo’s gallery website: “Nicholas Hlobo”, *Stevenson*, online at <<http://www.stevenson.info/artists/hlobo.html>>, accessed 28 May 2011; and material previously on the gallery’s former site, *Michael Stevenson*, online at <<http://www.michaelstevenson.com/contemporary/artists/hlobo.htm>>, accessed 10 August 2010.

^{ix} It appears in print in Zanele Muholi, et al., *Only Half the Picture*, ed. Sophie Perryer (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson; Johannesburg: STE, 2006), 20.

^x Zanele Muholi. See Muholi, et al., *Only Half the Picture*, 15.