Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art

GLYPHS: ACTS OF INSCRIPTION

Social Activism and the Politics of the Archive

Brett M. Van Hoesen

The phrase "art and social activism," surprisingly not yet a category in the Art Genome Project, has gained considerable currency over the past several years, implying that artists of the current age have begun to self-consciously reassess the role that visual arts can play in evincing social change.[1] In reality this relationship between art and social action has been strong for many decades. Today's seemingly renewed awareness of art's power to instigate social transformation provided the starting point for the exhibition *Glyphs: Acts of Inscription*. Hosted by the Pitzer College Art Galleries in Claremont, California, and co-curated by Renée Mussai, curator and head of archive at Autograph ABP in London, and Ruti Talmor, assistant professor of media studies at Pitzer College, this compelling show ran from September 19 to December 5, 2013, and included work by nine international artists from Africa, Europe, and the United States, including John Akomfrah, Cheryl Dunye, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Lyle Ashton Harris, Mwangi Hutter, Zanele Muholi, Andrew Putter, Mickalene Thomas, and Carrie Mae Weems. As the title of the exhibition implies, the curators aimed to interrogate how "identities are constituted through acts of inscription—real or imagined—into the visual archives that constitute history, popular iconographies, and artistic canons" and to further probe the "consequences of such acts on the poetic and political dimensions of representation, difference, and visibility."[2]

DOI 10.1215/10757163-2828020 © 2014 by Nka Publications

Published by Duke University Press

Zanele Muholi, images from series *Faces and Phases*, 2006–14.
Courtesy Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont

To emphasize this agenda the curators designed the exhibition as an opportunity for a cross-dialogue among artists of different generations working in photography and film, with the important inclusion of W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Paris Album 1900" to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the legendary intellectual's death. Du Bois's archive, commissioned for the 1900 Paris World's Fair, is composed of roughly five hundred photographs depicting African Americans' lives, notably documenting an emerging middle class of educated professionals, including doctors, lawyers, and teachers. With this rich visual history Du Bois self-consciously countered conventional notions of African American lives at the turn of the century. Indeed, *Glyphs*, as a collective whole, prompted visitors to think critically about the culture of the archive, the ways in which public discourses and systems of knowledge are formed through material evidence, and conversely the ways in which notable absences of archival collections also inscribe meaning. According to the exhibition program, "Silences, absences, and erasures . . . these critical interventions challenge existing discourses, destabilizing the deeply ambiguous and often surreal taxonomies of *raced*, sexed and gendered representation." Confronting canonical conventions of art history and modes of representational knowledge, the work in this exhibition presented a diverse understanding of the identity politics inherent in the African diaspora and the intrinsic power that photographic and filmic images carry as agents for social change, on both local and global levels.

Glyphs was presented in two galleries on the Pitzer College campus. The Nichols Gallery, the main gallery, included photographic work by Muholi, Mwangi Hutter, Thomas, Weems, Dunye, Fani-Kayode, Harris, and Du Bois. On the first wall, where one entered the gallery, hung twelve of Zanele Muholi's portraits from the series *Faces and Phases*, large-scale (twenty-by-thirty-inch) silver-gelatin prints selected from a collection of two

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Mwangi Hutter, *Aesthetic of Uprising* II, 2011, and **Mickalene Thomas**, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Trois femmes noires*, 2010. Courtesy Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont

hundred images that archive queer black (lesbian and non-gender-conforming) individuals. Muholi authored these works from an insider's perspective, aiming to provide a more representational history of South Africa, and at the same time to commemorate and celebrate the black lesbian and trans-(wo) men community. In the past several years Muholi's work has been exhibited widely, with recent shows including the Carnegie International, Documenta 13, and Art Basel, with additional current or recent exhibitions in cities such as Berlin, Amsterdam, Cape Town, Johannesburg, San Francisco, Minneapolis, and New York. Her work has received exceedingly favorable reviews; the New York show at the Yancey Richardson Gallery, for instance, was positively reviewed by *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter and highlighted as one of the top ten best exhibitions in 2013 by photography reviewer Vince Aletti in the December 2013 issue of *ArtForum*.[3] Muholi is charting new territory by having her project *Faces and Phases*, which dates to 2006, widely received by a range of venues across the world. At the core of her work remains the agency of, and at the same time serious dangers and potential human rights atrocities posed to, the lives of queer and transgender subjects in contemporary South Africa. Her work serves as a poignant protest against the crimes and prejudice that stem from "queerphobic, xenophobic, transphobic, lesbophobic, and homophobic" attitudes and actions that persist today.[4]

The installation of Mwangi Hutter, produced by a two-bodied artist team, with one joint name, that lives and works in Ludwigshafen and Berlin, Ger-

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Installation shot including **Carrie Mae Weems**, *Not Manet's Type*, 2010, and work by **Muholi**, **Mwangi Hutter**, and **Lyle Ashton Harris**. Courtesy Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont

many, as well as Nairobi, Kenya, explores notions of self-knowledge, social conventions, and issues of identity reception. Their work *Aesthetic of Uprising II* (2011), a large-scale photographic print, runs from a holder high on the wall to the floor below, merging into a lengthy pool of black ink. In one sense a durational piece, the ink, initially wet in places, dries over time, echoing the photographic black-and-white image of a barren landscape with severely cracked earth, which a nude, crouched female figure traverses. The visual tension in the photograph is reiterated by white, graffiti-marked towels partially submerged in the dark ink while still allowing for the legibility of disturbing key words, such as "Monsters," or full messages, such as "Peace Is Transient, Greed And Hate Will Begin To Rouse And Hound Us." Mwangi Hutter, an innovative collaborative, who works in video, performance, installation, and photography, poses challenging questions about shared identities and histories of land and resources in a postcolonial, globalized era. Significantly the collaborative prompts us to think not as divided entities or as individuals determined by national borders or even continents, but as members of a collective world who face many challenges, from the past to the present. Our contemporary condition warrants active engagement to live beyond the boundaries and limitations of the archive in a space of communal engagement, regardless of how uncomfortable or undefined, Mwangi Hutter seems to imply, if not quietly, persistently demand. The key is to see and hear these discordant histories and to face them, together.

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Carrie Mae Weems, *Not Manet's Type*, 1 of 5 panels, 2010. © Carrie Mae Weems, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

On the remaining two walls of the first gallery Mickalene Thomas's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Trois femmes noires* (2010) sat in dialogue with Carrie Mae Weems's five-part series *Not Manet's Type* (2010). Both works address the contested terrain of European Great Masters as the pinnacle of art-historical canonical conventions and hierarchies. Thomas's large-scale C-print (forty-eight by sixty inches) appropriates Manet's famed painting *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863), replacing Manet's figures with three black women dressed in vibrant outfits and jewelry, reminiscent of a revival aesthetic of the Blaxploitation genre. Playing with the role of the gaze, all three women look directly at the viewer. The surreptitious setting of the photograph, likely the sculpture courtyard at MoMA, incorporates one of Matisse's famed *Back* series, not only as the backdrop of the image, but also the awkward fourth figure in Manet's composition. In short, multiple levels of appropriation and restaging are at play in Thomas's work. In a related way, Weems, recently named a MacArthur Fellow in 2013, ponders representational politics, specifically the "absence or objectification of black women's bodies in the history of modern art," in her series of digital prints *Not Manet's Type*.[5] Her work, a pairing of photographic image and text, involves nude self-portraits that critically assess the hypothetical reception of her body (or her body as muse) by a coterie of canonical European male artists from Manet to Picasso, De Kooning to Duchamp. "It was clear, / I was not Manet's type / Picasso—who had a way / with women—only used me / & Duchamp never even / considered me." The performative quality of Weems's work—both as image and as poetic spoken word—reinforces the agency of her subjecthood. Her conclusion, "I took a tip from Frida / who from her bed painted incessantly—beautifully . . ." at the very least implies that the hierarchy of old canonical standards is shifting; indeed, the informed voice of the author has known this all along.

Additional work in this space included director Cheryl Dunye's *Introducing Fae Richards: Excerpts from The Watermelon Woman* (2013), a roughly six-minute mockumentary featuring Cheryl, a young black lesbian working a day job in a Philadelphia video store, who is in the process of making her own documentary-style film on black female actresses of

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the 1930s. Self-consciously manipulating the concept of the archive, the film features seventy-eight images by photographer Zoe Leonard, generated for Dunye's fictional character Fae Richards (1908–73), allegedly credited in films only as "the Watermelon Woman." Collectively, Dunye and Leonard's actions and their collaborative book, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive,* actively historicize a visual history that in truth does not exist, commenting on and critiquing the lack of tangible records devoted to the lives of women of a certain class, race, and sexuality.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode's (1955–89) *Nothing to Lose XII (Bodies of Experience)* and *Grapes,* two-color photographs from 1989, speak to more personal expressions of spiritual and erotic fantasy, a collaboration with the artist's late partner Alex Hirst. Drawn from the final body of Fani-Kayode's work, these photographs challenge the hegemony of conventional images, visualizing homoerotic poses. According to the artist in his essay "Traces of Ecstasy," "Both aesthetically and ethically, I seek to translate my rage and my desire into new images that will undermine conventional perceptions and which may reveal hidden worlds. Many of the images are seen as sexually explicit—or more precisely homosexually explicit. I make my pictures homosexual on purpose. Black men from the Third World have not previously revealed either to their own peoples or to the West a certain shocking fact: they can desire each other."[6] In this sense, Fani-Kayode as an agent of social change over three decades ago was self-consciously and politically generating his own kind of photographic archive.

On the mezzanine level of the Nichols Gallery Lyle Ashton Harris's 2002 series of large-scale (twenty-four-by-twenty-inch) Polaroid prints explores the expressive culture of famous performers such as Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday. The eight works on view showcase and interrogate the ambivalent negrophilia intrinsic to European and American modernism, a history newly documented through the scholarship of Jody Blake and Petrine Archer-Straw.[7] In an innovative manner through the mode of self-portraiture, Harris, who was recently named the 2014 recipient of the David C. Driskell Prize, assumes Baker and Holiday's identities, restaging signature gestures and poses from both performers' iconographies.[8] Exploring constructions of gender, sexuality, and difference, the series also prompts us to think critically about the complexities involved in being a megastar and how a public persona is framed by and consumed through the visual culture of the press photograph. Works such as *Je Ne Sais Quoi #5* and *Better Days #7* also play with visual tropes of European modernism—where the former plays upon the modernist aesthetic of capturing sequential motion, while the latter reinforces the modernist frenzy over primitivism, which problematically was perceived to be associated with both the black body and objects of material culture from Africa and the South Seas.

The Kallick Family Gallery hosted Akomfrah and Putter's video installations. These two pieces, perhaps because they occupied their own space, acted as particularly compelling counterpoints to one another and to the larger notion of the archive as a manufactured space. Putter's *Secretly I Will Love You More* (2011) attended to the lingering presence of a Dutch-colonial past in South Africa, aspects of which have been suppressed, if not forgotten, while Akomfrah's *Peripeteia* (2012) addressed an insufficiently documented history of the early African diaspora in Europe, an important archive yet to be unearthed. Putter's video, slightly under one-and-a-half minutes in length, stages a haunting, living Golden Age–style portrait of Maria de la Quellerie, the wife of the first Dutch commander of the Cape of Good Hope, Jan van Riebeeck. It is documented that around the time of 1652, the couple brought a young Khoikhoi ("Hottentot") girl, Krotoa, into their home for a number of years. Even as a child and young woman, Krotoa, who learned Dutch, served as an interpreter between the two cultures, an important role that sadly did not ensure a secure or prosperous life for her, as she died destitute just two decades later.[9] Putter creatively and unconventionally imagines van Riebeeck's wife as an inspired, heartfelt caregiver to Krotoa; he fictively imbues Maria with the ability to speak the young girl's language by staging a performance of the older woman singing a lullaby in the click-filled sounds of Nama, closest in form to the now extinct language from Cape Khoikhoi.[10] Putter augments the story, or selectively rewrites history, by creating a nonexistent archival record that Maria professed

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Lyle Ashton Harris, *Je Ne Sais Quoi #5*, 2002.
Monochromatic dye diffusion transfer print (Polaroid), 24 x 20 in.
Collection of Gregory Miller. Courtesy the artist

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Andrew Putter, video still, *Secretly I Will Love You More*, 2007.
Courtesy the artist

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a deep love for Krotoa. In Putter's living portrait painting, Maria smiles coyly at the viewer as she coos, "Do not fear me little one—Welcome into our home, How beautiful you are, Little shiny one, with your wooly hair.… I will love you as I love my own children: Secretly I will love you more.… I dream of your people and my people changing each other. Welcome into our home precious child."[11]

This visionary refashioning of history restages the colonial gaze. We watch Maria, inspecting her physiognomy and mood for proper registers of emotion; we hear her chosen linguistic markers of difference as she observes and characterizes Krotoa. Putter also notably distances the viewer from the emotional and social import of the lullaby, content that we learn only by reading the translated text on the wall. Portraying this fictive history of the emotional bond between Maria and Krotoa in the Nama language, Putter seems to be purposefully manipulating the power dynamic that one might expect when accessing archival evidence of Dutch-colonial presence on the Cape. Indeed, the language of the colonizer is subverted, the hegemonic relationship rewritten so that Nama is the prominent language of this archival fiction.

Akomfrah's stirring video installation *Peripeteia* (translated from Greek as a reversal of circumstances, or turning point), from 2012, just under twenty minutes long, begins by closely examining two drawings by the sixteenth-century German artist Albrecht Dürer: *Head of a Negro Man* (1508) and *Portrait of the Moorish Woman Katharina* (1521), two early representations of black people in Western art. Intrigued by both of these historical images, Akomfrah is ultimately interested in the lost history of members of the African diaspora in Europe. He presents this engaging fictional musing on what it must have meant to exist in this new, unfamiliar world through a psychological rendering of the vastness of the northern European landscape and the harshness of the environmental conditions, what he refers to as a "psycho-geography." While very little is known about these two individuals, Akomfrah encourages us to understand them through psychological means, inserting these figures into a collective history of Europe, not merely as unnamed, unknown subjects, but as contributors to the cultural fabric of the continent. Akomfrah is also concerned with the practical side of what it takes to sustain diasporas: "What necessary political, epistemic shifts have to occur to make diasporas possible?"[12] At the same time, these histories are often intertwined with loss and grief, dramatic change that comes from physical migration. Therefore, the artist takes creative liberties, adding fictional elements such as an Ashanti doll, loaded with symbolism for Katharina's hypothetical origins or, perhaps, connected to Akomfrah's own Ghanaian heritage. "Everything hides as much as it reveals," he notes, focusing on details of Katharina's face. "Where one eye looks slightly damaged, she attempts to hide this trait from us or perhaps from Dürer."[13] In the midst of these intimate, emotive connections between these two figures and the dramatic visual and acoustic atmospheric conditions of the landscape, the imagery shifts periodically to disturbing details from Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, where in the central panel dark-skinned figures seem to be associated with sinful temptations. This interplay between these disparate visual and symbolic zones reminds us of the extent to which the archive of the African diaspora, particularly in Europe, is incomplete.

It is worth noting that in tandem with the exhibition opening of *Glyphs* the curators hosted a keynote lecture by Carrie Mae Weems, followed by a full-day symposium at Pitzer College. An event such as this often serves as a mere footnote to an exhibition's history; however, in this case, the array of sincere and profound presentations amplified this project's cultural importance and urgency. The symposium included introductory remarks by curators Talmor and Mussai, a guest lecture titled "Inscribing Visual Disobediences" by cultural historian Nana Adusei-Poku, and individual presentations and a panel discussion by many of the artists featured in the show, including Weems, Harris, Mwangi Hutter, Akomfrah, and Muholi. The artists reinforced in subtle and overt ways the social justice issues inherent to their work and practice, noting the personal, political, and communal impetus for their social activism. Given the recent passing of the legendary cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Akomfrah's generous, finale discussion of the processes involved with making his documentary film *The Stuart Hall Project* (2012–13) and his three-screen installation

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The Unfinished Conversation (2012) was particularly timely and moving. Interwoven with sections of the films, Akomfrah, whose extensive background in working with filmic archives includes co-founding the Black Audio Film Collective, invited us to think critically about how we access archives, to consider how we create a dialogue between one's preconceived understanding of a person or event and the complexities of meaning that are embedded in archives, being ever mindful that we might intentionally or unintentionally steer the content. He posed additional provocative, compelling questions as well: How does the archive itself create a framework? How is the archive summarizing? And how does the archive allow one to understand the tempo of life or major cultural or biological shifts? Collectively, the exhibition and its symposium set the stage for the exhibition catalogue, currently in progress, a publication that importantly will document (if not archive) this impactful show.

***Brett M. Van Hoesen** is assistant professor of art history at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is currently completing a book manuscript on the legacy of Germany's colonial history in the arts and visual culture of the Weimar Republic.*

Notes

1 For further discussion of the Art Genome Project, see Melena Ryzik's essay "Online, a Genome Project for the World of Art," *New York Times*, October 8, 2012. For public access to the categories and terms listed as part of the Art Genome Project, go to: https://artsy.net/theartgenomeproject (accessed March 30, 2014) and http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/09/arts/design/artsy-is-mapping-the-world-of-art-on-the-web.html?pagewanted=all (accessed March 28, 2014).
2 From the exhibition program.
3 Holland Cotter, "Art in Review: Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases* at the Yancey Richardson Gallery," *New York Times*, March 21, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/22/arts/design/zanele-muholi-faces-and-phases.html?_r=0 (accessed March 30, 2014), and Vince Aletti, "Best of 2013," *ArtForum* (December 2013), 235.
4 Exhibition program.
5 Ibid.
6 Rotimi Fani-Kayode, "Traces of Ecstasy," in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, eds., *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (London and Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 1999), 276–81 (p. 276).
7 See Jody Blake, *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900–1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); and Petrine Archer-Shaw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
8 Awarded by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the annual national David C. Driskell Prize honors and celebrates contributions to the fields of African American art and art history. For additional information see: http://www.lyleashtonharris.com/news/.
9 For additional biographical information on Krotoa, see Trudie Bloem, *Krotoa-Eva: The Woman from Robben Island* (Cape Town: NB Publishers, 2010).
10 See Andrew Putter's text that accompanies the YouTube version of the video piece, *Secretly I Will Love You More*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lP8deaENJyc (accessed March 28, 2014).
11 For the full text to Andrew Putter's lyrics, translated into Nama by Pedro Dausab, see: http://www.venice-exhibitions.org/index.php?page=113&lang=en (accessed March 28, 2014).
12 From symposium, presentation by Akomfrah.
13 Ibid.

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