

Benevolent Excess: Transgressive Form in the Art of Nicholas Hlobo

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Lingering, persistent and sustained in repeated encounters with the work of Nicholas Hlobo is a tone, a chord, a certain music, a very particular blend of minors and majors, an exceptional interweaving of perseverance and avowal, exertion and elation, or, why not, the netherworld and the heavens. Certainly, any of Hlobo's wall-pieces/paintings or sculptures/architectural assemblages/installations will set off a cluster of responses, a broad spectrum of thoughts/emotions, and address an array of topics. Yet more insistent than all such specifics is the principal or primary music sounding throughout Hlobo's oeuvre, an enduring tune emerging from and indicative of Hlobo's ability to combine challenge with comfort, transgression with care, confrontation with consolation. Perhaps, thus, not an exaggeration to claim this as Nicholas Hlobo's own tenor, key and idiom, where tough shit is linked with high spirits, hardship married with *jouissance*, the troubles with an undefeatable buoyancy.

Indeed, as if referencing this concern and care, Hlobo speaks of engaging in conversation with his viewers, in relation to the topics his works address – tolerance, sexual identity, gender, language and body, transformation, mutation and change, self and culture, nationhood and ethnicity, to name a few. However, this notion of conversation does actually seem to precede the particular topic at hand, targeting the engagement as such a priori to its message. Yes, Nicholas Hlobo has things to tell, many things to tell, evident in the swift and solid creative flow characterizing his art for many years now. But even more so, Hlobo's art is saturated with the desire to tell, with a need to tell and a belief in the value of telling. Dialogue is central, exchange is key, as Hlobo's material stories are carefully nurtured upon their journey to a receiver. In fact, this dialogic aspect of Hlobo's visceral and materialist conversation pieces, in combination with the mentioned inspired surge, is a powerful generative force in his work.

Resolutely of the present, in conversation with contemporary events and conditions, from the personal to the global, Hlobo's artistic practice is

nourished by scrutinizing and exercising tradition as well as from challenging convention. The domestic and the vernacular maintains a lively presence through both the use of medium, method and the utilization and treatment of particular materials. The use of the stitch and the knot become sophisticated gestures which unite, link, mold, join together; the deployment of embroidery and sewing techniques, does import household craft and skills into the artistic practice; endorsing as well a gender play in reference to a domestic feminine sphere. Of equal weight is the use of materials; rubber coming mostly from recycled inner motorcar tyre tubes, leather, textiles, decorative ribbons, lace, chains, which reference both domestic and vernacular idioms as well as street and club subcultures. In fact, the way particular materials are assembled and orchestrated, including the occasional found domestic objects and furniture pieces, they speak equally elaborately of the human body as of the house, or the home. Articulated with a kind of *arte povera* choreography, the body, transgressive, transformed, mutated, is allowed to find its home, its place to dwell. Just as the increasingly architectural strain in Hlobo's work purports a strategy of reterritorialization, a movement of inhabitation and home-coming. Indeed, Hlobo's performative practice, the particular performances he enacts in relation to a new work, is precisely about inhabiting the space of the installation and wearing its sculptures. Wearing the costumes, he baptizes the works, as it were, with the presence of and the contact with his own body.

More Dionysian than Apollonian in its fusion of a discourse of excess and unboundedness with the quotidian and the familial, the art of Nicholas Hlobo, as it embodies, restages and revises the Bakhtinian carnival and/or the Renaissance *masque*, is Baroque, both in methodology, aesthetic choice and content. Methodology – in its operative position between the “rational” and the “organic”; aesthetics – in its affirmative deployment of plenitude, extravaganza and spectacle; and content – in its attention to the lines of translation between mind and matter, between the natural and the theatrical, between mask and skin. One may even claim that Hlobo is determinedly Mannerist in the way his works generate meaning out of transgressive form, unsettling or upturning the relations between form and content, refusing or displacing binaries and opposites in their intricate play of space and matter.

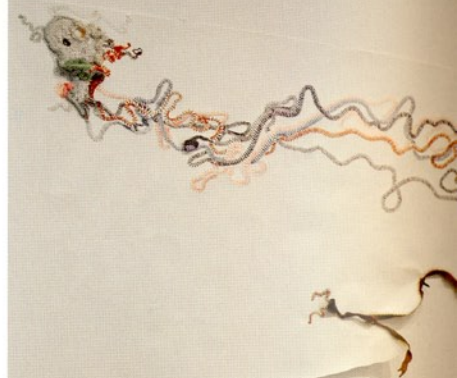


Any reference to the Baroque links inevitably and productively with the *fold* (as immortalized by Gilles Deleuze in his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*¹). It is not particularly controversial to claim that two key ingredients of Nicholas Hlobo's art – its components, gestures, speech-acts or language use – are the *stitch* and the *fold*. The stitch, already identified as the gesture which assembles, fuses and integrates. The fold, as the act which further discloses or generates temporal and spatial complexities. Hlobo is indeed the *cryptographer* that Deleuze calls for, “who can peer into the crannies of matter and read into the folds of the soul.”² Choose any piece by Hlobo and there we are involved with costumes, draperies, veils, masks, tessellated fabrics, skins, surfaces, organs, membranes, folding and unfolding – which, as Deleuze puts it, is the fold of the fold. Or take this passage from Deleuze:

... which offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small, each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages, surrounded and penetrated by an increasingly vaporous fluid, the totality of the universe resembling a ‘pond of matter in which there exist different flows and waves.’³

It could be a precise description of just about any work by Hlobo, following him in his quest as he investigates the ways of the soul, the destinies of matter and, especially, the irreverent and succulent translations and transmigrations which he stages between the both.

“I always find that the material tends to dominate the process of making work,” says Hlobo, making explicit how the broad geography of experiences his work entails; their “spirit in matter” is grounded in the *transformative* uses of Hlobo's signature materials (rubber, leather, fabric, ribbons, lace, et.al. – all of which he nonetheless also claims precise and pragmatic reasons for using, reasons which further underline their meaning in use).⁴ Again, in terms of material shifters, the fold follows us further, as a conceptual tool, if understood as an ontology of becoming, a multiplicity, or a process creating differences while maintaining continuity. Pursue and map the surfaces and the skins in the architectonic installation *Ingubo Yesizwe* (“the blanket of the





nation”, that references a Xhosa burial ritual in which the deceased is covered by a cowhide, as protection in the process of transmigration) as they fold in and onto each other, creating new spaces and temporal bodies, similar to the way the Möbius-strip contains infinity. Or engage with the rippled fabrics and interwoven leather surfaces in the more sculptural edifice *Ndimnandi ndindodwa*, and the architectural/spatial provocations of *Ndize* as it undermines the gallery spaces and upsets the white cube. In both cases Hlobo creates an array of visual rhythms and cadences, which define as well as upset orders of space and form, privileging movement as a leading principle, referencing life itself in perpetual metamorphosis from one condition or state to the next. For just as the fold is not ever a singular event, Hlobo’s sculptures/architectures/installations do not conceptualize singular bodies. The body, the form, is always plural. Or rather, form does not settle as a fixed body, but as an emergent entity, an entity of becoming. This is not Hegelian, even the antonym ‘unfolding’ is not to be understood as the opposite of the fold as language may suggest but rather it is what follows the fold up to the following fold. It is perhaps in this corpuscular interface that Hlobo’s art cannot but also explore the human/animal divide, importing in several works, a reptilian presence in an amphibious environment. Indeed, discussing the work *Umshotsho*, Hlobo talks of fluid under-water creatures such as the octopus as sources.⁵

Similar to Baroque sensibilities, the art of Nicholas Hlobo requires an immediate abstract and tactile sense of matter. As all material is reconfigured as a social practice, as the articulations of matter, they are made to speak and tell Hlobo’s narratives and stories, his observations and passions. Most fundamentally and explicitly, these narratives, unveiled as folded forms, take biographical matter into a range of identity issues, both personal and collective. Hlobo’s art asserts and explores (he often uses the verb *celebrate*), taking himself as source, identities – national (South African), ethnic (Xhosa), sexual (gay), gender, linguistic, cultural. In fact, Nicholas Hlobo speaks, through his art, very explicitly – and assertively – from the position as a gay male Xhosa South-African, African. And this clarified and self-confident, although never brash, standpoint is source material for works of art which engage multiple and changing subject positions, which support and abide a combinatory

play, as long as it is founded in tolerance and acceptance. Indeed, even given Hlobo's own identifications, the works of art, relaying biographical material with that of the cultural collective, in their radical interlacing of abstracted form with realist content, are exploratory, reassembling new and existing subject positions along the way. In summary, translating life world subjectivities into material expressions or forms.

But where then does the art of Nicholas Hlobo take us? What is the station and destiny of these dazzling transformations of bodies and homes, of the visual, tactile and visceral extravaganza performed in these somatopsychic sculptures/paintings/installations/architectures? Perhaps a clue is found in the dual or doubled purpose suggested by the *stitch*, the companion to the *fold* at the core of Hlobo's art.

The stitch is, yes, that gesture which does join or assemble or link things together. But the stitch is also that which breaks the surface, which penetrates the skin, which pricks in order to connect, pierces in order to join, indicative of the particular and – why not – redeeming nature of Hlobo's way of inviting and challenging the viewer. In view of the incessant invention of bodily forms, in the attention paid to morphing surfaces, folding and refolding skins,⁶ it is perhaps relevant to suggest that Hlobo excels in a kind of benevolent perversion. Here is the complete exuberant phallic vocabulary ("The penis is very important in my culture" says Hlobo, with full blue-eyed sincerity.) Here is the body with organs and the body without organs, here is blissful excess and joyous decadence, here is the display of strength and power but all without or before violence and dominance. What emerges is indeed a rainbow democracy, certainly a celebration of the body and the home and the consummate identities they may house or engender, as they form and reform.

Notes

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et la baroque*. First published in 1988, translated and published 1992 by University of Minnesota Press as: *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Listen for example to the 2010 Liverpool Biennial interview with the artist.
<http://vimeo.com/7574315>
- 5 Podcast 3, on the National Museum's website.
- 6 The skin being the largest organ of the body, as conceptualized in Ashley Montagu's classic on the skin: *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (Perennial Library, 1986).