

Animating Sculpture

by Kerry Greenberg

When I first visited Nicholas Hlobo's studio in downtown Johannesburg he showed me two of his early works that reveal much about his current practice. Lifting two antique ball and claw chairs out of an open crate he began blowing at the stubborn layers of dust that clung to the seats of molten soap. Once Hlobo had wiped the chairs, the imprints of a person's buttocks in the dark green waxy surfaces were unmistakable. As I moved closer to sniff the distinctive smell of Sunlight Soap, so familiar from my childhood in South Africa, I saw a slight round depression between the buttocks. Clearly a naked man made these marks. Although *Bhaxa* (2006) and *Iqinile* (2006) are among Hlobo's first works and look quite different to anything he has produced since, they reveal much about Hlobo's ongoing concerns and approach to art making, in particular the suggestion, even in his static works, of the sexualised body and the tension between exploration in private and coming of age in public.

Hlobo's foray into performance sprung from the desire to animate his sculptures, which already implied the presence of the body. In 2004 Okwui Enwezor observed, "Much of the work of interest in this decade [following the first democratic elections in South Africa] of interrogating identity and the body emerged in works that are partly based on performance."¹ Although Tracey Rose and Peet Pienaar² were at the forefront of Enwezor's mind when he wrote this, his assertion still rings true and is more widely applicable today. Hlobo is one of several artists, along with Berni Searle and Nandipha Mntambo, to achieve international recognition since 2004 for actively using their bodies to address questions of identity in South Africa. Recent work by emerging artists, including Lerato Shadi, Donna Kukama, Athi-Patra Ruga and Lunga Kama, suggests this trend will continue.

While there is a long history of performance art in America and Europe, these developments had very little impact on South African art until recently because of the country's cultural isolation during Apartheid. Hlobo has a broad



knowledge of western art history, but he is also inspired by African masquerades, theatre, puppetry, dance, music, gay pride parades, and Xhosa proverbs and rituals. In his first performance, *Igqirha lendlela* (2005), Hlobo donned a skirt made from old men's ties and a black leather biker jacket on to which he had attached a bulbous rubber hump. For Hlobo, this growth protruding from his back embodies what he has called "the baggage we carry around with us as South Africans."³ Wearing the outfit on a journey from Green Market Square in the centre of Cape Town to Lookout Hill in Khayelitsha, an informal settlement on the outskirts of the city, Hlobo behaved as if there was nothing abnormal about the way he was dressed, suggesting that South Africans are accustomed to carrying such baggage, even though the burden of the past is seldom visible.

The title of this performance, *Igqirha lendlela* (2005) is derived from the Xhosa song "Igqirha lendlela nguqongqothwane". According to Hlobo this means "the diviner of the road" and relates to the dung beetle, an insect noted for rolling dung balls up to 50 times its weight while moving backwards, which Hlobo argues

... says nothing about having backward thinking. Instead it presents a lot of intelligence and knowing where they come from. The song is used to refer to those who are wise and educated and says that they are the ones who are enlightened and know the way forward.⁴

Performance artists have long mimicked animals and employed their bodies, living and dead, to question the boundaries between nature and culture, human and animal. The list of artists is long and ranges from Oleg Kulick, whose performances originated in the political and social context of Russia in the 1990s and is best known for acting like a feral dog in public, to Matthew Barney, who merges the human and animal body into fantasy creatures, unfamiliar protagonists in a strange world. Apart from Louise Bourgeois, the artist Hlobo most often cites as an important influence is Joseph Beuys, who was enthralled by northern myths and folklore in which animals are endowed with mystical powers.

Hlobo draws on a long oral tradition in Africa, adopting age-old stories in which human behaviour and weaknesses are subject to scrutiny by reflection in the animal kingdom. These fables offer Hlobo a starting point from which to convey difficult truths and encourage dialogue around complex social issues. While he speaks lucidly about this, he seldom presents a simple narrative to the audience. His performances are frequently theatrical, but they are distinct from theatre. In most of the performances since *Igqirha lendlela* (2005), Hlobo has chosen to perform in a gallery setting rather than on a stage or in the street and prefers to remain silent throughout. The performances are seldom rehearsed, never announced and only occasionally repeated. Performances usually take place amongst the artist's sculptures and drawings and seating is not provided. In short, Hlobo does not wish to be a conventional actor and presents "what is left after theatre."⁵

Dubula (2007) begins with Hlobo sitting facing the gallery wall. A tadpole-like rubber form with a long black snaking tail is attached to a thong the artist is wearing, as if it were an extension of his genitalia. He cradles the appendage, then stands and stretches, before moving backwards dragging the black form with him. Performed at the opening of *Umakadenethwa Engenadyasi*, Hlobo's first solo exhibition at Extraspazio Gallery in Rome, the work is about coming of age and plays with stereotypes of how the black male body has historically been viewed in Europe. *Dubula* means "to shoot or to blossom," a word with both violent and sexual connotations. The video documentation shows Hlobo stop, wait and then turn, walking forwards with his hands clasped behind his back and the rubber ball making a swishing sound as it drags behind him. He walks out of the front door and into the night, attracting a crowd on the street before the video cuts. What we do not see in the video is the highlight of the performance: Hlobo picking up the black form and giving it to a young female student to hold, an intimate gesture of solidarity. When conceiving this work, Hlobo wrote on one of his visual diaries that "black is heavier than red even when blood is thick [...] Black is perceived heavy by Xhosa people." The black ball represents a burden that is sexual, historical and cultural. It is the ball and chain that is hard to bear alone, but it is also the lifeline that keeps one grounded and allows one to bloom. It is perhaps not surprising that the young woman holding the ball – an extension of Hlobo's



Skisse til / Sketch for performance
Igqirha lendlela (2005)

private parts and symbolizing everything that is important to him – was unsure how to react.

The production becomes more complex and theatrical in *Amaqanda'am* (2007) performed a few months later at the Aardklop festival in Potchefstroom. In this performance Hlobo and a musician are fully clothed in white robes made from Broderie Anglaise, a fabric incorporating embroidery, cutwork and needle lace invented in England in the 19th century. The hooded cloak is at once reminiscent of a monk's habit and cowl, Voortrekker bonnets, the white blankets young Xhosa men wear during initiation rites, and disturbingly, Ku Klux Klan robes. The references to race and culture are complex and contradictory, but on closer examination, these are secondary to underlying themes of sexuality as revealed by the Xhosa title and the song Hlobo sings during the performance.

Amaqanda'am means "my eggs" and refers to the inability of same-sex couples to reproduce. Rather than bemoan a childless life, Hlobo asserts his choices. He sings, "These eggs are mine. My neighbours are laughing at me. They are telling me: I have rotten or sterile or blank eggs. Whether they are rotten or not, these eggs are mine."⁶ The performance is long and intentionally slow as Hlobo incubates the large white fabric egg as a chicken would, continuously covering it with his body and slowly rotating the egg beneath him.

Hlobo is secretive and protective (verging on aggressive) in this performance. He averts his face and moves deliberately while the second character strums and picks at a guitar. He straddles the egg with his legs, supports himself with his arms and slithers forward, then sits on the egg, slowly rolls over the egg until it is on top of him, buries his face in the egg, curls his body around the egg and drags it, all while singing a low, mournful tune. The pace changes and the sound becomes louder, building expectations, but never delivering the climax. Instead Hlobo stretches out a long piece of white fabric, wraps it loosely around his neck like a noose and walks out abandoning the egg. Once the performance is over, the costume and egg are displayed, as though they were conceived as sculptures, and had simply been activated momentarily.

After performing *Amaqanda'am* (2007) for a second time in Cape Town, Hlobo decided to take a break from performance. He explains, "These performances require emotional and psychological preparation and are difficult to repeat. It worked better the first time, but even then it felt over the top. The music made it too theatrical."⁷ Hlobo began planning his performances more carefully, mostly in his head, but also through quick sketches and notes on his visual diaries. He decided against including sound in the next few performances and instead focused on creating drama through increasingly complicated costumes and props. Two details from the *Visual Diary* (2008) included in *Kwatsityw'iziko*, Hlobo's second solo exhibition at Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town in 2008, function like an informal storyboard, showing the different elements and mechanics of *Ungamqhawuli* (2008), also included in this exhibition.

Ungamqhawuli (2008) has its origins in the Xhosa proverb "the swing snapped while the children were still playing." This aphorism is used when someone becomes angry without warning. The piece itself is like a swing, a stretcher hovering just above the floor in the corner of the gallery, suspended from the roof by a pulley system. As guests arrived for the exhibition opening Hlobo settled onto the white stretcher, swaddled in light blue satin, his eyes veiled by a hood stitched with pink ribbon. A schism of pale pink fabric runs down his abdomen, as if revealing his innards. His feet are hidden beneath blue 'trouser legs' that suggest deformed and lifeless limbs below. The swing rocks gently as Hlobo lies still with his hands placed on his stomach. The scene stimulates a morbid curiosity amongst the audience who wait for some kind of disaster or resurrection. Hlobo reaches out for the rope and slowly begins to hoist himself upwards. The pulley system is basic and unstable and the top of his body rises more sharply than his lower half, inadvertently adding to the drama and suspense. The title of the work translates as "do not cut him off" (as in interrupt him) and whilst Hlobo's performance holds people's attention for some time, once he stops close to the roof and appears to intend to stay dangling in space, people begin to drift off. Lying above the viewers' heads, with arms outstretched, Hlobo becomes another sculpture; all the while playing with our expectation that something should happen. Again, the video documentation ends before the performance,

which lasted over two hours. It was only once all the guests had left that Hlobo lowered himself to the floor. In this performance and many others, Hlobo defies our expectation of a narrative by foregoing a climax or conclusion.

In *Thoba, utsale umnxeba* (2008) Hlobo is more physically present, sitting on a mat made from *impepho*⁸ at the entrance to his exhibition at the ICA Boston in 2008, but mentally removed. He literally “lowers himself and makes a [silent] call” as the title of the performance suggests. The *impepho* mat functions like a prayer rug, separating him from the floor, “demarcating a sacred space” and enabling him to “move to a higher state of thinking.”⁹ Hlobo wears a judge’s robe and an elaborate headdress made from rubber with multiple plaited ribbon ropes that connect to suction cups attached to the gallery walls. He sits in a meditative position, hands clasped, eyes closed, seemingly oblivious to the noise of the visitors surrounding him. Like so many contemporary art performances, this is an endurance test, a struggle to establish and maintain a private space within the public sphere. Cross-legged on his mat, with colourful cords emanating from his head, Hlobo looks like an apparition, either conducting or receiving energy from the walls. In a sense he is waiting for the audience as much as they are waiting for him. Eventually, Hlobo stretches, gathers his outfit and stands up. The audience continues chatting while he shakes out his skirt, arranges the plaits (which look like hair extensions), stands and stretches, as though preparing for something. One by one he removes the suckers from the wall and collects them into a pile, deinstalling the ‘sculpture’ and creating something else. He throws the ropes over his shoulder and demurely walks towards the exit. This performance follows the same structure as many others. He says nothing and does little throughout, but still manages to capture the viewers’ attention to the extent that he is followed down the staircase after the performance has apparently ended.

In the same way that the beginning of Hlobo’s performances are never announced, there is often no clear signal that they have ended and it is only on reflection that one might be able to identify the climax. In this performance, the climax is Hlobo standing up and it is the suggestion that things might occur, rather than anything in particular that happens, which holds our interest.



Performance: *Thoba, utsale umnxeba* (2008)

The sequence of events is often simple and it is usually through the creativity and craftsmanship of the costumes and the way they individually constrain or affect his movement that Hlobo reveals a more complex and frequently difficult underlying narrative. He treads the fine line between being passive and assertive in his performances and embraces the idea of otherness in a way that recalls the work of Steven Cohen, one of the first and most prominent South African performance artists. Both artists make explicit their sexual, cultural and racial identities through their costumes and performances: Cohen as a gay Jewish white man and Hlobo as a gay Xhosa black man. Hlobo's performances however are less confrontational and uncomfortable for the audience, especially since he generally chooses to perform in a gallery context while Cohen favours ideologically loaded or culturally significant public spaces for his performances.

For many performance artists, including Cohen, another person cannot enact their performances. Hlobo however thinks of himself as simply assisting his "sculptures to move,"¹⁰ something another person may be able to do under his direction. Hlobo takes this to its natural conclusion in his most recent performance, *Mondle umkhulise* (2009), where he retreats even further from the audience, literally into the sculpture. Four years after he first performed *Igqirha lendlela* (2005), the bulbous hump on Hlobo's back has grown to become the rubber womb or nest in which he crouches. From inside the sculpture Hlobo gently rocks the bulging form that hangs from multiple ropes, imbuing it with his spirit and as the title suggests, giving the impression that he has "caused it to grow". As with the buttocks imprinted in the soap on the chairs, the body in *Mondle umkhulise* (2009) is suggested rather than visible and the power of the work lies in the tension between what is revealed and concealed. If *Umgamqhawuli* (2008) referenced death with Hlobo horizontal on the stretcher levitating in air, this work signals a rebirth.

Performance: *Mondle Umkhulise*
(2009), fra utstillingen / view into
exhibition "Ngubani na lo?", Galleria
Extraspaio, Roma, Italia¹¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Okwui Enwezor, 'The Enigma of the Rainbow Nation: Contemporary South African Art at the Crossroads of History,' *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, volume 1 (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004), 35.
- 2 Enwezor refers specifically to an untitled sculpture made by Rose for her degree show at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1996. Fashioned out of a large block of ice and rendered in the rainbow colours of the new South Africa, this sculpture was not presented in a refrigerator. Instead it was allowed to melt, sending a pungent odour of urine (which was used to colour the ice) through the gallery. Enwezor also describes Pienaar's proposal to be circumcised by a black surgeon to highlight the concept of African masculinity achieved through Xhosa circumcision rituals and the relationship of taboo to culture. After much controversy, the circumcision took place and a video was exhibited as part of a larger installation, including the foreskin in a bottle of formaldehyde, at Brendon Bell-Roberts Fine Art Gallery in 2000.
- 3 See *South African Art Now* (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson Gallery, December 2006), 62.
- 4 Sue Williamson, 'Artbio: Nicholas Hlobo,' *Artthrob*, June 2006. Published online at <http://www.artthrob.co.za/06june/artbio.html>
- 5 Interview with the artist, 12 November 2010
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 In South Africa *impepho* is also known as curry bush. It is a herb which is burnt like incense to ward off bad spirits.
- 9 Interview with the artist, 12 November 2010
- 10 Ibid.