

EXPANDING AFRICAN QUEER VISUAL ACTIVISM WITHIN AND BEYOND THE CONTINENT: A LOOK INTO THE GENRE'S PAST(S), PRESENT, AND FUTURE(S)

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Abstract

This article examines the origin of the term “visual activism” in the context of post-independence South Africa, and further reflects on its development in response to anti-gay legislation in contemporary Nigeria and Uganda. The emergence of an explicitly queer strain of visual activism on the continent was sanctioned by South Africa’s pro-gay Constitution and propagated by the works of photographer Zanele Muboli. Whereas South Africa’s sociopolitical context has permitted the expression of queer visual activism through forms of photography and documentary media in Nigeria and Uganda, this expression has been routinely monitored and suppressed by such policies as the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill (SSMPA) and the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, respectively. This study specifically references the works of South African Muboli in conversation with those of Nigerian-American Adejoke Tugbiyele and Ugandan native Leilah Babirye as a means to articulate how these punitive national policies have forced contemporary queer visual activists to adopt expressive rather than representational forms of visual protest. This paper identifies a distinct difference in epistemological origin, aesthetic composition, and formal materiality across the practices of Muboli, Tugbiyele, and Babirye in order to explore the multiplicity of the genre as well as broaden conventional conceptions of African queer visual activism.

Visual activism is a genre that is forged at the intersection between arts, politics, and protest. It is a contrary classification of art that seeks to actively resist the existing political order, to transcend its ideological trappings, and therefore create possibilities for a new, more humane future (McGarry 16). As Zanele Muboli, a prominent queer South African photographer and self-proclaimed visual activist, describes,

If I were to reduce myself to the label ‘visual artist,’ it would mean that what I’m doing is just for play, that our identities, as black female beings who are queer or are lesbian, is just art. Art needs to be political—or let me say that my art is political. It’s not for show. It’s not for play. (“Zanele Muboli’s Faces and Phases”)

Drawing from Muboli’s articulation of visual activism as an artistic demonstration of protest, I critically define the genre as politically engaged, historically grounded, culturally relevant, and actively advocating for and contributing to the advancement of LGBTI human rights struggles on the continent. In this paper, I explore the history of the term “visual activism,” as well as the ways in which the development of this

genre in Africa has been tied to protests against gendered sexual violence and anti-gay legislation. I argue that while the genre was originally coined or named in the early 21st century, still, its tradition and practices are rooted in an earlier history of art/activism that predates the term itself. Here, by destabilizing the “origin,” form, and materiality of visual activism, and further connecting earlier struggles against racist legislation in South Africa with current struggles against homophobic legislation in Nigeria and Uganda, I seek to expand our understanding of what constitutes visual activism in the current sphere of African politics and protest.

There is a long legacy of African artists/activists that operated before and after the term “visual activism” was widely conceptualized. This tradition illustrates a history of visual activism on the continent that has been typified by those who straddle dual identities—committed first to their communities, and then to their crafts. Within the contemporary understanding of visual activism, creative researcher Tessa Lewin identifies two characteristics that reflect and constitute the historical lineage of the practice. The first is that the works exhibit a networked approach to visual art that is deeply rooted within the community it seeks to represent; and the second is that the artists consciously use money earned in the production of their art to further their activist work (Lewin 43). In this paper, I extend Lewin’s characterization of visual activism to consider the role of various mediums of visual art in the genre, as well as the compositional elements and historical undercurrents in the works of prominent queer African artist/activists throughout the diaspora, in order to articulate how artistic practices can themselves become forms of protest. I argue that this equal consideration of what is communicated within the frame alongside what is advocated for outside of it, as well as an analysis of the relationship between the two, allows me to understand how artists with restrictions on their freedom of expression—including those based outside of South Africa, those with limited direct access to their often state-censored communities, and those working without the largely inaccessible tools of photography and documentary film—will also be able to participate in the production of queer African visual activism.

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, the term “visual activism” has been applied across a diverse range of contexts to describe various artistic forms of demonstration, including protest graffiti, political funerals, films & documentaries, performance art, archives, and portrait photography. On the African continent, discourses surrounding prominent forms of contemporary visual activism have remained situated in South Africa largely due to the country’s international prominence in the art market and its progressive constitution, which permits freedom of expression for its queer artists (Lewin 41). Although South Africa has a deeply rich history of activism at the intersection of art, politics, and protest that extends far beyond the present, the term “visual activism” first emerged in the country at a relatively similar time to its emergence elsewhere in the globe. In an attempt to theorize a deeper history of the genre, the term has been retroactively applied to earlier histories of activism that

predate the term's conception (Lewin 42). As a result, the "official" visual record of South African activism has been defined by a commitment to struggles against, first, the system of apartheid from 1948 to 1994; then, the rise of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s and early 2000s; and currently, the tide of gender-based sexual violence and anti-gay discrimination targeting LGBTI communities.

Instituted by the Afrikaner government's National Party in 1948, apartheid was a brutal, institutionalized system of racial segregation that included laws prohibiting marriage between white people and people of color, as well as policies mandating "white-only" jobs throughout South Africa ("South Africa Profile"). Following the Bantu Education Act of 1953, South African artists were forced to work in a context where Black students were only taught subjects that would prepare them for unskilled service-based jobs in the labor market. Beyond this, these artists were also consistently denied access to galleries and museums, which were then the sole purview of South Africa's white elite population. This legalized system of racial segregation directly motivated the use of photography to document apartheid in the 1950s, the establishment of art centers in the 1970s to support anti-apartheid activity, and the increase in international interest in anti-apartheid visual production throughout the mid-1980s (Lewin 43). During this period—while the term visual activism did not exist yet—artistic attempts to protest racist legislation sowed the seeds of an activist tradition within the country that would codify itself in name and praxis in coming years.

The unilateral restrictions of the apartheid era were only lifted in 1994 with the official fall of the regime and the rise of a democratic government headed by Nelson Mandela in its place ("South Africa Profile"). By the turn of the 21st century, the primary focus of South African visual activist work had shifted from politics to healthcare as the country became the site of the biggest and most high-profile HIV/AIDS epidemic in the world ("HIV and AIDS in South Africa"). In response, South African documentary photographer Gideon Mendel collaborated with *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF) and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) on a series of photographs and films that were designed to support the TAC's advocacy for the state provision of antiretroviral drugs to HIV-positive people in South Africa (Hallas 112). In 2001, Mendel became the first to publicly describe his own work as "visual activism," creating a distinction between his artistic practice and the limited definition of documentary photography because he felt that he was no longer "passively witnessing [his] subjects." Rather, Mendel had begun to actively engage the subjects of his photographs in their own representation, thus transforming them into participants in the production of his photographs and his activism (Thomas 266). Provided this, Mendel's commitment to an intentional, discursive, and tangibly effective photographic practice goes on to directly frame the orientation and development of later visual activists in South Africa and beyond.

The novel focus on communities afflicted with HIV/AIDS in the mid-1990s post-apartheid landscape soon gave way to an explicit emphasis on LGBTI issues as the rise of HIV and gender-based violence disproportionately impacted queer South African communities. In 2006, South Africa became the first and only country on the continent to pass an amendment to its constitution which legalized same-sex marriage and forbade discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Still, despite the fact that South Africa's post-apartheid constitution was the first in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation for its citizens, unfortunately, this phenomenon did not inherently translate to the country becoming an implicit safe haven for its queer communities (Currier and Migraine-George 134). By tangibly providing a new, legal space for the constitution of homosexuality in the country's history and social consciousness, the scene of queer South African visual culture was thus transformed into a ripe, accessible landscape both for those wishing to do the queer community harm, and for a network of rising LGBTI visual activists wishing to advocate for the rights of their community.



Figure 1: Installation view of *Faces and Phases* (2006-) by Zanele Muholi. Photo by: Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg.

A key figure to rise out of this network of visual activists was Zanele Muholi, an Umlazi-born queer photographer, who has become widely known throughout the genre for their focus on issues facing South Africa's LGBTI communities—such that South African visual activism has become virtually synonymous with “queer visual activism” in the international art world. Notably, Muholi has consistently described their own practice as “visual activism” since their first solo exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2004 (Lewin 42). Following this, Muholi codified their commitment to visual activism with the debut of their *Faces and Phases* series in 2006,

which created a nuanced visual documentary of Black lesbian identity and community formation in post-apartheid South Africa (“Zanele Muholi’s Brave Project”). This valiant, ongoing series—featuring over 300 powerfully bold black and white portraits of lesbians in and around South Africa—is a living visual record that documents and exposes the onslaught of curative rapes and other hate crimes committed against Black lesbians (*Faces and Phases* (2006—); see Figure 1). Since these violent crimes typically go unreported to the police out of fear of retaliation, South Africa’s LGBTI populations are routinely rendered vulnerable and invisible in the country’s national landscape (Smalls 191). By archiving the portraits and lived realities of Muholi’s subjects—thereby disrupting the pattern of silence and invisibility that has qualified South Africa’s epidemic of homophobic violence—*Faces and Phases* confronts a legacy of Black queer disposability and insists on the social power of visual representation as a means to combat this trend. As the subjects in Muholi’s photographs look directly into the lens of the camera and the eyes of the viewer—posed and stylized by their own preferences—they each convey a sense of defiance, depth, vulnerability, and pride that exudes beyond the frame (see Figures 2 and 3). Additionally, the exhibition’s adjoining captions provide integral context to the images by offering names, dates, and locations. Muholi’s insistence on the inclusion of these details function to reinscribe their subjects within South Africa’s public domain, thus acting as a corrective to the pattern of dismissal and erasure ascribed to South Africa’s LGBTI communities (“Zanele Muholi’s Brave Project”). In the form of art inspired by life, this archival exhibition presents a positive representation of Black lesbians usually marginalized and hidden by society’s assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices. As Muholi describes the exhibition, “collectively, the portraits are at once a visual statement and an archive, marking, mapping and preserving an often-invisible community for posterity” (“Zanele Muholi’s Brave Project”). Through the production of *Faces and Phases*—a body of work rooted in advocacy, social justice, and memory making for future generations of South African lesbians—Zanele Muholi becomes critically engaged as an image maker, a historian, and a visual activist.



Figures 2 and 3: Bongwiwe ‘Twana’ Kunene, Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg, 2012 and Tinashe Wakapila, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2011 (respectively) from the series *Faces and Phases* (2006-). Photos by: Yancey Richardson Gallery, NY.

Markedly, the use of photography within *Faces and Phases*—in order to chronicle the lived experiences of queer individuals who were previously denied a legal, visible space in the country under the old system of apartheid, and who still must fight for protection under the current South African Constitution—functions as an act of political resistance and reclamation. Throughout history, photography has often functioned as a powerful instrument of masculine and colonial domination, with Black women generally being instrumentalized in this process for others’ self-definition and gratification (Lewis 13). Here, the fact that the contemporary emergence of an explicitly queer visual activism in South Africa was primarily conveyed through the medium of photography clearly demonstrates both a rewriting and a “speaking back” to the violent origins of the medium itself. Through *Faces and Phases*, Muholi directly refers to and subverts the historical archive of photography and its colonial underpinnings as a means to re-inscribe the humanity and agency of Black queer women. Further, Muholi’s choice to structure *Faces and Phases*’ exhibition in the form of an ongoing photographic archive, which explores documentation as a practice that can transform and uplift marginalized individuals, was critical in asserting visibility, autonomy, community, and legacy as key priorities in the conversation about LGBTI issues in post-apartheid South Africa. By allowing the photographic subject control over the framing of their own portrait and the recording of their own histories, Muholi

directly mirrors Mendel's earlier visual activist practice, which primarily emphasized conscious and discursive social engagement through art. In effect, *Faces and Phases* critically places Muholi's artistic practice within a larger trend of anti-apartheid struggle that threads through the history of South African activism. Reflecting on the current struggle for LGBTI rights and protections in South Africa, Muholi remarks,

We, as lesbians, have been given the right to express our love yet there is ongoing persecution. [I'm] thinking back to the history [of apartheid], how people were vilified and degraded and persecuted for being in inter-racial relationships—today we are fighting a different kind of war where we have to deal with hate crimes that persist. All the hate connects because history informs who we are today. (Lloyd)

These words and Muholi's photographic series both consider the reality that homophobic rhetoric and violence perpetuated across the African continent are implicitly tied to national struggles for decolonization and racial equality. Here, this work of equal parts art and protest is transformed into a contemporary iteration of visual activism that draws on a long history of activism in and beyond the context of South Africa that uses art as "a constitutive force in the building of social movements" (Holmes 2012 as cited in Lewin).

Despite the fact that South Africa has virtually dominated the official record of African visual activism as a whole due to the country's sociopolitical contexts, it is important to note that examples outside of this frame of reference exist both within and beyond the continent and are ripe for critical analysis. Though the prevalence of homophobic legislation within countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Uganda, and Zimbabwe has driven queer visual culture and scholarship underground, I suggest that the works of first-generation Nigerian-American visual artist, Adejoke Tugbiyele, and native Ugandan sculptor and current U.S. asylee, Leilah Babirye, provide fruitful depictions of both the current issues facing queer communities outside of South Africa, and the various forms of visual activism that have risen in response to these disparate contexts (Currier and Migraine-George 134). By placing the work of Muholi in conversation with those of Tugbiyele and Babirye, I argue that diasporic representations of queer subjectivity are implicitly informed and structured by the historical lineage and present landscape of post-colonial struggles against anti-gay rhetoric, legislation, and sexual violence on the continent. Whereas in South Africa much of the prominent forms of contemporary queer visual activism have included archives, documentaries, and photographs exhibited within the fine arts market and its associated institutions, elsewhere the genre is typified by other forms of visual art, such as sculpture and textile, exhibited both within and beyond the realms of the contemporary fine arts market (Lewin 41). While these works are united in a commitment to advocate for the livelihoods of queer individuals—provoked into being by the palpable threat of homophobic violence on the continent—still, the distinct variation in medium, composition, and exhibition across the practices of

Muholi, Tugbiyele, and Babirye reflects a deep nuance in the representation of this resistance throughout the diaspora.

As I have illustrated, African visual activism has primarily been catalyzed in response to the deployment of unfavorable government policies which abuse the human rights of its citizens, whether on the basis of race or, more recently, gender and sexuality. Currently, there are 37 African countries with laws that criminalize same-sex relations. In this context, many LGBTI Africans are faced with claims that homosexuality is quintessentially “un-African”—an unwelcome import from the deviant West (Currier and Migraine-George 134). This ideology—propagated by prominent American evangelical Christian missionaries who identify homosexuals and homosexual relations as an abomination to God—has effectively created the blueprint for political homophobia deployed by government leaders on the African continent today (Smalls 197). Two of such policies are the Nigerian Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill (SSMPA) and the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill. These national laws furnish the violently homophobic sociopolitical context that largely informs and shapes the genre of contemporary visual activism for queer artists operating outside of South Africa.

In Nigeria, the SSMPA was signed into law in early 2014 by the country’s former president, Goodluck Jonathan. According to a Human Rights Watch report which documents the consequences of the SSMPA for LGBTI individuals, while this legislation built on existing, colonial-era policies which had long since banned sexual acts between members of the same sex, it also went much further by effectively and unilaterally criminalizing LGBTI populations in Nigeria based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. To this end, the intentionally wide scope of the SSMPA forbids “any cohabitation between same-sex sexual partners” as well as, “any public show of same sex amorous relationship.” Further, in order to stigmatize queer individuals and break down mutual aid networks, the law also imposes a 10-year prison sentence on anyone who “registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organizations” or “supports” the activities of such organizations. In effect, the SSMPA has recently become a tool used by politicians, police officers, and members of the public alike to justify an increased pattern in human rights violations afflicted on LGBTI Nigerians (Isaack).

Similarly, in Uganda, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was first introduced in 2009 by Prime Minister David Bahati and was then signed into law in 2014 by the country’s current president, Yoweri Museveni. Framed as an attempt to preserve and protect “the traditional family,” the bill criminalizes sexual activity between persons of the same sex as well as “the promotion or recognition of such activity by any individual, governmental entity or non-governmental entity either inside or outside of Uganda.” As specified by journalist Brandon Ambrosino in his explanation of Uganda’s anti-homosexuality bill, while this policy harkens back to anti-sodomy laws, such as the Penal Code Act of 1950, that were instituted in Uganda during the British Colonial

period and never repealed, it also differs from these prior laws in that it broadens the scope of what constitutes a homosexual offense, and even mandates harsher punishments (Ambrosino). Importantly, the bill outlines two kinds of homosexual offences that can be targeted by Ugandan police: “aggravated homosexuality” and “the offense of homosexuality.” The former—which refers to cases in which one of the persons engaged in homosexual activity is either HIV-positive, a minor, or disabled—was declared punishable by death in the first iteration of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, such that the law became widely known as the “Kill the Gays” bill across Ugandan media outlets. By the same token, the current policy punishes “the offense of homosexuality”—which includes those who “promote” or “recognize” homosexuality, and those who attempt to engage in the act—with up to ten years in prison. According to Pepe Julian Onziema, program director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, since its introduction, this sweeping law has empowered public hostility and spurred physical violence towards LGBTI Ugandans such that queer individuals have had to either leave the country, face physical violence, or resort to suicide (Ambrosino). In this political context, Ugandan and Nigerian visual activists such as Tugbiyele and Babirye have been forced to adopt a visual language that primarily draws on representational rather than literal depictions of queerness as a means to protest the subjugation of LGBTI populations on the continent.

Throughout works ranging from subtle to resolute, Adejoke Tugbiyele has promoted awareness about Nigerian LGBTI rights issues while also exploring her own identity as a queer woman of Nigerian descent based in the U.S. Similar to Muholi, Tugbiyele considers her dual identity as an activist and a visual artist integral to her artistic practice. Tugbiyele is convinced that her art can and must engage its viewers by serving as a call to action on behalf of the marginalized members of the African diaspora (Smalls 194). To this end, the works *Homeless Hungry Homo* (2014) and *Gélé Pride Flag* (2014) both employ repurposed materials and performative aspects of traditional Yoruba culture alongside queer aesthetics in order to directly critique Nigeria’s Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Bill and advocate for richer and more humane understandings of queer African diasporic identity.



Figure 4: Installation view of *Homeless Hungry Homo* (2014) by Adejoke Tugbiyele. Photo by: The Brooklyn Museum.

Homeless Hungry Homo explores the dangerously taboo topic of public versus private expression of homosexuality and formally articulates the lived realities facing disenfranchised LGBTI communities in Nigeria—including and especially increased vulnerability to homelessness, poverty, and disease. Made the same year that the SSMPA was introduced, this sculpture directly speaks to the clauses within the SSMPA which prohibit “any public show of same sex amorous relationship,” as well as the aftereffects of the bill, which precipitated a wave of anti-gay violence and homelessness that still affects populations in Nigeria today (Isaack). In *Homeless Hungry Homo*, Tugbiyele weaves together various repurposed materials including copper wire, steel, wood, and palm spines in order to create an androgynous representational sculpture imbued with the colors of the gay pride flag. As the figure lies in a supine position across the floor—its shoulders curving almost painfully inward to protect its hollow chest—the mask made of U.S. dollar bills adorning its face works to simultaneously reference a long cultural history of African mask-making and masquerade, and conceal the colorful palette that decorates its full, “inner” form (*Homeless Hungry Homo*; see Figure 4). This sculpture directly addresses the ways in which queer Africans are forced to compromise their livelihoods in order to navigate social and institutional structures such as one’s family, religion, and the state (Smalls 196). For many LGBTI Nigerians, it has been critical in recent years to adopt self-censoring behavior, i.e., significantly and consciously altering their gender presentation, in order to avoid detection, suspicion, arrest, or extortion by members of the public and the police force (Isaack). Importantly, Tugbiyele writes,

Homeless Hungry Homo comments on how gay Africans are oftentimes more likely to end up in poverty because of the dual criminalization and demonization of same-sex love, by the government and the church respectively. It also comments on the fear of poverty as a result of coming out, and the notion that people will choose to remain ‘masked’ and in the closet for that reason. (*Homeless Hungry Homo*)

Here, Tugbiyele consciously pays respect to the nuanced, often dangerous, reality that many queer Nigerians must face in light of the SSMPA and further raises awareness about the intersecting margins of sexual identity, gender presentation, and status on the continent. Framed by Tugbiyele's deep faith in the ability for representation in art to affect a tangible impact, this is a work of visual activism that is intimately geared towards improving the human condition and imagining a brighter future.



Figure 5: Installation view of the *Gélé Pride Flag* (2014) by Adejoke Tugbiyele. Photo by: The Brooklyn Museum.

Tugbiyele goes on to further explore her commitment to a future that is habitable to LGBTI Africans in her next work, *Gélé Pride Flag* (2014). In an interview about her practice, Tugbiyele describes, “I am inspired to make work [...] that addresses my cultural heritage and builds on the work of my ancestors and finally to imagine a future of equality for all regardless of race, gender, class or sexuality” (Jason). As a hand-made flag that could be worn both in protest and in pride, *Gélé Pride Flag* perfectly captures Tugbiyele's motivations. By sewing together six vibrantly colored head scarves, commonly worn by Nigerian women as symbols of femininity and elegance, into a “rainbow” pattern indicative of the gay pride flag (see Figure 5), Tugbiyele creates an inherently political response to SSMPA that unites gay pride symbolism with a material reference to her home country into one large banner (*Gélé Pride Flag*). Interestingly, while Tugbiyele uses this work to respond to and resist the SSMPA, at the same time, this visual demonstration of protest consciously evidences the limited options available to queer visual activists based on the continent. It is significant that this work could not be exhibited publicly in Nigeria because it is in violation of the SSMPA's sweeping homophobic policy. Here, Tugbiyele's position as a Nigerian-American based in the U.S. allows her to not only legally create the flag, but also to publicly exhibit and promote it without the risk of persecution (see Figure 6). Rather than signaling the U.S. as a paragon of LGBTI acceptance, instead this work remains focused on the potential for Nigerians to create a future in which the *Gélé Pride Flag* can find its way home. Through a wedding of traditional materials that seeks to complicate discourses surrounding queerness in Africa, Tugbiyele subtly refers to the deep history of nonconforming sexualities and “indigenous homosexuality” dating

back long before Western contact and “contamination” on the continent (Smalls 197). In this way, *Gélé Pride Flag* critiques the political assertion that homosexuality is “un-African,” and instead posits that queerness is actually inseparable from Nigerian identity—that it is in fact embedded in the nation’s fabric of history.



Figure 6: Adejoke Tugbiyele posing with the *Gélé Pride Flag* (2014) at a NYC pride parade. Photo by: Adejoke Tugbiyele.

In a similar vein, the works of Leilah Babirye transform repurposed materials into expressive sculptures that courageously reflect on the human rights issues that motivated her to flee her native Uganda. Following the signing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in early 2014, Babirye was publicly outed as a lesbian in a local Ugandan newspaper (“Leilah Babirye”). Faced with threats of persecution, censorship, and physical violence, Babirye was forced to migrate and seek asylum in the U.S. through her participation in the 2015 Fire Island Artist Residency, a program that supports LGBTQ visual artists and poets (Keh). During this residency, Babirye created her first solo exhibition, *Amatwaale Ga Ssekabaka Mwanga II (The Empire of King Mwanga II)*—featuring a series of hand-made sculptures named after princes and princesses within Buganda’s royal family—as a means to critique the current Anti-Homosexuality Bill, pay homage to queer figures in precolonial Uganda, and create her own language of queer African futurity (see *Figure 7*). The exhibition’s title refers to King Mwanga II, an openly bisexual man who served as the Kabaka or king of Buganda (1884-88 and 1889-97), a subnational kingdom within modern-day Uganda. This body of work wrestles with the reality that colonization by Western missionaries fundamentally distorted perceptions of homosexuality on the continent such that current African nations, such as Uganda, pursuing decolonization have been deceived into rejecting the cultural customs they once embraced (Crain). By invoking King Mwanga II,

Babirye directly maps out a section of Uganda's deeply nuanced history of nonconforming sexualities and goes further towards dispelling ahistorical conceptions of African queer history.



Figure 7: Installation view of *Amatwaale Ga Ssekabaka Mwanga II (The Empire of King Mwanga II)* (2015) by Leilah Babirye. Photo by: Gordon Robichaux Gallery, NY.



Figures 8 and 9: Omumbejja Sangalyabongo (The Only Daughter of Nagginda, The Wedded Queen of Buganda) and Namasole Nakatya (Queen Mother of Ssekababka Mwanga II) (respectively) from the exhibition *Amatwaale Ga Ssekabaka Mwanga II (The Empire of King Mwanga II)* (2018) by Leilah Babirye. Photos by: Gordon Robichaux Gallery, NY.

Composed of debris collected from the streets of New York, Babirye's sculptures are carved, woven, whittled, welded, burned, and burnished into relief. The works incorporate a variety of materials, including a double-sided ceramic head with hair fashioned out of a chain, and wooden forms carved using traditional African techniques (Crain; see Figures 8 and 9). Describing her artistic practice, Babirye clarifies:

Through the act of burning, nailing and assembling, I aim to address the realities of being gay in the context of Uganda and Africa in general. Recently, my working process has been fueled by a need to find a language to respond to the recent passing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda. ("Leilah Babirye")

Here, Babirye's choice to use discarded materials in her work intentionally replicates the sociopolitical context of her home country while also providing nuance to national discussions of LGBTI issues. The pejorative term for a gay person in the Luganda language is "ebisiyaga," meaning sugarcane husk, or rubbish (Keh). By poetically assembling pieces of "rubbish" to represent queer royal figures of Uganda's precolonial past—effectively reviving the discarded materials—Babirye gives dignity to her queer subjects and makes a critical statement advocating against the disposability of contemporary LGBTI Ugandans suggested by the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. Even further, by depicting these royal subjects as androgynous figures undefined by any one distinct gender or sexual identity, Babirye challenges traditional ideas about gender and power in order to offer a new vision for a world in which queerness does not need to be explicitly named in order to be validated. In this contemporary iteration of queer Ugandan visual activism, Babirye animates the past as a means to imagine a tangible future—one capable of reclaiming a host of culturally discarded customs and beliefs surrounding homosexuality, one intimately invested in proudly making space for, protecting, and honoring queer Africans within and beyond the continent.

Following Lewin's understanding of visual activism articulated earlier in this essay, Tugbiyele and Babirye's diasporic representations of queer subjectivity allow them to maintain a distant connection and commitment to their respective home countries through their works' evocation of surreptitious queer Ugandan history alongside recognizable Nigerian cultural artifacts (Lewin 43). This connection is further cemented by their public promotion of active protests against anti-gay discourse, legislation, and sexual violence on the continent, as well as their continued investment in on the ground networks of LGBTI organizers such as the Kakuma refugee camp in Nairobi, Kenya which supports LGBT-asylum seekers (Keh). These

works radically reimagine and breathe into life a future in which equality across race, gender, sexuality, and class is no longer a question up for discussion.

Critically, where Muholi's photographic practice evidences a discursive freedom to create bodies of work that speak candidly about their sexuality and their protests against violent homophobia while based in South Africa, on the other hand, artists such as Tugbiyele and Babirye—whose home countries both have strict laws restricting the public expression of homosexuality—are forced to create alternative languages of representation in order to communicate their struggles in a way that both adapts to and subverts their dominant context. Through exhibitions in and beyond the continent, each of these artists posit the site of “the gallery” as a rich space for the contemporary production of visual activism. For these visual activists, their work is fused with a perceptive awareness of how the art market and art institutions have the capacity to amplify the voices and concerns of African queer populations. While the thematic similarities and connections across these artistic practices abound, the structural similarities end with the site of the gallery. In contrast to the form of photography in Muholi's practice—which generates more direct and transparent reflections of queer South African community and history—the mediums of textile and sculpture as used by Tugbiyele and Babirye instead illustrate more implicit and expressive depictions of queer subjectivity. Here, the variation in epistemological origin, aesthetic composition, and formal materiality throughout the development of queer African visual activism illustrates a nuanced index of the genre.

As the earliest self-declared queer “visual activist” concentrated in the southernmost country of Africa, Zanele Muholi has typically defined the genre of African visual activism as a whole. While it is true that the South African Constitution created a legal precedent for the “accessibility” of homosexuality through its sexual orientation clause, by exploring what constitutes visual activism in the specific sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts that surround the lives and works of other queer artists throughout the Diaspora, our understandings of the history and possibility of African queer visual activism has expanded beyond South Africa and even the continent. The works of Adejoke Tugbiyele and Leilah Babirye destabilize an essentialized aesthetic of African lesbian subjectivity, and thus establish a nuanced analysis of the various ways that same-sex-loving African women and non-binary individuals throughout the diaspora have used the visual arts to represent and advocate for their communities. By placing the earlier works of Muholi in conversation with contemporary works produced by Tugbiyele and Babirye, I analyze the various ways in which queer diasporic artists have been forced to cultivate their own traditions of visual activism in order to respond to and resist disparate forms of homophobic suppression in their respective home countries. Visual activists such as Muholi, Tugbiyele, and Babirye operate across distinct mediums, materials, and regional contexts in order to create art that is politically engaged, historically grounded, and culturally relevant. In effect, there is a nuanced tradition of contemporary queer visual

activism specific to the African diaspora that is primarily invested in promoting awareness about and advocating against gendered and sexual violence; reductive, homophobic stereotypes; and government sponsored suppression on the continent. My articulation of this genre offers a manifold, ever-expanding canon of methodology for the field of visual activism that hopefully reflects and inspires the organization efforts of past, current, and future queer African visual activists.

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