What If It Were a 20\textsuperscript{th}-Century Oguni Mask? How Nandipha Mntambo’s \textit{Contact} (2010) Creates A Tone Of Rebellion/Beauty At The Entrance to the Exhibition ‘Mosaic: Selections From The Permanent Collection’ At the National Museum of African Art

Bethany Hill

Dr. Kirstin Ringelberg

ARH 495: Senior Seminar

April 21, 2015
List of Figures

Figure 1: Nandipha Mntambo, Contact, cowhide, cowhooves, resin, polyester mesh, 190 x 195 x 70cm, Smithsonian Institution, 2010. Found at: Galleryhip, https://serurbano.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/nandipha-mntambo-091.jpg.

Figure 2: Nandipha Mntambo, uMecdo, cows' tails, wood, 320 x 335 x 150cm, 2009. Found at: Stevenson, http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/mntambo/images/umcedo.jpg.

Figure 3: Nandipha Mntambo, Refuge, cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, 3 figures 52 x 60 x 59cm 2009, private collection, Johannesburg. Found at: Stevenson, http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/mntambo/images/refuge.jpg.

Figure 4: Nandipha Mntambo, Zeus, bronze, 88 x 84 x 58cm, 2009. Found at: Brodie/Stevenson, http://stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/mntambo/zeus.htm.

Figure 5: Nandipha Mntambo, Ukungenisa, single-channel video projection, shot on HD. Duration 2 mins 30 secs, sound, edition of 5 + 2AP, 2008.

Figure 6: Nandipha Mntambo, Mlwa ne Nkunzi, archival pigment on cotton rag paper, diptych 112 x 84.5cm each, photographer: Lambro, 2008. Found at: http://www.artsatl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Nandipha-Mntambo-Mlwa-ne-Nkunzi-e1360078162181.jpg

Figure 7: Nandipha Mntambo, …everyone carries a shadow V, Archival pigment ink on 300gr Baryta paper, 100 x 85cm, 2013. Found at: https://d1ycxz9plii3tb.cloudfront.net/additional_images/535fcc3fc9dc24d7310001d9/large.jpg

Figure 8: Étienne Goeffroy de Saint-Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier, The Hottentot Venus from Histoire Naturelle des Mammifères, 1824. Found at: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Sawtche_(dite_Sarah_Saartjie_Baartman),_%C3%A9tudi%C3%A9e_comme_Femme_de_race_B%C3%B4chismann,_Histoire_Naturelle_des_Mammif%C3%A8res,_tome_II,_Cuvier,_Werner,_de_Lasteyrie.jpg
Figure 5
Figure 6
Founded in 1964, the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. is the largest public museum of African Art in the United States. One of the museum’s current exhibitions, entitled *Mosaic: Selections from the Permanent Collection* features three rooms of variety of objects from over 50 years of collecting. Describing itself as a tool in “America’s quest for interracial understanding”, the National Museum of African Art seems equipped and ready to fully engage with issues of race and identity as they have affected the collecting and interpretation of ‘African Art’. The work chosen for the entrance of this exhibition is the sculpture *Contact* (2010) by artist Nandipha Mntambo (1982-). This captivating piece, made from animal hide stretched over a cast of the artist’s own body, asserts its presence and demands attention. I will argue that within the context of the *Mosaic* exhibition *Contact* engages with issues and histories of the problematic display of African Art and represents this constructed category’s difficulty to both engage and to raise interest in African Art while also escaping the ever looming category of the primitive.

With the back attached flat to the wall, Mntambo’s sculpture *Contact* [Fig. 1], a headless life-sized torso, reaches forwards towards the viewer with phantom arms. The material of the ‘incomplete’ body shapes itself into the clearly delineated and realistically proportional curves of breasts, a stomach, hips, and thighs. The human form is rendered in undulating waves of curves from one continuous block of material. The sleek continuity of the work creates feelings of calm as well as eerie perturbations from the unfinished realization of the figural body. Mntambo’s highly engaging sculptures are made out of cowhide which the artist gathers from a slaughterhouse near the artist’s studio in Cape Town, South Africa.\(^1\) When viewing these sculptures with closer inspection one can see the short hairs of the hide bristle and prickle forward in a sensuously tactile way that almost calls out for the viewer to touch them. The highly
sensory impression of the piece captivates the embodied viewer and draws them in to further contemplate the piece. The fluidity of the rippling hide is disrupted by a cluster of animal hooves that protrude all along the base of the work in a wide rim. Like some sort of grotesque ornament, beige, brown, and blackened cloven hooves are piled on top of one another in an apparently random pattern. The coloring of the piece is a melted blend of soft earthy tones—dark brown, grey, beige sandstone, and cinnamon that quietly blend into one another. **While the violence implied by the medium of animal hide might shock and cause feelings of unease the soft colors present in the material successfully invite, please, and soothe the viewing eye rather than repelling it.** *Contact* is a captivating and engaging blend of smooth and rough, soft and hard, caving inwards and protruding outwards, and subtle transitions of color and light. Ultimately, the formal qualities of *Contact* are vital to drawing in and holding the attention of the viewer. It is a strategic and wise choice on the part of the National Museum of African Art to place a work of sleekness and beauty in such a prominent position of display. As the viewer approaches the entrance to the *Mosaic* exhibition, *Contact* emanates magnificence and energy.

One of the goals of this paper will be to give specific visibility to the significance of *Contact*, a work that has yet to be discussed in scholarship on the Mntambo’s work. This sculpture and the significance it has within the ‘Mosaic’ exhibition should be a part of discourse on the artist as her career continues to garner increasing international attention. Mntambo is an artist who clearly seems to be pushing her work in a variety of directions. The creation of a number of non-figural and figural sculptures [Figs. 2, 3], bronzes busts [Fig. 4], a performance piece and film entitled *Ukungenisa* [Fig. 5] and multiple photographic series [Figs. 6, 7], demonstrate the artist’s exhilarating ability to experiment with a variety of mediums. Through my discussion of *Contact* I hope to present a reading of Mntambo’s work that is two-fold: first to
demonstrates the sculpture’s ability to engage with significant issues of the display of African Art and second to reveal the significance of this work in discourse on the artist’s work.

The National Museum of African Art’s exhibition *Mosaic: Selections from the Permanent Collection* is located on the second floor of the museum. A reading of *Contact* in this exhibition includes a consideration of the sculpture’s placement as the central piece visible upon entering the exhibition. As the viewer descends the stairs of the museum and approaches the exhibition, the structure of the space is such that *Contact* is the only work visible at the entrance. Mounted against a dark purple wall and illuminated by lights beneath it, the museum has certainly worked to highlight the piece. The sculpture’s prominent placement is further emphasized by the exhibition’s introductory wall label which is also titled “Contact”.

Mntambo’s piece seems highly significant to the museum’s purpose and strategy of the “Mosaic” exhibition. I will argue that the *Contact* does indeed play multiple and complex roles in its institutional context.

Additional wall labels inside the exhibition reveal that the curatorial aim of *Mosaic*: to celebrate 50 years of collecting and to commemorate the development of the museum since its 1964 founding by Warren M. Robin, as a tool in “America’s quest for interracial understanding”. It is important to note that the language that we use to discuss ‘Africa’ and ‘African Art’ is inherently problematic and often throws together extremely different people groups, political systems, languages, histories, and creative processes under umbrella terms that we then wrongfully employ across important differences of individual and collective identities.

The framework of the *Mosaic* exhibition displays some of problematic issues regarding the display of African Art as well as challenging them. *Mosaic* demonstrates some of the difficulties and barriers museums with collections of African Art have in the interpretation of their objects.
Works of significantly different time periods, mediums, and geographical locations are located alongside one another. In the main room of the exhibition where Contact is displayed, a hunting horn from the late 15th century is located adjacent to a Crest mask dated to the early to mid-20th century, which is then placed next to a Yinka Shonibare piece from 2009. Explaining its vision for the exhibition, the wall label for Contact reads:

> Through misperceptions of the African Continent as isolated or “remote” may linger, the works of art in this gallery testify to the centuries of contact between Africans, Europeans, and Americans. The resulting exchanges yielded such treasures as an exquisitely carved horn presented as a gift between the royal houses of Europe and gave rise to such horrors as the transatlantic slave trade. The artists who created the works in this gallery provide insights into the entangled histories that unite us all, and invite us to contemplate the comingling legacies of beauty, talent, faith, identity, racism, and political and economic imperialism.

On the wall to the right of this label is a large map of Africa that we can assume works to illustrate the many individual countries located on the continent. It is important for the National Museum of African Art to be able to visually demonstrate Africa is not a country and that differences in geography are paralleled by a great breadth and diversity of distinct cultures. In analyzing the intent of the Mosaic exhibition, it is also significant to consider the quote that is located on the wall of the entry room on the first floor that declares: “As the cradle of humanity, Africa is part of everyone’s heritage. The National Museum of African Art is dedicated to advancing an appreciation and understanding of Africa’s rich visual arts and diverse cultures.”

The legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery that Mosaic acknowledges reveal the drastic consequences of feeling entitled to the land, cultures, and bodies of others. The tone of the Mosaic exhibition is complicated to decipher—at times seeming to further problematize the presentation of this constructed category of objects and at other times transforming it. In order to place the value of one human life above another as processes of contact that unites us is
potentially problematic. To uncritically frame the histories by which race was constructed as a category seems to dangerously teeter towards other forms of institutional racism.

To frame the tensions of the *Mosaic* exhibition I will first turn to the work of Carol Duncan that discusses the ways in which the museum space functions as a political tool in the formation of categories of national identities.\(^5\) Duncan’s work reveals that the museum is a site where narratives of difference, hierarchy, and the value of certain identities over others influences levels of display.\(^6\) Duncan explains that museums are fundamental in creating national identities and that the political representation of other cultures is essential in the processes that we use to distinguish ourselves from one another.\(^7\) Far from a neutral or objective space the art museum teaches us to which groups we belong and to which we do not.\(^8\) Duncan also argues that museums function as secular ritual space with a similarity to religious spaces of devotion in which individuals enter with a “willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity.”\(^9\) We come to museums with an inherent belief in the authority of the institution, certain expectations for what and how we will see, and knowledge of acceptable and unacceptable actions of behavior. And according to Duncan, there is a performance that occurs in this ritual space that is tied to identity.\(^10\) This identity is entangled with narratives on the progression of western history and constructed categories of Otherness.\(^11\) With Duncan’s understanding of how museums create rituals of belonging (and subsequent exclusion) we can begin to understand what is at stake for the National Museum of African Art’s *Mosaic* exhibition.

The article “‘ART/artifact': On the Museum and Anthropology” is a revealing case study of how the discourse as well as display of African art has developed from problematic origins. Written in the late 1980s, anthropologist James C. Faris reviews the recently opened exhibition,
“ART/artifact”, at the Center for African Art in New York. Faris’ analysis of the exhibition’s display of African objects reveals a heavily reliance on anthropological interpretation in the determination of how to make meaning of African objects that are no longer in Africa. The problematic language of the article and the exhibitions the author discusses describe these objects as ‘specimens’, ‘exotic objects’, and once-functional ‘artifacts’. The article’s discussion of “ART/artifact” is includes a mentioned link to the MOMA’s Primitivism exhibition which occurred only four years earlier. In this highly problematic exhibition African art objects were placed alongside works of western European masters as the primitive, artistically inferior, and eroticized inspirations for the ‘masterpieces’ of their superior western counterparts. At the foundation of Faris’ discussion is questioning how best to reconcile in object’s museum display, and anthropology’s role in this understanding, the separation of these objects from “indigenous Africans [and] the specific cultural setting that produced the item...” Faris argues against ‘anthropological orthodoxy’ that would promote, in the absence of an original African context that the function of the objects be prioritized. He concludes that the art/artefact debate about African objects tends to deny the objects’ abilities to exist on their own terms.

In his book entitled Making History: African Collectors and The Canon of Art History Assistant Professor of African and African Diaspora Arts at the University of California at Santa Barbara Slyvester Ogbchie writes that museums have a particularly significant role in determining whether African Art objects are authenticated, valued, and given attention by the art market and historians. Ogbchie demonstrates that determining the authenticity of African ‘art’ objects is tied up with processes of racism in which the process of authentication is contingent upon an object’s possession of an ‘indigenous’ and ritual context. Authenticating African Art is founded in the colonial ideal of a ‘primitive’ aesthetic and an exotic and eroticized Other. Further
preventing the recognition of a larger and more diversified collection of objects from Africa is the unfounded assumption that “all significant examples of indigenous African art have either been relocated to Western collections or have been lost due to changes in African cultural preferences.” An object with suspect ‘authenticity’ will not be accessioned into the collection of a museum and therefore never receives a documented provenance. This highly problematic myth of an original authentic African context has significant consequences for historical and contemporary objects. First, the scholarship then largely ignores objects that are not present in the collections of museums and second objects in major museums exist within a closed loop of repetition. Although this area of research by Ogbechie is primarily concerned with contextualizing the barriers that African owned collections of African Art face in being recognized by current art markets his work also demonstrates the responsibility museums have to ethically display and interpret African Art.

An additional work by Ogbechie critiques the ideologies and practices of famed African Art curator Okuwi Enwezor, who recently became the first African to hold one of the coveted spots as curator of the 2015 Venice Biennale. Ogbechie’s critique stresses a contemporary urgency to address some of the most troubling issues at hand concerning the display and interpretation of contemporary African Art and artists. His discussion reemphasizes a consideration of the history of this art category as one that has been devalued or excluded from both the context of the museum and academic discourse. In a system that exclusively uses Western defined parameters of value and interpretation it becomes difficult for contemporary artists not working and living outside of Africa to enter the canon. Ogbechie reveals that this dominance of western parameters of interpretation severely limits the ability of current scholarship to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of contemporary practices. The focus
on diasporic visual practices limits the ability of the institution of academia and the museum to take a varied approach to contemporary practices. Ogbechie argues that this in turn leads to curatorial practices that do not then see ‘contemporary’ African art practices as dynamic, shifting, and changing but rather as static.\textsuperscript{24} The choice of the National Museum of African Art to choose a work like \textit{Contact} that so distinctly looks ‘abstract’ and ‘contemporary’ is a successful attempt by the museum to display the movement and development of disrupt histories of presenting African art as objects from the primitive past.

Nandipha Mntambo’s art certainly struggles with this issue of contemporaneity and the expectation of her work to represent a marker of her ‘Africanness’. While the artist has argues for a more complex reading of her work scholarship demonstrates that the artist’s choice of medium is read as a representative sign of her ‘African’ identity. In her Master’s Thesis entitled “Locating Me In Order To See You,” the artist expresses frustration at the assumption that she uses cowhide as a medium expressly because she is African.\textsuperscript{25} The artist explains but then refutes an exclusive association of the medium of cowhide as tied to the significance of cultural practices in multiple African cultures. Mntambo explains that in the Nguni culture of South Africa there is a practice in which a bride’s family receives a set number of cows in exchange for a promise of good faith to the groom’s family.\textsuperscript{26} Although this cultural significance has been read in the artist’s work it is dangerous and inappropriate to assume that it is a fulfillment of the artist’s African or South African heritage.\textsuperscript{27} Performance artist Bettina Malcomess in their article “The Fragile Persistence of Memory” frames the medium of Mntambo’s work and its impact as directly linked with the charged contemporary political climate of South Africa. Malcomess’ discussion does include discussing the link between cultural practices, like lobola, with the cowhide material of Mntambo’s sculptures.\textsuperscript{28} Malcomess argues that as a female artist Mntambo
disrupts the gender roles associated with cultural practices in which working with cowhide was distinctly masculine labor. Although Malcomess aims to show that Mntambo’s performance of culture and history is complex it is dangerous to focus on this element of the artist’s work as a necessary or logical outcome of her identity as a South African woman. It is useful that this kind of scholarship reveals the activist potential of Mntambo’s work to challenge sexism, racism, and violence against women in South Africa. However, we must be wary of framing it this way in a way that does not recognize the intersectional nature of identity and her work. In addition to the artist’s requests to focus on other aspects of her work we might consider whether this discussion of the African cultural significance of cowhide is a problematic—representative of the problematic expectation of artists from African to have some recognizable/identifiable marker of Africanness in their work?

To consider this thought even further we might consider how this element factored in to the National Museum of African Art’s choice to place Contact at the entrance to the Mosaic exhibition. In considering the museum’s process for choosing the piece that would frame the entrance of the exhibition we might wonder just how critical it was that the work display or reveal an identifiable marker of African identity. The label for Contact declares that the work is “[c]ast from [the artist’s] own body and sheathed in cowhide and hooves in tribute to her cattle-raising heritage.”

The strategies that non-white artists have employed to confront the racism of the art historical canon are many and varied and reveal how Contact challenges problematic assumptions of African art. In scholar Kianga K. Ford’s work, the author discusses “contemporary reclamation work” to describe work by black contemporary visual artists that challenges exclusion from the canon by reclaiming space within it. I will add that at the heart
of this term is the understanding that processes of sexism, classicism, racism, homophobia and Eurocentrism have worked to exclude, devalue, or render invisible the work of black artists from the canon of art history. Deeply entrenched cultural biases since the time of Renaissance art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) have continued to privilege the work of white, European, straight, males as the pinnacle of artistic achievement. For black artists especially the question then becomes: how do you reclaim space within institutions that have for so long excluded you? The highly engaging and effective answer for many artists, including Mntambo, is a manipulation of stereotypes that ultimately reveals the racist structures and ideologies through which they were constructed.

Nandipha Mntambo’s sculptural works like that of Contact are created through a process by which the artist stretches cowhide over casts of her body. Mntambo purchases the hides from a slaughterhouse near her studio in Cape Town and then goes through the physically demanding process of scraping away layers of salt, dung, and fat. The viewer is then presented with female figures in which the line between animal and human is highly blurred. In Ruth Lipschitz’ analysis of Mntambo’s work, the graduate student of visual studies argues that in both form and content of Mntambo’s sculptural works employ race, gender, and the hybrid human/animal form as ways to challenge Western specieist hierarchies that support the creation of racial difference. In her analysis of the significance of Mntambo’s use of animal hide, Lipschitz briefly suggests that there are parallels between the artist’s work and visual presentations of Sarah Bartman. Although the disruptive presence of ‘the animal’ in Mntambo’s sculptural works has already been established I want to emphasize understanding Contact as a performance of a stereotype in which the artist uses her own body in subversive ways which ultimately reveal that Africa does not belong to everyone and the history of violence that has been inflicted on black
female bodies does not “unite us all”.

A variety of drawings and prints were made in the 19th century that depicted the South African woman Sarah Baartman whose large buttocks made her an exotic curiosity in Europe [Fig. 12]. Sarah Baartman was born in 1789 and brought to be exhibited in England in 1810. Often these images depicted Sarah standing in profile, in an ‘objective’ likeness that paralleled 19th century obsessions with cataloguing, categorizing, and ordering the natural world. Scholars Deborah Willis and Carla Williams argue that images and performances of her body became a way of showing the black female body as both grotesque, desirable, sexualized, and objectified. Sarah became a symbol for the black body and savage and justifiably inferior to white/Western bodies. Mntambo’s woman of cowhide is engaging with the traditional of portraying black women’s bodies as admissibly enslaved, objectified, exploited, and raped.

Nicole Fleetwood’s use of the terms of ‘hypervisibility’ and ‘excess flesh’ provide a useful model for interpreting the artist’s fleshy presentation’s connection to Sarah Baartman. In Fleetwood’s exploration of the visual codes by which we come to ‘know’ and ‘recognize’ blackness the scholar of black cultural studies uses the terms excess flesh and hypervisibility as a way to examine the works of black female visual and cultural artists. Fleetwood is invested in exploring the means by which these artists use, perform, or render visible the black female body as a means to disrupt the very processes by which “dominant public culture” polices acceptable and unacceptable ways of being for black women’s bodies. The term excess flesh is used to explain the ways in which the black female body is racialized, sexualized, and used as to establish white femininity as ideal, superior, and normative. The black woman’s body, its literal ‘surplus’ of thicker thighs, buttocks, and breasts, form the corporeal foundations by which the figures of mammy, jezebel, Angel Mcfood and Niki Minaja become recognizable signs of
black female sexual deviance. For Fleetwood hypervisibility is a strategy of critique and transformation that black women artists, like Mntambo, might employ to move beyond such negating spaces in a way that allows for “black women’s bodily enactments [to] signify beyond “explicit”. Hypervisibility allows artists to engage with historical representations of abject black female bodies and enact the idea of excess flesh. We can then understand that hypervisibility is a performance of the stereotype that ultimately challenges the processes of sexism and racism through which the stereotype is created. By fulfilling the expectation of a dark skinned body of ‘excess’, the viewer is forced to acknowledge their racist and sexist understandings of the black female body. As Fleetwood writes, hypervisibility is “an enactment of the flesh [that] points directly to historical context and racial and gender coding”.

In Kianka K Ford’s work “Playing with Venus: Black Women Artists and the Venus Trope in Contemporary Visual Art” the author analyses how contemporary artists respond to the symbolic figure of Venus/Sarah Baartman in a way that points beyond the historical moment of this character’s life to the legacy and lasting symbolism of the black female body as justifiably enslaved and inferior. According to Ford’s argument understanding the Venus trope is less about locating the original source of the black female body as deviant, but about engaging with the “residual ideologies which help to construct and sustain [these stereotypes]”. Therefore contemporary representations of stereotypes may engage with or perform against historical characters in a way that reveals the more insidious processes of institutional racism. Ford argues that the Venus trope functions as a “visual signpost that points toward rampant indulgence in the fantasy of the extreme other…the figure of the Venus is understood to stand in as iconic evidence of the spectacular and peculiar sex of the black woman. Ford employs the terms condensation and recycle as ways to counter the argument that to represent stereotypes is to give
them truth.\textsuperscript{50} With the term condensation Ford applies psychoanalytic theory to explain the process by which a stereotype always already points beyond that which is manifest, to a myriad of characters and thoughts that actually make up the figure.\textsuperscript{51} Contemporary artists and works like Contact can effectively represent the Venus figure in a way that acts a roadmap that ultimately points to the signs through which we construct highly damaging ideas about black female sexuality.\textsuperscript{52}

The work of Lucy Rayner presents an additional component of considering the notion of excess and the rebellious presentation of the Other’s body. Rayner argues that Mntambo’s sculptures Silent Embrace (2007) and Beginning of the Empire (2007) present hairy, smelly, curvy, and sensual female bodies that simultaneously attract and repulse.\textsuperscript{53} The curvy female form resists abjection through the grotesque and asserts its right to exist in difference.\textsuperscript{54} Rayner argues that these disruptive presentations of the feminine reveal the socially constructed nature of femininity “rather than as fundamental elements of African identity”.\textsuperscript{55}

Rayner’s argument, when applied to Contact in the context of the Mosaic exhibition, has triumphant results for the museum’s use of the sculpture. If Contact, like other sculptures by the artist, can reveal the constructed nature of identity we can see the National Museum of African Art’s resistance to a static and identifiable notion of “the African”. Contact enables the museum to combat both racism and sexism by using a work that reveals the socially constructed nature of these categories. Revisiting the introductory Contact label it is revealed that Mntambo’s sculpture successfully realizes the exhibition’s goal to present. Rayner expresses Mntambo’s sculptures rebuke tendencies to over generalize and essentialize the make-up of an African identity. What Rayner frames as the liberating success of Mntambo’s subversion of the feminine can be seen to extend beyond discussions of gender at the entrance of museum’s exhibition. Contact joins the
pieces discussed by Rayner and “demonstrate a certain critical tone toward the notion of an African cultural identity.”

In an example of the ways that a discussion of strategies for confronting racism and sexism functions in the work of others artists we turn to art historian John Bowles’ analysis of the Conceptual and feminist artist Adrian Piper. While the work of Piper and Mntambo are significantly different from one another it is worthwhile to examine Piper’s work—which perhaps even more explicitly performs race, markers of blackness, and recognizable signs of racialized stereotypes. Bowles argues that in the artist’s photographic *Mythic Being* series, Piper performs the stereotype of the hypersexualized, aggressive, macho black male that was prevalent in the American popular conscience and connected to contemporary blaxploitation films. For the performance the artist dons an afro wig, a moustache, and men’s clothing while walking the streets of New York City in staged scenarios of “cruising for white women”, or mugging a friend. Bowles argues that Piper’s performance in this series does not function as an autobiographical record of the artist’s personal experiences but “theatricalizes the effects of racism” in a way that forces the viewer to recognize their biases and role in the construction of racist stereotypes. For Bowles, Piper’s art effectively intersects with social justice activism because it is able to implicate the viewer into a realization of their complicity in the construction of racist stereotypes.

Out of this discussion of one of the especially significant tools of contemporary reclamation work begins to emerge—the use of the self in these performative efforts. For Mntambo’s work this takes on the very physical and tactile element of using the artist’s own body. In Mntambo’s photographic performances the artist’s strategies of confronting the art historical canon, involves her clearly visible black skin and raced body. Anyone without this
body, this skin, is not implicated into this space of challenge and confrontation. In works like *Contact*, the visibly raced body is not explicitly presented. In *Contact* there is a literal and symbolic space, in which the viewer must reflect on their own identity and its relationship to sexism and racism.

In *Contact* the specificity of the shoulders, torso, and hips that are particular to Mntambo are then challenged by the absence of the identifying feature of a face. These gaping spaces at the base of the neck and shoulders almost seem to invite the viewer to imagine substitutions, perhaps of themselves, in a way that the figure is constantly becoming only one person, no one, and everyone. The sculptures empty spaces ask the viewer to locate themselves within matrixes of identity and privilege. *Contact* however, has been placed against the wall of the museum and therefore does not have the same sort of ‘open invitation’ for the viewer to substitute or imagine something else in the empty spaces. I argue that in the context of the exhibition at the National Museum of Art this is crucial. It represents a claim of space in the context of ‘African’ heritage that does not support the “heritage of all humankind” argument.61 If the indentations left in the cinnamon and ash-colored animal skin are uniquely those of Mntambo: her broad chest, graceful hips, breasts, curving stomach and upper thighs it seems like we might consider the work a kind of self-portrait. The markers that are left in the material simultaneously reveal the presence and absence of the artist. However, the lack of a head or face of Mntambo leaves the ‘self-portrait’ eerily incomplete. Instead, a gaping negative space invites the viewer into the piece to imagine and substitute, perhaps filling in the space with their own likeness. *Contact* destabilizes the position of the artist and implicates the viewer into an interactive viewing experience. The work is always already only that of the artist, as well as a space that might be claimed and explored by anyone. *Contact* also challenges the *Mosaic* exhibition in that the piece displays an intriguing
sense of action that appears contradictory to the permanence it also displays. The cow hooves along the base display the sheen of resin or glue and the rougher edges of the material appear stiff and brittle. In the breezeless room of the museum the reality is that there is no source for the gust of air that seems to billow through the work. And yet, strategically placed ripples and folds transform the finality of resin hardened cowhide into eternally flowing fabric. The cowhide spreads out and waves around the knees of the female figure in a manner that makes it appear as if she were rising out of a frothy body of water. This added dynamism to Contact is further enforced by the work’s overall angle and placement within the museum. The torso of the figure is tilted dramatically forwards so that as the hollow base is attached to the wall it appears to propel the body outwards and into the space around it. Contact advances from the walls of the museum to radiate a compelling sense of action and drive.

The posture of Mntambo’s figures is fairly varied and I believe that the posture of Contact and the museum’s placement of the piece at National Museum of African Art has intentional and rebellious implications. Rayner writes of Mntambo’s sculptures that “[i]t is unclear whether [Mntambo’s] figures are awaiting some kind of salvation, or seeking a hiding place from an unknown terror.” This is not true, especially with Contact. Each of Mntambo’s sculptures varies in their exact posture, but they are in general upright and assertive. Contact reaches forward from the walls of the National Museum of African Art with a confident and empowered presentation of the body.

In this essay Nandipha Mntambo’s sculpture Contact is given specific attention with the context of the permanent collection of the National Museum of African Art. In conclusion, the impact of this work—an intriguing sculpture of the female figure created by stretching a cowhide over a cast of the artist’s body—is specifically used by the museum to engage with and challenge
problematic assumptions about African identity and African art. By applying other scholar’s arguments about the link between Mntambo’s animalized presentation of the female body and the imagery of Sarah Baartman to *Contact*, the work is revealed to disrupt expectations of the primitive and constructed notions of African identity.
2 Wall text, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
4 Wall text, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
6 Duncan, “Museums and Citizenship,” 89.
7 Duncan, “Museums and Citizenship,” 89.
8 Duncan, “Museums and Citizenship,” 90.
9 Duncan, “Museums and Citizenship,” 91.
17 Ogbechie, *Making History*, 60.
18 Ogbechie, *Making History*, 68.
22 Ogbechie, essay presented at University of Santa Cruz, “Curator As Cultural Broker.”
23 Ogbechie, essay presented at University of Santa Cruz, “Curator As Cultural Broker.”
24 Ogbechie, essay presented at University of Santa Cruz, “Curator As Cultural Broker.”
35 Wall text, Contact, National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
38 Willis, Deborah and Carla Williams, “Colonial Conquest”, 59-63.
40 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 9.
41 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 111.
42 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 110.
43 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 110.
44 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 119.
45 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 112.
46 Fleetwood, Troubling Vision, 119.
49 Ford, “Playing With Venus,” 100.
54 Rayner, “Carnival Impulses,” 12.
58 Bowles, Adrian Piper, 8.
59 Bowles, Adrian Piper, 8.
60 Bowles, Adrian Piper, 20.

Bibliography

Berzock, Kathleen Bickford and Christa Clarke, eds. Representing Africa in American Art


Tully, Ann-Marie. “Becoming Animal: Liminal Rhetorical Strategies In Contemporary South


