

## ‘Oh, There Are Politics in Billie’s Work!’: Billie Zangewa and/at the Boundaries of Feminist Visual Activism

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the consequences of reading textile artist Billie Zangewa’s art through the frame of feminist visual activism, both in terms of (i) recognizing the political potential of Zangewa’s work, as well as (ii) interrogating the conceptual boundaries of visual activism. Situating Zangewa’s work within a rich legacy of Black and postcolonial feminist investments in self-love and self-care, and in celebrations of domesticity (‘daily feminisms’ in Zangewa’s words), I argue that Zangewa’s art exemplifies the Black feminist practice of reclaiming the terms under which Black women are looked at, redressing histories of erasure as well as hypervisibility underwritten by the abjection, objectification, sexualization and dehumanization of Black women. Attending to Zangewa’s medium, fabric, I also argue against allegations of the individualised, atomized nature of self-love politics, demonstrating how Zangewa’s modality of self-love is deeply embedded in (rather than hostile to recognitions of) universality, solidarity, and the shared, collective experience of Black womanhood. Finally, reading Zangewa’s work through the lens of Lewis’ (2017) frame of presencing and Camp’s theorization of black visibility as refusal, I make the case for re-thinking visual activism as a relational, inter-subjective exercise in sense-making, generating a range of affects and effects that exceed its sites of production and circulation.

**Keywords:** post-colonial feminism, visual activism, feminist art, black feminism, black visibility

### INTRODUCTION

Fabric, this thing we all have a daily relationship with, is often dismissed by the world as mundane and unimportant, much like the daily, mundane work that women do to keep a home, a community and a society going. I wanted to use this dismissed cultural thing to speak against patriarchy by creating powerful images about the importance of another dismissed thing, domesticity and the ordinary but important aspects of women’s daily life and work in and around the home. – Billie Zangewa quoted in Okoro (2020: n.p.).

This article is an exploration of the tensions, contradictions and possibilities inaugurated by a reading of Billie Zangewa’s work through the frame of feminist visual activism. The boundaries of what precisely constitutes ‘visual activism’ remain labile and contested, with characterisations ranging from Demos’ definition as ‘politically directed practices of visibility aimed at catalysing social, political, and economic change’ (Demos, 2016: 87), to a more capacious interpretation of visual activism as simply the abandonment of neutrality in/through art (Bryan-Wilson, González and Willson, 2016). Attaching the epithet feminist, itself a deeply fraught terrain, to visual activism further muddies already murky conceptual waters. What can and should be considered feminist visual activism,

and why, are not futile musings – it is precisely a careful contemplation of these parameters that help us unpack how (in what forms, and to what extent) aesthetic interventions have the capacity to instigate social change, or, to the contrary buttress dominant (patriarchal, capitalist, racist) configurations of power.

Mediating between varied understandings of both feminism and visual activism, this piece asks: (how) can Zangewa's work be read as an instance of feminist visual activism? What are the implications of such a reading, in terms of recognising the political potential of Zangewa's work, as well as for what it means to do, witness, and think with and about 'feminist visual activism'? The first section of the article situates Zangewa's work within rich legacies of feminist – and especially Black and post-colonial feminist – insistence on (i) self-love and self-care (ii) celebrations of domesticity and the quotidian ('daily feminisms' as Zangewa puts it) as key sites of feminist praxis. The second and final section brings Zangewa's work in conversation with fraught debates on visual activism as a vehicle for social transformation, shifting the site of analysis from Zangewa's work and how she creates it (product and process) to the spaces of its reception and circulation (place), and then back to the artefacts, but recast in insistently relational terms.

## **'SELF-LOVE IS THE ULTIMATE RESISTANCE': ON REPRESENTING BLACK WOMEN'S STRENGTH AND FEMININITY, AND ELEVATING DOMESTICITY**

At some point I realized that I was seeing myself through a man's eyes—seeking approval from men, living my life in relation to another. It came to me that whilst I lived this way, I was in essence giving permission for others to take my power. I was giving it away. Then I asked myself the questions, "What if I started to see myself through my own eyes? What would happen if I took my power back and negated the omnipresent male gaze?" This is something I started to explore in my work, portraying myself as a poised, independent, empowered individual, not afraid to share her intimate self and be vulnerable (Zangewa in Collymore, 2021: n.p.).

While Zangewa's earlier works depicted botanical scenes and animals from her childhood in Botswana, she soon transitioned to creating cityscapes, with a focus on her own experiences as a Black woman in the city of Johannesburg. *The Rebirth of Black Venus*, a 2010 creation hand-stitched using raw silk fabric and threads, is emblematic of this shift. It depicts a larger-than-life Black woman towering over the urban cityscape of Johannesburg, hovering above the roofs of buildings dwarfed by her stature. Despite the sheer scale of the figure, she embodies delicacy and poise, with her svelte form carefully perched on the toes of one foot, as though mid-dance. The piece marks what Okoro (2020: n.p.) calls a 'threshold season' for Zangewa, signalling the commencement of a tender, complex, but firmly celebratory exploration of Black femininity (Lewis, 2017) and subjectivity, and its encounters with sensuality, solitude, sadness, strength and much more. Subtly invoking (and juxtaposing) both Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and the horrific story of the Black 'Hottentot' Venus, the image is striking in its refusal of scripts of Black female abjection, and its quiet subversion of the history of Black women's bodies as objects of the male colonial 'gaze', as theorised by Mulvey (1988).

The Black Venus, also known as the Hottentot Venus or by her colonial name Sara (Sarah/Saartjie) Baartman, was a Khoekhoe woman brought to Europe from the Cape in 1810 to be exhibited in fairs as an erotic-exotic freak, and later subject to (often public) examination as a racial 'specimen' by the leading French naturalist Georges Cuvier (Mattosio, 2017). Following Sara Baartman's death in 1815, Cuvier dissected her corpse in an attempt to establish a biologically hierarchical scale of human races in which Khoisan occupied the lowest grade, qualifying as closer relatives of the great apes than of humans (ibid). Just as grotesque as these conclusions and their implications was the treatment of Sara Baartman's remains – her brain and genitalia were preserved in jars, and displayed at the Parisian Museum of Natural History, Jardin des Plantes, alongside her skeleton and a plaster cast of her full body, which featured in the 1937 International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris. Her remains were then moved to the Musée de l'Homme, where they stayed on public display until the 1970s before being finally returned to South Africa, after a long diplomatic controversy, in 2002. Epitomising colonialism's racial and gendered brutalities, the figure and story of the Black Venus remain a grim reminder of the historical gaze Black women have been subject to.

The subversive and restorative potential of Zangewa's *Re-birth of Black Venus* must be read against the backdrop of not only this history of the abjection, objectification, sexualisation and dehumanisation of Black women, but also the more recent chequered history of academic and artistic accounts of, and efforts to recuperate, Sara Baartman. Magubane (2001) and Quereshi (2004) point to how, by way of her academic circulation, Sara – and the figure of the Black woman more generally – has been frozen as the quintessential bearer of intersectional oppression: the poor, black, colonised, exploited subject par excellence. She has become, as Mattosio (2017: 59) puts it, a sign – 'the bidimensional signifier of subjugation in the geometrical theorem of historical colonialism'. Both academic and popular circulations of the Black Venus (and the community she has come to stand for) thus

run the risk of replicating and reinscribing the voyeuristic gaze that her body has historically borne (Buikema, 2009; Gordon-Chipembere, 2011), even if intended simply to reveal the violence of the conditions she was subject to. Given the cementing of her place as the emblematic figure of enslaved women in the Atlantic world, to Hartman (2008) any efforts to represent the Black Venus must be alert to the risks of simply miming the violence of the archive rather than meaningfully redressing it.

It is precisely such a redressal that Zangewa offers through an insistently agential, powerful rendering of Black Venus, asking “What if I started to see myself through my own eyes? What would happen if I took my power back and negated the omnipresent male gaze?” (quoted in Collymore, 2021: n.p.). *Rebirth*, like much of Zangewa’s work, is an arresting display of a Black woman’s reclamation of the terms under which she is looked at, a practice of what hooks (1992) calls the oppositional gaze. The passivity of Black women as simply the object of male, colonial scopophilic voyeurism (Mulvey, 1988) is forcefully inverted through Zangewa’s determination to shift the gaze for and from which she produces her art: ‘from looking to the outside for approval and to define my value to saying, I’m going to have a romantic affair with myself. Society teaches us as women to be ashamed of ourselves, to feed self-loathing. I’m reclaiming my identity, my feminine power, and my significance in society at large’ (Zangewa quoted in Jansen, 2020: n.p.).

Zangewa’s self-portraiture following *Rebirth* is a celebration of self-love and self-care, a process she saw as a simultaneous reclamation of her narrative and her body (McDermott, 2018). In *In my Solitude*, the artist is portrayed languidly draped over a sofa, reading, in a scene that conveys a compelling sense of ease with herself and her surroundings. Scenes of Black women in leisure are disruptive in their own right, against a history of the hypervisibility of labouring Black bodies and the invisibility of Black women at rest (Mowatt et al., 2013). *Cold Shower* is an unabashed celebration of the Black female form, representing the artist in a startlingly open posture – inviting recognition of the beauty and power of her body and its stance rather than an objectifying or sexualising gaze. *Self Care Sunday* is the most expressive articulation of Zangewa’s politics of self-love, showing her surveying freshly painted nails, body and hair draped in towels, with a bottle of wine prominent on the table before her.

Within feminist literature and praxis, the place of a politics of self-love and self-care is by no means uncontroversial – it has often been subject to censure from a range of quarters for a variety of reasons. Gill and Orgad (2015), for instance, argue that dominant tropes of feminism as self-love and a culture of confidence locates feminism within what they call neoliberal therapeutic terms, as a consumer technology of self (see also Garcia-Favaro, 2016). Gill (2016) sees this version of feminism as having disproportionate visibility in contemporary media, especially through its promotion of feminine confidence, self-love, and self-esteem as a one-size-fits-all solution to gender injustice. Gill (2016: 10) writes, ‘in these iterations of popular feminism, the solution to injustice is to work on the self rather than to work with others for social and political transformation’. The critique here is two-fold: first, that a politics of self-care promotes an individualised, atomised subject shorn of their social location and the possibility of a more collective politics of transformation, and second (and relatedly), that such a politics upholds logics of neoliberal, capitalist consumerism instead of disrupting them.

Zangewa’s politics of self-love, on the contrary, falls within a tradition of work and practice emerging from feminists of colour Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and many others, who view and defend self-love and self-care by Black women and their communities as revolutionary and transformative forms of praxis. These authors write of the necessity for women of colour to engage in practices of self-love in order to survive and sustain themselves in the face of a daily onslaught of racism, sexism and class oppression. Reflecting on this tradition, Nicol and Yee (2017) locate the politics of self-love and self-care within communities of women of colour as a strategy of survival and resistance against the tyranny of violence, objectification, exploitation and abjection experienced at the intersection of multiple oppressions. By taking seriously the question of what it means to love themselves and experience joy within structures determined to deprive them of both (Barlow, 2016), gestures of self-love within communities of colour are a far cry from the atomised acts of consumerist indulgence critiqued above.

A compelling counter to allegations of an inevitably individualised, atomised subject of self-love politics, and the supposed antitheticality of a collective politics to self-love feminisms (Gill, 2016) lies in Zangewa’s choice of medium: fabric. Zangewa’s decision to work with fabric and thread – hand stitching, sewing, and embroidering – is not incidental to her art or her politics. A key theme animating Zangewa’s accounts of her attachment to her medium is that of universality (of experience)<sup>1</sup>: encounters and intimacies with fabric are almost a defining feature of the human condition (Okoro, 2020). Whether as clothes, sheets, drapes, or upholstery, our daily lives are spent ensconced within, and in close contact with fabric. While a relationship with fabric is not a specifically gendered experience, the historical (and in many ways contemporary) production of fabric remains insistently feminine in its associations (Michna, 2020). Michna (2020) reads forms of textile art and craft not simply as a means of artistic

<sup>1</sup> Used in opposition to atomism, rather than to particularity.

expression, but as a subversive aesthetic strategy, and a specifically and insistently feminine modality of creating and developing knowledge.

Zangewa embraces this association with femininity, as well as her location within a larger community of artists and craftsmen ‘using those materials and techniques to critique capitalist patriarchy and uphold the role traditional feminine “crafts” could have in creating time away from home, a sanctuary space for women experiencing domestic problems, and a way to speak to personal histories’ (Collymore, 2021: n.p.). As a child, Zangewa watched her mother and her mother’s friends come together to sew in the evenings – “Some of these women had issues at home and then they’d come together as a group and talk about it. I saw how sewing would ease some of the anxiety and pain” (Zangewa quoted in McDermott, 2018: n.p.). *Mood Indigo* (2016) captures such a scene of a group of women sewing together by hand, finding not only sanctuary, solace and safety, but also community as a Black woman. Zangewa shared “In those hours together, my mother and these women were figuring out how to make better decisions about their lives and how to keep cultivating resilience against the hardships of life” (Okoro, 2020: n.p.).

Fibre arts, including sewing, weaving and embroidery have been compellingly theorised within feminist art history as not only collective, communal and intergenerational work, but as gestures (and labour) of love and care (Pérez-Bustos et al., 2019; Kelly, 2014; Montgarrett, 2017). The patient, incremental, intricate, laborious and inevitably non-replicable nature of fibre arts also render these practices hostile to capitalist and neo-liberal temporal and other rationalities, and which overinvest in haste, efficiency, and replicability. Fibre arts, then, even when used as a medium for the expression of self-care, constitute what Pérez-Bustos et al. (2019: 268) call ‘affective-material-embodied practices of labour and pedagogy’, insisting on a recognition that self-care is always and necessarily care with, alongside, and for others. Zangewa’s medium of self-love is thus one that is deeply and consciously symbolic of self-love and self-care as constituted through communal practices of love and care. Her work depicts themes of solidarity by bringing attention to the shared, collective experience of Black womanhood – a resounding rebuttal to the alleged insularity and atomism of neoliberal renditions of self-love. Zangewa’s self-representations are not renderings of an isolated subject, ripped out of the social fabric into which she is so inevitably woven, but a tender, complex, celebratory depiction of Black femininity as a shared experience.

The latest iteration of Zangewa’s celebration of femininity is a quiet elevation of domesticity, commemorations of the quotidian that acts women perform within and in order to sustain this space – what Zangewa terms ‘daily feminisms’. Home is now the cynosure of Zangewa’s pieces: tapestries of silk hand-stitched into collages depict intimate moments of (especially maternal) care and social reproduction. Emblematic of this turn, *Heart of Home* shows the artist standing behind her son as he writes in a notebook, *Ma vie en rose* finds the artist delicately balancing her toddler on her hip in the kitchen while reaching for a feeding bottle, while *Soldier of Love* shows her leading her son to school. Through these works, Zangewa brings to view scenes that are often neglected in the broader contemporary art space (Collymore, 2021), scenes in which Black women are and have always been at the centre, for this is a world they have created, not one imposed on them (ibid). Once more, her medium bares its own message – her choice of fabric (an everyday and often neglected medium) serves as a gentle reminder of the beauty contained within the mundane, overlooked and underappreciated like much of the labour her work tenderly honours.

Zangewa’s ‘daily feminisms’ sit within a long and enduring tradition of feminist art reproducing and elevating mundane domestic scenes in order to challenge the patriarchal and colonial binary between the private and the public, feminine and masculine, blackness and whiteness, and their corresponding opposition in high and low art (Speaks, 2021; Horne et al., 2016). Further, and once again, Zangewa’s celebration of domesticity through fabric finds transnational, and arguably universal resonance. Chung (2021: n.p.) writes of her experience encountering Zangewa’s exhibition *Flesh and Blood* at Lehmann Maupin, Seoul:

In the traditional craft shops in the area around Lehmann Maupin’s Seoul gallery that hosts ‘Flesh and Blood’, Billie Zangewa’s first solo exhibition in the city, *jogakbo* – a Korean form of patchwork quilting – can be seen in abundance. Before Korean society began to modernize in the 19th century, women sought good fortune for their loved ones by sewing (primarily at home) geometrically shaped pieces of leftover fabric into wrapping cloths. For me, Zangewa’s works are very obviously imbued with the same warmth and care towards family and friends that Korean mothers continue to invest in the practice of *jogakbo*.

## **‘OH, THERE ARE POLITICS IN BILLIE’S WORK!’: INTERROGATING THE BOUNDARIES OF VISUAL ACTIVISM**

While the previous section attempted to map Zangewa’s work against the ever-shifting and embattled terrain of feminism, this section raises and engages with (without fully resolving) questions about what it means to think

of Zangewa's art through the lens of visual activism. (How) does reading Zangewa against literatures on visual activism enable or inhibit access to, and a critical engagement with, the political force of her work? Equally, how might it facilitate a critical encounter with the contested contours of what constitutes visual activism itself?

Writing this section presented an immediate challenge that did not confront the preceding one – while Zangewa has often expressly claimed an investment in feminism and her identity as a feminist, I was unable to trace similarly unambiguous attachments to the designation activist. What remained clear, however, was Zangewa's view of her work as *political*. In McDermott (2018: n.p.), Zangewa recounts the varied receptions her art provoked in different contexts:

In France, I felt there was a little bit of an idealizing and objectification, that I was just an object. When I showed in New York, the American people started seeing my sociopolitics. American politics are very, very complicated and the history is loaded, but I think there's a connection between being black in America and being a black woman in the world.

All of a sudden, after New York, Zangewa recalls, 'everyone else was looking and going, "Oh, there are politics in Billie's work! It's not just her looking pretty, holding her baby"' (McDermott, 2018: n.p.).

Despite the incontestably political intent (and growing recognition thereof) animating Zangewa's work, reading her contributions as instances of visual activism demands attending to more than the art itself, but also its spaces of circulation (Demos, 2016). Zangewa's art predominantly features in leading global commercial art galleries, including the Galerie Templon, Lehmann Maupin, the Tate, and international art fairs. Demos writes of the dangers of overlooking the compromised nature of these dominant arenas of art circulation (particularly commercial galleries and corporate websites), which he views as 'riven by conflicting interests' (2016: 87). These contexts, he argues, offer no political alliance, and often in fact exist in 'economic and political opposition to the displayed work' (2016: 88). While the politics of the artefacts themselves might sit in opposition to capitalist exploitation, the very fact of working within dominant art institutions, according to Fraser (2011: 124), 'ensconce[s] many of us comfortably among the 10 percent, if not the 1 percent or even the 0.1 percent', a demographic that often aligns itself with corporate neoliberalism, wealth inequality and the erosion of the social state (Demos, 2016). To Fraser (2011:124), 'if our only choice is to participate in this economy or abandon the art field entirely, at least we can stop rationalising that participation in the name of critical or political art practices – or adding insult to injury – social justice'.

In stark contrast to Demos' and Fraser's demands that art with political investments attends not only to its substantive content but to potential complicities with its sites of circulation, Steyerl (2015) makes the case for a 'duty free' conception of art, liberating it from the demands of aspiring to any higher purpose. For Steyerl (2015: 10), art 'ought to have no duty—no duty to perform, to represent, to teach, to embody value ... it should not be indebted to anyone, nor serve a cause or a master, nor be a means to anything'. In Steyerl's view of duty-free, art represents the very antithesis of art as visual activism through its insistence that art do precisely nothing, in the service of no politics. To Demos (2016: 88), this betrays an 'avant-gardist conceit that we can no longer abide'; such ostensible neutrality or apolitical posturing inevitably serves the market and other dominant structures and logics. To Demos, for it to be meaningful, visual activism *must* be driven by and demonstrate careful allegiance to an ethico-political imperative that is alive to, and in opposition to precisely these dominant arrangements of power. Such an imperative must take seriously the question of spaces of reception and circulation- in the words of John Jordan from the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii, an artist-activist collective), quoted in Demos (2016: 98):

In an age of extreme crisis, the key questions artists, activists and curators need to ask themselves are: Can these institutions be machines for amplifying our potential to radically transform the status quo, forms of redistribution of cultural and material capital, or do they simply reframe rebellion into a past tense, an immediate retro refit of revolt? Are museums public spaces that can become alternative common spaces of debate and action planning to reclaim the rights of the city, or are they palaces carefully engineered for us to play the fool in, whilst outside the kings and queens continue to play Russian roulette with our future whilst enriching theirs?

Demos' demand for an attentiveness to sites of circulation and attendant complicities must itself, however, be contextually situated. The requirement of attending to space is not equally burdensome to, or similarly experienced/negotiated by, differently located artists across the global landscape. Lewin (2020) describes how while visual activism in the United States and Western Europe is mostly linked to street protests or activism campaigning within expressly public spaces, in the post-apartheid South African context (within which Zangewa works), some forms of visual activism have historically been linked to the fine art market and its associated institutions. In post-apartheid South Africa, many self-professed visual activists view engagements with the

institutions of high art as a significant tactical opportunity and strategy<sup>2</sup>. Black queer photographer Zanele Muholi, for instance, with whom the term visual activism has been closely associated, alongside other activists and collectives, is keenly aware of the role the art market and institutions play in amplifying the message their work seeks to convey, rendering even commercial galleries an important site for circulating activist work (Lewin, 2020). South Africa has a vibrant history of activism at the intersection of art and politics, to which the term visual activism is often retrospectively applied (Thomas, 2017). Crucially, this history forces an acknowledgement of the many different public spaces within which visual activism can be meaningfully sited, including within Demos' condemned institutions of fine art.

Lewin (2020) carefully traces the ways in which visual activists like queer Black performance duo FAKA and artist Robert Hamblin tactically, instrumentally and productively engage with galleries and other sites of the commercialisation and commodification of art, while also expressly situating elements of their activist practice beyond them. FAKA, for instance, has been appointed brand ambassador for Adidas and has worked with Versace, while entirely alive to these moves as entanglements with the 'commodification of "blackness"' (hooks, 2014: 152 in Lewin, 2020: 40) in alignment with their broader project of challenging and remaking normative reality. Lewin (2020: 40) reads this 'performative engagement with corporate capital (2020: 40) through the lens of what Munoz calls 'disidentification' to describe 'a mode of being in the world that is also inventing the world' (Munoz, 2009: 121). FAKA also expressly view their visual activism as a pathway to the economic freedom denied to Black South Africans prior to 1994 (Posel, 2010).

Through her analysis of FAKA and Hamblin, Lewin (2020) challenges the false dichotomy between 'authentic' forms of street-based visual activism (Demos, 2016), and inauthentic or compromised art that circulates in galleries and other spaces associated with the institutionalised art market. A key element of Lewin's contribution here is her tracking of how FAKA and Hamblin engage opportunistically with the art market to generate literal and symbolic capital, which they then channel towards movement building (2020). What does this mean for a reading of Zangewa's work as visual activism, given the absence of express links to extra-institutional movement outside of the world of high-art? Leaning on Lewin's analysis, I contend that a similar argument can be applied to Zangewa's engagement with institutional sites, particularly when viewed through the lens of Gail Lewis's frame of 'presencing', and Tina Campt's (2019a) notion of 'refusal' through black visibility.

Lewis (2017) asks that we take seriously the ways in which 'the black women' as representation (as well as in the form of embodied, sentient being) is rendered visible and invisible, and to link this to the multiple and competing ways in which she is 'present'. Under what terms of representation is 'the black woman' allowed to emerge, in what spaces, and how are these fruitfully contested? Against the historical and contemporary regulation of representations of Black women shaped by the mutually reinforcing structures of colonialism, racism, patriarchy and extractivism, Lewis (2017: 6) sees 'presencing' as a 'decolonial move through which counter-histories, counter-spatialities, subaltern epistemologies and modes of being are created and announced'. 'Presencing' is the enactment of a desire for recognition, and a claiming of space within a landscape that is persistently invested in erasing, marginalising and even denouncing some aspect of who 'the black woman' is and who she might become (ibid). 'Presencing', in other words, is what Lewis (2017: 6) calls 'an epistemological and ontological praxis of emergence', which 'contests and has the potential to detoxify the effects of colonial discourse in which Indigenous peoples are rendered invisible and/or insensible'.

Campt (2019b: 25) sought to theorise how we can engage with a contemporary visual archive of blackness 'that is saturated by the proliferation and mass circulation of images of violence, antiblackness, and premature death'. As part of a collective process of meditation on this question alongside some students and collaborators, Campt produced a glossary to explore practices of refusal enacted by black contemporary artists who 'create radical modalities of witnessing that refuse authoritative forms of visibility', in a practice that is 'neither utopic nor autonomous, and neither pessimistic nor futuristic'. Instead, these modes of witnessing function through a practice of refusal Campt calls 'black visibility'. Here, refusal is:

A rejection of status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e., a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise (Campt, 2019a: 4).

Campt's most recent work (2021) extends the framework of Black visibility to a study of the Black gaze, celebrating the works of artists whose depictions of the everyday beauty and grit of the Black experience require viewers to do more than simply consume, but participate in what Campt calls the 'affective labour' of engagement commanded by this Black gaze. To Campt, Black visibility as refusal demands a form of relationality, and establishes

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that crucial forms of visual activism occur firmly outside the bounds of galleries and institutionalized art spaces.

a structure of feeling between viewer, artefact, and subject (rather than object) of representation in a way that produces certain effects – effects that begin to generate the possibility of a ‘living otherwise’ for Black communities (2019a, 2021). Camp’s analysis chimes with the work of Meskimon (2010) and other commentators on visual culture who argue that artworks do more than simply reflect and represent the world; instead, art can change the way we imagine, understand, and relate to the world and with others, especially those different to ourselves.

Zangewa’s art can then be read as an intervention within/into the very (admittedly particular and often elite) spaces of its circulation, but with effects that exceed them. Engaging with Zangewa through the lens of ‘presencing’ as a decolonial praxis, or Black visibility as a practice of refusal forces an acknowledgement of precisely this question of ‘effect’ – her work holds the potential to ‘detoxify the effects of colonial discourse’ (Lewis, 2017: 6), and ‘reject the terms of diminished subjecthood’ afforded to Black women (Camp, 2019a: 4) – effects that are not and cannot remain contained within, nor entirely co-opted in the service of, the commercial art spaces within which her art circulates. Returning to Lewin (2020), once more, there is no doubt that these effects can often be complex and sometimes contradictory, and can certainly never be fully anticipated, but this is a complexity and unforeseeability of effect that is shared across all forms of activism.

## CONCLUSION

In her contribution to this issue, Stielau (2022) notes the difficulty (and danger) in employing efficacy, based on directed, predetermined aims and effects as barometers in the appraisal of art-activism. In doing so, Stielau shifts the focus of analysis of visual activism from the artist as sovereign political actor, to ‘the circuitry of relations and materials that conduct change, of which art is both a medium and a mode’ (Stielau, this issue). Evaluating, or indeed, defining visual activism cannot then be an exercise in discerning the sovereign will/intent of an artist, interrogating its vehicles and sites of expression, and assessing its traceable, perceptible effects, as if any of these presented themselves as transparent, accessible sites for review. How, then, should we approach the question of what constitutes visual activism? What might Zangewa’s work teach us in this regard? Thinking of Zangewa’s work alongside (i) Lewis’s (2017) notion of presencing as a decolonial praxis of emergence, and (ii) Camp’s (2019a) framework of black visibility as instituting a structure of feeling between art and viewer, perhaps visual activism can be understood as a relational, intersubjective exercise in sense-making within/against complex histories, generating a range of affects and effects that exceed its sites of production and circulation, as well as its own intents and investments.

Through such a frame, analyses of visual activism are liberated from preoccupations with the sovereign will and intent of the artist, balance-sheet exercises in weighing up effects (themselves often indiscernible and untraceable), and ridged notions of (in)authenticity based on sites of circulation. Instead, we can engage, for instance, with the relational, inter-subjective, epistemological and ontological consequences of encounters with artefacts, read against the backdrop of a complex and dynamic web of domination and erasure, or objectification and hypervisibility. In Zangewa’s *Rebirth of Black Venus*, the formidable Black Venus dominating the Johannesburg cityscape is lightly caressed by a sash that reads: ‘Surrender whole-heartedly to your complexity’. Through her celebration of the complexity of Black femininity as a shared experience, Zangewa, in both message and medium, holds important lessons for feminism as well as visual activism, nudging us towards surrendering certainties in the favour of embracing the complex, indeterminable effects and affects that emerge from encounters with the visual.

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