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REVIEW

Contextualization of IsiXhosa Language Speech Acts Through Art Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article represents an iconographic analysis of a selection of artworks from the author's recent solo exhibition entitled *Obu bubomi bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art, 2021*. The selected artworks were titled using isiXhosa language speech acts which complement their visual narratives and expand their iconographic meanings. IsiXhosa is one of South Africa's indigenous languages and is also the author's mother tongue. The titles were consciously constructed to contribute to the art activism inherent within the artworks. These artworks do not only tell an authentic life story, they also highlight the importance of language in extending the impact of the visual narratives so that they are accessible to all viewers. This is because for any information and or message to be understood and meaningful to another person it must be conveyed through everyday / vernacular language. Thus, the selected artworks presented in this article were meant to influence and engage the viewers meaningfully as art actionism. The main objective of this article is to unpack these visual metaphors by reinterpreting the essence of their individual titles. The article is also meant to contribute to the contextualization of African indigenous languages as legitimate tools for the dissemination of inclusive and valuable knowledge.

1. Introduction

Artists make art for several reasons, including self-expression, communication, healing, aesthetic inspiration, income generation, and critique of social norms and issues. According to Dissanayake^[1] these reasons constitute "fundamental human nature, and a respect for it could guide our behaviour and serve as the model for a truly 'humane' though individually

varied-life for all". Dissanayake^[1] asserts that artistic actions are "an embodiment and reinforcement of socially shared significances" and this makes them valuable elements for "communicative action"^[2]. Habermas's theory of communicative action proposes that human communication is any act of expression be this verbal language, visual symbol, or an action. Habermas^[3] argues that any act of expression "can promote the acceptance of precisely

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those standards according to which it counts as an authentic "action or practice. Habermas considers any expression to be made up of three communication processes: "truth", which refers to having a good reason to believe; "rightness", which refers to the morals that justify the reason for belief; and "truthfulness", which refers to the normative expression that reflects authenticity^[4]. Communicative action is always used in a manner oriented to reaching an "agreement through reason"^[5]. Haberman's concept of 'action in communication' denotes that "the performance of a speech act" has a meaning for both the speaker and the listener resulting in an action and or behaviour^[6]. For art to be meaningful it must be accessible to the viewers, especially if it represents pertinent social concerns and issues for art activism and art actionism.

According to Newton^[7] "art activism is about the artistry of social consciousness grounded in human interaction".

Art activists do not want to merely criticize the art system or the general political and social conditions under which this system functions. Rather, they want to change these conditions by means of art not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself^[8].

In other words, art activists do not want to just operate in an echo chamber of the art world, they want to use their art to change society as a whole, to make real change not just intellectual change. Thus, the symbols inherent in spoken language can increase access to and understanding of the symbols inherent in the visual images, and therefore of the activist message in the visual image. Art actionism as used in this article seeks to convey reality and exhibit the real idea behind the stories in a similar way to realistic art. In my exhibition this was done through staged performances of the circumstances behind the stories narrated. Some of these performances were performed in the exhibition space or by digitally editing myself into a chosen scene creating a make-believe situation to complete the message. The engagement of the author's art works is elucidated in the first person singular as an expression of my connectivity with indigenous influences.

The use of vernacular language in the titles of my art-works seeks to not only engage the viewers but to also bring to the fore the intrinsic meanings of the artworks. The vernacular language invokes innate instincts by engaging the viewer who understands the language at a deeper level making it easier for them to relate in one way or another to the portrayed circumstances. IsiXhosa language speech acts always have a meaning for both the speaker and the listener resulting in reciprocal dialogical action. The intention of performance of a speech act is for the listener to perform or act in a certain manner in response to the speaker^[6]. In simple terms, dialogical action is the use

of shared language in a dialogue to discuss something meaningful with all participants operating equally authoritatively and assertively. According to Freire, dialogical action refers to a reflective dialogue leading to transformative action, because "there is no transformation without action".^[9] Martensson and Lee write:

In Dialogical Action Research, the scientific researcher does not "speak science" or otherwise attempt to teach scientific theory to the real-world practitioner, but instead attempts to speak the language of the practitioner and accepts him as the expert on his organization and its problems^[10].

Thus, as a researcher and insider in this case I understand not only the literal aspects of the language used in my titles, but the culture that embodies them, hence the importance of reciprocated dialogical action. In addition, the knowledge base the viewers bring to their engagement with these artworks is based on their experience along with cultural and genealogical transmission, thus making the represented visual narrative accessible and meaningful.

My artworks have always been, and still are, about my lived experiences. These experiences reference life in general as I am a member of a society with many women, girls and people who relate to such experiences, and thus they (the experiences) are not unique to me. Dissanayake^[11] argues that human societies throughout history have always displayed some form of behaviour that can be called art and that this behaviour fulfils a fundamental biological and evolutionary need. She further asserts that in non-Western societies this behaviour plays an integral part in daily social life and so functions as a communal activity. Art can provide a sense of meaning or significance or intensity to human life that cannot be gained in any other way^[11]. Gablik^[12] claims that the role of art in the modern era has been to challenge and disrupt by means of its otherness and inaccessibility. Today, the issue of access is foremost, asking the question "what art is for and who it is for?", but also "what influence should it have/does it have on viewers and the reality they live in?", thus changing the norm from "art for art's sake" to "art for life's sake"^[12].

The main objective of this article is to unpack the visual metaphors represented in the author's 2021 exhibition entitled *Obu Bubomi* Bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art. It seeks to unpack the essence of the artworks' individual titles using communicative action^[2] and dialogical action^[13] set within Martensson and Lee's^[10] dialogical action research framework. It makes the argument that the use of vernacular language is pertinent in expanding the meanings of visual narrative so that these can be understood not only by the art world and artists but also by ordinary people. My

artwork seeks to not only inspire the viewers but to engage them in meaningful dialogue and action.

2. The Rationale and Premise for the Argument

The exhibition entitled *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art* was opened on 24 September 2021 at the University of South Africa (UNISA) gallery. This was a retrospective reflection showcasing the author's artworks spanning three decades. The primary title *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8* means "This is my life 8 out of 8" encapsulates the essence of this exhibition as a visual autobiography. The secondary title *I teach art* expresses my passion as an art educator which is a major aspect of my life story and of my learning through action/experience. For example, when I was installing *Obu Bubomi Bam* I was assisted by my art students who inspired and enhanced some of my original ideas, hence they are acknowledged as creative assistants in my catalogue/book. The title *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art* sought to respond to Dissanayake's^[1] principle of 'making special', which she avers "is as distinguishing and universal in humankind as speech or the skillful manufacture and use of tools". 'Making special' in this case refers to deliberately elevating something to a special or higher level of sophistication. For example, living a life is part and parcel of being human and there is nothing special about that as we all are born to live a life. However, by making my mundane existence special I was placing my life story "in a realm different from the everyday" life^[1]. In other words, I deliberately portrayed my existence as subject matter, placing my life story into the aesthetic realm and inviting the viewers to see it as a special art piece to satisfy their aesthetic needs as well as to evoke their response and actions.

By using the isiXhosa language in titling my exhibition and the included artworks, I sought to expand the spectrum of the spectators to ordinary people who otherwise would not have understood these visual metaphors if I had chosen to use English titles. I made a conscious decision to use my life story to advocate for single parenting motherhood, and women's struggles in general. Since most of the audience I am advocating for do not all belong to the contemporary art world, I found it pertinent to expand the messages my artworks carry so that they can be accessed by ordinary people. I feel strongly that for art to be meaningful it must address societal issues in the direction of change. Although the issue of single parenting motherhood as well as women's struggles in general are prominent features in modern society, these are simply accepted without recognition, especially in an African context. I see this non-recognition as inappropriate since most of these mothers/women often find themselves in these situations not by choice. In many cases women are

blamed for having misbehaved and being responsible for these abnormal situations due to socially constructed and culturally accepted norms and values. Thus, my art practice seeks to position myself as a conduit or a spokesperson for all single parenting mothers and black women in general, as a way of acknowledging and honouring their/our noble roles in society, which are taken for granted. My art practice is meant to be a ray of hope and optimism for the younger generation, encouraging the audience to reconsider how they live their lives by learning from life stories like mine.

3. The Significance of Artwork Titles as Elements of Art Activism

Studies throughout art history suggest that the title of an artwork is an influential element in the assessing and interpretation of that artwork. This is because an accurate title provides insight regarding the artist's inspiration and intention. On a practical level, titles of individual artworks and series as well as exhibition themes serve as useful tools for publicising an exhibition and promoting an artist. In art activism, titles increase social consciousness around the issues being raised "not so much inside the art system but outside it, in reality itself"^[8]. Social consciousness represents conscious awareness of being part of an inter-connected community with shared concerns and issues. Art titles in works of art facilitate the understanding and appreciation of the messages and meanings the artworks represent. "It is assumed that part of the pleasure derived from looking at a painting is the feeling of having grasped the meaning and the understanding of it"^[14].

According to Samanian, Nedaeifar and Karimi^[15], the most important function of titles in works of art from the point of view of the viewers, is the "communicative function". The authors further assert that this function "covers the roles of title in establishing a primary connection with the artwork and the artist's intention, and communicating the primary messages of the artwork"^[15]. Thus, the communicative function of artwork titles is crucial in art activism because it stimulates meaningful dialogue making the artwork relevant not only as an aesthetic piece but as a carrier of pertinent messages as well. Construction of meaning "depends on the prior knowledge, beliefs and values^[15]" of the viewers. Depending on "how much" and "how well" the viewer can interrogate and construct the meaning, they can go to higher levels even beyond the artist's imagination^[16].

Cupchik, Shereck and Spiege^[17] conducted a study in which they observed participants' interpretation of works of art before and after providing them with textual information including titles. Participants rated the artworks with titles to be of greater value and power.

According to Millis^[18], “titles increase aesthetic experiences when they suggest an alternative explanation to what can be readily inferred from the explicit artwork”. Titles in an artwork can affect “the process of interpretation at different levels and in various ways”^[15]. Thus, my use of the vernacular language in titling my artworks seeks to provide gateways to the essential ideas they represent.

Habermas’s ‘communicative action’ and Freire’s ‘dialogical action’ both recognise the importance of communication/dialogue between the artist as the initiator of the dialogue and the viewers as receivers of the messages. Dialogical action acknowledges that all participants are recognised and enjoy equal standing. This engenders a transforming dialogue where the participants open themselves to all views and opinions, leading to transformative action^[9]. Thus, my art practice seeks to transform the way society engages with the issues raised through my artworks.

4. Interpretation of the Titles of Selected Artworks

This section presents interpretation of the titles of some of the artworks featured in my 2021 solo exhibition *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I Teach Art*.

When I create artworks I usually just start with a scribble or a still-life and get carried away adding forms until I feel I am done. It is only after the work is done that I think of the title. I usually don’t know what the work will be until I am satisfied with what I see^[19].

This way of arriving at titles mostly refers to my earlier works which were predominantly created through printmaking processes. These were represented in the 2021 exhibition and this article as *Amarhoqololo kaKim 2021*, meaning “Kim’s scribbles”.

My new artworks are a series of performances reflecting on some critical moments of my life and some are deliberate efforts to invoke pains towards healing. Some of these works portray the removal of the permanent band-aids I used to cover still bleeding wounds. This is done so that these wounds can be addressed towards permanent healing^[19].

In the artist statement of this exhibition, I explained that “the creative process of the featured artworks was intended to be a therapeutic process”. I further expand on this by writing “the therapy begins with revisiting moments of my life, some of which were breaking points in one way or another in relation to personal or family situations, and sometimes with my career as an academic”. I also made the point that some of these painful experiences never had the opportunity to heal, likening this lack of healing to “covering a bleeding wound with a permanent bandage and the more you see the bandage the more you forget about

the bleeding wound”, hence the significance of this exhibition. Healing and self-forgiveness were the premise for “*Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I Teach Art*”. Claiming my life in this manner “portrays my character which is imbued with determination, risk taking, hope, faith and perseverance”^[19].

4.1 NdithunukeNdizophola

Ndithunuke Ndizophola is the title of an installation piece composed of a 10 x 10 octagon labyrinth, built like a dome creating a slope. The installation incorporated various artworks. The title *Ndithunuke Ndizophola* means “inflict pain on me so that I can be healed”. The artist was calling for the viewers’ attention using vernacular language, and those who understood this language knew exactly what this meant, making this installation accessible in one way or another to most viewers. When an isiXhosa speaker says to you “*mandikuthunike*”, directly translated this means “let me pain or agonize you”. He/she is saying: “by reminding you of this painful experience I am healing you, urging you to put it behind you, to rise above it, move on”.

The confrontational size of the piece, combined with the accompanying visual symbols and the interactive nature of the labyrinth, enhanced the title. The viewers entered the labyrinth via a red carpet symbolising the importance of the journey ahead (Figure 1). They walked on the labyrinth/maze guided by red lines to an enclosed core (Figure 2). The centre was made into an intimate stage where a stop frame animation was playing. The drapery enclosing the stage was imprinted with a fresh scar from a surgical procedure still stitched with staples, forcing the viewers to come face to face with the type of pain portrayed.



Figure 1. Nombeko Mpako, *NdithunukeNdizophola*, Installation (10x10 octagon labyrinth)-red carpet (2021).



Figure 2. Nombeko Mpako, *NdithunukeNdizophola*, Installation(10×10 octagon labyrinth)-labyrinth and core (2021).

Source: <https://creativeoutput52.wixsite.com/ndithunuke-ndizophol>

The other images included in this installation complemented the pain suggested by the surgical scar with visual metaphors depicting material suffering, again invoking viewers' prior knowledge. These were images of the artist carrying big loads of logs and bundles of wood which portrayed material suffering associated with simple chores in the lives of women. Thus, the title of this installation *NdithunukeNdizophola* initiates a dialogue compelling the viewers to question, and answer questions, thus making the artwork dialogical. During the walkabout of this exhibition and the artist's talk, some viewers could not help but weep as the artist explained the experiences which inspired her to produce the artworks.

4.2 Mayenzeke intadoyakho ThixoNkosiyenyaniso

The stop frame animation (Figure 3) which was playing in the centre of the labyrinth, which could only be viewed after walking the maze, was entitled *Mayenzeke intado yakho Thixo Nkosi yenyano* meaning "Let your will be done O Lord of truth". Again this title makes use of the viewers' prior knowledge as this title is a well-known prayer which people recite when they are facing difficulties beyond their control; they say this prayer to seek for God's or supernatural help. Again here the artist makes use of the vernacular language to capture viewers' attention, complementing the portrayed artwork. The stop frame denotes being conscious about the inability to come out of painful events unaided, hence seeking God's will. The artwork depicts a healing journey from pain to purification and being liberated from the pain making use of the "body as the site for creation"^[20].

As part of the *Ndithunuke Ndizophola* installation, this stop frame directly complements the title,

telling a convincing story through actionism discourse. The performance conscientises those in aggravating pain that there are other ways and means to conquer physical pain to reach healing – through exploration of emotional and spiritual healing.

4.3 Inyanda Series

The *Inyanda* series also forms part of the *Ndithunuke Ndizophola* installation. The term 'inyanda' refers to a bundle of firewood in the isiXhosa language. This is a bundle which traditional women carry on their heads from a forest and take to their homes to make a fire for domestic use. This term also refers to struggles people come across through life circumstances and again this title is used in such a way as to invoke viewers' prior knowledge.

Through actionism this series addresses real women's issues, which many women can relate to, especially those who know what *inyanda* refers to. *Ukulahleka entsunguz iniyehlathi* 2021 portrays the artist's life's ups and downs, challenges, risk taking, facing obstacles (Figure 4). These are portrayed through images of the artist about to cross a breaking bridge, carrying a load of wood in the forest, coming out of the forest carrying a log, arriving at a cul-de-sac in the forest. *Ukulahleka* and again this title expresses life struggles likening them to being lost in a forest, portraying life's realities. Many people are compelled to experience difficult walks such as walking alone in a forest in order for them to reach their designated destinations, but are able to get out of these difficult circumstances to reach their full potential.



Figure 4. Nombeko Mpako, *Inyanda* series, Photographs(2021).

4.4 Ngumzimbha NegaziLam

The *Ngumzimbha Negazi lam* series meaning “this is my body and my blood” was created from the artist’s operating theatre images and pathology results. It depicts feelings of vulnerability that engulf many people who face cancerous illnesses. The artist covered her bloody body and exposed internal organs with bright colours to camouflage this painful ordeal (Figure 5). Again, through these images the artist managed to create an equilibrium between vulnerability and strength using abstraction by covering the moment of hopelessness with colours as a form of acceptance. These works seek to portray transcendence of all difficulties and challenging emotions, a process “that begins in the body and then becomes realized through action, which in turn becomes cathartic”^[21]. This title can be likened to the Christian sacrament or communion as found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer where the priest reads in the isiXhosa language: *Umzimbha kaYesu Kristu owanikelwa wena, Amen. Igazi likaKrestu elaphalalela wena, Amen.* [The body of Christ given for you, Amen. The blood of Christ shed for you, Amen.]



Figure 5 . Nombeko Mpako, Ngumzimbha Negazilam series, digital drawings on photographs (2021).

The artist made use of this well-known communion prayer to capture viewers’ attention to see the artist as a translator or change advocate, stressing the use of one’s body or story as actionism towards art activism. “Art activism attempts to combine art and social action”^[12] which expands the function of art beyond purely aesthetic appeal to also serve as a means for raising social consciousness^[12] facilitated through everyday language^[8]. The title *Ngumzimbha Negazi lam* contributes to this process as it is as provocative as the title *Ndithunuke Ndizophola*. Once again, a person who understands the vernacular language is challenged to question and answer questions so the art piece serves a communicative function geared towards transformative change. In this artwork the title was meant to encourage viewers to learn to accept difficult situations and to move on in life.

4.5 Amarhoqololo KaKim

Amarhoqololo kaKim, meaning “Kim’s scribbles”, is the title given to the artist’s earlier works which were produced through printmaking and were reinterpreted into massive and intricate tapestries epitomising flags as symbols of celebration (Figure 6). The title *Amarhoqololo* was 4.5 *Amarhoqololo KaKim*

Amarhoqololo kaKim, meaning “Kim’s scribbles”, is the title given to the artist’s earlier works which were produced through printmaking and were reinterpreted into massive and intricate tapestries epitomising flags as symbols of celebration (Figure 6). The title *Amarhoqololo* was meant to capture the viewers by tapping into their prior knowledge of what the term represents. *Amarhoqololo* or children’s scribbles represent innocence and the natural instinct of wanting to be seen and heard as an innocent child, which is why mothers encourage this type of communication. Scribbles are usually incomprehensible until the child is asked to explain. When one sees these tapes- tries first one is overwhelmed by the colours and patterns, and it is only when one gets closer that some comprehensible visuals are noticed. Thus, the title *Amarhoqololo* was meant to provoke the viewers to question and answer in the same way as they would listen to a toddler explaining his/her scribbles to a mother who is listening attentively. When viewing the *Amarhoqololo kaKim* series, the viewer is challenged by this title to see beyond superficial representation of the subject matter and to engage the work at a deeper level.

Another title which is not visually presented in this article is *Ndizakuphumelela noma kanjani*, meaning “I shall overcome all odds”, symbolises women as beacons of hope, strength and with survival abilities. The use of the vernacular here will resonate with women who use that language every day. Another important thing about this title is that it utilises contemporary slang making the artwork accessible to all generations who understand the language. It carries forcefulness and confidence denoting power and authority, enhancing the visual narrative that the artwork presents. Link : <https://creativeoutput52.wix-site.com/dean-office>.



Figure 6 . Nombeko Mpako, Amarhoqololo kaKim series, digitally edited prints (2021).

Source: <https://creativeoutput52.wixsite.com/amarhoqololo-kakim>

5. The Value of the Initiate Researcher/Intervener in Art Activism and Actionism

In the context of impact or intervention through the creative process or production inclusive of creating titles, the employment of the vernacular language by the artist initiates resonance in social consciousness. This artist-as-initiate understands not only the literal aspects of the language but the culture that embodies it too. This knowledge base emerges from experience and is grounded in cultural and genealogical transmission. The artist's culture and language is therefore lived and approached from the point of view of an insider who connects and communicates from within the context of the community as an initiate. The communication therefore serves the dual capacity of projecting to those outside of the community and also as an internal change effector as a member of the community. Receiving information from the intrinsic knowledge base of the community via the artist provides a wider lens of understanding for the outsider, while at the same time the process of creation and transmission causes reflection on the part of the artist-as-initiate and a deepening of their knowledge base so they are changed too.

This is supported by Hamilton-Ekeke and Dorgu^[22] who state that "African indigenous education is the basis for the foundation of Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) in modern education". Popular global (Western) knowledge influences are intrinsically non-indigenous; indigenous perspectives may offer solutions for more culturally complex social and ecological problems within spaces. In such situations the role of the initiate or indigenous researcher/ initiator/intervener manifests as an educator and/or agency that fosters creative strategies while at the same time encouraging activism for the community involved. This is in addition to functioning as a member of the global community. In this case the researcher/intervener takes on ideals of Ekpo's^[23] post Africanist theory in which this person is connected within the internal structure of the community and at the same time can relate to the external influences of other cultures and globalization in relation to the issue at hand. Thus, this person can be a translator and change advocate in the community and in broader society.

6. Conclusions

The use of the vernacular language in the titling of artworks expands the meaning of the artworks, making them accessible to ordinary people, and making art relevant in the dissemination of pertinent information. This is because iconographic analysis of an artwork determines the subject portrayed in the image. This is because titles expand the meaning of the subject matter and the way it is represented. In iconographic analysis the subject matter portrayed in the image usually references prior knowledge of the interpreter/viewer, making the artwork more meaningful

in one way or another. Thus, interpretation of artwork titles which use the vernacular language expands the subject matter by evoking prior knowledge of the viewers and making the work relevant.

The iconographic analysis of an artwork determines the subject portrayed in the image ... and characterizes the way in which such a theme is represented, e.g, the number of subjects or objects that constitute the representation, their disposition and mutual relations, and ultimately their possible symbolic meaning^[24].

The artworks and individual titles unpacked in this article are a form of activism on behalf of women's struggles in general and single parenting motherhood in particular. Therefore for these works to be understood, advocacy has to be articulated in terms of real life so that it is accessible to ordinary people. For this reason, titles play a major role in the dissemination of relevant messages. The messages being conveyed through the artworks described above advance a socio-political critique that seeks to redefine the function of art within the wider social sphere as an agent for transformation and change. The intention of these art-works is to change and transform society's mindset to see and acknowledge the important role women in general, and single parenting mothers in particular, play in our society.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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