

Editorial: Blind spots: Trickery and the ‘opaque stickiness’¹ of seeing

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In a flash the spot will disappear, and in its place – and this is the interesting thing – there is nothing ... According to experimental psychology, the eye does not fill in the blind spot, but tricks us into thinking that it has been filled ... the blind spot is pure absence of vision, and cannot be experienced at all ... The blind spot ... is an invisible absence: an absence whose invisibility is itself invisible (Elkins 1996:170).

In *The object stares back: on the nature of seeing*, James Elkins (1996:167) argues that ‘blindness is a constant accompaniment of sight’, and he compares medical conditions associated with the ‘difficulties we have bringing the world into focus’ to metaphors of blindness and ways of not seeing. He points out the difference between blindness that “sees” – or recognises – its own blindness, and blindness that is blind to its inability to see. ‘In medical blindness’, he writes, ‘the subject is not blind to the blindness itself – or to put it in philosophical terms, the blindness is visible, it is there to be seen’ (Elkins 1996:168). Applying the concept of blindness to socio-psychological ways of seeing, the most hazardous condition is double blindness in which a person has no idea that she or he is partially blind.

The four papers in this volume that engage with the theme of *Blind spots and ways of not seeing* evolve, in part, from an earlier exploration of blind spots in a collection of performances that I curated for the National Arts Festival in 2014.² Titled *Blind Spot*, the project included the following performance art events: *What difference does it make who is speaking?* by Mbali Khoza at the Eastern Star Press Museum (Figure 1); *Everse* performed by Joseph Coetzee, Ivy Kulundu-Gotz, Simone Heymans and Chiro Nott at Victoria Primary; *Barongwa* conceptualised by Mohou Modisakeng and performed by Sikhumbuzo Makandula at Fingo Village in the vicinity of the old Egazini Memorial; and *Bismillah* by Igshaan Adams in the basement of the 1820 Settlers National Monument.

1. The term “opaque stickiness” is used in relation to untranslatability by Sarat Maharaj in *Perfidious fidelity: The untranslatability of the Other* cited by Papastergiadis (1998:61).

2. The *Blind Spot* performances received funding from the National Arts Festival (NAF) and were on the main programme of the 2014 festival. Two of the articles (by Ball and Baasch) were first presented at the Rhodes University Fine Art Department and Visual and Performing Arts of Africa (ViPAA) Humanities Focus area symposium, *Blind Spots and Ways of Not Seeing*, in October 2014. This symposium, as well as the residencies in which Mbali Khoza and Igshaan Adams participated, were generously supported by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF).

Each site-collaborative³ performance engaged with the failure of seeing (literally or figuratively), drawing from the notion of scotoma, an obscuration of the visual field or a blind spot that creates an absence of vision. Just as with scotoma, when the brain makes up certain details that are actually not there, in terms of ways of seeing (or not seeing) and ways of thinking about the world, ignorance and prejudice create cultural or cognitive biases that rely on farcical information and skewed perspectives. As such, the metaphoric notion of a blind spot can be linked to the ‘opaque stickiness’ of untranslatability (Maharaj in Papastergiadis 1998:61), for just as the brain tricks one into “seeing” what is not actually there, a translation can trick one into thinking that the gap of meaning has been seamlessly filled.

Seeing through untranslatability

In the performance *What difference does it make who is speaking?* (2014), Mbali Khoza methodically pierced a long scroll of blank paper with a threadless needle, scarring the surface with seemingly meaningless perforated holes (Figure 2). The sound of the metal penetrating the thick paper was amplified, and sound and touch overtook sight as a transcription of an interview with a man speaking Soninke⁴ mixed with French was “stitched” into the paper using isiZulu phonetics as a guide. The act of piercing the paper raised the surface of the paper like braille (Figure 3). This performance was inspired by the work of Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera who, in his novella *House of Hunger*, compares the act of writing to a violent stitching of a wound. He writes, ‘As I read it every single word erased itself into my mind. Afterwards they came to take out the stitches from the wound of it. The stitches were published. The reviewers made obscene noises’ (Marechera 1978).

Performing in the Eastern Star Press Museum in Grahamstown (Figure 4), Khoza was surrounded by nineteenth century galley proof presses, wooden printers’ trays, and printing blocks that used to be meticulously arranged by hand to compose the content of the English newspaper the *Eastern Star* that first appeared in Grahamstown in 1871. While the laborious act of placing individual letters side by side to create one word at a time is paralleled in Khoza’s painstaking stitching of indistinguishable text, the brutality of the act of puncturing the paper alludes to the violence of silencing language, particularly one’s mother tongue. While English is only the first language for about 10% of the South African population, it remains the dominant language in the media and in government nationwide. In the context of Grahamstown, the English language that was brought with the 1820 British Settlers largely erases the local language of isiXhosa in the formal business and tertiary education sectors.

3. I have developed this term in order to indicate that site has the agency to collaborate with a performer who is sensitive to concerns of “place”. A performer does not simply “translate” what she or he sees in a particular place, but collaborates with place in order to co-create meaning.

4. Soninke is located primarily in Mali and is a Mande language spoken by the Soninke people. It is also spoken to a lesser degree in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, The Gambia, Mauritania and Guinea-Bissau.

Working with the idea of translation and its inevitable blind spots, Khoza produced the work *Search for my tongue* (Sujata Bhatt) for the *SLIP* exhibition,⁵ which consisted of a magnifying glass placed in front of a sheet of minute text illegible to the naked eye (Figure 5). Drawing a parallel between the never-quite-thereness of translation (Papastergiadis 1998:60) and the never-quite-thereness of the physical act of seeing (owing to the fact that the mind fills in gaps even when one does not see, so one is never quite sure what the eye *really* sees), the viewer had to draw the magnifying glass to her eye to aid her reading of the otherwise unreadable text about the ‘stickiness’ of untranslatability (Maharaj in Papastergiadis 1998:61). The text (Figure 6) is a response to Sujata Bhatt’s poem *Search for my Tongue*, which in its original form contains Gujarati script and is about the impossibility of translation, described as the awkwardness of two tongues in one’s mouth trying to speak at the same time.

To engage with translation, slippages and blanks through performance in particular, as Mbali Khoza does, is conceptually pertinent, for in its unrepeatability performance never fully arrives (Phelan 1993), just as translation ‘is forever conscious of its place of departure and unable to rest in any abstraction of its own destination’ (Papastergiadis 1998:60). In his article, ‘From the edges of exile to the limits of translation’, Nikos Papastergiadis compares the impossibility of fully arriving in the act of translation to the impossibility of fully arriving in terms of identity – a condition of all human beings, but most acutely recognised by the migrant. ‘Translation is always an encounter with the resistance of the untranslatable. From this tension there emerges both a haunting sense of irresoluteness and the driving energy for further translation’ (Papastergiadis 1998:60). Rather than one “pure” language being contaminated through the process of translation, two languages ‘are jostling and rubbing up against each other’, continuously being reinscribed ‘in the process of journeying’ (Papastergiadis 1998:61, 60).

Relating this to *Blind spots and ways of not seeing*, one can never rest in the knowledge of seeing, for there is no irrefutable image to see. (Even if there were, there would be no way of knowing when one actually sees it.) Performance disappears in its doing – the next time one performs, the action is new – and translation never arrives. Similarly, what one sees never reaches a moment of pure focus or absolute clarity, for the eye has a mind of its own and the mind in turn plays with the eye.

5. *SLIP: Mbali Khoza and Igshaan Adams* was curated by Ruth Simbao and opened at the Alumni Gallery in the Albany History Museum in Grahamstown in October 2014. The exhibition dealt with various forms of slippages that occur in relation to ways that we “know” through our senses. For this exhibition Khoza produced two series of monotype blind drawings titled, *The tongue and the other other tongues* and *Creating in a tongue*. Underlying her work is the impossibility of translation – the excess, the unspeakable and the slip of the tongue. The fabric works that Adams exhibited in *SLIP* draw from forced correlations between what we see and who we supposedly are in the process of interpreting the Rorschach inkblot tests. See <http://www.ru.ac.za/ruthsimbao/exhibition-performances/>. The exhibition was supported by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF).

Repetition as a desire to solidify what we see

Looking, then, must happen again, and again and again. It is precisely due to ungraspability that we need to look some more. If one *consciously aims* to see, one might “look yieldingly”, that is, with a willingness to see, and a willingness to see openly. Seeing in order to *really* see, however, is seldom a conscious aim, especially when one looks too fast, or with the conscious or sub-conscious desire to *not* see.

The act of looking again and again, though, does not mean that we necessarily see, for insistent repetition can have the opposite effect, in fact. Repetitive “shooting with the eye” can aim to fix, or to tame that which is ungraspable, like a determined form of denial. Such repetition is comparable to Homi Bhabha’s notion of stereotyping, in which fretful repetition attempts to drive home a falsity again and again precisely because there is no solid “factness” to uphold the illusory “type”. As Bhabha (1994:66) writes, ‘Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise, the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is “in place”, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ...’.

If I repeat a false idea, will it stand still long enough to behave? If I repeat it again, will it stick? If it solidifies (the word “stereotype” draws from the Greek *stereos*, meaning solid⁶) will others begin to see what I see, even if what I see is not actually there?

In her article in this volume, ‘Guarded Visions: walls, watchtowers and warped perspectives in the Israeli occupied West Bank Palestinian Territory’, Rachel Baasch argues that it is easier to demonise a so-called enemy when representation *precedes* eye contact. One can play an (erroneous) image over and over again in one’s mind, but, as Baasch argues, this image ‘usurps consciousness’ (Said 2004:71). One is afraid, perhaps, to “look yieldingly”. According to Baasch, when the Palestinian body is policed at checkpoints that ‘control movement of people between parts of the West Bank OPT like Ramallah and the city of Jerusalem ... ID books are requested before eye contact is made’. Paper is given more weight than flesh, she says, as ‘identification documents are demanded in order to prove that one has permission to move and permission to exist’. It is precisely because identity books are flattened translations of identity, that they are looked at again and again as a way of upholding the “type”, and as a way of being shielded by what one might actually see in another’s living face.

6. Stereotype stems from the French *stéréotype*, which references a printing method (printed by means of a solid plate of type). This draws from the Greek *stereos* (solid) and the French *type* (type).

If I keep looking at something will it conform to my eye? If I avoid looking, will it cease to exist?

Multi-directional looking

In her paper, Baasch proposes the idea of “looking with the skin” – of looking slowly and consciously in a self-reflexive and accountable way that seeks to connect with lived experiences beyond what one views at first glance. Drawing from Mirzoeff’s (2011:1) notion of mutual (and hence multi-directional) looking, she discusses the semi-permeability of the skin, which blurs borders as it ‘mediates the flow of matter between an inside and an outside’. What one sees cannot be separated from how one is seen. Pushing the analogy of skin a bit further, owing to the fact that the skin constantly dies, regenerates and dies, if one looks through one’s eyes as if the eyes *were* skin, then what one *thinks* one sees would constantly be shed. As with translation, in the act of seeing there is perpetual “shedding of the skin of the eye”, and a resting point (a static image) can never be reached.

The refusal of arrival throws the notion of direction in doubt, and significantly most of the papers collected under the theme *Blind spots and ways of not seeing* touch on the complexity of direction. Baasch describes how the Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR) programme based in Beit Sahour produced a project in which people occupied the empty Oush Grab military base, using it as an ‘optical apparatus’. Viewpoints were reversed, and those usually on the outside could experience how they may have been viewed from the inside, creating the feeling of being inside the control room of a panopticon prison.

In her paper in this volume, ‘Evasive manoeuvres: Participatory theatre in the facilitation of counter-disciplinary action/inaction in a South African female correctional centre’, Miranda Young-Jahangeer examines ways in which participatory theatre interventions are sometimes able to invert the panopticon and associated ways of seeing. This form of popular culture is used to temporarily render the powerful “blind”. However, looking power in its eyes in this context is dangerous, and, as Young-Jahangeer writes, ‘to look “at” power is also not culturally acceptable and Westville Prison was fast becoming a space that adopted Zulu codes and practices ...’. As such, ‘evasive manoeuvres’ (Fiske 1989) are often utilised rather than exercising overt resistance that is focused in a particular direction.

In contrast to the logic of the panopticon, in which sightlines operate rigidly along an exacting course and follow a particular direction, during the participatory theatre

events there are (at least temporarily) no straight lines between actors and observers – the women are all ‘spect-actors’ (Boal 1979); there are no straightforward lines between the takers and givers of freedom – for freedom cannot be given and ‘to feel free while incarcerated is to undermine the seat of power’, and these experiences of theatre are ‘the great escape, not from reality’, writes Young-Jahangeer, ‘but *towards* it’.⁷ Direction, as such, is turned on its head.

Touching beyond sight

Further, the participatory theatre in this prison allows the sense of touch to restore the dehumanising effect of sight (of always being observed without the freedom to look back). Ordinarily, touch between prisoners is policed by the eyes of the wardens, for contact is viewed as a security risk. Interestingly, as Young-Jahangeer points out, during participatory theatre sessions women ‘would often deliberately choose games that required physical contact’. In this context, touch transgresses the routine acts of seeing.

Touch as an extension of and sometimes a subversion of sight is a significant part of the work of Cape Town-based artist Igshaan Adams. In her paper in this volume, ‘Inkblots and their indices: Rethreading perception in the work of Igshaan Adams’, Jennifer Ball reveals the ways in which Adams’ found objects, such as carpets or pieces of vinyl flooring, have over the years been physically touched by friends and relatives. These traces of their presence, in stains, holes and burns, turn objects into ‘vehicles for a sense of selfhood’ (Hoskins 1998:2). Similarly, in the performance *Bismillah*, touch became a point of intimate familial knowing, where sight that might have elicited emotional and mental recognition ultimately failed. As Ball relays, Adams’ aunt seemed dead to him when she became a drug addict, and even though the only part of her he seemed to recognise was a scar on her foot, this visual trigger of memory was insufficient. The realisation that his living aunt was, to him, dead, led to the performance in which his father washed his body in the manner of a Muslim burial. In contrast to his experience with his aunt, in which a visual trigger failed to generate a sense of personal knowing and vivacity, in *Bismillah*, even though “dead” himself, after being tenderly touched during the ritual performance of being washed and wrapped up in white linen as if dead, Adams felt remarkably renewed.⁸

7. Emphasis added.

8. For a further analysis of the senses in relation to this performance, see Simbao, R. 2015. Cleansing via the senses as eyesight follows the soul: Igshaan Adams’ *Bismillah* performance. *Igshaan Adams*. Cape Town: Blank Projects.

Neoscopic vision

Ball further analyses the failure of physical seeing in her discussion of Adams' use of the Rorschach inkblot test. While this form of psychological testing narrows or closes down vision – and interpretation – in terms of what “reasonable” people are *supposed* to see, Ball points out how Adams plays with the ‘mysterious translations that occur between the eye and the mind’. Further, Adams opens up ways of seeing through the philosophy and spirituality of Sufism, that sees beyond the physical and the psychological worlds, pointing to an interior dimension of Islam. In Adams' *Parda* series, which refers to a ‘veil, or fine material covering, worn by Islamic women, as prescribed by Sharia law,’ he unravels skewed perceptions of the inkblot test as well as rigid perceptions of Islam. As Ball writes, ‘Subtle traces of Adams' process of threading and then unthreading the lower half of the inkblot emerge as small recesses in the tightly-woven pattern. This evokes a sense of revisiting, rewriting and remapping, which, in turn, reflects the undefinability and inconclusiveness of selfhood that Adams engages with’.

Arguably one of the gravest blind spots in the twenty-first century is the way that Islam tends to be perceived, interpreted and translated. Importantly Adams (2014/08/18) adopts a philosophical approach that he draws from the term “neoscope”, which he describes as ‘a new way of seeing or a wider range in which to see; maybe even the idea of discovering new things every time one looks at the same thing or situation’. The unravelling that takes place in his *Parda* works can be interpreted, in part, as a loosening of interpretations of the Islamic veil – an opening up of translation that finds affirmation in the never-quite-thereness of seeing and the never-quite-thereness of translation (Papastergiadis 1998:60). While on the one hand there can be violence in untranslatability, as Khoza reveals, on the other hand rigid translations that are blind to the inevitable slippages of translation are perhaps more dangerous. Western perceptions of Islamic women's veils tend to be static, and ironically they shut down vision in so-called feminist attempts to ‘free’ Islamic women from their ‘restricted vision’ despite the fact that, as Jahangeer-Young points out, freedom cannot be *given*.

Opening up translations of veiling, Hamid Naficy (2000:562) writes:

... veiling as a social practice is not fixed or unidirectional... [T]here is a dialectical relationship between veiling and unveiling; that which covers is capable of also uncovering. In practice, women have a great deal of latitude in how they present themselves to the gaze of the male onlookers, involving body language, eye contact, types of veils worn, clothing worn underneath the veil, and the manner in which the veil itself is fanned open or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or conceal the face, the body, or the clothing underneath.

Further, he argues that 'Veiling-unveiling, therefore, is not a panoptic process in the manner Foucault (1979) describes because in this system vision is not unidirectional or in the possession of only one side' (Naficy 2000:563).

The advantage of (un)seeing

In the article in this volume, 'What "global art" and current (re)turns fail to see: A modest counter-narrative of "not-another-biennial"', I critique the unidirectional approach of the discourse of "global art", which functions according to a problematic logic of addition. As articulated in *The global contemporary and the rise of new art worlds* (Belting, Buddensieg & Weibel 2013), "global art" perpetuates a normative vision that remains largely in the possession of only one side, for "new art worlds" are simply added to the existing dominant art world without significant destabilisation of the framework of contemporary art. The process of biennialisation is used to "prove" that the addition of "new art worlds" equals democratisation and the demise of the western art canon, without the recognition of the disadvantage of "privileged" seeing. Blind to what is actually going on in specific contexts, local narratives are "written out" as various forms of biennials across the world are simply added to the mega-list of "global" exhibitions. As I demonstrate with the counter-narrative of "not-another-biennial" (the Cape 07 and Cape 09 exhibitions), these additions are sometimes even factually wrong.

Instead, I propose a logic of subtraction, in which the assumptions of the dominant artworld are systematically stripped away, producing a deliberate shedding or an *unseeing* – a shedding of the "skin of the eye", so to speak, which acknowledges that privilege prevents people from seeing properly (Matthews 2013:31), creating a double blindness, an inability to recognise blindness (Elkins 1996:168). Such unseeing fundamentally changes the measures of "success" and "failure", and I argue that it is only when blanks, failures and things presumed not to exist are

carefully regarded, that the goal of achieving mutually shared art on a global scale might become a possibility.

Transformative seeing as an act of “turning over”

A logic of subtraction that calls for a deliberate *unseeing*, can be linked to a transformative view of language and translation, in which words and meanings are always in a state of flux (Papastergiadis 1998:51). According to Papastergiadis (1998:51; emphasis added), ‘blind fidelity to the original impedes the rendering of sense’, and ‘translation can only succeed when the boundaries of *both* languages are stretched to the point of touching’. Just as translation is ‘always an encounter with the resistance of the untranslatable’ (Papastergiadis 1998:60), seeing is always an encounter with blindness (Elkins 1996) – the unseeable. When blindness is *recognised*, though, seeing can begin to be transformative, in the same way that the *recognition* of the impossibility of translation in the etymological sense of transferral – of “carrying across” meaning, stemming from the Latin *translatus* – opens up transformative notions of language. As Pamela Maseko (2015/05/28) argues,

In isiXhosa, the term for translation is *ugququlo*, which literally means *a change, a turn over, a conversion*.⁹ [There is a] “conversion of text into something else”, [and] some of the features of the text do not get carried over into what the text becomes in the new form. Typically, [what is] left out is the culture embedded in the language and the emotions that are mostly not tangible.

What if one were to relate the act of translation, in the sense of ‘*turn over*’ (Maseko 2015/05/28), to the act of seeing, questioning the direction of these actions? Instead of moving in a particular direction across a two-dimensional plane (*translatus* – “carrying across” a particular meaning from one language to another or from an object to the eyeball), the action of *turning over* would imply animation into three dimensions. Literal translation often falls flat, just as seeing is relatively flat, not in the sense of the depth of vision within one frame, but in the sense that, unlike smell and sound, seeing cannot easily engage with what lies behind. (An object would need to be turned over, or walked around creating multiple frames, or it would need to be partially or completely see-through).

Recognising that which we do not see means recognising the relative flatness or paucity of the act of looking, particularly looking that does not involve a thoughtful turning over; a mulling over in the eye and in the mind. Borrowing from Papastergiadis’ (1998:60) description of translation, from this recognition of flatness

9. Emphasis added.

could emerge both a haunting sense of irresoluteness and the driving energy to see more – to see with transformative, neoscopic vision. Blind spots trick one into thinking that one sees that which is actually not there. One is less likely to be tricked, though, if one consciously and slowly turns over what one sees, aware of the 'opaque stickiness' (Maharaj in Papastergiadis 1998:61) not just of translation, but of seeing too; looking, as Baasch suggests, with the skin.

Looking. Shedding.

Seeing with a driving energy to see more.

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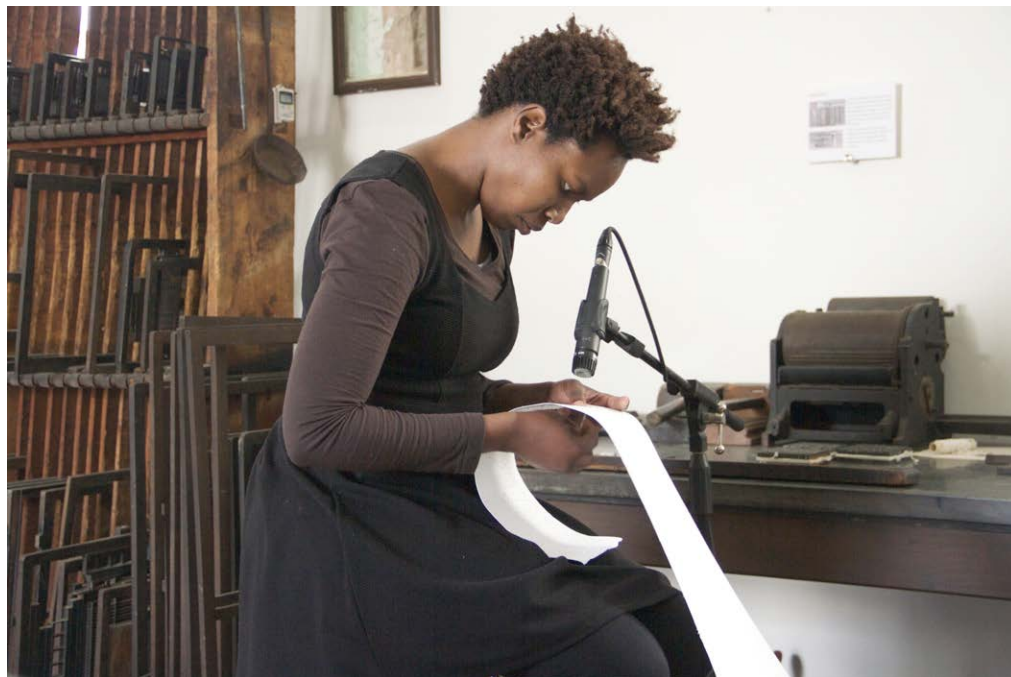


FIGURE **Nº 1**



Mbali Khoza, *What difference does it make who is speaking? Blind Spot* performance art programme curated by Ruth Simbao, National Arts Festival, 2014. Photo: Ruth Simbao.



FIGURE **Nº 2**



In *What difference does it make who is speaking?* Khoza used a threadless needle to stitch the transcription of an interview with a man speaking Soninke and French using isiZulu phonetics as a guide. The sound of the needle piercing the thick paper was amplified. Photo: Ruth Simbao.

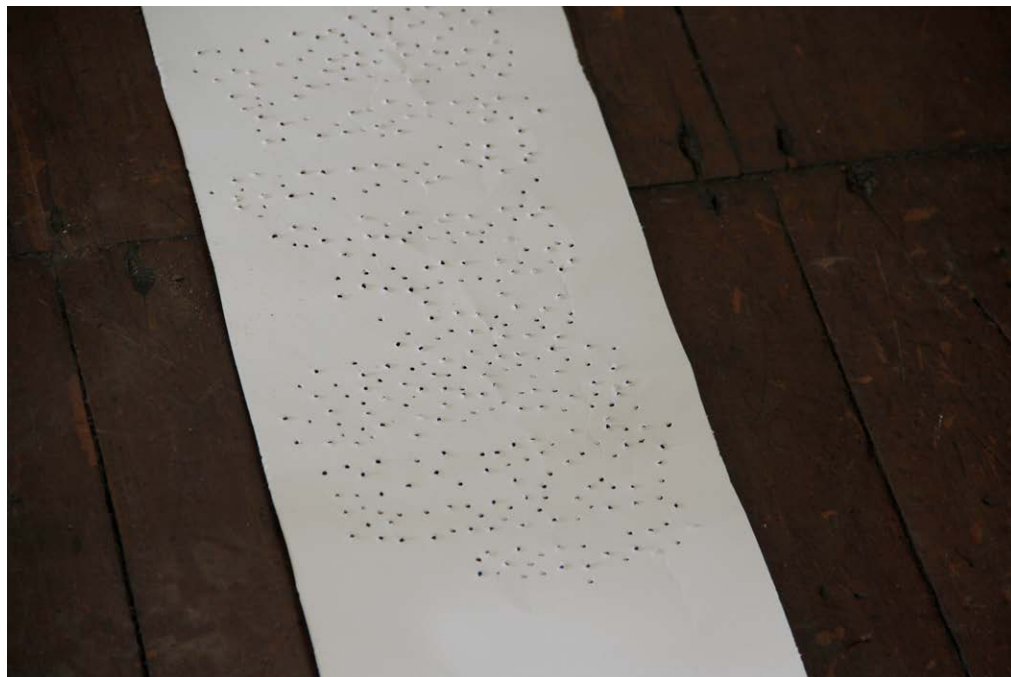


FIGURE **Nº 3**



Mbali Khoza, *What difference does it make who is speaking?* 2014. Inspired by Marechera's *House of hunger*, Khoza violently perforated a scroll of paper with a needle, raising the surface of the paper like braille. Photo: Ruth Simbao.



FIGURE N° 4



What difference does it make who is speaking? This site-collaborative performance took place in the Eastern Star Press Museum in Grahamstown, during the 2014 National Arts Festival. Khoza was surrounded by galley proof presses, wooden printers' trays and printing blocks, which were used in nineteenth century in the production of the *Eastern Star* newspaper.

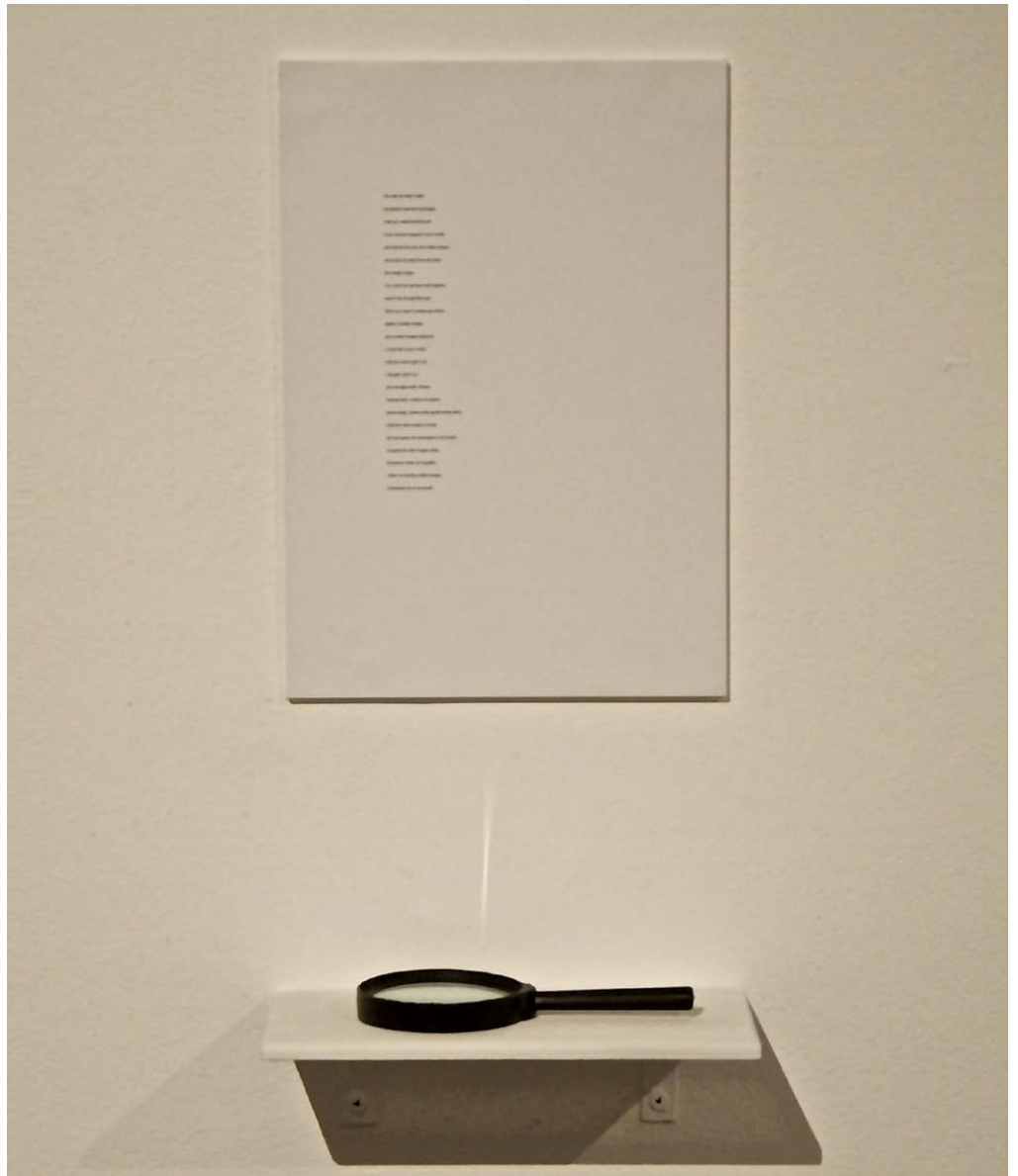


FIGURE **Nº 5**



Mbali Khoza. *Search for my tongue (Sujata Bhatt)*, 2014, in the exhibition *SLIP: Mbali Khoza and Igshaan Adams*, Alumni Gallery, Albany History Museum, curated by Ruth Simbao. Photo: Rachel Baasch.

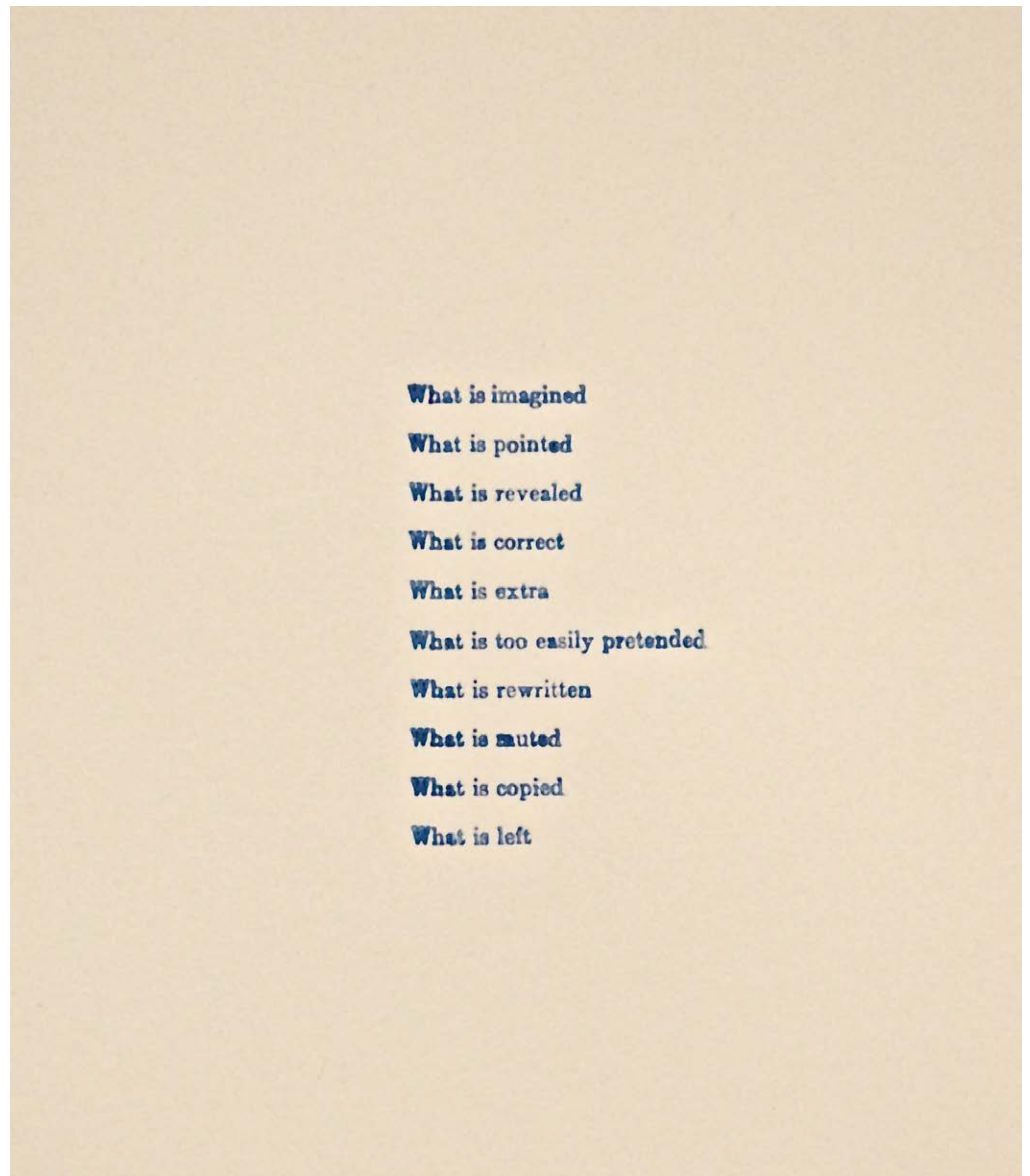


FIGURE **N° 6**



Mbali Khoza. *Search for my tongue* (Sujata Bhatt), 2014 (detail). Photo: Rachel Baasch.