

# Nika

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KALINOSI?MUTALE,  
ANAWANA?HALOBA  
KONSE KUBILI

Henry Tayali Art Gallery,  
Lusaka, Zambia,  
January 2004

To flip a coin is to play a game of fate that appears to only present two options: heads or tails. The outcome, however, is less restricted than it might first appear. Determined by the categories initially assigned to the decision-making process, there are potentially more variants than the two sides of the coin. The title of Haloba and Mutale's exhibition, *Konse Kubili*, means "both sides," or "both ways," in Bemba, evoking the duality that is often too simplistically imposed on African artists. Heads: African. Tails: not (really) African. Or in this context—Heads: Zambian artists. Tails: Zambians who have forgotten their artistic roots. By deliberately playing to both sides of this improbable equation, Haloba and Mutale assert that the coin is still in the air, and they insist that there are more options than just Heads or Tails.

Presented in Lusaka to a largely Zambian audience, *Konse Kubili* addresses the fact that Zambian artists who travel and study abroad often struggle to locally exhibit conceptual and installation art, as these works are perceived to be too European. As Haloba asserts, "we thought this [exhibition] would be another way of responding to those that say that when you go to Europe you forget the real art . . . and start to do what the Europeans are doing, which you can't even sell. We are trying to tell them we haven't stopped what we are doing. . . . We can't forget, but we also have new ideas."<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the European and American donor and diplomatic community in Zambia plays a significant role in determining what "real Zambian art" should be, as it makes up a large portion of art consumers in a context of meager financial support. Many exhibitions in Lusaka take place in the homes of expatriates, and as Zambian artist William Bwalya Miko says, "too many paintings are bought to match the home furnishings of unenlightened buyers who assume a position of con-

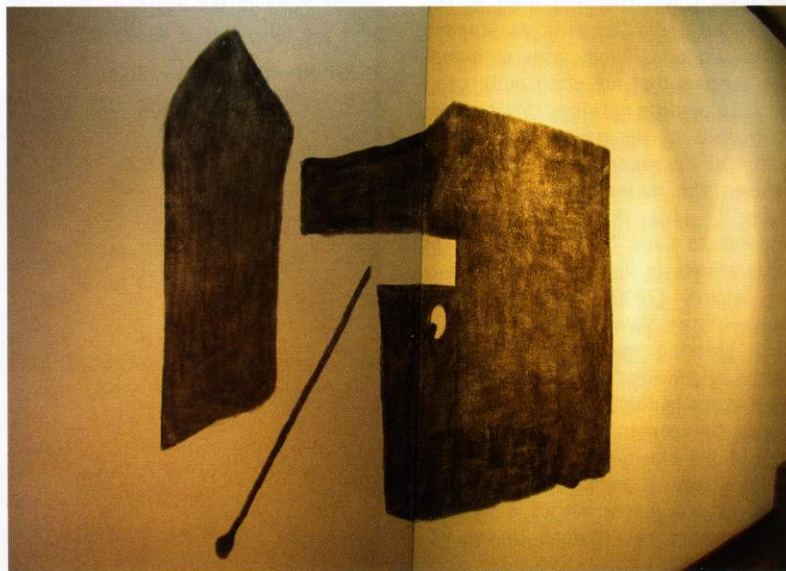
noisseurship."<sup>2</sup> The importance of *Konse Kubili* is that it not only flies in the face of amateurs who have posited themselves as the guardians of "Zambian art" but also takes seriously the perspectives of a local audience. It offers viewers in Lusaka both the expected (two-dimensional works on paper) and the unexpected (a sound installation and ephemeral drawings on the gallery walls).

In *Konse Kubili*, Haloba and Mutale playfully hide and reveal the visual as they respond site-specifically to the gallery space. Anawana Haloba, who calls herself a "universal artist who is proud to be an African,"<sup>3</sup> utilizes the central stage that is built into the floor of the Henry Tayali Art Gallery. As an architectural accessory, the stage brings to mind notions of candid display, performance, and oration. However, following the shape of the stage and the height of her own body, Haloba built a wooden tunnel that conceals the viewer, turning a site of exteriority into a private, dark space that shuts out both the ability to see and to be seen. The only thing that permeates the wooden walls is the eerie, recorded sound of someone crying or moaning inside the installation entitled *AIDS Tunnel* (2004).

According to Haloba, this sound piece began a few years ago when she asked a friend to scream and cry for her as if she were at a funeral. While funerals are an unavoidable and regrettably regular part of contemporary Zambian life, Haloba was particularly plagued

by the recorded scream when she was studying in Oslo, as she had not seen a single funeral in a year and a half. Just as the absence of the sound of real mourning heightened the emotional impact of the wail for Haloba, the lack of visual stimulus inside the *AIDS Tunnel* increased the effect of the cries and personal stories of HIV/AIDS sufferers, which were recorded in various local languages. The fluidity of languages, which included Bemba, Lozi, and Nyanja, resulted in a fluctuation of understanding for many viewers/listeners, and produced a sometimes-impenetrable soundscape reflecting the dead-ends in the recorded stories of Zambians who face the stigma of HIV/AIDS.

While Haloba uses audible language to both draw in and block the viewer, Kalinosi Mutale visually creates what he calls an "independent language"<sup>4</sup> of enigmatic shapes that derives meaning from the angles of the walls on which they are drawn, and from the movement of the viewers around the gallery space. As he says, "When I moved to Rijksakademie I realized that I have an opportunity to work not only on paper, but I can use other surfaces. The first thing I did when I was given a studio was a big drawing on the wall, and I really liked it. . . . I try to see if the language will change when I draw on paper and on the wall."<sup>5</sup> Concentrated in the corners of the gallery, the beautifully textured charcoal drawings either wrap around convex bends or sink into concave



*Lucifer* (2004). Photo: Ruth Kerkham



**Kalinosi Mutale and Anawana Haloba** at their exhibition *Konse Kubili*, Henry Tayali Art Gallery, Lusaka. Photo: Ruth Kerkham, January 2004.

niches, enhancing the meanings of the works and their titles. For example, the drawing titled *Lucifer* (2004) folds around a sharp corner that juts out at ninety degrees, so that only half of the drawing is visible as the viewer enters the gallery. As such, *Lucifer* appropriately plays a game of deception in which the full picture is initially hidden from sight. Comparably, *Kalinosi Ma Miss* (2004) recedes into an alcove, making the drawing appear to fold in on itself as if in an act of retreat or self-preservation. According to the artist, the drawing is about missing something such as home, and as it recedes into the wall it aptly assumes a posture of melancholy.

The drawing *Movement* (2004) consists of an undulating horizontal form that skips across four variously angled adjacent walls. As the viewer walks around the gallery, this snake-like form appears to contract and expand, creating a vibrant interplay of presence and absence. Although Mutale does not “perform” these drawings for the public, the images maintain a trace of his physical presence. He claims that, “Working on the wall . . . takes energy, you know, like working on a big surface. But it is not only the energy created in the shape, but also the energy in me.” In *Two People* (2004) the residue of the artist’s performative presence is evident despite the simultaneous sense of absence that is produced by the two negative shapes rep-

resenting a couple that seems to slide down the wall as if slumping into an unknown sadness.

Like many of the works in this exhibition, *Two People* suggests that a sophisticated understanding of art allows for the complex coexistence of apparent opposites. Absence is not mutually exclusive of presence. Movement does not discount immobility, and the choice of Heads does not ignore Tails. These two artists, Haloba and Mutale, show a local audience that, as Zambian artists, they can incorporate what Zenzele Chulu calls

the “exotic flavors of Oslo and Amsterdam”<sup>6</sup> without pitting “Europe” against “Africa”—as if these were the only two sides of the coin. While numerous exhibitions in North America and Europe have addressed the flexibility of “African artists” working in the interstitial spaces between Africa and the international (read Western-dominated) art world, *Konse Kubili* is a momentous exhibition in that it pertinently presents these issues to Zambian viewers—and it does so on its own terms, without someone else’s coin determining its fate.

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The author wishes to thank Anawana Haloba, Kalinosi Mutale for their input on this review.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anawana Haloba, personal conversation, Henry Tayali Art Gallery, Lusaka, January 25 2004.

<sup>2</sup> William Bwayla Miko, personal conversation, Lusaka, March 5, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Haloba, personal conversation, Henry Tayali Art Gallery, Lusaka, January 15, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Kalinosi Mutale, personal conversation, Henry Tayali Art Gallery, Lusaka, January 14 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Chulu, Zenzele, exhibition brochure for *Konse Kubili*, printed and produced by the Visual Arts Council Documentation Department, Lusaka.

*Konse Kubili*, exhibition view. Photo: Ruth Kerkham

