

Positive Living: Art and AIDS in South Africa

A new exhibition in London showcases how South Africa's creative community used art to move their government to act on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Suyin Haynes previews the exhibition.

On a rather rainy December morning in a small corner of Bloomsbury, a slice of remarkable African art and activism was brought to the Peltz Gallery, housed in one of the many terraced buildings around Russell Square. The current exhibition at the gallery, entitled *Positive Living: Art and AIDS in South Africa*, played host to its artists giving an interactive walking tour of their work and explaining the deeper context behind the pieces on display. This event concluded [Birkbeck's conference on Women and HIV/AIDS in South Africa](#), exploring the themes of Medicine, Art and Activism. Curated by Professor of Material and Visual Culture Annie E. Coombes, the exhibition contains a select number of pieces across different mediums, tied together with the focus on the creative community's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa and the government's inaction to the crisis.

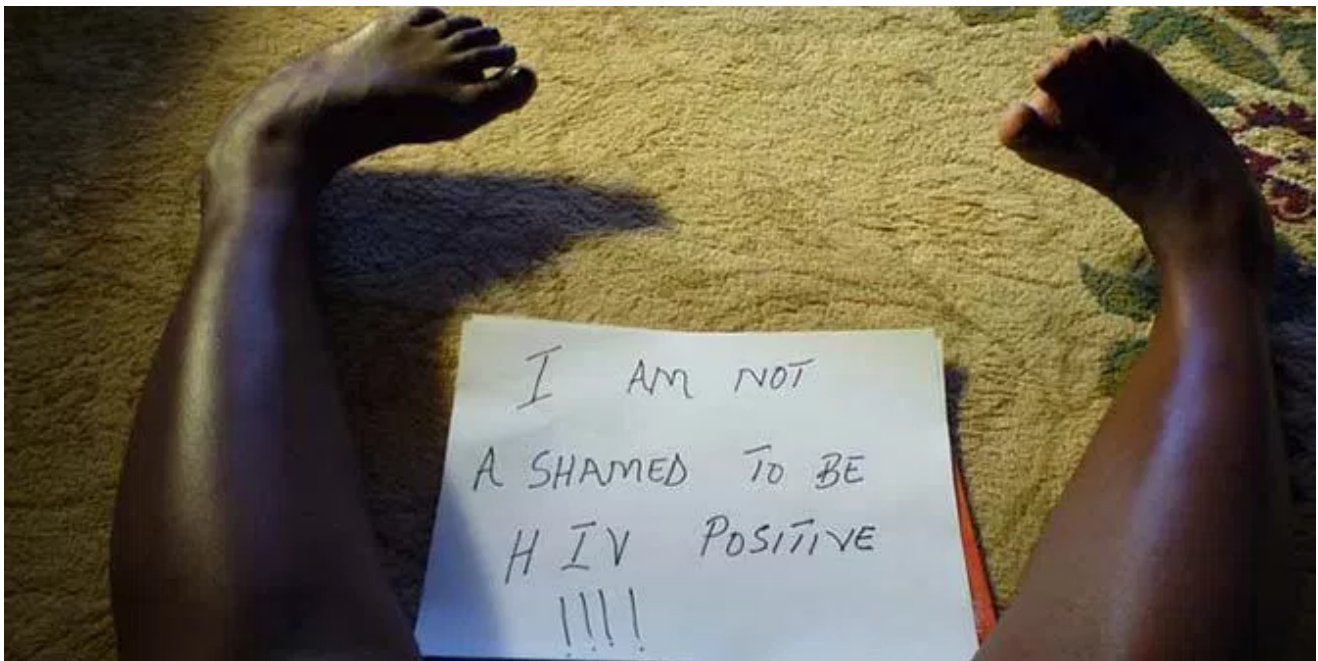
The bleakest years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the country were 1995 – 2008, and it is still an ongoing problem in the contemporary era. During this period, the former president, Thabo Mbeki, [appeared intent on denying the relationship between HIV, AIDS and immune deficiencies](#). The government of the period continuously withheld anti-retroviral drugs and lifesaving treatment from citizens who were just emerging from the traumatic era of apartheid. What the exhibition strives to illustrate is the way in which artists and photographers were able to use a variety of visual strategies to win international support and provoke action on the crisis from the South African government.

Coombes started the event by introducing the three South African artists and speakers: Novuyani Peyi, Nondumiso Hlwele and Gideon Mendel, while explaining the rationale for the project. Art has always been a powerful means of challenging assumptions and raising difficult questions, and this was quite evident in many of the pieces on display. Coombes noted the historical nature of the exhibition, indicative of artists working together across different mediums and voices in dialogue on the challenges collectively faced. Commenting on the unusually long captions to the pieces, it was noted that the power of narratives and stories was highly central to the concept of the exhibition; the texture of the captions gives context and depth, but moreover respect to the subjects who may not be present anymore.

First to address the audience in the intimate space was Novuyani Peyi. Peyi was representing the [Keiskamma Trust](#), a community organisation working with people in the Eastern Cape that supports the most socio-economically vulnerable members of society. Initially created as part of a poverty alleviation project, Peyi spoke eloquently and emotionally about the tapestry on display that members of the Trust had handmade. With inspiration drawn from Picasso's *Guernica*, the piece draws together traditional techniques of hand-beading and sewing. Its interpretation of dealing with HIV/AIDS as a war was particularly poignant, but what was most striking were the symbols of hope that Peyi highlighted within the richness of the overall picture.

Nondumiso Hlwele followed, telling the story behind her internationally acclaimed *Body Map* series; life sized images tracing the contours of the painter's body to articulate the impact of HIV/AIDS. Exploring the journey from diagnosis to living with the disease, Hlwele showed how she mapped it onto her body through her own visual interpretation of it. Although her work has been exhibited in Cape Town, London, Ontario and UNCTAD, the artist commented that it was a bit of surprise; she did not expect her body maps to be seen as artwork but more of a personal, cathartic expression of feeling. Most movingly, she finished by stating that her work was a statement against the virus, and showing that "diagnosis is not the end".





This photo is part of a photographic collection entitled *Through Positive Eyes*, a collaboration with Gideon Mendel and UCLA Art & Global Health Center
 Photo Credit: Gideon Mendel (<http://bit.ly/1jZL2Yq>)

Finally, photojournalist Gideon Mendel shared insights from his journey following the pandemic throughout the 1990s to the present day. Admitting that at the start of his career he was perhaps guilty of what critics called many photojournalists of the times as being a 'victimologist', he noted that his current position was much closer to that of an activist. The goal of his work is to get as close to the subjects with as much dignity and respect as possible, showing them as fighters with agency rather than powerless victims. Mendel presented two short films from his project **Through Positive Eyes**, a global photographic collaboration with UCLA to show a global outlook on HIV/AIDS providing a forum for people to represent themselves through photography and film.

From the intricate textile piece of the Kersikamma Arts Project to the linocuts from the 'HIV and Me' portfolio project working in the Natal, the exhibition is a celebration of the creative resilience of those living with HIV/AIDS over the past twenty years and to the present day. The nature of art as advocacy is the key theme throughout the exhibition. Through its intimate connections to the political and emotional struggle for self-representation in a time of pandemic and stigmatisation, *Positive Living* is an exhibition well worth visiting for all with an interest in the arts, activism and Africa.

Positive Living: Art and AIDS in South Africa is on at the Peltz Gallery until 24 January 2016.

Suyin Haynes is a third year undergraduate student reading International Relations and History, with a strong interest in African politics and culture. Follow her on Twitter @suyinsays.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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