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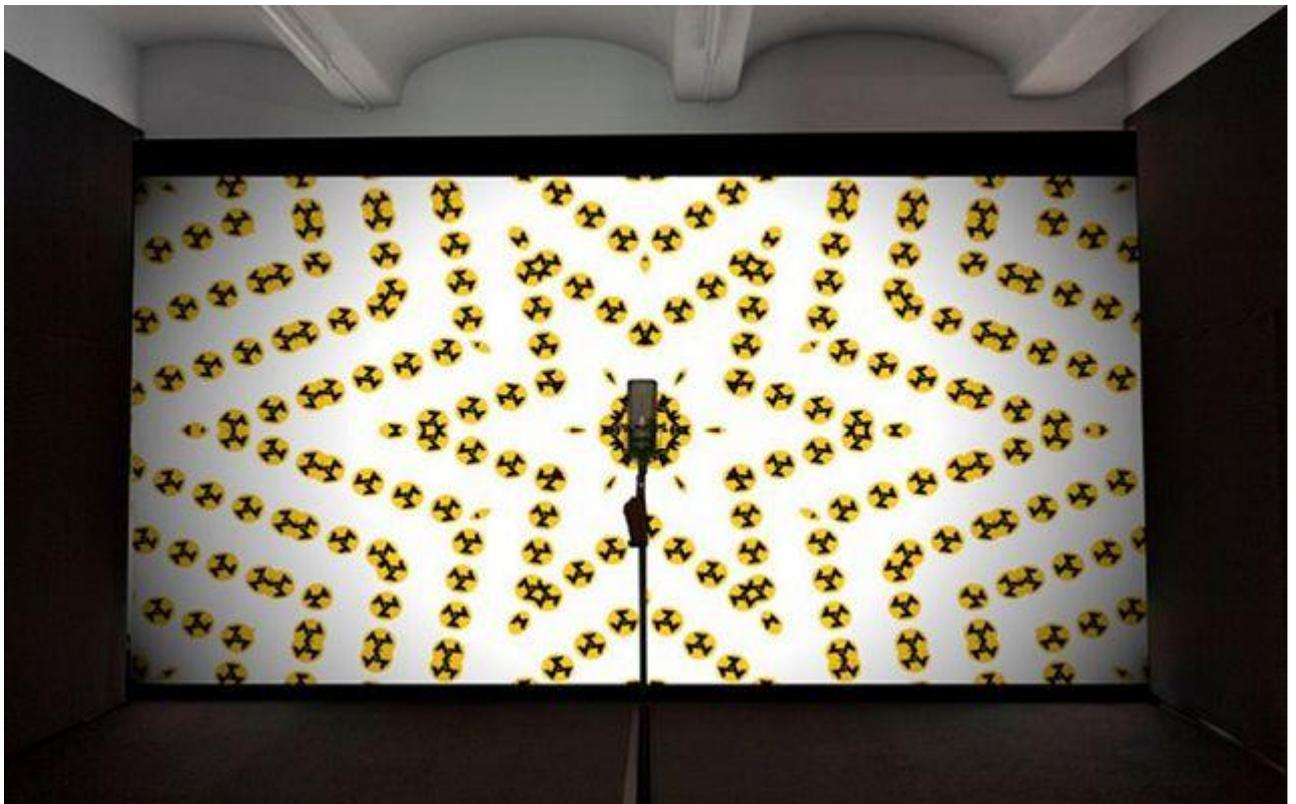


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Series of new takes on old images suggests that context is the key

BY CHRIS THURMAN, MARCH 06 2014, 05:52



NOT WHAT IT SEEMS: Black Right in Hank Willis Thomas's exhibition History Doesn't Laugh. Picture: CHRIS THURMAN

WHETHER you like it or not, we live in the age of the selfie. The ability of both public and private individuals to leverage this ubiquitous visual meme to good effect — social, political or otherwise — is a significant aspect of their brand identity management (to use the marketing phrase *du jour*).

Barack Obama got it right when, after being re-elected in 2012, he tweeted a picture of himself hugging his wife Michelle with the caption, "Four More Years". This rather professional-looking photo was retweeted about 780,000 times, boosting Obama's good-guy and family-man image around the world.

The traditional selfie can also backfire, as Obama found to his cost when he was roped (along with British Prime Minister David Cameron) into Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt's ill-considered snapshot during the memorial service held for Nelson Mandela at FNB Stadium. The moral of the story: don't be too spontaneous when it comes to selfies.

No doubt quite a lot of planning went into Ellen Degeneres's selfie stunt at the Academy Awards (helped by a little bit of luck and good aim from Bradley Cooper). The Oscar host's record-breaking tweet of that picture has made her the uncontested queen of the selfie — for now. But the viral image of Hollywood A-listers is telling: beaming smiles at awards ceremonies are part of the job and, as various red-carpet veterans have attested, often they require all the *faux* enthusiasm that an otherwise unhappy celebrity can muster.

If plastering on your happiest face — or your sexiest pout, or your wackiest expression — is requisite behaviour in front of the cameras of the E! Entertainment Channel, it is also an unwritten rule of the selfie. Smile, strike a pose ... in short, put on an act. This is one of the direct consequence of the cellphone camera: we are all becoming consummate performers.

There is nothing you can do in front of a camera lens that is not, ultimately, a form of self-promotion. Even the best intentions of Brent Lindeque and his "Change One Thing, Change Everything" campaign — the #neknomination fad turned into charitable acts — are tainted by this narcissism. You do something beneficial to someone else, but you do it on camera with the express purpose of showing others what you have done.

If you're a corporation, you do it for brand promotion and, down the line, increased revenue; if you're an individual, you do it to grow your social capital. While the immediate benefit of all this is arguable, the longer-term impact is untested. If an act of compassion or generosity occurs in a forest and no one records it on camera, does it still count?

For all these reasons, we should always be sceptical about the stories that visual materials purport to tell — "the treachery of images", to borrow from René Magritte's famous painting. The work of Hank Willis Thomas is a useful provocation in this regard. In *History Doesn't Laugh* (at the Goodman Gallery Johannesburg until March 29) the American artist revisits various archival images, addressing some nuances of South African history and popular culture by reproducing the images in unusual forms.

The work from which the exhibition takes its title, an inkjet print on white retroflective material, is an excellent example. Viewers are encouraged to take photographs of the print using flash photography — cellphone cameras especially — because exposure to bright light reveals the black-and-white detail: a gleeful crowd from an old issue of Bona magazine. "These smiling faces," we are told, "in a mundane advert for insurance, present an artifice of happiness" during the "dark moment" of apartheid.

What is the difference between the grinning mugs in Ellen's Oscars selfie and these anonymous South Africans, disenfranchised by racist legislation but nonetheless jovial? Context. And, whether he is turning iconic photos of protesters into sculptures, or morphing the swastika-like triskelion of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) into a dazzling kaleidoscopic animation, or magnifying the political buttons of struggle solidarity movements alongside "Afro-American Mail Order" classifieds from True Love magazine, Thomas seems to be insisting: context is everything.



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