

Zanele Muholi's visual activism "Isibonelo/Evidence" at the Brooklyn Museum

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Xana Nyilenda (2011) in Newtown, Johannesburg From 'Isibonelo/Evidence' by Zanele Muholi

Back in 2006, David Goldblatt showed me a catalogue showcasing fourteen South African artists' work, with Zanele Muholi's photograph of singer Martin Machapa (<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/season2006/muholi1.htm>) on the cover. Machapa's dashing young body, clothed in a patterned blouse knotted up to display taut belly skin, pivots towards the camera in a quarter turn. Goldblatt had mentored Muholi at Market Photo Workshop (<http://www.marketphotoworkshop.co.za>) in Johannesburg, and he wanted to make sure I directed my attention to her work. By the following year, Zanele Muholi had a solo show, "Being" (<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/being.htm>), at Michael Stevenson Gallery. I walked up the steep cobblestoned streets to the Waterkant district in Cape Town, where the gallery was then located. There, shimmering by the doorway, was the opening day crowd: narrow champagne flutes in hand, effervescent in the light of the setting sun behind Signal Hill.

Inside presented a different set of stories – stories that were rarely incorporated into the national narrative or South Africa's celebration of itself as a newly democratic nation. I remember one of them well: *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta* (<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/being6.htm>), Ext. 2, Lakeside,

Johannesburg 2007. In it, two women are seated leaning into the warmth of an ancient Jewel coal stove, kissing in quiet intimacy. The scene could be set in early September; it is still cold; even though they are indoors, one of the women wears a blue woollen hat. But it isn't so cold that they are bothered by their bare legs. We sense that spring is coming. The coal stove, an antique harkening back to their grandmothers' era, is peeling in spots. There is nothing new to see here: this is an inherited way of loving, old-fashioned and solid as the Jewel.

Included in that first solo show were portraits that provided the foundation for her remarkable, long-term project, *Faces and Phases* (<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/facesphases.htm>), a portrait series created between 2007 and 2014, which "commemorates and celebrates the lives of the black queers" Muholi met in her journeys throughout South Africa. The project also collects firsthand accounts that bear witness to the schizophrenic experience of living in a nation where LGBTI people are often the targets of violence – this despite the fact that South Africa's progressive constitution specifies that it protects the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) people. Muholi points out that whilst South Africans may

...look to our Constitution for protection as legitimate citizens in our country [...] the reality is that black lesbians are targeted with brutal oppression in the South African townships and surrounding areas. We experience rape from gangs, rape by so-called friends, neighbours and sometimes even family members. Some of the "curative rapes" inflicted on our bodies are reported to the police, but many other cases go unreported. At present South Africa has no anti-hate-crime legislation. Rampant hate crimes make us invisible. Coming out exposes us to the harshness of patriarchal compliance. We are also at risk when we challenge the norms of compulsory heterosexuality.

Already, in 2007, Muholi had embarked on a long-term project of cartography — mapping, marking, and revisiting her participants again and again. The target of Muholi's project is to counter invisibility, marginality and systemic silence. She seeks, instead, to include LGBTI people to the forefront of South Africa's liberation narrative. To that end, Muholi notes that her goal is to create an archive of "visual, oral and textual materials that include black lesbians and the role they have played in our communities".

More than seven years after seeing her exhibition in Cape Town, I arrive at Brooklyn Museum to experience a retrospective of Muholi's work, "Isibonelo/Evidence" (https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/zanele_muholi), armed with a copy of her recently published book, *Faces + Phases 2006 -14* (<https://steidl.de/Books/Faces-and-Phases-0220273133.html>) (Steidl Publishers, 2014). The opening essays remind us of the significance of photographs in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: they are evidence of existence, of being, of present-ness. Muholi realises that not having photographic

evidence of her maternal or paternal grandparents is a "deliberate" erasure, emphasising her feelings of "longing, of incompleteness, believing that if I could know their faces, a part of me would not feel so empty" (6). That knowledge of deliberate, systematic erasure from the historical records of the nation is so acute that she is driven now to "project publically, without shame" (7).

Following Muholi's opening salvo, Sindiwe Magona's powerful poem, "Please, Take Photographs!" exhorts parents to

Go to the nearest or cheapest electronic goods store

And there, buy cameras by the score

Hurry, Go! Go! Go!

Then go home; gather your family and

Take photographs of them all

Magona reminds us why even the ordinariness of photographing one's beloved child is an act belied by an unspeakably painful understanding: we know that the young man or woman "will not see thirty."

Muholi gifts her labours to her mother, Bester Muholi, "and to all mothers who gave birth to LGBTI children in Africa and beyond" and to those "who lost their children to hate crime-related violence"; she reminds them that they are "not alone" in their mourning. Her work here at Brooklyn Museum is a reminder of the fact that violence against LGBTI people continues; however, in mourning, we are not only asked to remember, but equally invited to celebrate and exhorted to continue—with pride and even arrogance, if necessary. The exhibition promises a wide-ranging collection of ongoing projects about LGBTI communities, both in South Africa and abroad; included are eighty-seven works created between 2007 and 2014—photography, video, and installations that showcase her mandate as a "visual activist"—ranging from her iconic *Faces and Phases* portrait series, the photographic series *Weddings*, and the video *Being Scene*, which focus on love, intimacy, and daily life within Muholi's close-knit community.

As one walks in through the double glass doors to the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art on the 4th floor, one sees a larger than life portrait of Ayanda Magoloza (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/16/zanele-muholi_n_4101706.html), of Kwanele South, Katlehong, Johannesburg (76.5 x 50.5cm, taken in 2012). Ayanda's hair is a crown of curls arranged above her head; she is the regal queen, welcoming visitors into this gallery. Positioned directly behind her is a black chalkboard with haikus of loss and rejection. The chalk inscriptions on the board are handwritten odes, minimalist narratives of loss and rejection, threats of sexual assault and bodily harm, and records of violent deaths carried out. One reads, "How are you getting satisfied with a

finger and tongue? You need a penis." In case you imagine that to be a playful bit of crassness, the next reads, "ONE TIME A GUY TOOK OUT HIS PRIVATE PARTS, AND SAID, 'this is what you need'". Then, that threat is made real: "THE COACH SAID HE DOESN'T LIKE ME AS A LESBIAN AND HE WANTS ME AS HIS WIFE SO THAT I CAN STOP BEING A LESBIAN. WHEN I SAID 'NO' AND TRIED TO LEAVE, HE BEAT ME WITH A STRAIGHTENED CLOTHES HANGER. THEN HE RAPED ME MANY TIMES, ALL NIGHT". And another: "There are 28 stab wounds on her face, chest and legs. She even has cuts on the soles of her feet." In between these stark lines, inscriptions of possibility, evidence of the ability to fight back—if we are gathered in numbers. Written in some of the smallest, most decorative writing on this board is this narrative: "They were outside the bar, a crowd of people calling them Tomboys. But she said, 'No. We are not tomboys we are lesbians.' And they left and we never saw them again."

In order to reflect the strength of that legion, the most prominently displayed work in the first room of the gallery is the *Faces and Phases* (<http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/facesphases.htm>) portrait series, juxtaposed at a right angle to the backboard. There are thirty portraits here—ten in a row, and three deep; they are accompanied by a full digital archive giving us access to over 250 portraits taken around the world. Muholi explains that the title, *Faces and Phases*, is about a long-term relationship, not a simple snapshot—a process of growth and change during the time that the country, too, transitioned. The participants' faces and bodies communicate two distinct messages: one set presents themselves to the world bold as lions—they communicate a monumental strength with the invitation of a come hither look. The others' eyes focus on something else—they look within to find reasons to stand still with dignity, despite life experiences of pain, rejection. Muholi notes,

Faces express the person, and Phases signify the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and experience to another. Faces is also about the face-to-face confrontation between myself as the photographer/activist and the many lesbians, women and transmen I have interacted with from different places.

Photographs in this series traverse spaces from Gauteng and Cape Town to London and Toronto, and include the townships of Alexandra, Soweto, Vosloorus, Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Katlehong and Kagiso.

Opposite the blackboard, framing the portraits on the right side, is a timeline of significant dates in South Africa's hate crime history—listed are some of the most gruesome murders of gay and lesbian subjects of this country. On the other side of the timeline, a larger-than-life image of a woman's hands holding an ID card. Disebo Gift Makhau's Identity Card (I.D. No. 901123 0814 08 7) is held open in someone's hands—someone wearing a jaunty striped sweater, the camera so focused on her fingers that we can see that her cuticles need some pushing back. We see that Disebo Gift was born 1990 – 11 – 23. The card was issued in 2006 – 07

– 23. The opposite page bears the stamp: “DECEASED”. It is a plain message. But nothing about the sweet face in the ID card picture prepares one for the finality of that stamped message. Muholi explains,

Phases articulates the collective pain we as a community experience due to the loss of friends and acquaintances through disease and hate crimes. Some of those who participated in this visual project have already passed away. We fondly remember Buhle Msibi (2006), Busi Sigasa (2007), Nosizwe Cekiso (2009) and Penny Fish (2009): may they rest in peace. The portraits also celebrate friends and acquaintances who hold different positions and play many different roles within black queer communities – an actress, soccer players, a scholar, cultural activists, dancers, filmmakers, writers, photographers, human rights and gender activists, mothers, lovers, friends, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons.

In Muholi's returns and re-visitations, she communes with each of the participants, reminding us that there must be a deep and abiding relationship in order to build such an archival project. Without this on-going relationship, she would have only mapped surface structures or a general lay of the land. In returning to converse with each person, she gives them the space to show how they shift into new modes of expressing gender and sexuality, and define how they wish to be seen as desirable subjects. For that reason, explains Muholi, only photographs those who are over 17 years old; she specifies that her participants had to be 18 by the time her work was published. She also specifies that her participants must be out of the closet – because, as she said at a talk at Light Work (<http://www.lightwork.org/archive/zanele-muholi/>) in Syracuse, NY, she “does not want to be responsible for someone else's closet” — that is, she does not want to “out” anyone, or decide for them when and how they negotiate that difficult entry. Her participants must be sober, and fully present in their participation in this project, so that they can consent to being photographed. They must not be drunk or smoking in the photograph, because she does not want to feed stereotypes of gay people — that their “lifestyle” drives them to lives of addiction, or that addiction is what drove them to practicing “unacceptable” sexualities. Her work is intended to convey an intentionality of steel—her own, and that of her participants.

The rooms beyond celebrate weddings, mourn at funerals, and take respite in the daily rituals—including lovemaking—that make us feel human, when the world tells us only of our marginalisation. The video of Ayanda Magoloza and Nhlanhla Moremi wedding (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqDsEChblrI>) from November 9, 2013 records the joyous event of a public declaration of love, fidelity, and promise between two women who thenceforth commit to walking together in life. There are billowing peachy-pink frocks on bridesmaids, shimmering pearls, starched white shirts under pressed black suits and perfectly tied bowties, false eyelashes curling like black waves, dramatic gold eye makeup, little white fans to chase a little breeze, and purely decorative, white lace parasols

that do nothing to prevent the heat of the summer. A hilarious yellow and blue Volkswagon Beetle convertible rolls up, filled with revelers dancing to blaring music. The vows are as dramatic as one may expect; excited whispers are hushed with noticeable "shhhh..."s. Then, as with any celebration, there is ear-splitting ululating when the pastor declares that the couple is now wedded: "I declare you now to be married spouses." This is not a union meant to be carried out in secrecy—it is noisy, bright, and out in the full glare of the sun, and the revelers carry on celebrating well into the night.

In the same exhibition space as the video celebrating the heat, colour, and sounds of a public union is "*Koze Kubenini XX*" (*Until When XX*) 2014: a Perspex casket topped with a funereal wreath, the colours on the flowers as brilliantly jarring as those in the wedding video opposite. On the walls next to the casket, posters meant to mirror posters of newspaper headlines that are pasted daily onto lampposts in South Africa, blaring the most sensational news in order to drum up sales. They read, "ANOTHER LESBIAN' RAPE AND MURDER" and "QUEER-CIDE: 22 YEAR OLD LESBIAN GUNNED DOWN IN HER HOME. NYANGA TOWNSHIP". Upon closer inspection, we see that Muholi's posters are intricately beaded artworks—the yellow or white backgrounds, and the black letters forming the headlines are created by beads glued onto wood panels. By recalling the decorative beadwork for which South African women are famous, each poster now memorialises and individualises the women's lives, rather than reducing them to a titillating headline on cheap paper that will tatter down drains by the next rainstorm.

On the day of the opening, Muholi performed a funeral, laying her body down in the Perspex casket whilst a crouching mother mourned next to the coffin. Many such mothers are mourning the loss of their children, killed solely because of the need of patriarchy and heterosexuality to violently police and punish bodies that run other to their dictates; the mother who mourned here on opening night represents but one of the many to whom Muholi has spoken in South Africa. Now, long past opening day, Muholi's own black and white portrait from *Faces and Phases* is laid to rest in the white folds of a pillow inside the casket. In the portrait, Muholi is dressed in leopard print, her signature black hat, and black-rimmed spectacles. Because she has set herself against a leopard print backdrop, she settles in easily with her surroundings—a chameleon who belongs, but who nonetheless stands out. Above her, resting on the clear Perspex of the coffin, that violent wreath of flowers: the pink orchids on the wreath advertise their sex organs: the labellum, intended to invite pollinators in, are twin vulvular cushions, unashamed of their presence.

In between these celebrations and memorials to those whose lives have been forcibly taken, there is a reminder of ordinary love: *Being Scene* (http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitions/muholi/index2012/being_scene.html), a video of a lovemaking couple in soft focus, identities blurred (it is Muholi and her

partner). We cannot identify who the figures are, nor is it pornographically focused. But we can see that the lovemaking is vigorous, penetrative, one partner atop the other. It counters claims of those who continue to imagine that in order for a woman to feel good sexually, a penis needs to be in the picture. The ordinariness of love, and lovemaking underscores Muholi's project; she stresses the need to create a visible visual archive of a range of experiences: arrogance and sweetness, fight and contemplation.

Zanele Muholi and Visual Activism: "Isibonelo/Evidence

(https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/zanele_muholi)" is at Brooklyn Museum from May 1–November 1, 2015.

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