

Conference Report

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Zanele Muholi Colloquium, 24 March 2014

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There have been so few South African texts of any kind representing female same-sex intimacies and desires, particularly between black women, that it is perhaps fitting that the figure who has emerged as the “voice” of black South African lesbians is not a writer, but a photographer ... (Munro 2012:218-219).

The South African photographer and self-described ‘visual activist’ Zanele Muholi has been gaining recognition across the globe since presenting her first exhibition, *Visual Sexuality*, in 2004 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Since then, Muholi's work has featured in numerous exhibitions including the 29th São Paulo Biennial in Brazil (2010); *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African photography* at the V&A Museum in London (2011) and *Lesbians Seeing Lesbians* at the Leslie/Lohman Gallery in New York (2011). In 2014, Muholi had two solo exhibitions, one at the EinsteinHaus in Ulm, Germany (18 September – 25 October) and the other at the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto that coincided with WorldPride 2014 (18 June – 24 August). Furthermore, her work was featured in no less than six group exhibitions in 2014, including *Where We're At!: Other Voices on Gender* at the Bozar/ Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels (17 June – 31 August); *Contemporary Art/ South Africa* at Yale University Art Gallery (9 May – 14 September); *Worldwide Africa: Fashioning Personhood* at Minneapolis Institute of Arts and *From Sitting to Selfie: 300 Years of South African Portraits* at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg (24 June – 6 September).

Taking this prolific showing into account, it seems only apt that on 24 March 2014, Unisa's Institute for Gender Studies in collaboration with the University's Department of Communication Science hosted a Zanele Muholi colloquium to give established

and young academics the opportunity to critically engage with and comment on various aspects of Muholi's work.

Dr Leora Farber (University of Johannesburg) started off the proceedings with a paper focussing specifically on Muholi's *Faces and Phases* and *Belulahs* series. In her paper, entitled *Seeing face to face: confrontation and provocation in Zanele Muholi's 'Faces and Phases' series*, Farber discussed the way in which Muholi critically engages with the ethnographic archive in these two series. According to Farber, Muholi's work manages to appropriate historical and/or popular archives to expose and critique the assumptions that underlie them. The paper suggested that Muholi's works could in fact be seen as counter-archival and Faber employed Deborah Willis' metaphor of 'subversive resistance', which entails the use of strategies that produce images that counter dominant meanings or stereotypes, and argued that Muholi makes use of this subversive resistance, thus creating 'counter archival' images that not only record black LGBTI's presences, but also challenge the time-honoured conventions of photographic portraiture.

Following a screening of Muholi's acclaimed documentary film, *Difficult Love*, in which Muholi uncovers the challenges that face black lesbians in South Africa, Dr Beschara Karam (Unisa) presented her paper, *'Difficult Love': trauma art and memorialisation*. In the paper, Karam approached both Muholi's photography as well as *Difficult Love* from three distinct perspectives. In the first place, she attempted to answer Gilles Deleuze's phenomenological question of "what does the visual do?" with specific reference to Muholi's film and photographs. Secondly, Karam argued that Muholi's work is a form of trauma art, and looked at the works' role in 'secondary witnessing', and finally, she argued that Muholi's artworks can be seen as a 'site of memory' or a form of memorialisation, thus linking to the idea of Muholi's work displaying a process of archive production as was discussed by Farber.

Prof Amanda du Preez (University of Pretoria) provided a philosophical perspective on Muholi's work in a paper entitled, *'Material girls': presence and the material sublime in Zanele Muholi's work*. Du Preez started her paper with an in-depth discussion of the material sublime, explaining the difference between the material and the modern sublime. The material sublime was shown to stand in stark contrast to the modern sublime, where the modern, or Kantian sublime, is seen in terms of rational epistemology, something that appeals to the intellectual, whereas the material sublime looks to material and experiential world for inspiration. The material sublime is also often viewed as a counter discourse within the modern sublime, and it was the second time in the colloquium that the concept of 'counter' was used in the analyses and discussions of Muholi's work. Du Preez argued in particular that Muholi's images

provide a form of material resistance, even through the mere fact that they exist. She also suggested that the material sublime corresponds in a significant manner with Muholi's images of so-called 'outsider' figures.

In the paper, *Looking at you, looking at me: looking at Zanele Muholi's portraiture*, Irene Bronner, a PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Johannesburg, argued that Muholi employs a strategy of performative and self-aware qualities in her photography in combination with other characteristics of materialist and radical feminist art theory. Bronner also employed the concept of the archive, much like Farber, when discussing Muholi's work, arguing that through her work, Muholi has created an archive that documents LGBTI individuals in a way that shows them to possess both agency and vulnerability. To build on the narrative of agency and vulnerability, Bronner also looked at the controversy that broke out 2010, when then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana denounced Muholi's work and compared it to the incident in 1996, where the then Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Baleka Kgositsile, objected to Kaolin Thompson's artwork, *Useful Objects*, which featured an ashtray in the form of a vagina.

Selogadi Mampane, a Masters student in Performance and Gender studies at the University of Pretoria, focused her paper on aspects of queerness and blackness as communicated in Muholi's work. In her paper, *Subverting queerness and blackness as abject identities: cultural narratives of black, queer, female-bodied identities in South Africa*, Mampane, who employs Queered Practice-led Research in her own studies, used Muholi's photographic work as a case study to foreground her exploration and so-called 're-representation' of the experience of black, queer, female bodies. Mampane was particularly interested in the way in which Muholi's self-mediated process of visual activism to reflect African homosexualities and how she constructs certain cultural narratives that make these African homosexual identities visible. Muholi's work thus serves as an inspiration for Mampane who said that she wants to follow the same trajectory as Muholi by using performance as intervention to open up new spaces where alternative sexual and gender identities can be expressed and explored.

The day's proceedings were concluded with a paper by Dr Christo Cilliers (Unisa), entitled *Publicity and mediated reality on queer activism of Zanele Muholi and the Lulu Xingwana incident*. Cilliers moved away from looking at Muholi's art in particular and instead focused on the reception of her work and the reporting on this reception. The particular event that Cilliers focused on is the same one discussed by Bronner, namely the *Innovative Women* art exhibition which took place at Constitution Hill in 2010 where Lulu Xingwana walked out of the exhibition, complaining about Muholi's

work that was part of the exhibition. The minister famously called the work 'pornographic' and was outraged that 'three-year-old' children at the exhibition could have seen the photographs. Cilliers argued that the media coverage of this incident brought Muholi's work into the public domain and subsequently made more members of the general public aware of her work and her activism.

It is clear that Zanele Muholi's artworks provide a rich basis for discussions, analyses and debates from a wide variety of academic fields. This colloquium gave those who attended the opportunity to critically engage with various aspects of Muholi's work and afforded the chance to identify even more critical areas against which her work can be read. As South African feminist writer and academic, Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006:89), rightly states: 'At her most powerfully evocative and courageous ... Zanele Muholi ushers in a new language to articulate Black lesbian sexuality creatively and politically at the same time ... She is a photographer we cannot neatly classify, and one whose vision we would be foolish to ignore'.

REFERENCES

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