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Haunted by Solitude:
Isolation and Representation in Zanele Muholi's Archive

I'd like to begin with this gallery installation shot of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi's on-going photographic archive *Faces and Phases* from 2014 taken at Wentrup Gallery in Berlin. The right wall is dominated by a grid of portraits from the series *Faces and Phases*, which was shot between 2006 and 2014 and is made up of exclusively black and white individual portraits of black lesbians and trans men. The photographs are packed tightly together in their white frames and extend up the wall significantly higher than the typical eye-level hanging one is used to in a gallery space. Opposite *Faces and Phases* three photographs from the *Beulahs* series are individually framed and each given a significant amount of wall space. The viewer is encouraged by the spacing to linger at each photograph individually before physically moving on to the next one, a much different experience from the *Faces and Phases* grid where one is forced to stand at a distance in order to take it all in or to even see the top line at all.

The series is always shown in this grid format and almost always framed in thin white frames with the photographs separated by a few inches.¹ At the tenth anniversary of the series, it is exhibited at Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg in this same way. The large format prints dominate the additional wall and in the back two rows of portraits can be seen stretching across the room. Blank spots in the place of portraits are left sporadically to serve as reminders and memorials to those who were lost to targeted homophobic hate crimes; those lost are still a part of the structure of the series even in their absence. The grid provides a testament to the size of

¹ <https://artthrob.co.za/2016/10/12/voice-and-visibility-zanele-muholis-faces-and-phases-10/>

the community, but the photographs are also always of individuals. The isolation that is inherent in the solo portraits of *Faces and Phases* seems to go against the goal of community representation that Muholi notes as their objective for the project. In the introduction to *Faces and Phases*, Muholi states their goal of “[articulating] the *collective pain* [black lesbians] as a community experience.”² How then does this “collective pain” and communal experience translate to the individual portraits presented in the series? Many of Muholi’s other series, such as *Beloved*, include paired portraits or photographs of intimate, often erotic, moments between two black lesbians. However, in *Faces and Phases* Muholi chooses to formally isolate the participants within their own frames which appears paradoxical to a series that centers on the issue of visibility and representation at large a strategy to show the women they are not alone in their identity and to counter the isolating effects of homophobia.

When you walk into an exhibition of *Faces and Phases* Muholi intends for it to be an overwhelming experience. The quantity and diversity of the portraits is enough to send the mind reeling, but there is an emotional barb that catches you as the women gaze and stare back at you. It is impossible to deny the existence of the queer community when confronted with them in such a manner, affirming Muholi’s goal for the project of making not only a visual statement of the presence of lesbian women in South Africa but also to catalog and archive the community in order to “mark and map” it.³ Queer individuals are constitutionally protected in South Africa, but continue to be stigmatized and threatened nonetheless. The LGBTI community, and specifically more marginalized groups within it such as black lesbians, are the target of hate

² Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (Germany: Steidl, 2014), 6.

³ “Zanele Muholi,” *Artsy*, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/zanele-muholi>

crimes and systematically erased from national attention. Muholi's archive begins the project of filling in the media gaps of representation of the queer community. The national coverage often sensationalizes or demonizes it and focuses on white gay men, crime, or the flair of drag queens. Muholi's focus on relatively simple portraits of black lesbians thus creates a space and platform to discuss the issues that affect the community's daily lives. Her portraits, while they focus on black lesbians and trans men, depict a staggering array of individuals in all their uniqueness. Butch, femme, trans, and nonbinary individuals are photographed dressed however they want, showing off their unique styles and attitudes through clothing, piercings, and tattoos.

Although the grids of portraits on the wall are formidable and proudly proclaim the presence of the queer community, the women are still ultimately rendered alone. The women gaze out at the viewer, but there are never other figures that the subject interacts with. While the posing and framing vary slightly, the vast majority of the over two hundred solitary portraits are taken in three quarter profile with the subject gazing directly out at the viewer. Many are taken in empty obscured locations with the backgrounds further blurred so as to make the setting of the photograph unknowable. This serves both to provide a degree of security to the participants who could become targets for their involvement in the series, but also to formally centralize the figure. However, these same qualities also isolate the subjects within their frames. While the expanded visual documentation is priceless for the community in that as an artist Muholi allows for a large degree of self-representation on the part of the sitter, the set up of the portraits, both formally and how they are logistically conceived and treated as an archive, toe the line of further isolating and objectifying the participants.

At their recent Performa 17 event at the Bronx Academy of Art and Dance (BAAD), “Masihambisane- On Visual Activism,” Muholi spoke extensively in conversation with writer and activist Staceyann Chin on the topic of solitude. Throughout the event Muholi repeated the sentiment and statement of “being haunted by solitude.” Again and again they went so far as to claim they were *haunted* by solitude, and that they didn’t want to, “feel alone, be alone, create alone.” Here it is important to note their definition of solitude as not only being alone in a physical space, but also not being able to share experiences or what they referred to as “the voices.” When someone comes to them and shares their problems they are no longer alone, the sharing quells the solitude. Again then, this emphasis on communion seems to be antithetical to a lot of their work, specifically *Faces and Phases*, which shows solitary figures in obscured or abstracted environments.

In order to come to terms with the isolation one has to look beyond the photographs as static images or signs. The intimacy that is evident in Muholi’s relationships with their participants and between the participants themselves is what is so subversive in their archival project. The emphasis on self identification and self representation minimizes the distance between artist and subject and sets the series apart from the archival projects that dominate African photography where the subjects were often portrayed as an exotic “other” or information about them was lost or simply never accurately acquired. In contrast, Muholi is clear that the project extends beyond the walls of the galleries and institutions that house the physical prints of the series. “This is not art, this is life,” says Muholi. “Each and every photograph is someone’s biography.”⁴ In fact they do not even really consider themselves an artist, instead choosing to call

⁴ “Zanele Muholi: Faces and Phases,” <http://ncartmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/13857>

themselves a “visual activist.” In the print version published in 2014, personal narratives are strewn throughout the book opposite of the authors’ portraits. They shed light on the women’s experience not only with the difficult situations they face such as rape, domestic violence, and HIV related complications, but also on their personal victories. These narratives take a variety of forms from free verse poetry to longer prose but are generally written in the first person and are always deeply personal and intimate. They celebrate the women’s relationships both romantic and familial, their communities, their jobs, and their goals, expanding the notion of what it means to be South African and queer and banishing the idea that to be gay is to be “un-African”.

Let us look at one of the portraits taken in 2014 in Braamfontein, Johannesburg of Andiswa Dlamini. It is typical of the series in its vertical format, and displays Dlamini in a shallow three quarter profile view. She is dressed entirely in black with her rumpled t-shirt tucked into jeans held up by a conspicuous leather belt whose buckle catches the light. The faint wrinkles on her forehead and lining her cheeks emphasize her slightly furrowed brow and faintly downturned mouth, and her head is slightly tilted so that she seems to look up at the viewer. Her facial expression and closed posture make her appear wary of the viewer. The vertical folds in the fabric of the shirt and her crossed arms conceal any visible bust, minimizing the conflation of breasts and femininity or womanhood. Her biceps catch the light as her arms fold over the deep black of her t-shirt, dominating the photograph and emphasizing her musculature. Neither hand is visible—one is tucked under her arm and the other half hidden in the neckline of her shirt—giving the viewer no accessible point through which to make contact or, more sinisterly, to grab hold of her. Although the closed stance and charged stare serve to protect Dlamini from

the possibility of voyeurism or exploitation by the viewer, it also further isolates her within the frame.

While Dlamini remains in the frame alone and closed off to the viewer, her inclusion in the series extends beyond the singular portrait. A poem that she wrote, entitled “I used to be a lesbian” is printed next to Dlamini’s portrait, although she also extensively publishes her writing on the online platform Inkanyiso’s, started by Muholi in 2006 with the idea that queer media is queer activism. Dlamini’s poetry, as well as the other women’s narratives, makes extensive use of the first person and details her own unique perspective and experience. Important to me in the poetry included in the book that is also evident in Dlamini’s is the emphasis on determining her own labels and place within the community and therefore within the archive itself. Historically labels and information included in archives have either been largely left out with no signifiers to identify the subjects, or written in anthropological or pseudoscientific ways that serve to other the subject. In Muholi’s archive the titles of the photographs themselves, whether in the book or sold at a commercial gallery, incorporate the women’s given names as well as often their nicknames, the location of the photograph, and the date. More biographical and personal information is given in the accompanying prose about their jobs, families, and hobbies. Many of the narratives discuss the women’s desire to stay outside the confines of labels, for example outside the dichotomy of butch vs. femme. Four participants self identify as butch and one as femme but many specifically state they resist identifying as either. For example Lerato Dumse writes, “I am careful not to attach an additional label: I am aware of how the butch-femme construct can be limiting and unfree, so I will not define myself within those confines”.⁵

⁵ Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (Germany: Steidl, 2014), 56.

Acknowledging the way in which a categorical system is repressive, the project makes no attempt to homogenize or classify the participants. Three women never even mention being queer or lesbian. Instead they focus on other aspects of their lives and identities, undermining the idea that to be included in an archive one must be reduced to a singular attribute. Returning to Dlamini, her narratives continues this trend of the rebuttal of labels when after she details the night she was raped, writing, “I used to be lesbian / But in heaven God said / We are not defined by titles / So now I live as a woman that loves ...”. Her place in the archive is self determined. Although *Faces and Phases* is a project about black lesbian visibility, Dlamini was given the authority of reclaiming and reassigning her own labels in a way that fit her own experience. Not only can she forgo labeling as Lerato Dumse did by remaining outside of the butch femme dichotomy, but she can create her own taxonomy and simply be “a woman that loves.”

The tone of the narratives is casual and written in a way as if it is a community member reading them, a certain intimacy is assumed. Participant Pearl Mbali Zulu directly addresses the reader and gives them advice as if the reader is also a community member. The casual tone sometimes manifests itself in entries that are written as if they are a diary entry, the most intimate and personal of archives. Another participant, Penny Zoliswa Nkosi writes, “I wouldn’t say I’m butch, but I think I am dyke ... yeah, I think I’m a dyke.”⁶ With the addition of an ellipsis she seems to pause in her writing to give herself a moment to establish how she wants to portray herself as to the reader. She *thinks* she is a dyke, it is not written in stone, established for her or read into her portrait.

⁶ Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (Germany: Steidl, 2014), 179.

In many ways this focus on labeling dialogs with other South African artists reimaginings of the archive, such as Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me: 1890-1950*. Mofokeng's 2013 project reclaims commissioned photos and portraits of black South Africans that have been relegated to dusty storage bins and forgotten under beds. His project led him around the townships where he interviewed family members and acquaintances to uncover not only the identities but the biographies of the subjects of the photographs. He identifies Johannes Monkoe who played the violin, Maria Letispa who was born into a family of "inbockselings" in Free State, and Moeti and Lazarus Fume who were laborers, but were photographed in their tennis whites, showing off their passion for sports.⁷ Mofokeng's reassembling and rediscovering the subjects of the photographs transforms them from what some critiques hail as evidence of the "mental colonization" of assimilation into European, here specifically Victorian, culture, to personal mementos that attest to the depth of what it has historically meant to be black in South African society. By re-ascribing the biographical information to the photographs and therefore both metaphorically and physically returning them to a photo or family album, Mofokeng reintroduces a level of intimacy into the photographs that was not present in the anonymous prints. The intimacy of familial relations transforms them into personal proclamations of identity and the struggle to assert oneself in a racially divided nation. However Mofokeng's project remains one of inscription. His subjects cannot speak for themselves and in the end are reduced to being simply a composer or a violinist. The rediscovery of biographical facts ultimately reduces the subjects to whatever trait Mofokeng can identify from acquaintances.

⁷ Santu Mofokeng, *The black photo album look at me: 1890 - 1950*, The Walther collection (Göttingen: Steidl, 2013).

Muholi's project continues this strategy of giving primacy to personal and biographical information, but on new and uneven terms. While Mofokeng worked with historical photographs where the sitter had often already passed away in a manner more typical of archival projects, the on going nature of *Faces and Phases* allows for continuous reworking and self identifying on the part of the participants, who all actively play a role in their inclusion and place in the project. This turn to contemporary photographs allows for Muholi's commentary on the nature of archives specifically dealing with black subjects to be more comprehensive and forward thinking. The Stevenson exhibition shown earlier that marked the 10th anniversary of *Faces and Phases* highlights this. Many of the participants had two portraits hanging in the gallery, showing how their own identities and self expression have changed over the course of the project, that they are not static in the way the subjects of Mofokeng's project will be remembered. The project is on going and continues to grow and change as the participants do. The grid format allows for this with its malleable format and space to leave sections blank as the community fluctuates, grows, and ultimately deals with loss. The absence of detailed titles and labels directly next to the portraits allows each of the women to portray themselves in the way they want to style and pose themselves. While the grid detracts a level of individuality, the seclusion allows space for growth that would otherwise not be present when categorically bound by labels.