
Enigmatic gazes in Zanele Muholi's "Faces and Phases"

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This paper discusses South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi's ongoing project "Faces and Phases", which consists in a series of portraits of black lesbians and transmen¹, mostly (but not exclusively) from South Africa. The project started in 2006 when Muholi first photographed her friend and fellow activist Busi Sigasa at the old Women's Gaol in Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, a central suburb of Johannesburg. Sigasa was a survivor of so-called "curative rape", a widespread practice in South Africa², and had contracted HIV as a consequence of the attack. She was to die eight months later, at the age of 25. The picture (Muholi, 314) is a low-angle close shot of Sigasa, who is dressed in a plain jumper, raincoat and woolly hat and is staring out into the distance, looking calmly determined. She is slightly decentred to the right and has her back turned to a blurred structure which towers above the high grass, and is clearly identifiable as a mirador, a sufficient synecdoche for the Women's Gaol and the history of political oppression and resistance attached to it. The picture makes several points: on the one hand, the blurred fragment of the prison visible in the shot is also in itself a synecdoche of the anti-apartheid struggle. Throughout the apartheid era many activists were incarcerated there in particularly infamous living conditions. While the dominant historiographical narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle has tended to minimize, or even erase, the contributions of black LGBT people, implicitly or explicitly condoning the ubiquitous claim that "homosexuality is un-African"³, the shot forcefully inscribes Sigasa within this context, and thus claims the space of political activism as a legitimate sphere of visibility for the LGBT community and, importantly, for this particular individual. On the other hand, Sigasa has her back *turned* to the watch tower in the picture, and is gazing out at something which we cannot see. The shot thus opens up a space of intimacy and freedom for her,

1. Men who were assigned female at birth.

2. For an extensive inquiry into the "rape culture" of South Africa, see Pumla Dineo Gqola: *Rape, A South African Nightmare* (2015). See also *Difficult Love*, Zanele Muholi's film documenting her life and work. <https://www.imdb.com/videoplayer/vi3128728089> (accessed 20 September 2018).

3. For just two examples of the many responses to this myth, see Amanda Lock Swarr, "Paradoxes of Butchness: Lesbian Masculinities and Sexual Violence in Contemporary South Africa" and Diriye Osman, "To be Young, Gay and African".

about which we can only speculate: she will not be passively written into the grand narrative of the South African nation, but will situate herself within this narrative on her own terms. Poignantly, if we are aware of her story, we cannot avoid the thought that what she is contemplating on the horizon may be her own death—a thought reinforced, in Muholi's 2014 book, by the insertion of Segasa's spoken word poem "Remember me when I'm gone" on the page opposite her picture and the page after that. The poem's title is reminiscent of the dying Dido's aria in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, but the poem forcefully reverses Dido's stance of passive acceptance. Structured on the repetition of the anaphoric pronoun "I", it lists all the positive actions for which Sigasa asks to be remembered, referencing her work as a poet, photographer and activist. It echoes another poem in the book, Sindiwe Magona's "Please, Take Photographs!" which features as one of the epigraphs to the volume, and urges an unknown addressee to "Take photographs of them all/Especially the children; especially the young,/ Before it is too late. [...] Before all the children are gone." (Muholi, 8) The poem conjures up a context of pervasive violence and precariousness, where the lives of children are bound to be "snuffed, easily as candlelight" (8), and must be preserved in a photographic archive—a archive which will thus be, in part, an archive of the dead, a repository of dead presences.

Muholi's project in "Faces and Phases" is, in her own words, "to document, document, document"⁴ a community which is ostensibly protected by a remarkably liberal body of legislation, yet exposed to the violence of a largely homophobic, transphobic society in which black lesbians, transmen and gender-nonconforming people are the most vulnerable individuals.⁵ The archive she is constituting gives a new kind of visibility to a community who is routinely forced, concomitantly, into invisibility (both reluctantly endured and self-inflicted, because visibility is potentially lethal) and hypervisibility in the mainstream media's sensational representations of hate crime victims. Part of the compelling power of this archive lies in the fact that we are aware, as we envisage each new person in a picture, that this person may be dead at the time of viewing. This paper seeks to articulate the nature of Muholi's political and aesthetic intervention in this project. Building on and inflecting Judith Butler's 2015 article "Gender Politics and the Right to Appear", it first suggests that it constitutes a visual counter-narrative to mainstream understandings of "the people", in which a community of precarious, invisibilized individuals collectively claim "the right to appear" in the political sphere. It further argues that the subjects in Muholi's shots do not merely claim visibility but, crucially, return the viewer's gaze. Borrowing Nicholas Mirzoeff's conceptualisation

4. Zanele Muholi, during the "Difficult Love" session of the Aspen Ideas Festival, 2013, introduced and curated by Anna Deavere Smith. <https://www.aspenideas.org/session/difficult-love> (accessed 20 September 2018), [8:11].

5. As Muholi points out in the course of the 2013 Aspen Ideas Festival discussion (quoted above), the new post-Apartheid Constitution of 1996 opposed discrimination on the basis of sexual discrimination, and in 2006 the Civil union Act legalised same-sex marriage in South Africa. However, Muholi makes the point that despite this liberal legislation, the country lacks anti-hate crime legislation, specific health measures for lesbians and transmen, and shelters for LGBT people. She also points out other hardships faced by LGBT people in the country (especially by the more vulnerable among these, i.e. black lesbians and transgender people), such as secondary victimization by police, health services and social care networks, and the rejection of raped women by their families.

of “visuality” as an arrangement of the sphere of appearance inherent in the project of colonial modernity, it suggests that “Faces and Phases” promotes a counter-visual distribution of space in which participants claim not only “the right to appear” but also, in Mirzoeff’s phrase, “the right to look”. Reading “Faces and Phases” as a decolonial project, I contend that it uses photography to critique a way of looking which manifests, sanctions and perpetuates the continuing epistemic and aesthetic effects of coloniality in postcolonial South Africa, as well as in other postcolonial contexts referenced in the pictures.

In “Gender Politics and the Right to Appear”, Butler attempts to articulate what happens when disenfranchised bodies choose to gather together in a given public space:

When bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and inserts the body in the midst of the political field and demands more livable economic, social and political conditions no longer afflicted by precarity. (Butler, 24-25)

Such assemblies may well do without verbalization; rather, their action is performative, in the sense that it is the co-presence of bodies in a space where they are not normally visible which speaks for itself and makes “demands”. Butler critiques the appropriation by neo-liberal rhetoric of the notion of responsibility, which is perversely resignified as the need “to be only responsible for ourselves, and not for others”. Conversely, public assembly performs an ethics of mutual dependence which, she claims, “stand[s] a chance of transforming the field of appearance itself.” (43) This is especially relevant for gender-nonconforming people who deviate from the norms which they are expected to embody: “Those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment, pathologization, and violence.” (34) By assembling in public places, Butler argues, such precarious bodies claim the “right to appear”—the right to be recognised and accommodated as interdependent bodies.

Of course Muholi’s “Faces and Phases” is not literally a gathering of bodies, but a collection of photographs; yet, I argue that Butler’s concept of public assembly provides useful ways of thinking about its performative intervention in the political sphere. The viewer’s experience of encountering Muholi’s work varies greatly according to circumstances—whether she comes across the large pictures (30 x 20 inc.) in a exhibition, where they can be taken in together at one glance, or faced individually, according to the viewer’s standing point, or in the book, where they are much smaller (8 x 5 inc.) and may only be viewed individually or in twos. The life-size shots in public shows give an eerie impression that you are facing real people rather than photographs; individuals, each of them photographed in a way that enhances rather than reduces singularity, but also a community with clearly traceable identity markers (race, and often gender nonconformity). While the viewer is

at all times aware that the presence of these individuals is an illusory effect of photographic realism, further undermined by the fact that they are in black and white, still they can be seen as an assembly of disenfranchised virtual bodies in a very specific public space: the privileged, economically and often racially segregated space of the art gallery or the museum. In deciding to take part in the project, Muholi's subjects (to whom she refers as participants, emphasising their active role) claim visibility for the members of a highly vulnerable community in the politically contested space of high culture, and thus in the incipient narrative of the young South African nation. Risking public identification as lesbians or transmen, and thus heightened exposure to violence, they performatively claim the right to appear in this national narrative, and demand to be included in what constitutes "the people". Collen Mfazwe's 2012 shot (Muholi, 27) shows her wearing the sash she won when she was crowned "2nd Prince" of Mr. Uthingo, an LGBT-initiated beauty pageant in Daveyton, Johannesburg. The word "Uthingo" ("rainbow" in Zulu) ingeniously references both the global symbol of LGBT identities and the "rainbow nation", a narrative of the postcolonial South African nation as a space of inclusion, acceptance and reconciliation. One understanding of the rainbow symbol is subtly set to play against the other, since the "rainbow nation" has consistently denied inclusion to black LGBT people, sustaining the myth that homosexuality is un-African, an importation from white colonial culture⁶. While traditional beauty pageants reinforce heteropatriarchy by celebrating commoditised women whose performance of gender best conforms to idealised gender norms, "Mr. Uthingo" queers the national narrative and opens it up to gender-nonconforming individuals. In this picture Mfazwe defeats categorization within the male-female binary and performs instead a fluid, playful version of gender, with her gracefully nonchalant posture, hands in pockets, untucked shirt, spotted bow-tie, and the conspicuous sash labelling her "2nd Prince", white with black letters, in contrast with the less pronounced shades of grey of the figure and the stone wall against which she is standing. While the "Mr Uthingo" pageant takes place on the margins of mainstream culture, which it parodies, Muholi's pictures are shown in the privileged space of high art—both strategic sites in which black lesbians and transmen performatively claim the right to appear and to be included in the national narrative.

However, the singular power of Muholi's portraits does not lie only in the way in which it reinscribes marginalised, vulnerable bodies into public space. The project started with Muholi's picture of Busi Sigasa, but this picture is untypical in that Sigasa is looking away from the camera. With very few exceptions, all the other subjects in the series gaze back at us with enigmatic gazes, and claim not just the right to appear, but crucially, "the right to look". I am borrowing this phrase from Nicholas Mirzoeff's 2011 book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Mirzoeff traces the origin of the word "visuality" to British historian Thomas Carlyle, who used it in 1840⁷

6. A sentiment expressed by Minister of Culture Lulu Xingwana after walking out of an exhibition at Constitution Hill in 2010 where Muholi's pictures of nude lesbians were shown. She commented that "it was immoral, offensive and going against nation-building." *The Times (South Africa)*, 2 March 2010, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2010-03-01-minister-slams-porn-exhibition/> (accessed 20 September 2018).

7. In his 1840 lecture "On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History", first published in 1841.

“to refer to what he called the tradition of heroic leadership, which visualises history to sustain autocratic authority.” (Mirzoeff, 319⁸) Visuality does not only comprise visual perceptions, but “is formed by a set of relations combining information, imagination and insight into a rendition of physical and psychic space.” (445) It produces an epistemic ordering of the world which it seeks to establish as the only legitimate, authoritative one. To do so it first “classifies”, then “separates the groups so classified as a means of social organisation”, and finally “makes this seem right and hence aesthetic.” (445) This is an eerily precise description of apartheid; indeed Mirzoeff sees visuality as one modality of colonial domination, which persists in what decolonial theory has termed “coloniality”—the living legacy of colonialism in postcolonial societies in the form of a worldview which perpetuates hierarchies and forms of discrimination and oppression first produced under colonialism. Visuality is thus a confiscation of what Mirzoeff calls “the right to look”, which he glosses as “the right to the real”—the right to construct one’s own understanding, or vision, of the real, without submitting to the authority of visuality. “It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable.” (424) Crucially, the right to look entails the right to be recognized as a subject. “The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else’s eyes to express friendship, solidarity or love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other, or it fails.” (417)

My intuition is that what makes Muholi’s pictures so powerful is that they dramatize this mutual exchange of looks that constitutes both the person photographed and the viewer as autonomous subjectivities, with no preconceived knowledge of the other, and equally legitimate in the act of “inventing the other”⁹. It is not just that the person in the picture is looking at the camera, and thus, it seems, at us. Rather, the photographer’s framing choices and the subject’s gestuality combine to suggest a body engaged in the act of looking, of inviting, sustaining and reciprocating our gaze. While we are at all times aware that this exchange is a fiction, since we encounter not a person but a photograph of a person who is not literally present (and may indeed be dead), the power of Muholi’s very specific brand of photographic realism is to create the illusion of a reciprocal gaze, so that we feel that as we envisage this person, we enter into an intersubjective transaction with her whereby, as we construct our narrative of who she is from what we are given to see in the picture, we are reciprocally being “invented”, and therefore transformed, by her. More precisely, while the co-presence of reciprocal gazes is fictional, we are nevertheless really being transformed by the experience of encountering her gaze which demands an ethical response—whether we experience recognition, solidarity, puzzlement, or rejection. An overview of the project reveals that Muholi has created a repertory of postures which her subjects then inhabit with infinite variations. In one series of medium and close shots the subjects—often, but not always, strong-looking butch women or transmen—face us squarely with arms folded and a confrontational, cocky or merely observant

8. Numbers refer to locations in the ebook edition of this book.

9. In this sense, they are the opposite of ethnographic photographs which posit a one-way gaze, and an asymmetrical production of knowledge according to the pre-established epistemic configuration of visuality.

expression. Curiously, almost all of them have their heads slightly tilted to one side, a movement which cannot be ascribed any given meaning yet suggests attentiveness, a degree of concentration in the act of looking, a readiness to engage with us. In another series (which overlaps with the previous one), the subjects have their bodies turned away from us, but their faces towards us, so that the shots literally capture the movement of the body which enables the subject's gaze, returning or perhaps soliciting ours.

In the book the pictures are interspersed with poems and testimonies by, or occasionally about, the participants in the project. One recurrent feature is their insistence on being actively involved in the creation of a visual archive of their community. This constitutes what Mirzoeff calls a counter-visibility—an alternative worldview organised by the look of gender-nonconforming people, many of whom describe themselves as “aspiring photographers” and “filmmakers”. Sharon ‘Shaz’ Mthunzi tells of her harrowing experience of awakening to her vocation as a traditional healer in an unsupportive family: “When I started seeing things, getting visions, I’d tell them and they would laugh and say I’m young and couldn’t possibly see anything, there’s no such thing . . . I was seeing things nobody else saw . . . I thought I was losing my mind.” (Muholi, 224) After initiation, however, she claims to have found a degree of peace, though she registers the difficulty of living up to her responsibility as a healer. Mthunzi’s realization of her vocation comes with the discovery of an alternative way of seeing, one which she cannot resist although it is first experienced as a burden and a cause of rejection, before being embraced as life-enhancing. The story is both a poignant individual testimony and an allegory of the experience of discovering oneself different in an unsympathetic environment which makes you question the reality of your perceptions—or your desire¹⁰. Mthunzi’s testimony suggests that non-normative sexualities or ways of performing your gender make you see the world differently, and that part of your responsibility is to claim the legitimacy of that counter-visibility. Mthunzi’s story also forcefully inscribes her fluid performance of gender within a specifically African tradition. In the 2014 shot which features opposite her testimony (225), she offers a modernised performance of the *sangoma*, wearing a traditional hat, dreadlocks, beaded necklaces and bracelets and a leopard-printed skirt, and pointing towards us the end of what seems to be a traditional divination stick. Later in the book, in a 2013 shot (263), she stands against a graphically scratched black plastic sheet, hands in pockets, in a stylish tuxedo, white shirt, dark tie and trendy belt. In both shots her expression is defiant, as if daring us to recognise both performances—the African healer and the sophisticated dyke—as equally authentic, legitimate expressions of who she is. Pamela Dlungwana, also an unforgettable recurrent presence in the project, recalls how for her first shot with Muholi she “insisted on the third eye” (146-219)—the shiny earring which disrupts the almost perfect symmetry of the face and the picture, and is a modern transposition of the invisible third eye which provides vision beyond perceptual sight in various eastern esoteric

10. “It’s just a phase”, the ubiquitous parental response to the coming out of their LGBT children, is ironically referenced in the title of the project.

traditions. While Dlungwana mentions this with humorous distance, in the picture she both looks at us with a magnetically grave gaze and claims for her sole attribute (as no other piece of clothing or jewellery is visible) a symbol of heightened vision. Finally, Muholi herself inserts herself into the archive. The last picture in the book is a self-portrait (322), in which she stands in her signature hat and leopard-printed shirt against a leopard-printed cloth, in defiance of the basic rules of “taste”, and in a triumphant demonstration of her mastery of the technique of black and white photography. Framing her gaze, the oversized glasses claim the right to look.

I want to end this essay with one more picture, that of Nosiphito Kulati’s portrait (307). For a split second this picture is hard to read, because there is a discrepancy between Kulati’s poised look, her face turning to meet our gaze as we have seen in many other pictures, and what seems to be happening in the background which is strangely blurred, as if deliberately overexposed. How can she be standing there so calmly while people behind her are running in a panic? But if we break away from her gaze and look at the backdrop more attentively, we realise that it is not a scene from real life but an iconic picture which we have all seen before, Sam Nzima’s picture of the young Hector Pieterse being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu after being shot by the police during the Soweto uprising in June 1976. The young woman running alongside them, and struggling to keep up, is Pieterse’s sister Antoinette, dressed in her schoolgirl uniform, her hand raised in a futile effort to fend off disaster. As with Sigasa’s picture with which I started, this shot claims a space for Kulati, and by extension for her community, within the national narrative of anti-apartheid struggle, and it also asks that this narrative be expanded to include all anti-discriminatory struggles. But because the backdrop of the picture is itself a picture, this picture also demands inclusion within the visual archive of the emerging nation, to which it claims to make a “genuine” contribution. At one level Kulati is using the inscription on her shirt ironically, both to respond to accusations of inauthenticity routinely made against lesbians and transmen (construed as “fake” men), and to reference the nature of both photographs (Muholi’s and Nzima’s) as simulacra. But beneath the surface of the paradoxical postmodern game, it claims the right for a dissident, counter-visual practice of photographic documentation to be recognised as a genuine modality of postcolonial South African historiography.

Muholi’s “visual activism” is one instance of art’s power to raise awareness and, hopefully, transform the homophobic culture of South Africa in order to bring it more fully in line with the country’s nominally LGBT-friendly legislation. In manufacturing a new manner of “human images”, ones which require the exposed subjects’ full participation in and commitment to the project, she also invites us, the viewers in the galleries and the readers of the book, to change our looking habits and engage in more reciprocal interaction, recognising the legitimacy of the countervisuality claimed by the projects’ participants. This paper has also suggested that Muholi’s specific brand of photographic realism challenges scholars of visual and cultural studies to reappraise our critical habits. Crucially, it challenges us to become aware of the political implications inherent in the act of looking and interpreting, and of the fact that such an act always takes place within a certain frame

of ready-made assumptions which it is our responsibility to acknowledge, question and perhaps discombobulate—or, in the phrasing of the expanding field of decolonial studies, to “decolonise”.

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