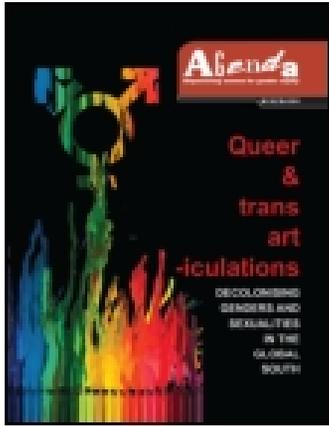


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How to be political? Art activism, queer practices and temporary autonomous zones¹

Antje Schuhmann

abstract

How to be political and do the “right” thing under “wrong” conditions? The following essay and the embedded conversation with Cornelia Schlothauer, a political artist in Germany, reflect on these questions. This text moves between theoretical analysis and practical examples of forms of resistance, opposition, and subversion of normative body politics through the arts. By critically discussing campaign politics in the context of emerging activism industries versus anti-state politics as practiced by autonomous women’s movements, the text explores the liminal space between the commitment for change and simultaneous complicities with the status quo. Can the arts be a catalyst for disrupting hetero-normativity, in the form of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi’s work, or of racist representations through direct action as described by Cornelia Schlothauer? To what extent are the commodification mechanisms of the international art circus compromising the political positioning of art activists whose “authentic” voices become an integral part of success? This dilemma is theoretically framed by drawing the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt into the conversation, translating their reflections for today’s complexities. Hakim Bey’s (1991) anarchistic model of temporary autonomous zones is offered as an alternative for our understanding of disruption, intervention and empowerment.

keywords

South Africa, Zanele Muholi, German anti-racist movement, hate crimes, intersectionality

Introduction

This is not a text about queer politics and about artistic representations of queerness only; it is a queer text in itself. Understanding queer not as another word for LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) but as radical, anti-identitarian, as subversive theories and practices, transgressive and transformative, this text itself is written as a queer text, matching form and content.

This work is neither here nor there, it is neither a description of activist practice nor elevated theory – only; it is neither rehearsing the conventions of a journalistic interview nor of academic knowledge production – only. Its language is analytical and anecdotal, its

reflections are colloquial and complex, its structure weaves along through thought-processes, exchanged on the phone and in writing, between the global South and North, people alive and passed on.

It aims to explore the shades of grey we face when trying to do the “right” thing under “wrong” conditions; how intersections of privileges, organised around gender, race, class and sexuality are reflected in our commitment for change and our complicity with the status quo at the same time. As such, this text is not a statement but a suggestion, an invitation to explore how artistic practices can help to transgress static, normative perspectives in order to subvert their limiting or even

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harming impact on those constructed as Other, condemned to the margins of the norm. However, this text is neither lobbying for the penetration of the centre nor romanticising the margins, but suggesting a destabilisation of their respective boundaries constructed from outside and within.

It explores the question: “Is there a way to do the right thing under/within wrong conditions” in conversation with Cornelia Schlothauer², a German based political artist and artistic political person. We refer to the images of South African artist Zanele Muholi³, who beautifully illustrates the ambiguities of queer body politics, and we discuss exhibition practices as political interventions in the minefield of a gendered, racialised and class-based art market under capitalist conditions as exemplary of the dilemmas we all face when asking: “How to be political”?



Figure 1. *Mamu*, 2006, Zanele Muholi
©Zanele Muholi. Courtesy Stevenson

What do you see here? Two men, two girls, two boys, a girl and a boy, a *gogo* (translation: grandmother) and a man, walking, running, lovers, sisters, comrades – or all of it? There are many classifications and labels we⁴ all seem to “know by heart” in one way or another. The arts can play a role to confuse dominant assumptions of single stories and static identities of gender, sex, age, sexuality, class and so forth. South Africans “read”⁵ each other: due to colonialism and apartheid in particular, racial classifications are still very much alive and form an important part of collective everyday practices informing loyalties as well as discriminations.

Skin colour, hair texture, facial features, accent, location, and who is who seems to come easy for those initiated into the social codes and often provides a challenge for outsiders not socialised into what to look for when reading bodies and people’s performances in an attempt to position oneself in relation to those one interacts with but can not (yet) “read”. In Germany for instance, many distinguish different kinds of artificial blond: the posh, golden haired white German super mama, on the one hand, and the poor Polish immigrant domestic worker on the other hand, who is white too but with ‘cheap’ yellow blond hair signifying her class status, feeding into racialised historic legacies of the inferiority of eastern Europeans. Such differentiations are not only an issue of class identification but often inform racism and xenophobia. Different racial regimes, often self-evident only to those who are familiarised with them, are complex social constructs and, in some aspects, speak to locally specific residues of the past.

Even as ‘race’ is more and more understood as a social construct, a continuum with no essence in our bodies, most people seem to still see the categorising of a body’s sex as based in biological difference; as an either/or binary rather than an as well as possibility. We are doing gender constantly and it is so normal to us that we only realise this practice in the absence of its automatism: it makes us feel awkward if we cannot determine the sex of the person next to us in a split second. Man, woman, s/he-because bodies are supposed to be a matter of biological fact.

This is not the case. Neither the two sex model nor the existence of ‘essential’ differences between ‘races’ are biological facts. Where do these categories, which inform powerful politics of otherness and their respective in-/exclusions, come from? Is it enough to undo the hierarchies in which these categories are ordered, or do we need to challenge the categories and the underlying concepts themselves and the history of categorising as part of a larger problem of injustice? If we look back in history we can see that the racialisation of bodies developed in close dialogue with the emergence of other dominant concepts, which helped to ‘order’ the emerging colonial world necessary for the western imperial project.⁶ Many of these ordering principles reflect, among other influences, forms of western dualisms constructed

as being interdependent, contradictory and mutually exclusive: Culture/Nature, rational/emotional, male/female, active/passive, heterosexual/homosexual, good/evil, white/black, objective/subjective, North/South etc. Most of these categories have direct or indirect gendered and racialised undertones, which are speaking to each other. One example of such a false dichotomy is the notion of the close to nature, irrational black/female subject versus the rational active and objective white male. Such interlinked discourses have provided support for the intersecting systems of racialised, gender, class (and so forth) privileges.

Is gender and sex like culture and nature?

Feminists in North America and Europe challenged the unequal distribution of privilege and the patriarchal social order over several decades, at least its gendered aspects, acknowledging only recently its intersection with racism, class and sexuality as well; something women of colour, lesbians and working-class women have pointed out for a long time. Whereas first wave feminists in the 19th and early 20th century fought for legal rights such as the right to vote, their second wave sisters demanded more than legal equality. Simone De Beauvoir's (2009 [1949]) important statement, that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, signaled possibilities for change by understanding gender as socially constructed. Feminists in the 1970s struggled against injustices which had not been obtained through the achievement of legal equality: protection against domestic violence, the right to legal and safe abortion, control over their own sexualities, and equal pay. 'The personal is political' became the slogan of the time and the key analysis was that it is not one woman that is beaten, raped and/or exploited but women as a whole who are victimised due to structural power in the hands of men. Society had to change; men had to change, so that women could achieve socio-political equality.

Societies began to shift towards seeing women more as equal and different rather than different and inferior. Some feminists now even claimed superiority over men based on their assumed essential femininity. So-called second wave feminism argued that gender equals socialisation and that sex is a matter of biology, a notion that was later

critically problematised by postmodern feminists and queer identified people. Some of the most interesting contemporary postcolonial and queer works critique the universal notion of "we" women, supposedly located in the female body and the idea of a collective "our" experience; both seen to provide a collective speaking position or platform. It is the fallacy of this assumption which is critiqued as being nothing more than a white, heterosexual, and middle-class point of reference that erases the experiences and existence of black, queer, and working-class women, and women in developing countries.

Formally marginalised voices have grown louder, demanding the acknowledgement of diverse and multiple identities and the intersection of different positions in relation to power. The lesbian and gay movement at the time, and the later emerging trans- and intersex movements, women of colour, and immigrants – to evoke Audrey Lorde's (1984/2007) notion of "outsiders within" – made it clear that we are constituted by diverse identities and inhabit multiple positionalities within a given context. Therefore, relations to power are not always straight forward (working class but heterosexual, lawyer but refugee, etc). Our identities are neither static nor based on supposedly biological facts. Radical queer feminists have argued that we need to change our gaze on the body in order to understand that the way we look at and interpret what we see and how we name it is already a deeply gendered and racialised process. Our gaze and our language need to change in order to capture the diversity of human gender identities and sexual orientations: female masculinities, masculine femininities, transgender performances, intersex people, and so on. The very assumption that we can simply divide bodies into only two sexes has come under scrutiny, revealing the falseness of the heteronormative idea of gender justice as only being about the relationship between men and women.⁷

Look art act: Subversion instead of activism

New spaces are opening up; subversion, irony, and confusion seem sometimes more fruitful than clear cut opposition to regimes of domination as the arts have shown. Notions that men have to be men – "real men", and women have to be women – "proper women",



Figure 2. *Bra*, 2003. Zanele Muholi
©Zanele Muholi. Courtesy Stevenson

are tackled through the arts. Visual subversions of hegemonic body and gender norms help to destabilise dominant representations of privilege and power under conditions of late capitalism.

Rickett and Muholi both question notions of the supposed “naturalness” of gender identities and expressions. Muholi, by documenting that sex is not an “either or” binary but rather a continuum, and Rickett, by provocatively challenging normative gender



Figure 3. *Pissing Woman*, 1995. Sophy Rickett
Courtesy of the artist

performances. Are we seeing two women? A woman with hairy chest or a man with breasts – a man in drag peeing or a woman appropriating public space and masculine behaviour? Queer art practices pave interesting escape routes through patriarchal heteronormativities.

Often this is referred to as art activism. But what is art activism? Are there escape routes? Do we escape, how, where to, and for how long? Labelling ourselves academics or art activists, we might subvert the two-sex system and challenge heteronormative patriarchy for a moment, but how do we sustain this moment of consciousness. How can we navigate between the sometimes contradictory positions we inhabit: being in- and outside of different systems of privilege at the same time?

Given the multiple intersections of power, privilege, and regimes of violence we are situated towards and within - race, gender, sexuality, class to name only a few – aren't we rather part of a complex field of ever changing positionalities, which oscillate between commitment and complicity?

These questions are relevant in different places and for different people. In the following I capture a moment within an ongoing conversation with Cornelia Schlothauer, a friend, artist, and comrade; the conversation we have had, we still have and most likely will have in future, revolves around how one can become and remain political under the given circumstances we find ourselves in, she in Frankfurt, Germany, and I in Johannesburg, South Africa?

Cornelia, you are an artist and you are politically active in different collective contexts in Germany. Please tell us a bit about your political practice. Are you an activist, an art activist?

About thirty years ago I started to live my life as a political life. I became part of different social movements and for short precious moments we realised some of our goals. For example, being politically active with each other in constructive ways; to successfully implement what we wanted or at least having tried to do so. I also was active in the autonomous feminist movement. Autonomous meant not institutionalised but self-organised and anti-state. We opposed the idea of nations

and states as deeply patriarchal and authoritarian structures. We were not a party or NGO (non-governmental organisation) and we organised in independent, often interconnected, groups of women. Some of us were collaborating also with men in other political contexts, working in alternative projects or lived in communes together. For many years we analysed German colonialism and fascism and responded politically to their current legacies. Obviously the universal category “woman” is insufficient to describe the complex ways in which women are situated differently within structures of violence and domination. We developed a feminist understanding of the different roles women played back then: as perpetrators, as victims, and as resistance fighters. Does a black female Namibian anti-colonial fighter have something in common with a white female German concentration camp guard or not - and if, so what? Feminists have to ask this question and then do something with it. We considered feminism an analytical instrument as well as a way of living and as a way to fight.

In our anti-racist struggle we often found ourselves on the streets. After the reunification in 1989 racists began to reorganise forcefully - we organised demonstrations when they attacked the homes of migrants and tried to protect the people who lived in attacked refuge camps and shelters. Many of us did paper marriages with immigrants to prevent them from being deported. We fought against an inhumane deportation system relying on the justice system, deportation prisons, refugee camps, and airlines which deported refugees against their will to countries where their lives, their health, and their economic well-being was in danger. We fought a parliamentary party system which diminished the limited rights of refugees and migrants even further. Established political parties fuelled racist debates in Germany and we considered many politicians as partly responsible for acts of violence against refugees, immigrants, and black Germans; acts carried out by ordinary citizens often with the police simply standing by. At the same time we questioned each other about our own unintended forms of internalised racism; how we were socialised into Othering certain people; the way we were situated within society's structures of privilege, benefiting those people with a German passport and being white and often middle class.

This was not always easy and caused a lot of friction amongst us, even if we saw the so-called private as political in every aspect. We also debated the so-called private as being part of the political with our male comrades and experimented with alternative ways of living: in communes, by working in collectives and by attempting to embrace the values of consumer society as little as possible. We aimed to do as little as possible, estranged wage labour within this capitalist system. We discussed where the money for our daily life came from, how we lived our partnerships, who did the washing up, and how we raised our children outside of a classic nuclear mama-papa-child context. We criticised hierarchical structures of the very same social movements where we were active.

In this broad sense I am a political person but I wouldn't call myself an activist. I think the idea of an activist is often related to one particular issue your organisation/NGO campaigns for or against. Often this concept results in “professionalism” and does not politicise the connections between public activity and aspects of every day life, the so-called private. If we agree that different forms of violence intersect – the way we live our lives should critically reflect this and life itself should become a counter narrative in the here and now, not only in a better (post-revolutionary) future.

Another world is possible – but how do we get there?

Today we speak of an activism industry. Advocacy, lobbying, consulting, and fundraising often come with their own pitfalls of ‘NGOisation’ and professionalism. These kinds of institutionalised activisms often resemble the corporate world when aiming to influence governments, donors, and society. Such approaches generally focus often on standpoint politics rather than radical systemic change; on campaigns with a fashionable subject to secure a budget, and operate within a limited human rights framework. Feminists became ‘femocrats’ or ‘gender activists’ and the LGBTI struggle was transformed into “pink washing” – a practice promoting gay friendliness to demonstrate either so-called corporate social responsibility or to cover up national chauvinism and state organised human rights violations under the pretext of

sexual liberalism. It seems as if commitment and complicity are rather entangled. Enlightenment, in the sense of being able to escape irrationality and to replace it with clear cut rational decisions that will propel us towards progress and an unambiguously better future for all, seems to have failed us.

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno concluded in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* (published in 1951 and written in exile during the Second World War) that a good, honest life is no longer possible because we live in an inhumane society. He formulates a sharp critique of enlightenment in the aftermath of the holocaust and under conditions of late capitalism. Genocide no longer appears as an accidental relapse of modern civilisation but rather as proof that enlightenment culture has failed as a whole.

“Adorno says that right living is not possible because, in a radically evil social setting, whatever we do short of changing this setting will likely implicate us in its evil either, indirectly insofar as we contribute to maintaining this social setting where it should be changed, or directly by actually participating in and furthering particular evils within it. In other words, in most cases we can only hope that we do not participate actively and directly in evils. However, even if we do not participate actively and directly, to think that this would constitute right living would mistake a lucky and merely partial escape for more than it is” (Freyhagen, 2008:3).

Is there no escape or is there at least a temporary escape from complicity? What does this mean for feminists engaging with sexist, racist, and homophobic violence at the intersection with capitalism.

The hidden and repressed: Homophobia and abjection

As I am writing this text South Africa remembers the gang rape, torture, and murder of a poor black teenage girl in the rural Eastern Cape Anene Booysen in February 2013. Simultaneously, we watch the court case against Oscar Pistorius, the international sport icon and alleged murderer of a well-known white model in his house in a gated community in Pretoria: both of the accused are intimate partners. ‘Father’ state himself

has just finished investigating the role of the state in the 2012 killing of striking miners in Marikana. Are these incidents connected? Through the pages of the Constitution, holding the post-apartheid promise to protect the vulnerable, to make right what was wrong under apartheid rule, to free those formerly not free, to constitute a society of equals, the violent processes of everyday abjection keep resurfacing.

Psychoanalytic readings of cultural and social practices uncover the traces of the hidden and the repressed. Ann McClintock (1997) explores the violence of abjection, and citing psychoanalyst and intellectual Julia Kristeva, she argues that abjection lies at the core of the constitution of the social being and that acts of expulsion were considered formative for modern industrial imperialism. To imagine oneself as social we learn to expunge “certain elements that society deems as impure: excrements, menstrual blood, urine, semen, tears, vomit [...]” (McClintock, 1997:72). We have abject objects like the clitoris, domestic dirt, and menstrual blood. We have abject groups like lesbians and the homeless, and we have abject zones like the Gaza strip, prisons, and battered women’s shelters. The “expelled abject haunts the subject at its inner constitutive boundary” indispensable to the modern state as:

“Abject people are those whom industrial imperialism rejects but cannot do without: slaves, prostitutes, the colonized, domestic workers, the insane, the unemployed and so on. [...] Inhabiting the cusp of domesticity and market, industry and empire, the abject returns to haunt modernity as its inner constitutive repudiation: the rejected from which one does not part” (McClintock, 1997:73).

According to Kristeva (in McClintock, 1997), the self and society will not succeed with purification through abjection. Expelled elements keep haunting and disrupting, possibly even dissolving the edges of what we consider to be the norm, the identity of the self or of society. Here art’s potential for disruption enters, making the hidden visible, transgressing the normative gaze. Muholi says:

“I see myself as a person occupying insider/outsider status, tracing and crossing delineated borders in order to reflect

upon both our displacement as black LGBTI individuals around the globe and our creative resiliency in building 'homes' through our bodies and communities. In facing these complexities, my pictures are meant to dare us all to question the act of refusing citizenship, of rejecting visas and turning people away at borders, and even of denying people their right to medical care due to lack of funds. I dare us to ask why queer bodies remain on the outside of an unquestioned heteronormative sociality" (Muholi, 2011:3).

Psychoanalyst and writer Nathalie Zaltzman reminds us of the void Hanna Arendt (1963) described in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* within which she explored the tension between horror and banality when reporting about the trial of the Nazi mass murderer Adolf Eichmann.

"It is finding nothing where she was seeking to grasp the roots of evil that engenders the frustration of thought, and not finding any deep meaning for it is for Arendt what reveals the banality of evil" (Villa and Weil, 2010:669).

It is exactly not the singular exception, the psychopath behind the tree in the night, but the normal guy from next door, the boyfriend, the politician's hate speech, the police forces who commit secondary victimisation: it is the middle of society and not its pathologised and criminalised margins which are at the centre of the problem.

Sexual terrorism: Appealing to 'Father State'?

Acts of violence targeting women and transgender people, are reflected in an uncanny routine of anticipation, shock, outcry, followed by commemoration. That continuum of "sexual terrorism", as Arriola (2002) describes the 'femicide' at the Mexican border, poisons - in the form of traumatic memories and as a potential future threat to women's fragile attempts to recreate their 'everyday' as a livable one. Acts of homophobia consume lives which are now no more and they consume the lives of those who - tired, sad, angry, triggered - still struggle against the continuation of homophobia, for

justice for those murdered, for allies amongst progressive forces and movements, against a conservative backlash of traditional authorities, politicians and religious leaders.

Acknowledging the absence of the extraordinary forces us to face the everyday normality of violence against women and queer people: from silencing and misrepresentation to the physical control of women's sexuality and assaults on their bodies because "you dare to wear pants", "your skirt is too short", and what was formerly referred to as 'curative rape': "you want to be a man? I will show you your place". In response to the assertion by Carl von Clausewitz⁸ that war is simply a continuation of politics with other means, Zilla Eisenstein (2007:12) argues that:

"If war is politics in another form, and if gender is a political configuration, then the process of gendering males and females, is a continuation of politics and war in other forms. It is why the rape of females continues to be so central to war, and a form of war, and not simply a crime of war."

Here, rape is not an exception to the rule but rather a disguised rule of warfare and conflict itself. There is a debate that post-apartheid South Africa is experiencing a low intensity warfare, a remilitarisation of public life, that its transition remains unfulfilled and that it is not post-conflict on a societal level considering increasing economic inequality, high levels of crime, increasing state violence (as seen in Marikana), an emerging murderous xenophobia, and extremely high rape statistics.

What to do in light of such realities? How to re-act and how to act? Different explanations of hate crimes against black lesbians in South Africa seek to understand the societal roots of homo- and trans-phobia which often involves gang rape, torture and humiliation, and often results in murder. Due to inconsistent reporting and data collection, epidemic secondary victimisation, neglect and/or ignorance by the police and justice system, many hate crimes are neither reported at all or are not processed or followed up with formal investigation. Through massive lobbying since the mid-2000s, with the sparse resources of a few NGOs and networks, who in the course of doing so often over-stretched their financial, organisational, human and emotional resources and capacities, the

media and government have begun to reluctantly respond. In 2011 a Corrective Rape Task Team was established by the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security Cluster to conduct a legislative audit of existing hate crime legislation and, in early 2013, the National Council Against Gender-Based Violence, based within the Ministry of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, was established. Both structures are largely seen as passive and dysfunctional.⁹ The recently published *Outside the Safety Zone. An Agenda for Research on Violence against Lesbian and Nonconforming Women in South Africa* by Susan Holland-Muter (2013) highlights important findings: firstly the pervasiveness of the heteronormative and patriarchal bias in the criminal justice system; secondly, the problem of building an effective reporting and monitoring system which could contribute to a better understanding of homophobic hate crimes. A still small but growing body of work on the subject developed various recommendations for how to tackle the problem, however neither legislative nor broad-based societal interventions are effectively implemented. Consequently, successfully prosecuted cases are still largely outnumbered by cases that remain uninvestigated and unprocessed¹⁰ and this is producing a sense of impunity for those perpetrating acts of trans- and homophobic violence.

Cornelia you are very critical about traditional campaign politics and towards cooperating with or appealing to the state, why?

For me, campaign politics often exclude the personal situation of the activists and as such neglect the notion of the personal is political. I can't be such a campaigner while my private situation or those of my friends and comrades collapse, also, campaigns often appeal to the state and/or the government. This means that you implicitly legitimise the state and/or government and therefore their power over you. We rejected handing over your power to a sovereign as you no longer have your power at your disposal. The political idea of a state to grant the well being of all the individuals clearly does not work: it is hierarchical, patriarchal and deepens other forms of injustices and exclusion. The idea of the modern state invites us to urgently think about less wrong alternatives within

which all that is rendered invisible by existing state structures will become visible. I want to socialise in non-hierarchical, collective forms and feel inspired by notions of grass-root democracies.

Imagining pockets of liberation

Conditions of liberation are often envisioned as post-revolutionary - a manifestation of supposedly just laws and policies which are now issued by "us", the "good ones". Instead of looking for the fulfillment of a Christian salvation narrative, the anarchist writer Hakim Bey (1991) speaks of the radical potential of temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) where non-permanence is not a failure but a moment for potential change, which is ongoing and not stalling. Bey's idea was to create moments that eluded incorporation into capitalism and commodification, creating opportunities to resist the dominant narratives.

"The overall aim was to highlight indeterminate zones within late capitalism, everyday occurrences that refuse, whether by accident or design, to be incorporated into dominant narratives" (Sellars, 2010).

Inspired by historic, philosophical and artistic practices Bey saw TAZ as a way to introduce interstitial moments where a non-hierarchical world, beyond the reach of "Spectacle" and mass communications, exists briefly:

"Bey divines resistance as embodied in everyday instances or moments that refuse to engage directly with the Spectacle, that lie outside of simulation and recuperation, inhabiting 'cracks and vacancies' only to disappear and reform elsewhere, thus avoiding detection and invasion. Such spaces he terms 'temporary autonomous zones' - 'an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen...'" (Sellars, 2010).

Bey (1991) argues that information becomes an important tool in the crevices of formal social protocol and processes. The boundary lines of the new TAZ fall on established and existing knowledge.

Attempts to extract permanence from the moment collapse the possibility to free individual creativity; collapse the potential which lies in the non-permanence of the moment and which is a chance for creativity and ultimately for empowerment.

As people who want to see change, who fight for this, one would think we want a permanent change and not something temporary only – what do you make of Bey’s notion of TAZ, of never reaching a goal ‘outside of established boundary lines’?

I like the notion of temporary autonomous spaces even if in my own experience these spaces shrank drastically over the years. You refer to Adorno, saying that “a wronged life can’t be lived rightly”. As much as his statement is situated in a specific historical period it is at the same time also universal, but keeping Hakim Bey in mind I think that there is nevertheless no alternative to trying to make a difference. For me, this is less about morality but a rather banal aspect of being human. We all want to identify as good, and as not as living a wrong life. Especially those of us who consider themselves to live political lives. Your question, how to live a right life under wrong conditions, implies that we might have an idea of what is at least less wrong in a given situation and that we try to live accordingly. I do. But what are the categories? What is not wrong or more modestly, less wrong? You and I will possibly agree if we tried to describe what a good, a not wrong life could mean. Others, even close friends, may describe it differently but in ways we still could accept. And then there are those whose choices we would simply reject outright. Others might critique us and point out our own blind spots. So how can we identify a good, a not wrong life? I think to judge a life as good in the sense of not wrong is situational, it is temporary and subjective. In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt speaks about action in the sense of the deeds and the words of an individual. To Arendt action is always political as it is carried out visibly and as it has an impact on others. As we are speaking and acting out of our free will, we join the world, we

participate, and so do all of us. I think that our equality as individuals who speak and act and enter the world is given, nobody can create this equality.

Cornelia, can you translate these reflections to the work of Zanele Muholi?

I would say Muholi makes contradictions visible. She acts and others respond with their own deeds and words and vice versa. When I see her photographs I see a person who acts, who does something. The women in the first image walk hand-in-hand and wear specific clothes. This can be interpreted in a gendered way. We always act within a given setting where other acting people exist. My act, my words directed towards this photograph do not only implicitly refer to the gendered aspects. I am more interested in a notion of joy and carefreeness I see in holding each others’ hands. I see the posture of the individual in “Bra” and I associate beauty, humour and pride. Both photographs make me feel happy. I feel confirmed that we human beings are different and equal. We want to feel good. Many of us want to live a less wrong life. Arendt says, that as we act we are also affected by the deeds of others. The possible effects we have on each other are infinite and last through time and space. Therefore there is no action that can be restricted to the direct addressee only.

Keeping this in mind, one could argue that Muholi generates a temporary autonomous zone in museums and gallery spaces when including those normally excluded via organising their physical presence and their visual representation in a still predominately white, heterosexual, male dominated, and middle/upper-class art world space. When the combi taxis arrive from the townships, the artist de-centres the ‘white cube’ through her bussed in audience, transforming a traditionally white comfort zone - for a moment. She allows the inhabitants of white heteronormative comfort zones to experience and interact with ‘the Other’ without the risk of leaving behind the green suburbs or the secured pockets of gentrification in the inner city when looking/gazing/consuming Other’s realities. Her success as an artist in breaking down silence around sexual difference has earned her accolades among LGBTI activists. At the opening of *Love and*

Lust at the Stevenson Gallery in February 2014 Muholi was hailed for her celebration of sexual difference and diversity and for giving expression to subjectivities that are socially repressed and denied:

“The prevailing tone in the air was that which acknowledged Muholi as a messiah, who has united us all; black, white, drag queen, Butch, township dwellers and suburbanites in a space where the societal and cultural etiquette was challenged to fit the context of diverse people in the Museum and Gallery, thus embraced the contrasts of love and loss under one roof [...]. It became a melting pot of culture and norms as all protocol was abandoned. Songs of freedom were chanted in celebration of a ‘soldier’ who had fought a good fight and was now being rightfully honoured” (Humbane, 2014).

But is this really a carnivalesque moment of transgression where legacies of violence and difference are contested, transformed, momentarily dissolved in a container of proclaimed equal status, looking and speaking, soon to disperse again in one way or another? Situations like this earn Zanele a twofold credit - her organising of a social and spatial transgression is, on the one hand, providing access for those excluded, exposing those who were historically (and are presently) sheltered from those at the margins. On the other hand, it reinforces her street credibility and authenticity within the international art circuit as a homosexual member of what is called in South Africa, a “formally disadvantaged” group. Consequently it enhances her two statuses, which mutually reinforce each other: being an artist and being an activist who is in with the people. These two aspects of Zanele’s visual activism are not an antagonism that she faces alone. In fact, one could argue I build my academic career by working on topics such as gender based violence, xenophobia, homophobia – theorising forms of in- and exclusion. Of course I want to believe that my work will contribute to bring social change but ultimately I am facing a dilemma: I am benefiting in one way or another from the very existence of such structures of violence as I am at the same time subjected to some of them.

How do you position yourself in the conundrum of wanting to change structures, which are at the same time privileging you?

I have a good education and very good degrees, but as many other artists I was unable to sustain myself through my art work. This is a structural problem as the art market is gendered, racialised, class based and a capitalist battlefield. I had to work in the corporate sector to finance my art work. The compromises I had to make to earn enough money, enough time for my political activities, and for my art work impacted very badly on me. The increasing difficulty to impact politically on a radically changing world, our defeats in political struggles and our internal quarrels played another role and eventually I became sick. I lost my home, my studio and my partner because of my sickness. Nevertheless I am glad that I experimented with different ways of living and that I pursued my artwork. For me the dilemma of commitment and complicity is not so striking, this contradiction is a given. We navigate it. If we feel a dilemma, a temporary solution does no longer satisfy, we search for amendments and develop a less wrong approach. Remember what we do does not only affect others in unwillingly negative ways but also in positive maybe unintended ways. They will respond in unforeseeable ways and may be this is what Hakim Bey’s temporary autonomous zones are about – we can not control the full impact of our doing in a given situation, from a given positionality, nor can we control the responses we evoke.

We discussed your political practice and now you referred to your art practice. How are they linked?

My political background plays an important role for my art practice. Let me give you some examples: In 2001, in the context of a week-long anti-racist and anti-colonial camp in the city of Hamburg, with a group of participants I organised an anti-colonial walk through the city. As we moved through the streets of Hamburg we renamed some, by putting stickers with the names of anti-colonial fighters over the street signs’s original names - all of them still name in honour of colonialists. We pasted on street signs with the names of colonisers the names of anti-colonial fighters.

We also covered a statue in front of the so-called Africa-House, the building of a former colonial trading company, which was mainly active in Cameroon during German colonisation. The statue showed a so-called Askari warrior, an African soldier who served the German colonisers. Apart from an apron, the male figure was naked. He stood upright and gracefully with both legs on a pedestal, head straight he held a spear in one hand and a shield in the other, facing the viewer and at the same time gazing inward. This sculpture portrayed the Askari in ways which naturalised his fight against his own compatriots in the service of the "superior" interest of the colonists. We confronted the white construct of a "barbarian savage" who has to be civilised into the construct of the "noble savage". Both stereotypes are racist and render the complex histories and the biographies of all those who were affected by the brutality of colonialism invisible. Through covering/hiding the statue we made visible what was rendered invisible: The historical and current wealth of the Woermann company, wealth which was derived from Germany having been a colonial power - power that was based on racism, exploitation, and murder.... Behind the visibility of the figure and the ideology it transports, lie the complex historical and current realities of the colonised population of Cameroon - and of the colonising society, which Germany was back then, and the racist society Germany is today. We politicised an aesthetised memory in order to critique how the city of Hamburg has benefited from colonial rule and its embedded violence and linked this to today's anti-racist struggles.

When I used art in a political context, I often did this together with others in non-authoritarian and horizontal ways. We were all active collectively and it was not me, the artist, who positioned herself as the expert or talented genius, I did not see this (or sell it) as MY art work. However, I also realised performances, paintings and sculptures with mainly aesthetic and formal criteria in which I scrutinised political topics such as the freedom of movement, border politics, different forms of exclusion. Here I was seen as the sole creator. It is not only because of this, that I don't consider myself an art activist, I don't generally use my art work in order to unveil specific political contexts or to achieve

specific political aims in my capacity as an artist.

Art activism faces a dilemma that other activism face as well: in the struggle against something you become part of the commodification of the issue that you critique. The utopia that you promote within a capitalist market and your symbolic value depends on the rules of the very same market you critique. Of course, one could argue that this dilemma is more complex as it is all about who is speaking, from where, about what, and in which manner? The positionality of the person who is representing a certain subject matter within her/his artistic, scholarly, professional work is of course relevant to the ways this work is signified and contextualised. However, to what extent does the experience (real, past, potentially) of the materialities of violence provide a person with a positionality, which supposedly does grant her/him "authenticity"?

Will these "authenticating experiences" free him or her from complicity and legitimise the person to speak on behalf of others, supposedly experiencing the same? What representational claims and what assumptions are at play? What to do with privileges one is born into or that one has earned over time; privileges that might distance you in the here and now from a shared experience of marginalisation in the past that informed your individual and collective identification? What to do with the personal benefits one accrues through working against subjugation of others one identifies with whom one no longer shares the experience of the materialities of violence? What if these benefits distance you from a collective experience and therefore strip away a claim to an authorising authenticity?

Many argue identity politics are problematic. Some argue we need a collective identity in order to be able to say "we" want, demand, oppose.... Others critique identity based politics as producing constantly new boundaries of belonging and therefore exclusions from the "we". How do you situate yourself as a political person and artist in this dilemma?

My artwork was partly dealing with inclusion and exclusion. With temporary installations I

restricted access to a certain part of public space, closed off a niche. This sparked the curiosity of passers-by: the audience now tried to access the hidden. Sometimes they attacked the flexible and vulnerable walls I created in order to have a look at what was no longer accessible. Inside the hidden was simply space. Without the installation there wouldn't have been a defined place at all. In the sphere of social interaction, of identity politics, an inclusion such as a defined "we", an acting group, would not be visible otherwise. As the "we" is always also exclusive at the same time as it is inclusive, it will be "attacked" by the outsiders and will be forced to amend its boundaries, its identity and its goals. I think "we/s" are not dangerous as long as they are strategic and not essential. They must remain fluid, temporary, open to critique, and to access and leaving. I think that essentialised personal or group identities should not and cannot exist.

Conclusion

Maybe it is precisely the carnivalesque moment of transgression which allows for a more radical deconstruction of norms and privileges. Transgression stresses the fluidity, the changeability of situations, boundaries, positionalities, and as such, challenges the creation of permanent, essentialised identities. Transgressions pollute claims to purity, properness and static concepts such as "culture/tradition", "nature", "the divine order". The subversive, often playful and ever changing character of certain moments of transgression could be an inspiring space for (re) conceptualising radical socio-political change, inviting us to rethink feminist queer practices beyond the state organised, NGOed, and the academically dried out femocrat gender euphoria of the last decades.

Beatriz Preciado (2002), queer cult author and dildo collector envisions in her contra sexual manifesto a radically post-identitarian society within which neither your body nor your desire signifies your positionality. A society where it is neither men nor women, neither gays nor lesbians who find each other; where it is simply bodies who enter a temporary contract. Preciado deconstructs the man until there is no phallus left against which we need to rally; the penis is constructed as a copycat of the dildo; the counter-practice of "dildotronics" only knows bodies working with



Figure 4. *Isibuko I*, 2005. Zanele Muholi
©Zanele Muholi. Courtesy Stevenson

dildos/tools which include fingers, tongues, arms, heads, cucumbers. This post-gender society knows no masculine or feminine, knows no marriage and no liberal substitutes such as gay-marriages, and sexuality is disconnected from reproduction - there are no more families and family values. The anus is the universal contrasexual centre and the dildo becomes a tool of resistance against the norm as it only knows body orifices. The disruptive potential of the arts might come in handy when aiming

to confuse the established order of things in order to generate new perspectives - on how we struggle and what we fight for, on how we organise and relate to each other, and how we relate to ourselves and to our bodies, differently.

It encourages us to stop searching for an uncompromised, a pure, legitimate authentic position; to acknowledge our complicity in spite of our very best intentions; to make it work rather than to deny it.

Next to a radical critique of the harsh realities this means to also embrace the radical force of possibilities lying in the continuously temporary character of empowerment, again and again, as already materialised in the here and now and as no longer merely aspirational.

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Notes

1. This text is a continuation of more theoretical explorations of and around Zanele Muholi's work in Schuhmann (2015) and 'Shooting from the Other's Side? Ways of looking in Zanele Muholi's work' to be published in 2015 with WITS University Press in a volume edited by Antje Schuhmann and Jyoti Mistry.
2. See <http://www.corneliaschlothauer.de>
3. See <http://inkanyiso.org/>. For further readings on Muholi's body of work see also: Baderoon (2011); Humbane (2014); Gqola (2006); Muholi (2011); G Smith (2004).
4. I use "we" deliberately, as I think no one can be exempted from being implicated fully by hegemonic discourses, at least in some ways.
5. I deliberately use "read" as it signifies a cultural practice, something we learn to do. As such it objects to the notion that bodies have an essence we can discover. It is conceptual language and includes again all people as it does not speak to a top down approach of discriminatory identification practices only. Women scrutinise women, black people 'read' other black people as 'proper' black or 'coconut', whites read each other as Afrikaans or English etc. It is an act which is crossing multiple positionalities.
6. See the work of Stuart Hall, Ann McClintock, Ann Laura Stoler, Louis Gordan, Jean-Paul Rocchi.
7. For studies about the 'making of sex' see Thomas Laqueur, Heinz Jürgen Voß, Judith Butler, Sandy Stone, Beatrice Preciado and many others.
8. Von Clausewitz was a general in the Prussian army who theorised general principles of warfare.
9. This statement refers to multiple conversations the author had with experts in the field, who are involved or have been invited and declined to be involved in these structures.
10. See for instance the above mentioned research report.

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