

wyndham art gallery

VISUAL ACTIVISM

Video artwork by ZANELE MUHOLI



Pinky Zulu at Constitution Hill by Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi is an accomplished and awarded artist from South Africa. Her work is her life and she makes work about her life as a lesbian living in South Africa.



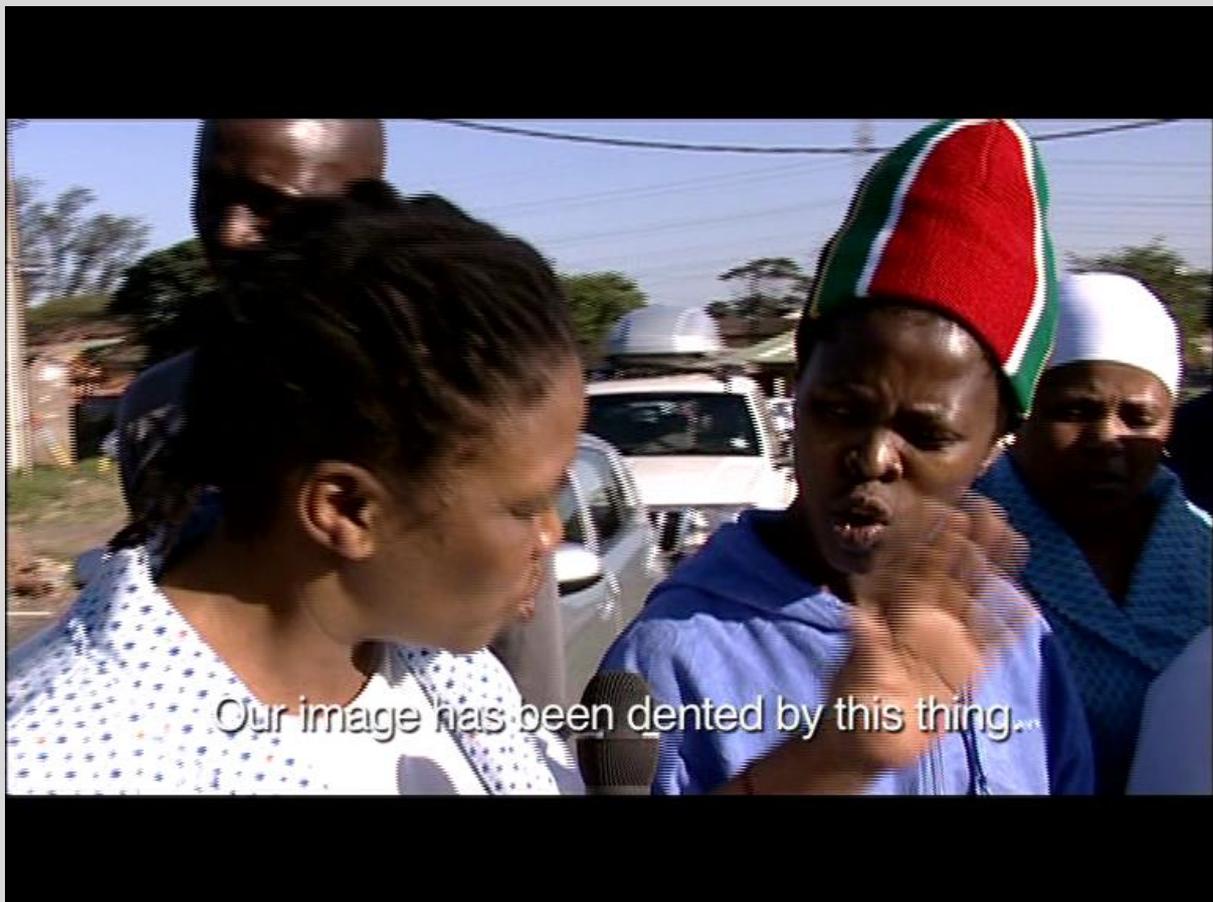
Zanele Muholi in Still image from *Difficult Love* – by Zanele Muholi

South Africa is an anomaly when it comes to the rights of GLBTIQ community. It has passed laws regarding gay marriage that Australia has yet to accept in legislation and yet at the same time it has some of the most violent hate crimes against lesbians. While legislation has supported the rights of people to choose who they marry, the message hasn't got through to the broader community. This is the issue that Zanele talks about in her powerful videos.

I first saw her video *Difficult Love* at Documenta 13 and was so moved by it that I couldn't walk away from its 21 minute run. Usually a documentary style work on video doesn't capture me, especially in an extensive exhibition like Documenta where

audiences are overwhelmed with imagery and sounds and can easily become immune to effect of art.

However this work is so compelling that the form and style aren't in the forefront. In fact the technique is sometimes quite clunky, moving from portrait stills to full screen and then small format video. This would usually distract me from the work as I tend to be aesthetically driven.

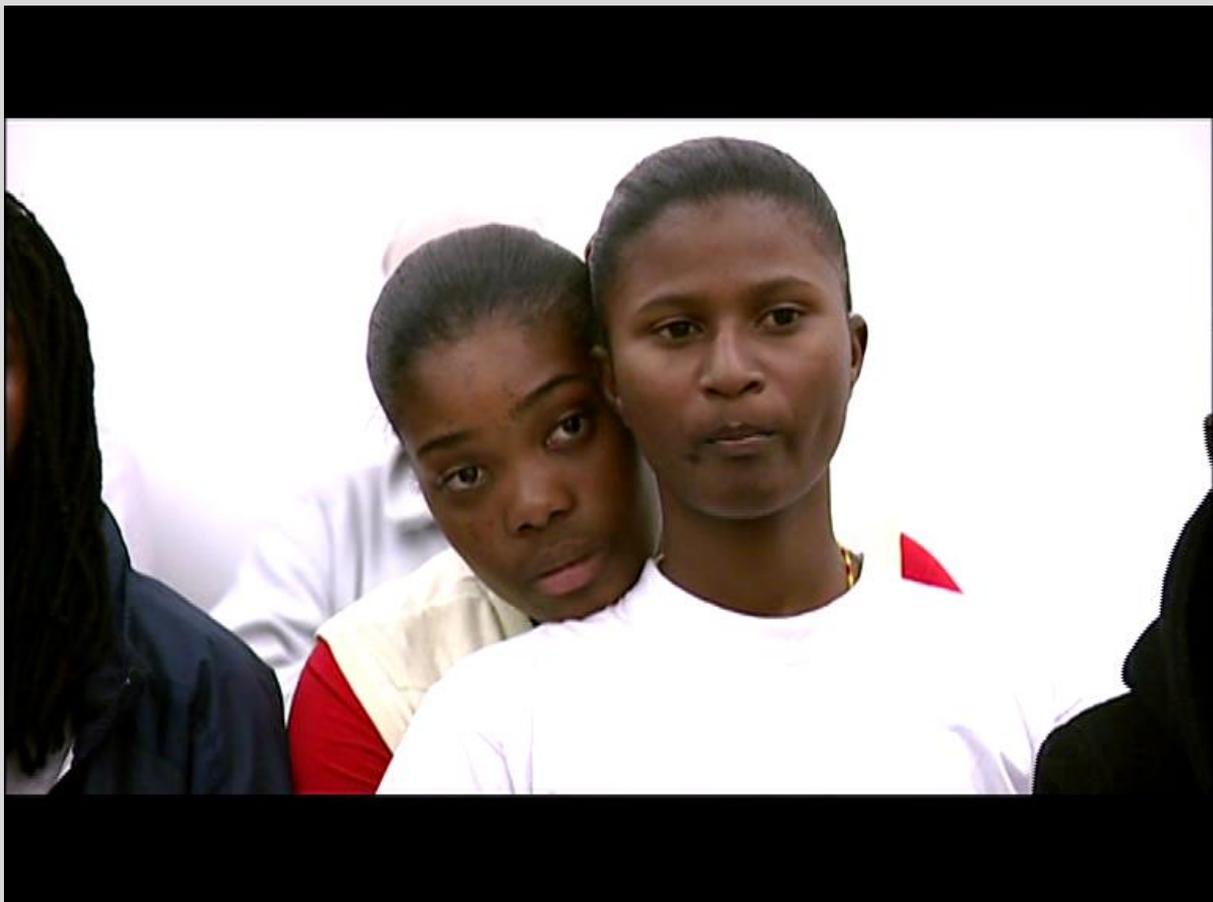


Still image from Difficult Love – by Zanele Muholi

Zanele's work challenges this view as her art is unapologetically political and out to change people's attitudes and actions. She doesn't shy away from prejudice and somehow she manages not to judge it either. She skilfully embraces all the voices on her camera with the intention that they are able to see their own prejudice reflected back at them.

While her message is extremely important and I would not want to diminish it by discussing it as artwork, I do want to look at the aspects of this highly political and confronting work that are also very distinctively art.

Zanele places herself in the video and it follows a tradition of artist as performer however she brings her life into the frame in the way that many artists do, but often with less courage. Her work is a reflection of her life in a way that no documentary film maker can achieve. She isn't on the outside presenting an objective view of the issues she and her friends and family face, she is squarely in the frame. She exposes her own life, her own fears and her own dilemma's.



Still image from *Difficult Love* – by Zanele Muholi

She brings to mind the powerful work by Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present* where Abramovic is herself the work and has stripped everything away from the art experience so that the

audience experiences being with the artist and in doing so experiences themselves as present. Although completely different in purpose Zanele has the courage to place her life in the public domain in a way that she is at risk of being a victim of the very crime she is alerting the world to. Zanele allows us to enter this world through her story telling and imagery and by the trust she engenders from her friends who allow her to include them in her work.



Still image from *We live in Fear* – by Zanele Muholi

The traditional view of art held by most people who are not artists is that it is something that exists beyond the hand of the artist. It exists as an object, once created by the artist lives independently of them. While this is the case with much art, I see this as a basic misunderstanding of what art actually is and where it comes from. Art is not an outcome, it is a way of thinking and seeing the world. An artist lives a life that is given by this way of thinking and seeing. It is very difficult for an artist to go on holiday as they always bring their eyes and their mind with them. Even if they leave the tools of their trade at home they are always working.

Many people can make pictures and create images, sculptures and videos but not all of them are artists according to this definition. An artist in my view is someone for whom those outcomes are the end result of a whole process which is more akin to philosophy than to craft. Artists think and the work they make is the necessary expression of that thinking.



Still image from *Difficult Love* – by Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi is a great example of this. Her life is her art. She creates as a way to deal with the grief and trauma she encounters daily as a black lesbian in Sth Africa in the 21st century.



Still image from *We live in Fear* – by Zanele Muholi



Still image from *F(o)und* – by Zanele Muholi

It is the responsibility of all of us to be aware of these issues and to share this awareness so that her work can reach more people and make the difference she wants it to make.

It is also the responsibility of us all to stand up for the rights of GLBTIQ members of our community so that such abhorrent violence isn't allowed in our own back yard. And never presume that it doesn't. There lies complacency and with it a blindness that must not be accepted.

Zanele Muholi's work is a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility that is so beautifully encapsulated in the word Ubuntu, a Nguni Bantu term roughly translating to "human kindness." It is an idea from the Southern African region which means literally "human-ness," and is often translated as "humanity toward others," but is

often used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.

I would ask us all to consider that while violence is committed towards people based on their sexual orientation it is all of our responsibility to stand up against it wherever we are.



Still image from *We live in Fear* – by Zanele Muholi

Dr. Megan Evans
Visual Art Curator