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Dressing up the Self: Feminism and the Anomalous Art of Zanele Muholi and Cindy Sherman

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ABSTRACT

For Lauren Berlant (1998), intimacy begins with shared narratives or narratives about something shared. In other words, we desire our story as humans to be set within 'zones of familiarity and comfort' (Berlant, 1998: 281). How do we know we have achieved familiarity and comfort? Berlant says, that we know it is enough to intimate or gesture, to communicate with brevity because of a communal language (like the intimacy of a shared joke). But, says Berlant (1998: 281), 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness'. This 'public' side is related to what she terms the 'institutions of intimacy' that we create in the hope that these will give us 'a life' (by which she presumably means a life of intimacy). Might Berlant consider Art as an institution of intimacy, a means of creating a shared language by which we can enter into zones of familiarity and comfort but also by which we can point out the flaws in each other's thinking and laugh together at the ways in which we have failed at intimacy? Berlant describes a tension between desire and 'therapy' (or what one might think of as a response to immorality) and says this tension governs our 'modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy'. The article explores whether one might think of feminism in the photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi as a form of 'therapy', a means of correcting the violence we commit both knowingly and, as is often the case, out of a kind of willing ignorance.

Keywords: Zanele Muholi, Cindy Sherman, camp, queer, visual art

INTRODUCTION

I find the tension between the intimate and the public especially pertinent in feminist art which has especially in the last few years afforded me the opportunity to talk to students about the feminisms of earlier generations that suddenly seemed relevant after the #metoo movement. This essay reflects on the slow intimacy between feminisms, the progress out of and in reaction to each other, but secondly, the way these feminisms have responded to human intimacies, especially when these responses are facilitated by the camera.

The camera both engenders intimacy and is in violation of healthy intimacies, even those that govern our politics as feminists. If feminism is a house, then I'd like to spend time in the dressing room of this home, to explore the arts of theatricality, mimicry and dress-up as feminist strategies. I'm writing here about two artists, Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi, from radically different parts of the world and different phases of feminism and who may not even identify as feminist[1] but who are both interested in a form of photographic theatre that has meaning beyond being merely poignantly entertaining. Sherman dates from an era of radical feminism in America where the gendering of the gaze was especially important to those thinking through the violences inherent in much heteronormative media. Muholi, works in a far more intersectional way, and although also concerned with the gaze, is a more determined critic of particularly *white* heteronormativity. Their practice is a critique also of feminism that draws on Queer Theory and Black Consciousness discourses. Both artists, however, use their own bodies and identities in what feels like an act of political re-orientation but occurs in a way that is cheeky, cheesy and angrily

[1] Muholi describes their empathy for those who are marginalised as emanating from their own experiences of being side-lined … for instance, at an African feminist forum in 2006 where some of the feminists felt uncomfortable at having to share the intellectual space with lesbians (Muholi in Baderoon, 2011: 409).

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joyous. For this reason, it seems fair, if not entirely intuitive, to compare their most Camp artistic expressions and to ask what the shared language between them is and whether this might constitute an inside joke.

The recent (2012–) self-portraits of South African artist, Zanele Muholi, dressed in Afro-Camp costumes, are both adamant in their critique of mainstream feminisms and ambivalent in their pastiche of earlier performances within the movement, especially those mediated by the camera. They refuse the easy moralism of the past but also reach back to the ethics of an older feminist tradition of the 1970s and 1980s in which for instance the American, Cindy Sherman, operated.

SHERMAN AND THE *FILM STILLS*

Cynthia Morris Sherman, the youngest of five children, was born in 1954 and grew up in Huntington Beach, Long Island, where she loved to play dress-up. In other words, she came of age at a time when American homes were beset with television screens and American dreams were moulded by the movies. She enrolled for an art degree at Buffalo State College, where she flunked a photography course and started dating fellow student and artist, Robert Longo. Around this time, she began dressing up in earnest and taking photographs of herself. These often-serialised self-portraits spoke of gendered becoming like that of the nerd-girl 'evolving' into the vamp or a 'real' magazine cover girl devolving into Sherman's goofy parody. After college Longo and Sherman became part of the Pictures Generation, a New York-based collective from the 1970s that included Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and other artists obsessed with the simulacral nature of the image-world. Douglas Crimp, writing in the *Pictures* exhibition catalogue of 1977 explained,

> To an ever-greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures first-hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it (in Allen, 2021: 14).

Crimp argued that these artists approached the media glut with an astute criticality … but was this really true of Sherman, who was left out of the original *Pictures* exhibition but later included in Crimp's revised essay for the art journal *October* in 1979 (Allen, 2021: 16)?

Her *Untitled Film Stills*, for instance, are eight-by-ten-inch black-and-white photographs in which she herself acts as model, make-up artist, stylist and director with a relish for fancy-dress that borders on the narcissistic. These incredibly famous *Film Stills* – seventy in all – made between 1977 and 1980 feature her in a remarkable array of female tropes that mash-up the highbrow and lowbrow fantasies of Hollywood, the European avant-garde and B-grade cinema.[2] She is new to the city, fighting with her partner in the kitchen, leaning out of a doorframe in her underwear, posing in the bathroom mirror, a sorority sister reaching for a book, a jilted lover… all enacted with a pornographic self-interest…and this is the point. In every image she takes pleasure in *being* 'visual pleasure'. If there is a critique here, it is confused by her desire to be desirable, her complicity in a spectacle of promise. And yet this speculative future is bound to a nostalgia for a cinematic past.

It was Roland Barthes who in *Camera Lucida* (1981: 15) observed that cameras 'were clocks for seeing.' In the introduction to their book on time and photography, Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder (2010: viii) assert that even current critical thinking about photography is generally guilty of a 'blindness to the complexity of photography's temporalities, for it is no longer possible to use the word "time" in singular'. Sherman seems deeply invested in the project of stopping or fixing time, capturing an elusive moment before it slips from memory (as happens with the moving image). But she presents a photographic 'record' (or 'still' like those used to promote feature films) that operates on the thin line between movement and stasis, the narrative and non-narrative, the fictional and the documentary and as such the temporality she relays is by no means singular. The *Film Stills* reverberate with the tension between the unitary photograph and celluloid film strip as a testimony to the multiplicity and complexity of time in her art and the very real idea that we are all living "life, the movie" (Gabler, 2000). Sherman reconciles her interest in feminine desirability with her notion of time-regained so that our perverse hunger for a past simplicity is gendered. In effect Sherman genders time.

In *Untitled Film Still #3*[3] (1977), for instance, a moment of womanly domesticity is recreated that simultaneously feels 'now' and 'then'. A woman with a blonde 'bob' (obviously a wig), stands at the kitchen sink wearing an apron and surrounded by dishes. She is beautiful and sexy. A coy glance is cast from the heroine to an off-camera other. Her chin rests on her shoulder in a gesture of femininity as she pauses to consider what the presumed 'he' is saying. Time slows down as we wait for him to finish what he is saying. Her right hand touches her waist and the belt of

[2] See, for instance, at: https://artlead.net/journal/modern-classics-cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills/.
[3] The image is available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56520.

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her apron while her left arm scaffolds her body against the edge of the kitchen sink as she too waits. On the countertop we see an empty jar, a bottle of dishwashing soap, a drying rack, mug and the end of a cooking pot (out of focus). There is a shelf above the sink but it is mostly cropped out of the image. The woman's body and pert breasts face the sink while she looks back, over her shoulder at the unseen antagonist. Her bodily reticence to face him, is the source of the drama as we, the viewer, contemplate her sexy boredom and longsuffering.

In a different image (*Untitled Film Still #13*, 1978),[4] Sherman appears as a 1950s student, reaching for a book in the library. This time she wears a virginal white blouse. Again, she looks back over her shoulder and again there is a passivity about her. Is she waiting for the viewer's gaze to turn away or the camera shutter? Either way, she is poised and appears to perform a kind of knowing-naiveté. The books in general, not just the one she is reaching for, seem like props in a schlock film, shot clandestinely in a university library because the movie is low-budget. She doesn't even look at the book she is extracting, as if the book itself is inconsequential. Her blonde bangs, peeking out beneath a headband, seem almost too perfect … but the viewer suspends their disbelief and refuses the hint at a wig. Her shapely breasts are pushed out and her back arched. She is young but not ignorant of her power. In such scenes, 'woman' is preserved in moments that, in real life, pass unnoticed but which have power when captured cinematically. The point is that they canonise gendered subjectivities and mannerisms in ways that pretend to offer an ironic parody but feel so seductive that they may well do the opposite and merely entrench our desire for a spectacular femininity (and whiteness).[5] And each persona reveals something of the interest Sherman herself has in the filmic stereotypes that one is supposed to disdain (especially as a feminist) but which seem even more poignant when representative of a period that is past and can only be brought back through the camera lens.

In terms of being feminist, these images complicate and unmask libidinal desire, a surrealism that feels weirdly honest or 'real.' Yet, this recognition of the signified real occurs even whilst the viewer begins to understand the problem with mimesis: 'an imitation of reality produces the desire to imitate' (Avgikos, 2003: 340). The question is whether Sherman's *Film Stills* interrupt 'automatic scopophilic consumption' (Avgikos, 2003: 339) and infuse the libidinal look of the viewer with a sufficient amount of 'dread and dis-ease' (Avgikos, 2003: 339) to deem them 'feminist'. They are obviously naïve in terms of race but do they even succeed in critiquing the construction of woman as Mulveyan visual pleasure?

Mary Anne Doane's (1988–1989: 46) famous consideration and reconsideration of femininity as masquerade is a means of creating a 'glitch' in a semiotic system that stipulates a claustrophobic closeness and immediacy for the feminine, a bodily proximity that situates the feminine outside language. Doane (1988–1989: 47) conceptualises masquerade as a feminist strategy but it still presupposes 'a logic dictated by masculine position' and as such is not 'a joyful or affirmative play but … an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture,' a position that is 'psychically painful for the woman.' Are Sherman's images 'painful' enough? Do they cause us to question or do these mythic generalisations naturalise femininity-as-appearance and make it interesting via a technological spectatorship?

The *Film Stills* are thus emblematic of slow intimacy in two (counterintuitive) ways. First, she uses a camera, which has the effect of radically slowing down, even paralysing time. Second hers is a fashion system that is 'of the moment' but also refuses to disown its own past. Let me explain why these assertions are counterintuitive. In terms of the first assertion, Lutz Koepnick (2014: 57) explains that photography is historically cast as a means of 'rapid seeing' (not slow seeing). Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag all bemoaned the way the camera engendered 'fast seeing'. But Koepnick (2014: 57) argues that,

> photography's task was not simply to slice individual moments out of the continuum of time and embalm them for future generations. It was to capture critical contractions of temporality: instants pregnant with historical energies and meaning, sudden events rupturing the ordinary flow of time, extraordinary folds within the fabric of the everyday that had the power to speak for larger personal or political reconfigurations.

In other words, it has the potential to slow down our perception, unlock the 'optical unconscious, bless us with epiphanic insight, and serve as uncanny memory prosthesis. Yet it can only do so because photographers understand how to use their camera's speed as a medium to encounter and withstand the otherwise unstoppable rush of time' (Koepnick 2014: 59). Koepnick (2014: 59) proposes that when the twentieth-century street photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, renounced the camera for the paintbrush, he 'hoped to escape the camera's presumed complicity with modern acceleration, speed, and transitoriness, whereas the true challenge would have been to break away from a thinking about both modern temporality and the art of photographic seeing that cannot but envision slowness as merely a leftover from the past amid the velocity of modern culture' (Koepnick 2014:

[4] The image is available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56576.

[5]Although not the focus of this article, it is worth noting that Sherman seems, at the very least, naive about the whiteness she and her characters occupy, an assertion that is complicated by her subway series from the mid-1970s. This collection of caricatures includes Sherman problematically dressed and made-up as a black, woman commuter.

59). Where Cartier-Bresson failed, Sherman succeeds. Hers is an intuitive understanding of the 'logic of the camera', it's 'layering of different durations, the simultaneous copresence of dissimilar temporalities, as one of the key features of what defines modernity as modern' (2014: 60). As Koepnick (2014: 60) maintains, 'even photographers can go slow without violating the logic of their medium' and this is exactly what Sherman achieves, a

> revision of modern culture as a sight of pluralistic, frequently illegible, and often incompatible trajectories of change. There is not one time that is at play in modern culture but a whole panoply of different temporalities. And to slow down is, not to abandon the modern altogether, but to behold and probe the overlapping durations that structure modern time.

In terms of the second point, one might say that where fashion is concerned, 'the depreciation of the past in favour of the present is what keeps the wheels of the system turning' (Cronberg 2014: 10). Sherman's stills are so very current, so very 'fashionable' yet they also provide the sweet pleasure of cinematic delay. They are both 'of the moment' and richly timeless or nostalgic. As Eva Respini (2012: 20) points out, they mimic the feminine ideal held by the generation to which Sherman's mother belonged – 'women that had cinched-in waists and pointed bras, lots of make-up, stiff hair, high heels, and things like that'. The *mise-en-scène* of every still seems richly redolent of a different time, a former time, even if the exact moment is vague. Nostalgia is the means and the objective and retro styling is indexical of retro personas. Sherman co-opts a vague but temporally seductive otherness from the filmic genres that are the shared language between her and the viewer. There is comfort and familiarity here because this is a place of otherness that, whilst it mimics reality, also renders it undesirable.

This methodology of first slowness and second nostalgia attests to a feminism that refused *and* delivered instant gratification because it represented a self-conscious spoof of time. My sense is that Sherman's parodic stills play-act at feminism whilst indulging a game of dress-up that feels too enjoyable, too much like a guilty pleasure to be a real critique of the male-gaze.

CAMP

Susan Sontag's 1964 articulation of the sexual pastiche that is Camp is useful here. *Notes on Camp* is not a feminist text exactly but, of course, its emphasis on (dramatic) irony, its mockery of everything serious, signalled the end of the masculinist sanctimony of the (especially American) art scene of the time – most notably that of the Abstract Expressionists. Her broad assertions were that first, Camp involves 'the love of the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not,' (1964: 3) that 'Camp sees everything in quotation marks', most especially gender ('it's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman"') (1964: 4). Second, that Camp 'reveals self-parody [and] reeks of self-love' (1964: 6). It is a performance, a disinterested means of enacting the self as the object of affection. Third, that it is also 'something like a logic of taste', a means of 'seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon' (1964: 1–2). This means of aestheticism places the emphasis on a deliberate superficiality, a limitation in terms of what can be achieved politically through Camp. As Sontag (1964: 2) put it, '[t]o emphasize style is to slight content.' For Sontag (and Sherman) an 'essential element of the aesthetic distinction of Camp is precisely that it represents a seriousness that fails' (1964: 7). Camp poses as Art, yet falters when it has to provide the content required of Art. As such, Sontag (1964: 1) was completely right that we are 'strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it.' Camp 'converts the serious into the frivolous' and, as such, 'requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.'[6]

Thus, feminists celebrate Sherman perhaps without understanding that through the *Film Stills* she was 'merely' offering a *Camp* Feminism – a feminism that was possibly too involved with itself, too enamoured with its own reflection … and thus today feels a little out of date.

But the fact that it is a Camp performance doesn't mean it isn't real or honest or truthful. Richard Avedon's famous essay on 'borrowed dogs' serves as a useful reminder of this tension.[7] Avedon explains his family's deep pleasure in creating family portraits when he was a child. They dressed up, posed in front of other people's houses and most importantly borrowed dogs. In looking at a family album he finds eleven different dogs in the photographs from one year. This fiction or more aptly deception seems to be the kind of Camp performance that invokes laughter or pity at the need for a lie. But, in fact, as Avedon argues it is far more revealing of the spirit of his family than any portrait in their real home could have been. As he explains, 'I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performance – because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that's not it at all. The point is that you can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the

[6] This summary of Sontag's explanation of Camp is taken from Viljoen (2022).
[7] It is unclear when the essay was first written but it was republished in 2002 in *Richard Avedon Portraits*.

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sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface' (2002: n. p.).

Sherman is the master of surface, and this is what makes her *Film Stills* so difficult to assess politically, especially given that the discourses associated with feminism have shifted. What would contemporary artists, concerned with veneer and the power of the screen, make of Sherman's *Film Stills* and how might they develop concepts her work seemed unable to explore?

MUHOLI AND *SOMNYAMA NGONYAMA*

The artist I want to present as an answer to the question of a more contemporary interpretation of Camp (and feminism), is the internationally-acclaimed South African, Zanele Muholi, whose art was infamously described by the South African Minister of Arts and Culture (Lulu Xingwana in 2009) as 'immoral, offensive'.

The youngest of eight children, Muholi was born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban and studied Advanced Photography at the famed Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg. In 2009 Muholi completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. In 2002 Muholi, who describes themselves as a visual activist, co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women and in 2009 Inkanyiso, a forum for queer and visual (activist) media. They also facilitate access to art spaces for youth practitioners through various participatory projects and continue to provide photography workshops for young people through PhotoXP.[8]

Muholi's photography is a means of 'differencing the canon,' to use Griselda Pollock's phrase (Thomas, 2010: 422) or perhaps critiquing the feminist art that went before it, but failed to anticipate it. Feminist scholars like Desiree Lewis (2005) and Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006) have analysed Muholi's early work as a means of making visible the invisible lives of queer women. Muholi's work uses '"minor intimacies" to push tacit fantasies into being' (Berlant, 1998: 285, 287). In an article from 2010, Kylie Thomas uses Barthes' legendary notion of the 'punctum' as a device for what she terms 'queer reading'. Thomas (2010: 421) argues that Muholi's early work is indexical of their political strategy of 'passing' – 'passing *away*, passing *between* states of gendered being, and passing *through* the prohibitions against making lesbian experience visible and mourning lesbian loss' (emphasis in original). In this way, Muholi queers memorial photography (Thomas, 2010: 421) and renders it a means of both grieving the slow violence enacted upon queer women and the failures of a feminism that refused to see this.

But it is Muholi's more recent series that reconfigures or re-imagines queer activism. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a series of self-portraits which started in 2012 and is ongoing.[9] Muholi appears with a tiara and Rapunzel-like hair knotted around their neck. They are photographed from the side with combs stacked as a titanic head-dress. They wear a wooden stool like a habit and in a different image, porcupine quills grow upwards like well-manicured extensions from their skull. Black rubber gloves are inflated and worn around Muholi's torso and head like an elaborate and regal cape. Sunglasses are piled on top of their head. Surgical masks are worn over their mouth and in their hair. Or they recline in a field, both wearing and disappearing into the grass around them.

In *Ngwane I, Oslo*[10] from 2018, wreath-like Peacock feathers are twisted before Muholi's naked form. The wreath is extravagant, opulent. The 'eyespots' or *ocilli* of certain feathers face forward as if deliberately arranged. Muholi's naked torso behind the wreath feels illicit – the viewers see too much. The coal-black feathers energetically flick outward. Beaded necklaces divide their body in two and accentuate the majesty of the portrait. An almost military head-piece comprises feathers spilling over a basket-like structure. Muholi gazes at the viewer with a challenging indifference. Here too the exaggerated blackness of the subject, costume and background are what shifts the image out of the realm of the benign and into the sphere of political or civil imagination. This is not merely a response to the feminist critics of the camera like Jane Gaines, Lola Young and bell hooks who bemoaned the looking relations of white spectators, this portrait is rather reminiscent of the films of Safi Faye, the Senegalese doyen of African film, who created fictional-ethnographic documentaries that were both poetic and militant but typically situated 'her work and gaze centrally within the communities whose voice she prioritizes' (Thackway, 2003: 151). Her films, and the photographs of Muholi, present the artist-director as the observer and observed, a remarkably personal casting, in other words (Riesco, 2011).

[8] In the artist's statement of the exhibition of *Somnyama Ngonyama* at the Norval Foundation in 2022, Muholi describes themselves as a visual activist who wants to 're-write a Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond.' For a full biography of Muholi see the webpage of the Stevenson Gallery (https://www.stevenson.info/artist/zanele-muholi/biography).

[9] Muholi won the 2019 'Best Photography Book Award' by the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation for *Somnyama Ngonyama: Hail, The Dark Lioness* (https://www.stevenson.info/artist/zanele-muholi/biography).

[10] Muholi juxtaposes isiZulu, their home language, in the titles with the often western names of the places where the photographs were taken. The image can be accessed at: https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/39041.

Somnyama Ngonyama has been exhibited in Norway, Hong Kong, America, England, Argentina, Sweden, Scotland, Germany and South Africa and Muholi credits a life of constant travel and displacement as part of the reason this series came into being. They explain:

> This shuttling around sometimes makes me feel disoriented, disconnected and almost homeless. The culturally dominant images of black women start to infiltrate my soul and function as a constant reminder that such images still inform how black women are perceived here and now. One way that I deal with this exoticised self/other is to exorcise those images through my photography (Muholi, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440).

In *Fisani, Parktown*,[11] from 2016, Muholi wears a necklace and headpiece made from giant safety-pins that form chains and networks around their head and neck. They look away from the camera and again merge with the pitch-black backdrop. Muholi uses household props to challenge racial stereotypes and create portraits that feel like a homage to their mother who was a domestic worker. Time stands still and the viewer is forced to pause, wait and ultimately resist the urge to move on. The work is an act of temporal activism that creates a space of safe (but not naïve) waiting. Exotic dreams become the strategy for revising memory, a revision that eroticises a refusal to forget.

Writing about temporality in this series, Ashraf Jamal (2017: 162) argues that photography is a-chronological, it refuses to be temporally fixed, preferring instead to operate somewhere between the 'then', the 'now' and the 'yet-to-come'. This a-historicity is self-evident in Sherman's *Film Stills* but is also apparent in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Jamal (2017: 162) following Geoff Dyer (2012) argues that 'photographs actually speak more about other photographs', past photographs for instance, than about current reality and wonders why, if this is the case, we still expect photography to explain the world?

Somnyama Ngonyama is important because it signals what Jamal (2017: 161) calls 'a vital reconfiguration of blackness', it exposes *and* employs a 'raced optic' (Jamal, 2017: 161). As Muholi (https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440) themselves explains, '[b]y exaggerating the darkness of my skin tone, I'm reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being black; it is my skin, and the experience of being black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.' Although it's meaning is oblique, what the series tells us about the world, is that it is possible to evade the spectacle of race, the fiction of racial authenticity expected by the viewer, whether in terms of the past, present or future, whilst at the same time owning the 'experience of being black', claiming it, in other words. Jamal (2017: 173) comments, 'I see these photographs as having radically traduced shame: no afflicting shadow lingers in these images in which blackness, applied like any other accessory – black on black – further deflects the photographs from a pathological engine-room of meaning.'

Whilst it is important to acknowledge 'the manner in which [certain bodies have] been positioned and viewed as a site of numerous struggles in post-colonial African discourse' and we see this recognition in Muholi's early work (Matebeni, 2013: 405), Zethu Matebeni (2013: 405), writing about queer intimacy and race, points out that there are other ways of looking, that see beyond colonial constraints, that look in order to see 'pleasure, joy, beauty, intimacy and eroticism'. *Somnyama Ngonyama* drags (pun intended) the Camp performances of Sherman into the realm of racial politics in Africa in the 21st century, but, not unlike Sherman, does so in a way that permits *joyous* looking. The series provides a pastiche of the canonical self-portrait, a carnivalesque parody of the feminist mirror-image, recast for Africa. It alludes to the ethnographic photography (or more rightly pornography) of the colonial project but is somehow less sanctimonious than the portraits of even Sherman who is also trying to undo a way of looking.

Ariella Azoulay (2012: 3) uses the concept of 'civil imagination' to describe a photographic practice that exposes systemic injustice in creative and empowering ways. She believes photography can engender a kind of civil discourse that refuses to identify a community or population with the disaster or injustice inflicted on them. 'Civil discourse is not a fiction' says Azoulay (2012: 3), it is the process by which relations are cultivated within and between the citizens of a particular country and those denied citizenship, whether literally or figuratively. To overcome systemic injustice or oppression, especially that which took place in the past, 'requires an act of imagination' (2012: 3):

> This achievement – the fact of becoming a citizen in practice – sometimes obscures the enormous imaginative leap that was required in order to conceive of subjects as partners in the shaping of the regime who simultaneously possess the right to be protected from it. What is at stake is not the simple exercise of imagining something in one's mind's eye, for example. Rather, I am concerned with the capacity known as 'political imagination,' that is to say, the ability to imagine a political state of being that deviates significantly from the prevailing state of affairs (2012: 3).

[11] Access image at: https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/70.

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Muholi's series is a powerful example of the way political or civil imagination can erode a regime that dehumanises through its failures to recognise and affirm the dignity of its subjects. It also addresses a more universal bigotry, both past and present, via parodic exaggeration that feels decolonial because it mocks and arrogates a stereotypical imaginary of 'Africa'. This observation is perhaps too sweeping to be really helpful, but *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a fairy tale that is necessarily as generalisable as mythology whilst addressing problems that feel especially relevant to and articulate on the South African situation. As Mark Sealy (2022: 6) puts it, '[w]hen photographs knead on colonial meanings and disturb our sense of humanity, reminding us of the pains people have endured and the gains they have made, they can help us to acknowledge that we must hold all the world's memories as precious.' The point is that the imaginative creativity of each portrait is empowering because it is both 'political' in Azoulay's sense *and* playful (meaning it challenges the status quo without voicing overt political arguments). One possibly smiles but it is a smile filled with pathos since one is also moved by the righteous anger behind each image.

In her important work on Black women's satire as a representational strategy and site of political inversion, Jessyka Finley (2016: 236–237), remembers the acerbic wit of stalwart feminist, Florence, 'Flo' Kennedy:

> One of her most quotable jabs targeted a man who was questioning her while she was on the lecture circuit with Gloria Steinem in the 1970s. Addressing Kennedy directly at a lecture in the South, the man stood and asked if she was a lesbian, to which she responded, 'Are you my alternative?'

Finley (2016: 237) points out that 'Kennedy's satiric humor delegitimizes [the audience member's] manhood, by calling into question *his* desirability as a sexual object.' Not unlike Kennedy's retort, Muholi's performances silence the racial and gendered delegitimisation of the art historical canon. Their gaze inverts the authority of the kind of onlooker whose haughty eyes need to be met with dramatic ridicule. Muholi's camera serves as the mirror that draws the 'outlaw position' (Thomas, 2010: 421) into the realm of representation. The images are deeply personal or 'erotic' but they also offer 'spectacles of promise and disappointment' (Strauss, 2014: 471) in so far as they visualise 'corporeal disciplining, violence, and gendered' performativity (Strauss, 2014: 472). I use the term 'erotic' in the way Audre Lorde (1978) used it. For Lorde, 'The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined' (1978: n. p.) but 'our erotic knowledge empowers us' because it is 'a reminder of [our] capacity for feeling' (1978: n. p.).

Somnyama Ngonyama – isiZulu for 'Hail the Dark Lioness' – represents a 'lightness at the heart of blackness, a refusal, through self-objectification, of being objectified in turn' (Jamal, 2017: 172). Muholi provides a playful parody of the performance-driven modes of self-portraiture in which Cindy Sherman operated but, unlike Sherman, employs what bell hooks described as the 'oppositional gaze'. The double consciousness of Du Bois, who recognised the problem of seeing yourself through the eyes of an other, is picked up by Fanon for whom 'this "look," from – so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire' (in hooks, 1992: 116). hooks, however, remembers the way her family and community laughed when encountering television programmes that so artlessly and earnestly represented or misrepresented race in her youth. She thinks of the visual contestation and ridicule they felt as viewers as initiating 'critical, interrogating black looks' (1992: 117). 'The private realm of television screens or dark theatres could unleash the repressed gaze' or 'oppositional gaze' (1992: 118) hoped for by Du Bois and Fanon. Here, specifically black, women spectators of the 1960s could return the gaze, could look 'without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze' (1992: 118). For hooks this was an important step in her understanding of her own right to look. Where Sherman feigns ignorance of the camera and seems to earnestly desire that her viewers will suspend their disbelief, Muholi looks directly at the camera-viewer with an indifference that not only feels oppositional but therefore also queer.

QUEER

For Sara Ahmed (2006: 2), at the most basic level, a queer phenomenology is a means of disorienting us. It directs us toward and away from objects, experiences and ideas. Ahmed (2006: 2) says 'it matters how we arrive at the places we do' and it is this genealogy of ideas or process of arrival that interests me in terms of these disparate artists. Muholi disorients in ways that Sherman did not. Both seem to enjoy the game of dress-up. Both use the camera as an implement of *jouissance*, but where Sherman's *Film Stills* feel like they are endorsing (or, at the very least, indulging) the mechanism they pretend to critique, Muholi's arguments are less emollient. Theirs is a gratifyingly obvious satire, by which I mean exposure or naming of the minstrel show that is demanded by contemporary Art.

Sokari Ekine (2013: 78) identifies two lines of argumentation regarding the politicising of queer identities in Africa. The first is a fundamentalist belief that various religious texts dictate that queer sexualities are un-African

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(see also Baderoon, 2011: 392). The second, emanates from the Global North and specifically a colonial interpretation of African sexuality as perverse, and pathologises Africa as the source of violent homophobia (Ekine, 2013: 78). Muholi responds to both of these narratives via a visuality that is both 'African' and queer. It is a deeply ethical practice, in part, because it is their body that is on display. It presents an optical solution to the problems identified by Ekine and succeeds in creating 'characters' that are aspirational even whilst or because they are acerbic, witty. This fumerism (Willett, Willett and Sherman, 2012: 226) or furious humour is less obvious in the commercial art that seems to reference *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Mehita Iqani (2023: 72–73), for instance, describes fashion designer Rich Mnisi's insta-campaign for his expensive black handbags as indicative of a kind of queer luxury not only because Mnisi is proudly gay or because the advertisements present a naked, muscular, masculine man as the potential user of the handbag but because 'the bold over-emphasis of black tones, in background, body, and the leather of the bag, speaks to a sensibility in which Black pride in the form of a luxurious, minimalist celebration of ebony skin tones is merged with celebratory queer consumerism.' And yet, the campaign takes itself so seriously that it is hard to discern the same undertone of parodic irony that is so powerful in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. In Muholi's photographs, the allusion to historical violence bubbles to the surface to complicate the almost-humour which leads to a feeling of affective dis-ease in the viewer, but is nevertheless irreverent.

The series is also not an example of what Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2022) terms 'elite capture'. In other words, it does not co-opt the rhetoric of queer precarity whilst indulging capitalist aspirations of class or a racial reductionism. It does not reveal one kind of erasure whilst allowing another. Jasbir Puar (2007, 2013: 336) has criticised the contradictions of liberalism in America, where a tolerance of queer politics is used to excuse other kinds of oppression and violence. Homonationalism, as she calls it, is a hermeneutic whereby racialised discourses on security are instrumentalised in the service of anti-blackness even by those who champion the rights of LBGTQIA+ communities. Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama* is not a snapshot of neoliberal multiculturalism. It does not represent the homonationalism of Puar or the elite capture of Táíwò in South African terms. Rather, it is a powerful counterpoint to the anti-blackness, classism and other exclusionary practises of these discourses. Muholi's series reinforces queer, black subjectivities as agentic and able to repeal the soft power that ratifies, for instance, gay-friendly racism. It provides a fantastical and radical alterity from the settler colonialism that is an ally to queer, liberal subject-hood. Muholi's work does not make racism less intelligible in the name of a queer visibility or vice-versa. Instead, their work provides a truly intersectional politics that simultaneously destabilises transphobia and anti-blackness. But unlike their early work, they do not only turn the debate inward in this series but also turn it outward, to include others; the series invites outsiders into the fable. It welcomes an audience to the theatre. In other words, the portraits do not police gender and race but provide a kind of theatre that feels radical because it is both angry and jubilant, both private and public. Even whilst employing an acerbic wit, the discourse is hospitable. Muholi places 'African' and 'Black' in quotation marks by exaggeration but as with the borrowed dogs, this performance is not just about 'passing' or asserting a pseudo-realness, it actually points to something very real, what they have termed a 'gender within gender' (in Baderoon, 2011: 390). The intimate reality of these works is that they re-orient us toward, they humanise a subjectivity and political identity rendered invisible not only by the 'epistemic coloniality' (Ratele, 2020: 3) of the art-world but also that of feminism.

CONCLUSION

Is it fair to compare these photographers as feminists? Does this make sense when they refuse this terminology themselves and regardless of this does the ornery-ness of the photographic medium – its constant need for attention and refusal to know its place (Malcolm, 1997: i) imply that their art cannot really do the political work of feminism? I have argued that the artworks of both these artists prick or wound (like *punctum*), but also stitch these artists and the viewers of this art together through an 'ideal of publicness' (Berlant, 1998: 284) that celebrates *and* critiques the too easy construction of race and gender in the media and Arts. This is the function of not just feminist labour, but all good art. It binds us even as it exposes our prejudices, failures and short-comings. Perhaps this is what public intimacy looks like.

But, it is also important to ask whether their art really involves a leap of the imagination, a rupture of intellectual boundaries? It is surely plausible that that which is intended to fracture a mode of representation, in fact, reinforces it. What, then, in the words of Ariella Azoulay (2012: 3), is political imagination and does it require a shift in the way we see reality or is it enough that the imaginary is representative of or iconic of reality? An iconic image is one that is culturally produced and becomes mythic because of its religious, political or social significance and recognisability. People who are the subjects of icons can themselves become stereotypes and lose their personal individuality. The icon can be affective and transformative or it can blunt the viewer, desensitise them. My analyses of both artists involved a kind of over-seeing and under-seeing but the point was that Sherman's *Film Stills* are still iconic – they make a certain culture of looking more visible – but they also visualise her own infatuation with the iconography of Hollywood. They do not simply critique or call out, they further the project of filmic scopophilia.

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Somnyama Ngonyama on the other hand is critical in a way that exposes current and past tropes of bigotry and leaves one changed by this recognition. Both artists created work that is powerful in its naming of visual mythology, but Muholi succeeds in providing the reader with a call to arms, an invitation to political imagination.

Berlant says it is important to recognise the extent to which 'intimacy' (and the tension between desire and therapy at its core) is world-building. The world-building of Sherman, as this article has argued, is illustrative of desire, and this is immensely helpful, but the world built by Muholi is therapeutic because it reveals the ways desire can pervert reality. In both cases, life writing has succeeded in slowing us down, prompting the thought that pace is also a *feminist* or, more rightly, a political concern. Finally, the self-portraits of Sherman and Muholi demonstrate that our aptitude for ethical world-building can progress over time and become better at producing slow intimacies.

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