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# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ART

NOVEMBER 1ST, 2016

**INCONVERSATION**

## ZANELE MUHOLI with Allie Biswas

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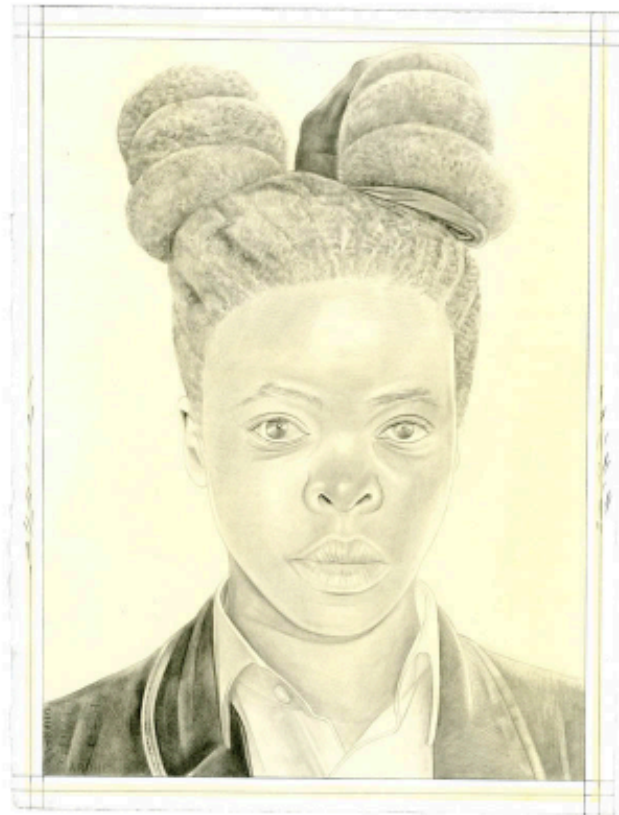
Installation view: *Faces and Phases 10*, 2016. Courtesy Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Defining herself as a visual activist, South African artist Zanele Muholi uses photography to record lesbian and transgender lives in her country. Provoked by a lack of LGBTQ visual histories, Muholi took it upon herself to create an archive of images that documented her community. “Faces and Phases,” the artist’s most powerful project to date, began in 2006. It is an ongoing black-and-white portraiture series that documents the lives of her friends. The series, which currently comprises more than 300 images, is a celebration in which bodies are made visible, as well as an act of resistance in the face of persisting hate crimes against LGBTQ people. Most importantly, as Muholi has pointed out, the photographs first of all look at human beings before gender is attached.

“Faces and Phases” and “Somnyama Ngonyama”—a series of self-portraits Muholi began in 2015—are on view through January 23 at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, in Cincinnati, Ohio, as part of the 2016 FotoFocus Biennale.

**Allie Biswas (Rail):** When did activism become such a central part of who you are?

**Zanele Muholi:** I was born in South Africa in the '70s, so I'd say I'm a child of apartheid. I was aware of all the systems that displaced the black person in South Africa, whether that be the education system or the medical care system. The poor education in place did not qualify you to become anything afterwards. It really couldn't make you into anybody. I think that was my level of conscientiousness. That was the beginning of questioning what was around me. Looking at my life, looking at my sisters, looking at my family, and looking at the black experience, as a child, left me with so many questions. I was aware of not having a family history that was produced by my family.



Portrait of Zanele Muholi. Pencil on paper by Phong Bul.  
From a photo by Zanele Muholi.

**Rail:** Are you referring to the role that photographs play in creating a history?

**Muholi:** A camera became a luxury, a tool for the rich. It wasn't for any ordinary family. I saw my family pictures that had been photographed by a relative, who documented my sister's wedding. I was curious, because it had been going on forever: there is this man who is photographing the neighborhood, who is photographing women mostly. I thought, where does all of this go? And up until a later stage it really freaked me out to think that there is this person who has produced a massive kind of body of work—a community archive—and when he dies, nobody possesses the negatives. I could say that this life experience forced me to produce my documents: to question the existence of a people that was never taken seriously and is nonexistent in the archive.

**Rail:** What about your realization relating to how black people were being documented outside of this family context?

**Muholi:** As you grow up and go to different museums, and fairs, and exhibitions, that's when you realize how important black lives are. You have this image, maybe by Malick Sidibé, from the 1960s, and you wonder where those people are. You look at the work of Seydou Keita and you think to yourself. "These people—Africans—have documented their livelihood and their people back then—how is it that this is not happening now?" For me, my work has been focused on families, friendships, and relationships that are shared over a period of time.

**Rail:** In particular, you are making a record of the black lesbian and trans community in South Africa. How did you begin to think about what kind of visual documentation of these people already existed within your country?

**Muholi:** Before the museum there was a space that was there for me, that is still there for me: the Lesbian Herstory Project in New York. I came to New York to carry out work for my thesis, which was specifically looking at lesbian visual history in South Africa. I was assisted by Shawnta Smith, who worked for the organization at that time. The Lesbian Herstory Project is major, but might not be known by outsiders.



**Rail:** What is the purpose of the organization?

**Muholi:** It's a space that archives the lives of lesbians in the U.S., especially lesbians of color. And I guess that it is inclusive now to transgender persons. It has been running for quite a while, and it gives you access to history, texts, and visuals. It's a space that is supposed to be used for life skills, or life orientation skills, and it looks at lesbian histories over a period of time: those who were there before us, those who are no more, and those who exist currently. You have the work of Cheryl Clarke there, you have the work of the late Pat Parker. You'd find texts that were written by Audre Lorde, which was massive, because you could only imagine Audre. We cannot imagine a piece of text like that was written maybe in 1975, 1979. It is very, very important for people here to know of this archive.

**Rail:** How did your work develop at Ryerson, where you were studying for your MA?

**Muholi:** The first year I had to be there most of the time, but during the second half of the program I traveled and presented at different conferences, because I needed to reach out and distribute. The work that I was producing wasn't for me, it was for larger audiences. I wanted to help them understand what was going on in South Africa at that time. In 2008, a few months after I arrived in Toronto, a well-known lesbian soccer player in Johannesburg—Eudy Simelane—was brutally raped and murdered. It was at that time that I thought, *Oh my god, I'm here, I should have been at home*. I needed to work on these issues and document these incidents.

**Muholi:** When I became a teenager, I loved photographs—but there was nothing cute about those photographs. My first girlfriend had a point-and-shoot camera, and she claims to be the person who made me because she gave me that camera. [Laughter.] I look at the pictures of our interaction and how nice those images were. They are beautiful images of a freed person who was longing to live and also trying to heal using images or photography. It was about connecting with the self in different ways. That's how I look at myself in the picture. When I had the point-and-shoot I made so many mistakes. Like, I made *a lot of* mistakes.



Zanele Muholi, *Ntozakhe II, Parktown*, 2016. Silver gelatin print, 43 × 32 inches. © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Rail:** But there was a relatively big gap between this time in your life and the moment you started studying photography and taking pictures for a living, is that right?

**Muholi:** It came very late. I was at Market Photo Workshop when I was twenty-nine.

**Rail:** Had you been deliberately moving towards this, or were you not so strategic?

**Muholi:** I had been given a camera by a couple of people at that point, and I guess these people were saying to me, this is your calling, give it a try. And it came at a period when I needed to be healed the most. I wasn't willing to sit and speak to a shrink, to talk about my life, which was a mess at the time. I can't say it was something that I was destined to do, but at some stage photography saved me.

**Rail:** David Goldblatt, the founder of Market Photo Workshop, saved you in many ways, didn't he?

**Muholi:** After working as an activist for so many years, I didn't have any money. People who work as activists for NGOs, they don't make money. So I basically couldn't afford to pay for university. I approached David in 2006 at a show and asked him if he could help me. David is the man who gave me an education. He is the forefather of photography in South Africa and one of the best men—he has changed many people's lives. I could say he is a visual activist himself, because most of his work is based on politics, though he owns the position of just being a photographer. At some stage in my life I needed someone to look at my work—to mentor me, to read and process the work without looking with the queer eye. By looking at my work he was looking as an outsider, but also as a parent. If he had a child like me, how would he react?

**Rail:** It must have felt revelatory to have someone believe in you.

**Muholi:** Of course. You need that. There are not many people like that. I was saved, and therefore it is important for me to help others.

**Rail:** You talk a lot about photography as a healing mechanism.

**Muholi:** You know, when you have a camera in your hand you have this freedom and a different way of articulating yourself. There are no words that can describe that situation or how you feel at that time. I feel I shoot better than I write. I keep notebooks, of course. I move with them, I sit somewhere maybe for hours, traveling between different spaces. But I photograph more. I would say my brain is more on the visual end, and I tell my stories better with the camera than anything else.

**Rail:** Your project, "Faces and Phases," is the biggest story that you have been telling so far. You recently marked its tenth anniversary with an exhibition at Stevenson in Johannesburg. You have talked about this work as the beginning of a visual archive, the first of its kind in your country.



**Muholi:** “Faces and Phases” is about my community. I live in South Africa and I wanted to say that there are hundreds of black lesbians who are existing at this time. There is no better way that I could tell that story than by producing visuals that speak to their existence. There is no better way in which the next person could see what I’m talking about. The photographs have done wonders. They have taken me to spaces that have allowed me to connect with different groups of people that I’m still connected with. For the participants, for the first time in their lives, they could see themselves. Before, yes, their photos may have been taken by someone. But that “someone” was a person they did not know, who either “othered” their lives, or simply just didn’t care as much. Also, I guess it happens to be the first project in Africa to be done by a person of the same community as the person being photographed. That connection and that personhood has tied me to them.

**Rail:** What is also critical about the project is that you have photographed many of the same participants over a decade. You are recording how their lives have developed, how they have physically changed. To me, this is a way of giving their personal identity even more validity, in the sense that you are saying, this is not just about their sexuality—it is about recording the life of this person.

**Muholi:** I started the project with lesbians, and some of them maybe became bisexual along the way, or some of the people that I knew as lesbians became trans men, or realized that maybe they were not that. For me, it is not even about how the picture was taken, it’s about how that person and I met. Before the image is realized, we’re talking about this relationship. When I started, all I knew was that there wasn’t positive imagery of our people. For the most part, it was academics who were interested in black lesbian lives writing about those black lesbian lives, but they were not our lives, as written by us.

**Rail:** You are quick to define yourself as an activist, rather than as an artist.

**Muholi:** I am a visual activist before I am an artist. I use visuals to push a political agenda. Remember that, for the longest time, queer art or queer lives were not part of the visual arts scene, and if they were, it was in relation to HIV and AIDS. Nobody thought of how the visual of LGBTQ people could become part of the art, and how the artwork is actually about activism.

**Rail:** So does art for you play a secondary role?

**Muholi:** When I enter any space I am clear to say I am a visual activist. You know, sometimes art does not matter. I come from a place where, when you say you study art, you are questioned about how you’re going to pay for the bills. There has been a lot of stigma attached to being an artist. The professions that matter there are being a doctor, or a nurse, or a teacher. But nobody would think about how we can use art on a daily basis to heal or deal with psychological issues, and so on.

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**Rail:** The prelude to “Faces and Phases” was an organization you co-founded with Donna Smith in 2002 called FEW (Forum for the Empowerment of Women), which is still operating. Can you talk about how this, in many ways, became the genesis for the work you made later on?

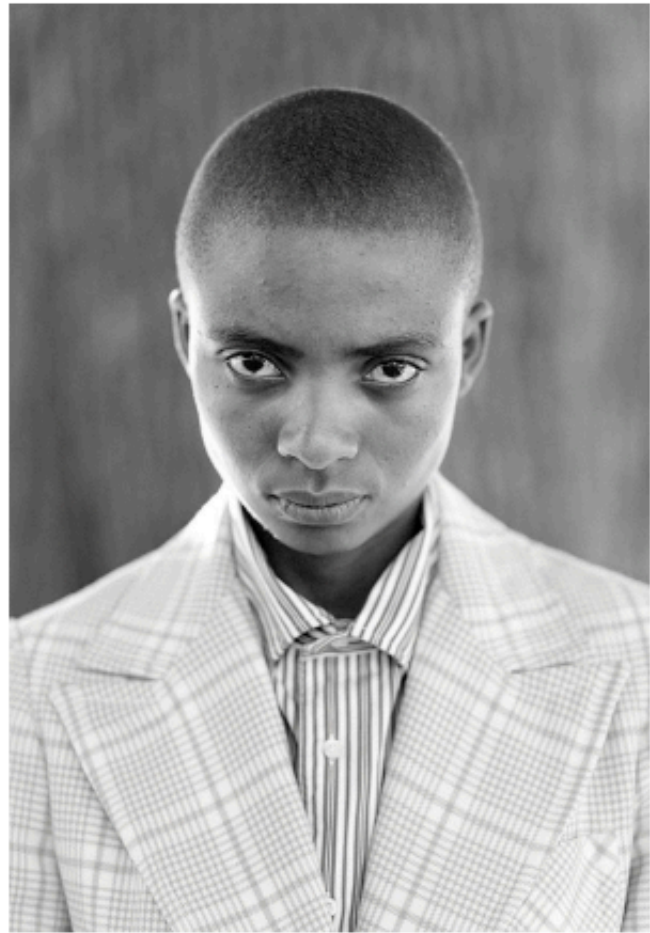
**Muholi:** We didn't have a black lesbian organization in our country. So Donna Smith and I started something. She's originally from Jamaica and came to South Africa for a conference, and she ended up staying. In the organization we had a few youngsters who were quite active and one of them was Busi Sigasa. She'd be your typical Audre Lorde, if I could say so. She was a poet, a spoken-word artist, and an activist, and she used her words to explain or relate to the situation that was taking place at that time. At the age of twenty-five she succumbed to HIV-related complications—three incidents of hate crime left her with HIV. She passed in 2007, in March. I think that was the worst loss that I'd experienced in my life because we shared so much. The experiences she had at home, and how she related to her family members. I think that sometimes people need a space to speak, and to have people they can confide in. Before her, I had tried to capture some portraits—and because I was still learning I messed up big-time—but the image that really changed my life was the one of her. Before Busi's passing, I had also lost Buhle Msibi who was a poet, a lesbian mother and spoken-word artist. As we speak now, I am commemorating my mum's passing, she passed on September 27, 2009. I would say that “Faces and Phases” has been about loss over a period of time.



**Rail:** You mentioned before that there isn't a precedent for the work that you've been carrying out over the last ten or so years. How does that make you feel, as the person in your country who is instigating this visual record?

**Muholi:** It's not even about me. It's about a community. It's about us. I just happen to be a messenger with the camera. I had people who trusted me, who agreed to participate, hence I call the people in my photos class participants. We're doing it together, you know? I happened to be here in this period in our lives and I noticed a lack of something, which I took on. I thought that something needed to be done, because you can't keep on complaining about what we do not have. We know that we are capable of changing how the systems are constructed.

**Rail:** How do you deal with the risk that is attached to the work that you do? I know that you have personally experienced aggressive responses. I'm referring specifically to the incident in 2012 when more than twenty external hard drives were stolen from your flat in Cape Town. And, funnily enough, nothing else was taken.



Zanele Muholi, *Lerato Dumse, Syracuse, New York Upstate*, 2015. Silver gelatin print. 34 x 24 inches. © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Muholi:** Silence is dangerous. Silence is poisonous. Because even when you're not saying anything, you're still being attacked. People will still have a perception of you and say things about you that are nasty, even when you haven't said a damn thing. It is better to speak out, and, that way, if anything did happen to you, you know that you had at least said something—people have been hurt, people have been killed, people have been violated in different ways—without saying *anything*. They are attacked just because of their race, just because of their sexuality, just because of how they express their gender. So, personally, I would rather take a risk.

**Rail:** And the participants in “Faces and Phases”—many of them very young—are also taking a risk by agreeing to have their photo taken by you.

**Muholi:** The participants in my work need to be out of the closet, they need to be over the age of consent, and they need to be clear about who they are—because they will be seen. I don't want to expose someone to danger when they are not ready. So most of the people who are in my photo class are out, and they already know who they are. I'm also at risk, but I'm also at a space in my life where—should I die tomorrow, should anything happen to me—I know that I've said something. There is nothing wrong with what I'm doing, I'm just writing a history that has forever been omitted by histories. It is a history that exists in South Africa. And I'm doing it simply. I'm doing it by giving the visual to back up the laws that are already in place. To say: South Africa, you cannot have a constitution without the visual, you cannot talk about Chapter Nine and talk of a Bill of Rights without presenting a visual that connects with all of those rights that are given to us but that are also violated in our country. You cannot talk of the Civil Union Act of 2006, which is turning ten this year, without bringing in those same-sex couples that have married over a period of time. So for me, it is clear. Bring the visual into place, let the world see what you're talking about. Let the next generation of youngsters, who are born as we speak and who then come out tomorrow, have a sense of our existence. Let's shape the reference books that mark or trace our existence in this world. We can't theorize our lives. Theory is good, but let's show as well. You know, let's be practical about those theories.

**Rail:** Do you think that you have been able to change how art that relates to LGBTQ culture is considered in a South African context?

**Muholi:** Before me, you didn't have in South Africa—in Johannesburg specifically—many black lesbians who went to galleries. I set a trend. I changed how things were done. I said, come and see yourselves. Six years ago I had an exhibition in Cape Town and I brought lesbians to the gallery. These people happened to be in a gallery for the first time in their lives, because why would they need to visit a gallery when they couldn't see themselves there? I was trying to change the space and the setting. And it worked! Similarly, in 2010, when South Africa was hosting the World Cup, I was asked to contribute my work to mainstream spaces. But lesbians didn't have access to those spaces, so something had to change.



Installation view: *Faces and Phases 10*, 2016. Courtesy Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg.

**Rail:** What about changing attitudes elsewhere, within the gallery and museum? How did you feel about your show at the Brooklyn Museum last year?



**Muholi:** Showing at the Venice Biennale, The Brooklyn Museum and Documenta—it wasn't about the art, it was about the politics of representation or re-writing art; it was about using my activism within those spaces, in which I said, "We are here. We have been here before. And we exist." It was about having more than 150 portraits of black people in a museum space. The Brooklyn Museum had the first black lesbian from Africa to showcase LGBTQ people. Surely, if people were to be fair and honest, they were thinking, *Brooklyn Museum, why did you bring this person here? Why not have a black lesbian artist from America engage with Zanele? Why not bring her in as a collaborator?* I also had so many questions, but at the same time I was thinking, *For so long we have had Americans exploit Africa.* It was, in a way, like a flipping of the coin. It was exciting. It was educational. It had its own challenges, but we made it. It was not my portrait that was all over those walls, it was *our* visual. And, in that way, there was a new dialogue in place, questioning how free we are as Africans in the diaspora, and as Africans who are written about in the American syllabus. I'm just trying to make sense of things, like any other person who might be producing art, who might be writing for academia, or might be screaming to be freed in different ways, and is using any form of whatever that makes sense to them.

**Rail:** Lastly, is it true that you have a tattoo of the female reproductive system?

**Muholi:** [*Laughter.*] A friend of mine went to get a tattoo and I just thought that I needed to have something meaningful. It's of the fallopian tubes. I wanted something that would connect every single person. We all come from here, and it doesn't matter what gender you become. I wanted to have a tattoo that could connect anybody and everybody in whatever space.

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#### CONTRIBUTOR

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ALLIE BISWAS is a writer and editor. She is based in London and New York.