

PICTURING ME

by Carl Collison

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“I am hoping to show younger lesbian women out there, who might be struggling with their sexuality, that it is now our turn – our Constitution allows us to live freely,” says 26-year-old Zelda Mahlati of her reason for participating in the photo-voice workshop spearheaded by award-winning young photographer, Zanele Muholi, together with the Cape Town-based Triangle Project.



Figure 1: File photo Zelda Mahlati, Faces & Phases (2008)

Mahlathi, Triangle Project’s Paarl Community Coordinator, is one of 16 young lesbian women who have chosen to take part in this workshop which seeks to afford women, who might otherwise not have had the opportunity to do so, the capacity in which to document their own realities photographically. “This is a project through which we are aiming to provide young women with agency over how they’re represented,” says the photographer, who once told me that “photography is about communication”. Initiated in 2004 by her as a way of “giving back to the community”, the project was given its second wind when Triangle Project came on board. “When Triangle approached me hoping to collaborate on this project it was like a dream come true,” she says. Muholi then, along with her new fellow collaborators, selected the young women they felt would be best served through participation in this initiative. “I recommended some women I thought needed to have their voices heard while Triangle selected their own, with an emphasis on women from the more rural areas of the Western Cape, such as Paarl and Worcester etc.

This was, I thought, particularly necessary and exciting as opportunities such as these rarely - if ever - come their way.”

Aptly title *Ndim’lo (This is me)*, the project is, for the politically fervent Muholi, no doubt taking her one step closer towards her ideal of creating a “school for women photographers ... or simply a space in which people can speak out without being judged; a safe haven in which they can feel worthy”. Detractors might question the need for such a space, especially given that South Africa’s much-vaunted Constitution does, as Mahlati so rightfully points out, enshrine the protection of gay rights for all South Africans. The brutal reality on the ground is, however (as most lesbian women – especially those of colour – could attest), exactly what so urgently calls for the need for this kind of supportive space. Despite having secured these hard-fought-for rights, the broader majority of South Africa’s lesbian community still live under the ever-present threats of discrimination, stigmatization and, that most brutal of practices so favoured by some South African men, corrective rape. This is, of course, in addition to the alienation and depersonalization many experience within the very community in which they – naturally – expect to be welcomed as equals: the gay community itself. The fact that most of the gay community’s ‘safe spaces’ are run by men (particularly white men) speaks volumes of the extent to which, firstly, this community is divided along racial and gender lines.

As though hoping to illustrate this disparity between ‘experienced’ and ‘on-paper-only’ rights, Muholi asked participants to interpret the different clauses within this Constitution photographically. The results of this, the group’s first task, was, according to Muholi, “very interesting. What particularly stood out for me was the work done by a couple in the group. Because they are homeless – they live under a bridge in an area close to town – they spoke of their homelessness. They also looked at issues relating to motherhood and racism – issues which affected them directly.”



Figure 2 & 3: Homeless lesbian couple making fire to boil water for tea under the bridge in which they have been living for over a month. Photos by Zanele Muholi

The highlighting and exploration of these issues, which she, by her own admission, had not tackled in her expansive body of work only served to secure her belief in the necessity for this “needs-based” project. “I can’t,” she says with trademark frankness, “tackle all the issues affecting lesbian women. We, as a people, need to start telling the world of our realities and break the perceptions of us imposed on us by society. This would help to break all the negativity that comes with self-hatred. Also, as Black people, we have had our histories obliterated by our ‘masters’. At some point we need to take ownership of this and start redressing it. This is what this project is hoping to start doing.” Echoing these statements is Triangle Project Researcher, Jill Henderson, who, in a post-mortem of the Swiss-made documentary *Are You a Boy or a Girl?*, screened during the group’s first workshop session, questioned the filmmakers’ intentions by saying: “What kept going through my mind was ‘who is telling, controlling and owning this story?’ But more importantly ‘how do we begin telling our own stories?’ We need to find a way to do things differently – starting with this project.”

Though it is unclear who the ‘we’ is Henderson was referring to, one could safely presume that she is hoping, as Muholi does, that the different sectors of the gay rights movement and its affiliates would come together in an effort to better address the many challenges facing the black lesbian community. Says Muholi: “There is so much fragmentation in our quest to address these issues – I want to do away with it. There are scholars, academics, activists, subjects, ‘victims’. We need to do it together in order to succeed.”



Figure 2: Paying attention is the 2009 Photo XP participants during one of the workshops held at Triangle Project offices, Mowbray
Photo by Olivia Coetzee

So, aside from the publication and travelling exhibition, which this project will culminate in, what is this self-proclaimed ‘visual activist’ hoping to achieve for herself through this project? “Well, I want to be able to sleep at night knowing that I have imparted some of the knowledge and skills I have onto others who might be in need of them. My wish is that we all get to share the skills we possess.”

Passion, principle and political purpose - this is what makes up Muholi’s world. This is her.

For more details on the Ndim’lo project, visit www.zanemuholi.com and www.triangle.org.za