

Profile:

Digital visual activism: A profile of Inkanyiso

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The first thing that every reader should think of when entering this platform is Queer Activism = Queer Media.

(Inkanyiso, no date)

The Wordpress site, Inkanyiso, is an online space that documents issues relating to queer activism in South Africa. The site contains reports on events and exhibitions of interest to feminist and LGBTQI activists and also contains personal testimony, life stories and poetry.

Many of the contributors to the site are members of the non-profit organisation Inkanyiso, founded by South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi in 2009. The organisation provides skills training for LGBTQI artists and writers in South Africa, providing a much-needed platform for their work. On the site the organisation's objectives are described in the following way:

Inkanyiso's focus is on Visual Arts Et Media Advocacy and visual literacy training. *We Produce. Educate. Disseminate* information... to many audiences especially those who are often marginalized or sensationalized by the mainstream media. (Inkanyiso, no date)

The site provides a way for people to be informed and to connect with others both inside and outside of the country. Based on the comments made by readers of the site, Inkanyiso provides a critical resource. In the South African context where there is widespread homophobia and where lesbian women are subject to systemic social and physical violence, digital spaces such as Inkanyiso provide a space of community and to some extent, of psychological refuge.

Activist work has always been a central component of Muholi's visual practice and the Inkanyiso site makes clear that Muholi's visual activism is by no means limited to photography or to the space of the gallery. Her photographic works have been exhibited in galleries across the world and she has achieved

international acclaim for her work. In 2013 the artist was made an Honorary Professor of the University of the Arts/Hochschule für Künste Bremen and was the recipient of both the Prince Claus and the Carnegie awards. Her work was also featured as part of the South African exhibition at the 55th Venice Biennale. Muholi understands the exhibition of her work in gallery spaces to be a form of visual activism. Her beautiful, carefully composed, black-and-white photographic portraits that assert the presence of lesbian women are often accompanied by works that present a fundamental challenge to the space of the gallery and to those viewing the exhibition. Such interventions include video-works documenting the funerals of black South African lesbians who have been raped and murdered, and works rendered in blood.

Her extensive portrait series, “Faces and Phases,” is an excellent example of how the artist is fusing aesthetics and activism in her work. Muholi began the series in 2006 and it represents her ongoing attempt to create a visual archive of lesbian, and in particular, black lesbian lives. The Inkanyiso site contains profiles of several of the people that Muholi has photographed and in this way offers a space for the narratives of those she photographs to be widely circulated. One of the women whose portrait forms part of “Faces and Phases” and whose narrative accompanies her photograph on the site is freelance artist Oyama Mbopa. Her description of why she decided to work with Muholi conveys her understanding of how their collaboration constitutes visual activism:

I've known Zanele since I was 16yrs old. She's one of those outspoken activists that had felt that enough was enough and if someone didn't take a stand and challenge our country's Constitution and fight for her human rights. When she told me about the Photo Project I was looking forward to the 2nd edition because I also felt that my picture would help assist other LGBTi people to know that they are not alone in this struggle. (Inkanyiso, 2013)

The Inkanyiso site offers a space for dialogic exchange on issues such as access to treatment for transgendered transition. Njabulo Masuku's post “Frustrations of a transgender man” expresses the challenges he has faced in seeking medical care and support as a transgendered person in South Africa (Masuku, 2013). This was followed by a response published four days later by Sbu Kheswa, an activist who works with the transgender organisation GenderDynamix in Cape Town (Kheswa, 2013). These position pieces relating personal experiences were followed by a response by Transgender and Intersex Africa (TIA), an organisation campaigning for the rights of trans people in South Africa. The TIA piece

acknowledges the struggles of trans and intersex people in the country and at the same time uses the testimonies of Masuku and Kheswa to argue that:

Trans* organisational funding is one of the biggest problems at the moment, most of us don't even know if our organisations will still exist in the coming year as funding is very difficult to come by. Adding the total number of staff members at TIA and Gender Dynamix equals to 9 people. We cannot expect 9 people to lead and take charge of a trans* movement that includes thousands of trans* people. We all need to own the movement and be the change we want to see in the world. (Transgender and Intersex Africa, 2013)

These exchanges provide an example of how the Inkanyiso site provides a space for critical debate on a wide range of issues affecting LGBTQI people in South Africa and beyond. Inkanyiso is a space of documentation and history-making that chronicles not only the ongoing violence faced by black lesbians in the country but also their dreams, struggles, achievements and hopes. Along with blog sites such as human rights activist Melanie Judge's "Queery";¹ The Forum for the Empowerment of Women website² and in particular the Few Tech Voices Project which aims to empower lesbian women to use new media to address gender-based violence; and Free Gender, the Khayelitsha-based black lesbian organisation,³ Inkanyiso is playing a key role in fostering the production of queer media in South Africa.

Endnotes

1. Available at <<http://queery.oia.co.za>>.
2. Available at <<http://www.few.org.za>>.
3. Available at <<http://freegender.wordpress.com>>.

References

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