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On Representation(s): Art, violence and the political imaginary of South Africa

The purpose of this article is to explore the multiple layers of representation which occur in the South Africa Pavilion at the Art Biennale in Venice, in order to understand how they constitute and affect the state's political imaginary. By analysing three artworks (David Koloane's *The Journey*, Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years next to his heart*, and Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases*) which were exhibited in the 2013 Pavilion, two key arguments emerge: 1) in this context artistic representation can be understood as a form of political representation; and, 2) these artists are simultaneously state and citizenry representatives. A tension emerges between the political imaginary desired by the South African state and the political imaginary enacted by its representatives. The article draws on seven months of participant observation fieldwork at the Biennale, which included 76 interviews with people associated with the South Africa Pavilion, including government representatives, exhibition organisers, artists, and visitors. Part I explores the concept of representation in order to establish the two philosophical trajectories (political and artistic) with which this article engages – with particular reference to Michael Saward's framework of the representative claim. Part II explores the multiple representative claims which the three artists and their artworks enact.

Key words: representation, art, violence, Biennale, South Africa.

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Every two years around 85 states stage national pavilions at the Art Biennale in Venice (the Biennale). Membership of the Biennale is highly political, dependent on recognition by the Italian Government and other member states. Permanent member states – under half of the participants – are for the main part the geopolitical axes of the mid-twentieth century, a grouping that predominantly emerges from post-war Europe. The US, Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, Israel, Japan and Egypt (to name a few) reside side by side in architecturally distinct art embassies at the geographical centre of the Biennale, the *Giardini* (gardens). Semi-permanent member states – those with time-limited participation rights – are largely emerging out of periods of authoritarian rule or conflict to assert their position in the international community. South Africa, Argentina, Kosovo, Turkey, Indonesia, Lebanon and Chile are examples. These states exhibit inside converted warehouses in the *Arsenale* (arsenal), arms-length from the permanent members, under the watchful eye of an active naval base next door. Temporary member states – those who have to apply each year to participate – are often post-colonial states, or states whose political activities make the permanent members uneasy. Zimbabwe is a case in point. The exhibitions of these states are dotted around the city alongside those of nations which the Biennale does not officially recognise as states, such as Taiwan and Palestine.

Amid these geo-political cradles of influence in Venice, and the symbolic struggles over state power and legitimacy captured by the Biennale, the issue of representation – both political and artistic – is paramount. How states represent themselves through art affects how they are perceived and received by the international community, itself constituted through the exposition. This representation also reflects how states understand themselves at the national level. Artists become political representatives, selected (rather than elected) to represent the state, while art becomes the medium through which representation occurs.

The purpose of this article is to explore the multiple layers of representation which occur at the Biennale in order to understand how they constitute and affect the state's political imaginary, specifically in relation to South Africa. During the cultural boycott of apartheid (1968-1993), South Africa was banned from participating in the Biennale. It was not until the prospect of political change and democratic elections emerged that the state was invited to return. South Africa's contemporary participation in the Biennale is marked by this historically tense relationship. Its first national pavilion as a semi-permanent member in 2013 made efforts to show the breadth of the state's artistic output since the end of apartheid – to reinsert its art history back into the Biennale.¹ Three artworks in this exhibition stand out for how they draw attention to remembering, recording, and restoring violence as key acts of representation in post-apartheid South Africa. These artworks are David Koloane's *The Journey*, Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years next to his heart*, and Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases*. Each artwork captures how the pervasive practices of discrimination and violence live on in South Africa, questioning what it means to represent a nation-state and citizenry that is in flux.

By undertaking a close analysis of these artworks, two key arguments emerge, specifically in relation to South Africa. First, in the context of the Biennale, artistic representation can be understood as a form of political representation.² The normative position contained in this argument posits that conceptions of representation should be expanded in order to more fully grapple with the politics that occurs through artistic processes outside of the bounds of the state. Second, artists at the Biennale are simultaneously state and citizenry representatives. They represent the state as well as the claims of citizen groups – the latter most often occurs

¹ During the preceding decade (1993-2013) South Africa was a sporadic temporary member of the Biennale. In 2013 the Government secured a ten-year lease on an exhibition space, making South Africa a semi-permanent member.

² This argument extends the idea that art is a radical form of political participation in times of political transition (Garnsey 2016).

through their artworks. In the 2013 South Africa Pavilion, the artists interrogated the state of the nation through the lens of the past. A tension arose between the political imaginary desired by the state and the political imaginary enacted by its representatives.³

The article adopts an interpretive standpoint, drawing on seven months of participant observation fieldwork at the Biennale, which included 76 interviews with people associated with the South Africa Pavilion, including government representatives, exhibition organisers, artists, Biennale staff members, and visitors, as well as archival research.⁴ As such, the claims made throughout are particular, rather than universal, referring specifically to the South African case study. The article deliberately engages two research approaches – the analytical methodology of political theory and the narrative prose of art theory – in order to arrive at the discursive meditation and ‘self-reflectiveness required to understand the complexities of visual global politics’ (Bleiker 2015, p.872).

Part I briefly explores the concept of representation in order to establish the two philosophical trajectories with which this article engages. Part II analyses artworks by Koloane, Williamson and Muholi, exploring the multiple forms of representation which these artists and artworks enact.

The clash of representations

The concept of representation encompasses a wide range of meanings, approaches, and emphases for different areas of study. Broadly speaking, political representation remains

³ The concept of the political imaginary being engaged broadly relates to the ways in which political identities, groups, communities, and states are constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves to be part of them (Anderson 2006).

⁴ Interviews were conducted May - December 2013 in Italy and May - November 2014 in South Africa. Statements made in interviews are non-attributable to individual people, only their titles will appear. Where a name appears, the quote is attributed with their permission.

most commonly conceived as a ‘substantive acting for others’ (Pitkin 1967). That is, the process through which governments and their officials are responsive to constituents, which in turn establishes the legitimacy of democratic institutions. How this process occurs and what it achieves is the subject of continued debate (Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008, Shapiro *et al.* 2010, Brito Vieira 2017). Struggles over the meaning of political representation continue to captivate large swaths of political theory. Efforts to define political representation highlight its contested semantic domain (Sintomer 2013) as well as the impurity of the concept (Disch 2012).

The same can be said of artistic representation, although art theory appears somewhat more comfortable with the ambiguity of the concept. Artistic representation most often relates to the manner in which meaning is communicated through signs and symbols (Ferne 1995, pp.358-360; Hall 1997). How this representation functions aesthetically rather than mimetically, and what the value of this communication is – power, knowledge, or myth production – remains the subject of discussion within art theoretical discourse (see Pollock 1988, Nochlin 1999). Representation in relation to art also often bears the implication that artworks resemble ‘real life’ objects. Such representation (or naturalism) in art is sometimes denigrated as being aesthetically unsophisticated or as limiting interpretation. Representation in these terms can be pejorative.

The multifarious understandings of representation across both political and artistic domains mean that the concept remains open to a variety of interpretations. While this may cause confusion within the literature, this article is less interested in pinpointing a correct theory of representation. Rather, it seeks to understand what political and artistic representation are *doing*, and what claims are being made about representation, through close interpretive engagement with an empirical case study.

Despite its conceptual pluralism, the word representation contains an inherent paradox which remains foundational to most discussions of the concept regardless of disciplinary boundaries. That is, the paradox of simultaneous presence and absence: ‘the presence that comes from being *re-presented*, and the absence that comes from needing to be *re-presented*’ (Brito Vieira and Runciman 2008). Representatives stand in place of absent constituents, in order to present the concerns of constituents to government. Signs and symbols signify absent objects and ideas in order to impart knowledge about their value. The act, or event, of representing involves the implicit presence of the person, group, object, or idea being represented, at the same time as it necessitates their absence. The dynamic potential of representation simultaneously emerges from its multiple modes of operation (political, artistic) which are connected by this underlying presence-absence paradox.

Until recently aesthetics has been largely sidelined in discussions of political representation, having been perceived at best as an analogy of political representation and at worst as a distraction from politics. This is despite the aesthetic turn in international political theory being relatively long established. Recent scholarship on political representation has begun to recognise the value of aesthetics and the close relationship between aesthetic and political representation (Ankersmit 2002, Saward 2010), as well as to revive the performative and imaginative aspects of political representation which are largely overlooked in foundational accounts (Brito Vieira 2017, Disch 2012). This scholarship shares key ideas about political representation being a dynamic and creative act constituted through a process of exchange. Political representation contains an aesthetic moment because the represented has to be evoked by the representative and judged by the represented (Saward 2010). In this moment emerges a gap between the represented and the representative (Ankersmit 2002): this gap is the very location of politics (Bleiker 2001, p.510).

The aesthetic moment and performative act are key to understanding artistic representation as a form of political representation. Michael Saward (2010, p.44) argues that political representation is an ongoing process of claim-making and claim-receiving rather than ‘a fact established by institutional election or selection’. He proposes that representative claims consist of five interconnected dimensions: maker, subject, object, referent, and audience. For example, ‘[a]ntiglobalization demonstrators (makers) set up themselves and their movements (subjects) as representatives of the oppressed and marginalized (object) to Western governments (audience)’ (Saward 2010, p.37). The referent in this example is the actual people who comprise the oppressed and marginalized. This framework places particular emphasis on the making of symbols of the represented, as well as the role of the audience in not simply receiving claims but making counter-claims. By doing so, Saward shows how political representation is deeply connected to aesthetic representation and the circular (performative) relationship between represented and representative.

This article goes one step further to explore how artistic representation can be understood as a form of political representation. The distinction between aesthetic and artistic locates the article specifically in relation to art, rather than aesthetic philosophy broadly understood. Taking Saward’s framework as a starting point, the next section explores how Biennale viewers (audience) play a central role in receiving the claims of artists and artworks (both makers) about violence (subject) as representatives of South Africa (object) and particular citizen groups (referent) within the state and make counter-claims about the artworks on display.⁵ The institutional structure of the Biennale in the form of national pavilions imposes

⁵ The idea that artworks are makers may cause unease in the context of political representation, especially since Hannah Pitkin (1967) claimed that inanimate objects could not be held responsible to constituencies. However, in relation to artistic representation WT Mitchell (2004) argues that artworks are animated beings with desires which have the power to affect political lives.

state-centered political representation onto artworks which in another context may be interpreted very differently. Herein lies the gap between representative and represented which both designates particular artworks as highly political and locates the political imaginary being enacted through artistic representation.

Although political theory has begun to recognise the close relationship between political and aesthetic representation, and although art theory regularly grapples with politics in discussions of representation, neither side has gone as far to suggest that artistic representation can be understood as a form of political representation. This article seeks to fill this gap. Only then is it possible to more fully comprehend political representation as it increasingly occurs in transnational spaces (outside of state confines) and through ‘non-traditional’ actors. The article also responds to five gaps in discussions of political representation noted by Saward (2010), the need to: 1) focus on what representation is doing (not fix upon what it is); 2) understand the constitutive role of representation; 3) employ interpretive depth (not normative theorising); 4) highlight the dynamics of what is going on in representation (not focus on an ideal typology); and, 5) take non-electoral modes of representation seriously. Addressing these gaps enables greater understanding of the role of representation(s) in seeing how politics functions (for and through whom) and how it might function differently. In the context of South Africa, these imperatives are critical.

State of representation

In his speech opening the South Africa Pavilion, Arts and Culture Minister Paul Mashatile (2013) said that the exhibition was ‘about using the arts to question and challenge our reading of the past, to reach a new understanding of it and to craft a new and inclusive narrative for our country’; calling the 17 artists in the exhibition ambassadors, their ‘voices... as rich and varied as those of the citizens of our beautiful land’. Artists are interpellated by the

Government as being agents of the state; they have diplomatic roles as ambassadors and representatives of the state. The artists also have political roles as representatives of different groups of citizens within the state. This creates a tension between the artists representing the interests of the state, and the artists (and their artworks) representing the interests of citizens which do not necessarily align with those of the state.

Contrary to the Government's desired reinterpretation of the past to create a new inclusive narrative, the exhibition, entitled *Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive*, used the lens of the past to draw attention to the ongoing conflicts which persist within the state. The disruption of the state's political imaginary was made possible by the structure of the Pavilion. After a public tender process, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) selected the National Arts Festival – a non-profit arts organisation – to stage the exhibition based on the theme of *Imaginary Fact*. However, many of the exhibiting artists were only selected and announced after the tender was already awarded. This meant that the state had limited prior knowledge or control over the content of the exhibition; effectively being kept at arms-length to the artistic decisions made by the curatorial committee.

Although this process was deliberately enacted by DAC in order to distance itself from the opaque selection process and ensuing accusations of nepotism which plagued the 2011 Pavilion (see Blackman 2012), it resulted in an exhibition which created the conditions for a tension to arise between the state's desired representation and the artists' representation of the state.

Imaginary Fact drew on two invitations proffered by the overarching theme of the Biennale, *The Encyclopedic Palace* (Gioni 2013) – to journey and to assemble. The theme encouraged an encyclopedic journey through history; to see how knowledge is produced through the organisation of artworks and how artworks organise certain kinds of knowledge. The theme

also implied monumentality and the assemblage of artworks on an encyclopedic scale. The 17 artists in *Imaginary Fact* presented a journey over 20 years through diverse methods and mediums (Maart 2013). The exhibition's title alluded to the creation of knowledge and the knowledge of creativity; playing on the idea that facts evolve from imaginative processes over time as well as from the gathering of these processes through archives. *Imaginary Fact* suggested it would impart facts and simultaneously invited reflection on these facts and their construction, the veracity of which were always in question through reference to imagination.

Violence was a dominant subject within *Imaginary Fact*: the unresolved violence of apartheid-era crimes; the structural violence of pervasive practices of discrimination; and, the physical violence which people continue to be subjected. Three artworks stood out for the ways in which they emphasised that remembering violence, recording violence, and restoring violence are crucial responsibilities of political representation within South Africa. These artworks were David Koloane's *The Journey*, Sue Williamson's *For Thirty Years next to his heart*, and Zanele Muholi's *Faces and Phases*.

Koloane (b. 1938), Williamson (b. 1941) and Muholi (b. 1972) are highly influential figures within South African contemporary art. In their roles as practicing artists, curators, writers, and educators, they are all involved in forms of arts activism and have founded key arts organisations. All three artists regularly exhibit internationally, all are represented by major commercial galleries in South Africa and abroad, all have artworks in the permanent collections of major arts institutions around the globe, and between them they have won every major art award in South Africa (see Perryer 2004, Williamson 2009). Their artworks which were exhibited in the South Africa Pavilion are regularly shown in major exhibitions overseas. The reputation of these artists and the exhibition history of their artworks is important in establishing these artists as representatives, especially the context of the

Biennale where they serve as representatives of the state, but their artworks create a critical view of the state's political imaginary.

Remembering violence

David Koloane's *The Journey* 1998 (Figure 1) is a series of 19 oil pastel works on paper which reconstructs the sequence of events that lead to Steve Biko's death: from his arrest, interrogation, detention, and autopsy. Biko was leader of the Black Consciousness Movement and an anti-apartheid activist, whose murder in 1977 at the hands of members of the Security Branch became a discursive event in the fight against apartheid and remains a discursive event in the nation's transition – one that often arose in interviews and conversations with South African decision makers and artists.



Figure 1. David Koloane, *The Journey* (1998) 19 acrylic and oil pastels on paper, each 29 x 42 cm. Installation view at the 2013 Biennale. Photography by Giovanna Zen, courtesy of the National Arts Festival.

The Journey engages multiple layers of representation. Firstly, by imagining the events of Biko's death Koloane is making a claim to represent a pivotal figure and moment in South Africa's struggle for humanity. Koloane created *The Journey* in response to observing the perpetrators of Biko's death seeking amnesty at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Having worked with Biko at Black Community Programmes – an organisation running development projects – in the 1970s, the process of making the artwork was a way for Koloane to remember Biko's murder and reflect on the subsequent process of amnesty: 'It left a deep impression in my mind... to see how dangerous the apartheid government was, that people could just disappear and be killed like that' (Interview Koloane). *The Journey* is deeply personal and at the same time highly political. The artwork depicts the intimate scenes of Biko's torturous journey; restoring 'the simplicity of the horror of torture and murder to a collective consciousness' (Maart 2013, p.18). It is a product of Koloane's reaction to Biko's death: 'It was one of the most brutal things I've ever experienced emotionally' (Interview Koloane). By drawing on his personal response to the murder in order to imagine the event, the artist memorialises Biko, representing his prominent legacy in the anti-apartheid struggles and continued legacy in the post-apartheid transition.

Secondly, the artwork bears witness to the contested truths which emerged during the perpetrators' testimonies at the TRC; questioning what it means to enact truth and reconciliation. In 1999 – the year after Koloane created *The Journey* and in the same year the artwork was first exhibited abroad – the five surviving policemen (Harold Snyman, Daniel Petrus Siebert, Jacobus Johannes Oosthuysen Beneke, Rubin Marx, and Gideon Johannes Nieuwoudt) responsible for Biko's death were denied amnesty on the grounds that they failed to disclose the full truth and that their version of how Biko died was 'so improbable and contradictory that it had to be rejected as false' (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1999).

Despite admitting to taking part in Biko's murder and being denied amnesty for it, the five men were never prosecuted. In 2003 the South African Justice Ministry announced it had insufficient evidence to prosecute for murder and that it would be unable to lay any other charges because the timeframe for prosecution had expired. While the amnesty hearings afforded an important opportunity for public confession, the TRC has been criticised for not asking more detailed questions during these hearings which would facilitate criminal prosecution if amnesty was denied. The result of the TRC and the inability of the Justice Ministry to prosecute, means that Biko's killers have in effect received de facto amnesty (Nagy 2004, p.25). The lack of resolution around Biko's death remains an open wound in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly for Biko's family who challenged the constitutionality of the amnesty process at its initial stages (see Mihai 2016). Given Koloane created *The Journey* one year before Biko's killers were denied amnesty and six years before the Justice Ministry's decision not to prosecute, the commemoration of Biko's murder in the artwork takes on heightened political significance; it becomes an unintended symbol of the limitations of South Africa's transition, representing the unresolved issues which Biko's case has come to exemplify. *The Journey* complicates the progressive narrative of the TRC by drawing attention to its limitations; reflecting the ongoing claims for truth and justice which exist in South Africa.

Thirdly, the artwork is received by viewers as a warning against the repetition of such crimes: 'It's a constant reminder to say look this is where we were and we can't go back there' (Interview Exhibition Management). This claim aligns with Koloane's intention: 'to remind people that even if we have a black government it doesn't mean things are going to be rosy. This [Biko's death] could still happen with a black government' (Interview Koloane). By

remembering the events surrounding Biko's death, the artwork contemplates how those events came to be, but also how these circumstances are potentially not unique to apartheid.

It is not necessary to be familiar with Biko's story in order to access the politics of, and racial conflict within, *The Journey*. In the context of the South Africa Pavilion, *The Journey* is circumscribed by the nation's political tensions and oppressive past. The sequential images portray the torture of a black body at the hands of white bodies. The repeated figure of Biko is Christ-like, each frame becoming a station of the cross, progressing through the final days of life. This sense of martyrdom was increased by the artwork being hung in a low-lit area of the Pavilion. The imagery in *The Journey* is abstracted by the densely coloured layers of oil pastel. This style increases the tension; the artwork becomes more disturbing the more it is looked at: 'there is a quality in those works, an impressionistic quality that, for me, keeps it trembling and living now' (Interview Curatorial Team Member). The blurred lines between abstraction and realism in *The Journey* avoid sensationalising torture and death. The symbolism and style of the artwork, coupled with its deliberate installation, implicates Biko in a redemptive narrative. His sacrifice comes to symbolize South Africa's sins. Rather than representing the reconciled political imaginary of the state Koloane comes to represent the ongoing struggles of a nation and the people within its borders.

Through his art Koloane is also making a broader claim to be reclaiming the space which was restricted under apartheid: 'Apartheid was a politics of space more than anything... and much of the apartheid legislation was denying people the right to move... Claiming art is also reclaiming space' (Koloane 1999). Not only is the South African state reclaiming their space in the international community by participating in the Biennale (from which they were previously banned), but through the exhibition Koloane is reclaiming the space which under apartheid he was denied. This reclaiming of space is about physically inhabiting space

through art, as well as believing in the right to that space. There is a sense then that the issues of representation at stake in Koloane's *The Journey* are about enacting claim-making and claim-receiving, as well as *re*-claiming political representation through art.

Recording violence

Sue Williamson's *For thirty years next to his heart* (Figure 2) portrays evidence of the apartheid Pass Laws. The artwork depicts 49 colour laser prints of Ncithakalo John Ngesi's *dompas* (passbook) – a document required under the apartheid government to be carried by every black South African over the age of 16 at all times. Dompas contained personal information – photographs, fingerprints, and addresses – employment history, employer's signatures and reports, travel and residential permissions, and other identification information. A person's rights to live, work in, and visit, certain areas – as well as their family's rights – were jeopardised if an employer did not endorse their *dompas*, regardless of the reason. Around 18 million arrests for failure to produce a *dompas* on demand occurred between its introduction in 1952 and repeal in 1986 (Savage 1986). As a document of oppression and control, the *dompas* was a hated symbol of apartheid.



Figure 2. Sue Williamson, *For thirty years next to his heart* (1990) 49 Photo-copies in unique hand-crafted frames, 182.9 x 261 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

Unlike *The Journey*, which re-claims space through the imaginative remembering of pivotal events, *For thirty years* draws attention to the restriction of space through the recording of a document designed to deny people the right to move. The artwork becomes evidence of several claims about representation. This is not to say it only serves a mimetic function, rather it captures the invasion of private life by public authorities. In doing so, the artwork subverts the apartheid claims on private life by making these claims public; enabling claims about the representation of structural violence to be made and received.

Firstly, *For thirty years* represents a highly personal item carried by Ngesi, recording aspects of his life; his movement, his employment, his earnings, his encounters with other people. As the title suggests, the dompas was held close to his heart. Yet it is not an object of love, but

an object forced upon Ngesi's body by the apartheid government; tellingly, Ngesi gave his dompas to Williamson, he did not want it back (cited in Maart 2013, p.163). The dompas was highly personal, but at the same time it was also highly de-personalised, being an instrument of discrimination against the majority of the population, perpetrated by the state. The inhumanity of the apartheid system is exposed by its invasion into, and regulation of, Ngesi's personal life.

The tension between private and public, personal and political, is evident not only in the subject matter of *For thirty years* but in the way the artist depicts the dompas. Glimpses of Ngesi's hands remind viewers that this document belongs to someone, it is about someone's life. By contrast, the highly gridded display of the artwork is symbolic of bureaucratic control. Each frame is made from material relating to the page pictured. For instance, bank notes cover the frame of the taxes section and tin is used to make the frame of the employment section, referring to Ngesi's work in a mine. Using a colour photocopier to create the prints reinforces the sense of officialdom in the artwork.

Secondly, *For thirty years* is simultaneously evidence of Ngesi's life and evidence of apartheid's mechanisms of control; an indictment of the system and a warning against it. Williamson draws on this evidence to expose the gross injustices which the Pass Laws proliferated: the artwork testifies to this effect. The artist documented a dompas so people who never had to carry one did not 'forget about quite how horrific they were' (Interview Williamson). Williamson is making dual representative claims about the people subjected to the dompas system and those who were not, preserving the dompas in order to prevent its return.

The artwork records the dompas system and it also becomes evidence of participation in that system. Names of companies and signatures of people are found on every page: ‘One is implicated in the whole system of passbooks whether you want to be or not, because it’s your signature, you as an employer have this power over the people that you wish to employ’ (Interview Williamson). The artwork draws attention to the involvement of people beyond official levels, where so many ordinary people were complicit in proliferating an unjust system. It is not only evidence of Ngesi’s life being circumscribed by state control, but it is also evidence of people observing and participating in that state control. The artwork implicates certain groups in the maintenance of apartheid, while revealing the structural violence of that system against other groups, divided along racial lines. This has the effect of creating a tension between the representative claims being made and the representative claims being received by multiple groups of people.

Thirdly, *For thirty years* presents a familiar visual vocabulary for viewers unfamiliar with the dompas. The dompas looks like a passport, which similarly allows and restricts freedom but on an international scale – an increasingly critical issue in current debates about statehood and migration. This familiar imagery also makes the artwork tangible. A viewer from Australia, almost in tears in front of *For thirty years*, said they were upset because they had been previously unaware of the severity of the injustices under apartheid (Field Note 2013). Through the representation of the evidence of structural violence, the artwork emphasises the continuing claims of people subjected to the dompas system, the complicity of others in enacting this system, and is an indictment of the system.

There is also an inherent paradox of freedom in *For thirty years*: it captures a false ‘freedom’ imposed by a repressive regime: ‘it’s a symbol of restriction and a symbol of freedom because if you had this passport you could go everywhere’ (Interview Biennale Staff

Member). The original un-freedom of the dompas is freely transported as an archive. The artwork is well travelled, being regularly exhibited outside of South Africa. Its transformation into an artwork turns a hated symbol of apartheid into a public denunciation of that regime.

Restoring violence

Zanele Muholi's series of portraits of LGBTI people in South Africa, entitled *Faces and Phases* (Figure 3), restores black queer visibility. The black and white photographs portray a marginalised segment of South African society; marginalised in terms of being erased from historical canons, and subjected to severe discrimination and physical violence resulting from ingrained heteronormativity and apartheid's major legacy of intolerance. Through the photographic series Muholi is restoring representation, creating 'images of people like me for reference point for posterity' (Interview Muholi); rebuilding a legacy of queer identity in the 'new' South Africa.



Figure 3. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (2006–2013), series of 200 photographic prints, unframed black and white digital photographic prints, each 30.5 x 44cm. Installation view of *Imaginary Fact*, 2013 Venice Art Biennale. Photography by Giovanna Zen, courtesy of the National Arts Festival.

Ten gaps in the grid of 200 photographs signify the missing portraits of people who have been the victims of hate crimes. Homophobic violence is an ongoing problem in South Africa. Violence often takes the form of ‘corrective rape’ – where men rape women in order to ‘cure’ their lesbianism (Jody Kollapen cited in Martin *et al.* 2009). These crimes are not only underreported due to associated stigma, but they are also under-recorded by the police and seldom prosecuted as hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation, which contributes to the silence around such violence (see Mwambene and Wheal 2015). The simultaneous presence and absence of the portraits draws attention to this violence.

Muholi defines herself as a visual activist rather than a visual artist (Williamson 2009, p.130).

Her artistic practice arises from activism, but it is also a lived imperative. She documents

ongoing cases of rape, assault, and murder: 'I [go] from one place to the next place documenting, listening to people, their needs. If there is a case that needs to be referred to an organisation, I refer that case' (Interview Muholi). By refusing to call herself an artist, Muholi is making a claim about the form of representation she is practicing. Her visual activism is explicitly political representation, yet it is also artistic representation as it is created and mediated through her photographic works which are exhibited in major art exhibitions.

While *Faces and Phases* restores black queer visibility, it is simultaneously an indictment of current discrimination in South Africa: a call to action. Muholi is advocating for equal rights and treatment, drawing attention to the violence and discrimination faced by the LGBTI community: 'The whole point is to educate the next person who is not a member of the LGBTI community' (Interview Muholi). There is a deliberate element of didacticism in Muholi's work. However, for audiences unfamiliar with these issues, it is difficult to grasp them from the photographs alone, without accompanying text or information which explains who is being represented and why. In the context of the Biennale viewers 'needed to be guided into that process' (Interview Exhibition Management). *Faces and Phases* successfully de-essentializes the gender of the people represented in and by the photographs, yet it does so to such a degree that the claims being made about representation require further elaboration. The claim-making of the artist does not easily, or necessarily, align with the claim-receiving of the audience.

There is a tension between celebration and bereavement in *Faces and Phases*. Five percent of the people represented in the artwork – whose portraits are absent – are the victims of fatal violence, while the remaining ninety-five percent embody an enduring community. The missing photographs mourn absent people, while the existing photographs celebrate the

people present. The direct gaze of each person looking out from each photograph, creates a personal connection with viewers: ‘Muholi’s work really puts you in the moment of these women staring at you, being almost canonised in a way that makes you consider where they come from, who they are, and what they were subject to after all these years of democracy’ (Interview Curatorial Team Member). This gaze also counter-exerts power, the photographs are of people not of art objects to be looked at (Maart 2013, p.23). The series is about more than looking. *Faces and Phases* is about restoring and celebrating representation, it is also about challenging why the absence of representation exists in the first place – both regarding individual representation of victims of hate crimes and the collective representation of the LGBTI community.

For the artist *Faces* expresses the people in the photographs and her face-to-face encounters with them. While *Phases* signifies ‘the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and experience to another’ (Muholi 2010, p.6). However, there is also a more disturbing association to the word ‘phase’ which is sometimes used pejoratively to refer to sexuality as something that can be overcome. In the context of South Africa phase also evokes a political association with the nation’s transition.

Including *Faces and Phases* in the South Africa Pavilion draws attention to the politics within South Africa which surrounds Muholi’s visual activism. In 2009, the then Arts and Culture Minister, Lulama Xingwana, refused to open an exhibition featuring Muholi’s work on the basis that it was ‘immoral’ because it depicted images of lesbians: ‘[o]ur mandate is to promote social cohesion and nation building. I left the exhibition because it expressed the very opposite of this’ (Xingwana in Munro 2012, p.219). This event sparked controversy in South Africa both within and outside of art circles; becoming a discursive event noted by many participants when speaking about Muholi’s work.

The Minister's statement presupposes a vision of the nation circumscribed by heteronormativity. This gendered form of political identity in the 'new' South Africa betrays its disintegrating rainbow nationalism, but it also echoes apartheid-era strategies of silencing alterity. For Xingwana, social cohesion appears to be less about representing all citizens and in the process of doing so addressing the struggles of marginalised communities, and more about constructing an image of the nation built on a narrow conception of citizen-hood. The Minister's actions are indicative of the discrimination experienced by the LGBTI community at some of the highest levels, emphasising the vast gap between the conceptual liberalness of South Africa's constitution and its political practice: 'On the face of it we have this very liberal constitution which forbids discrimination of any kind and in fact it's just not adhered to, even by the government itself' (Interview Artist).

The inclusion of Muholi's work in the 2013 South Africa Pavilion challenges the views of the former Arts and Culture Minister. In opening the South African Pavilion, Arts and Culture Minister, Mashatile (2013) described all the artists in the exhibition as 'immensely talented and, as a nation, we are proud of them and of the opportunity to showcase them to the world'. The sentiment of this statement is significant because it stands in opposition to the views expressed by the previous minister and it also stands in opposition to the longer running history of discrimination against LGBTI people in South Africa. Despite Mashatile and Xingwana belonging to the same political party – the African National Congress – Mashatile's statement is a concerted effort to distinguish his leadership of arts and culture from his predecessor's.

While DAC ostensibly had little control over the inclusion of *Faces and Phases* in the South African Pavilion – the artist was selected and announced by the curatorial team at a late stage

– it is significant that they did not distance themselves from the exhibition in light of the previous Minister’s actions. Rather the Government embraced Muholi and her work as an example of South Africa’s liberal development: ‘to destroy the myth that Africa as a whole persecute people because of their sexual orientation’ (Interview Molobi, Commissioner of the Pavilion and Consul-General of South Africa to Milan). The inclusion of *Faces and Phases* in this international context is intended to differentiate the state from other nations on the African continent who criminalise homosexuality. However, although homosexuality is not criminalised in South Africa, it is far from accepted. Muholi’s artwork complicates the Government’s political imaginary by exposing the ongoing struggle for representation in a society plagued by prejudice.

The inclusion of *Faces and Phases* stems from two competing attempts to restore representation: the Government’s claim to restore South Africa’s representation in the international community, seeking to cultivate an image of the state’s inclusivity and to distinguish it from other states and, the artist’s and the curatorial team’s claim to expose continuing discrimination in the ‘new’ South Africa – and to restore representation of the black queer community. There is also a third dimension of restoring representation at stake. By exhibiting in *Imaginary Fact* Muholi is representing South Africa. This is important because it signals support for her artwork as one of the representatives of the state at the Biennale – which would not have been possible under the apartheid regime (or arguably under the former minister). This inclusion is significant because it is actively redressing the imbalances of representation directly resulting from apartheid.

Beyond its specific relationship to South Africa, *Faces and Phases* opens up a wider discussion about LGBTI representation in the member states of the Biennale: ‘People don’t think about the past, as in all the other works [in *Imaginary Fact*], because it’s something

they immediately recognized as current and contemporary, a universal theme that is a social issue also in Italy' (Interview Biennale Staff Member). Although *Faces and Phases* is focused on practices of discrimination in South Africa it also responds to broader practices of discrimination not unique to South Africa. In the context of the Biennale, Muholi's visual activism provokes reflection on the practices of other nation-states. This fourth representative claim is especially significant given that *Faces and Phases* is widely exhibited internationally.

Violence reverberates throughout the artworks by Koloane, Williamson and Muholi. Remembering, recording, and restoring violence become key responsibilities for these artists in their dual role as state representatives and citizenry representatives at the Biennale. Each artist questions what it means to represent a state that is in flux. They capture three ways in which the pervasive practices of discrimination live on in South Africa, leaving a sense that the process of political transition is not only unfinished, but must be remembered, recorded, and restored so as not to be repeated.

Conclusion

In the case of South Africa at the 2013 Biennale, the representations of violence enacted by particular artists and artworks can be understood as a form of political representation, constituted through creative acts and a process of exchange between representatives and represented. Returning to Saward's framework, the artists and artworks (makers), as representatives of South Africa (object) and particular citizen groups (referent), evoke images and symbols of violence (subject) which are judged by viewers (audience) in an ongoing process of claim-making and claim-receiving. Koloane makes claims about *The Journey* being a remembered archive of Biko's death, a way for him to personally process the emotion of the event. Through the artwork Biko is memorialised as a pivotal figure in South Africa's

struggle for humanity. The artwork bears witness to the ongoing debates about truth versus justice which pervade contemporary South Africa, becoming an unintended symbol of the limitations of the state's transition. *The Journey* is received as a warning against the repetition of such crimes, while its presence also re-claims the space which was denied under apartheid.

Through the representation of the evidence of structural violence, Williamson's *For thirty years* emphasises the continuing claims of people subjected to the dompas system, the complicity of others in enacting this system, and is received by viewers as an indictment of the system. Like *The Journey*, it is a warning against the system. The artwork subverts the claims on private life made under apartheid by making them publicly visible. Muholi's visual activism makes a claim to restore black queer visibility and is simultaneously a call to action against ongoing discrimination. While the Government seeks to cultivate an image of the state's inclusivity through *Faces and Phases*, the artist and artwork expose the continuing practices of discrimination in the 'new' South Africa.

By understanding artistic representation as a form of political representation, it is possible to more fully engage with politics as it becomes dispersed to transnational spaces beyond state confines and is no longer the sole purview of elected representatives (if indeed it ever was). South Africa gains legitimacy through its membership of the Biennale, itself an international organisation. This legitimisation occurs through artistic representation. Koloane, Williamson and Muholi are responsible not only for representing the state through the national pavilion to an international audience, but also for representing the differing claims of citizens through their artworks. Gaps emerge amid the representative claims which are made and received, creating a tension between the state's desired political imaginary of inclusivity and reconciliation, and the artists' political imaginary capturing the ongoing problems and divides

within the state. Thinking about artistic representation as a form of political representation enables a better understanding of what can be seen and said, who has the ability to see it and say it, and how it is possible to *know* and *do* politics in different ways.

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Figure captions

Figure 1. David Koloane, *The Journey* (1998) 19 acrylic and oil pastels on paper, each 29 x 42 cm. Installation view at the 2013 Biennale. Photography by Giovanna Zen, courtesy of the National Arts Festival.

Figure 2. Sue Williamson, *For thirty years next to his heart* (1990) 49 Photo-copies in unique hand-crafted frames, 182.9 x 261 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

Figure 3. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases* (2006-2013), series of 200 photographic prints, unframed black and white digital photographic prints, each 30.5 x 44cm. Installation view of *Imaginary Fact*, 2013 Venice Art Biennale. Photography by Giovanna Zen, courtesy of the National Arts Festival.