

Changing Visual Politics in South Africa: Old and New Modes of Exclusion, Protest and Offence

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What constitutes an *offensive* image lies in the eyes of the viewer. At times the act of photographing itself can be offensive—this may be deduced from the gaze of the photographed back at the viewer. An offensive image could be one that insults or that shows an act that is considered to interrupt a normative code of behaviour or that is against the law. As the editor of this volume has suggested, ‘offensive’ is a rather slippery category, and—not surprisingly—which images are deemed offensive is highly contested in current South African society.

When attempting a necessarily not exhaustive entry into the genealogy of offensive images in South Africa, it is important to revisit the extensive visual archive of gruesome photographs of black bodies in pain, suffering from the physical consequence of state-sanctioned racism (see Enwezor 2006). These well-known photographs taken by the notorious ‘Bang-Bang Club’, comprised of Ken Oosterbroek, Greg Marinovich, João Silva and Kevin Carter, and other predominantly

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white and male photographers, constitute ambivalent documents. They could be considered 'offensive', for depicting the consequences of ongoing police violence and oppression (see Osha 2015). In this regard, and through their affective charge, they may have created outrage in viewers, potentially moving them to action, and could be used strategically as political weapons and evidence of injustice. At the same time the very same photographs were also criticised as sensational 'violence pornography' and as showing the black townships primarily as places of danger and aggression. These photographs circulated globally through news media and some even won Pulitzer Prizes in the 1990s, attesting to a Western, sensationalist demand for these very images.

Compared to the black majority, images of white bodies habitually conveyed secure and 'good' lives. During the struggle against apartheid images of suffering black bodies, for example after evictions, arrests or protests, were frequently composed in ways alluding to Christian iconographies, in order to 'move' people—across the colour line—into political action (Kesting 2017, Newbury 2009). After the official end of apartheid in 1992, these documentary media aesthetics changed—due to the new political dispensation, but also through the proliferation of cell phone cameras and social media—but at the same time they have not completely disappeared. This contribution will concentrate on two examples that use offensive images as a mode of protest, empowerment and provocation in a very different way than during the struggle. The materials to be analysed are the works and media coverage of two socially involved artists, Zanele Muholi and Dean Hutton. While the photographs and images that Muholi and Hutton produce look very different from each other's, they are both 'queering' image production and thus offer a critical commentary on the hegemonic mediascape, since queer artists are producing playful, innovative or experimental approaches in order to shake up the order of representation. This analysis seeks to flesh out the paradox that offensive images may be protested against in one context, while at the same time others strive to defend their right to produce them. Since this volume prominently puts an emphasis on the 'politics of offence', only visual case studies that resulted in public discourse and political actions, albeit in different ways, were selected.

The two selected practitioners, Zanele Muholi and Dean Hutton, had already had long experience of having to negotiate stereotypical and denigrating images and were attempting to turn the gaze around, to expand what is visible, to create new and empowering archives (Muholi), and

possibly to provoke or offend 'back' (Hutton). To sum up, this chapter compares different materials from the recent past and the present in order to produce a more nuanced view of the complexity of current media politics in South Africa and of how its offensive images are constructed, disseminated, viewed and responded to. It highlights old and new mechanisms of offence, exclusion and protest, and how these are playing out in the visual sphere.

OFFENSIVE IMAGES IN POST-APARTHEID TIMES

After the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa entered an ongoing phase of (re-) constructing its national identity, which implied democratisation, and in its wake the introduction of advanced capitalism and neo-liberal reforms. At the same time, there was also a transformation of the audio-visual media sphere, in terms of who has access to cameras and networks of distribution (Thomas 2018). The rise of cell phones with advanced imaging technology has contributed to the proliferation of 'citizen reporters' and amateur images entering the public sphere via YouTube and Twitter. Yet the profession of the commenting photographer or artist has not become obsolete, and probably never will.

In spite of the societal and media-circuit transformations, South African society is to this day still strongly divided along old and new fault lines of socio-economic inequality, race, class and gender. Post-apartheid South Africa is a nation in transition and therefore a place full of contradictions, of inherited and new divisions and ambivalences. This situation is not uncommon for a nation-state in the twenty-first century, characterised by a higher complexity of societal and political divisions—what one could also call 'messiness' (Mbembe 2001). The South African constitution of 1996, however, is one of the most progressive in the world in terms of offering rights to minorities, including LGTBQI people.

ZANELE MUHOLI: *ENRAGED BY A PICTURE* (2005)

In order to introduce a different angle on the question of what an 'offensive image' may constitute and how precarious the visibility of the black female body is, photographer Zanele Muholi's series entitled *Visual Sexuality: Only Half the Picture* (2004) and the subsequent short film *Enraged by a Picture* (2005) make a bold statement. Muholi, who studied at the renowned Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, has been

one of the first black photographers in South Africa to give visibility to black women's sexuality, and particularly to black lesbian women. Her photographs often document intimate moments between couples and capture both the strength and the vulnerability of her subjects. Muholi's gaze never seems to be that of an outsider, but rather that of a person closely connected to her subjects. She argues that much of her work aims to ensure that black LGBTQI people exist in the visual archive. 'The key question that I take to bed with me is: "What is my responsibility as a living being, as a South African citizen reading continually about hate crimes in the mainstream media?"' (Muholi 2018). The hate crimes Muholi refers to are most often committed against queer black people, and particularly against black lesbians. In South African society black lesbians have a particularly unwarranted status. They are regarded as 'deviant' and are at the highest risk of being subjected to violence, including the crime of 'corrective rape', which is classified as a hate crime against (alleged) lesbians, committed by men who want to discipline and change these women's sexuality (Gqola 2015). One of the stereotypical arguments brought against them from within black society is that 'same-sex marriages are a disgrace to the nation and God', as then-President Zuma prominently declared on Heritage Day 2006 (quoted in Gunkel 2010, 48).

Consequently, Muholi's black-and-white images break several taboos by focussing on female sexuality and related intimate topics, for example showing a sanitary napkin with menstrual blood on a plate with a fork and knife and titled 'Period', but also a naked torso of a black woman wearing a white dildo belt, simply called 'Dildo', as well as a close-up of a rape survivor's torso, wearing male underpants, titled 'Aftermath'. While photographs of naked or half-naked women are not uncommon in tabloids, advertisements and other media, the type of nudity that Muholi's photographs present informs a completely different perspective of appreciation. However, the photographs have been seen as 'going too far' and met with hostile reactions from some viewers, although there have also been positive responses, as Muholi documents in her short film *Enraged by a Picture*, in which several people comment on the images (Muholi 2005). While some consider the work an outstanding example of creating empowering images of black lesbian women, her photographs have been deemed 'offensive' by homophobic people, or simply made viewers uncomfortable with their open display of sexuality. One example of a negative written comment on her pictures submitted by

an anonymous viewer that Muholi cites in *Enraged by a Picture* is: 'It is truly unacceptable for you to undermine our races especially black portraying Nudity and sexual explicit content images...' (Muholi 2005). But Muholi, rather than retreating, has taken these reactions as a point of departure for probing more deeply. At the end of the film she states that '...I capture images of sexuality ... because I believe that our experiences as black lesbians add to a history of struggle that has not yet been written or recorded'. Her images and film work are an assertion of presence, as she states, 'But our voices are here now, in this visual "text", and perhaps we will be allowed, for the first time, to speak to all the languages and cultures within our communities' (2005).

Remarkably, it is not the images showing intimate sexual relations, but instead the photograph 'Period' that has been considered the most shocking and offensive by viewers, and many have not understood the subtext (Gunkel 2010, 2). Muholi wanted to emphasise with it that 'the same blood that defines us as women, is the same blood which we shed in the attacks against us, while some make a meal of their hatred of us as women, as lesbians' (Muholi, quoted in Gunkel 2010, 2). In addition, once a girl starts to have her period, she is considered to have entered womanhood and it is therefore also a signifier for female sexuality. The leaking of bodily fluids, especially from the female body during the period, or while nursing, or crying, is often constructed as shameful, dirty and as a visual taboo, in the Western as well as in the South African context. While feminist and queer discourse has always argued against these visual silences, in 2015 Instagram still censored photographs from the Indian-Canadian writer and poet Rupi Kaur in which she showed herself lying in bed, from behind, with a stain of menstrual blood on her pants (Kaur 2016; Sanghani 2015). The censoring on Instagram is proof that the topic of periods can still not be represented and is considered a transgression in the global visual realm as well as in South Africa.

MASCULINITY, WHITE PRIVILEGE AND DECOLONISATION

Despite South Africa's progressive constitution promoting gender equality and women's rights, it also has one of the highest rates of violence against women (Sibanda-Moyo et al. 2017). Being at risk is dependent on real or seeming sexual preferences, since '[n]ormative femininity is, above all, defined through sexuality—and, more precisely through (presumed) heterosexuality and its appearance' (Bartky 1990).

Thereby, a binary value system of good, 'traditional' African culture on the one hand, and bad, 'modern', Western liberal culture on the other is reaffirmed. The need for security and a type of visibility that is appreciative of the female body thus leaves open many questions that cannot be addressed solely in visual culture. As Maxim Bold and Dinah Rajak (2016) have stated, '...violence in its different forms, continues to define the domestic and working lives of millions of poor South Africans'. Masculinity, but also whiteness and enduring white privilege, remain determining factors that structure South African society and culture, as well as the social reality of institutions and the identities of women and men (Burnett 2018). At the same time, these racist and patriarchal structures are repeatedly challenged, especially during the recent formation of a new student protest movement.

At several large universities, students started massive protests in 2014 in the wake of the Marikana killings of black mine workers in 2012 (Makinana 2012; de Waal 2014). The student movements of the 'born-frees'—the first generation that was born and grew up after apartheid officially ended—criticise the ongoing racism and socio-economic deprivation of black workers and students (Pillay 2016). Some have invoked the memory and writings of, among others, Steve Biko, who was a prominent anti-apartheid activist until he was murdered by the apartheid government in prison in 1977 (Biko 1987). As artist and writer Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi observed about the formation of the student protests tagged #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall: 'There is a palpable sense of "knowing" that is happening on university campuses across the country right now. Students and workers are declaring very clearly, "Know there is something wrong with the system"' (2016, 257). Therefore, the realisation of being constantly offended and outraged by continuing discrimination, and that structures that still privileged whiteness were so strong, translated into direct action and demands. The students persisted in demands for the thorough decolonisation of the higher education system in South Africa, and for study to be made more affordable, ideally 'free'—at no cost to students. South African visual culture researcher Kylie Thomas (2018) argues that a new iconography has emerged in this context that references the past, but also breaks away from the social documentary forms of representation that characterised the struggle against apartheid.

The student movement is not a homogenous entity, but rather consists of several different groupings, sometimes at odds with each

other, but they agree on declaring it an offence that black people are continuously discriminated against by police, security forces, and white people, even in post-apartheid society, and that their lives are less secure and their socio-economic status often not secured. Thus they can also be linked globally to other movements like 'Black Lives Matter' in the United States or against the 'Black Genocide' in Brazil (Smith 2017). These protests are directed against corrupt and violent police practices and against the persistence of colonial and apartheid-era ideologies that manifest themselves also in the ongoing upholding of sculptures, images and street-names of white racist men in South Africa, like Cecil Rhodes, as tokens of colonialism, the slave trade and Jim Crow history. Consequently, they propose a fundamental decolonisation of the educational sector, its architecture and structures, implicit and explicit role models and symbols, as well as their environments.

OFFENSIVE IMAGES AS PROVOCATION AND LOOKING BACK

An artistic position that was inspired and provoked by the images of the student protest, and that also uses a queer context as a point of departure, is that of white South African Dean Hutton's work. They (Hutton uses the pronoun they and them) are a gender-fluid, queer artist interested in portraiture as co-authorship, social media as narrative, and technology as self-reflection and provocation. After a long career as a photo-journalist, they have moved into the medium of performance and installation. Their practice explores ways in which to build a 'love revolution' from their personal work and to create relationships and gathering collaborators to make South African public and intimate spaces safer through artist-led creation, mentorship and community organising. Much of Hutton's work is concerned with social issues, such as the rights of women, queers and the dispossessed. Two different works are the *Goldendean* (2015) project and the *F___ White People* suit (2017). For *Goldendean*, Hutton's body, which would be considered 'overweight' in a normative setting, is covered completely in gold paint and otherwise naked. Hutton commented frankly: 'So I painted myself gold to become more valuable' (Hutton 2018b). This work points to a paradox, especially in an affluent Western society where 'fat'¹ bodies are

¹The word 'fat' is used by body-positive groups in a non-derogatory, self-empowering way.



Fig. 5.1 *Goldendean* (2015) Artwork by Dean Hutton (© Dean Hutton)

hyper-visible in one sense, but at the same time considered shameful and hidden. There is also a common understanding that if you are fat, you should keep your body covered, since ‘nobody wants to see this undesirable view’. Therefore, the fat body, and especially the naked female fat body, stands out and is immediately noticed as not normal, while at the same time there are hardly any respectful, positively connoted images in mainstream visual and popular culture, contemporary art or advertising of bodies that do not fit into contemporary body norms (Hermann 2017, 16). Overweight bodies are supposed to be not only unaesthetic, but also unhealthy, and hence often assumptions are made about a person’s character and intelligence based on their physical appearance. Since the late 1960s feminist and other groups have protested about this debasing of fatness, with prominent slogans like ‘Riot not diet’ (Cooper 2016).

What does the action of covering a naked white body in gold suggest about race, skin colour and the value of queer bodies that do not fit in? This work rather coincides with Renate Lorenz’s observation that ‘...images are increasingly appearing in the field of queer art that

undermine the established categories of racialised or gender categories, or that show no bodies at all’ (Lorenz 2012, 7). Lorenz has proposed working with the artificial figure of the ‘freak’, which she imbues with the positive values of challenging norms, reproducing difference without reinstating identity. At the same time the “freaky” ... would point to the history of constraints, violence, and self-assertion that is already tied to the historical freak shows’ (2012, 7). This figure of the ‘freak’ seems appropriate for describing the strategies of the *Goldendean* project, which exposes Hutton’s own body as a freak show and at the same time in an upgraded version, covered in gold, which can be read both as adding value to an excluded body and as an ironic gesture. They have challenged the norm through accepting the gazes of onlookers on their body in a purposefully voyeuristic setting and by looking back as a subject (see image above), even smiling. By doing so the work explicitly and intentionally plays with offence, turning it around and using it—almost weaponising it—as a means of self-defence and empowerment. On the surface level, however, the *Goldendean* performances often creates warm reactions from viewers, smiles are exchanged, and requests are made to take selfies together, creating a space of openness, while the more difficult topics may come to people’s attention only later. But Hutton have also created another performance that has a much more serious, stark and possibly militant impact, and that pushes viewers directly onto provocative and outspoken terrain.

In their ongoing exploration of performative and political strategies and in response to discussion of white privilege they created the *F___ White People* suit in 2016. This is a piece of clothing in white fabric, onto which the words ‘F___’, ‘WHITE’, and ‘PEOPLE’ are printed all over, but with each word appearing repeatedly in straight lines, going around the garments front and back (see image below and further images at SAHO 2018). The installation consisted of a poster with the same words and a chair covered in the text, as well as a pair of golden boots, evoking the *Goldendean* persona and linking the two works.

The piece was inspired by the aforementioned student protest movements in Cape Town, which Hutton had documented as a photographer. The slogan ‘F___ White People’ had been written on the back of a T-shirt, while the front of the T-shirt said ‘Being black is shit’. The student from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, Zama Mthunzi, commented: ‘I just took a T-shirt and I wrote how I was feeling at that moment. I was angry because so many black

students, who are good students, were facing financial exclusion' (Chernick 2016). Mthunzi was reprimanded and disciplined by his university. The slogan also appeared on walls and signs during marches. Hutton appropriated the slogan for their work, and even though Hutton's piece became known under the slogan 'F___ White People', the text could also be read in the piece in different ways, such as 'White People F___' or 'White People F___ White People', or 'People F___ White', etc.

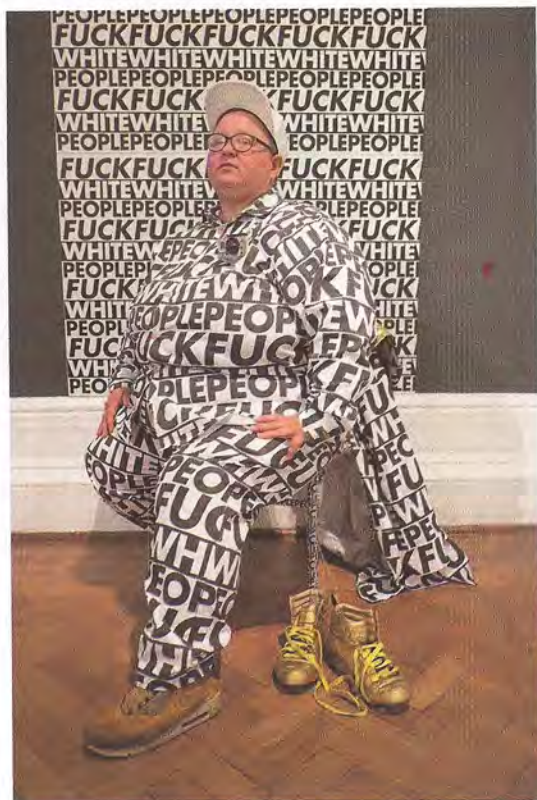


Fig. 5.2 Fuckwhitepeople at IZIKO Gallery. Sitting in front of the installation that was vandalised and drew hate speech charges from a white separatist party in 2016 (© Dean Hutton)

The work was shown at an exhibition called *Art and Disruption* at the Iziko National Gallery in Cape Town and immediately created outrage. Some white people were deeply offended and the work was accused of being hate speech (Pather 2016). The exhibit was vandalised by a group of white men, who mounted a large sticker onto the piece reading 'Love thy neighbour' (Petersen 2017). This group of white people used the label 'offensive' to protect themselves from engaging with these challenging images and their unsettling political questions about white privilege, and the value of black lives. By saying 'This is offensive' they tried to push back what is brought to light and 'on-scene', but should—according to white privilege—be kept off and 'ob-scene', and therefore should remain invisible and unchallenged.

The perpetrators belonged to the separatist and white-dominated Cape Party, which subsequently filed a case against the gallery that had exhibited Hutton's performative installation. The ruling of Magistrate Daniel Thulare, however, declared that the work was found to be neither racist nor hate speech against white people (Wilford 2017). This protected freedom of expression and art also understood the self-reflective dimension of the piece: as Hutton have noted, 'When I say fuck white people, the first white I fuck is me' (Hutton 2018b).

While the *F___ White* people suit seemed to grab all the attention, it was also invoking the previously discussed *Goldendean* project, where Hutton's naked body was covered completely with golden paint and they then put themselves on display in a window, like a living shop-window mannequin. This link, however, was lost on many white viewers who read the slogan only as an 'anti-white' sentiment, assumed it had been executed by a black artist, and reacted in panic and fear. These viewers did not seem to care about the personal connection of Dean Hutton and their experiences with the work, but rather were immediately offended and shut themselves off from further discussion.

For others the slogan 'F___ white people' seemed only to restage an angry response to ongoing racism, discrimination and violence in South Africa's supposedly post-racist society. The painfulness of racism is used here strategically and could be linked to other global movements like Black Lives Matter, but making a negative statement and expressing frustration about a world where black lives matter less.

Social justice scholar Samantha Vice has demanded 'silence' and 'humility' from white people in South African society, since any 'white

voice in the public sphere would inevitably be tainted by the vicious features of “whiteness” (Vice 2010, 340). This seems a problematic proposal, since ‘whiteness’ works best in silence, as the unchallenged normative ideal, as Mohammad Shabungu suggests in a critical response (2010, 56). Moreover, queer white bodies like Dean Hutton’s are completely excluded from white normative beauty and fitness standards, as has been explored in the discussion of *Goldendean* (see Goldendean 2018).

However, there is also the inherent tension of a white artist still profiting from their connection to the mostly white art institutions and circles of funding and recognition. In some regard this provocative art project could even be seen as—unwillingly?—proving again the asymmetry of power, of what a white artist can get away with as a symbolic gesture, or even as appropriating black people’s frustration and anger. Social justice researcher and writer Kwanele Sosibo cautions, in a review of the work, that ‘...it is as an expression of allyship — a person of privilege showing solidarity with a marginalised group — that the work falls short’ (2017). As a thought experiment, one could try to imagine the reactions if a black artist had created the *F___ White People* piece. At the same time, Hutton is aware of these contradictions. A lecture format that accompanies their performance quotes James Baldwin, who wrote prominently about whiteness in the United States and who stated that ‘[u]ltimately, to be white is a moral choice. It’s obviously a very deliberate challenge to people who think they are white to re-examine all their values, to put themselves in our place, to share in our danger’ (Baldwin 1979). Hutton’s work takes up this very challenge and attempts to re-examine whiteness in South Africa, to render it hyper-visible and to criticise it (Goldendean 2018).

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored how certain iconic photographs and commenting artworks activate, but also abstract from, the cultural photographic archive in South Africa. What constitutes visual instances of ‘offence’ depends on who has the power to define offence: For some, the ongoing display of sculptures and images of colonial and apartheid leaders may be offensive, whereas others perceive the exhibition of particular naked bodies as crossing the line. By concentrating on two queer artists’ works, this chapter analysed how certain images may be used to provoke and

offend, but also to instigate political activism or to challenge societal norms. Nevertheless, what can be shown and talked about in the South African public sphere has profoundly changed in the last decade since the first publications of Zanele Muholi’s photographs, and especially with regard to queer and non-binary expressions. One example is the black rapper Mx Blouse (Sandiso Ngubane), who performs at public concerts, and their new single *Is’phukphuku* (2018), in which they rap about women’s issues and empowerment and state ‘...it’s a revolution when someone like me has your ears when I speak...’. One can also observe, both in the photographic and in the filmic realm, more projects that use fictionalisation and self-staging rather than documentary aesthetics. Zanele Muholi has in her latest series, *Somnyama Ngonyama—Hail the Dark Lioness* (2017), used only herself as a model in all the photographs, taking on different roles, props and costumes.

The new aesthetics in the visual realm of the last two decades, particularly in the work of Zanele Muholi and in the student protest movement, have pushed the boundaries of what can be shown and how. These changes have also influenced or inspired some white artists, who respond to the protests in their own way, as the example of queer artist Dean Hutton’s work has proved. In addition, one can detect a frustration with trying to create more ‘just’ and empowering images in the documentary realm and therefore new strategies of fictionalising and staging are used. At the same time tensions around asymmetrical power relations and positions of (white) privilege within a dominantly white art world also come to the fore when one looks at who is allowed to offend whom. Therefore, while Zanele Muholi’s and Dean Hutton’s work shares a queer context as a point of departure for engaging with politics of visibility, and conceivably both exhibit an aesthetic of exposure and bluntness, they are, of course, also completely differently coded by blackness and whiteness, respectively, which constitute both symbolic and material differences regarding access to the Western art market, white privilege, and lived experiences. South Africa in 2018 is not a post-racist society, even though that is what it aspires to be.

Instead of offering a general survey of the state of the visual sphere or how to deal with offensive images, this text has offered two examples and the need to consider these as a mode of intervention, without offering any resolutions, and instead provoking more questions and a grounded analytical gaze. In this reading, offensive images can create instances of probing violence and violations, ethical dilemmas and power relations.

Before looking away or quickly asking for censorship, one needs to access each case in all its complexities. As has been argued in relation to the different visual materials, outrage about offensive images may be justified and considered progressive, or it may be deemed reactionary. To conclude that exclusionary practices still exist in post-apartheid society is the basis for an analysis of the present visual politics of protest and offence, where the categories of difference have diversified, but not disappeared.

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PART II

Offence, Representations and Popular Culture