

Photographers Actively Commenting on Social Issues in a Democratic South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa is well known for the work produced by artists who were politically motivated to comment against apartheid during the 1980s and early 1990s. Artists felt '[a] great responsibility... to align themselves consciously with the forces of democracy and national liberation... to free our country from racist bondage' (Nadine Gordimer, 1989:10). This paper addresses how this activist tradition is continued in the work of photographers Gideon Mendel, Zanele Maholi and Damien Schumann as they comment on contemporary social issues in South Africa. The aim of the paper is to reflect on the manner in which a post apartheid generation of photographers actively participates in commenting on issues, which they believe, need to be brought to the attention of the South African and broader international viewing audience using photography, multimedia and installation. The research is based on interviews with the individual photographers as well as in depth literature study. The focus of the study reflects the photographer's ideology, choice of subject matter and use of the medium. The significance of the paper lies in understanding how each of these individual artists have managed to use their creative talents in visually representing a particular South African social cause.

KEYWORDS: South African social cause, activist photography, Gideon Mendel, Zanele Maholi, Damien Schumann

Introduction

Photography has long been a mouthpiece for social and political agendas. As far back as 1866, Thomas Annan created the first document on inner city slums, which may well be the starting point of social documentary work. Annan, who was commissioned by the Glasgow City Improvement Trust in 1866 to record the vast slums that grew up around the mills and factories, before the buildings were torn down and rebuilt. This was the first document of inner city slums. Although Annan's images were made with the intent to document the buildings before they were torn down, they represent the documentation of poverty, which

was to become a growing concern of practitioners of the emerging science of sociology in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Another example is John Thompson's photographic survey of London's poor. Thompson's survey resulted in the book *Street Life in London* published in 1878, 'the preface stressing the function of photography to document objectively without omission or exaggeration' (Marien, 2002:147).

This type of approach to documenting society became labelled documentary photography during the 1930s although both Scott (1999:14) and Rosenblum (1997:341) caution against attempting to define the essential nature of photography too narrowly. Many would question whether it has an essential nature at all. John Tagg (1993, p. 63) talks about 'photographies' rather than 'photography' – 'photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work'. For the purpose of this research the terms documentary photography and photojournalism can be reflected on as social documentary photography - playing a role in the way that societies inform themselves about their own identities and values and those of other cultures and societies (Newbury, 1999:21). Social documentary photography therefore serves both the intention of the photographer and a role in society. The blending of documentary work, photojournalism and art photography became increasingly apparent in the late 20th century in the work of photographers such as Brazilian, Sebastião Salgado and Americans Mary Ellen Mark and Eugene Richards. Affiliated with Magnum Agency, they sought employment where their ideas would be subject to the least interference by editors. Their work centers on the plight of unfortunate people, yet their images are seldom sentimental (Marien, 2002).

Social documentary photography plays a significant role in bringing national and international exposure to current events and conditions of social importance. This paper sets out to describe and examine, through literature study and analysis of interviews from ongoing research, the role of social documentary photography within the activist tradition, in a democratic South Africa. Firstly reference needs to be made to social documentary photography prior to democracy and therefore the use of photography in *Drum* magazine during the 1950s and 1960's as well as during the 1980s anti apartheid struggle is briefly reflected on. The paper will then consider the work of photographers Gideon Mendel, Zanele Maholi and Damien Schumann as they deal with contemporary social issues within South Africa as well as from a more global perspective.

Context: South African activist tradition

'*Drum* (March 1951-April 1965) was launched in response to an emerging urban African culture that was virtually unrepresented in either the captive black commercial or alternative political press at the time' (Choonoo, 1997:253) *Drum* magazine was guardedly sympathetic to ANC policies at the time and also reflected and fostered the vibrant sub-cultures that flourished in places like Sophiatown and District Six (Johnson, 1991:23). Peter Magubane, (from interview with Darren Newbury, Johannesburg, 2003), sheds some light on his perceptions of photography before joining *Drum* Magazine:

You would find a black photographer at the corner with his hood, you'd go there, you take the picture, he covers his head with this black cloth with his big camera ... the man is making his living and that's it. Nor did I think that photography had any strength in changing people's

minds. It was only when I began to read Drum magazine and saw pictures, stories that dealt with the social issues affecting us black people.... stories like house arrests, farm labour, the children working on farms, the difference between black and white, which, at the time I didn't know. Immorality act which wasn't in there, many other things you know. And I said 'oh this is what is going on', you know, this magazine is dealing with the issues that affect us.

Drum magazine heralded a cultural revolution in Southern Africa, and within its pages a new literature was born, accompanied by the development of a school of documentary photography. *Drum* was a vehicle for the positive expression of the black urban experience. In 1958 Ernest Cole began his photographic career as a darkroom assistant at *Drum* magazineⁱ working under the supervision of Jurgen Schadeberg. According to Coleⁱⁱ (from interview with Rune Hassener in New York, 1967):

It was then that I also met a lot of Africans who were very concerned about what was going on and it was then that I became aware of the existence of the United Nations and the Afro-Asian block, which was of course strongly attacking South Africa that year. So I decided I could help the outside world and the Afro-Asian block by photographing the conditions in South Africa, the everyday life of the people and I was not sure what form my working was going to take but in 1959 I saw my first photographic book which was entitled People of Moscow by Cartier-Bresson, the French photographer. So then I decided this is the form I wanted my work to take and slowly I started documenting, you know just to show what life was really like. I was aware that after finishing it I would not be able to remain in South Africa but I did not care because this is a chance you take and all of us have taken. You don't want to live under those miserable conditions.

Ernest Cole recorded the human condition of the oppressed. His images of the 50s and 60s are testimony of the injustices of society where one group systematically dehumanises another. He challenged apartheid in South Africa with his powerful haunting images and became the first photojournalist to expose to the world, the stark realities of life under the oppressive apartheid regime. His topics ranged from the mines, passbooks, education and street children, travel by train, domestic servants and hospital care to oppressive signage. He worked for a period of five years on the book, *House of Bondage* (Lelyveld, 1967:19). In 1966 Ernest Cole left South Africa, and in 1967 became the first black South African photojournalist to publish a book. Although the book was banned in South Africa it became an icon for young black photographers during the 1980s and 1990s. While discussing the photography of Ernest Cole, Allan Sekulaⁱⁱⁱ (as cited by Marian, 2002:418) acknowledged that distinct social situations, such as racial apartheid, called for approaches particular to the situation. He cautioned that it 'would be wise to avoid an overly monolithic conception of realism, because not all realisms necessarily play into the hands of the police' (p. 418). Sekula (as cited by Marian, 2002) also noted that the South African preferred to construct narratives using photography and text in situations such as unemployment or workplace struggles, where 'ideology fails to provide a 'rational' and consoling interpretation of the world' (p. 418).

South Africa is well known for the work produced by artists who were politically motivated to comment against apartheid during the 1980s and early 1990s. Artists felt '[a] great responsibility... to align themselves consciously with the forces of democracy and national liberation... to free our country from racist bondage' (Nadine Gordimer, 1989:10). The 1980s was an extremely prolific period for social documentary photography in South Africa

and South African social documentary photographers rose to the challenge. The laws of the apartheid government restricted international photographers from entering and working in South Africa, leaving the South African photographer with more opportunity to supply the international marketplace. Photographic collectives such as *Afrapix* encouraged photographers and provided established channels to the international marketplace. The alternative press in South Africa made use of images to promote the struggle against apartheid in underground publications. Expansion in the press internationally created a market for photojournalism and images documenting conflict. Many of the photographers felt the need to testify their involvement in the struggle against apartheid through images 'crusaders basically going out there on a mission' (E. Miller, personal communication, 12 August, 2004). The struggle against apartheid was a cause that most social documentary photographers in South Africa could identify with. The type of subject matter in demand was easily available 'you did not have to think much, it was all happening in front of you' (G. Wulfsohn, personal communication, 16 January, 2004), 'You could go out into the street, use your camera to photograph anything and you could sell your pictures' (G. Tillim, personal communication, 17 May, 2004).

During the 1980s South Africa social documentary photographers became internationally known for their conscious effort to use their photographs as a tool to fight apartheid. The photographers predominantly worked together in collectives and their work propagated particular themes based on what effectively highlighted the atrocities of apartheid as well as was sought after by the international community. These photographers were working on a particular theme within their own country to present a unified unique view of South African society at the time. Effectively, the images have become a historical document, which bears testimony to a courageous fight for justice in which the majority of South Africans took part, many of them playing an active role. South African documentary photography during the 1980s and early 1990s tends to be labelled 'struggle photography'. With the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the advent of democracy in 1994, the role of the social documentary photographer has undergone dramatic change as they turn the camera lens on a democratic society. It should however be pointed out that the activist tradition so strongly evident in previous decades of South African social commentary photography is continued in a new approach to documenting societal need, inequality and injustice in South Africa. These photographers have increasingly been accepted into art galleries worldwide and coupled with the impact of modern technology their work becomes increasingly effective as activist platforms. .

Photographer: Gideon Mendel

South African born photojournalist Gideon Mendel is recognised as one of the world's leading activists in the campaign against AIDS in Africa. During the 1980s he worked with Agence-France Presse and as a correspondent of Magnum Photos photographing change and conflict directly related to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. After the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 he joined Network Photographers in London and began documenting social issues globally, and in particular in Africa. His first work on AIDS in Africa was commissioned in 1995 by the Positive Lives action group and this subject has become a principle concern in his work for which he has received numerous photography awards. According to Mendel (as cited by Friend & Snider 2001):

Photographs can be powerful weapons. They can convey intimacy, tragedy, passion and hope. I do not consider myself an objective photographer. I see my work on AIDS in Africa as partisan and committed to social issues. I hope that my images address the pain and suffering caused by the disease yet at the same time work to challenge the stereotype of people with AIDS in Africa as pathetic victims. In Africa, as in the West, people with AIDS are starting to come together to mobilize against the prejudices they often face, to help their own communities fight against the virus, to demand equal access to new drug treatments.

Mendel's book, *A Broken Landscape*, published in 2001 'testifies to the extraordinary bravery and love which thrives in the most appalling of circumstances. It asks how humanity is allowing a treatable illness to ravage a continent, and it demands our response' (Boot, 2002:synopsis).

Mendel has been commended for empowering his subjects rather than representing them as objects of pity. His chosen medium of representation includes magazine publications, multimedia web and video presentations. He has produced a number of pioneering photographic projects working with charities and campaigning organizations, such as The Global Fund, MSF, Treatment Action Campaign, The International HIV/AIDS Alliance, Action Aid, UNICEF and Concern International. In his current practice he has been working on a variety of new advocacy projects often involving a mix of photography and video. Two of these projects include *Through Positive Eyes* and *3EyesOn*



Figure 1 Gideon Mendel, *Through Positive Eyes* website (UCLA Global Health Centre)

Through Positive Eyes is an attempt to address key themes of the AIDS epidemic: widespread stigma, extreme social inequality, and limited access to lifesaving medication. The project involves working with groups of HIV positive people who use cameras to document their own lives and is based on the belief that challenging stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS is the most effective method for combating the epidemic—and that art can play a significant role. This project is a collaboration between Mendel and Art/Global Health Center at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles). From the images produced, local and international advocacy materials have been created including exhibitions, short films, a book, and a website. *Through Positive Eyes* has been produced in major cities such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Chennai, Kiev, and New York City.

The *3EyesOn* project is dedicated to finding innovative ways of working with young children, often from poor communities in the United Kingdom. *3EyesOn* is a partnership between photographers Crispin Hughes and Gideon Mendel. “Our work is dedicated to working with pupils from deprived communities to respond photographically to their lives. We believe the current fatigue in conventional documentary photography offers a remarkable opportunity for the unselfconscious vision of schoolchildren to make profound artistic and social comment” (Hughes & Mendel). The children are given a camera as a tool to explore their world often producing intimate and revealing portraits of themselves, their families and communities. According to Hughes and Mendel:

“We have found that given the right motivation, structure and direction a class of pupils of varying ability will produce an exhibition of a high enough creative standard to sit comfortably in a mainstream gallery or museum ... The children find this an enriching and confidence building experience and some of the academically weakest children have excelled in this project.”

Hughes and Mendel then work with the children to enhance and expand their photographs using multimedia video to produce pieces for gallery and web exhibition. The resulting body of work takes on a life not only as a multi-disciplinary teaching resource but also as a way of drawing potentially diverse local communities together. Mendel has successfully managed to marry the tradition of activism and social upliftment within his highly acclaimed social commentary images.

Photographer: Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi a self-identified black lesbian, views her photography as a form of activism addressing issues directly related to sexuality in particular lesbian lifestyles Zanele Muholi (as cited by O’Toole, 2006) ‘My aim is not to make nice pictures but to crack open the issues’ (p58). Her body of work *Faces and Phases*, first exhibited in 2006, deals with the struggles, lives and history of the black South African lesbian. From an insiders perspective Muholi strives to establish relationships with her subjects based on their mutual understanding of ‘what it means to be female, lesbian, and black’ in contemporary South Africa. The motivation for the body of work relates directly to Muholi’s (2007) following quote:

Most of the time being lesbian is seen as negative, as destroying the nuclear heterosexual family; for many black lesbians, the stigma of queer identity arises from the fact that homosexuality is seen as un-African. Expectations are that African women must have children and procreate with a male partner, the head of the family. That is part of the “African tradition”. Failing to

conform to these expectations, we are perceived as deviants, needing a “curative rape” to erase our male attitude and make us into true women, females, real women, mothers, men’s property ... From an insider’s perspective, this project is meant as a commemoration and a celebration of the lives of black lesbians that I met in my journeys through the township ... many of them had been violated; I did not want the camera to be a further violation; rather, I wanted to establish relationships with them based on our mutual understanding of what it means to be female, lesbian and black in South Africa today. I call this method the birth of visual activism: I decided to use it to mark our resistance and existence as black lesbians in our country, because it is important to put a face on each and every issue’ (p.64)

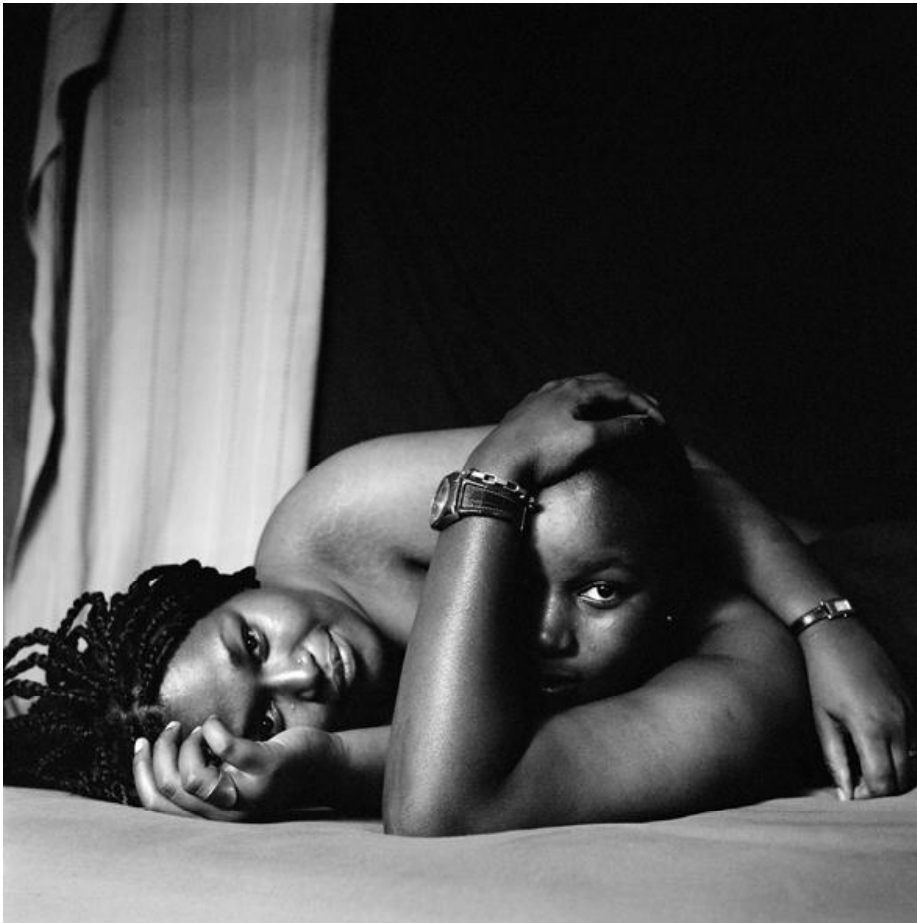


Figure 2 Zanele Muholi, *Apinda Mpako & Ayanda Magudulela*, Johannesburg, 2007, exhibited in the series 'Being', collection of the photographer, courtesy Zanele Muholi

Muholi's documentation of the lives and experiences of black lesbian women is met with varied reactions. Her work represents the black female body in an open and intimate way that challenges the history of the portrayal of black women's bodies in documentary photography. Her work is widely recognized as being conceptually provocative and confrontational. Her book published in 2010 *Faces and Phases* reflects her attempt to 'channel power to those who make her images possible, who tell their stories through her photography, visibilises black queer people, and turns on its head false ideas of the objective position of the photographer (Sanger, 2010) Exhibitions she has taken part in both locally and internationally include *Only Half the Picture*, *Second to None* and *Erase Me From Who I Am*.

Increasingly Muholi experiments with new approaches to documenting black lesbian lifestyle. Her internationally acclaimed work provides a glimpse of the harsh realities that come with the label of lesbian in South Africa while at the same time casting her subjects as individuals who deserve just as much respect and freedom of choice as any other South African.

Photographer: Damien Schumann

Damien Schumann refers to himself as photojournalist and committed social activist, 'I document to find understanding and everything that comes from that is simply a repercussion of asking why' (D. Schumann, personal communication, September 28, 2009). He constructed *The TB/HIV Shack*, representing a typical South African, low-income dwelling, to raise awareness about one of the settings where TB and HIV-Aids coexist. While working in conjunction with the Desmond Tutu Tuberculosis Centre in 2004, *The shack* was created as an exhibition space for Schumann's images dealing with Tuberculosis and Aids which he photographed over a six month period in the townships of Cape Town, South Africa as well as Lusaka, Zambia. The work documents the lifestyle and living conditions of people living with aids. As part of the exhibition he asked the people that he photographed to write about their perceptions of their disease in their mother language and these hand written testimonials are exhibited along with the images on the walls of the shack. Schumann (personal communication, September 28, 2009) expresses reasons for including these testimonials in the following statement:

The idea of the work was to have the patients perspective of what it was about ... to be living with TB and so I couldn't express that through a picture on its own and I wanted it to be as personal as possible ... it was their interpretation.



Figure 3 Damien Schumann, *The Shack* exhibition space

Many of the Shack exhibitions were held at international conferences and parliament where policy and decision makers were gathering to discuss issues related to health and poverty, for example the 38th Union Conference on TB and Africa in 2007 and the AIDS Conference in Mexico City, August of 2008. This installation proved to be very successful as an advocacy campaign as it was a medium that could bring the realities of living conditions to those who would normally never visit a township or slum (Schumann).

Another of Schumann's bodies of work is *Face It: The Stigma Exhibition*. This exhibition invites the viewer to look within instead of without, engaging curiosity and encouraging the viewer to flip through a book with no title and no faces. The exhibition deals with stigma and living conditions surrounding issues such as homosexuality, drug addiction and anorexia amongst others. The exhibition is about inspiring individual contemplation and as such is made up of nine photographic books each representing the living space of a particular individual. While viewing the photographic volume a recorded conversation between the individual and the photographer can be listened to via headphone:

Without knowing where we are or who we are looking at, all of the typical situations in which stigma arise melt away and we are placed in the same position Mr. Schumann was in when the photographs were taken; talking as one person to another, without judgment. This is the beauty and ultimate brilliance of the 'Face It' series (Dierks, 2010).

Schumann avoided hanging pictures in a typical gallery manner because the work is about participation, not show. No faces are shown; the effort of capturing the abstraction of prejudice is achieved by reflecting on the environment in which subjects are living, rather than on the subjects themselves. But 'instead of focusing on poverty, filth, or other environmental conditions that might evoke distance through pity or judgment, what is revealed are the most mundane and innocent of actions' (Dierks, 2010). This intimate and yet distanced method of presenting demands physical involvement and is Schumann's way of encouraging the viewer to look at society without prejudice:

The gradual awakening to subject matter serves both as evidence of and an encouragement to adopt a more intuitive method of exploring the world. The lack of ability to explain is what breaking down stigma is about, both tangentially and centrally (Dierks, 2010).

Conclusion

Increasingly the social documentary photographer exhibits within the gallery space and turns to modern technology as a vehicle of visual expression. During the 1980s and 1990s South African social documentary work was internationally recognised as a voice against the apartheid government. With the advent of democracy photographers such as Gideon Mendel have continued in the activist tradition turning their lens to motivating for some or other social cause. Mendel in particular has worked to highlight the impact of aids in Africa and to educate and so alleviate the stigma of testing positive for HIV and HIV related illness. His highly acclaimed images and use of technology effectively convey an activist approach to documenting South African and African society.

Zanele Muholi presents a poignant view of the issues that address black South African lesbians. Exhibiting in galleries both locally and internationally she explores and presents her subject from an insiders perspective. The function of her art in contemporary society is not meant to undermine the subject photographed but rather to give voice to issues that may never have been heard previously.

Damien Schumann relies on presenting the individual's experience of their environment and understanding of self when placed within a particular stigmatised frame of reference. His *Shack* exhibition space is a remodelled township shack with all the trimmings of daily life. The walls become widows into the individual's experience as he hangs portraits with hand written texts, by the subjects themselves as they address issues relevant to tuberculosis and Aids. The three dimensional experience brings with it not only the individuals "story" but their actual environment cementing the personal experience within the activist message.

These three artists use their images in innovative ways to actively comment on relevant issues in contemporary South African society. They actively participate in commenting on issues, which they believe, need to be brought to the attention of the South African and broader international viewing audience using photography, multimedia and installation.

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ⁱ Disillusioned with the Bantu Education System enforced in 1954 and introduced into his grade in 1957, Ernest Cole dropped out of school at the beginning of 1957 and continued his schooling via correspondence. At the same time he pursued a correspondence course in photography from a school in New York (Lelyveld 1967:18).

ⁱⁱ Extract of a documentary by Rune Hassner, 1967, *Ernest Cole*. This extract was viewed on a video titled *Ernest Cole photojournalist*, produced by Jurgen and Claudia Schadeberg in 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ Allen Sekula was one of the few photography critics to extend his perspective to other than Western settings (Marien 2002:420)