

SOME  
THING  
WE  
AFRI  
CANS  
GOT

January 2018



Zanele Muholi, *Faniswa*, Seapoint, Cape Town, 2016  
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg  
and Yancey Richardson, New York

*contemporary  
art*

## ***performa 17***

***a focus on live  
art practice and  
contemporary  
african art  
and culture***

TEXT JAREH DAS

Performa is the first biennial solely focused on global Performance Art. Every two years, it transforms New York City into a "world capital of artists' performance" for both national and international audiences. Since its founding in 2005 by South-African born, NYC-based art historian and curator, RoseLee Goldberg, there have been over 600 performances presented alongside a touring program that has traveled to 20 countries around the world. The organization has brought South African artists and groups such as Berni Searle, Candice Breitz, Athi-Patra Ruga, Robin Rhode, William Kentridge, and Chimurenga, and this year the country's artists feature as a focus together with Estonia. The current and 7<sup>th</sup> edition presents three main curatorial strands: the role of live art practices central to African art and culture ("AFROGLOSSIA" and "South African Pavilion Without Walls"), the intersection of architecture and performance ("Circulations"), and the hundred-year legacy of Dada ("Projects and Commissions"). A team of curators and producers presented "commissions and projects on research themes focused on a cross-cultural dialogue between artists working in several African cities, the intersection of architecture and performance and the legacy of Dada, that represent timely opportunities to work with a diverse range of global contemporary artists." These manifested as performances, dance, workshops and a four-day film program in varied spaces including a skate park, a shop, a club, a church, a modernist house, gallery spaces, a park, and a concert hall, all spread across Manhattan, Brooklyn and New Canaan.

The South African Pavilion Without Walls considers artistic practices developing in a post-Apartheid era by different generations who are informed by activism, and modern and contemporary art, as they evolve alongside global changes. Live art practices have always been central to African art and culture and performance art is deeply embedded in its culture, ranging from impromptu street performances to masquerades and carnivals as a few examples of how lived experiences occur in a richly diverse and varied context where art and life are constantly

blurred. A LGBTQI visual activist, Zanele Muholi embodies this life-art experience and introduces her work that is deeply imbued within the South African context as multiple interventions and engaging events across the city. Muholi has long used photography and performance as a form of visual activism celebrating queer, black South African females who have been subjected to violent discriminations. Her works are about communities, safe spaces and creating platforms of visibility for black female bodies rendered invisible by oppressive forces and understated protest against the stigma and violence that individuals within the LGBTQI community are often faced with. For Performa 17, she was accompanied by a 23-person strong squad of performers, dancers, singers, poets and activists that traveled with her from South Africa spreading her #VisualActivism message with *Masihambisane: On Visual Activism*. All of the events they participated in shed light on the importance of the community of individuals that both inform and make her works possible. Muholi's portraits were also staged as interventions across the city as a billboard at Times Square and digital screens at six NYC subways and City Point at Albee Square in Brooklyn.

Kemang Wa Lehlulele's *I cut my skin to liberate the splinter* was a part-sculpture, part machine-like performance where six collaborators used handmade props as musical instruments in a dynamic presentation exploring sound and movement lasting an hour. Childhood games were a central motif; an old wooden school desk, cut apart and reassembled, became a makeshift wooden drum; others were remodeled as birdhouses, into which a performer thrust her arms and legs, and writhed on the floor. The accompanying sound work was influenced by *Cosmic Africa*, a 2003 documentary about Thebe Medupe, an astrophysicist who traveled throughout the continent and shared knowledge about the universe, ancient artwork in Namibia and Egypt, and myths with villagers along the way. William Kentridge returned to the biennial with *Ursonate*, a rendition of a sound poem first presented by the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters in 1932 against the backdrop

of his signature hand-drawn animations and presented in Harlem Parish. Finally, sculptor and performer Kendell Geers gave a lecture-performance devoted to Marcel Duchamp, delivering an apparently serious, conspiracy-minded perspective on the most famous of all Dadaists.

AFROGLOSSIA, another core theme of the festival, is a term coined and organized by Performa curator Adrienne Edwards that highlights "a range of artistic voices and coalesces diverse perspectives from various regions of the African continent currently being made by artists from Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Morocco, and South Africa." The commissions in this section see each artist take up the specific social, historical, political, and economic scenarios and experiences in their own distinctly formal ways. At BKLYN Studio at City Point, writer and photographer Teju Cole was very present at *Black Paper*, a politically charged and focused account of the politics surrounding the 2016 US elections and the topical imagery of fallen black male bodies. Visitors took a seat in a darkened room with six surrounding screens, one of which stayed the same throughout and depicted a hotel room with views of the sea. Other screens depicted front page news on the elections and a slideshow of his photographs, accompanied by a score of field recordings. As the performance began, Cole slowly changed into loose-fitted clothing and lay in a stupor position throughout as images flickered, often of in-between spaces across different geographical locations. A visual diary of all of his travels and next to this, layering of front pages of a daily newspaper overlapping as the performance ensued. The piece ended with the artist rising suddenly and screaming as if awoken from a nightmare. Alongside Cole's performance which sadly was the only running commission for the opening week, was a four-day film program at Anthology Film Archives offering a context of films that influenced the participating artists' commissions or their overall practice. Cole selection included *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983, 100 min), *Lifeline* (Victor Erice, 2002, 11 min), *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* (Arthur Jafa, 2016, 8 min), *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya

Deren & Alexander Hammid, 1943, 14 min) and *Best of Luck with the Wall* (Josh Begley, 2017, 7 min).

Week one of Performa 17 brought bold performances by some of the most exciting and norm-breaking artists living on the continent or of African descent. In recent years there has been a celebration of contemporary African art with debates fluctuating between the complexity of the label 'African Art', viewed a limiting term encompassing the nuances of 54 countries that make up the continent and subsequent art forms. Performa has a strong connection to the South African art scene and this year, with AFROGLOSSIA succeeded in presenting a dynamic and vibrant approach to a range of multimedia performances blurring and contesting the nationalistic boundaries of West and other, whilst with South African Pavilion Without Walls, a critical presentation of intergenerational artists demonstrated current concerns that are not limited to an African context, but also transposable across other geographies thus serving as a reminder that in times of conflict and upheaval the individual is culpable as a force for social and political change.

Performa 17 took place at various venues, mostly in New York City between November 1<sup>st</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

#### Jareh Das

*Jareh Das is a curator/writer/doctoral researcher based currently in Rotterdam. She has worked on a variety of curatorial projects encompassing exhibitions, art fairs, consultation, sales and public programming (talks, events and education) in international cities including Berlin, London, Dubai, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Middlesbrough and Tehran.*

