

Radical Decomposition: Unravelling Agencies in the Art of Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis

Anna Stielau ^{1*}

¹ *New York University*, UNITED STATES

*Corresponding Author: as11065@nyu.edu

Citation: Stielau, A. (2022). Radical Decomposition: Unravelling Agencies in the Art of Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 7(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/12751>

Published: December 30, 2022

ABSTRACT

For understandable reasons, global discourses around queer, feminist, and decolonial activism are unified by an emphasis on action, the agential, and the productive. Doing is what matters most, hence the critical focus of this special issue on how the doing gets done, or the forms that most effectively transmit action. However, these discourses risk reproducing the hard binaries by which political activity has historically been assessed, including success/ failure and resistance/passivity - in other words, they can unintentionally reinforce a racialized and gendered dichotomy between those who do things in the world and those who are simply undone by it. Such binaries further scaffold progress narratives that have long been weaponized against populations in the global South, founding good subjects, proper objects, legitimate politics, and viable futures in line with agendas set elsewhere. In this article, I turn to contemporary South African art to ask a different question: what might we learn from scenes of undoing instead? What expanded repertoire of actions, affects, alliances, and options emerges when we are sensitive to how decompositions, not just compositions, reroute agency, mediate relations, and make worlds? My article explores decomposition as a literal and figurative method in recent works by Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis, three South African artists who do not all align with notions of visual activism proper. But by placing pressure on the unruliness, vulnerabilities, and expressive limits of form and material, I argue that each artist usefully troubles the figure in whom normative notions of political agency are supposed to reside. In so doing, they sensitise their audiences to how vectors of precaritization and (in)capacity intersect today, unravelling the linear means-ends logics that conventionally underwrite theories of both art and activism.

Keywords: South African art, agency, visual activism, decomposition, decolonial

INTRODUCTION

In the great slackening of life and hope that was the first Covid-19 lockdown in New York City, I kept returning to a single line from Jia Tolentino's collection of pop culture essays, *Trick Mirror*, published around the same time. The cruelty of the internet, Tolentino (2020: 31) writes in her chapter 'The I in Internet', is its intensification of an asymmetry baked into much modern media consumption: 'The internet was dramatically increasing our ability to know about things, while our ability to *change* things stayed the same, or possibly shrank right in front of us'. The reality is more complicated than a soundbite can capture, capacious 'us' included. Much of online life is sustained by a sense of doing something, as current affect-forward discourses of offence and cancellation hint. Yet part of the strangeness of virtualized social space is that statistically speaking, this feeling rarely translates into liberatory action, with a few dramatic exceptions. The Covid-19 pandemic has cast the resulting imbalance into sharp relief.

Those privileged enough to stay inside are positioned as spectators only, paralyzed in the eye of a disaster. From the vantage point of that little eye/I, not much can harden into a plan, let alone a political program.

Anxieties about a diminishing capacity for action are a red thread running through Western philosophy, stringing together theories of the subject as a perpetually busy doer of deeds. Predictably, these theories advance an individualist understanding of political agency that has been foundational to Euro-American grand narratives of progress and freedom, where action itself is framed as rational, linear, productive, and future-oriented. Most famously, Hannah Arendt (2013 [1958]) argues that men acting in concert is the only real form of politics proper, and must be ferociously defended against the incursion of less special sorts of activities, like the boring matter of staying alive. She claims that,

Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it [...] A life without speech and without action on the other hand [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men (176).

Black feminist thinkers like Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) have since turned a more critical eye on these divisions of capacity, showing how racialized and gendered difference is naturalized as exactly the distinction between those who can affect (subjects, transparent 'I's') and those who are affected (objects). Because who counts as a political actor is one of modernity's founding assumptions, any reading of action must inhabit the terrain that modernity has made, including its ossified arrangements of who gets to speak, listen, be heard, and be seen (Rancière and Žižek, 2004). Though there have been efforts to assign agency more generously to the material world, disturbing these entrenched parts and positions (Latour, 2014; Bennett, 2010), it remains surprising to me that the spectre of incapacity is seldom taken seriously on its own terms, given how it trails agency everywhere like a shadow. In the face of so much attritional violence, maybe it is easier to live in a world composed entirely of small forces waiting to happen.

In this article, I am not interested in relitigating where agency begins or ends. I do not want to identify the correct objects or practices through which to channel intent or excavate some latent redemptive drive that might transform a feeling of incapacity into action-to-come. In my home country of South Africa, as in much of the global South, history tells us that when somebody makes or does something, they risk being soldered into racially-inflected scripts of failure and success, resistance and passivity, *even when that thing is only making do*. These prevailing scripts serve to further regulate distinctions between people, divvying everyone up into camps of those who get stuff done in the world and those who are simply undone by it. Arguably, these scripts are at their most far-reaching when it comes to artists in the global South, who tend to be governed by strong discourses of endurance, empowerment, and resistance that conceive all creative action as always already reaction, whether those artists like it or not (see Yapp, 2014, 2021)¹.

Instead of reinforcing these stories, I want to use this text as an opportunity to sit with a problem that might seem at odds with the general thrust of this special issue. It is the underside of those urgent studies of activism that would combat a threatening (and increasingly democratized) experience of affectability. If Tolentino is right that some people are newly sensitized to precarity, passivity, and incapacity in moments of globally distributed crisis, that seems like cause to explore what political imagination blooms when human agencies disintegrate, or perhaps when action changes nothing at all. What is produced by losing – or surrendering – a feeling of control, and with it the ability to make things or people act on our behalf? Is it possible to evaluate decisions to embrace Arendt's 'deadness to the world' without fetishizing the abdication of agency or glorifying apathy? *What if deadness to aspects of this world may yet make us alive to others?*

In what follows, I explore how three South African artists, Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit and Nolan Oswald Dennis, employ tactics of undoing, agential rearrangement, and material breakdown, or what I call 'decompositions'. I adapt this language from Denise Ferreira da Silva (2018: n.p.), for whom the concept is inseparable from the decolonial feminist task of unthinking our world with a view to the end of that world *as we know it*. For da Silva, decomposition names an intervention in the master codes of Western epistemology, and specifically its schemes of separability (dividing and defining things according to their qualities), determinacy (that true knowledge of things can be obtained via formal constructs), and sequentiality (historicity, or progressive movement in time). Together these schemes make up the framework through which agency is usually apprehended and assessed as a fixed attribute of subjects, and a name for what does and does not belong to the category

¹Writing in the context of contemporary Chinese art, Hentyle Yapp elaborates the flattening effects of these universal discourses, which can reinforce rather than change an order of things. '[T]he entrenched argument that non-Western art is worthy of inclusion and valuable for demonstrating resistant agency against the strong state repeats static formulations of subjects, culture and the state, and reinforces logics of liberalism, modern humanism and capitalism', he points out (2021: 6).

'human'². Decompositions are therefore a method of introducing the uncommon to common sense, and unravelling what exists without deciding in advance what will replace it. By rejecting preconceived notions of agency, and by resisting the impulse to force matter into the shapes demanded exclusively by efficacy, I argue that artists working in a decompositional vein reimagine what activist art *is* and what it mediates. In the process, they productively provincialize the goal-seeking, self-possessed subject of political action, itself a trope of Enlightenment thought.

ART'S ACTS

To understand how South African artists are *undoing* things, it is helpful first to consider how their art is read as communicating normative notions of agency, as well as what this reading takes for granted. One case study is particularly instructive. In her glowing review of a mid-career survey exhibition by the acclaimed South African photographer and filmmaker Zanele Muholi, at the Tate Modern, *The Guardian* critic Laura Cumming (2020) concludes decisively that, '[T]his is an art of agency'. On its face Cumming's description makes sense. As an important voice for Black lesbian, trans, and gender non-conforming communities, Muholi has dedicated their entire career to challenging dominant attitudes about race, gender, and sexuality by filling a representational void. They have repurposed the tools and techniques of documentary photography, a genre with an ugly history of racialized objectification, to stake out a claim to personhood for Black queer people in the face of extreme, ongoing persecution.

Yet, Cumming's phrasing is suggestive in both its ambiguity and its constitutive outside. First, it is unclear if the critic locates agency in the artist, audience, subjects, or photographs. This vanishing mediator recurs throughout critical engagements with Muholi's body of work, which centres 'seeing the agency – life choices, decisions, failures, confusions, discoveries, rejections – of the Black lesbian in the picture' while making form and context into second-order problems (Gqola, 2006: 84). As a result, Muholi's choice of *art* as a preferred delivery method recedes from view, as though a political message must come at the expense of its medium. Second, these celebrations of sovereign agency inevitably code incapacity, its other, as weaker or less worthy (Berlant, 2011: 96). By downplaying the constraints that continue to inhibit free action and choice-making, from social limitation to economic lack, this coding reserves humanity for spectacular postures of performative action while ignoring what erodes will. In a fundamentally assimilatory gesture, agency is therefore extended only as far as subjects whom the viewer recognizes as equally human *like them*, capable of self-authoring and self-extending in meaningful, legible ways. Ultimately, contending with these blind spots requires thinking more about 1) how artworks mediate political action in ways distinct from other forms of discourse, and 2) how agency might be transformed by art, rather than just represented in it.

Though there have long been politically-engaged artists and aesthetically-minded activists, the convergence of art and activism is in some ways a very recent phenomenon. 'Activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century', Peter Weibel (2015) writes in *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, tracking a turn toward reading activism as artistic and art as (in)direct action that cuts across artworlds of the new millennium. Without a doubt, Zanele Muholi is heir to a tradition of cultural producers in South Africa for whom art represents a distinct grammar of political struggle, a position shared by the artist themselves. But their self-identification as a visual activist marks an evolution of this tradition, eliminating distinctions between aesthetic and political considerations in favour of symbiosis³.

In key respects, however, visual art and activism are actually in conflict. As authors in this special issue appreciate, activism is a big and elastic tent. It encompasses everything from humble postures of resistance to collective expressions of rage, generally prompted by necessity and often coming from the margins. What unifies activism as a category – and what defines it per se – is the marshalling of human action toward a specific end within a perceived power imbalance. For activist practices to cohere, then, a degree of certainty is required about the sources of action, its agents, its objects, and its objectives, as well as the forces worth harnessing for social change. These guarantees clash with art's longstanding location within a realm of creative freedom distinct from the realm of political necessity, and its strong association with qualities like openness and targetlessness. 'The goal of

² The Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter (2003) has meticulously unpacked how a Western European notion of Man was made synonymous with the human through knowledge systems formalized in the nineteenth century, meaning that the characteristics of what we now call 'humanness' are themselves legacies of racial colonial modernity.

³ Though it is not always named as such, this is an increasingly popular position to adopt in contemporary discourses around artistic production, which today tend to follow from the assumption that content trumps form, as effect trumps intent (Nelson, 2021). Some writers have suggested that this focus derives from the rejection of an (ostensibly) ideologically agnostic brand of formalism, infamously dominated by white male artists and summed up by the old modernist mantra of 'art for art's sake' (see Ruiz, 2016 for a rich analysis).

activism’, the media theorist Stephen Duncombe explains, is ‘to generate an effect’, whereas art is usually geared more ambiguously toward affect over effect, even at its most didactic (2016: 118). Indeed, current debates about the instrumentalization of art and the social responsibilities of artists revolve around this basic contradiction, wherever a desire to agitate for change is opposed to a desire to leave things without a clear moral position (see Van Niekerk, 2013; Nelson, 2021). For Duncombe, the point of departure when thinking about activist art-making must therefore be a question that better reconciles the two domains, ‘a question that haunts, or ought to haunt, the entire practice [of art activism]: Does it *work*?’ (2016: 115, my italics).

‘Does it work?’ is a valuable approach when activist art is imagined as a direct conduit for wilful agency and a vessel of intention. Any would-be answer must imbue artworks with a heroic world-transformative power so that their effects can be held to the same standards as other kinds of political activity. Likewise, any answer must iron out ambiguities in order to get to grips with *the work of art*: what is produced, where it is produced, and why it matters. Still, this opens up other challenging questions. From whose perspective is art’s action assessed? Who determines what qualifies as ‘working’? According to what measures, metrics, and timescales? Duncombe himself proposes a non-exhaustive list of goals for activist art from fostering dialogue to building community while acknowledging that any number of exceptions continue to arise.

To be clear, by highlighting these tensions between artistic and activist agendas, I am not advocating for a retreat into disinterested aesthetic judgment, where it is enough to evaluate an artwork for its beauty alone. Rather, I am struck by the extent to which not being purposive disqualifies something from having a politics when art is theorized like other activist discourses. Instead of ‘Does it work?’, I find myself curious about the far queerer question of what does no/t work, evading the combined imperatives of productivity and progress, or perhaps perverting their paths. As Denise da Silva (2018: n.p.) remarks, instrumentalizing views of art impose imaginative constraints not because they express a desire for change, but because a tight hold on efficacy restricts the kinds of questions we might ask about how things can be otherwise. ‘What if what matters in (the) artwork exceeds representation not because of its “why” or “when” or “where” but because of its “how” and its “what”?’ she wonders (2018: n.p.). Which is another way to say, what if what does not obviously *work* in the work of art is part of how transformation happens?

Briefly, I want to show how restoring the less obviously activist ‘how’ and ‘what’ to Zanele Muholi’s art reveals a richer, more nuanced vision of agential unevenness, scrambling the teleological drives that would reduce all means to ends. What counts in an image is not always its content. As objects, Muholi’s photographs possess quieter properties that do not enter the conversation much. They have scale, proportion, proximity, sequence, mass, surface area, gloss, density, and number. Though representation rises to the fore, these secondary properties carry affordances of their own. Without supplying the already-existing narratives to which documentary modes are particularly vulnerable, these properties nonetheless structure and pattern perception.

The ongoing *Faces and Phases* (2007–) series, Muholi’s most widely exhibited work, now comprises more than 500 photographs of Black queer people (Figure 1). Usually displayed in tight, evenly spaced clusters, these black-and-white portraits generate a densely populated visual field in which many bodies crowd the viewer, with the eyes of each figure breaking the fourth wall of the frame to meet the gaze. Crowd is the operative word. Instead of encountering every portrait as a single unit of meaning, the sheer number of images encourages the eye to move fluidly between scales: from the individual to the collective, from what is distinct to what is held in common. In other words, if these photographs depict the ‘phases’ of life experience, sexual object choice, or transition, then the viewer’s gaze is invited to phase in turn, travelling freely between states and across surfaces. Rather than consolidating *Faces and Phases* around individuals infused with an agentic power that makes them worthy of care or capable of self-determination, the artist’s use of a number of portraits thus sets the stage for understanding agency as a property of relation. When it is difficult to aggregate individuals into a totality, but similarly impossible to reject collectivity for exception, we are invited to de/re/compose boundary lines between these categories. The direct, individualized connection that portraits conventionally stage between human subjects is substituted for a more diffuse communal demand that the viewer can neither meet nor deny. This is what it means to establish *a ground* for political action, not simply a figure who acts.

Comparably, when the people of *Faces and Phases* are read formally as sequence, curious commonalities surface. All the portraits depict figures in moments of repose, a decision that bumps up against accompanying rhetorics of agency. Each person inhabits a quality of time that does not immediately register as urgent, and therefore is too easily and too readily disqualified from the political. Here there are only suspended moments without before or after, a constellation of linked presents (Figure 2). Muholi’s repeated focus on ordinary, undramatic instants interrupts a vision of effective will that would assign value to persons proactively taking charge of their own destinies, despite the experiences of repression, exhaustion, and slow death that plague queer and Black communities. Zanele Muholi nudges us to remember that ‘lives are not novels’, as Lauren Berlant (2011: 99) puts it. They do not always have to have intentionality to be meaningful. Some bodies do not do, or cannot do, or have done enough.



Figure 1. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases 13*, Stevenson Gallery installation, Cape Town, 2019.



Figure 2. Zanele Muholi, *Faces and Phases 13*, installation detail.

Zanele Muholi's photographs push beyond individual autonomy and sovereign performativity. By deepening the kinds of agency that activist art is understood to encode and enact, and finding sharedness in their stead, *Faces and Phases* allows for the radical possibility that being in the world together, existing and persisting, and doing nothing at all can be as important as exercising control. In their play of medium and message, the artist also wedges open an additional space to think beyond instrumentality, so that the form of a piece might enhance, rather than usurp, its subversive potential. Perhaps the most famous description of anti-instrumentality in art comes from the poet W. H. Auden (2007 [1939]), who wrote in his elegy for W. B. Yeats that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. Auden's sentiment is helpful here not for that line but for the line that concludes the stanza, which is quoted far less. Poetry may make nothing happen, Auden writes, but it is also 'a way of happening, a mouth'. Muholi's art, too, proffers a *way of happening*, a word without a defined subject, static object, or finite space and time.

DECOMPOSING A PHOTOGRAPH, OR HOW TO DO REPRESENTATION WITHOUT (EN)CLOSURE

The philosopher Bruno Latour (2014: 11-12) has identified a deep seam of incapacity at the heart of contemporary climate change activism. Today our ability to assert control as a species is being pushed to its utmost limit, he writes:

[I]t seems now very plausible that human actors may arrive *too late* on the stage to have any remedial role ... Through a complete reversal of Western philosophy's most cherished trope, human societies have resigned themselves to playing the role of the dumb object, while nature has unexpectedly taken on that of the active subject! Such is the frightening meaning of 'global warming': through a surprising inversion of background and foreground, it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace.

For Latour, climate change is a seismic disturbance in the system of differences that discourses of agency help to sustain. In a decidedly decompositional formulation, he articulates how experiences of environmental anxiety rearrange the what and how of things, so that it is no longer possible to give a confident account of efficient causes or final effects. Background becomes foreground. Subjects become objects. As the ecological scholar Timothy Morton (2013) argues, when vast images trouble sight itself, so things fall apart.

Confronted with the threat of irreparably compromised agency, the South African photographer Jean Brundrit advances an alternative account of the field of environmental action beginning with a simple insight: sometimes, things must come apart in order to reform. From December 2019 to January 2020, the artist spent six weeks aboard the scientific research vessel SA Agulhas II, travelling from Cape Town across the Southern Ocean to Antarctica and back again. Equipped with an icebreaking hull and several working laboratories, the SA Agulhas II is equal parts polar supply ship and polar research vessel – it has played a key role in recent assessments and explorations of the region⁴. Brundrit's attempts to document her own journey on the ship form the core of *Over the Horizon* (2019-20), a photographic series concerned with sea ice and the kinds of relations we might establish with and through it.

Visual evidence from the poles has become a principal marker of human-induced planetary change, with the material vulnerability of ice simultaneously spectacularizing broader climate concerns and offering a legible, empirical measure of change. The most iconic images of climate crisis are of ice, from melting glaciers to polar bears clinging to ice floes. In fact, an iceberg was chosen as the cover image of Morton's book *Hyperobjects* precisely because its scale analogizes the 'strange strangeness' of hugely distributed objects that reveal the limits of human mastery over nature, of which global warming is a prime example. Such visualizations are employed as metonyms for concerns so enormous or urgent they are otherwise difficult to grasp, offering a general shorthand for emergency.

However, visualizing the South pole is also a way to exercise power over the thing itself, in that images of the Antarctic have long been instruments, anticipating use. When she embarked on her ocean journey, as Brundrit explains to me in our February 2022 interview, she found the experience to be eerily familiar.⁵ The artist was retracing the steps of generations of previous explorers from Shackleton to the legendary Maori voyager Hui Te Rangiora. Although some of these men did not return home, their archives attest to their successes, and it is those archives that have filled out the picture of a place where few people have set foot. Drawings, photographs, diaries,

⁴ It bears mentioning that as I write, that same ship is playing host to the Endurance22 expedition. Divers are descending more than 11,000 ft beneath the shining surface of the Weddell Sea to the wreck of Ernest Shackleton's vessel, which has lain undisturbed on the seafloor for 107 years.

⁵ This article draws on interviews conducted in the course of my ongoing doctoral research. The artists Nolan Oswald Dennis and Jean Brundrit were interviewed about their recent exhibitions in 2021 and 2022, respectively.



Figure 3. Jean Brundrit, *Untitled 1*, Handprinted Black and White photograph. Ilford Fibre paper. Selenium toned, 2019/2020, 45 cm × 36 cm.

memoirs, novels, and scientific publications mark each passage. Today, the ice is even more extensively documented, with cameras trained on its myriad mutable surfaces. The Australian Antarctic Division operates four data-gathering public webcams at permanent stations on the Antarctic continent and on the sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island. The McMurdo Oceanographic Observatory hosted a two-year livestream from the depths of the McMurdo Sound, so that viewers all over the globe could familiarize themselves with the shadowy seafloor and respond with appropriate environmental action to ensure humanity's survival. Something that is not easily experienced, collected, or preserved can thus be made knowable, a precondition for a call for action that depends on bringing home the reality of crisis, yet one that paradoxically reproduces the imperial drive for total knowledge and unlimited extension that contributed to that crisis.

If it has long been desirable to obtain a clearer picture of the ends of the earth, then the photographs that make up *Over the Horizon* are at first disconcertingly out of focus. Without knowing Brundrit's methods, these pictures resist interpretation in a standard photographic vocabulary of figures, grounds, subjects, and objects. In the handprinted black and white photograph *Untitled 1*, for example, all co-ordinates for orientation have disappeared (**Figure 3**). Instinctively, viewers draw closer to the photographic surface, looking for details from which some additional information might be gleaned. Perhaps the dark swathe occupying the lower third of the frame is water. A white band slicing through the centre of the image might be an ice shelf. A pale grey field could be sky. Beyond finding subtle shifts in tone at the borders of forms, though, the impulse to extract data comes up short. As Annabelle Weinand (2021: n.p.) observes of Brundrit's elusive work, this soft opacity is particularly unsettling to 'contemporary eyes used to the straightforward record taking of mobile phones and the sharpness of the commercial photograph'. Our image-saturated society means that '[w]e are accustomed to recording with great ease and achieving instant results'.

Other photographs from the same series, like *Untitled 5*, intensify the initial confusion. The eye can find little to stick to between what could be ground and what should be sky. A long exposure has left traces of uncertain, repetitive movement across the surface of the image, with bright lines cross-hatching one another in the darkness of their setting (**Figure 4**). Yet, any relationship to time remains as hazy as the location in space, and as difficult to parse. Nothing is constant enough or solid enough to assess duration. The introduction of planes of colour to subsequent shots offers little aesthetic respite, as blue piles onto ever more blue, enfolding the viewer (**Figure 5**). What lies over the horizon appears to have no end and no order. Though they are undeniably photographic in nature, with the skilful printing and lush surfaces one might expect from the medium, these images do not present an unimpeded window to the world, instead reflecting the enormous plasticity of their subject matter.

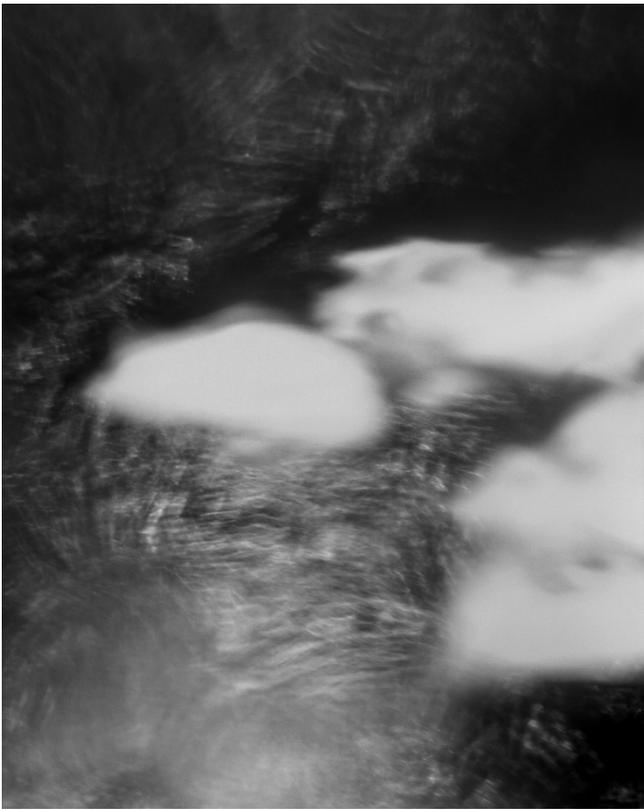


Figure 4. Jean Brundrit, Untitled 5 (from the series *Over the Horizon*), Handprinted Black and White photograph. Ilford Fibre paper. Selenium toned, 2019/2020, 45 cm × 36 cm.



Figure 5. Jean Brundrit, Untitled 18 (from the series *Over the Horizon*), Colour photograph inkjet printed on Hahnemuhle Photorag Ultra Smooth Paper, 2019/ 2020.

Over the Horizon is in deliberate contrast to a history of photography where the photograph has been cast – whether intentionally or not – as a means to an end, sustaining arrangements of power and knowledge. As Zanele Muholi’s appropriation of the documentary genre indicates, and as scholars of colonialism concur (Ryan, 1997; Sealy, 2019), photography has played a major role in the composition of modern regimes of subjectification and subjection, determining who gets to affect and who is affected. There is a reason why the anti-colonial philosopher

and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon chose a provocatively photographic metaphor to describe the crushing force of a depersonalizing white gaze. 'I found I was an object in the midst of other objects', he writes of the scene of racializing encounter in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 [1952]: 109), '... the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye'. As Fanon understood, cameras are tools for taking photographs, but they are also technologies for separating subjects from objects, and for making those divides seem natural, inevitable, and unbridgeable. Because of this, cameras are technologies that readily serve the interests of oppression, helping to lay the groundwork for who gets to be an agent of history and who, a prop.

The repressive function of photography derives in part from the medium's promise of objective truth, an artifact of its automation. To the eye, the camera's viewfinder resembles a transparent screen held up to the world, as a photographic surface later appears to preserve a direct stencil off the real, or a very close approximation of it. But this seemingly direct, neutral mediation is a medium-specific trick of the light – more often than not, photographs vanish the hand and eye responsible for creating them, displacing human agency into the machine by outsourcing elements of the decision-making process. The age-old battle about whether photography is really an art form has this displacement at its heart, as the language of the medium likewise hints at an underlying uncertainty about who is doing what. We *take* a photograph, we do not *make* one, a word choice that obscures how users of any machine inevitably calibrate parameters in line with aesthetic and social norms.⁶ We also *capture* a scene, a word that hints at a trap waiting to be sprung.

Contemporary photographers typically grapple with the photography's inherent power asymmetries by trying to restore agency to their subjects, levelling the scales on either side of the closing shutter. Among other strategies for more equitably sharing power, they invite collaborations and solicit consent, guided by the prevailing liberal conviction that recognizing and including the other is a solution to injustice. More agency all round is taken to be better for everyone. In her anti-imperial polemic *Potential History*, Ariella Aisha Azoulay (2019) identifies some of the limitations of such efforts to fold care into mastery, suggesting as they do that an individual photographer might will their way out of larger structural dynamics. Imbalances of power and knowledge are embedded in the basic mechanics of photography, Azoulay points out, as they also background the aesthetic imaginations that animate it:

Think of the camera shutter. It is a commonplace in the discourse of photography that an operating shutter is necessary for obtaining a legible, sharp and precise image out of the flow of light. Understood as a subservient element of the photographic apparatus, a means toward an end, the shutter is discussed mainly in technical terms, related to the rapidity of its closure, the ability to control and change its velocity, and the swiftness of its performance. The picture obtained is presumed to exist, if only for a brief moment, as a petty sovereign. The petty sovereign is not what is recorded in the photograph (in terms of its final content or image) but, rather, is the stand-alone photograph-to-be, the image that prefigures and conditions the closing and opening of a shutter ... What is suppressed and made irrelevant is excised by the shutter. In the technological and historical discussion of the shutter, the only elements that matter are the quality – precision, clarity, recognizability – of the images, the end product, and the erasure of any trace of the shutter's operation. This is an effect on the one hand of the means-ends relationship between the camera and the images it produces, and on the other hand, the disassociation of the camera's shutter from other imperial shutters.

Building on this insight, Azoulay develops a theory of imperial power predicated on a vanishing shutter mechanic that feigns innocence. She shows how in the hands of white explorers, missionaries and scientists, the camera laid the imaginative tracks of empire by rationalizing the power of a white ruling class along with its ways of knowing. As the phrase 'other imperial shutters' insinuates, shutter apparatuses supplied much of the conceptual architecture for the colonial project, from its systems of classification to the thresholds of its archives. The shutter is a way to differentiate, delimit, and make disposable through a careful arrangement of elements, composing an image and the world together.

Photography's capacity for compositions makes it a good medium through which to unpick the processes by which sovereign subjects emerge, like figures posed in relief against a ground. The universal subject of modernity is arguably invented by representations of that exact ground, with landscape imagery recruited to make the world knowable and ownable (and those are often the same thing) (Mitchell, 1994). A landscape scene reassures the viewer of their stable location in social and physical space by enclosing the land in a grid of fences, perspective lines, and schemes of longitude and latitude; as a result, we know our place and feel sure of where we stand. But this grid also creates an outside, held at bay by those fences but always encroaching. Stefano Harney and Fred

⁶ For instance, as scholarship on the intersection of race and media has shown, technologies are racialized in their design as well as in their use. Inevitably, this skews information toward the interests of white, elite populations, even as it makes it possible for those who benefit to feel like innocent users (Browne, 2015; Noble, 2013).

Moten (2011: 17) name this outside ‘the surround’, ‘the common beyond and beneath – before and before – enclosure’. For Harney and Moten, the surround is all that shutters cannot (en)close, and the relations that may breach them.

The many visual ambiguities in Brundrit’s *Over the Horizon* arise from a technical conceit that dialogues with a surround, troubling the divides conventionally manufactured by the camera. It is a conceit that rejects the entire principle of enclosure and with it, the distribution of capacities it shores up. The artist has chosen to photograph her surroundings with a lens made of ice. This method is the result of much prior experimentation with width, density, water clarity, shape, and temperature, although it is an imperfect science. In her exhibition catalogue, Brundrit (2021) explains, “The idea behind this project arose from my interest in rapid climate change and an engagement with making artworks in this area. And specifically, from a thought I had while photographing ice in my photographic studio in 2016 – I wondered if ice shaped into a lens could form an image. And if it could, how would ice see the world?” This formulation is the conceptual key to the project. *If ice can see, then ice can return the gaze*. Seeing askance from a colonial episteme requires renouncing the authority of a single vantage point and admitting a surround that can, and does, look back. No less importantly, it requires a deliberate disidentification with the feeling of control that vantage point affords a viewer.

The decision to shoot through an ice lens cracks photographic representation along two fault lines. In part, it reveals the secret dance of intentionality at stake in composition, as the artist grapples with, but cannot control, her new machine. ‘An ice lens offers few guarantees,’ Brundrit writes (2021); it is an instrument through which little is predictable. Effectively restoring the fact of mediation to representation, so that the hand and eye of the photographer reappear in a less-than-seamless end product, Brundrit’s images are clearly the result of human decision-making. And yet, the artist also points to the impossibility of exercising mastery over the world that she documents. By introducing ice as a collaborator, she establishes the object in front of the lens as a participant in the project of representation with whom agency must be shared, or to whom agency must be granted. At once subject and medium, ice is invited into the scene of its own imaging, where it actively *does* things as it is undone, altered by use and changing shape with temperature. Instead of enlisting the visual as a prompt for human action, as per traditional climate activism, Brundrit bridges a figure/ground, subject/object divide to offer a less imperial understanding of reality.

Her understanding resonates with older strands of feminist and anticolonial thought that seek to hold the wreckage of a shattered world, not contain or even repair it. In her poem *Diving into the Wreck* (1971), the poet Adrienne Rich describes a similar experiment, beginning deep beneath the ocean waves. Somewhere below that icy surface, Rich’s narrator is investigating a ship that belonged to the many explorers who came before her. She does not map meaning onto the broken fragments she finds there, nor does she try to forge new wholes from them – in fact, Rich knows that any image of the whole would elude her. The poet leaves her reader with only the vivid smear of subject through object, and individual experience through collective. So complete is this blurring, in fact, that by the end of the text, the human explorer has been remade. From one line to the next, Rich’s narrator transforms into a decomposing instrument, no longer useful for the purposes she previously served or the exploratory project that drove her:

we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

For Rich as for Brundrit, the lines that individualize action and responsibility become less sharp. When we abandon the reductive insistence on a singular subject of political action, and on the solid ground where that subject once stood, ‘We are’, ‘I am’, ‘you are’ the one/s to find our way, a conclusion Rich notably expresses in the present continuous tense. *Over the Horizon* is an experiment in representing a world without (en)closure.



Figure 6. Nolan Oswald Dennis, *garden for fanon*, 2021, bioactive system, books, borosilicate globes, community of *eisenia fetida* earthworms, care protocols, microcontroller, steel armature. Variable dimensions.

DECOMPOSING A WORLD, OR HOW TO DO DIFFERENCE WITHOUT SEPARABILITY

Where Jean Brundrit collapses photography's subject/object split in order to redistribute the agencies in play, Nolan Oswald Dennis rocks the epistemic foundations from which we think *acting in and for* this world. To the Zambian-born, South African-based artist, art is a 'decolonizing machine' equipped to intervene in the durable arrangements of matter and meaning that constitute our anti-Black social, cultural, and political milieu. Dennis credits the phrase 'decolonizing machine' to the writing of the activist and academic la paperson (K. Wayne Yang), who uses it to describe a subversive assemblage that breaks down the ideological machinery of colonialism from within (2018: n.p.). In conversation in Johannesburg in 2021, Dennis and I discuss what these machines are designed to do, and how one might judge their success. I ask, 'Do your machines work?' To me this seems like an intuitive question, or at least a point of entry from which to evaluate an ambitious artwork and its effects upon the viewer. Dennis informs me that this is not the right question at all: efficacy can be the problem, not the solution. According to the artist, any means-ends analysis restricts his apparatuses to only those logics of use available now, rather than a more expansive range of possible applications as yet unimaginable.

Despite the title, Dennis's art installation *a garden for fanon* (2021) is not obviously a garden, if a garden is understood to be a plot of cultivated ground prepared for human use. The work is more like a heterogenous assemblage, with its proportions dictated by the space in which it is displayed. *a garden* consists of multiple stands, glass vessels, and ceramic *izinkhamba* pots, some of which are loosely connected to one another with cords (Figure 6). Inside these vessels a community of earthworms are quietly going about the business of staying alive (Figure 7). The artist's sophisticated reticulation system maintains a constant internal environment of around 70-80% humidity inside the artwork, ideal for the worms' subsistence. An ample food supply makes the system more habitable. For food, the creatures are methodically consuming editions of Frantz Fanon's final book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004 [1961]), written while Fanon himself was slowly being consumed by leukaemia in 1961 (Figure 8). The lifecycle of these worms is self-contained: as they eat the pages and bindings, they defecate. Their waste matter then becomes an element in which they can continue to live. Gradually, and with the absolute indifference of nature, Dennis's worms are making and terraforming an entire environment.

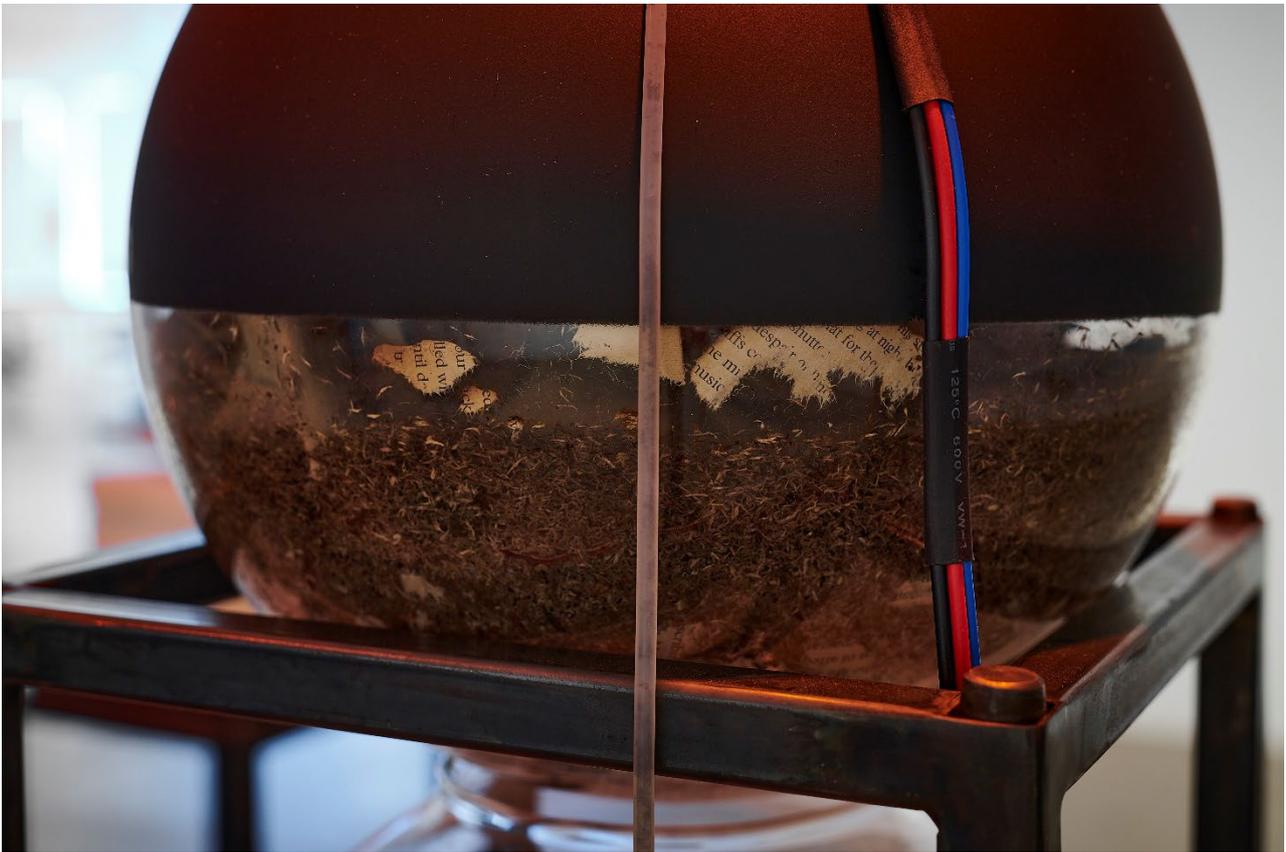


Figure 7. Nolan Oswald Dennis, garden for fanon (detail, earthworms).



Figure 8. Nolan Oswald Dennis, garden for fanon (detail, books).

Though they lack intent, these tiny animal metabolisms nonetheless have a cumulative, horizontal effect that looks a lot like collective action. Their effect cannot be read within the normal timescale of an encounter with an artwork, because very little is visibly happening, and it is happening very slowly. Yet, as Jane Bennett (2010: 100) explains in her writing on Charles Darwin's study of worms, a community of earthworms – like the temporary community of a human public, perhaps – demonstrates that 'there is no action that is not conjoint, that does not, in other words, immediately become enmeshed in a web of connections'. In this entangled environment, every worm implicates every other worm, and every bacterium and microbe matters. Drawing diverse bodies into a complex set of processes through which destruction eventually becomes indistinguishable from creation, the hummus these worms create is life-giving and life-sustaining for all. Thinking in terms of 'life-sustaining' outcomes shifts the conceptual frame of this machine from ends to ecosystems, and its temporality from conclusions to continuities. Arguably, there is no such thing as being done when what one is making is a world.

Dennis' garden is a continuum of interlocked connections and relations, largely indifferent to its viewer. Concretely, the only thing that is produced is more of what already exists, at a slow and sustainable pace. All that is extracted is what is needed to survive. In this, *a garden* illustrates a poetic form of sociality that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten theorize as 'incompleteness', characterized as 'a more or less uncontrollable generativity, as a profound danger, a metamorphic problem, always unfinished, always in decay, never complete, always simultaneously more and less than one' (2021: 109). Unlike means-ends readings of art and of political action, which Harney and Moten would critique as 'logistics', this radical incompleteness is *being without end* in both an ontological and a temporal sense. The authors' chosen metaphor for an experience of incompleteness is revealing: "Think of it as having an apple embedded in your back. It is as if one has not only become more and less than one, but also that here, where decay and generation combine, *one has become soil*" (Ibid, my italics). Becoming soil is the antithesis of the destruction of planetary life in pursuit of capital, with its illusion of endless growth and mastery. Against urgent demands to act and react, for which the agent is both a necessary and a necessarily limiting figure, *a garden* pits processes and relations.

Dennis's choice of text is not incidental to this dream of becoming soil. By invoking the canon of anti-colonial literature, the artist positions his artwork within a long lineage of efforts to remake the world by those who have been made worldless, a process that must begin from the ground up (see Joja, 2021). The opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'Concerning Violence', specifically describes colonization as the imposition of unbearable divides onto the earth, rending the world along race lines. "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments", Fanon writes (2004: 38) and "The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity" (ibid). Here again is the shutter mechanic by which those who affect are differentiated and opposed to those who are affected, without reciprocity. In mud, this inflexible, deadening structuration between zones of living and unliveability becomes fluid: it simply cannot hold.

Dennis's *a garden for Fanon* envisions decomposition at its most totalizing. Composting matter and meaning together, the artwork aims to rezone existence at a microscale. The artist's role in this process is mainly as facilitator. Neither Dennis nor the viewer can dictate the pace, form, or quality of action. Pushing blindly through the earth, it is the worms who make space where none was before, carving out their own paths. Without sequentiality, without anything that could be called progress, it is the worms who make history.⁷ As space and time de/re/form in this new world, the difference between book and earth loses meaning, as all structural integrity is lost in service of the reproduction of life. For Dennis, as *a garden* makes abundantly clear, it was always separability that was the aberration, a disturbance in a world that wants to be whole. This reunification drive is reinforced by an invitation to participate extended by the artwork itself. To keep things running smoothly, a set of minor tasks are assigned to the curator of the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, where the piece was first exhibited. Only by assuming full responsibility for this tiny world can the gallery keep *a garden* going. 'Our role here is not to observe or contemplate the garden as a work of art but to tend to the conditions that make the garden possible', Dennis (2020: n.p.) clarifies. "Simply, one must feed the worms, one must maintain a conducive temperature, humidity and illumination. What comes at the end is a result of what we put in, and what we don't. Some soil and leachate and more worms and some time spent together caring" (ibid).

Contained by the figure of an individual political actor, agency must retain its original militant and performative character, measured by grand actions with knowable effects and anchored by the spectres of incapacity, passivity, and inaction. However, '[a]gency can be an activity of maintenance, [not making] as well, Lauren Berlant notes (2011: 100). Sometimes we change nothing at all. Because its care protocols are listed on the wall behind the garden, the audience is privy to a continual, otherwise unseen labour of maintenance that helps *a garden* to endure. This labour is the only intervention that can actually be made in this case, an intervention with no visible effects. Entitled 'directions for care, or how to have a world', Dennis's protocols include checking and draining the water level,

⁷ See Jane Bennett (2010) on how worms 'make history' for a related but not identical approach to Dennis's.

placing handfuls of prepared pages into the system, and maintaining a garden log so that any significant changes can be noted. ‘TL/DR these are simple relations’, his instructions conclude, ‘take care, be patient, do what is necessary when it is necessary. It may take time. We have time’.

Like the rest of Dennis’ 2021 exhibition *conditions, a garden* is dedicated to confronting a conception of the world as a seamless, enclosed, and knowable unity, best represented by the standard blue-and-green globe displayed in elementary school classrooms worldwide. That globe is an idealized figure of Western cosmology, camouflaging the ideological as merely descriptive and naturalizing it through sheer ubiquity. Such models were as important to the imperial imagination as the photograph, transforming everything into a potential possession and object of knowledge by securing protocols of interpretation. A colonial whole is made by splitting and breaking, enclosing and isolating – it was always already in pieces. In contrast, *a garden* is a portrait of life lived *through, with, as, and in decomposition*. For Dennis, as for all the artists I have discussed, coming apart can be a basis for coming together.

CONCLUSION

By unravelling and relocating agency, Zanele Muholi, Jean Brundrit, and Nolan Oswald Dennis shift focus from a sovereign political actor to the circuitry of relations that conduct change, of which art is both a medium and a mode. They blow up the figure of an individual agent and in the process, they mark that figure – in terms the Black Marxist Cedric Robinson would appreciate – as not only rarer, but much more compromised, than it may appear (see Robinson, 2016: 196). Threaded through these artists’ work, capacities and incapacities are so closely knitted together that they cannot easily be separated.

When the figure of action is called into question, surprising avenues and practices of creation emerge, born from still and quiet places. In his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, the philosopher Jacques Rancière has previously directed attention to some of our base assumptions about political action, many of which are so familiar as to have become almost invisible. Chief among these assumptions is a distinction drawn between what it means to be a spectator and what it means to be an agent. Art in particular is often understood as *acting upon* a viewer, who is the quintessential passive spectator, supposedly absorbing the artist’s intention like so much soft wax. Against this model, Rancière formulates an alternative, inclusive interpretation of agency, beginning with his observation that even the most receptive spectator also acts. She thinks, interprets, wonders, doubts, and compares. Or, as he puts it (2011: 13), ‘she composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her’.

To decompose is not to tear to pieces, or not only. Decomposition admits the possibility that all that exists can come undone, a possibility already alive in the fabric of things.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. (2013). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Auden, W. H. (2007). *Selected Poems*. New York, NY: Vintage International.
- Azoulay, A. A. (2019). *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso Books.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jh6w>
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220p4w>
- Browne, S. (2015). *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw89p>
- Brundrit, J. (2021). *Over the Horizon Exhibition Catalogue*. Cape Town: AVA Gallery.
- Cumming, L. (2020). Zanele Muholi review – Portraiture as activism, *The Observer*, 8 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/nov/08/zanele-muholi-tate-modern-review-south-africa> (Accessed: 16March 2022).
- da Silva, D. F. (2007). *Toward a global idea of race*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- da Silva, D. F. (2018). *In the Raw - Journal #93 September 2018 - e-Flux*. Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/> (Accessed: 16 March 2022).
- Dennis, N. O. (2018). *Toward Misreading: Assembling (K) new Meaning* [Master’s thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology].
- Dennis, N. O. (2021). *Conditions Exhibition Catalogue*. Johannesburg: Goodman Gallery.
- Duncombe, S. (2016). Does it work? The effect of activist art. *Social Research*, 83(1), 115-134. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2016.0005>
- Fanon, F. (2004). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

- Gqola, P. D. (2006). Through Zanele Muholi's eyes: Re/imagining ways of seeing black lesbians, in M. Stevenson/STE, *Only half the picture* (pp. 82-89).
- Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2013). *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York, NY: Minor Compositions.
- Harney, S. and Moten, F. (2021). *All Incomplete*. New York, NY: Minor Compositions.
- Joja, A. M. (2021). Nolan Oswald Dennis' Conditions. *AFRICANAH.ORG*, 7 September. Available at: <https://africanah.org/nolan-oswald-dennis-conditions/> (Accessed: 16 March 2022).
- Latour, B. (2014). Agency at the time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History*, 45(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0003>
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (ed). (2002). *Landscape and Power*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Morton, T. (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Muholi, Z. (2014). *Zanele Muholi: Faces and Phases 2006-2014*. Göttingen: Steidl.
- Nelson, M. (2021). *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press.
- Noble, S. U. (2013). Google search: Hyper-visibility as a means of rendering black women and girls invisible. *InVisible Culture*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.50883fff>
- Rancière, J. (2011). *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso Books.
- Rancière, J. and Žižek, S. (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Continuum.
- Rich, A. (2013). *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Robinson, C. J. (2016). *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469628219.001.0001>
- Ruiz, A. (2016). Radical formalism. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 26(2-3), 233-240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2016.1264625>
- Ryan, J. R. (1997). *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Sealy, M. (2019). *Decolonising the Camera: Photography in Racial Time*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Tolentino, J. (2019). *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. London: Random House.
- Van Niekerk, M. (2013). The literary text in turbulent times: An instrument of social cohesion or an eruption of 'critical' bliss. Notes on J M Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K. *Acta Academica*, 45(4), 1-39.
- Weibel, P. (ed). (2015). *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Weinand, A. (2021). Erasure and clarity: Jean Brundrit's 'Over the Horizon'. *ArtThrob*. Available at: <https://artthrob.co.za/2021/06/24/erasure-and-clarity-jean-brundrits-over-the-horizon/> (Accessed: 27 July 2022).
- Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation--an argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3(3), 257-337. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>
- Yapp, H. (2014). Chinese lingering, meditation's practice: Reframing endurance art beyond resistance. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 24(2-3), 134-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.973756>
- Yapp, H. (2021). *Minor China: Method, Materialisms, and the Aesthetic*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478013068>