CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | Unravelling anti-feminism: On the domestication of resistance |
| Authors | Thomas, Kylie |
| Publication date | 2022-12-30 |
| Original Citation | Thomas, K. (2022) 'Unravelling anti-feminism: On the domestication of resistance', Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change, 7(2), 20 (8pp). doi: 10.20897/jcasc/12761 |
| Type of publication | Article (peer-reviewed) |
| Link to publisher's version | 10.20897/jcasc/12761 |
| Rights | © 2022, the Author and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ |
| Download date | 2026-10-31 00:18:15 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14200 |



University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

JOURNAL OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change, 2022, 7(2), 20
ISSN: 2589-1316

lectito

# Unravelling Anti-Feminism: On the Domestication of Resistance

Kylie Thomas [1,2*]

[1] *NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, NETHERLANDS
[2] *University College Cork,* IRELAND

***Corresponding Author:** kyliethomas.south@gmail.com

**Citation:** Thomas, K. (2022). Unravelling Anti-Feminism: On the Domestication of Resistance, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 7(2), 20. https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/12761

**Published:** December 30, 2022

## ABSTRACT

This article provides a critique of neoliberal feminism and argues for nuanced and critical approaches to the question of what constitutes feminist resistance. It focuses on visual artist Billie Zangewa's creative practice and positions it within the longer history of how women have made use of traditional crafts, such as quilting and embroidery, as a means of expression and as a form of resistance. It positions Zangewa's work alongside that of some of her feminist contemporaries who have also used thread and cloth in their work to reveal how the political is woven through the fabric of everyday life. I argue that in order to understand why Zangewa's seemingly mundane, even bourgeois practice, has been framed and taken up as a form of feminist resistance, it is necessary to read her work through a historical lens that takes colonial dispossession and the brutal history of violence in Southern Africa into account. My readings of Zangewa's work acknowledge the significance of the artist's affirmation of care and self-love as resistance, as much as they point to the limits of a politics that valorises (unpaid) domestic work and fails to address the structural violence of capitalism.

**Keywords:** Africa, feminism, visual art, visual activism, neoliberalism

## INTRODUCTION

This article places visual artist Billie Zangewa's creative practice within the longer history of how traditional crafts, such as quilting and embroidery, have been used as a means of expression and as a form of resistance. It positions Zangewa's work alongside that of some of her feminist contemporaries who have also used thread and cloth in their work to reveal how the political is woven through the fabric of everyday life. I argue that in order to understand why Zangewa's seemingly mundane, even bourgeois practice, has been framed and taken up as a form of feminist resistance, it is necessary to read her work through a historical lens that takes colonial dispossession and the brutal history of violence in Southern Africa into account. In light of this history of oppression and censorship, all forms of Black women's self-expression can be read as liberatory signs. However, as I aim to show here, such a reading misses how inequality continues to define the postcolonial and post-apartheid condition. My critique is directed less at Zangewa's beautiful renderings of her private realm and relationships, than at the larger terrain within which her work circulates and is framed as a form of feminist resistance. My readings of Zangewa's work acknowledge the significance of the artist's affirmation of care and self-love as resistance, as much as they point to the limits of a politics that valorises (unpaid) domestic work and fails to address the structural violence of capitalism.

This piece asks what it means that Zangewa's work has largely been framed and received as a form of feminist resistance – the artist has been included in shows such as "Manifest Yourself! (Queer) Feminist Manifestoes Since the Suffragettes" at the Künstlerhaus Bethanian in Berlin in 2022 and "Global(e) Resistance" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2020, and her images are described by the Lehmann Maupin gallery as exploring

*Copyright © 2022 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.*

'contemporary intersectional identity in an attempt to challenge the historical stereotype, objectification, and exploitation of the black female form' and as illustrations of 'gendered labor in a socio-political context'[1]. I argue that positioning Zangewa's work within the frame of feminist visual activism forms part of a larger phenomenon that equates feminism with women's self-empowerment and overlooks whether and how such forms of representation affirm classist, homophobic, and even sexist conceptions. I understand this to be a depoliticized form of feminism, as exemplified by some of the artist's statements, such as, 'the best way to fight the patriarchy is not by going to war with it but, rather, by showing one's appreciation of and solidarity with domesticity and femininity' (McDermott, 2018), and that 'the ultimate form of resistance is self-love'[2]. I return to these claims and discuss the implications of the appropriation and hollowing out of once-radical concepts of (feminist) resistance below.

While acknowledging how Zangewa's visual practice opens spaces of representation for Black, cisgender, heterosexual and economically privileged women, I argue for paying attention to how the artist's work affirms rather than contests the limits of neoliberal feminism.[3] The question of what is at stake in defining what constitutes feminism and anti-feminism is taken up by Serena Bassi and Greta Lafleur (2022) in their introduction to a special issue on trans-exclusionary feminisms. Bassi and Lafleur point to the continuities between 'strands of liberal feminism centered on the primacy of gender over other vectors of power, authentic womanhood, embodied vulnerability, and individualizing notions of happiness and empowerment' and trans-exclusionary, gender-critical feminism (Bassi and Lafleur, 2022: 312). In this piece I take up Shahrzad Mojab and Afiya Zia's call to 'return to a Marxist feminist analysis that is based on social materiality rather than on a trade between class and gender' (2019: 259). I define feminism here as Silvia Federici does in her book, *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender and Feminism* (2021) as standing 'for a commitment to eliminate inequalities and all forms of exploitation', and draw on Mojab and Zia's insight that, "As an ideological formation, capitalism is also a set of cultural and political practices that obscures relations of domination while simultaneously co-constituting patriarchal, racist and class exploitation and oppression" (2021: 270).

## CLAIMING SPACE

Billie Zangewa, who was born in Malawi, raised in Botswana and who lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa, forms part of a small number of contemporary Black women artists from Southern Africa whose work has been widely acclaimed. After studying print-making at Rhodes University in South Africa during the country's transition to democracy, Zangewa found it difficult to launch a career as an artist. The equipment and studio space required to work as a print-maker were costly and proved impossible to attain – instead the artist found work in the fashion and advertising industries. Her love of fashion and textiles forged in her childhood would continue to play a key role in the silk 'paintings' for which she is now increasingly renowned. In interviews Zangewa has described her determination to succeed as an artist against all odds, and her creative vision and persistence have led to three international gallery shows and three major museum exhibits since 2020[4]. Zangewa's large-scale works rendered in raw silk provide a portrait of everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa that reveals the extraordinary within the quotidian. Her work, which presents images of what the artist terms 'daily feminism', is best understood as part of the wider cultural turn inaugurated by the demise of apartheid.

While the visual remains an important medium of and for resistance in South Africa, since apartheid ended in 1994, works of protest are no longer the dominant mode of expression[5]. The move towards a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes political art was initiated in 1984, when South Africa's foremost cultural critic, Njabulo Ndebele, delivered an address at a conference in London that has come to serve as a heuristic for understanding cultural life in the last years of apartheid. Ndebele's 2006 essay, 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary',

[1] https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/billie-zangewa/biography

[2] See the TateShots video in which Zangewa speaks about her practice, "Artist Billie Zangewa: The Ultimate Act of Resistance is Self-Love". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CISkiELcT6I I return to this phrase and discuss the implications of the appropriation and emptying out of once-radical concepts of (feminist) resistance below.

[3] For analyses of neoliberal feminism, see Akinbobola (2019) and Rottenberg (2018).

[4] Zangewa's solo show, 'Wings of Change' was held at the Lehman Maupin Gallery, in New York in 2020; this was followed by 'Running Water' in London and 'Flesh and Blood' in Seoul, both held in 2021-2022. 'Billie Zangewa: Domestic Life' opened at the *Musée des Beaux-Arts Le Locle* in Switzerland in 2021; 'Billie Zangewa: Thread for a Web Begun' was on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, California from October 2021-February 2022, and at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina from June to September 2022.

[5] Under apartheid, fine art was largely the preserve of white South Africans. From the 1960s onwards, visual media was taken up by the anti-apartheid liberation movements as a weapon of struggle (Seidman, 2018). There is by now considerable literature on resistance art and visual activism during apartheid. Among others, see Williamson (1989), Peterson (1990), Berndt (2007), Newbury (2009), Gaule (2017).


© 2022 by Author/s

remains a critical touchstone for interpreting creative production in South Africa today (Ndebele, 2006). In that work Ndebele charts how South African writers were beginning to describe the contours of their own inner worlds and were opening new ways of seeing not only the political but the material and psychic effects of apartheid on everyday life. In an essay in which she considers how 'Ndebele's theorization of the spectacular remains a powerful commentary on contemporary South African culture and gendered public life' (2009: 61), Pumla Gqola makes a series of astute observations about literary production during and after apartheid that can equally be applied to visual art:

> Unlike apartheid writing, contemporary South African prose and poetry have turned inward to amplify the details of the everyday. In other words, the focus on the common textures of people's lives and interiority is the common ground of post-apartheid literature. Today the 'ordinary' has been 'rediscovered', turned upside down, probed, circled and celebrated in varied forms (Gqola, 2009: 62).

Alongside, and partly because of, the significant turn towards creative works within which the politics of personal experience holds a central place, Black women and nonbinary artists working in the country have become increasingly visible and are producing significant and powerful work that has achieved international recognition. While in the early post-apartheid period Black women artists were tokenized and subject to the patronizing attitudes of white curators and audiences, there has been a marked shift in the last decade, a change that can be linked to a new wave of anti-colonial social movements in Southern Africa and to the greater visibility of Black women artists and photographers across the Continent[6]. Artists such as Gabrielle Goliath, Lebohang Kganye, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande and Portia Zvavahera, and curators such as Lerato Bereng, Qanita Lilla, Nomusa Makhubu, Portia Malatjie and Gabi Ngcobo have been instrumental in challenging how the work of Southern African Black women and nonbinary artists is perceived and received, and in opening new paths for their contemporaries.

## EMBROIDERING THE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY AND CRAFTING POLITICAL COMMUNITY

In 2019, Joana Choumali became the first African woman to win the prestigious Prix Pictet award for photography[7]. Like Zangewa, whose process begins with photographs that she translates into large-scale cloth works, Choumali works with photographs that she embroiders with thread to create beautiful, innovative images[8]. While the merging of photography and embroidery is not new, contemporary women photographers and artists are working with these materials in diverse and unusual ways that challenge definitions of both visual forms. As Annebella Pollen notes, "Over the last decade or so, the embroidered photograph has attracted much attention in contemporary art internationally" (2022: 44) and "Contemporary artists who bring photography and textiles together speak of the power of the needle to intervene in the photograph, puncture its veneer, bring hidden stories to the surface and fill its silences" (2022: 45). Sewing onto images provides a way to interrupt visual codes, to rupture the surface of the photograph, and in this way to intervene in the socio-political world the photograph depicts.

Choumali's series, '*Ça va aller* …', was made in the aftermath of the terrorist attack at Grand Bassam, a coastal area not far from Abidjan, the city where the artist lives and works[9]. Using cotton, lurex and wool thread, Choumali hand-embroidered colourful designs onto portraits of people and photographs of the landscape in Bassam. Creating these detailed works composed of thousands of tiny stitches served as a form of meditative therapy for Choumali whose practice is at once extraordinary and banal[10]. Seen from within the long history of women's craft, sewing and embroidery are for the most part, unremarkable, and when the skill involved in creating beautiful fabric works has been recognized, those who created them were recognized as domestic heroines rather than as artists.

Embroidery, like sewing, knitting and weaving, has for the most part been perceived as a women's craft, and while certain forms of art created with fabric and thread have featured in the history of art (such as tapestries) it is

[6] While it remains difficult for Black women to contend with the racism of the global art market, Zangewa's work is framed in a very different way from that of Esther Mahlangu, for example, one of the first Black women artists to be represented in the collection of the South African National Gallery. On the history of racism in the South African art world and the Iziko South African National Gallery in particular, see Lilla (2018).

[7] Joana Choumali was born in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire in 1974.

[8] Choumali, like Zangewa, studied graphic arts and then worked at an advertising agency before launching her career as a photographer.

[9] To view the images from Choumali's series, see the artist's website: https://joanachoumali.com

[10] See the artist's statement about embroidery as a calming practice and an act of hope on her website: https://joanachoumali.com/index.php/projects/mix-media/ca-va-aller

© 2022 by Author/s 

not a form associated with artistic genius nor, until the last decades of the twentieth century, has it led to individual women artists becoming internationally recognized. Such forms of artistic practice have often been carried out by groups of activists working together and these forms of collective creation do not only produce artefacts, but can also be sites of support, care and community. They have also been spaces for political organization and resistance – from the quilts made during the time of slavery in the United States[11]; to women's sewing collectives during and after apartheid in South Africa[12]; and the massive project of collective remembrance that is the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt[13].

Contemporary women artists have drawn on these long-standing practices of crafting resistance in their own work. Faith Ringgold, who began her career as an artist in the United States in the 1960s, and began creating 'story quilts' in the 1980s, combines painting, text and fabric to create works that insist upon the presence of African-American women within history[14].

Through works like those that make up her extensive 'French Collection' series, Ringgold challenges the erasure of African-American women writers, activists and artists within art history. Ringgold's own practice is connected to the act of quilt-making from the time of slavery and provides a way to honour her foremothers. She notes how quilting was not only a way to create objects that could be shared across generations but also a process through which knowledge and stories could be transferred:

> You can make a social event; the slaves did it. After working in the fields all day, they would have a quilting bee, and it was like a party. And they could actually make something that they could give to somebody: they could pass something on. They couldn't enjoy the luxury of an object. They were cut off from the drum, they were cut off from the mask. But they weren't cut off from those skills of sewing and appliqueing and piecing things together. And when they were sitting there they were talking and respecting each other because the best way to learn to respect another person is to work with them. And to let them show you their skills and then you see theirs and together you make something and there is a bond that grows there (Ringgold in Graulich and Witzling, 1994: 17).

For Ringgold, recalling the history of Black women's communal practice is particularly important in contexts where women's participation in political life has been limited. For her, the act of 'piecing things together' becomes a form of social repair. Although Ringgold, Zangewa and Choumali have been acclaimed as individual artists, the works they create evoke the memory of collective labour and the forms of solidarity such practices generate[15]. In an interview Zangewa recalls how she was introduced to the social practice of sewing as a child:

> When I was a young child, I saw my mother and her sewing group working together and observed that it was not just about making pretty things for their homes. These women supported each other emotionally and coupled with the soothing repetitive nature of stitching, it was like group therapy. Without understanding it, I sensed that there was a power in this sewing thing that I was witness to. I now refer to it as the soft feminine power of stitching (*Phaidon*, Talking Textiles).

While Zangewa situates herself within an imagined community of women and of mothers she does not create her work as part of a collective and makes no secret of the fact that she uses, 'fabric and sewing, which traditionally is a female pastime, to empower myself'. This individualist claim differs considerably from Ringgold's aim, as well as from that of much feminist art-making and activism. Exhibitions of Zangewa's work online and in locations in different parts of the world make it possible for individuals to engage with her work, and while her aim is not necessarily to empower others, Enuma Okoro describes the sense of connection she felt on seeing Zangewa's exhibition, 'Wings of Change' in New York in October 2020. In a poignant essay Okoro (2020: n.p.) conveys the affective charge of Zangewa's work and describes how she had 'spent the first month of lockdown oddly comforted' by the artist's work, which prompted her 'to look for silken silver linings' in her own domestic life.

---

[11] See for instance the quilt made by Harriet Powers c.1895-1898 https://collections.mfa.org/objects/116166

[12] On community embroidery projects in South Africa see the work of Brenda Schmahmann (2005, 2022). See also Puleng Segalo's account of a community embroidery project in a township outside of Johannesburg (Segalo, 2011); and Gille de Vlieg's photographs of sewing collectives in South Africa during apartheid (https://vimeo.com/589867843).

[13] https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt

[14] Faith Ringgold was born in 1930 in Harlem, New York and has worked as an artist since the 1960s. To view her 'story quilts', see the artist's website: https://www.faithringgold.com/art/

[15] I have written elsewhere of how solidarity has become atomized and visual practice is often delinked from collective work and activism when individual artists are taken up by the international art market (Thomas, 2022). This is not to discount how individual works of art might inspire those who view them, but to point to how the practices of activism can be detached from images originally produced as forms of resistance.


© 2022 by Author/s

Standing before Zangewa's tapestry, 'An Angel at My Bedside', triggers her desire 'to inhale all the radiant, revitalising energy spilling out of the red silk swaths', and she leaves the show feeling joyful[16].

'Engaging with the visual arts', Okoro writes, 'is always a move towards internal and external re-examination. And one thing that has come out of the pandemic is a call for a re-examination of how we live, and an examination of what makes a world recognisable, inhabitable and hospitable, and for whom' (2020, n.p.). Okoro's response to Zangewa's show reveals the power of art to move people, at the same time as it reveals how, unless such affective responses are linked to collective action, the radical potential of art, whether feminist or not, is tempered, if not neutralized. The structures of the contemporary international art world effectively (and unsurprisingly) separate collective struggle from individual experience and raises the question of the politics of depoliticized feminism – are works like Zangewa's that provide consolation for some viewers, rather than insisting on justice, anti-feminist?

The recognition granted to artists such as Zangewa and Choumali is significant – until recently African women were entirely excluded from the international world of art. In this particular context of exclusion, repression and resistance, Zangewa's work is revolutionary in a minor key. Zangewa's approach is one that proposes an ethics of care, one that focuses on the intimate spaces of the family and of home and that centres human relationships. At the same time, equating femininity, motherhood and domesticity delimits the bounds of the category 'woman' and invokes conservative and regressive ideas about gender. In the South African context, this equation erases the history of the separation of motherhood and domestic labour under apartheid and neatly evades the problem of class. To be granted entry into the institutions of power that have excluded Black women is not necessarily to change them, or even less to overturn them, nor does the exhibition of works by Black women artists necessarily advance the cause of those who remain marginalized and dispossessed.

## WHEN FEMINISM ISN'T ENOUGH

> "There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort for all" – The Freedom Charter.

Zangewa's works centre on images of the home and of domestic life and collectively form a kind of family photo album. One way to read Zangewa's work is as an overturning of the visual logics of apartheid, within which the experiences of Black people appeared in and through what Ndebele terms 'spectacular' violence:

> Everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random mass pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation, the ultimate symbol of which is the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites: servants; all encompassing privilege, swimming pools and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression (Ndebele, 2006: 31).

Zangewa's images are portraits of individual experiences and of moments in time that have little, if anything, to do with the mass violence and mass exploitation that reduced the lives of Black people to a cipher under apartheid. Yet, while Zangewa's works seem to portray the antithesis of the violent universe of apartheid that Ndebele describes, in their depictions of 'all encompassing privilege, swimming pools and high commodity consumption', these images hold traces of the violence that continues to contaminate life under capitalism in present-day South Africa. Her images ostensibly depict 'the work done by women that keeps society running smoothly, but which is often overlooked, undervalued, or ignored' [17] and while they portray the artist at work as a parent, otherwise occlude the forms of domestic work that remains a key form of employment for Black women in the country[18].

In many ways the 'ordinary' life that Zangewa represents in her work remains extraordinary in South Africa, where more than 18 million people live in extreme poverty[19]. South Africa also remains one of the most unequal societies in the world and the divide between rich and poor has deepened since 1994[20]. The suburban, domestic

[16] To view images of Zangewa's work, see: https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/billie-zangewa

[17] Billie Zangewa *Thread for a World Begun* Gallery Guide, edited by Dexter Wimberley, 2022.

[18] According to Statistics South Africa, 47% of women in South Africa are unemployed. Of those who are employed, 11.9% work as domestic workers (https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15668). The monthly minimum wage for domestic workers in South Africa in 2022 is R3710 (176 GBP). This is less than half of the amount required for a living wage.

[19] According to the World Bank, 30.3 million people (55% of the population), were living at the national upper poverty line in South Africa in 2020. This means their household income was less than R992 per month (50 GBP). https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_ZAF.pdf

[20] Aroop Chatterjee, Léo Czajka, Amory Gethin. "Wealth Inequality in South Africa, 1993-2017". 2021. halshs-03266286

© 2022 by Author/s 

world Zangewa depicts is one of affluence and privilege that remains beyond the reach of the majority of Black South Africans. In this sense, Zangewa's work can be read as a historical document of her own time and place, offering insight into the lives of the emerging Black middle and upper classes, portraying scenes that were unthinkable for Black people during apartheid. This includes depictions of the spaces in which she and her son live together - a beautiful home in a neighbourhood that was previously segregated and reserved solely for white people. Several of Zangewa's images portray the spacious kitchen in which she works at a large table, creating her intricate fabric works in close proximity to where her son plays. 'The Heart of the Home', presents the artist standing alongside her son, engaged in the everyday task of checking his homework or admiring something he has drawn, mother and son enclosed in the private moment they share, oblivious to the gaze of the viewer. This piece was made during the global coronavirus pandemic, when schools in South Africa were shut. While the image does convey a sense of the vulnerability of the small family unit at a time of deep uncertainty in the world outside the frame, it is also a portrait of motherly love and protection.

The homely, social world Zangewa occupies with her son is one that celebrates their togetherness. Their 'ordinary' family structure is in stark contrast with the lives of many Black women who worked in white areas during apartheid and who were separated from their children for months at a time. It is also in contrast with the living conditions of the majority of those who live in the country today. This work is one of several that conveys the complex and even discomforting politics of Zangewa's images, which on the one hand, can be read through the lens of Black feminist (self)care and on the other, are images that expose the complicity of the artist (as well as the majority of those who view and consume these images) with the structures of racialized capitalist exploitation.

Within the world portrayed in Zangewa's works, violence is in abeyance – many of her images works show herself and her son at ease and at rest. There is a critical politics here of insisting on the value of the lives of Black people, on the centrality of care, beauty and love, and on the radical nature of care for the self within systems of racial injustice and brutality. I understand the impulse to celebrate the bright scenes portrayed in Zangewa's work, such as 'Return to Paradise', which shows the artist and her son on holiday, joyfully relaxing at a poolside. At the same time, delinking these scenes from the context in which they were made is difficult to sustain in the face of ongoing inequality and the persistence of structural and extreme violence in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is interesting to note that among the many articles published on Zangewa's work, only one includes the fact that the artist does not always create her work alone. According to Catherine Dormor:

> While many of her works focus on the singular woman caught up in her daily work, Zangewa's broader oeuvre speaks of an agency built upon communal care and mutual support, forming a system of symbiotic relationships that follow through into her working practices. She has two women who support her when she needs it: they help her, and she provides employment. Through the careful work they undertake, they become agential partners in the production of these expressive artworks (Dormor, 2022: 18-19).

That Zangewa's 'agential partners' remain unnamed and unacknowledged is symptomatic of the radically unequal context in which she works and their elision points to other significant contradictions in thinking of Zangewa's work as feminist resistance. The difficult matter of how the artist's peaceful domestic scenes are bound to and simultaneously obscure the structural inequality that led, for instance, to the Marikana Massacre of 2012 (Bruce, 2015), or the food riots in Durban in 2021 (Ngwane, 2021), have not been raised by those who celebrate her work. Yet the question of how one might render visible what June Jordan describes as 'the difficult miracle' of not only surviving but of creating beauty in contexts of extreme racial violence without simultaneously erasing the everyday forms of violence to which so many people remain subject, is a critical one (Jordan, 2002: n.p.).

In her own framing of the political valence of her work, Zangewa draws on Black feminist philosophy to articulate the radical nature of care in a world which negates the value of the lives of Black people. Zangewa claims that 'the ultimate act of resistance is self-love'[21] and seems to be attempting to locate herself within the orbit of Black feminist writer and lesbian activist Audre Lorde, as well as reaching towards the philosophy of Black consciousness activist and writer, Steve Biko. However, in both instances her appropriation of their positions is emptied of its political content. Framing Zangewa's work as resistance exposes how once radical feminist and anti-racist concepts have been hollowed out and appropriated in service of the neo-liberal myth that individual triumph is an indicator of collective gain. Among the key insights of Lorde's much-cited essay, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' are that racism, sexism, classism and homophobia are bound, and that "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (Lorde, 1984: 112).

[21] See the TateShots video in which Zangewa speaks about her practice, 'Artist Billie Zangewa: The Ultimate Act of Resistance is Self-Love'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CISkiELcT6I


© 2022 by Author/s

To be fair, Zangewa herself, other than framing her work as 'daily feminism', makes no claim to addressing social injustice, and cannot be held to account for the ways in which the global art market assimilates, commodifies, and often neutralizes, resistance. Zangewa's work brings new forms of representation of Black experience into visibility and is intended less to disrupt, but rather to enlarge, the bounds of the art market[22]. Zangewa's work can be read as a call to recognize the vulnerability and beauty of the binding threads between ourselves and those we love. At the same time, it raises the question of who constitutes this 'we' who look and see ourselves reflected in these works and who it is that is excluded. As Panashe Chigumadzi (2017) notes in her essay, "'Ain't I A Woman?" On The Irony of Trans-Exclusion By Black And African Feminists':

> When our trans sisters have to look at us, and ask as our feminist foremother Sojourner Truth did a century and half ago, "Ain't I A Woman?", it tells us that our visions of freedom from the oppressions that we face as black women are not only unimaginative, exclusionary, and violent, but historically regressive (Chigumadzi, 2017: n.p.).

Like Choumali's works that transform landscapes of terror into magical zones of colour and light, Zangewa's aesthetic renderings insist that we see what is beautiful in the everyday. To expand the individual, utopian vision implicit in these works, to challenge its exclusions and to see it linked to a political programme to realise a world in which there is security and comfort for all, would be a truly beautiful thing.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Sophie Douglas, Alastair Douglas, Tessa Lewin, Qanita Lilla, Priya Raghavan and Ksenia Robbe for discussing this piece with me. I would also like to thank Jemma, Sophie and Alastair Douglas for their support.

This article was supported by the KNAW Academy Institutes Fund.

## REFERENCES

Akinbobola, Y. (2019). Neoliberal feminism in Africa. *Soundings*, (71), 50-61. https://doi.org/10.3898/SOUN.71.04.2019

Bassi, S. and Lafleur, G. (2022). Introduction: TERFs, gender-critical movements, and postfascist feminisms in trans-exclusionary feminisms and the global new right. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly,* 9(3), 311-333. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836106

Berndt, J. (2007). *From Weapon to Ornament: The CAP Media Project Posters (1982 to 1994)*. Cape Town: Arts and Media Access Centre.

Bruce, D. (2015). Summary and analysis of the report of the Marikana Commission of Inquiry, *Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution*. Available at: https://www.casac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Summary-and-Analysis-of-the-Report-of-the-Marikana-Commission-of-Inquiry.pdf.

Chatterjee, A., Czajka, L. and Gethin, A. (2021). Wealth inequality in South Africa, 1993-2017. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 36(1), 19-36. https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhab012

Chigumadzi, P. (2017). 'Ain't I a woman?' On the irony of trans-exclusion by Black and African feminists, *Afropunk, March 17*. Available at: https://afropunk.com/2017/03/aint-i-a-woman-on-the-irony-of-trans-exclusion-by-black-and-african-feminists/.

Dormor, C. (2022). Frayed and fraying: Textile actions and the edges of belonging, in B. Sliwinska and C. Domor (eds), *Transnational Belonging and Female Agency in the Arts* (pp.17-38). London: Bloomsbury Publishing. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501358722.ch-001

Federici, S. (2021). *Patriarchy of the Wage: Notes on Marx, Gender, and Feminism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.

Gaule, S. (2017). Ernest Cole: The perspective of time. *Safundi*, 18(4), 380-399. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2017.1299985

Gqola, P. D. (2009). 'The difficult task of normalizing freedom': Spectacular masculinities, Ndebele's literary/cultural commentary and post-Apartheid life. *English in Africa*, 36(1), 61-76. https://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v36i1.42868

[22] The case of the documenta 14 protest in Athens in 2017 and the controversy around the most recent edition, documenta 15 in Kassel, provide an indication of the explosive effects that can emerge when the depoliticized conventions of the art world are disrupted.

© 2022 by Author/s 

Graulich, M. and Witzling, M. (1994). The freedom to say what she pleases: A conversation with Faith Ringgold. *NWSA journal*, 6(1), 1-27.

Jordan, J. (2002). The difficult miracle of Black poetry in America: Something like a sonnet for Phyllis Wheatley, in J. Jordan (ed), *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays*. London: Basic/Civitas Books.

Lilla, Q. (2018). *Setting art apart: Inside and outside the South African National Gallery (1895-2016)*, PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/103265

Lorde, A. (1984). 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', in A. Lorde and C. Clarke (eds), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 110-114). Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.

McDermott, E. (2018). Billie Zangewa: The fierce feminine, *Art Basel*. Available at: https://www.artbasel.com/news/billie-zangewa-the-fierce-feminine-art-basel-miami-beach-2018?lang=en (Accessed: 5 December 2022).

Mojab, S. and Zia, A. S. (2019). Race, class, and agency: A return to Marxist feminism. *Journal of Labor and Society*, 22(2), 259-273. https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12427

Ndebele, N. (2006). The rediscovery of the ordinary: Some new writings in South Africa, in N. Ndebele (ed), *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (pp. 31-54). Scottsville: UKZN Press.

Newbury, D. (2009). *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

Ngwane, T. (2021). Mall attacks and the everyday crisis of the working class in South Africa. *Global Labour Journal*, 12(3), 312-324. https://doi.org/10.15173/glj.v12i3.4935

Okoro, E. (2020). New York art diary: A miracle on 24th Street, *Financial Times, October 24*. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/ff7299b4-cae4-4a73-b9be-d168e96323ac.

Peterson, B. (1990). Apartheid and the political imagination in Black South African theatre. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16(2), 229-245. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079008708232

Phaidon. (2019). Talking textiles with Billie Zangewa, *Phaidon*. Available at: https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2019/march/13/talking-textiles-with-billie-zangewa/ (Accessed: 5 December 2022).

Pollen, A. (2022). 'Picture perfect: Embroidered photographs, past and present'. *Selvedge*, July/August, 42-45.

Rottenberg, C. A. (2018). *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190901226.001.0001

Schmahmann, B. (2005). 'Stitches as sutures: Trauma and recovery in works by women in the Mapula embroidery project'. *African Arts,* 38(3), 52-69. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2005.38.3.52

Schmahmann, B. (2022). When life hangs by a thread: Representations of Covid-19 by the Mapula embroidery project'. *Textile*. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2021.2024982

Segalo, P. (2011). Our lives through embroidery: Narrative accounts of the women's embroidery project in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 21(2), 229-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2011.10820451

Seidman, J. A. (2018). Visual arts of the armed struggle in Southern Africa. *South African Historical Journal*, 70(1), 234-269. https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2018.1444084

Thomas, K. (2022). Atomized solidarity and new shapes of resistance: Visual activism in South Africa after Apartheid, in L. E. Shipley and M. Moriuchi (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003159698-21

Williamson, S. (1989). *Resistance Art in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Wimberley, D. (ed). (2022). *Billie Zangewa*: *Thread for a World Begun*. Exhibition Catalogue.


© 2022 by Author/s