



Zanele Muholi photographed in Brooklyn, New York, May 2015.



# ZANELE MUHOLI

THE SOUTH AFRICAN VISUAL ACTIVIST DEMANDS TO BE SEEN.

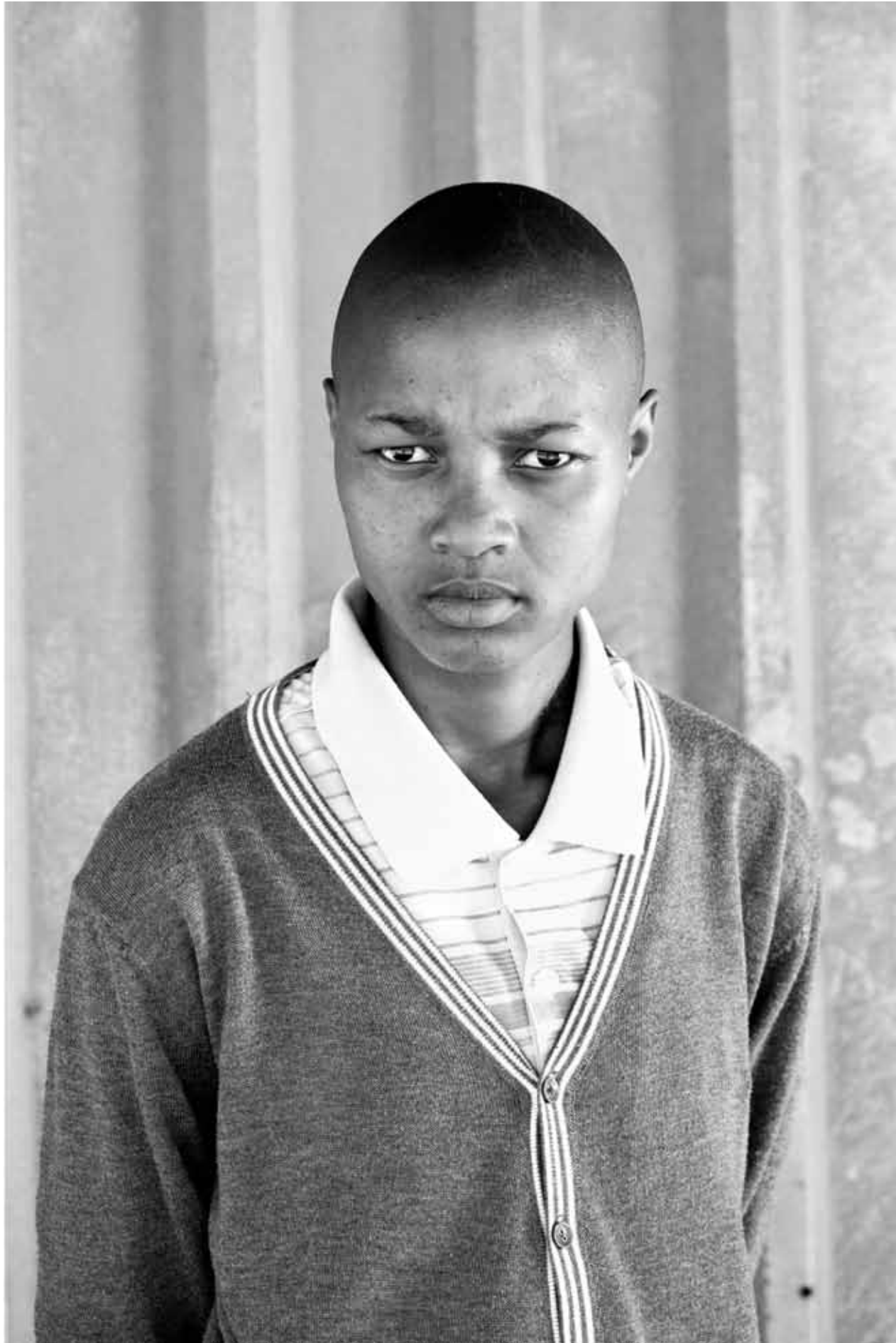
TEXT BY PATRICK SWEENEY  
PORTRAITS BY DANIEL MOSS

When I met Zanele Muholi, the first thing she said was “You look so gay.” I wondered what caused her to say that. Was it what I was wearing? Was there truth to the claims made by contemporary social scientists that gay and lesbian people have structurally different faces than straight people? Regardless, I figured if anyone knew who looked gay, it’d be the South African photographer and visual activist whose *Faces and Phases* project compiles elegant portraits of more than 250 LGBTQI people.

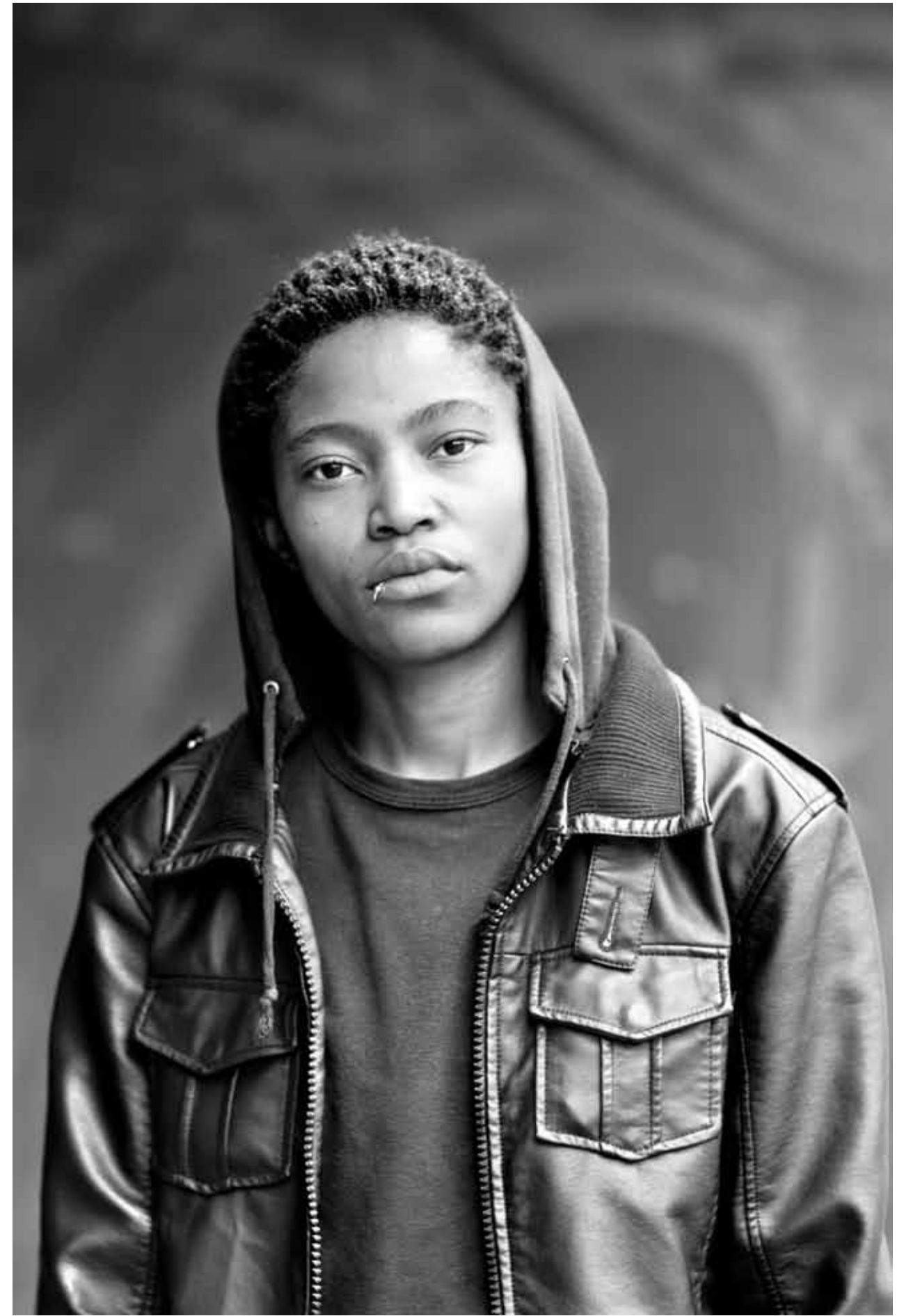
On an overcast morning in May, I biked from my apartment to the Brooklyn Museum to meet Zanele for the opening day of *Zanele Muholi: Isibonelo/Evidence*, the most comprehensive exhibition of her work to date. She walked me through the impressive show, which features 87 works created between 2007

and 2014. Many illustrate the violence LGBTQI people face even today, while others depict joyful celebrations and hopeful visions of queer communities. The centerpiece of *Isibonelo/Evidence* is an imposing wall of 60 portraits from the *Faces and Phases* project, which anchors the exhibition.

“Isibonelo” is a Zulu word for “example” or “illustration,” a theme that unites the collected series of photos and videos. Visitors entering the fourth floor of the Brooklyn Museum are confronted by the giant color photograph of a pair of hands holding open a South African identity document stamped “DECEASED.” The identity document is “evidence” of the life—and death—of Disebo Gift Makau, a South African lesbian who last year was found raped and murdered, partially nude, a pipe shoved down her throat.



"Lumka Stemela, Nyanga East, Cape Town, 2011," gelatin silver photograph, 34" x 24" (2011).  
 Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York.



"Xana Nyilenda, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2011," gelatin silver photograph, 34" x 24" (2011).  
 Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York.



"Ayanda Mqakayi, Nyanga East, Cape Town, 2011," gelatin silver photograph, 34" x 24" (2011).  
Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York.

"I like the fact that 'the butch' is a way in which we exercise our rights and claim space as gendered beings within the female gender."

"You're counted, or validated, by this piece of plastic or paper," Zanele told me. "I brought this to show you what happened to someone who is no longer there, whose life was taken early."

On the other side of the wall, stunning black-and-white portraits from the *Faces and Phases* series are made all the more crucial by the weight of knowing that the people they represent have confronted discrimination and violence, including "corrective rape," a particularly perverse attempt to realign the victim's gender and sexuality.

Zanele's photographs offer an alternative archive to the South African identity card and other state records of human life, one that parallels official documentation while challenging its almighty claim to record and represent a person's existence. Like official identity photos, Zanele's images center on the individual's face, but the composition differs. The photographer—always Zanele—is a community member, not a government official or social scientist, and her photos are imbued with dignity and care, absent the straightforward frame that defines officialdom.

The facial image—that neutral expression associated with passports, drivers' licenses, and other methods of population control—became official when criminologists, anthropologists and psychologists worked with law enforcement and other government agencies to put photographic technology to work in knowing their subjects. Often, the kinds of people most photographed in such a way are those deemed deviant—the "criminal," the "insane," anyone outside the bounds of heteronormativity. These images are used as evidence of alleged differences between, for example, "normal" people and "sex perverts"—a criminal category that at one time included people considered gay, lesbian or trans. Zanele's portraits offer a different way of knowing, with LGBTQI subjects defiantly staring back at the viewer, asserting their humanity.



"It's very important for us to document realities of LGBTQI people in our space, beyond just thinking of gay people when they're at Pride or only when there are dramatic events that scandalize us. What I am trying to do here," Zanele told me, "is document my reality—our realities—for the people who will be born after us, to have something tangible. We're talking about our existence," she said.

Taken using only natural light, her spectacular photos are human records that, while referencing official documents, speak to the need to see one's self represented. "I don't want to be covered," Zanele told me. "I don't want to be hidden—I need to be seen."

When I asked about the preponderance of butch women in her work, Zanele said, "It's personal. I like that butchness is gender within gender. I like the fact that 'the butch' is a way in which we exercise our rights and claim space as gendered beings within the female gender."

To more fully document LGBTQI existence in South Africa today, *Isibonelo/Evidence* also displays the *Weddings* photo and video series that uses images of same-sex marriage to focus on the love and intimacy within Zanele's community. Another video, delicately blurred, shows Zanele and her partner having sex.

In an adjacent room, a clear coffin entombs a lush flower arrangement and a black-and-white self-portrait of Zanele atop a white pillow. Above the coffin hang two bright, beaded renderings of tabloid-style headlines announcing yet another homophobic murder.

That's what *Isibonelo/Evidence* is: a mirror, reflecting life and death in Zanele's community. Those of us now "in the life" will likely see something familiar in the joy and pain, even if we're privileged to have legally risen above the worst of it. But we can't forget what it was like, what it is like. Zanele won't let you. ■