

Strained Interpretations:
The Labour of Imaging
Lesbian Lifestyles in Art

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Introduction

Strained Interpretations: The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art

As an artist and a member of the lesbian community, and in my research into the production of photographs, installations and sculpture, I have observed and experienced firsthand the difficulty of imaging and making lesbian lifestyles public. My experience has been such that lesbian lifestyles often entail painful secrecy on the one hand or crude and shocking exposure on the other. In this work I thus delve into the difficulty, effort and strain involved in representing and imaging lesbian lifestyles.

In my photographs the gestural melancholy defamiliarises and renders the subject matter difficult to decipher. In interaction with or when investigating my sculptural installations, physical strain, weight and heaviness are experienced and suggested. In installations portraying devices such as the camera obscura and chamber obscura, which invert, reorganise and shift perspectives on images and the gaze, the labour of perception is highlighted. Difficulty and strain are thematised in each medium.

My interest in the imaging of lesbian lifestyles begins with exploring the following question: Is it possible to relate the strain attached to the recognition of lesbian lifestyles in society with the strain inherent in representing lesbian lifestyles? Furthermore, I explore how lesbian lifestyles have been represented historically. A central point of interest in this study concerns the concept of slowing down and absorption in relation to the subject matter. I explore the strategy of slowing down the process of interpretation as a means of drawing closer to understanding the challenges experienced by lesbian women who have consistently been misrepresented or marginalised in and by society. I ask if it is possible that such a process of slowing down has the potential to initiate sensitivity and self-awareness in the participant or spectator, and I push further and ask if a decelerated process could enable the spectator or viewer to rethink previous biases projected onto lesbian lifestyles. Does the slowing down of the process of interpreting lesbian subject matter inspire self-awareness in the participant or spectator? Could this stalling of the interpretation process allow the spectator or participant to contemplate or re-evaluate that

which is unfamiliar, and thus to reconsider bias? By which means can the interpretation process by spectator or participant be slowed down? Does self-awareness about the interpretation process inspire a more intense experience of the subject matter or does it draw attention to the subject matter? Can this aid in instigating a witness experience in the participant? How may a witness experience through interaction with an artwork, which places you in a position of responsibility toward the subject at hand, be inspired in the participant or spectator? Can allusive gestures or subtle hints, the experience of physical weight, or the inversion of pictures contribute to this? The section that follows will introduce a theme that is central to my work in imaging lesbian lifestyles, i.e. strain.

Strain

There are complex themes of strain throughout my body of work: visual strain, physical strain, perceptual strain and interpretive strain. Each artistic medium embodies a different strenuous element. My understanding of strain begins with an exploration of Mary Coble's *Aversion* (2007) (Figures 1 and 2), a live performance and installation that was exhibited in the Conner Contemporary Art Gallery, Washington, D.C.

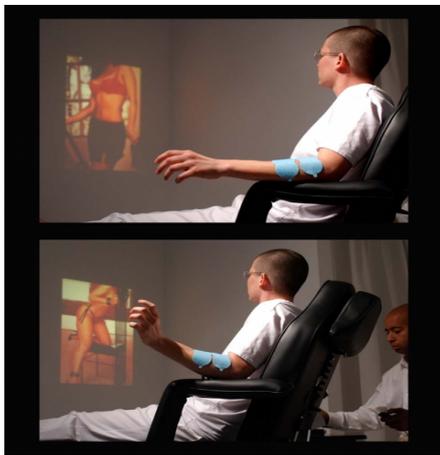


Figure 1: Mary Coble, *Performance Documentation (from Aversion)*, 2007, Conner Contemporary Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 2: Mary Coble, *Untitled 3 (from Sessions)*, 2007, 16x24, Chromic Print. Edition: 5. Washington, D.C.

Coble attached electrodes to her arm and had herself shocked with an electric shock device to recreate the severe effects of electric shock aversion therapy, a method once commonly used to “cure” homosexuality. The American Psychological Association (APA) supported this type of

reorientation therapy in the United States until 1973 when homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder. The shock therapy sessions in Coble's performance would last for 30 minutes, mimicking the duration of an actual session of shock aversion therapy. During the shock aversion therapy process *patients* were shown a series of erotic images. Whereas opposite-sex images (heterosexual imagery) elicited no negative stimulation, shock was administered in conjunction with same-sex images. The aim was to rehabilitate the patient to "normality". In other words, the patient was encouraged to embrace heterosexuality because it was considered the only normal form of sexuality and a form of punishment was reserved for positive reaction to homosexual images.

Figures 1 and 2 of *Aversion* are central to the present study's argument where one can clearly identify the strain in the body of the lesbian patient. In the photograph in Figure 1 a nuanced but still ironic undertone is evident in what the spectator is witnessing. Figure 1 shows the electrodes attached to Coble's arm as well as the figure in the background, who is administering the pain and physical shock. The movement suggested in the pair of still photographs depicts the surge of electricity through her body, which forces her arm, hand and even her fingertips to move with the shock impulse. The suggestion of movement allows for the spectator to become aware of his/her position as a witness and perhaps to elicit an emotive or empathetic reaction to the pain and conflict inherent in the homosexual subject. There is also the anticipation of a transformation of the depicted "patient" promised by the witnessed movement since the shock therapy elicits electrical impulses that move the "patient" physically; a trigger that could potentially fulfil the fundamental goals of shock aversion therapy. The visual line of sight towards the projected pictures, staged in Figure 1, plays a powerful and forceful role in terms of the envisaged change which is supposed to take place within the patient. Her head's position tilted directly towards the projected pictures (of a semi-nude female figure in both these stills), forms the basis upon which the patient is supposed to be "rehabilitated". Coble's photographs and performance bring me to the following questions relating to the present study: What effect do images have on the witnessing spectator? As an innocent bystander or spectator of art, to what extent do we become involved or become witnesses in relation the subject matter? The investigation into whether spectators are aware of their witnessing role and the degree to which we become witnesses are central to my thesis. Instead of depicting the power associated with the erotic images combined with shock aversion therapy in Coble's work, my intention is to explore the relation between the viewer and representations of lesbian lifestyles as a means of challenging the spectator's gaze on sensitive subject matter.

Throughout all of my artworks but specifically in my sculptural works of art, spectators may experience my chamber obscura installation as a vulnerable space, as the chamber is dark and unfamiliar, with the only available light source projecting the external world upside down. The chamber obscura is a commonly occurring phenomenon recorded since the 18th century. A small hole on one side of a dark chamber projects an inverted image of the outside view onto the surfaces of the room. On entering, the viewer may barely perceive the image; the room might appear to be completely dark. But as one's eyes adjust, the picture becomes increasingly apparent, growing brighter and revealing the colour and detail of the projected image inside the chamber space. The viewer is immersed in a continuous present, watching and listening, as much a part of the installation as of the view outside or inside the gallery space. These devices are then positioned to assist in seeing, the right way up, a photograph which is upside down in the gallery space. This allows for a sense of movement within the externally represented image, which the spectator will experience upside down, where the contemplation (or reconsideration) of images depicting homosexuality is induced, bringing with it the potential to evoke change in the participant. While Coble's work explores the violent treatment of lesbian lifestyles and constitutes mainstream and sometimes pornographic images, my work depicts a more nuanced and subtle representation of lesbian subject matter. In contrast to Coble's exploration of aversion to lesbian or homosexual content, I aim to investigate how visual and artistic strategies can be used to bring the viewer closer to the subject matter with the hope of initiating a sense of empathetic regard. In my research I consider whether the slowing down of the interpretation process through visual stimuli could allow for the spectator or participant to contemplate or re-evaluate that which is unfamiliar and to reconsider prevailing stereotypes and social norms.

A further aspect of the work which became an important part of my argument concerns visual devices or projections which are important in the act of looking, regarding and considering. In addition, the position of being a witness, interacting with Coble's performance, carries with it a burden; a sense of strain and weight. This heaviness develops in the form of ethical responsibility and liability and can be connected to the sculptural elements of my thesis, namely *First Stone, John 8:7* as well as the chamber/camera obscuras discussed in the second and final chapter.

Coble's second photograph (Figure 2), which documents the performance already described, is a close-up still image of the symptoms of the physical strain and shock endured by the artist throughout her 30-minute performance. The projection forcefully channels the focus onto the

visual imagery being projected onto the screen before her; the images shown to Coble during the performance. These projected images may relate to the experience of looking through a visual device like a peephole or camera obscura. Peepholes force the spectator to be isolated or to watch individually, and obscura devices overwhelm the spectator with a sense of isolation and vulnerability, as if in an intimate space much like the aversion therapy experienced by Coble in Figures 1 and 2; an isolated, contemplative state enhancing the tribulations presented to the spectator or participant in the hopes of making a deep cognitive shift toward or connection with the subject matter. The spectator witnesses the physical movements induced by the electrodes, shocking every cell in Coble's body. In this way the significance of the origin of the word *movement*, from the Latin 'movere', becomes evident, in that the spectator is *moved* by the projected images and experiences an empathetic response. It seems as if Coble's experience of the projected images demonstrates a physical and emotional response by means of the movement observed, and one can thus further argue that the spectator is at times encouraged to move away from a position of apathy to emotional or empathetic witnessing (Figures 1 and 2). With this movement comes difficulty. Participants are overwhelmingly aware of the strain felt by Coble through every painful shock. Every twist of the wrist and every twitch of the finger reminds the spectator of the heaviness and painfulness of the convulsions. The spectator experiences strain in the empathetic understanding or interpretation of Coble's performance. By fulfilling the role of a witness every excruciating second has the power not only to shift the experience emotionally, but also through the labour of acknowledgement and potential understanding, to become a catalyst for re-evaluating preconceived ideas about lesbian lifestyles.

The strain of struggling as spectator or participant to come to terms with or to understand what is being implied by the images on offer is what is investigated in this study. As a spectator the participant is vulnerable to visual stimulation that is not necessarily expected. Coble's powerful performance may resemble a journey within the self of the spectator which allows for a broader understanding of whether or not a spectator is automatically a witness of these powerful performances, or if the images used in these performances are powerful enough to reflect on one's self as a witness.

Coble's process is my starting point in interrogating the difficulty of cultural expression experienced by lesbians. I ask how the artist may guide the spectator to slow down and contemplate the medium, composition and subject matter of the artwork, through the suggestion

of strain over a prolonged period, comparable to the emotional and physical struggle that is clearly visible in the production of Coble's performance.

In order to investigate the effects of slowing down the process of interpretation, of giving spectators time to de-familiarise themselves with what they think they know and understand, giving them time to re-evaluate, to inquire, to think about the medium in a new way, I refer to Nagel and Pericolo (2010) and their explanation of an aporia. For them, aporia is the strenuous forging of a new path, or a new meaning engendered out of old cloth.

In their book *Unresolved Images: An Introduction to Aporia as an Analytical Category in the Interpretation of Early Modern Art*, Nagel and Pericolo refer to Polidoro da Caravaggio's frieze-painting technique of the 1400's. They endeavour to explain compositional confusion by using a 'path' as metaphor. They describe the traversed path from pre-existing compositions to an emerging new composition, which leads back and forth through familiarity to dislodged understanding. A new composition replaces or collaborates with pre-existing compositions, which adds to the confusion of a defined interpretation of the original composition and so to the understanding of subject matter. Nagel and Pericolo (2010: 1) state that "[t]hrough the process these alternatives function because they are both analogous and distinct, working with and against each other within a range of relation and difference", as if reading between the alternative compositional constructs enlightens the spectator to a deeper understanding of the visual concept rather than the surface-level confusion, which is a ruse. In the present study's investigation of new ways of imaging and making lesbian lifestyles public by looking at past expressions and struggles, Nagel and Pericolo offer a theoretical aid for deciphering a new path or journey, where spectators or participants "look at" or "see" artworks that are initially confusing or disorientating, with a deeper conceptual meaning.

This process that Nagel and Pericolo speak of is the back and forth nature of producing and deciphering compositions from pre-determined sketches to the focus of redefined and additional compositions, which are ultimately juxtaposed onto pre-existing forms. Aporia, as explained by Nagel and Pericolo, is thus "a blind alley" and this description of difficult interpretations ultimately aids in the understanding of the labour of imaging homosexual lifestyles. Nagel and Pericolo's theoretical contribution assists in defining a new and innovative path that can be forged by going back and forth between historical and contemporary representations of lesbian lifestyles. In this strenuous process of deciphering, contemplating and re-evaluating subject

matter, both artist and spectator, through various stages in the interpretation process, experience strenuous and quiet contemplation, which is an embodied form of slowing down. This deliberation of the “unresolved” creates within itself a bafflement or confusion that is intriguing for the viewer. Nagel and Pericolo’s complex theory has assisted me in unraveling strategies of drawing attention to the difficulties experienced by lesbians in order to gain acceptance in society through images. Nagel and Pericolo compare the understanding of subject matter to a journey, a path down which subject matter leads you in the discovery of what the image involves. This entanglement within ambiguous subject matter is what intrigues Nagel and Pericolo and to them subject matter dwells in the aporic depths of this journey of deciphering the unknown.

Strain is found in two main aspects of the subject matter of my artworks. Firstly there is the evident struggle experienced in the art-making process itself. There is the physical strain of working with harsh, unforgiving, problematic and heavy materials such as concrete and, in certain cases, wood. Secondly, there is difficulty in relating to or deciphering what is presented before you as the spectator. Nagel and Pericolo explore artworks of the Early Modern era, which are difficult to understand or to decipher; artworks which are layered with meaning, compositional entanglement and complex narratives. By means of investigating the aforementioned aporia, Nagel and Pericolo offer different strategies to explore issues related to struggling for acknowledgement or understanding sensitive subject matter. In my own struggle to present art and photography to the spectator I explore some of the paths discussed in Nagel and Pericolo’s work. Some of these paths include an exploration of analogue and darkroom photography; a labour-intensive process associated with strain. Furthermore, I work with concrete, stone and wood, all of which carry both a physical weight and strain, which in itself is a strenuous process. The camera obscura devices which I define in detail in the body of this thesis also carry an element of strain, where viewers need to peep into a device and decipher an inverted image, once again focused on lesbian lifestyles.

Nagel and Pericolo’s research sensitises one to the complexities involved in presenting subject matter such as that dealing with lesbian lifestyles, and how to decode meaning that cannot easily be relayed through visual representations of the subject. This speaks directly to my research that is focused on representing lesbian subject matter strategies used to relay messages and decode meanings in communities that may be considered historically conservative, such as in Bloemfontein, South Africa. I investigate how an exhibition may challenge initial or facile understandings of lesbianism in art and photography and my work urges the spectator to slow

down and, through the experiences of subtle strain in my work, I encourage the spectator to shift normative and heteronormative perceptions toward sexuality.

Chapter layout

The first chapter of my thesis will focus on photography and I make a strong case for the importance of slowing down in one's engagement with photographic images. "Slowing down", in the context of my photographic series titled *Periphery* (2012 – 2016), is a reflection on how re-focusing attention on photography as a medium may aid in the slowing down of a spectator's relation and connection to art photographs and their narratives. I explore the absorptive qualities of this slowing-down process by analysing absorption in photography, in ironic contrast to the popular term commonly associated with photography, namely the "snapshot" (suggesting instantaneity). I investigate possibilities of the slowing down of time in the photographic medium. Slowing down also assists in understanding the labour of imaging lesbian lifestyles through a medium such as photography, which slowly reveals hidden gestures and clues, if the spectator takes the time to decipher these clues. This is one step in addressing one of the overarching questions of this section of my research: Could a lingering contemplation by the spectator through slowing down help to initiate a process of transformation in spectators' or participants' moral awareness?

In Chapter 2 I discuss three separate sculptural elements. Firstly, I ask how heaviness or weight may be interpreted as inherent strain. How can the experience of and engagement with the sculptural medium be used as a means through which the participant can experience the *weight* of responsibility in relation to the subject matter being presented. For instance, I argue that witnessing through interaction with an artwork or visual image has the potential to enhance the responsibility of the spectator and emphasise the truth of becoming a witness. Weight and effort are inherent in the technical aspects of working with a medium such as cement or concrete and wood. I ask: could an emphasis on these techniques, which take time, strenuous time, lingering time, have an effect on the participant of engaging in deeper reflection on difficult subject matter?

The theme of witnessing is central to the second chapter of the thesis. I draw from Kelly Oliver's work titled *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (2001), which foregrounds the importance of allowing time for reflection and self-awareness and how a process of slowing down is central to

the relationship between the spectator becoming a responsible witness. In Oliver's words, "[w]e are obligated to witness beyond recognition, to testify and to listen to testimony – to encounter each other – because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing. That is to say, subjectivity and humanity are the results of response-ability" (Oliver 2001: 90). With this "response-ability" Oliver proposes that it is within our ability, as both spectators and subjects, to reflect either a positive or negative response toward other people. In other words, our ability to respond also leaves us with a certain sense of responsibility.

A third aspect of this study delves into the theme of vulnerability, which I explore in my work on camera and chamber obscuras projecting inverted images of South African lesbian women. Our acts of vision and the way in which we perceive reality reveal a resemblance to inner and outer spaces: we perceive the inside of our observation from the outside, or (e.g. as the anatomical eye perceives objects, shapes, texture, etc.) from the outside in. The installation devices that I created for this exhibition play a central role in challenging the normative ways in which we perceive certain subjects. A central feature of the camera obscura, e.g. the peephole, is used to relay the significance of looking from the outside in (camera obscura) and looking toward the outside from within (chamber obscura). The spaces with which the spectator becomes familiar in my exhibition are intimate spaces and places, and the loving embraces or everyday lived experiences represented in the exhibition are seldom represented to the outside world. Intimate spaces become accessible in my exhibition, which further initiates a sense of responsibility toward those who are engaged with the camera or chamber obscuras. The spectator looking through the peephole of the camera obscura and who is consequently confronted with the image of a lesbian embrace or an intimate moment, is suddenly made vulnerable and simultaneously left with a sense of response-ability. This thesis explores how subtle modes of strain, weight and responsibility in artistic devices can contribute to recognising, understanding and shifting perceptions of lesbian sexuality in South Africa.

Slowing Down: Absorption and the ‘Snapshot’

CHAPTER 1

The title of this chapter, *Slowing Down: Absorption and the ‘Snapshot’*, is a reflection on how drawing attention to photography as a medium may aid in the slowing down of a spectator’s relation and connection to art photographs and their narratives. In this chapter I explore the absorptive qualities of this slowing-down process by analysing absorption in photography in ironic contrast to the popular term commonly associated with photography, namely the “snapshot” which suggests instantaneity. I investigate possibilities of the slowing down of time in the photographic medium. Slowing down also assists in understanding the labour of imaging lesbian lifestyles through a medium such as photography, which reveals hidden gestures and clues slowly, if the spectator takes the time to decipher these clues. This is one step in addressing the overall question of this thesis, i.e., whether a lingering of contemplation by the spectator through slowing down may help to initiate a process of transformation in spectators’ or participants’ moral awareness?

I focus on one of my own artworks to begin with in order to decipher subtle visual clues to be found in later arguments and which slowly unravel the concept of absorption and the processes of slowing down in photography. By starting with a reading of my own work where I have drawn inspiration from art historical examples and visual traditions, I endeavour to introduce a process of the slowing down of interpretation and apprehending the medium itself. Related to this slowing-down process I will address themes of melancholy and mourning, especially typical of the secretive, hidden lifestyles of lesbians in Southern Africa. I also argue for the existence of a long tradition of visual representations of a *Two Female Friends* topos, a strand which has continued over a few centuries in art history, lending itself to renewed exploration in this study.

One of my photographs which provides a platform from which the rest of my analysis will take place, and which is discussed in relation to other representations of lesbian lifestyles, is a work titled *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3). *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3) is an intimate and peaceful black and white photographic depiction of two female friends in a private home or domestic place. One figure is meticulously beading and threading a bracelet similar to the bracelets worn by each of the two friends, with the other intently looking on. There is emphasis in the composition on the centrally placed hands and fingers of the bracelet-maker as she

focuses on threading the beads one by one, taking time, effort and concentration. The skillful hands at the centre of the image convey the slow passing of time during the performance of the difficult task. The bodily posture of the *beader* seems to contribute to the performance of the task. Her slumped shoulders and just barely open mouth convey an absorptive obliviousness as she is engrossed in the activity.



Figure 3: Mandi Bezuidenhout, *Kate & Nadine*, 2013, *Periphery* Series, Photographic C Print. 2000 cm x 980 cm

The female figure looking on is more relaxed and at ease, although her breasts, which seem to be standing at attention as if pointing toward the activity in front of her, reveal her captivation. The two female figures who are consumed in the single activity of threading the beaded bracelet - one for the other, to create a bond proudly worn on their arms for the world to see - communicate a sense of poignancy, as one's identity as a lesbian is less acceptable in public than wearing a bracelet which bonds the two females in a secret relationship; a symbol of love. The bond or intimate connection between the two female figures is underlined by the complementary elements of intertwined connectivity, as though their bodies perform the essential roles of puzzle pieces. The erasure or anonymity of the identities of the cropped female figures depicted in the monochrome photograph suggests that something is hidden or that someone has deliberately been left unexposed. It points to a secretive lifestyle that allows the viewer in as a spectator, but restricts the viewer from seeing more. This secrecy subtly implies the pathos of unknown sadness lingering in the monochrome space we are not afforded the opportunity to see fully and experience unreservedly. What we are visually enlightened to is the subtle desire emitted by the intertwined touching of two women's knees and legs, as if they are clasping each other's yearning. The subdued visual cues, which can be read from the photograph, make it uncertain whether or not an intimation of erotic desire is purposefully suggested or not. However, the

powerful undertones guide the spectator to dwell on an intimate moment between two lesbian lovers, an occurrence which is rarely exposed in the South African public sphere. This is a private space, however, and may therefore speak to the fact that many lesbian lifestyles and their everyday experiences dominate private/interior spaces.

The door which is subtly suggested to be open in the lefthand corner of the photograph and the window panes of the sliding door behind the figures indicate that this is an indoor scene, constituting a threshold between inner and outer space. This acknowledgement of a threshold in the depiction of a forbidden or unrecognised lifestyle between public and private environments subtly hints at the struggle and trauma of 'coming out'.

Another visual cue to the differentiation of inner and outer spaces is the pattern formed by a reflection of light on the window pane of one of the sliding door's glass panels. Light captured on the reflective glass pane in the photograph points to the medium of photography itself as a mechanism of slowing down through the time it takes to produce a photograph from the moment the shutter flings open to the moment it closes, to the light that has been captured on light-sensitive photographic paper. All of this slows down time, drawing attention to the passing of time and to the fact that the photographic medium, ironically, operates slower than expected.

This self-reference also points to the slowing down of the process of making and interpreting the work. My argument in this reading is that the medium of photography is usually associated with the quick 'capturing' of a moment, an instantaneous trigger effect that promptly creates a photograph from what is seen in front of the photographer in an attempt to mimic the functions of a machine, because the eye sees in a more complex way, by rapidly 'capturing' and freezing a moment in time. I argue that photography as a medium is rather much more complex and time consuming, where the creation of a photograph starts in the preconceived ideas of the photographer, meticulously contemplating subjects and especially lighting. Light plays an important part in generating the right exposure and atmosphere for each photograph, the time it takes for that light to pass through the lens, to be shifted through the shutter and to appear on the light-sensitive paper is a process typical of the medium and which can be associated with the mechanism of slowing down, suggesting the time and process of creating and developing analogue photographs. The production of the photograph, which happens before any thought of the photograph's development, is a time-consuming process in itself.

The powerful natural light that pours through the opening of the door and window panes impacts the tonal value of the contrasting hues that accentuate outer space, and separates the inner light reflected in the glass of the window pane, from the outer light. The grid-like structure of the sliding door, with its strong straight lines is a recurring motif throughout this photographic series titled *Periphery*. The grid-like window of the sliding door that is slightly ajar on the left suggests a sliding or shifting movement from inside to outside. This suggests that the reading of the image is important to the interior and exterior position and placement of the subject matter. According to Rossouw, “[i]n the prevailing Western tradition of reading from left to right, people are inclined also to perceive images as organised from left to right. And, in evaluating artistic or visual compositions, we tend to ascribe a special weight to the left side over the right” (2011: 85). Even though the opening of the door on the left is not the first thing one notices as a spectator, it does read metaphorically as an opening for the barriers encountered in the grid of the window panes. The grid-like window also reflects on the constrictive framing of the scene inside, as if the outside just to the left of the two figures escapes them and they are compressed into a space of safety from the social powers outside. In Rossouw’s thesis *Meeting of Film and Philosophy: A ‘Deep-structure’ Perspective* (2011), he draws attention to ‘the framed picture’ in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, and how nature, as the context for the plot entailing a gay relationship, is portrayed through framed pictures within interior spaces to reflect on memories of a nostalgic and free nature. Nature, in contrast with framed pictures throughout the film, suggests freedom to escape from an indoor or framed world of suppression, of living a false heterosexual lifestyle indoors and under societal constraints. Just as the open door suggests an escape, so the grid-like window pane emphasises constraint and suffocation from social powers that enclose the two female figures, as the window pane is a frame that ‘boxes them in’. These motifs point to the effort, difficulty and strain of shifting perspectives or ‘points of view’, which is the problem or question confronted and unraveled in this thesis.

In *Kate & Nadine* a refracted light is absorbed within the folds on the sofa. The creases in the two friends’ shirts and in the heavy, sloping folds of their cargo shorts as well as the curvature of these folds, are caused by the impact of the light flowing through the window panes and the open door from the left. The light reveals the folds subtly and slowly from the outside towards the inside. Mieke Bal (1999: 27) points out how folds incorporate points of view as follows: “But, to use a baroque conceptual metaphor, it only comes to life – or rather to light, to visibility – for us through our point of view, which itself is molded by *it*, folded *in* it.” Bal accentuates the relationship between object and subject, the entanglement of being consumed by a concentrated

event. For Bal, “objects seen as thus enfolded with the subject in a shared entanglement, are considered events rather than things – events of becoming rather than being” (Bal 1999: 30). The fold is of significance because it shows how a visual stimulant as simple as a fold can enrapture the viewer in an absorptive state to slow down and contemplate points of view, as if the folds tuck you in, wrap you up and hold you as spectator in a metaphorical grip. This grip then slows time down long enough for the spectator to reconsider, re-evaluate and recognise the subtle hints within the photograph referring to the spectator’s point of view. The light and folds thus draw attention not only to the medium itself and to the spectator’s stance, but also to the passing or slowing down of time. I develop these ideas further throughout this chapter.



Figure 4: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Soap Bubble*, ca. 1733. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.

Kate & Nadine (2013) (Figure 3) brings to mind Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s painting *The Soap Bubble* (1733) (Figure 4) in which two young male figures are engrossed in the single activity of blowing a soap bubble. In both works two figures are completely absorbed by the task at hand. The activity is performed by the dominant subject while a passive subject looks on and is calmly enraptured by it. Both activities - blowing a soap bubble and threading beads - are delicate, meticulous, slow processes, which seem to stretch the passing of time. The figures in the artworks are lost in their own imaginative worlds and oblivious of their surroundings or of the necessary presence of the viewer or artist. In other words, this absorptive state, where the figures who are usually restricted from being oblivious to their environments because of social conventions and norms, are now allowed to be. In addition to this the absorptive state demands that the viewer/spectator slows down and pays attention to the inner world of the figure in the photograph. This painting by Chardin is a prominent example discussed in Michael Fried’s book

Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot (1980) in which he distinguishes an absorptive tradition in art. In his later book *Why Photography Matters as Never Before* (2008), Fried extends his discussion of this tradition to photography of the present century. He emphasises the way in which artists in this tradition are able to make time linger. According to Fried (1980: 45), Chardin “made painting after painting in which engrossment, reflection, reverie, obliviousness, and related states are represented with a persuasiveness equal to that achieved by the greatest masters of the past, and by so doing perpetuated as much of what I shall call the absorptive tradition as it was in one man’s power to keep alive.” Fried refers to this ‘absorptive tradition’ as a powerful persuasion, which can be observed in Chardin’s oeuvre as a lingering of gestures, movement and time, in fact therefore evoking a sense of timelessness. The reflection of light in the translucent round bubble can be compared with the reflection of light in the window pane in *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3). In Chardin’s painting the spectator observes a shadow falling onto the wall next to the male figure in the background of the painting, suggesting the passing of time, light fading and changing during the day as the sun begins to set, similar to the way that the afternoon sun enters into *Kate & Nadine* (Figure 3), also suggesting the passing of time, the change from daylight to darkness, and the qualities of slowing down. The gradual discolouration of the leaves in *The Soap Bubble* from top to bottom, from green to gold, moreover suggests the changing of the seasons and the passing of time. There is a definite divide between inside and outside space in *The Soap Bubble* (1733) (Figure 4), as the male figure blowing the bubble is on the outside and is consequently illuminated by sunlight. The other male figure, however, who is inside and observing the action, can be defined as being left in the dark as suggested by the low light on his face. The foregrounded male figure blowing the bubble is in an active position, while the male figure in the background is in a passive position – part of – but also removed from the action, much like the female figures in *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3). The absorptive quality is more prominent with the active figures, suggesting a tension between them, one passive and the other active. While Chardin’s painting may not have aimed to convey anything sexual, it does say something about those located outside of the action. The window frame itself suggests or makes a direct reference to actor/spectator and insider/outsider relations. As the spectator or ‘passive’ figure in both figures (3 and 4) is contemplative, relaxed and perhaps even removed from the action, so also the spectator of the artworks is removed from the image, but through absorption and the slowing down of time I suggest that our passive role as spectators should be equally active as we reconsider preconceived norms or practices.

Fried's distinction and investigation of an absorptive tradition in art aids in analysing how the work of interpretation by participants or spectators can be slowed down. This helps to probe the next question, namely whether this lingering of contemplation by the spectator may help to initiate a process of transformation in spectators' or participants' stance? Could this slowing down aid in fostering a willingness to shift, or at least self-reflectively consider each spectator's individual point of view? These questions are gradually addressed through the comparison and interpretation of artworks in the rest of this chapter by analysing works from art history that suggest the passing and slowing down of time and by comparing paintings that are in themselves time consuming to create. I begin to introduce the idea that slowness of time provides a space for the viewer or spectator to truly reflect on their own point of view, which could ultimately, slowly but surely, begin to shift and perhaps even adapt when confronted with difficult subject matter.

In Chardin's *The Soap Bubble* (1733) the blowing of a soap bubble is presented as a skillful art, which opens our minds to the passing of time. Because the painted figures are so intensely enraptured and absorbed in the act of blowing a soap bubble, we as spectators are urged to be a part of the process. This passing of time is visually intimated through details such as the pouted mouth of the soap blower as it is positioned close to the centre of the painting and prospectively leads the eye down to the subject's hands steadily holding and perhaps twisting the rod to ensure that the bubble is blown to perfection. This is comparable to the oblivious anticipation and absorption of the female figure's dropped jaw in *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3). The mindful blowing of the bubble also mimics the slowness and concentration of the vigilant threading of the beads, in the awareness that the needle must catch the beads one by one, so as not to fall. As the two boys' focused gazes guide us to the positioning of the soap blower's hands, we discern the tight grip of one steadying hand holding onto the ledge in concentration and focus, as the other hand is gracefully executing the delicate process of forming a soap bubble. Similarly, in *Kate & Nadine* (2013), the curvature of the beader's fingers emits a sense of strain and concentration - a sense of the passing and slowing down of time.

The comparison of the slowing down of time in *Kate & Nadine* (2013; Figure 3) and Chardin's painting shows how absorptive strategies aid in slowing down the spectator's participation in works of art as there is a belief that the spectator is usually distant or uninvolved in the artwork being viewed. I argue that the slow participation and involvement or absorption of the spectator in the work of art aids to bring about a sense of transformation within the spectator. However, it

also brings to the fore how each work, the photograph and the painting, self-reflectively points to the slow and meticulous process that went into its own production. Fried discusses absorption not only in the analyses of early modern and 18th century paintings, but also in relation to 20th century photography which implies the comparison of the time which elapses between the pressing of a button on a camera to release the shutter instantaneously, and the time that has been filled to preconceive, prepare, and manipulate that moment, on the one hand, and the time it takes to complete a painting, on the other. The question is if the fullness of time it takes to develop difficult subject matter into pictures could be shown to contribute to encouraging participants to linger and struggle in its presence by suggesting that there is a direct link between the premeditated actions of the artist or photographer and the lingering or engagement of the spectator with the work of art. Chardin's painting is a good example of the difficulty of relaying absorptive qualities because his painting style is formed through hours and hours of painstaking brushstrokes to create an artwork that seems to 'capture' a single moment in time. It is evident that the term 'capturing' is essentially false, because whereas the term denotes a quick, spontaneous action, what is in fact referred to essentially entails hours and hours of work.

Fried refers to the tear in the bubble blower's jacket, which doesn't seem to bother him or the boy in the background or even the spectator for that matter, because all of the attention is focused on the act of blowing a fleeting bubble and in anxiously awaiting the outcome. Fried comments,

Chardin appears to have been struck precisely by the depth of absorption which those activities tended naturally to elicit from those engaged in them. At any rate, he appears to have done all he could to make that depth of absorption manifest to the beholder, most importantly by singling out in each picture at least one salient detail that functions as a sign of the figure's obliviousness to everything but the operation he or she is intent upon performing. (Fried 1980: 47)

While spectators become aware of their own slowing down and taking in and contemplation, they become aware of the subtler details otherwise overlooked and hidden. The question is whether this lingering, waiting and contemplation in both the labour of making the artwork, in the typical subject matter presented in absorptive works, as well as in the process of deciphering them, may initiate a process of gradual transformation and contemplation in the spectator or participant, prompting a greater willingness to reconsider or even shift points of view.

Jeff Wall (cited in De Duve 2002: 134) suggests that “in photography, there is always an actual moment – the moment the shutter is released. Photography is based in that sense on instantaneousness. Painting, on the other hand, created a beautiful and complex illusion of instantaneousness. So past, present and future were simultaneous in it, and play with each other or clash.” On the other hand, however, there is indeed a slowness of the photographic medium, in the technique of making an artwork through the absorptiveness of the process. The “snapshot” is typically understood as a quick and spontaneous photographic “shot” which “captures” or rather embodies a moment in time. However, it has been argued that a snapshot is not a means of ‘capturing’ time, that is rather a lingering moment, ironically full, and an instantaneous fully loaded depiction of a scene in history that will never be seen from that specific angle again. It slows down our understanding of the “snapshot” to realise that some artworks, including photographic ones, are strenuously difficult in their preparation and method of production, as well as in their deciphering. The term “snapshot” is problematic because it is historically associated with documentation and believed to be a fingerprint of an event or moment in time. W. J. Mitchell describes this fallacy as follows: “A photograph is fossilized light, and its aura of superior evidential efficacy has frequently been ascribed to the special bond between fugitive reality and permanent image that is formed at the instant of exposure. It is a direct physical imprint, like a fingerprint left at the scene of a crime or lipstick traces on your collar” (Mitchell 1992: 25). Even though a *snapshot* is never a “true” depiction of a moment in time, photography is often erroneously seen to fix time, to generate a true reflection of reality. Here we are reminded of early photographic techniques, where subjects were obligated to sit in a specific position for a long enough period of time to produce a photographic image. The irony is that there is no such thing as a ‘snapshot’, because no matter how advanced the creation of a virtual reality may be, there is no technological device that could capture a moment in time in the sense of documenting that moment. “Snapshot” is not necessarily a snap of the shutter to produce an image; the image is rather filled with time, moments, and fullness in the sense that what can be read from a photograph potentially engrosses the spectator. History, memories and absorption embody a photograph and there is much more to an image than it merely being a static documentation. In other words, it is necessary for the spectator to recognise the moments and time that characterise the captured image. If we were to compare painting and photography, as Wall suggests, photography embodies instantaneousness where paintings create the illusion of this instantaneousness. The 19th century photographic medium and techniques of pinhole and darkroom development can be described as typical photographic methods of slowing down; a slowing down that is associated not only with absorption, but also with melancholy.



Figure 5: Jean Brundrit, *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa*, 1995

I now look at Jean Brundrit's photographic work with reference to my own work and an earlier representation where the difficulty and strain of the photographic process is visible in Brundrit's photographic work, *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995). It has been discussed how, in Chardin's *The Soap Bubble* (1733), a display of reflected light can be observed on the bubble's surface in two light spots, while in the photograph *Kate & Nadine* (2013) a reflection of light can be seen on the glass of the window pane within the sliding door, which refers to time passing, slowing down and even to the laborious hours taken to produce or make a photograph or painting.

The medium used in Brundrit's work is pinhole photography. As with the previously analysed photographs, slowness is also inherent in this medium. As seen above it is evident that two female figures have been removed from Brundrit's photograph. It is a long, lingering process to scrupulously manipulate the picture by cutting out the two female figures in the darkroom development of the photograph. The creation of the blank space in silhouette entailed that a copy of the outlined figures was either pasted over the exposed pinhole photograph, or a cut-out of the two figures was carefully held over the chemically enhanced area in the darkroom, as the exposure time was counted down. This could take up to 30 seconds or more. This technique of photographic development shows that time is formative in the editing and manipulation of the pinhole photograph exhibiting the blank cut-out figures. Brundrit has further accentuated the "cut-out" by placing cut-out lines around the figures. This 'blank' space alludes to the emptiness experienced by lesbian couples at the time, seemingly drained of any identity. Producing and creating the artwork (Figure 5) is time consuming, where this experience of the fullness of time

applies not only to absorption in the process of creation but also to the spectator's absorption in the photograph. This difficulty and strain in producing an image points to the pinhole camera device. This is a difficult, unstable and unpredictable device, which captures light manually, through the use of the photographer's finger (acting like a shutter, exposing the pinhole to light when capturing the image and closing it with a finger when complete). Time is needed to wait for the image to become exposed and one is aware of this by the movement of the device, which blurs the image. In the pinhole photograph *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995), the erasure, obliteration and imposed hiddenness of the gender-ambiguous couple suggest the difficulty of the process of "coming out", one of the prominent struggles encountered by members of the white lesbian community in South Africa at that time. The suggestion of two figures, not only ambiguous in identity or gender but also equivocal in the relationship between them, stimulates curiosity in the photograph. The title identifies the figures as female because it indicates that the picture is of a lesbian couple.

It is evident at this stage that two figures of the same gender as subject matter constitutes a recurring element in the works already discussed. Furthermore, as depicted in Chardin's *The Soap Bubble* (1733) and *Kate & Nadine* (2013), a recurring theme is the combination of a passive figure and an active figure. In *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5), the spectator can distinguish between one figure in an active position with her arm around the second figure who is passively standing/sitting or posing for a portrait. The active participation of trying to figure out who is who and how these lesbian women draw the spectator in is what enables this absorptive process to begin. The act of passively observing has the effect of partaking in a process of slowing down while watching or participating in the active figure's activity. Sometimes depicting two figures in this relationship is used as a strategy to suggest that they are more than friends, acquaintances or family. The strain of the activity taking place between one active figure and a passive figure is emphasised, because it is slowed down and contemplated, as it is in the depiction of two lesbian friends observed in *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5). In society lesbian figures are already unrecognisable because of certain prevailing norms and lenses through which people prefer to see aspects of society. I think Brundrit cleverly plays on this idea by making it obvious that this is the case, therefore making it more difficult for the spectator to identify the couple whilst simultaneously evoking a sense of curiosity and purposeful strain in the spectator. There is no choice but to become absorbed and to engage with the subject matter. The knee-jerk reaction by many when confronted with an obvious lesbian relationship is to withdraw and reject the scene. In this case, however, the lack of clarity

around the subject matter prevents the spectator from withdrawing and enables this process of slowing down and lingering, which is the central argument of this chapter.

The atmosphere suggested in the background of Brundrit's photograph is created by clouds which seem to be rolling, moving, and regrouping. Through this rippling effect I argue that there is a lingering sense of change in Brundrit's work which is comparable to the changing of seasons evoked in Chardin's painting *The Soap Bubble* (1733) where the discolouration of the leaves can be associated with change - the colouring of each leaf fading as it dies and withers, then falls off the tree to allow for a new beginning. This metaphor of change could also be linked to the shifting/changing of perceptions or ideas through the process of time it takes for seasons to change, time that is necessary for an ultimate shift in perception or ideas surrounding the subject of lesbianism; a subject for further discussion later in this thesis. There is also a suggestion of inner and outer space in that one is not entirely sure if the two female figures in *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5) are portrayed outside, in nature, with a mountainous view in the background, or if they are on a balcony/ledge. A close resemblance to a light reflection on glass can be perceived beside the hair of the figure placed to the left, suggesting on the other hand that the photograph could have been taken from the inside looking out. The clouds depicted are a blank space, like the faces of the outlined figures, and we are absorbed in the clouds to imagine a shape, as with the blank space of the two female figures. This allows for participants or spectators to replace the blank spaces with identities that we create in our imagination, as one figure appears to be a man and the other is evidently a woman on account of the hair style/shape. Although it is left up to the spectator's imagination to fill the blanks, Brundrit's title disrupts the practice of assigning a heterosexual status to the couple when she explicitly states that this is a portrait of a South African lesbian couple. Brundrit reacts to the suppressed acknowledgement of lesbian couples in South Africa at the time, by visually describing the obliteration and erasure of the lesbian community, responding to the blindness of society, the emptiness felt, the gaping blank space that exposes the erasure of the self and the pressures to fit into heterosexual norms. The dark, gloomy, shifting environment in the background of the photograph, as if a storm has just passed, or as if it is the beginning of nightfall or early morning, hints at the lifestyle in the shadows, always on the outskirts of society where no one is watching or paying attention.

Because of the blank space provided for the portrait of a lesbian couple, one is drawn toward the emptiness, absorbed within the medium of photography. As observed in the absorptive artworks

of the 17th century masters discussed by Michael Fried, photography as a medium can aid in the lingering of time that draws the spectator in, into a stifled and noiseless awareness of the picture space, which lures you into its absorptive and melancholic milieu to anticipate a dialogue with the spectator in the hopes of acknowledging its subject matter. Brundrit depicts a struggle with what is out of sight, lingering in the shadows and hiding in exile, because silence or ignorance regarding lesbian lifestyles was preferred in the South African society and culture of the time.

We can identify a poignant cutting out of or erasure of individuals identified as lesbians through the title of the artwork, suggesting a hidden, or secretive lifestyle associated with the necessity to hide and which is consequently linked with a feeling of sadness. The visual representation of cut-out lines and a blank space where the figures' faces should be, resembles the absence of faces or identities in my photograph *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3), where the erasure or severed body parts of the two female friends or lovers, left out by the frame, also encourages a sense of pathos and suggests that something is missing or lost. This blank space in turn suggests a sense of loss and represents a space of mourning for an identity that has been stripped away, cut out and erased, both in Brundrit's work and my own.

The slowness of creating and making an artwork dealing with strained subject matter like lesbian relationships could also be related to the work of mourning, and to the restoration and upkeep of relationships, which is somewhat laborious in task and effort. When comparing the effort and strain that goes into the process of creating these artworks, the discrepancies in time spent to produce respectively painting and photography, ironically, is not as drastic as is sometimes assumed; i.e. a vast amount of time is spent in the laborious process of producing both mediums.



Figure 6: Jeff Wall, *Restoration*, 1993; Silver dye bleach transparency in light box; 46-7/8 x 16 ft. 7/8", The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The labour-intensive process involved with producing a painting and photograph is clearly manifested in Jeff Wall's photographic work titled *Restoration* (1993) (Figure 6). This may be read as a comparison of the strained and labour-intensive processes involved in producing both a photograph and a painting, because the restoration of a panoramic painting is the subject matter

of this photograph morphed from a large number of photographs taken from diverse angles. The photograph depicts or documents female restorers tending to and patching a panoramic painting of a war scene. The process of restoring a historical painting is slow, and so is the process of representing a panoramic painting in a two-dimensional photograph. The photograph has been digitally manipulated to render the painted scenes portrayed in a 360-degree panorama on a flat surface. Jeff Wall explains, "It [the photograph] was achieved over a period of about three weeks by the production of multiple photographs which were carefully digitally montaged together so as to present a seemingly seamless unified composition." Lowry (2000: 99) emphasises the labour of producing this photograph in three weeks of layered, staged, stop-frame photography.

Panoramas are rare in the 21st century because the time and effort needed to construct the panoramic space is unnecessary when a digital cinematic three-dimensional image in film can emit the same amount of entertainment or more. There is also a loss of interest and understanding of the panorama, because of the difficulty to document a panoramic structure, which the viewer needs to experience physically. Furthermore, the painting needed for the panorama is too time consuming to produce and maintain in order to be viable in the time of the moving image when film is faster and able to tell a longer story in a compressed time frame. In this sense it may be argued that Wall's theme is the labour-intensive production of photographs, paintings and panoramas. With reference to his photograph 'Restoration', Wall reflects on the paradox between the instantaneous production of the photograph and the labour-intensive production of the panorama. Wall's reflection resonates with the central argument in this chapter about the instantaneous nature of the snapshot and the strained production and labour of the painting described previously. Wall is cited in De Duve: "One paradox I have found is that, the more you use computers in picture-making, the more 'handmade' the picture becomes. Oddly then, digital technology is leading, in my work at least, towards a greater reliance on handmaking because the assembly and montage of the various parts of the picture is done very carefully by hand by my collaborator and operator, Stephen Waddell, who is a painter" (De Duve 2002: 134). Wall suggests that reliance on digital technology should not be understood as any less strained/laborious or difficult than painting, therefore photography is just as strenuous and difficult to produce.

When considering hidden lesbian lifestyles that are erased or screened from our view by perspective, Wall's work is thought-provoking. He is not only fascinated by the curvature of the

panorama and the ways in which the painting can be represented on a flat surface, but even more with what the documentation of a panorama evades, cuts out or hides from the viewer. He suggests that: “The fact that the panorama can be seen escaping from view is one of the things which most interested me in making the work. The idea that there is something in every picture, no matter how well-structured the picture is, that escapes being shown. I’ve always been interested in this” (De Duve 2002: 132). Something which escapes from being shown intrigues our curiosity of the unknown.

Restoration (1993) is a representation of the ruins of history, figured in the disrepair of a large panoramic painting in Lucerne and which was painted by Edouard Castres in 1882 and is known as the Bourbaki Panorama. Castres’ painting depicts the retreat of a defeated French army into Switzerland, an event that the artist himself witnessed. Wall’s photograph of the painting represents the mammoth task of restoring this panoramic painting. At the same time, the historic event depicted in the painting represents the restoration of defeated and injured soldiers. Ironically both events are led by female agents, in the form of nurses restoring, reviving and recovering fallen soldiers from the battlefield in the painting by Castres, and the female restorers of a history painting represented in the photograph.



Figure 7: Jeff Wall, *Restoration*, detail, 1993; Silver dye bleach transparency in light box; 46-7/8 x 16 ft. 7/8", The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Upon unraveling the restoration scene further, a hardworking female restorer is seen on the right who is meticulously tending to and mending a history painting of a war scene that represents soldiers who have retreated from enemy lines to seek shelter, healing and restoration. The various photographs of this process of the restoration of the painting allude to the shifting of perceptions or perspectives and the changing of the spectator’s frame of mind. Great war scenes on a panoramic scale usually depict victorious scenes of nationalistic battles being won and conquered, but instead, in this panoramic painting, the soldiers seek healing, comfort and rest at

the hands of female nurses, and ironically female restorers are also tending to the wounds of history where the “wounds” of the painting need restoration.

This photographic depiction of female restorers mending and tending to a fragile history depicted in a monumental painting, intriguing as it may be, contains numerous undertones and gestures which point to the relationship between the two depicted female restorers, their relationship to the historical figures in the painting, as well as to their relationship to spectators of the photographic work. For Lowry, “[r]ead allegorically the scene that he [Wall] constructs for us poses the relationship between Woman and History: the young restorers are handmaidens to history itself. Wall describes the dramatic intensity of this allegorical subtext as ‘pictorial’: I think there is something striking in the confrontation of a young woman (or a group of young women) with a monumental painting: that something is evocative, dramatic, what I call ‘pictorial’... the relation to the men who made the picture, and the tradition in which it was made” (Lowry 2000: 98-99).

We are fascinated or drawn to the melancholy of the two female restorers in the foreground of *Restoration* but also the overall presence of women in the photograph of the painting and its restoration. Whereas Wall is interested in the pictorial fascinations between history’s hierarchy and the position of the female restorers, I am intrigued by the two female restorers in the foreground of the photographic depiction by Wall as seen in Figures 8 and 9 for different reasons. The relationship between the two female restorers in the lingering of their gazes and the slowing down of their gestures, suggests the fullness of time. There seems to be a lingering presence of tension and unspoken desire, as one passively gazes in the opposite direction of the other female restorer who is engrossed in the activity of restoring, tending to, healing and reviving the historical painting. As in previously discussed works, *Kate & Nadine* (2014) (Figure 3), *The Soap Bubble* (1733) (Figure 4) and *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5), once again there are two figures in relation to each other, one passive and the other absorbed or engrossed in an activity of importance which comments on the relationship between the figures, a relationship which entails something more than just being friends.

The unknown, lingering bond between the two female restorers seems poignant and sad so that we may infer a relationship between them. It is not quite clear if the figures are close friends, siblings, family or lovers. Unlike *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 7), there is no suggestion of what the two subjects are in relation to each other and this allows for a

material world into meaning” (Lowry 2000: 99). The melancholic labour may also include the labour of creating photograph work such as that found in pinhole photography and of taking photographs of a very secretive, hidden and resistant lesbian community, the labour of slowing down an artwork in its spectator relation so that spectators may reconsider ideas and thoughts about subject matter which is difficult to decipher. But there is also the labour of keeping up lesbian relationships because of social pressure and lack of support or understanding, which has inspired authors like Judith Butler to associate melancholy with homosexual relationships.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler associates mourning with the prohibition of a homosexual union and argues that melancholy aids in managing or dealing with the abandonment of desire and love as an object in the understanding of homosexual love. Butler (1990: 74) explains how melancholy is essential to mourning processes and attaches to the ego to find shelter from loss. Butler explains further that the abandonment of object and desire in prohibited homosexual unions allow for a platform of melancholy: “In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union, it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is deflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalised strategies of melancholia” (Butler 1990:75).



Figure 9: Georg Schimpf (1889-1935), *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* (ca 1937), Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, framed.



Figure 10: Jeff Wall, *Restoration*, detail, 1993; Silver dye bleach transparency in light box; 46-7/8 x 16 ft. 7/8", The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

There is no particular mention of the relationship between the two female restorers in Jeff Wall's artwork *Restoration* (1993) by Lowry or De Duve, with regard to their sexual relationship or desire. Yet whether Jeff Wall had intended it or not, a subtle lesbian ambience could be read into the two female restorers' relationship. The visual cues of their masculine attire through wearing trousers, which are usually associated with men, the ambivalent tension in their stances and their melancholic aura are suggestive.

There seems to exist a rich tradition of depictions of two female friends in art history, which will henceforth be described as the topos of *Two Female Friends*. This interests me because in earlier historical depictions of lesbian relationships in art, the female figures were ambiguous in their relation to each other and were instead represented as friends. I suggest that these female friends were represented in such a manner to communicate with other like-minded 'friends' as the beginning steps toward acknowledgement of lesbian lifestyles.

The term *topos* is commonly used in literature and can be explained as a motif, or a repetition of a recurring theme. A quick scan through historic examples of representations of two lesbian female figures, especially since the 19th century, reveals the frequent occurrence of intimate gestures that hint at hidden relationships, and can be grouped together under this topos of *Two Female Friends*. An example of the *Two Female Friends* topos may be found in the painting by

Georg Schrimpf, *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* (1937) (Figure 9). The visual clues that link this work with Jeff Wall's *Restoration* are the lingering stances of the two female subjects toward each other. In Schrimpf's painting (Figure 9) one female figure is passively gazing into the distance with her back turned toward the second female subject in the composition. In *Restoration* one of the female restorers is tending to the panoramic restoration by placing a patch on the painted fresco with her back to the other female restorer who lingers on the edge of the scaffolding and gazes into the distance. One female figure is active and the other is passive. There also seems to be an avoidance that heightens a sense of melancholy between them. The melancholic nature inherent in the passive behavior of one of the female figures in each work now reveals itself. In Jeff Wall's photograph the restoration process is associated with the labour of painting and the technique of photography because of the slow production in each medium. In the other example of the topos, the painting *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* by Georg Schrimpf (1937) (Figure 9), there is a more pronounced lingering tension between the subjects as the spectator can observe a gentle, subtle touch of the hand by one of the female figure's legs, strongly suggesting closeness between the two. We can compare this touching of the leg with *Nadine & Kate* (2013) (Figure 3), where the intertwined nature of the two female figures' legs is also a visual cue of desire. As Butler argues, homosexual desire, which is prohibited, is powerfully melancholic because of the longing and loss of being unable to exhibit this love (Butler 1990: 80 – 81). The posture and gaze of the figure bending over the windowsill in *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* (Figure 9) reminds one of the duality of the inside and outside spaces presented in *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3) with the open door and window panes, as well as in *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5), questioning if the couple is indeed in an inside or outside space, remaining hidden, or coming out. There seems to be a conflict between existing in one space rather than the other, the threshold being visually suggestive of some form of 'coming out'. The comparison of these ambiguous gestural connections allows for the interpretation of historical lesbian relationships, which were disguised within the representations of *Two Female Friends*. Lowry compares the figure in Dürer's *Melancholia* with one of the female figures in *Restoration* and I have in turn argued that melancholy is the central theme inherent to the topos of *Two Female Friends* and is seen in my own work as represented in *Kate & Nadine*.

This *Two Female Friends* topos is particularly relevant in the analysis of Wall's photographic montage *Restoration* (1993) as it aids in formulating my argument that lesbian content in visual representations has not necessarily been historically excluded or suppressed. Rather there exists a tradition of delicate, elusive and complex depictions of lesbian relationships which may be

revived and developed to complement the more activist and brash renderings of the event of “coming out” which is more common in recent (South African) art. The restoration of this tradition, comparable to the labour of the female restorers in the *Restoration*, entails not only the revival and consolidation of a fragmented historical topos, but also the transformation and remodeling of such known depictions of trauma, suffering and defeat. Just as the nurses depicted in *Restoration* (1993) assist in healing the wounded and sheltering the fatigued soldiers who have retreated from a war, so in my art I aim to aid in rebuilding, restoring, healing, transforming and developing existing subtle depictions of trauma in lesbian relationships. As the spectacle of the defeated army is depicted in the panoramic painting in *Restoration* (1993) (Figures 6, 7 and 10), so the spectacle of the two female restorers in the foreground of the work can be reinterpreted in terms of the *Two Female Friends* topos, healing and assisting to give sanctuary to a history of this topos. In Wall’s work *Restoration* (1993), masculinity is ultimately placed in the hands of women, rescuing and restoring history, shifting ideas about how masculinity and authority are valued. The spectator is confronted with a paradox or confusion of previously accepted ideas about war, where the soldiers are retreating instead of charging into battle. Lowry asserts: “From the beginning, therefore, it is clear that this is an image whose meaning it is impossible to fix, slipping back and forth as it does between the different layers of reference – the event of the war, the restoration of the painting of the event of war, the photograph of the restoration of the painting of the event of war” (Lowry 2000: 98). Within the layers of the restoration process that exist in *Restoration* (1993) and which revolve around the exhibition of war, so too this artwork resonates with the difficulty and complexity of the restoration of a war painting and the complexities surrounding war as a topic. *Restoration* (1993), and the restoration exhibited through the various layers of this photograph, is closely linked to my argument of slipping back and forth in analysing historical references of potential lesbian couples in the tradition of the *Two Female Friends* topos. For example, I explore the idea that once hidden and secretive lesbian relationships in art and photography also contain some type of slippage that can be unearthed or restored through these subtle visual representations.



Figure 11: Jean Brundrit, *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa*, (1995)



Figure 12: Wilhelm Sasnal, (1972 -), *Hardship 1-4* (2010).

The *Two Female Friends* topos which is constituted through gestural interactions between female subjects forms a central part of this analysis in historical and contemporary works of art and in photography. The strain or effort of interpreting these interactions is what leads me to link the topos with difficult conceptual narratives and subject matter.

There is a lingering sense of melancholy present in these artworks, as if in the silence of the figures' gaze one can absorb the deep longing or sadness shared between the two female figures in their difficult relationship. There is also a lingering silence and invisibility within the lifestyles of lesbian subjects that sensitise the spectator to the suffering and struggle within the community. This can be seen in Brundrit's representation of a South African lesbian couple (1995) and Wilhelm Sasnal's painting *Hardship* (2010). The title *Hardship* is also a direct reference to the complexities associated with lesbian relationships and the distance in this painting may also be a reference to the distance that often emerges in visual representations of lesbian relationships.

The featureless faces in Sasnal's *Hardship* (2010) can also be directly connected to the silhouette effect created in Brundrit's work. Themes that can be identified in these works are the lack of visible lesbian identity and sexuality and the oft-times hidden lifestyles specific to lesbian relationships. Erasure, secrecy, emptiness, and obliteration can be observed in *Hardship*. Of the two female figures in relation to each other, one is active (as in Brundrit) as is seen through the arm she holds around her partner (Figure 11), where we observe the movement of the figure's

hand as she is actively talking to the passive figure lying beside her. In *A Portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 11) the figure who is embraced is passive as the embracing figure is active, and in *Hardship* (2010) (Figure 12) the listening figure is passive as the other does the talking as is evident in the movement of her hands. Subjects or artists within the community have for centuries been communicating with other lesbians or members of the community through subtle gestures to the select few. Subtle gestures, body language and hints contained in the visual representation of lesbians can be linked to the *Two Female Friends* topos which suggests clues of these hidden and secretive lifestyles. Furthermore, the friends or lovers themselves have chosen exclusion as the theme of invisibility could be a refuge for a silenced community, “taking closeted homosexuality not as a negative, defensive attitude but as the model for a specific manner of “speaking” what cannot be spoken” (Brennen 1996: 141). Closeted homosexuality is a metaphor for the hidden and unspoken melancholy that exists in the lesbian community. The unspoken trauma and suffering that lingers between gestures and in the understanding of visual cues of ‘coming out’ suggests something which is difficult to communicate.

The spectator realises that visibility of alternative lifestyles such as lesbianism is more complex and there are strategies to cope with the vulnerabilities attached to exposing a complex narrative that is other than the norm. Judith Butler argues: “My view is that there are norms into which we are born – gendered, racial, national – that decide what kind of subject we can be, but in being those subjects, in occupying and inhabiting those deciding norms, in incorporating and performing them, we make use of local options to re-articulate them to revise their power” (Butler 2004: 117). I argue that there is power in the depths of silence or stillness that relays a powerful message or narrative to the spectator, through silence being connected to a form of subversion in the lesbian community, a rebellion against specific norms. The aim in my work as well as in my interpretation of Wall’s artwork *Restoration* (1993), is to extend and expand the subtlety of earlier submerged, suppressed and concealed depictions in a continuum of visual acknowledgement of earlier traditions that brings out their ironies, fascinations and lures. The purpose of my analysis and reading of lesbian representations is to revise the absorptive aspects inherent in these images and to define and identify hidden lived experiences specific to this community. I link the undertones of my photographic work to earlier representations that have formed a tradition of lesbian depictions, by slowing down the passing of time, and relating to an absorptive tradition in art that assists the viewer in rethinking and reimagining set norms.

Butler's suggestion that lesbian unions are forced to dwell in prohibition that opens a platform for a melancholic outlook toward these lifestyles as they are criticised and rejected in visual representation and culture, could be amended. A visual tradition of lesbian depictions and interpretations of these lifestyles in the history of art in the *Two Female Friends* topos makes us aware how this subject matter is entangled in more complex ways in visual culture and indeed is not suppressed.



Figure 13: Marianne Breslauer (1909-2001), *Sacrow* (1934)



Figure 14: Germaine Krull (1897-1985) *Nus*, tirage gelatino-argentique, Coll.

In both *Sacrow* (1934) and *Nus* (Figures 13 and 14) we can observe that the two female figures, rather than one figure, are equally engrossed in an activity, absorbed in their relationships with each other. Erotic desire is more obvious in the visual representation of these female figures' affection toward one another, shifting from standing to lying down, sharing the same blanket and bed. To begin with *Sacrow*, one observes the intimacy of time spent between two women enjoying their leisure time together and sunbathing. Although the two women are not embracing each other the shared time between them provides us with a glimpse into the everyday experience of a relationship that is often hidden and misrepresented in society. We can discern a vanitas element in the smoking of a cigarette, which also symbolises transience. The smoke flowing into the air can be linked to death and the lacking procreation of a lesbian couple. This mourning, longing and loss can be linked to the melancholy in erotic desire to which Butler points. Butler suggests that there is a melancholic connection to homosexual relationships because there is a lingering sense of loss, trauma and mourning within the homosexual community through the strife and suffering experienced by the community when pursuing happiness within a relationship (1990: 80 – 81). Butler's (1990) poignant reference to melancholy

that attaches itself to forbidden homosexual relationships emerges prominently in visual representations of lesbian lifestyles. The melancholy defined by Butler and which is present in Figure's 5 to 14, is also related to the tenuous process of coming out in a homophobic society and the trauma associated with this process. I also identify with these difficulties and the strain associated with lesbian lifestyles in my photographs. For example, the *Two Female Friends* topos as demonstrated in my image *Kate & Nadine*, resonates with the same type of melancholy and strain. I argue that the historical references in this dissertation can be viewed as a line of visual representation that sometimes speaks to overt 'coming out processes' and at other times subtle or more nuanced references to lesbian lifestyles. Different historical periods can thus be identified with varied coming-out processes and unique representations that started with the *Two Female Friends* topos.

The subject matter in *Nus* (Figure 14) depicts interiority and reveals a private room. Two female figures are seen together on a bed with the one woman dressed in a nightgown and shoes and the other is naked but with back slightly turned away from the viewer. There is a subtle but direct hint of sexual interplay between the two female figures, in the tilt of their heads, the direction of their gazes and the slight touching of their skins, again between the knees and legs. This is similarly the case with my photograph *Kate & Nadine* (2013) and *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* (1937) (Figures 3 and 9). The absorptive erotic desire between the two lovers is emphasised by the detail that one female figure is oblivious of wearing her shoes on the bed. The baffling difficulty of perceiving and analysing these works as spectator or participant is also conveyed by the difficult photographic techniques of manual and analogue photography which in itself is strenuous and creates obscurity and ambiguity in the subject matter. Artists such as Marianne Breslauer in the 1900's portrayed a nuanced or subtly erotic representation of her female subjects in her photography. Breslauer has displayed an interaction between two female figures which is more obvious than subtle, and which can be linked to the *Two Female Friends* topos tradition through the exploration of the female body.

In comparison with the other works discussed in this chapter, complex interrelations between same-sex characters become more obvious and a secretive, hidden existence of lesbian relations in a *Two Female Friends* topos manifests by comparing a series of works, including the South African representation of a lesbian couple by Jean Brundrit in 1995 (Figures 5 and 11), as well as Sasnal's *Hardship* (2010) (Figure 12) which introduces the potential of lesbian desire between two faceless female figures. This comments on the faceless nature of existing as a lesbian couple as

opposed to 'coming out' to public display, by exploring intimate scenarios where two female lovers embrace each other as well as the female subjects in *Sacrow* (1934).

In an interview with De Duve, Wall contextualises some of his ideas about photography and the exemplary nature of pictures with particular reference to the work *Restoration*: "One can make gestures that are very intimate and personal in a public scene, and they become sort of models of behaviour. I think that in the arts, crafts, and professions people develop patterns of behaviour, which function as social models. These women, as restorers, are acting out a kind of conceptual model of what their idea of civilization is like, their idea of a certain valid way of life. I think one of the historical roles of pictorial art was to make images which in a way are models of behaviour, too" (De Duve 2002: 132). He also suggests that the models for social behaviour of the female figures is to nurture, recover and restore a fragile history, much like the restoration and transformation of a traumatic understanding or representation of a fragile, broken and tortured lesbian community. In the social behaviour of the two female restorers I suggest that there is a deeper, somewhat hidden sense of gestural attraction between the two figures in the foreground. Lowry (2000) analysed their gestural stances of turning away as being an allegory for time turning; the past, which opens a door to the future. She suggests that our position as spectator placed outside of the panoramic space depicted in the photograph allows us to rethink and reorient our own relationship to history. Within the chaotic relationship between space, time and historical subject, the image questions the subject's relation to the spectator: "The past can be seen to give way to the future. A moment of hiatus is encoded in the space between two gestures: a young woman gazing abstractly backwards, her companion turning to place a patch on the wall, sealing up the fissures of history" (Lowry 2000: 98). I am investigating how difficult subject matter may accomplish the questioning of the spectator's perspectives and ask how the absorptive presentation of lesbian subject matter may achieve this. The curious behaviour exhibited between the two female figures in Wall's photograph allows for the spectator to interpret the narrative as if they were in the narrative themselves, slowing down time as to relive the narrative for themselves. This reliving experience brings the spectator closer to the subjects, allowing for the spectator to become a participant, and within this relived experience I argue that there is a long enough space for slowing down to shift perceptions. In different styles and forms of 'coming out', clues invite you into a secretive revival of old to modern, *not only* in the process of witnessing these pictures from a distance on the wall, which evokes a sense of time. This process is related to a time to process the image, a time to decipher the hidden agendas and

clues, as well as the time it takes to shift through your own moral perceptions about the topic at hand.



Figure 15: Susanna Majuri (1978 -), *Kaksoset (Gemini)*, (2009).



Figure 16: Marder (1971 -), *Carnal knowledge (2005), Girls in.*

The photographic image is not only about what can be seen but it furthermore delves into certain evaluations of society and the world. Seeing subjectively is aided by numerous subconscious influences and the imprint of an experience embeds itself into a recording of what has been interpreted and how important that recognition or interpretation is to the evaluation of the world. The way in which society reacted to the first known historical camera devices, such as the camera obscura, and the camera in the late 18th century, already shows this: “It became clear that there was not just a simple, unitary activity called seeing (recorded by, aided by cameras) but “photographic seeing”, which was both a new way for people to see and a new activity for them to perform” (Sontag 1977: 88). In the same way that a new way of seeing emerged with the initial employment of the photographic medium, I argue that a new way of seeing emerges in representations of lesbian lifestyles with this same medium.

If this process of ‘seeing’ can slow down the viewer’s interpretation of the artwork long enough, it may make an impact on their individual perceptions by allowing a space of contemplation and reconsideration. Both *Kaksoset (Gemini)* 2009 (Figure 15) and *Carnal Knowledge* (2005) (Figure 16) strongly suggest, also through their titles, that erotic desire exists between the two female subjects. The female couples are entangled in each other’s arms, almost clinging in desperation to one another and it appears as if they are comforting each other while drowning or entrapped, thus clinging to each other. In *Kaksoset (Gemini)* (2009) (Figure 15) the spectator is overwhelmingly aware of the water which is linked to erotic desire and the visual representation of what seems to be the two female figures drowning. The spectator is absorbed into a frozen

moment of time where the figures appear to be taking their last breath in this moment of intimacy. In their desperation to cling onto each other in their last dying moment, there is once again a powerful sense of melancholy and loss in their embrace while the figures slowly float under water. There is a lingering sense of despair, melancholy and loss which reminds one of Brundrit's pinhole photograph *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995), since the identities of the female subjects are mostly concealed as in the erasure or blank faces. The blurred image may also be seen as a reference to the process that takes place in processing photographs in a darkroom. The photographer's role in shaking off the chemical fluid resonates with *Kaksoset* where the image is yet to be exposed under the blurred liquid. The time and patience it takes to expose the black paper to just the right development time before moving to the next process, initiates a metaphor of time and change. This is linked to the process of exposure related to lesbian lifestyles which is often drowned or misrepresented. My role as a photographer is thus very important for portraying a true representation of intimacy between lesbian women.

In *Carnal Knowledge* the obvious closeness and intimacy of the semi-nude female figures lying down in a private bedroom, the figures' knees and legs again lovingly, even desperately touching, may be compared to my own work *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3), as well as the subtle beginnings of a touch in *Zwei Mädchen am Fenster* (1937) (Figure 9) as well as the not so subtle embrace in *Nus* (Figure 14). In *Carnal Knowledge* (2005) (Figure 16) once again the identities of the female figures are obscured, as in Brundrit's pinhole photograph (Figure 5), in *Hardship* (2010) (Figure 12) and in my own work, *Kate & Nadine* (2014) (Figure 3). Both female figures, rather than only one, in *Kaksoset (Gemini)* (2009) and *Carnal Knowledge* (2005) (Figures 15 and 16) are active and engrossed in exploring their bond. The passive and active roles displayed in each and every one of the examples explained above draw attention to time and slowing down as there is an active figure which is responded to by a passive figure.

The camera aids in shifting perspectives through this 'photographic seeing', allowing a device to come between the act of seeing and generating an image of reality through photography. This device which aids in the 'seeing' process is of significance to my argument as my artworks are, needless to say, in the photographic medium. The fact that there is a 'seeing' device between the artist's impact on the artwork and what is being reflected through the lens of the device, initiates a shift or filter of the authentic vision of the artist. According to Lowry:

Photography, cinema, television, have all played their role in the imploding geographies of our century, collapsing distances, fragmenting spaces, subverting the precarious relationships between vision and the body, between eye and mind. If in the eighteenth century the obsession with the representation of the ‘self-absorption’ of figures depicted in painting was an indication of the limitations of vision within the geometry of pictorial space then this implied that the boundaries between notions of the public and the private, between self and other, between distance and identification, were themselves products of a discourse of visibility that was dependent upon the presence of the spectator beyond the frame. In the era of communication technology it is precisely this frame that has been put into question and with its disappearance has vanished our certainty about how to map the co-ordinates of identity and subjecthood (Lowry 2000: 108).

As Lowry discusses the fundamental impact of photography, cinema and television, all of which bring their own unique shift on the precarious relationship between body, mind and soul, she suggests that our vision is limited to what we are exposed to, the environment we live in and societal laws, which is judged beyond the frame of spectatorship. Technology is put into question and explores our disillusioned reality surrounding identity; the limitations of vision have shifted. In the context of this perceptual shift, ideas on the existence of visual representation of lesbian lifestyles have indeed been difficult to decipher, but nevertheless exist in a tradition of the *Two Female Friends* topos. Being somewhat entangled in a frame of vision that is limiting, the expression of the hidden sensitive topic of lesbian lifestyles referring back to earlier representations of these traditions, is now being reflected upon and rejuvenated in a sense of revival, through cleansing preconceived ideas about lesbianism, hence reviving the older interpretations of ‘coming out’ to a modern representation of these lifestyles.



Figure 17: Zanele Muholi (1972 -), Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg (2007)



Figure 18: Sophia Wallace, *Untitled #5*, Truer Series, C – Print 2008

Although a subtle, yet clearly visible manner of presenting lesbian subject matter already exists in the *Two Female Friends* topos, I now look at representations of cleansing. The notion of cleansing can be used as a metaphor for the struggles of ‘coming out’ in a subtle manner, but it also speaks to much bolder statements with regard to exposing one’s lesbian sexuality. South African visual activist and artist Zanele Muholi and the American artist Sophia Wallace focus on lesbian dynamics and relationships within their respective countries. Muholi’s photograph *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg* (2007) (Figure 17) shows two women bathing together in a small bath and sharing a very intimate space. While Muholi’s work focuses on the South African context and a reality that continues to be influenced by a complex socio-political history, Wallace’s photograph *Untitled#5* represents an everyday reality of two white women embracing each other in a shower in a modern and much more wealthy setting in the West. The scenes depicted in both of the artists’ photographs are private spaces of everyday circumstances in the lives of two lesbian women. As a spectator, one can clearly decrypt numerous visual cues within the photographs *Two Woman Bathing* (2012) (Figure 17) and *Untitled #5* (2008) (Figure 18).

The bathing, washing and cleaning can be linked to water, i.e. water which is part of the photographic developmental process and is used as a stop bath to fix the image onto photographic paper in the darkroom. The cleansing can also be linked to *Restoration* (1993) by Jeff Wall where the cleaning of the painting is related to the metaphor of restoration, and is also associated with the healing of the soldiers, the restoration of their strength and the revival of their souls. In the processes of cleansing, bathing and washing depicted in the other photographs (Figures 17 and 18), water may be understood as a metaphor for the cleansing of ‘sins’, the rejuvenation of souls, which is significant to the re-evaluation of our understanding of lesbian representation in art and the healing of lesbian struggle and trauma. This can all be associated with the revival of the *Two Female Friends* topos and the restoration or transformation of a negative view of lesbian melancholy. Painful melancholy associated with homosexual unions is now transformed into something else through the images that reference revival and rejuvenation. Rather than negative connotations there is a lingering sense of contentment which is evoked in the images, a understanding of normativity and a reflection on traditions that have paved the way to generate a less subtle approach of communicating the ‘coming out’ process. Once again the concealment of identities in both *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg* (2007) and *Untitled #5* (2008) (Figures 17 and 18) can be compared to my photograph *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3), Brundrit’s pinhole photograph (Figure 5), and

Sasnal's *Hardship* (2010) (Figure 11). The female figures in Muholi and Wallace's photographs are absorbed in the task at hand, cleaning, washing and loving gestures. There is a slowing down of time depicted in the processes of the running of water, showering and bathing, which are time consuming. In *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg* (2007) (Figure 17) the burning of candles and in *Untitled #5* (2008) (Figure 18) the condensation of droplets on the shower glass all relay the passing and slowing down of time. This slowing down of time aids in the understanding of previously strained interpretations of lesbian lifestyles and the 'coming out' process. The presence of water as a restorative element and the condensation and bathing process which marks the aspect of slow processes, are closely tied into my argument that aspects of the everyday help us to reinterpret images of lesbians in a positive way. This movement, metaphorically indicating a shift in conceptual ideas, preconceived moral standpoints and emotional connotation to the representation of lesbian lifestyles, brings my argument to the overall theme of various styles of representing the 'coming out' process. The 'coming out' process will be discussed in the section that follows.



Figure 19: Jean Brundrit, *Out of Site*, The AVA Gallery, Cape Town 2013



Figure 20: Zanele Muholi Xana Nyilenda, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2011 dalla serie "Faces and Phases", courtesy of Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town/Johannesburg.

In *Out of site* (2013) Jean Brundrit explores subversion in depicting the female form through portraiture with the subject's eyes closed, blind to the viewer or beholder, referring to the hidden and secretive portrayal of lesbianism in a South African context. In a similar portrayal Muholi's second collection of photography, *Faces and Phases* (2014), documents black and white portraits of black lesbian women who return the gaze and challenge the speculative gaze applicable to their lifestyles in a South African context. The coming out process is thus explored in two rather nuanced ways in Brundrit and Muholi's photographs. Brundrit's focus on white lesbian sexuality and her photograph *Out of Site* references a subversive refusal to engage with the spectator but simultaneously to live out a lesbian lifestyle. The use of the word 'site' also contains a double meaning where 'site' references both a physical space and 'sight' as a manner of seeing. Black and white South African lesbian women share different struggles in terms of coming out and this is also clearly represented in Brundrit and Muholi's photography. In light of the homophobic and sexual violence disproportionately exercised against black lesbian bodies in South Africa, the documentation of black lesbian portraits who return the gaze and challenge the viewer is a significant subversive act. Muholi's unprecedented documentation of black and white portraits of black lesbians on the African continent resonates with the realities of black lesbians who are targeted in homophobic communities because of their lesbian sexuality. The title is a satirical euphemism of the understanding of the lesbian community she is representing because this community lives mostly in secrecy. Almost always living out of site, in the shadows, without questions and/or answers, this lesbian community has closed their eyes to the powers of society and taken it back into their own hands. This blindness also gives the power back to the subject as it is taken from the spectator so that the subject cannot be objectified, judged or criticised, emitting a more secretive, hidden and less brash identity as a lesbian. The melancholic struggle that exists within lesbian portrayals and depictions can closely be linked to the various communities that exist within a South African framework, through turmoil and strife that still exists hand in hand with depictions of minority groups in conservative public spaces. One side of the community feels a strong desire to remain anonymous, hidden, and secretive within their lesbianism, which Brundrit depicts in *Out of Site* through the subject's 'blindness' or closed eyes. Previously in her oeuvre Zanele Muholi has reflected on this activist approach in documenting a culture and a lifestyle of lesbianism in South Africa that is plagued by discrimination, abuse and injustice because of their visibility. Lesbian visibility and identity in the diverse cultures constituting South African society are perceived in various ways. This variation of lesbian cultures in various ethnicities is coupled with a string of preconceived notions about sexuality,

race, religion and culture. Zanele Muholi, an internationally acclaimed photographer, is also an activist for lesbian rights, predominantly in black lesbian communities. In her analysis of Muholi's work, Henriette Gunkel argues that, "[t]he political message that underlines Muholi's images reflects on the work of predominantly Black lesbian and gay organizations in Johannesburg and contrasts with Brundrit's political stance, which seems to mirror the efforts of assimilation of the mainstream gay and lesbian community since the implementation of the sexual orientation clause within the constitution" (Gunkel 2015: 78). This mainstream gay and lesbian community has only been documented from a reductive perspective, meaning there have only been one or two angles when approaching the documentation of lesbian lifestyles through visual representation: one of struggle, loss, trauma, remorse or sexual desire, while the other proposed by Jean Brundrit allows us a preview into the lifestyles of mainly privileged white lesbians in Cape Town, South Africa. My aim is to re-discover older trends and experiment with new forms of representing lesbian lifestyles in a South African context. In both my art and critical analysis of lesbian lifestyles I seek to tease out the nuanced ways of being that are expressed in diverse lesbian lifestyles and with a focus on restoration that is central to my analysis I identify new ways of impacting the viewer through challenging preconceived notions about the lesbian community.

Out of Site (2013) (Figure 19) is in stark contrast with *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5). Although both Brundrit's works of art uses the photographic medium - one using pinhole photographic techniques, and the other a colour digital photograph, the narrative is relatively similar. In *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figure 5) the identities of the lesbian couple are erased, blanked out or cut out, while in *Out of Site* (2013) (Figure 19) Brundrit depicts a lesbian figure with her eyes closed as to purposefully erase herself, blind herself from public display or represent a hidden persona within the photograph as a comment on 'coming out'. This is a powerful statement on the white lesbian community in South Africa in contrast with Zanele Muholi's depiction of a lesbian woman, *Xana Nyilenda* (2011) (Figure 20), a photograph which forms part of the series *Faces and Phases*. This photograph (Figure 20) is a documentation of lesbian lifestyles in black communities. Muholi researches their lifestyles, catalogues their portraits and represents a proud, unashamed community of black lesbian women regaining power through depictions of who these women represent and what they stand for. This bold, striking and powerful depiction of a lesbian community that is plagued with trauma, criticism and shame within the social realm of the South African public, portrays a heroic female lesbian warrior, in a sense, who is not afraid, and with a self-assured attitude staring directly at

spectators, inviting their judgment and confronting their prejudice in *Xana Nyilenda* (2011) (Figure 20). Jane Taylor writes in the *Mail & Guardian* (1995) about Jean Brundrit's artwork *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figures 5 and 11): "Brundrit is telling us that the subject matter of the portrait, the lesbian couple, is excluded from the language of visual images because the 'couple' as we know how to see it, is generally a heterosexual one." I have tried to show that "a visual language" has not been excluded from portrayals of lesbian lifestyles and through the beginnings of a delimitation of a *Two Female Friends* topos, for example in Figures 9 through 20, I've intended to argue that there has been a long subversive or buried tradition of visual representations of lesbians and their lifestyles. However secretive they may have been, we can revive and transform a long line of historical depictions of lesbian relationships in the *Two Female Friends* topos that ultimately serves as a guide to various forms of 'coming out'.



Figure 21: Mandi Bezuidenhout, *Shifting (Sever)ity*, 2014, photographic C – print, 750 cm x 750 cm.

My own work, *Shifting (Sever)ity* (2014) (Figure 21) confronts the spectator with a female figure that is actively in the motion of standing up from her chair, this motion could be a metaphoric movement toward change, change in understanding stereotypical notions of lesbian lifestyles or change in the acknowledgement of these lifestyles. Inviting the spectator into a dialogue with the artwork by severing identifying traits or obscuring the personal identity of the female figure in an attempt to shift stereotypical biases, the phrase "I like girls that like girls" seen on the woman's t-shirt reveals an acknowledgement of sexual orientation without shame and criticism. The

absorptive quality of the photographic medium aids in the process of shifting preconceived notions by slowing down the passing of time as the female figure is either in a position of standing up confrontationally or sitting down passively.

Shifting (Sever)ity (2014) (Figure 21) draws together numerous strands of the representations of lesbian lifestyles explored in this chapter. The smoke in the air produced by the lit cigarette in the hand of the figure standing up slows time down to a point of engrossment or absorption in the image. Similarly, the text on her t-shirt obliges spectators to concentrate and contemplate the contents of what they are reading. The changing of seasons observed in the leaves on the ground, much like the discolouration of leaves in Chardin's *The Soap bubble* (1733) (Figure 4) may be linked to the shifting of perspectives. These leaves observed on the grass in the background of the composition, are depicted in a shifting motion as the wind blows the faded and withering autumn leaves that have fallen from the tree away, making way for new beginnings, urging a new way of understanding lesbian culture and lifestyles. There is a subtle indication in the bottom left-hand side of the photograph (Figure 21), an unfocused area of an interior door frame, that suggests the photographer is indoors looking outdoors where the female figure is slowly getting up from her chair in a subtly confrontational stance. This entails a move away from the clear indication of an indoor space as opposed to an outdoor space, as in *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3) and the grid-like window panes that framed, restricted and isolated the female figures indoors. Unlike *Kate & Nadine* (2013) (Figure 3), *Shifting (Sever)ity* (2014) (Figure 21) depicts a sense of freedom, of escape and of less subtle indications of lesbian female attitudes, e.g. as her desires are printed in black and white on her chest for the world to read. The concealment of the female figure's identity by the severing of her head, which is left outside the photograph, indicates that there is still a lingering caution, as if there is still an element of secrecy and the missing deck panel directly in her path, even suggests that there is still the possibility to fall.

I have tried to show in this chapter that to depict lesbian lifestyles from a historical perspective enlightens us, but is a slow process, a gradual evolution and a cautious step-by-step process from a space of melancholic longing, to a willingness to hide, as depicted in Brundrit's *A portrait of a Lesbian Couple in South Africa* (1995) (Figures 3 and 11) as well as in *Hardship* (2010) (Figures 12), to the confident and unafraid documentation of black lesbian culture as in Muholi's *Xana Nyilenda* (2011) (Figure 19).

These representations of lesbian couples found in historical perspectives and traditions, the strain inherent in exploring various forms of 'coming out' and the meticulous and strenuous deciphering process of these hidden relationships depicted in photography and painting over the centuries, are what have inspired me to write this thesis. The past is thus repeating itself through various representations of lesbian culture, lifestyles and forms of 'coming out', all the while deciphering a formula to understand the present. It is especially in the representation of aporetic narratives in photography that one has to refer back to the past, cultivating new ideas from past traditions. Subtle 'coming out' narratives depicted within layers of visual clues versus bold, activist visual representations both explore phases of the 'coming out' process, exposure to a conservative public and interaction with an apprehensive spectator. The slowing down of time, time that it takes to create and experiment with specific mediums, the time that is represented as lingering within these representations and the strenuous time it takes to find the courage to either confront yourself as a lesbian artist or the time it takes to carefully interpret and represent a lesbian lifestyle or culture that is not willing to be exposed, all contribute to the slowing-down process of understanding, acknowledging and considering the various perspectives of this highly secretive and sensitive theme.

Sculpture: The Burden of Witnessing

CHAPTER 2

In this chapter I ask how heaviness or weight which is inherently part of the experience of the sculptural medium as an interactive art, can suggest the weight of responsibility to the spectator or participant. I want to explore the possible connection that can be made when the spectator physically interacts with a sculptural work through touch and movement and furthermore how this physical engagement may enhance the experience of becoming a witness in relation to the subject matter. The question is how the spectator may become an active part of an active deciphering, process of witnessing and unraveling the artwork and its subject matter. In the process of creating sculpture, and here I refer to my artwork *First Stone, John 8:7* there is an inherent weight and heaviness in working with materials such as wood and cement. The process of working with these materials reflects a sense of strain in the mixing of cement, hardening of concrete and smoothing of rough edges. I suggest that these processes have symbolic value and are specifically related to the difficulty and strain of representing so-called 'difficult' subject matter, such as that of lesbian sexuality.

It may be argued that the artist's experience of the creation of the work differs from the spectator or participant's witness experience of the work. A question that interests me regarding the creation of sculpture and viewing devices is how the process of slowing down the interaction between the spectator and artwork can enhance the witnessing experience and the responsibility on the part of the viewer. In *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* (2001) Kelly Oliver foregrounds the importance of regarding spectatorship as a form of responsibility. I draw from Oliver's work and expand upon this by arguing that in slowing down the spectator is given the opportunity to reflect, respond and become more self-aware, and this translates into the position of becoming a witness. Oliver (2001: 90) makes the argument that, "[w]e are obligated to witness beyond recognition, to testify and to listen to testimony – to encounter each other – because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing. That is to say, subjectivity and humanity are the result of response-ability."

Oliver's use of the word response-ability has direct reference to the subject position that is assumed by humans in relation to other humans and in this context it becomes relevant in

defining a subject position of humans in relation to artworks. For example, I argue that the heaviness inherent to the creation of a wood and stone sculpture that carries a loaded message is not only strenuous for the artist herself but also has the potential to implicate the spectator and demand a position of responsibility or reaction to the subject matter. Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the process of interpreting messages embedded in the artwork forms part of the spectatorship journey.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis my work explores the difficulty involved in representing lesbian sexuality and delves into the theme of homophobia. My work titled *First Stone, John 8:7* has Biblical relevance and explores the theme of judgment and homophobia identified in the Bible. The sculpture makes reference to six Bible verses that condemn homosexuality. The sculptural installation consists of six wooden pulpits that are arranged in a circular position. A heavy cement block is placed on the surface of the individual pulpits and a stone is embedded into these blocks. Each stone contains a Bible verse that references the condemnation and punishment associated with homosexuality. The text in the cement slab is engraved from right to left making reference to the ancient Hebrew text. Spectators or participants are required to lift the heavy stone from the cement block and once they turn the stone toward themselves the homophobic verse becomes readable from left to right; leaving the spectator in a position of responsible regard or witnessing. The stones are heavy and carry a physical and moral weight. By engaging with the stones and the messages embedded therein the spectator becomes a witness and occupies a position in relation to the subject matter. The artwork thus demands to know if the spectator will take part in the act of judgment and throw the first stone?

In this thesis I ask whether it is possible for the spectator to become a witness of an artwork in the same way that someone becomes implicated by witnessing a crime, an accident or a significant incident. I explore if a spectator can be compared to an eye-witness who is willing to give testimony about the gravity of a situation. The central question is how the spectator of an interactive artwork can be moved into assuming a position of responsible regard that goes beyond the act of mere recognition. In my artwork *First Stone, John 8:7* I discuss and decipher the emphasis of weight and the burden of responsibility, and in the next section I discuss my camera and chamber obscuras as they debate the emphasis of sight and the burden of responsibility.



Figure 22: Elmgreen & Dragset (Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset), *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime*. 2008. Concrete, glass, film projection. 366 x 199 x 491 cm. Tiergarten, Berlin.



Figure 23: Elmgreen & Dragset (Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset), *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime*. DETAIL – lesbian couple kissing, 2008. Concrete, glass, film projection. 366 x 199 x 491 cm. Tiergarten, Berlin.

Questions regarding the position of witnessing and responsibility are similarly relevant to Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime* (2008) (Figures 24 and 25). As pictured above, the memorial is a large concrete block located in Tiergarten, a public park in Berlin. The memorial reminds the viewer or spectator of the lost lives of homosexual people and it also comments on the marginalisation of lives and the erasure of memory during times of persecution. Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer (2013: 230) comment on the above-mentioned work:

Their [Elmgreen and Dragset's] extended series of *Powerful Structures* uses the intersection of architecture, art and design to scoff at the icons of queer culture. Their strategies are astutely urban, attentive to unraveling the possibilities of behavioral experiments in public consumption that are often slyly queer. Their proposal for a Holocaust memorial points to Berlin's Tiergarten as a longstanding location for public sex and refers to previous works that use cruising¹ as an embodiment of Michel Foucault's understanding of power as something everywhere present and everywhere subject to subversion. It also draws attention to homosexual victims of the Nazis.

This artwork (Figures 25 and 26) consists of a massive, 75 tonne concrete structure and for the curious there is a small window on the side of this structure where the public spectator is lured

¹ Cruising – a definition used predominantly by gay men to search for sexual partners in public spaces such as parks.

into watching a video projection that displays two men kissing or two women kissing. Lord and Meyer note that:

Every two years the projection will be replaced by a new video of a same-sex encounter, each made by a different artist, ensuring the work's reading as a living memorial and allowing for the inclusion of imagery of and by lesbians – another group who were victims of the Nazis. (Lord & Meyer 2013: 230)

The projected imagery in this memorial implicates participants by making them a witness to the potential trauma associated with viewing sensitive and conceptually loaded material. Once they have peeped in and seen, are they implicated as witnesses? Is the trauma related to seeing such imagery or the act of peeping, the secrecy of looking through a small peephole enough to implicate a spectator or participant as a witness?

The square structure of the artwork with a small viewing window on the side resembles that of a peephole or peep-show device. A peep-show could either be a large structure specifically designed so that, most typically, men would be able to gaze through a peephole to see a performance of a woman undressing or it could entail smaller, coin-generated devices that would display erotic films through a peephole or magnifying glass. This activity is known as a peep-show and the person taking part in this activity is known as a peeping Tom (–i.e. a person who gets sexual pleasure from secretly watching people undressing or engaging in sexual activity).

Similar to the structure and function of the peepshow, my camera obscura devices (Figure 26) foreground the role of the spectator in relation to the device. These camera obscura devices consist of a wooden tripod stand, a wooden box, magnifying glass and transparent paper. The spectator has to lift a piece of black material in order to step underneath it and view the image, this is so that your eyes can adjust to the darkness and the image is projected more clearly. The camera obscura devices are designed in such a way that they render the participant both physically and visually vulnerable in their interaction with the artwork. In the same way that Elmgreen and Dragset's work requires the spectator to peep through the small window, the camera obscuras place the spectator in the position of a voyeur or, as mentioned earlier, a peeping Tom. The voyeur position is however turned on its head when the participant becomes exposed to a homosexual scene, and in the case of my work, to that of a lesbian embrace. The purpose of inviting the spectator in and simultaneously challenging her/his views on a subject such as lesbian art is to allow the spectator a space to reflect on her/his views, to challenge them, reconsider them and debate them internally and with others around them. This is in the hopes of a dialogue between spectators who are not necessarily like-minded.

Similar to *First Stone, John 8:7*, strain also emerges as theme with the camera obscuras when the spectator peers through a peephole. The moment of seeing, deciphering and interpreting is loaded with strain. In *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996) James Elkins examines the complexity of seeing and the sometimes undependable and inconsistent nature of seeing. Elkins foregrounds the complex process involved in seeing an object and highlights that seeing is caught up in the unconscious. He dispels the notion that seeing is detached, efficient and rational and writes that “seeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious” (Elkins 1996: 11).

By emphasising the various ways in which our direction of viewing is obscured and somewhat shifted in specific instances where ‘seeing’ is strained and difficult, the act of seeing can be a strenuous process and in the process of interpreting a concept or narrative within an artwork, the spectator is placed in a position of power on the one hand and on the other is placed in a position of vulnerability. Sunil Manghani (2013) describes how seeing is mostly about seeing into or out of. Our acts of vision and the way in which we perceive reality portrays a resemblance to inner and outer spaces, looking in to observe the outside, or (as the anatomical eye for example perceives objects, shapes, texture and so forth) from the outside in. Our visual complexities range from the visual stimuli we perceive externally which we decipher internally (in our minds) and this resembles what we experience through interior and exterior spaces (outside to inside). These various directions of observation then are important: the inside which observes the outside, the outside which is emitted from the inside. For Manghani,

[t]here is a constant inside/outside process to our vision – we have been exposed to the visual world from birth in order to gain visual competence, yet equally vision is not a passive process whereby the image is impressed upon the brain. Through an elaborate system of parallel processing the brain is active in constructing the images we see. If anything, images in science begin to test the boundaries of what we mean by ‘seeing’ and the very concept of the ‘image’ itself. (2013: 218)

Manghani argues that seeing is an active and not a passive process. If we take this to be true then the spectator becomes an active participant in the process of revealing that which is seen. This has particular relevance for the camera obscura devices where participants look through a peephole device and become actively involved in the process of interpreting conceptually loaded subject matter. The significance of the peephole is that it makes us aware of inner and outer spaces and the complex process associated with either looking in from the outside or looking out

from within. This is particularly relevant for a subject focused on homosexuality and says something about our ways of seeing or the heteronormative gaze. I have made a clear distinction between inside and outside spaces by utilising camera obscuras. In doing so I am commenting on the judgmental gaze which is specific to looking in on lesbian lifestyles from the outside. Furthermore, I wish to investigate how inner or internal spaces (spaces that are somewhat removed from the external world) hold the potential to challenge a homophobic lens or gaze of condemnation. Peeping through the cracks or through a circular hole from the exterior, to something in the darkness or something in the light in the interior suggests the various difficult and complex realms in which we exist, look and consider; these are spaces of strain, there is no easy way of simply 'seeing', there is a complex shift from one space to the other. Elmgreen and Dragset's memorial and my sculptural and viewing devices speak to the complex process of seeing. In order for the spectator to become a witness beyond the mere act of recognition and to respond with response-ability, it becomes necessary for the "object to stare back" and to challenge the usual, heteronormative gaze.

My chamber obscura and camera obscura devices are naturally occurring phenomena recorded since the 18th century. A small hole on one side of a dark chamber or a magnified hole on one side of the camera obscura box projects an inverted image of the outside view onto the surfaces of the room or transparent paper. On entering the chamber obscura or viewing the camera obscura, the viewer may barely perceive the image; the room or surface might appear to be completely dark. But as one's eyes adjust, the picture becomes increasingly apparent, growing brighter and revealing the colour and detail of the projected image within the chamber space or onto the transparent paper. The viewer is immersed in a continuous present, watching and listening, as much a part of the installation as of the view outside or inside the gallery space. These devices are then positioned to aid in seeing a photograph which is upside down in the gallery space the right way up.

My sculptural installation *First Stone, John 8:7* and my *Camera Obscuras #1 and #2 (2016)* and *Chamber Obscuras #1 and #2 (2017)* strongly resemble the aforementioned *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime*. The use of concrete in Elmgreen and Dragset's memorial resembles that of the concrete used in *First Stone, John 8:7*. The use of this medium in both works represents strength and solidity through the resilience of the medium, which can be put through its paces but still comes through it all standing. Concrete is then a metaphor for the resilience of the lesbian community through the struggles it has endured. In the case of Elmgreen and

Dragset's artwork *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime* (2008) (Figures 24 and 25), the slightly square and concrete structure may reference entrapment through the resemblance of a box or square structure without any form of entrance or exit, neither windows nor doors. On the side of the memorial is a small window that makes space for a video projection that is built into the concrete structure. The spectator needs to peer deep into the concave window in order to view the video scene and the spectator action resembles that of looking into a peephole. This process of peering in to see the video image places a certain amount of strain on the spectator who becomes responsible for deciphering or interpreting the image on the projected screen. As this artwork is a memorial for the homosexual victims of the Nazi regime, one is drawn into the secretive, hidden nature of the design, as if curious to decode the meaning or understand its significance. Site-specific artworks or installations that are exhibited to the public are created with the idea of interaction, public interaction or participation which in turn functions as a sort of entrapment. A feeling of shame and entrapment may overwhelm you as spectator while you observe the filmed subjects being intimate with one another in a secluded public space, and the spectator will be challenged to respond response-ably.



Figure 24: Mandi-Anne Bezuidehout, Untitled. 2014 (Artwork No.1 x 3)



Figure 25: Marcel Duchamp, *Given*, 1946-1966, Photograph of exterior looking through a peephole into interior. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The image on the left above depicts the camera obscuras used in my exhibition. These devices become a visual aid when spectators look through the peephole device and similar to the above-

mentioned memorial are invited to look in upon the projected image. By looking in upon the image, the spectator's sight and positioning of the body become vulnerable to the visual stimuli. The peephole device facilitates a process of looking in and simultaneously explores the conceptual theme of inner and outside spaces specific to a history of visual representations of homosexual and lesbian lifestyles.



Figure 26: Samuel Van Hoogstraten, *A Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House*, oil and egg on wood, ca.1655–60. National Gallery, London.

Both the standing camera obscura artworks and the chamber obscura in my exhibition lure one into an internal space providing the spectator with a private show. The box shape devices resemble each other as well as the images displayed inside and onto the boxes themselves both reflecting the depths of inner and outer spaces and the way in which we perceive them. This is where van Hoogstraten's conceptual ideas and artistry enlighten the spectator to the deception of sight and alternative ways of 'seeing', focusing on spectator participation and how interaction with an artwork has the potential to shift perspectives. According to Witkovsky,

Samuel Van Hoogstraten, creator of the most complex surviving perspective box from the Dutch Golden Age, understood perspective as 'eye-fooling artistry', a technique of marvelous deception and manipulation of the viewer, as Celeste Brusati has shown. Van Hoogstraten and the many other makers of perspective boxes in his day tried their utmost to control the view, applying perspectival constructions that allowed an image to make sense to the eye only from a single point, fitted with the peephole (Witkovsky 2015: 116).

This idea that perspectives of reality or reality itself can only be made 'sense' of by vision or the eye when a device is in place, conceptually questions how we make 'sense' of any form of perspective. The illusion of perspective allows for shifting realities and an imaginary exploration. Spectators are invited inside, into an interior that is either big (chamber obscura) or small

(standing camera obscuras) to experience something seemingly miraculous in the expanse of shifting perspectives and enlightenment. The round peepholes, convex lens and camera obscura surfaces relate the spectator to our subconscious understandings of the shape of the 'eye' and to vision. This in itself opens one's mind, to allow vulnerability to set in, before a spectator can gradually absorb what is being exposed. When confronted with the content of a homosexual nature, the sexual connotation to the peephole and the discomfort about public and private space comes into call. The spectator relationship within the surveillance of surveying puts the spectator in a vulnerable position. You as viewer feel like you are intruding on an intimate space (peeping into somewhere you shouldn't). The "function of art as a question was first raised by Marcel Duchamp," following this up with the statement: "All art after Duchamp is conceptual (in nature)" (Jones, 2006, p. 145). My work shows elements of Duchamp's work "*Given*", not just physically with enlightening cracks or peepholes that draw you toward the paintings but also in the sexual undertones that allow you to question your voyeuristic gaze. Because a camera obscura, peephole, or peepshow usually functions in the public sphere, the spectator is usually made a spectacle of in a public space as he or she gives in to temptation and peeps through a tiny hole or lens to see privately what is on the inside, in a public space. This act by the spectator is a form of entrapment in a public space. The chamber obscuras in addition reverse the inner and outer spaces: rather than the spectator peeking through a peephole into a private space, the spectators find themselves entrapped inside the secluded or "private" space exposed to the public space through a peephole. All of the sculptural devices or structures mentioned resemble a chamber or box format, reflecting on inside and outside space. Unlike the installation *Given* (1946 – 1966) and *A Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House* (1655 – 60) the spectator isn't necessarily looking inward from outside.

The previously discussed installation devices also resemble a trap or entrapment. In *Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps* Alfred Gell (1996) explores the significance of entrapment in artworks and suggests that, similar to animal traps, the creator of the trap (the artist) is aware of the motive of the intentional trap (the artwork) in the space that it is installed. The artist is conscious of the intention of the trap while the spectator is unaware of the trap until he/she is confronted by it. In the same way that the trap ensnares an animal the device captures the attention/imagination of the spectator.

The spectator/participant is referred to as the (hunted), a helpless bystander (animal) that is entrapped or ensnared within the artwork (trap). Gell explains (1996: 27):

Of course, it is not really the case that the trap is clever or deceitful; it is the hunter who knows the victim's habitual responses and is able to subvert them. But once the trap is in being, the hunter's skill and knowledge are truly located in the trap, in objectified form; otherwise the trap would not work. This objective knowledge would survive even the death of the hunter himself. It would also be (partially) 'readable' to others who had only the trap, and not the animal lore that was reflected in its design. From the form of the trap, the dispositions of the intended victim could be deduced. In this sense, traps can be regarded as texts on animal behavior.

The animal trap discussed above can also be identified in Marcel Duchamp's *Given* (Figure 27), Samuel Van Hoogstraten's *A Peepshow with Views of the Interior of a Dutch House* (Figure 28) and Elmgreen and Dragset's memorial (Figures 24 and 25). The artist is lured in by the interactive nature of the artwork and with works such as *Given* and *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime*, conventional views and knowledge are subverted. In addition to this voyeuristic component in Elmgreen and Dragset's memorial, the location also becomes significant. The artists are conscious of cruising that takes place amongst members of the LGBT community in public parks, and thus the choice to situate the work in a public park or garden adds significance to the site-specific work. In this case the heterosexual community gains access to a space which would be considered exclusive to the gay community; location thus forms part of the transferal of meaning. The act of peeping through the small window combined with the curiosity of the spectator places him/her in a position of vulnerability but furthermore enables one to question the spectator's intent.

The metaphor of a trap is also connected to the weight, heaviness or burden implied by my cement artwork. This heaviness can be identified in the weight and workability of the material used but also in the intention of creating awareness around victims of homophobia. Furthermore, this heaviness is situated in moral baggage that accompanies becoming a witness to themes of homosexuality and homophobia in interactive installations. With my exhibition, for instance, the spectator is positioned in a gallery and becomes an active participant in the process of deciphering and interpreting the artworks. The physical movement toward a peephole device or camera obscura already aligns you as spectator to the position of becoming a witness. Such a position carries its own burden of testimony where the spectator is lured into a position of response-ability. Further examples of artworks that carry a sense of weight and expose homosexual lifestyles include those of George Segal. These works commemorate the Stonewall

Rebellion (Figure 29) and Gay Pride (Figure 30) in New York City. The sculpture commemorating New York City's Stonewall Rebellion consist of a park bench and four life-size bronze figures. The two women are seated in the bench and their body language, where one woman's hand is placed on that of the other, suggests closeness and intimacy. The standing figures are those of two men who are also close to one another and suggest a sense of love and care.



Figure 27: George Segal, (1924-2000), Gay liberation, Commemoration of NYC's Stonewall Rebellion, 1969 (2008), Christopher Park, NY 4.



Figure 28: George Segal, (1924-2000) Gay Pride.

George Segal, an influential American artist of the 20th century was commissioned to create a public sculptural work in New York and Los Angeles. The commissioned work was only accepted for installation in New York. However, the installation of this work was met with some resistance by residents of Greenwich Village, NYC, and the production was stalled a number of times. Upon its eventual unveiling in 1992 complaints emerged from the LGBT community about the bronze figures being painted white and there was criticism about the heterosexual identity of the artist.

The intention to destroy confrontational artworks within the public sphere as well as the protests against such artworks reflects the potential of artwork centered on homosexuality to elicit such a strong emotional reaction. This extreme reaction against a public artwork is exemplified through a work titled *Tilted Arc* (1981) by Richard Serra.



Figure 29: Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, installed 1981, photographed in February 1987, Federal Plaza, New York.

Site-specific works such as Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) and Segal's *Gay Liberation* (2008) evoked strong reactions from the public, community and spectators exposed to the work. *Tilted Arc* was a sculpture commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration's (GSA) Arts-in-Architecture programme for the Federal Plaza in New York. It was designed by Richard Serra and constructed in 1981, and dismantled, after much debate, in 1989 (Gamboni 1997: 156).

Unlike most other modern artists, Richard Serra did not create his sculpture to exist in a self-directed space such as a gallery, independent from its surroundings. *Tilted Arc* was a 120 feet long, 12 feet high and 3 inches thick solid, unfinished plate of Cor-ten steel and leant 1 foot off its vertical axis. Serra's work is site-specific and has a significant relationship to its immediate surroundings (Gamboni 1997: 156). In terms of the setting of his work, Serra declared that it is necessary to work in opposition to constraints of the context, so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power (Gamboni 1997: 156). *Tilted Arc* (1981) was intended to be a public sculpture. One could claim that by implication, the work in some sense belonged to the public as well as to Serra and the GSA. In this way *Tilted Arc* (1981) and my artwork *First Stone, John 8:7* are both public sculptures, because of their interactivity and the way in which the sculpture alters the site-specific space in that participation in the work is requested. Unfortunately no steps were taken to consult with or prepare the public for the installation of *Tilted Arc*, and this is where unrest and debate arose around public and private space. As *Tilted Arc* (1981) confronted spectatorship, so do my artworks, but they are not site-specific to a public space but rather exposed through interaction in the exhibition space. While *Tilted Arc* (1981) evoked mixed reactions, the majority of witnesses were in fact in favour of keeping *Tilted Arc* on the plaza. Serra was not principally interested in subverting the site in a

hostile fashion, but rather wanted to make the site work for the spectators and the artwork. He wanted to make the spectators aware of themselves and of their movement through the plaza (Gamboni 1997: 157). Serra intentionally designed and created his work in such a manner that viewers would become aware of their own physical existence and motion. Serra's intention was to make the person walking alongside the arc aware of him or herself in this environment, as do my chamber and camera obscuras that place you in a space which allows you to contemplate your existence and impact within a certain environment. One of the big criticisms against Serra's work was that it blocked views and pathways to the plaza. Serra's work comments on the fact that art is not always for pleasurable viewing but that it needs to interact with the spectator, as does *First Stone, John 8:7*, which enforces a certain amount of strain as a spectator is encouraged to lift the weight of a stone and hold the moral weight of his/her judgment. Recognizing the fundamental relationship between the awareness and primary identity, Serra also realised that his works could be potentially unsettling for viewers. However, Serra did not foresee that the *Tilted Arc* would have unsettled spectators to such an extent that it would eventually have to be removed. Still, the comments of the public must also be taken into consideration:

The effect of the *Tilted Arc* on its site was regarded as destructive in terms of the latter's beauty and use. The wives of the plaza architects argued that Serra's work ruined another site-specific work which included the surrounding buildings and the pavement. Other criticisms against Serra's work was that it impinged on the right to freedom of expression by other artists (Gamboni 1997: 160).

Tilted Arc (1981) (Figure 30) emphasised the unknown, enlightening the spectators' curiosity around the massive structure and questioning what existed on the other side of the sculpture as its massive steel structure blocked one side of the plaza off from the other, causing curiosity to arise in spectators to find out what was on the other side, if anything. This curiosity was even more enticing as the distance it took to walk around the sculpture allowed for time to contemplate human interaction and dialogue, as the sculpture cut off communication or view of one side to the other.

The destruction of the artwork and actual demise or demolition was politically driven by businessmen in powerful positions and because of its lack of aesthetics and the fear it conjured up in spectators with a lack of imagination. Serra's work and the debates around it emphasise the burden of witnessing sculptural installations that are not necessarily for pleasurable viewing. These fears confront being entrapped within a space that is uncomfortable or closed off, as if being trapped within a small space, a space that could render you invisible as a spectator, similar

to the 'closets' individuals places themselves in as homosexuals, rendering oneself invisible by choice and out of fear. This can be linked to the work of Elmgreen and Dragset as well as Segal's public sculpture installation which expose a lifestyle and culture that has struggled to be visible within the immediate and mainstream culture. Artists of the 1980s were obliged to "reinforce the closet". Lord and Meyer argue that this invisibility was then what it is now, and we have been conditioned to find comfort in the closet, as it is ultimately safe and un-intrusive. Lord and Meyer explain that,

[a]t the end of the 1970's, lesbian artists 'existed almost entirely outside the boundaries of mainstream culture', as Terry Wolverton noted when looking back upon the 1978 'Great American Lesbian Art Show', organized in Los Angeles. Consenting to invisibility was all too often the price of a lesbian's ticket to the commercial art market. (2013: 31)

This argument still has relevance in my sculptural artworks as there is a stark difference between the argument formulated in the previous chapter explaining that lesbianism was not suppressed but rather a part of the visual representation and tradition of history proved through the *Two Female Friends* topos. In Chapter 1 it is evident that there is a history of lesbian representation but in Chapter 2 it becomes clear that there are challenges to "seeing" lesbian lifestyles. Lord and Meyers' comment on the invisible nature of lesbian culture resonates with a deeper argument in this thesis concerning that which we choose to see and that which we choose to remain blind to. Both the cement and wood sculpture and the camera obscuras in my work raise questions around ways of seeing and interrogate the role and responsibility of the participant who is presented with conceptually loaded subject matter. Much like Segal's artwork, which interrogates the way in which we see and the responsibility of what we are witnessing, this public sculpture makes a strong and powerful statement that questions the spectator's relation and response to the life-size figures that showing clear gestural affection toward one another. This openly interactive artwork which allows you as spectator to walk around, sit next to and pose for a photograph, reflects a monument of heroes, giving the power back to the community and away from social conformity or judgment. Furthermore, the artworks titled *Memorial for the Homosexual Victims of the Nazi Regime* (2008) (Figures 24 and 25) and *Gay Liberation* (2008) (Figures 26 and 27) carry physical and emotional weight. These are concrete structures that are meant to withstand the elements, vandalism and criticism, and serve as a powerful statement against homophobia and prejudice in public spaces.



Figure 30: Mandi Bezuidenhout, *First Stone: John 8:7*, 2016. Installation: concrete, wood, stone.



Figure 31: Mandi Bezuidenhout, *First Stone: John 8:7*, 2016. Installation: concrete, wood, stone.

The artwork featured above, titled *First Stone, John 8:7* (2017), signifies the weight and heaviness associated with homosexuality in a Christian society and represented in the Christian faith.

The title of the artwork *First Stone, John 8:7* (2016) (Figure 28) has been taken from the well-known Bible verse, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." This Bible verse refers to a case where teachers of the law sought punishment for an

adulterous woman and confronted Jesus about the case. The unexpected response from Jesus disarmed those ready to judge the adulterous woman and resulted in the teachers of the law walking away without condemning her for this sin. The theme of condemnation and judgment is central to *First Stone, John 8:7*. In this work the spectator is encouraged to lift up the individual stones embedded in the six concrete blocks on wooden pulpits. Upon picking up a heavy stone the participant becomes implicated by reading a Bible verse that is carved into the stone. The text engraved into the stone is reflected and written from right to left in the cement slab, resembling the ancient Hebrew text which symbolised the law of the time. The engraved, inverted text embedded in the concrete seems quite improbable and unusual as it is illegible, resembling a form of text but also obscure. According to Punt (2006) there are six verses that reference homosexuality in the Bible. Punt writes that “[t]he Bible is seen as a revolver with reference to six texts (Gen 19:1-29; Lev 18:22, 20:13; Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tm 1:8-11) which act as ‘bullets’ directed at lesbians to kill off their access to claim full membership in the community of faith” (2006: 425). The New International Version of the Bible references homosexuality in different ways and it is worth debating how the lifestyles represented in the Bible have relevance for homosexual lifestyles today. The focus of my work is on lesbian sexuality and therefore I have decided to include only five of the six Bible verses referencing homosexuality, deliberately choosing to exclude a verse that references sodomy (Genesis 19: 1-29) because it holds less significance for the argument of this thesis. To make up for the sixth verse, I’ve split Romans 1:26 and 1:27 into two separate artworks. The engraved verses on the six concrete slabs included in my work read as follows:

1. Leviticus 18:22: Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.
2. Leviticus 20:13: If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.
3. Romans 1:26: For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural.
4. Romans 1:27: And in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.
5. 1 Corinthians 6:9: Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals.
6. 1 Timothy 1:10: ...for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.

While the above-mentioned scriptures make it clear that homosexuality is deemed unacceptable in the Christian faith, William Countryman argues that “[d]iscussions about homosexuality and biblical interpretation involve (concerns about) power and ideology: To deny an entire class of human beings the right peaceably and without harming others to pursue the kind of sexuality that corresponds to their nature is a perversion of the gospel” (1999: 522). *First Stone, John 8:7* aims to stimulate debate around the concept of homosexuality in conservative and faith-abiding communities and churches and in this instance I focus on the conservatism that exists around lesbian sexuality in the city that I live, i.e. Bloemfontein, South Africa. The laws and traditions in the Biblical text are deeply embedded in South African culture regardless of race and class. It becomes clear that there is a latent but powerful consensus on laws pertaining to sexual orientation that are prescribed by the Bible and church. There is a strict code (the Bible) to which each and every Christian abides.

First Stone, John 8:7 bears testimony to the high incidence of homophobic hate crimes perpetrated against the LGBT community. The hate crimes are physical and emotional and in some cases result in death or mental illness that is triggered by the alienation experienced by homosexuals because of their sexual orientation. The way in which homosexuality is perceived, read, interpreted and theorised is often influenced by a Christian God who condemns any homosexual behaviour or relationship. *First Stone* initiates a pause and by interacting with the work the participant is given the opportunity to think about and re-think her/his actions toward homosexual people. The act of picking up a stone and then reading a text that makes the spectator aware of the heaviness of condemnation regarding homosexuality plays an influential role in initiating a sense of responsibility for the person interacting with the work. According to Punt (2006: 424):

It is useful therefore to accept that everybody has certain predilections when it comes to reading the Bible and making sense of it, since sense-making takes place within someone’s framework of reference saturated with diverse influences. Recognizing and being willing to share those influences, and to have them challenged and critiqued are important aspects of an ethical approach to biblical interpretation – it implies an openness and willingness to dialogue and debate; it implies an appropriate humility towards the texts, the dialogue-partners, the theme and towards those most affected by the discussion, as well as humility towards God.

First Stone is a powerful statement on the judgment of sin and the tolerance or acceptance of homosexuals within the church structure in South Africa. It also foregrounds the condemnation inherent to Christianity when it comes to homosexual lifestyles today. For Punt (2006: 422), “[i]t is dangerous and in any case not even very helpful to merely assume that values and institutions

mentioned in the Bible necessarily and immediately have the same meaning and resonances in our culture and society.” The Bible has been interpreted in different ways from ancient times until today and there are many versions of the original text that have been written with strong influences of that time and don’t necessarily apply to contemporary realities. The Christian faith is highly influential in the lives of South Africans and the condemnation associated with homosexuality thus works against constructing healthy lesbian lifestyles and relationships. Homophobia and hate crimes perpetrated against homosexuals are often predicated on rules specific to religious groups and their beliefs that homosexuality is unnatural or unChristian, therefore needing correction. Homosexual people who have had the courage to come out of the closet or to expose their sexuality are often faced with persecution that is backed up by religion and the Bible. This reaction has forced many Christian gays and lesbians to practice their faith but to hide their sexuality. These practices of discrimination, homophobia and disallowance of homosexuality have inspired the artwork *First Stone, John 8:7*. The artwork encourages the spectator to interact with Biblical scripture in a different way. The spectator lifts the heavy stone and while the text is less legible in the cement slab because it is written from right to left, it is clearly written in the stone that is now turned toward the spectator and constitutes a strong reminder that judgment lies with the individual interpretation of the text. Furthermore, upon reading the verse the spectator becomes aware of the heaviness or weight of the words that are now held in one’s hand. Rocks, stone and bricks are a basic tool of violence and protest in many cultures around the world. Rocks and stones are universally accessible and when used with hatred and violence they can inflict serious injury and even death. In *First Stone* this power is now placed in the hand of the spectator who is given the opportunity to think about the condemnatory practices toward homosexuals. The aim of my art is to ask whether it becomes possible to change one’s view on homosexuality when the stone or rock is held in one’s own hand and is now turned toward you. Engaging with *First Stone* is meant to cause discomfort and where many people would avoid being confronted with the decision to condemn homosexuals, they are now placed in a position where they become challenged in their views. *First Stone* forms an integral part of my exhibition and comments on moral and legal codes that promote discrimination and alienation of homosexuals in society.

The way in which we look upon and perceive subjects and objects can be challenged through the use of camera and chamber obscuras, devices which have been employed since the 18th century. As the name suggests, the chamber obscura consists of a chamber or room where a small hole on one side of the dark chamber is used to project an inverted image of the outside view onto

the interior wall or surface of the room. When entering the room or chamber the viewer may barely be able to perceive the image in this dark room. However as ones' eyes adjust with time, the picture becomes increasingly clear, revealing the colour and finer detail of the projected image reflected in the chamber. The viewer is immersed in a continuous present, watching and listening, and the spectator becomes as much a part of the installation as of the view outside or inside the gallery space.

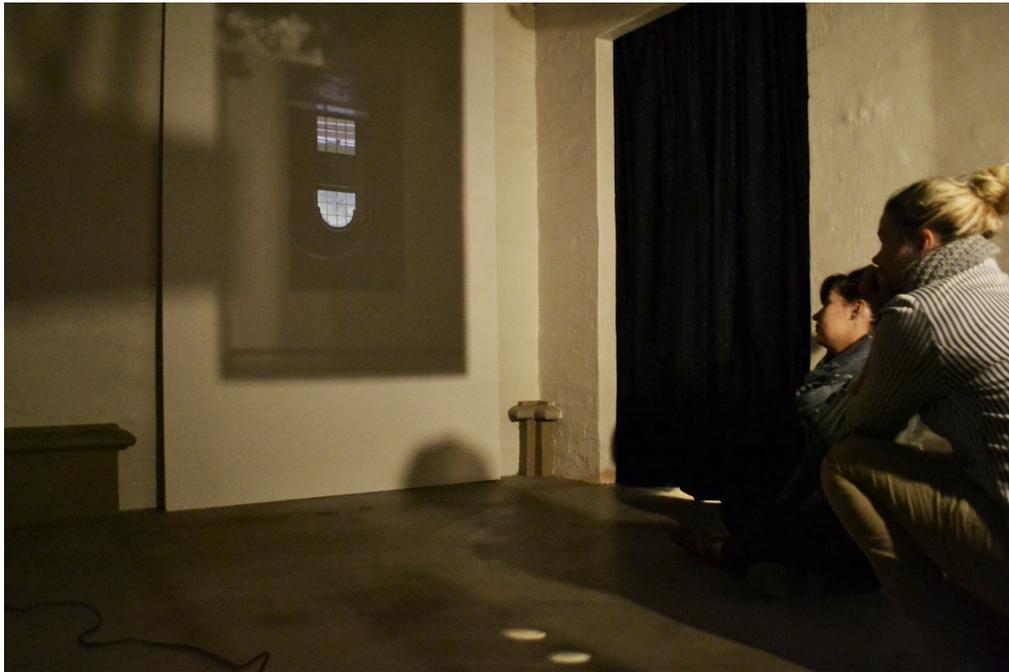


Figure 32: Mandi Bezuidenhout, Chamber Obscura x2, 2016. Centenary gallery.

The work that forms part of my exhibition is site-specific and it was important for me as an artist to select a gallery that allows for quiet contemplation. I selected the Centenary Complex Gallery on the University of the Free State campus which allows natural light to stream in from the outside, which works well in setting up the chamber obscura. In the same way that the standing camera obscuras project an image of the external world, the chamber obscuras enable more people to participate in looking upon a changing image that is reflected from the outside in. The chamber obscura captures movement from the outside and therefore participants who are standing or seated inside the chamber obscura are provided with an opportunity to look upon the spectators who are interacting with or peeping into the camera obscuras located in the gallery space. Both devices are designed to project an upside down image which, upon looking or closer reflection, appears the right way up. This allows for a sense of movement within the externally represented image, which the spectator on the outside of the device will experience the wrong

way around, while the participant or viewer/spectator participating in the device will experience the images the right way up.

While spectators settle down to orientate themselves inside this seemingly virtual reality, the chamber obscura presents a fresh perspective on internal and external spaces or realities. The chamber obscura reflects an exterior space upon an interior space and by doing so prompts one to interrogate concepts of interior and exterior, or private and public spaces. The gallery space is considered a private space but my intention is to make the spectators aware of the external world that the subject of strained lesbian lifestyles speaks to. For example, my photographic series *Periphery* (2012 – 2017) concerns private spaces but the women in these images are also part of an outside world; a world which they are often alienated from.

The intention of the chamber obscura is to enable those found inside it to look upon the reactions of those peering into the camera obscuras and gauge the reactions of those looking upon the image of lesbian embrace. Does the camera obscura house within its ‘abnormal’ interior, a safe space in which to release this grip and defuse the image which would allow not only the liberation of the spectator’s imaginative depth, but also a ‘correction’ of perspective and a ‘reversibility’ of social and cultural constructs?

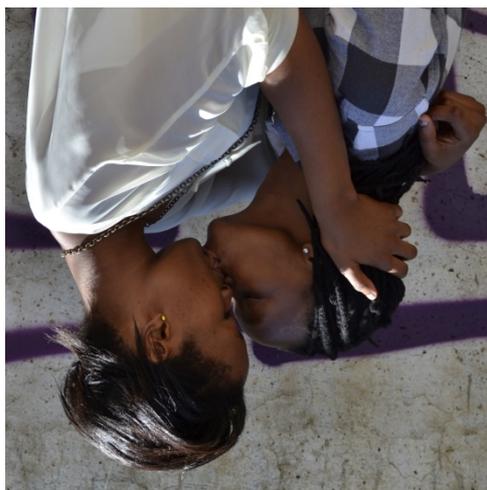


Figure 33: Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout, Irreversible #1 and #2. 2012

The images *Irreversible* (2012), which are a vital part of both the camera and chamber obscura installations, expose or enlighten the viewer to photographic images which are suspended from the ceiling and connected to the floor and strategically placed in the view of the camera obscura device. These photographs portray lesbians in a romantic embrace and are exhibited upside down and can only be viewed the right way up when the spectator looks into the camera obscura device. Barbara Babcock writes that,

[s]ymbolic inversion may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political. (1978: 14)

My camera obscura devices endeavour to symbolically invert the images of a culturally unaccepted embrace of lesbian lovers. To view this intimate embrace the spectator or participant needs to move close to the device in order to peer through a peephole and in the process the spectator takes on the position of a voyeur. However, this voyeur stance is not taken in private and therefore the viewer is simultaneously made to feel vulnerable and surveilled in the gallery space. Furthermore, the spectator could feel that they are entering and intruding on an intimate space and looking upon something that is intended to be private. The stance of the spectator in relation to the subject matter is thus significant in itself. For example, while it is clear from my work *First Stone* that members of society are quick to condemn sexuality, it becomes apparent with the camera and chamber obscuras that one needs to be sensitive to the private lives of those that are easily judged and condemned. I argue that my work echoes elements of Duchamp's work *Given* by luring one to peep inside and furthermore by reflecting sexual undertones that prompt one to question a voyeuristic gaze. The gaze of the spectator combined with the subject matter of lesbian lifestyles and lesbian intimacy may be defined as the question in my work. The spectator is guided toward an alternative method of looking at or perceiving controversial or conceptually loaded subject matter. This process implicates the spectator and challenges the voyeur to become a response-able witness.

With the camera and chamber obscura devices the spectator enters a position of external observation and also internal immersion. This position makes the spectators acutely aware of internal and external spaces and their significance in relation to a subject such as homosexuality. With reference to the camera obscura John Locke (cited in Mitchell) writes: "The camera obscura is the model which helps us to see how ideas originate in the objective, material world, and it is presented as a positive figure in position to the idealist notion that ideas are "innate" or

self-generated by the mind” (1986: 196). Mitchell (1986) explains that Marx and Locke used the camera obscura as an aid in understanding or as part of conceptualising the reality of the external world. Locke explores the notion of external and internal sensations and Marx investigates perception and imagination as central themes in the formation of ideas and both use a viewing device to achieve this. In my exhibition I use viewing devices such as the camera and chamber obscuras to challenge norms around perception and ways of looking. Participants or spectators in the gallery space are prompted to ask “what is the right-side-up?” and to explore why the image is exhibited upside down but reflected the right way up when using the camera or chamber obscuras. Such a process is part of implicating the spectator as witness and inspiring them to revise normative and in some cases negative responses to lesbian sexuality.

The inversion of the content projected as well as the abstraction of an intimate embrace is intended to obscure the emphasis on lesbian sexuality. Babcock asserts that:

Inversion, however, has also been used in the sense of perversion – notably by Evans-Pritchard in “Sexual Inversion among the Azande,” which describes approved and disapproved male and female homosexuality. Evans-Pritchard notwithstanding, anthropologists generally use the term to describe ritualized “role-reversals” and not actual sexual practices. (1978: 22)

Inversion is a theme that also emerges in Rene Magritte’s *The Lovers* (1928). The figures in this painting are blind-folded and although they are dressed as man and woman their gender remains obscured. My sculptural artworks invert the images and there is a connection to be made with the term ‘invert’ or ‘inversion’ in that these were the terms used by sexologists and psychologists to describe lesbian/gay sexuality in the late 19th and early 20th century.



Figure 34: Rene Magritte, the lovers, 1928.



Figure 35: *ZaVa I. Paris*, 2013. Image © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

In Rene Magritte's *The Lovers* depicted above, gender ambiguity, restricted space suggested by the surrounding walls and the white sheets closely wrapped around the figure's heads, hiding their faces, comment on an embrace that is undisclosed and forbidden (Figure 34). Zanele Muholi's photograph *Paris* (2013) similarly represents a sense of enraptured embodiment. In Muholi's photograph (Figure 35), a shower curtain or sheet is positioned in front of the lens and partially obscures the image. In the centre of the sheet or curtain however a small opening or peephole allows the viewer to look in on a private and intimate embrace between the artist herself, Zanele Muholi, and her partner Valerie. Magritte's painting (Figure 34) and Muholi's photograph (Figure 35) represent a moment of impassioned intimacy that the viewer becomes privy to. The spectator becomes an active participant in looking in on a moment of intimacy between two women and his/her voyeuristic position simultaneously makes him/her a vulnerable witness. This question of participant interaction and the subject of lesbian sexuality that is central to my work prompts me to ask the following question: Is the interaction with these camera obscura devices a reflection on the participant's own sexuality and is this subconscious curiosity a realm to explore these feelings, to question prejudice and shift understandings about shame or vulnerability? Mitchell (1986: 39) writes the following about the camera obscura:

First of all the camera obscura performs an operation of individuation, that is, it necessarily defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It implies a kind of 'askesis', or withdrawal from the world, in order to regulate and purify one's relation to the manifold contents of the now 'exterior' world. Thus the camera obscura is inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world.

Within the isolation that the chamber obscura provides, the participant or spectator is placed in a position that allows for deep contemplation, as an individual without any social pressures or guidelines. One's understanding of the exterior world is reversed, placed upside down and inverted, which initiates a curiosity to question our understanding of what the 'right-way-up' should be and what our perception of the 'right-way-up' is. Furthermore, the process of moving into the chamber obscura means that the spectator's sight slowly has to adjust from the exterior light to the interior darkness. This process forms part of a play on what we choose to see and that which we avoid seeing. The process of slowing down and the opportunity to reflect on that which we "see" thus gains significance as the projected image of the outside world becomes clearer inside the chamber obscura.

Conclusion



Figure 36: Abrie Fourie, *we have eyes to see but do not see*, (2013) Installation artwork Richmond, South Africa

Abrie Fourie's artwork titled *we have eyes to see but do not see* (2013) (Figure 36) is an installation piece, site-specific to Modern Art Project in Richmond, South Africa. Fourie's text or words are written on a white surface wall, in white, which is difficult to decipher at first glance but once the spectator takes his/her time to look closer, the words appear as if from nowhere. This white on white technique also emphasises blindness, as you struggle to focus on the illegible letters and to formulate the words. Similar to *First Stone, John 8:7* (Figure 30), Fourie's *we have eyes to see but do not see* (2013) used the medium of the artwork as a message to be deciphered by the spectator or participant. Because we don't immediately 'see' what has been written, we are faced with questions that focus around what we are actually 'looking' at and what the elements of the artwork are that we are not seeing. There is emphasis on time and the slowing down of time as we wait for our eyes to adjust and ponder the meaning of the words that appear letter for letter and then word for word, until we are able to decipher exactly what we 'did not see' in the first place. Fourie's title is also a biblical reference but instead of using the original verse, he changed *they* to *we* to include himself as an artist and viewer into the verse, instead of it just being the word of God.

In the same way that Fourie's work plays with the viewer's mind and eye, the chamber obscura also troubles traditional concepts of seeing. The chamber obscura work allows for the spectator to interpret and reinterpret that which he/she sees if they see anything at all.

Sight, either what we physically 'see' or what we metaphorically 'look at' is important throughout my thesis because in the first chapter lesbian lifestyles are difficult to decipher in historical representations of the *Two Female Friends* topos, but when one takes the time to slow down and engage with the artwork one is exposed to what one wouldn't necessarily see at first glance, much like Fourie's artwork *we have eyes to see but do not see* (2013) (Figure 36). These representations of lesbian couples 'coming out' refer to the meticulous and strenuous deciphering of hidden relationships depicted in photography and painting over many centuries. This historical perspective has inspired me to research how the past thus repeats itself through various representations of lesbian culture, lifestyles and forms of 'coming out', creating a lens through which we understand the present. Subtle 'coming out' narratives depicted within layers of visual and historical clues differ from bold, activist visual representations, yet both explore phases of the 'coming out' process, exposure to a conservative public, and interactions with an apprehensive spectator. In Chapter 1 it is evident that there is a history of lesbian representation in art but in Chapter 2 it becomes clear that there are challenges to "seeing" lesbian lifestyles through interpretation of mediums and concept.

The slowing down of time includes the time that it takes to create and experiment with specific mediums expressed in Chapter 2, the time that is represented as lingering within these representations, and the strenuous time it takes to find the courage to either confront yourself as a lesbian artist or to carefully interpret and represent a lesbian lifestyle or culture that is not willing to be exposed. All this contributes to the slowing-down process of understanding, acknowledging and considering various perspectives of a highly secretive and sensitive, almost traumatic topic: the theme of representing lesbian lifestyles and various forms of 'coming out', across historical distances.

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Visual Source Material

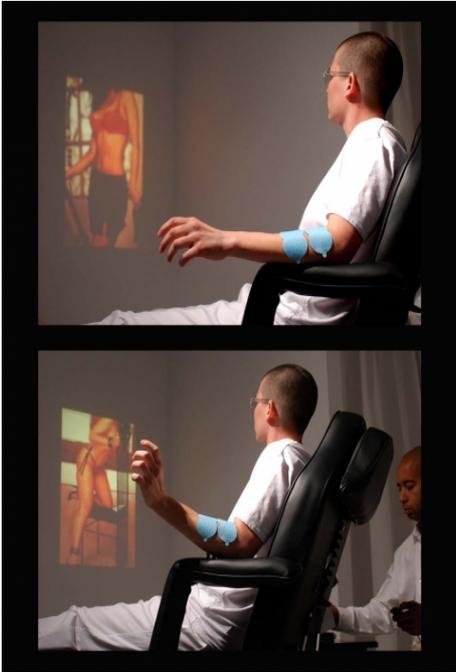


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

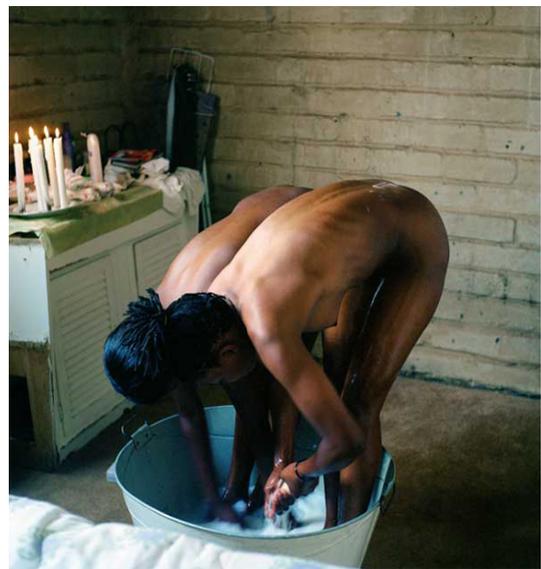


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33



Figure 34



Figure 35

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The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art

STRAINED INTERPRETATIONS STRAINED INTERPRETATIONS

The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art

STRAINED INTERPRETATIONS

multi-media exhibition by Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout

10 May - 19 May 2017

In partial completion with the requirements for the MA (Fine Arts) Degree, University of the Free State

Centenary Gallery, University of the Free State, 205 Nelson Mandela Drive, Bloemfontein

In Tribute and Loving Memory of:

Dot Vermeulen & Thato Antoinette Modriagale



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INTRODUCTION

Strained Interpretations constitutes photographs, installation art and sculpture which refer to contemporary lesbian lifestyles in South Africa, focusing on Bloemfontein and its surrounding areas. As a member of the lesbian community, and an artist, I explore the complexities of imaging and exposing lesbian lifestyles. The strain of identifying as and coming out as a lesbian, and the difficulty involved in imaging these lifestyles are examined in various media in the exhibition. The complex processes and production strain involved in each artistic medium is tied to the strain of imaging lesbian lifestyles. My work endeavors to draw the spectator into these strained and dynamic processes and through this process to initiate a dialogue on the difficulty of representing, exhibiting and viewing lesbian lifestyles. The lack of acknowledgement accorded to lesbian modes of living is thematised with reference to secrecy, 'coming out', and being a witness.

In contrast to the popular term "the snapshot" which suggests instantaneity, for instance, I explore slowing down and absorptive processes in the photographic medium. I consider strategies that may aid in slowing down the spectator's relation to photographic representations and narratives of everyday lesbian scenes. I investigate if these slowing down processes may facilitate a deeper understanding of the labour involved in imaging such lifestyles and encourage the spectator to relate to some of the hidden gestures embedded in the images. This process is an attempt at answering the broader question inherent in my work: Can a process of transformation or moral awareness be reached through an artistic process that initiates slowing down, absorption and lingering contemplation?

In the sculptural section of the exhibition, in the work *First Stone, John 8:9 (2016)* also focused on strain, spectators become participants and are required to pick up a heavy stone, thus exposing them to the physical strain involved in becoming a witness to the "scriptures" and religious condemnations which lesbians are often vigorously exposed to. The heaviness or weight of the stone is also related to the burden of the homophobia inherent in religious practices, and in a subtle way this work of art endeavors to encourage inner reflection and true witnessing on the part of the spectator. Witnessing through interaction, when one can touch, can manoeuvre, contemplate up close and potentially hold a part in one's hands, may enhance this sculptural experience of being burdened. In this section of the exhibition I ask how heaviness or weight is inherently part of the experience of the sculptural medium and how, as an interactive art form, it can have an impact in terms of the weight of responsibility on the spectator or participant. The question posed is whether the spectator thus becomes part of an active deciphering process of witnessing and unraveling the artwork. Weight and effort is inherent in the technical aspects of working with a medium such as cement or concrete and wood. All have a harsh and strenuous workability in the first place: from mixing the cement, to the hardening of the concrete, grinding to a finish or varnishing to perfection, techniques, all of which take time, strenuous time, lingering time. I ask whether processing this time in the creation of a heavy, burdensome artwork (both in its physical capacity and / or ethical emotional impact) has an effect on its reception. My artworks, *First Stone, qwJohn 8:7 (2016)* are reflections on the weight that is embedded not only in social criticism and judgments of homosexuals, but also the deep, painful shame and disgust that is associated with the perceived abomination of being a homosexual individual in the Christian faith.



Shifting (Sever)ity (2014) photographic print, 75cm x 75cm





Kate & Nadine (2013) photographic print, 1200cm x 586cm

The third element associated with strain in this exhibition concerns 'seeing' or the spectator's gaze or perception and is related to the installations of camera obscuras and Chamber Obscuras, *Untitled #1 and #2 (2017)*, *Camera Obscura #1 and #2 (2014)*. My work intends to challenge preconceived ways of 'seeing' and by inserting lesbian subject matter, thereby to destabilize the stereotyping of lesbians. The type of strain evidenced in the three dominant media in my exhibition differ and accordingly, so do the related themes. My photographic series *Periphery (2012 – 2016)* consists of seven large-to medium- format black-and-white photographs. The works subtly hint at and acknowledge the genres of documentary and conceptual photography without embodying either. The interpretive approaches to the lives and lifestyles of white South African lesbians hint at the marginalization of these narratives within a conservative society and culture. This explains the title of the series, *Periphery*, as a 'space' in which these lifestyles are experienced as being safe. Lastly perceptual and visual strain is brought about through my installation which employs 18th century techniques of creating chamber obscuras and various camera obscuras which project a reversed and inverted image through a lens onto the adjacent wall or transparent paper. These image devices include lesbian subject matter and are installed in such a way as to comment on the idea of visibility and the reality of lesbian lifestyles. The questions considered as central here include: What is the right way-up or upside down? What is socially acceptable normative behaviour and why?

The focus on the lesbian couple as subject matter also refers to the strain of interpretation of the historical topos of the

Two Female Friends. The investigation of and references to this historical topos in which overt lesbianism was shunned, simultaneously aids in my contemporary reinterpretation of lesbian lifestyles and of lesbian women 'coming out'.

Strained Interpretations seeks to challenge preconceived ideas about lesbian lifestyles, and foregrounds the importance of slowing down and contemplating the complexities involved in imaging such lifestyles. By challenging initial understandings of the subject matter, the exhibition aspires to remind the spectator constantly to slow down, contemplate, and through the experience of such subtle strain, to shift stereotypical and normative perceptions of lesbianism.

APORIA | BLIND ALLEY

In their book *Unresolved Images: An Introduction to Aporia as an Analytical Category in the Interpretation of Early Modern Art*, Nagel & Pericolo discuss the struggles of understanding difficult compositions and unreadable subject matter. Nagel & Pericolo refer to Polidoro da Caravaggio's technique when painting friezes in the 1400s. They endeavor to explain compositional confusion by using a 'path' as metaphor. They describe the traversed path from pre-existing compositions to an emerging new composition which leads back and forth from familiarity to dislodged understanding, new compositions replaced by or collaborating with pre-existing compositions. This complex switchback adds to the confusion of a defined interpretation of the original composition, and later on the understanding of subject matter. *Aporia*, as explained by Nagel & Pericolo is "a blind alley" and this

description ultimately aids in the understanding the strain of interpretation when considering the labour of imaging homosexual lifestyles. *Aporia* then contributes to the blind struggle toward a complex paradox of understanding in order to discover a way to design an innovative path. In this strenuous difficulty to decipher, contemplate and reevaluate subject matter, both artist and spectator-through various stages in the interpretation process fall into a state of quiet contemplation, which is an embodied form of slowing down. The gallery space of the Centenary Complex Gallery on the University of the Free State campus is strikingly isolated, removed from the public, almost invisible in character, and this makes it an ideal exhibition site to conceptually work with *Strained Interpretations*, because the exhibition investigates how the environment aids in the quiet contemplative state of deciphering a medium or subject matter that seems simple but is on the contrary complex and difficult. This deliberation of the unresolved creates within itself a bafflement or confusion that is intriguing for the viewer. Nagel & Pericolo's investigation, although focused on radically different Early Modern art, aids in unravelling strategies which involve drawing attention to the difficulties experienced by lesbians with regards to social acceptance and the interpretations thereof by participant or spectator. Nagel & Pericolo describe subject matter as a journey, a path that leads one to the discovery of what the image or sculptural work is trying to relay to you the spectator. They make us aware of how the artist may guide the spectators to slow down, contemplate the medium, composition and subject matter of the artwork presented to them through bodily strain over a prolonged period, and to acknowledge the emotional struggle that is clearly inherent in this performance.

Spectator or participant may consider the instigation of a new path or a new perspective. In order to investigate the effects of slowing down the process of interpretation, of giving spectators time to defamiliarize themselves from what they think they know and understand, what is represented before them, time to reevaluate, to inquire, to slow down and think of the medium in a new way, I refer to Nagel & Pericolo and their explanation of an *Aporia*, the forging of a new path, of new meaning constructed from old cloth.



Intimate Disclosure (2015) photographic print, 75cm x 68cm

PERIPHERY (2012 - 2016) (2016 - 2012) PERIPHERY

Periphery (2012 - 2016) is a photographic series that consists of seven black-and-white digital prints of large-to-medium formats, which were taken over a time frame of 4 years. The couples and individuals are photographed in Bloemfontein and in smaller towns in South Africa and have endured arduous struggles in their 'coming out' process. The strain and difficulty of gaining the trust of my subjects over several years, had an effect on the form of the works which cannot be classified conclusively either as documentary photography, or conceptual photography, but rather as something between the two. Instead of forced compositions or rigid instructions, my subjects led me down a path of discovering or forging a new solution, a path of subtle visual hints or clues to an existing struggle or a secretive lifestyle.

This process generated a new understanding and acknowledgement of lifestyles of people who were ready to start a dialogue with spectators, but who were still wary of scrutiny and criticism. I locate my work in this photographic series on the margin between Zanele Muholi's almost quantitative activist, documentary photography of lesbian lifestyles in South Africa, and Jean Brundrit's satirical exhibitionism of South African lesbian lifestyles. *Periphery (2012 - 2016)* aims to broaden preconceived ideas about lesbianism in South Africa and allows for a quiet space of contemplation, a space for the reconsideration and acknowledgement of hidden and secretive lifestyles.

SLOWING DOWN | ABSORPTION AND THE 'SNAPSHOT' | THE 'SNAPSHOT' SLOWING DOWN | ABSORPTION AND

Slowing Down in the context of my photographic series *Periphery (2012 - 2016)* is a reflection on how re-focusing attention on photography as a medium may aid in the slowing down of a spectator's relation and connection to art photographs and their narratives. I explore the absorptive qualities of this slowing-down process by analyzing absorption in photography, in ironic contrast to the popular term commonly associated with photography, namely the "snapshot" which suggests instantaneity. I investigate possibilities of the slowing down of time in the photographic medium. Slowing down also assists in understanding the labour of imaging lesbian lifestyles through a medium such as photography, which slowly reveals hidden gestures and clues, if the spectator takes the time to decipher these clues. This is one step in addressing one of the overarching questions of this section of the exhibition: could a lingering contemplation by the spectator through slowing down help to initiate a process of transformation in moral awareness in spectators or participants?

A snapshot is not a means of 'capturing' time, but is rather a lingering moment, ironically full, and an instantaneous, fully loaded depiction of a scene in history that will never be seen from that specific angle again. The realization that some artworks slow down our understanding of the "snapshot", artworks including photography, are strenuously difficult in preparation and method of production, as well as in their deciphering. "Snapshot" is not necessarily only a snap of the shutter to produce

an image; the image is rather filled with time, moments, and fullness in the sense that what can be read from a photograph potentially engrosses the spectator. History, memories and absorption embody a photograph. In *Kate & Nadine (2013)* which is an intimate and peaceful black-and-white photographic depiction of two female friends in a private home or domestic place, one figure is meticulously beading and threading a bracelet similar to the bracelets worn by each of the two friends, while the other is intently looking on. There is emphasis in the composition on the centrally placed hands and fingers of the bracelet-maker as she focuses on threading the beads one by one, taking time, effort and concentration. The skillful hands at the centre convey the slow passing of time during the performance of the difficult task. The bodily posture of the beader seems to contribute to the performance of the task. Her slumped shoulders and just barely open mouth convey an absorptive obliviousness whilst she is engrossed in the activity.

The female figure looking on is more relaxed and at ease, although her breasts, which seem to be standing to attention as if pointing toward the activity before her, reveal her captivation. The two female figures who are consumed in the single activity of threading the beaded bracelet – one for the other, creating a bond proudly worn on their arms for the world to see – communicate a sense of poignancy. The bond or intimate connection between the two female figures is underlined by the complementary elements of intertwined connectivity as though their bodies perform the essential role of puzzle pieces. The erasure or anonymity of the identities of the cropped female figures depicted in the monochrome photograph suggests that something is hidden or that

someone is purposefully left unexposed. It points to a secretive lifestyle that allows the viewer partial entry as a spectator, but restricts the viewer from seeing more. This secrecy subtly evokes the pathos of unknown sadness lingering in the monochrome space we are not afforded to see fully and experience unreservedly. What we are visually enlightened about is the subtle desire emitted by the intertwined touching of two female knees and legs, as if the figures are clasping each other's yearning. The muted visual cues, which can be read from the photograph, create uncertainty as to whether or not an intimation of erotic desire is purposefully suggested. However the powerful undertones guide the spectator to dwell on an intimate moment between two lesbian lovers, an occurrence which is rarely exposed in the South African public sphere.

WINDOW | GRIDS | DOORWAYS

- COMING OUT TO DOORWAYS -
WINDOW | GRIDS | DOORWAYS

The 'window' spaces in the Centenary Gallery are exploited as powerful links between the three media exhibited in the gallery. The natural light which pours through the large windowpanes across the distance of the hall, is a strong source of light for the chamber and camera obscura installations. Conceptually this exterior source of light (natural light) is significant when considering inner and outer space. The safe, almost isolated interior space of the gallery can be read as a form of entrapment or 'a private space' which is available to the public. Whereas 'public', in terms of lesbian lifestyles, is usually associated with 'exterior spaces' and 'private' with interior spaces, the bafflement or confusion surrounding the subject matter and 'coming out' is elevated by the use of windows, grids or doorways.



Threshold (2012) photographic print, 75cm x 68cm



Rain Check (2016), photographic print, cold press, 70cm x 40cm



Loyalty (2014), photographic print, cold press, 70cm x 40cm



Guidance (2015), photographic print, cold press, 70cm x 40cm

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- Nagel, A & Pericolo, L. 2010. *Unresolved Images: An Introduction to Aporia as an Analytical Category in the Interpretation of Early Modern Art*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

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Shifting (Sever)ity, 2014
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Sentec
75cm x 75cm

Figure 2 | Pg 6 & 7

Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
Kate and Nadine, 2013
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Sentec
1200cm x 585cm

Figure 3 | Pg. 10

Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
Intimate Disclosure, 2015
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Sentec
75cm x 68cm

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Mandi- Anne Bezuidenhout
Threshold, 2012
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Sentec
75cm x 68cm

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Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
Rain Check, 2016
Series Periphery, 1/3
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Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
Loyalty, 2014
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Coldpress
70cm x 40cm

Figure 7 | Pg. 17

Mandi-Anne Besuidenhout
Guidance, 2015
Series Periphery, 1/3
Photographic Print on Coldpress
70cm x 40cm

ARTIST INFORMATION

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ART AWARDS

ART AWARDS

2012

- **ABSA L'Ateleir Regional Finalist Exhibition**
(Title of Work Exhibited: Trend, a movement toward equality)

- **Oliewenhuis Fractal Young Artists Exhibition**
(Overall Finalist/Curator of Event)

- **University of the Free State**
(Best Conceptual Artist in Fine Arts Award)

2013

- **ABSA L'Ateleir Regional Finalist Exhibition**
(Title of Work Exhibited: Blurred Intimacy)

- **Sasol New Signature's Art Competition Finalist Exhibition**
(Title of Work Exhibited: Traumatrope)

2016

- **Phatsoane Henney New Breed Art Competition Finalist**
(Title of Work Exhibited: Shifting (Sever)ity – selected to be displayed at offices)

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CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

These representations of lesbian couples 'coming out' refer to the meticulous and strenuous deciphering of hidden relationships depicted in photography and painting over many centuries. This historical perspective has inspired me to research how the past is thus repeating itself through various representations of lesbian culture, lifestyles and forms of 'coming out' in order to understand the present. Subtle 'coming out' narratives depicted within layers of visual and historical clues differ from bold, activist visual representations, yet both explore phases of the 'coming out' process, and exposure to a conservative public, and interactions with an apprehensive spectator.

The slowing down of time includes the time that it takes to create and experiment with specific mediums, the time that is represented as lingering within these representations, and the strenuous time it takes to find the courage to either confront yourself as a lesbian artists or to carefully interpret and represent a lesbian lifestyle or culture that is not willing to be exposed. All this contributes to the slowing down process of understanding, acknowledging and considering various perspectives of a highly secretive and sensitive, almost traumatic topic: the theme of representing lesbian lifestyles and various forms of 'coming out;' in history.

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Mandi- Anne Bezuidenhout

Camera Obscura #2, 2015 – 2016

Wood, Glass and Transparent Paper

Installation Artwork

Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout

Irreversible #1, 2012

Series Periphery, 1/3

Photographic Print on Sentec

75cm x 75cm

Figure 2 | Pg. 8 & 9

Mandi- Anne Bezuidenhout

Camera Obscura #2, 2015 – 2016

Wood, Glass and Transparent Paper

Installation Artwork

Figure 3 | Pg.12 & 13
Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
Chamber Obscura #1, 2017
Installation Artwork

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Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout
First Stone: John 8:7, 2016 – 2017
Stone, Concrete and Wood
Installation Artwork

- **Sasol New Signature's Art Competition Finalist Exhibition**
(Title of Work Exhibited: Traumatrope)

2016

- **Phatsoane Henney New Breed Art Competition Finalist**
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This artwork is a powerful statement on the judgment of sin and the tolerance of homosexuals within the church structure in South Africa. The Bible has been interpreted from varying perspectives from ancient times until today and there are many versions of the original text that have been written under strong influence of that time. Religion is a fundamental structure within the culture of most South Africans and this view of homosexuality and the Bible has been used as a powerful weapon against the opposing construct of a healthy lesbian relationship or lifestyle.

Emotional abuse and hate crimes against homosexual individuals have been firmly based on the rules and regulations of specific religious groups which have instilled a 'corrective' stance in individuals who have a problem with the unknown or the fear of what homosexuality threatens. Most homosexuals who have come out of the closet or come out to their families have been faced with the very powerful wrath of religion and Bible bashing. This has forced most homosexual believers into a silenced communion or hidden fellowship and has led to the creation of this artwork. Not only does one read a Bible verse that has been embedded within the concrete of ***First Stone, John 8:7 (2016)*** backwards, but one becomes involved in the struggle to decipher the illegible writing in the concrete. When the spectator lifts the rock and holds it in his/her hand, he/she is left guessing or wondering what it all means until the spectator takes the time to look under the rock/stone in his/her hand and then only can he/she read the Bible verse from right to left, in legible writing. However the enlightenment in this process of interaction is significant when one realizes the weight of the words one holds in one's hand. Rocks/stones/bricks are used as a basic tool of violence and defence in many cultures

around the world. Because they are so accessible and universal, historically and biblically, a stone has the power to do major damage, to cause injury or even death. This power has then been placed in the hand of the spectator or participant. Is it possible that the weight of this power that has been given to the spectator or participant could subtly or slowly begin to make him/her reflect and shift points of view on homosexuality? Most people don't enjoy being confronted with the heaviness of this decision even without having a weapon placed in their hands and asking them to contemplate their judgment or criticism.



Do you not know that
the unrighteous will
not inherit the kingdom
of God? Do not be deceived;
neither fornicators, nor
idolaters, nor adulterers,
nor effeminate, nor
homosexuals.

1 Corinthians 6:9





First Stone, John 8:7 (2016), Installation artwork: wood, concrete, stone. 250cm x 250cm



Leviticus 18:22

“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”

Leviticus 20:13

“If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”

Romans 1:26

“For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural.”

Romans 1:27

“And in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.”

1 Corinthians 6:9

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals.”

1 Timothy 1:10

“for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.”





HEAVINESS & WEIGHT

In this section of the exhibition I ask how heaviness or weight may be interpreted as inherent strain. How can the experience of the sculptural medium be enhanced to become an interactive medium which may impact the spectator or participant as “the weight of responsibility”. Witnessing through interaction-when one can touch, can manoeuvre, can closely contemplate and potentially hold a part in one’s hands may enhance the sculptural experience of being burdened. The question is whether the spectator thus becomes more involved in an active deciphering process of witnessing and unravelling the artwork. Weight and effort are inherent in the technical aspects of working with a medium such as cement or concrete and wood. All have a harsh and strenuous

workability in the first place: from mixing the cement, to the hardening of the concrete, grinding it to a finish or varnishing it to perfection. These are techniques, which take time, strenuous time, lingering time. My artworks, *First Stone, John 8:7 (2016)* are reflections on the weight that is embedded not only in the social criticism and judgment of homosexuals, but also in the deep, painful shame and disgust that is associated with the abomination of being a homosexual individual in the Christian faith. The title of the artwork *First Stone, John 8:7 (2016)* is from the very well known Bible verse, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,” in John 8:7. In this verse the teachers of the law who sought punishment for an adulterous woman, confronted Jesus in a test of his teachings. As adultery was considered a sin and punishable by death, the teachers of the law tested Jesus’s response, while not expecting him to respond in the way that is referred to in the title. They contemplated his response and walked away without condemning the adulterous woman. Condemnation is a key issue in my work as it is an interactive sculptural piece where the spectator is encouraged to lift up the individual rocks or stones embedded in each of the six concrete blocks on wooden pulpits, in a circular installation. While the spectator or participant is physically holding the mildly heavy, hand-sized rock or stone in one hand, they are enlightened by a text or verse from the Bible (New International Version), which is carved away or written in the indentation that the rock has left within the concrete. This is inscribed backward, similar to Hebrew that is written from right to left. The inversion of the text as well as the indentation of the text in concrete which is a very hard and heavy material, seems out of place, and somewhat unlikely. The engravings within the six concrete indentations read as follows:

Chamber Obscura #1 (2017) Installation: Reconstruction
of 18th century device with natural and artificial light





the darkness or something within the light suggests the varied, difficult and complex realms in which we exist, look and consider. As a viewer one holds the power within a gaze over the object, which is presented before one. The hidden, secret, silent spaces that the peephole exposes is an intimate scene, which forces us to regard and consider. It is of added significance if the content which is being displayed through the peephole is of a sexual nature.

The active process of physically interacting with the installation of sculptural devices, allows for the numerous camera obscuras to achieve the status of a visual aid: the spectator/viewer/participant is physically drawn to the camera obscura devices in order to discover what is being projected in the box shape of the devices. This physical movement toward the camera obscura devices and the close and intimate position of peering, resembles the physical strain and movement of a participant looking through a peephole. A peephole points to the relationship between inner and outer spaces, looking from within toward the outside or from the outside within. Both the standing camera obscura artworks and the chamber obscura lure us into an internal space, which, aside from all of its illusion, gives the spectator a somewhat private show as if curiously sneaking a peek through a peephole. Spectators are invited inside, into an interior that is either big (chamber obscura) or small (standing camera obscuras) to experience something seemingly miraculous in the expanse of shifting perspectives and enlightenment. The round peepholes, convex lens and camera obscura surfaces relate the spectator to our subconscious understandings of the shape of the 'eye', and to vision. These visual devices open one's mind, to allow vulnerability to set in before a spectator can gradually absorb what is being exposed.

When confronted with the content of a homosexual nature, the sexual connotation to the peephole and the discomfort about public and private space come into play. Because a camera obscura, peephole, or peepshow function in both public and private spheres, the spectator is usually made a spectacle of in a public space as he or she gives in to temptation and peeps through a tiny hole or lens to see what is on the inside, in a public space. This act by the spectator is a form of entrapment, in a public space. The chamber obscuras in addition reverse the inner and outer spaces: rather than the spectator peeking through a peephole into a private space, the spectator finds his/herself entrapped within the private space exposed to the public space through a peephole.

The active process of physically interacting with my installed devices, allows for the camera obscura to attain the function of a visual aid. The spectator/viewer/participant is physically drawn to the camera obscura devices in order to 'see' what is being projected within the box shape of the device. The photographs portrayed are of lesbians in a romantic embrace, exhibited upside down so that when observed within the gallery space by spectators they appear to be inverted, up-side down and can only be viewed the right-way-up with the aid and use of the camera obscura devices, sparking curiosity within the spectator which will ultimately guide them to an alternative way of 'looking' or 'seeing' the photographs. My camera obscura devices symbolically invert the images of a culturally unaccepted embrace of lesbian lovers, but to view this intimate embrace the spectator or participant needs to move close to the device in a similar act of peering through a peephole, experiencing the artwork close up, moving into a vulnerable position

by placing themselves as spectators in a voyeuristic position. One's gaze as spectator is important because as the realization sinks in that one is being guided toward an alternative way of 'looking' or 'perceiving' the image before one, the powerful content of the image which was once obscured but is now visibly clear, can only be experienced in a vulnerable state, and individually.

INVERTED | UP-SIDE DOWN **INVERTED | UP-SIDE DOWN**

The chamber obscura is a naturally occurring phenomenon recorded since the 18th century. A small hole on one side of a dark chamber projects an inverted image of the outside view onto the surfaces of the room. On entering, the viewer may barely perceive the image; the room might appear to be completely dark. But as one's eyes adjust, the picture becomes increasingly apparent, growing brighter and revealing colour and detail of the projected image within the chamber space. The viewer is immersed in a continuous present, watching and listening, as much a part of the installation as of the view outside or inside the gallery space.

As this work is site specific, it was significant for me as an artist to select a gallery space that is mostly quiet or silent because contemplation is of great importance. I selected the Centenary Complex Gallery on the University of the Free State campus to exhibit these chamber obscuras because the natural light that streams in from afar in relation to the artificial light in the gallery, is a combination of interior and exterior light. The chamber obscura chamber will allow for as many spectators as possible to sit inside

of the projected area and experience the external world projected on the adjacent walls in the same way in which the standing camera obscuras invert the external world.

While the spectator sits in the chamber obscura, the image projected on the adjacent wall is of participants or spectators curiously looking or 'peeping' through the camera obscura devices. These devices are then positioned to aid in seeing a photograph which is upside down in the gallery space the right way up. This allows for a sense of movement within the externally represented image, which the spectator will experience upside down. While spectators settle down to orientate themselves within this seemingly 'virtual reality', the chamber obscura presents a fresh perception on internal and external spaces or realities, but because the chamber obscura will reflect an 'exterior space' which is still an interior gallery space within an 'interior space' which is the chamber obscura, we are questioning not only interior vs. exterior, our position within public and private space, but also the depths of observing a projected image in a dark space where the projected image is displayed up-side down on the adjacent wall from where the lens is directed.

Only further bafflement occurs by being a witness to a witness whose vulnerability is exposed by 'peeping' through the camera obscuras at a photograph of an intimate embrace between a lesbian couple in the gallery space. Does the camera obscura house within its 'abnormal' interior, a safe space in which to release this grip and defuse the image which would allow not only the liberation of the spectator's imaginative depth, but also a 'correction' of perspective and a 'reversibility' of social and cultural constructs?





Camera Obscura #2, 2015 – 2016, Wood, Glass
and Transparent Paper, Installation Artwork:
250cm x 250cm

VULNERABILITY | PEEPING TOM VULNERABILITY | PEEPING TOM

Peepshows were large structures that were specifically designed so that most typically men would be able to gaze through a peephole to see a performance by undressing or naked women, or were smaller devices which were coin generated and would displace erotic films through a small peephole or magnifying glass. This activity is known as a Peep-Show and the person taking part in this activity is known as a Peeping Tom, a person who derives sexual pleasure from secretly watching people undressing or engaging in sexual activity. My camera obscura devices resemble these in design and display and rely on spectator interaction for the devices to work. They place the participant in a vulnerable and unexpected position, which is not anticipated and is somewhat of a surprise.

Our acts of vision and the way in which we perceive reality portray a resemblance to inner and outer spaces, looking in to observe the outside or (as the anatomical eye for example perceives objects, shapes, texture and so forth) from the outside in. These various directions of observation are important: the inside which observes the outside, and the outside which is emitted from the inside. A peephole, makes us aware of the effect of inner and outer spaces, looking from within toward the outside or from the outside within. Peeping through the cracks or through a circular hole to something in



Irreversible #1, 2012, Photographic Print on Sente 75cm x 75cm

BURDENSOME WITNESSING | RESPONSIBILITY

The artist's experience of the creation of the work differs from the witness experience (of the spectator or participant) of a work. One asks whether the allowance of time for inner contemplation, of slowing down, can lead to the instigation of a witness experience in the participant and how this witness experience may be enhanced. Kelly Oliver's discussion in *Witnessing Beyond Recognition (2001)* of spectatorship as a responsibility, for the things we see and the things we don't see, argues that in slowing down, a time is allowed for reflection and self-awareness, instigating a witness relation. "We are obligated to witness beyond recognition, to testify and to listen to testimony – to encounter each other – because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing. That is to say, subjectivity and humanity are the results of response-ability." (Oliver 2001:90) With this response-ability Oliver is suggesting that it is within all of our abilities, both as spectators or participants, to conjure a positive or negative response to other humans.

We may argue, that this response shift applies also to artworks created by humans, for humans. The weight of a loaded concept within artworks burdens an artist in terms of the production, as well as the spectator, in terms of the response. The strain of interpreting or deciphering an artwork is a journey which entangles and enraptures the spectator within the composition and subject matter of an artwork, as it has been argued in the opposite section of this catalogue. The resistance to the unknown is described by Nagel & Pericolo in their book *Unresolved Images: An Introduction to Aporia as*

an Analytical Category in the Interpretation of Early Modern Art. In this section I ask whether enticing the spectator to become part of the sculpture enhances witnessing and taking responsibility for interacting with subject matter. I ask further if witnessing can be experienced as burdensome, if it becomes a stumbling block to the spectator, if the spectator can begin to feel implicated by these sculptural works - if the spectator or participant may be compared to being a witness who is implicated because he or she has witnessed a crime, accident or incident. The spectator may then be compared to a spectator giving testimony to what he or she has borne witness to, and is faced with the gravity of the situation, which is burdensome. A burden of witnessing sculptural artworks that are interactive to the point of luring one to become a participant or spectator, into a space where one's witnessing becomes a responsibility.

As a spectator one is placed in a position within the public space of a gallery to respond to an interactive work of art. The physical movement toward a peephole device or camera obscura already aligns one as spectator to a position of being a witness to what one is looking at. This position of being a witness carries its own burden of testimony, judgment and obligation, being unwillingly placed in a role which carries responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Strained Interpretations constitutes photographs, installation art and sculpture which refer to contemporary lesbian lifestyles in South Africa, focusing on Bloemfontein and its surrounding areas. As a member of the lesbian community, and an artist, I explore the complexities of imaging and exposing lesbian lifestyles. The strain of identifying as and coming out as a lesbian, and the difficulty involved in imaging these lifestyles are examined in various media in the exhibition. The complex processes and production strain involved in each artistic medium is tied to the strain of imaging lesbian lifestyles. My work endeavors to draw the spectator into these strained and dynamic processes and through this process to initiate a dialogue on the difficulty of representing, exhibiting and viewing lesbian lifestyles. The lack of acknowledgement accorded to lesbian modes of living is thematised with reference to secrecy, 'coming out', and being a witness.

In contrast to the popular term "the snapshot" which suggests instantaneity, for instance, I explore slowing down and absorptive processes in the photographic medium. I consider strategies that may aid in slowing down the spectator's relation to photographic representations and narratives of everyday lesbian scenes. I investigate if these slowing down processes may facilitate a deeper understanding of the labour involved in imaging such lifestyles and encourage the spectator to relate to some of the hidden gestures embedded in the images. This process is an attempt at answering the broader question inherent in my work: Can a process

of transformation or moral awareness be reached through an artistic process that initiates slowing down, absorption and lingering contemplation?

In the sculptural section of the exhibition, in the work *First Stone, John 8:9 (2016)* also focused on strain, spectators become participants and are required to pick up a heavy stone, thus exposing them to the physical strain involved in becoming a witness to the "scriptures" and religious condemnations which lesbians are often vigorously exposed to. The heaviness or weight of the stone is also related to the burden of the homophobia inherent in religious practices, and in a subtle way this work of art endeavors to encourage inner reflection and true witnessing on the part of the spectator. Witnessing through interaction, when one can touch, can manoeuvre, contemplate up close and potentially hold a part in ones hands, may enhance this sculptural experience of being burdened. In this section of the exhibition I ask how heaviness or weight is inherently part of the experience of the sculptural medium and how, as an interactive art form, it can have an impact in terms of the weight of responsibility on the spectator or participant. The question posed is whether the spectator thus becomes part of an active deciphering process of witnessing and unraveling the artwork. Weight and effort is inherent in the technical aspects of working with a medium such as cement or concrete and wood. All have a harsh and strenuous workability in the first place: from mixing the cement, to the hardening of the concrete, grinding to a finish or varnishing to perfection, techniques, all of which take time, strenuous time, lingering time. I ask whether processing this time in the creation of a

heavy, burdensome artwork (both in its physical capacity and / or ethical emotional impact) has an effect on its reception. My artworks, **First Stone, John 8:7 (2016)** are reflections on the weight that is embedded not only in social criticism and judgments of homosexuals, but also the deep, painful shame and disgust that is associated with the perceived abomination of being a homosexual individual in the Christian faith.

The third element associated with strain in this exhibition concerns 'seeing' or the spectator's gaze or perception and is related to the installations of camera obscuras and Chamber Obscuras, **Untitled #1 and #2 (2014), Chamber Obscura #1 and #2 (2017)**. My work intends to challenge preconceived ways of 'seeing' and by inserting lesbian subject matter, thereby to destabilize the stereotyping of lesbians. The type of strain evidenced in the three dominant media in my exhibition differ and accordingly, so do the related themes. My photographic series **Periphery (2012 – 2016)** consists of seven large-to medium- format black-and-white photographs. The works subtly hint at and acknowledge the genres of documentary and conceptual photography without embodying either. The interpretive approaches to the lives and lifestyles of white South African lesbians hint at the marginalization of these narratives within a conservative society and culture. This explains the title of the series, Periphery, as a 'space' in which these lifestyles are experienced as being safe.

Lastly perceptual and visual strain is brought about through my installation which employs 18th century techniques of creating chamber obscuras and

various camera obscuras which project a reversed and inverted image through a lens onto the adjacent wall or transparent paper. These image devices include lesbian subject matter and are installed in such a way as to comment on the idea of visibility and the reality of lesbian lifestyles. The questions considered as central here include: What is the right way-up or upside down? What is socially acceptable normative behaviour and why?

The focus on the lesbian couple as subject matter also refers to the strain of interpretation of the historical topos of the Two Female Friends. The investigation of and references to this historical topos in which overt lesbianism was shunned, simultaneously aids in my contemporary reinterpretation of lesbian lifestyles and of lesbian women 'coming out'.

Strained Interpretations seeks to challenge preconceived ideas about lesbian lifestyles, and foregrounds the importance of slowing down and contemplating the complexities involved in imaging such lifestyles. By challenging initial understandings of the subject matter, the exhibition aspires to remind the spectator constantly to slow down, contemplate, and through the experience of such subtle strain, to shift stereotypical and normative perceptions of lesbianism.

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*Because of this,
God gave them over
to shameful lusts.
Even their women
exchanged natural
sexual relations
for unnatural ones
Romans 1:26*

STRAINED INTERPRETATIONS

multi-media exhibition by Mandi-Anne Bezuidenhout

10 May - 19 May

In partial completion with the requirements for the MA (Fine Arts) Degree, University of the Free State

Centenary Gallery, University of the Free State, 205 Nelson Mandela Drive, Bloemfontein

In Tribute and Loving Memory of:

Dot Vermeulen & Thato Antoinette Modriagale

The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art

STRAINED INTERPRETATIONS

The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art