

## Spectacularising Resistance: Zanele Muholi and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter Address GBV

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19634916

### Abstract

*This article explores the transformative power of activism. Protest art is geared toward social or political objectives and serves as an instrument of change. The article focuses on two processes: spectacularisation (artwork as spectacle) and redirecting the spectacle (onto the viewer-as-perpetrator or complicit bystander through the oppositional gaze). By focusing on these strategies, the analysis demonstrates how art can become a catalyst for social reform. The analysis explores how two contemporary artists employ the strategy of spectacle to disrupt the normative gaze and assert collective agency. Visual activism is crucial within the context of systemic gender-based violence (GBV) and erasure, particularly addressing issues like 'corrective' rape. The article addresses the urgent need to challenge violence structurally entrenched by cisgendered power that regulates who has the right to live and be free. The research employs a qualitative methodology framed by Black feminist and decolonial theory to analyse visual content. The study uses intersectionality to explore the interlocking systems of oppression impacting Black women and queer individuals. The primary case studies are Zanele Muholi's photographic series *Faces and Phases* (2006-ongoing) and Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* (2016). Results indicate that both artists use visual defiance to transform narratives of victimhood, asserting agency and refocusing the gaze. Muholi's work uses a counterarchival strategy, and *Lemonade* utilises spectacle to position Black women's bodies in defiance.*

**Keywords:** Spectacularising, Counterarchive, Feminism, Oppositional Gaze, Activism, Gender-based Violence

### Introduction

In the global and local context of systemic violence, protest art is making a spectacle of an issue to politicise the commentary of both the artist and the viewers' responses. Protest art uses art as a tool with a political purpose that encompasses awareness, struggle, and policy change (Pauwels, 2022, p. 124). Govender and Moodley (2025, p. 22) define activism as "protesting artistically or arts used as a form of protest." Socially engaged art activism serves as a powerful medium for confronting pervasive social injustices, such as gender-based violence (GBV) and the enduring legacies of colonialism and racial oppression. This article addresses the central role of spectacular visual production through spectacularisation, which magnifies the agency of those who are systemically marginalised and subjected to violence. The focus of this article is on the work of South African visual activist Zanele Muholi and

American artist Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, who both use art as a spectacle to highlight human rights issues and the participants in their art use the defiant oppositional gaze to redirect the spectacle onto the viewer.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a public health crisis and a global human rights violation, manifesting in diverse forms – sexual, physical, psychological, and economic (CGE, 2024, p. v; Enaifoghe et al., 2021, p. 119). Capitalist, racial, and gendered systems treat certain populations (especially women, racialised, and poor communities) as disposable, akin to “humans-as-waste” (Yates, 2011). GBV is a gendered form of the waste of potential. While GBV disproportionately impacts women and LGBTQIA+ persons, GBV touches everyone in particular ways, as the term GBV is inclusive.

In the South African context, this crisis is deeply rooted in history. The prevalence of GBV is alarmingly high, stemming from past inherited policy failures, with the apartheid legacy that contributes significantly to high levels of violent crime (Jugmohan & Devroop, 2025, p. 29-30, Enaifoghe et al., 2021, p. 119). GBV remains a persistent crisis in South Africa, shaped by historical inequalities, entrenched patriarchy, and systemic failures. In 2020, one in five women reported experiencing GBV, with seven women killed daily (Mkwanzani & Nathane-Taulela, 2024, p. 1). Between April 2022 and March 2023 alone, South Africa recorded 53,498 reported sexual offences, including 42,780 rapes (CGE, 2024, p. v). Violence directed against Black transgender women, in particular, is structural and rooted in patriarchal cisgender power structures that represent them as devalued others, exacerbated by apartheid legacies of racialised economic marginalisation (Shabalala & Wessenaar, 2023, p. 50).

Visibility campaigns are criticised by activists for being “limited to awareness and with no concrete intervention plans to bring services that are needed in communities to combat violence” (Mkwanzani & Nathane-Taulela, 2024, p. 4). For example, public demonstrations such as the *One Billion Rising* campaign and artistic interventions in South Africa, including performance art, street theatre, and photography, often involve pointed imagery, direct addresses to the audience, or symbolic enactments of defiance. The lack of concrete intervention plans is made more evident by awareness campaigns such as the annual 16 Days of Activism against violence towards women and children. However, these acts do spectacularise the issue by turning GBV into a visible, undeniable presence in public and media spaces, compelling viewers to confront structural inequalities and the social conditions that enable violence.

In artistic contexts, spectacularising can include portraiture that employs confrontational gazes, staged settings, or visual symbolism that resists victimisation, where participants’ direct gaze and compositional strategies assert dignity, presence, and defiance (Van Der Vlies, 2012, p. 146). In this way, spectacularisation functions as both a political and aesthetic tactic: it renders GBV highly visible while reframing survivors and communities as agents rather than passive victims.

### **Targeted Violence: The Reality of ‘Corrective’ Rape**

Specific communities face targeted harms. GBV is directed against individuals based on their “gender identity or gender performance” or their “location in the hierarchy of masculinities” (Chujo, 2025, p. 58). Corrective rape is a form of GBV that targets queer people and is defined as the use of sexual assault to correct a sexual orientation (Mutero, 2025) and to enforce heteronormative performativity norms. This form of rape is fuelled by heteronormative gender hierarchies and patriarchal cultural norms that historically accept sexual violence against women and disregard their bodily autonomy (Mutero, 2025). The

persistence of corrective rape underscores the need for interventions and creative pathways that address GBV by fostering resilience. Corrective rape is a deliberate form of GBV targeting lesbian women, aimed at enforcing heteronormative and patriarchal norms (Mutero, 2025).

In her article, 'Beyond the surface: understanding the cultural roots of corrective rape in South African townships', gender and culture researcher Vimbai Mutero (Mutero, 2025) underscores that corrective rape is not merely an act of individual homophobic violence. Corrective rape is entrenched within broader structures of systemic inequality and culturally sanctioned patriarchal norms about femininity and masculinity. However, the term "corrective rape" is misleading, as it incorrectly implies that lesbian identities require rectification (Mutero, 2025). Silence and complicity at the community level means that community leaders and police often treat corrective rape as a "private matter" or as culturally justified discipline, and this silencing normalises the violence (Mutero, 2025). To combat this silencing, artists use the gaze as a tool of resistance. The gaze is fundamentally political, functioning as a mechanism of control and a means of establishing authority. The patriarchal gaze reinforces power and control over those viewed as inferior, subjecting women to a critical gaze that both documents and questions them (hooks, 2014, pp. 115–131). Countering the patriarchal gaze, the oppositional gaze is viewed as a strategy for resisting or defying authority. Within this context of systemic violence and erasure, protest or struggle-oriented artists use creative practices as instruments of change. In this paper, I use the word 'struggle' because in South Africa, this word is active and political. This article examines how Muholi and Beyoncé employ the strategy of spectacle to assert agency and catalyse resistance. I will argue that by intentionally spectacularising their subjects and by presenting them visually in ways that command attention and refuse invisibility, these artists challenge the objectifying gaze and transform representations of victimisation into collective acts of defiance. Importantly, the possibility exists that viewers in the audience who are victims also have the opportunity to identify with the participants in the portraits and to feel that they are part of a collective.

In this article, spectacularisation is theorised not as sensationalism or voyeurism, but as a critical strategy that challenges the patriarchy, demanding accountability from the audience members who are also perpetrators or complicit bystanders. The primary research questions addressed are:

- **How do Muholi's and Beyoncé's works feature activism regarding GBV and community cohesion?**
- **What struggle art techniques do Muholi and Beyoncé utilise to achieve this spectacular defiance?**

Existing scholarship on Muholi extensively examines themes of visibility, archiving, and the ethics of representation (Poulain, 2019; Van Der Vlies, 2012). Muholi consciously aims to decolonise the canon of Black body representations, particularly Black female bodies (Poulain, 2021). Muholi and their participants claim the right to appear in the political sphere, contesting their people's relegation to invisibility or misrepresentation, thereby constituting a visual counternarrative (Poulain, 2019, p. 4). The existing critiques of Muholi's work predominantly frame spectacle in terms of the risk of commodification, voyeurism (Van Der Vlies, 2012, p. 142), or aestheticising of suffering (Poulain, 2019, p. 2). However, critics rarely consider how spectacle might also be deployed positively as a countervisual strategy that confronts viewers, asserts agency, and resists the silencing effects of GBV. Muholi's work actively counters by having her participants "return the viewer's gaze" and claim "the

right to look” for themselves (Poulain, 2019, p. 6). Spectacularising as defiance has not yet been applied to Muholi’s portraiture. Little attention has been paid to how her visual strategies can be read through frameworks of spectacle and defiant presence.

Art-based activism involves using visual media to pursue a political agenda, particularly on human rights issues (Muholi, 2021). Muholi (2025) voices a strong need to counter corrective rape with an activist strategy:

**‘Curative rape’ is used on us. That forces me to redefine what visual activism is. If I were to reduce myself to the label “visual artist”, it would mean that what I’m doing is just for play, that our identities, as, is just art. Art needs to be political – or let me say that my art is political. It’s not for show. It’s not for play. [...] I’m calling myself a visual activist, whether I am included in a show or not, whether I am published or not. That’s my stance as a person, before anything else, before my sexuality and gender.**

### Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The analysis in this article is guided by Black feminist thought, race theory, intersectionality, and the oppositional gaze.

### Politics of Gaze and Strategy of Spectacularisation

The visual strategies employed by Muholi and Beyoncé centre on establishing a countervisuality that challenges the politics of the gaze, particularly the historical objectification of Black and female bodies. Among these strategies is the oppositional gaze. In the chapter ‘The Oppositional Gaze’ in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks (2014, p. 115) describes the concept of the oppositional female gaze that is more than just the opposite of the male gaze; it is a perspective shaped by women’s individual experiences, and influenced by factors such as race, culture, and class. The oppositional gaze becomes a tool of resistance in Muholi’s and Beyoncé’s works by challenging social and cultural norms around gender and representation.

This strategy shifts the focus from the victim to the observer. Crucially, counternarratives are achieved by the participants returning the viewer’s gaze (Poulain, 2019, p. 6). This inversion of the gaze disrupts the normative visual economy by denying perpetrators the anonymity that often shields them, compelling them instead to occupy the position of the scrutinised. In so doing, the work subverts the spectacle of victimhood and redistributes visibility in a manner that re-centres where accountability lies. The portraits’ collective orientation functions as a moral mirror that implicates viewers and demands that they interrogate their hesitation to act, their silence to speak, and, consequently, their complicity.

In *The Right to Look: A Counter History of Visuality*, philosopher Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) argues that the right to look requires a mutual gaze, where each person invents the other, an ethical transaction that Muholi’s photographic realism attempts to create. Muholi’s subjects transform the viewer into a participant, inviting a reciprocal exchange of looks that challenges the historical ethnographic and criminological traditions of using photography to catalogue and subject Black South African bodies to surveillance (Garb, 2011)).

This article investigates how Muholi’s portraiture mobilises spectacle as a tactic of defiance against GBV and erasure in South Africa, situating her practice in dialogue with the visual spectacularising strategies Beyoncé uses in *Lemonade* regarding victims of violence against Black Americans. This curatorial redirection of the gaze within the gallery space by Muholi and the visual albums by Beyoncé reconfigures the dynamics of spectatorship by redirecting the gaze away from victims of GBV and toward the perpetrators themselves.

Traditionally, representations of GBV have too often positioned survivors as the spectacle, compelling audiences into modes of viewing that risk reproducing dynamics of objectification and voyeurism. By contrast, in this curatorial arrangement, Muholi's participants staring from the walls become a collective presence – an imagined crowd whose attention is fixed firmly on those who have enacted harm.

The portrait and video participants gaze at the viewer, confronting the identified perpetrator and the complicit bystander who are encountering the installation. Audience members who are not perpetrators are positioned within the scene as witnesses to this confrontation, and their role is not neutral. The implied question for the spectator audience becomes: How long can you remain a spectator and deny meaningful allyship? In destabilising passive forms of looking, the work calls into question the adequacy of mere acknowledgement or sympathetic observation. The confrontational strategy reframes the encounter as a site of ethical demand, where the gaze becomes an insistence on receiving a response.

### **Relocating the Spectacle by Spectacularising the Perpetrator**

This research proposes using spectacularising as a framework to recognise the potential of Muholi's work as a reparative, resistant strategy that subverts the victim narrative. Muholi's celebration of queerness' otherness from the patriarchal norms and the reframing of victims of patriarchal violence as not-victims who redirect the Western objectifying gaze back at the spectator, relocating the spectacle from the victim to the perpetrator. Firstly, the gaze is a self-reclamation and an assertion of agency and, secondly, the gaze would make uncomfortable both the perpetrator and those who do not act to defend the victim. In a gallery of portraits, the collective gaze becomes a public act of resistance.

The performers in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* intentionally interact with the camera, also seeking eye contact with the audience (Hartmann, 2017, p. 7). The album features women participants who have been targets of online hate, collectively framed against landscapes that evoke, present, historical, and antebellum pasts (Joshi, 2021), including well-known women of colour such as Serena Williams and Winnie Harlow. This presentation is a spectacle that asserts "communal agency" and presence, wherein Beyoncé subverts negative images of diverse Black bodies and celebrates sass and truth-tellers (Fain, 2021).

By framing the research in this way, this research suggests that spectacularising can be used as an artistic practice to redirect the gaze towards creating pathways that can be employed with striking visual, performative, or media strategies to make the invisible visible, disrupt complacency, and foreground the agency and resilience of survivors. By bringing together Muholi's and Beyoncé's participants' direct gaze and spectacularising of Black presence, this study proposes that spectacle can be a strategy of resistance that reclaims visibility, asserts dignity, and challenges the systemic and structural violences underpinning GBV.

### **Systemic, Gendered Violence**

The article uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, p. 139) notion of intersectionality as a crucial analytical framework, as it addresses how single-issue analyses perpetuate treating race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience. For example, single-issue analyses result in the theoretical erasure of a particular race, class, or gender. Although intersectionality initially focused on Black women, the intersectional lens includes an understanding that the factors that instigate violence are experienced by all genders (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 155). The intersectional lens reveals GBV to be systemic, intersecting physical, sexual, psychological, and economic forms of harm (Chujo, 2025, p. 51) that are

hegemonised (Villa Braslavsky, 2025, p. 201): “[GBV’s] repetitive patterns [are] rooted in entrenched practices, social justifications, and systemic normalisation”.

### Methodology: Case Study Artivism

This research employs a case study methodology for theorising visual artivism. The case study approach is qualitative and affective, exploring contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, allowing for a deep understanding of complex issues rather than relying on abstract generalisations (Yin, 2003, p. 7). Using case studies drawn from artmaking is appropriate as it allows for “thick descriptions” of GBV and a deep understanding of its causes and consequences (Buscatto et al., 2025, p. 11). Although here Pauwels (2022, p. 131) is describing South African art galleries, this statement is globally relevant:

**The art world [is a] space used by socially engaged artists and civil and political actors to battle out some of the country’s key political, racial, gender and class struggles with varying means, methods, interests, legitimacies, and degrees of success.**

This research focuses on struggle art. The artistic creation is intentionally geared towards social or political objectives. The primary case studies for this paper are Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* (2006-ongoing, South African) and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s *Lemonade* (2016, American)

### Findings

Muholi and Beyoncé are both globally influential Black artists who engage with racialised and gendered systemic violence, offering contrasting yet complementary insights into the role of visual activism across different cultural and commercial spheres. Muholi’s portraiture is deeply embedded in South African queer activism and the physical threat of corrective rape, while Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* engages with the recurrent racialised violence against African Americans. The comparative analysis of Muholi’s exhibition, *Faces and Phases* (2006-ongoing), and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* (Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, 2016) reveals how these contemporary case studies successfully employ spectacle to achieve political and social objectives, thereby enacting artivism.

### Case Study 1: Zanele Muholi and the Counterarchive

Muholi’s work provides a physical record of existence and resistance. Muholi (2025) rejects the passive label of “visual artist”, instead identifying as a visual activist before anything else because their work deals explicitly with human rights and a political agenda. Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* photographic series of hundreds of Black and white portraits began specifically to commemorate Muholi’s friend Busi Sigasa, a survivor of corrective rape, who died shortly after the project started (Poulain, 2019, p. 1). Sigasa contracted HIV as a consequence of the attack and died eight months later at the age of 25 (Poulain, 2019, p. 1). The series participants’ involvement in shaping their representation is central to Muholi’s counterarchive (Van Der Vlies, 2012, p. 147), ensuring that images are not merely taken but are collectively made. Muholi explicitly refers to *participants* rather than *subjects*, emphasising the participants’ active role in knowledge co-construction and resisting objectification (Muholi, 2020).

This study highlights the self-determination in the production of the archive. Muholi rejects the passivity implied in the word *subject* (Poulain, 2021), foregrounding instead the co-creative process in which participants are active narrators of their own visual presence. The linguistic shift from *subject* to *participant* embodies Muholi’s commitment to ethical representation, resisting traditions of ethnographic and colonial photography that objectified Black and queer bodies.

The series documents and witnesses the gender-based and hate-based violence endured by Black LGBTQIA+ individuals in South Africa. Muholi and the participants risk public identification as queer, accepting the heightened potential risk of exposure to violence for the sake of being a collective body in a public space (Poulain, 2019, p. 5). This visual strategy challenges dominant discourses of victimhood by affirming Black queer beauty, agency, and existence in the face of persistent violence (Greenberg, 2020; Jensen, 2020). This photographic strategy is explicitly defined by Muholi as visual activism, as they focus their documentary photography and portraiture of Black LGBTI people in South Africa, specifically Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and intersex persons (Muholi, 2020). The core motivation is self-representation, in which the community documents their own existence and asserts their worthiness (Muholi, 2020) on their own terms. (Muholi, 2025) **“We should be counted and certainly counted on to write our own history and validate our existence.”** Victims in the audience are offered the sense that they are part of the struggle collective on the walls. Muholi’s head-and-shoulders framing choice is key to the strategy of spectacle and defiance, demanding that the viewer and the photographed person engage with each other, transforming each portrait into a biography that helps others know they are not alone (Muholi, 2020). The significance of the participants’ direct gaze into the camera in Muholi's work is less about making Black lesbians visible and more about “engaging with the regimes that have used these women's hypervisibility as a way to violate them” (Gqola, 2006, p. 84). Also, the stare refuses invisibility and confronts the viewer with the reality of Black queer existence (Poulain, 2021). Through their gazes, the participants reclaim visual power, transforming the act of being seen into an act of ‘seeing back’.

### **Zanele Muholi: Visual Activism and the Counterarchive**

This active stance that aligns the participant with the authorship of their image deliberately distinguishes Muholi's photographic documentary practice from earlier South African creative writing and journalism, which often favoured the “hegemony of the spectacle” – an aesthetic of shock and excess used to represent oppression (Ndebele, 1986, p. 143). Muholi (2025) urgently asserts that visual activism is necessitated by the threat of violences such as “curative rape”.

Muholi’s commitment to self-representation and documenting Black LGBTI lives (Muholi, 2020) directly combats this erasure. Through spectacle, queer African art seeks to foster spaces of agency for queer lives to thrive, countering societal processes of silencing and shaming rooted in hetero-patriarchal regimes (Matebeni et al., 2018, p. 13). The resulting portraits, through their direct, “in your face” gaze (Muholi, 2020), perform a gazing back strategy (Poulain, 2019), disrupting the normative, often voyeuristic, gaze that seeks shame and silence. Eventually, these analyses reinforce the core political stance of Muholi’s self-designation as a “visual activist” (Muholi, 2025), affirming that the most impactful cultural production in the face of deep-seated violence is that which explicitly seeks political outcomes. Muholi’s portraiture demonstrates how spectacular display challenges the type of media hypervisibility that sensationalises stories of hate crimes and its victims (Poulain, 2019, p. 6). Muholi seems to follow W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1899) counterarchival strategy presented in *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, which argued that alternative archives challenge racist narratives by documenting Black achievement and dignity. In the same way, Muholi resists the relegation of Black queer people into invisibility or misrepresentation and claims with them the “right to appear” on their own terms (Poulain, 2019, p. 3). For Muholi, the collective act of self-representation in *Faces and Phases* fosters community cohesion, enabling viewers to know they belong (Muholi, 2020).

The Black and white portraits in the *Faces and Phases* series document the lives of Black LGBTI people, providing a visual history often excluded from the mainstream canon (Muholi, 2020). This photographic project functions as a counterarchive to racist and homophobic narratives (Poulain, 2019, p. 2). The portraits assert collective identity and utilise spectacular display to challenge the type of media hypervisibility that sensationalises victims' stories of hate crimes (Poulain, 2019, p. 2). The subjects' gaze is consistently directed at the viewer in a direct and unsettling manner, creating an enigmatic power that compels viewers to respond in "aesthetic, ethical, and political terms" (Poulain, 2019, p. 2).

### Case Study 2: Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and Collective Agency and Resilience

In *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé employs similar strategies of visible defiance. Black women's bodies are positioned in spectacular defiance of the white gaze. An example in *Lemonade* is Serena Williams, who twerks in defiance of the criticism she received for twerking (Smith, 2018). Many of *Lemonade's* participants are women, queer, transgender, and non-binary people, who are all more likely to be subjected to GBV and thus need creative freedom in depicting what has happened to them and responding visibly (Bull, 2025, p. 136), thereby transforming victimhood, asserting agency, and refocusing the gaze. The visual album serves as a multilayered artwork that intertwines mass culture, technology, and social discourse, addressing complicated narratives of race, history, culture, and identity (Joshi, 2021, p. 11). The work is a countervisual intervention that centres the "ethnic and race-related struggles that African Americans (and especially women) have faced" (Joshi, 2021, p. 301) and presents women gazing directly into the camera as an active collective (Hearn, 2019, p. 160):

***Lemonade's* manifestation of Black female bodies should be reread as an attempt to make visible the collective effort of Beyoncé, the dancers, and other female artists involved in the work of representing female power, sexuality, and solidarity.**

The album's scope is inclusive, also regarding GBV against men, where the mothers in their lives, such as Sybrina Fulton, Lesley McSpadden, and Gwen Carr, silently speak up while gazing into the camera and holding portraits of their sons killed by vigilantes or police (Joshi, 2021, p. 54). *Lemonade* intertwines personal stories of pain, Beyoncé's own journey of navigating infidelity, mothers' suffering arising from police brutality and racial violence, the racialised consequences of Hurricane Katrina and #BlackLivesMatter (Hearn, 2019, pp. 155, 160), and victims of enslavement and sexual exploitation in antebellum America (Joshi, 2021, p. 60). The album serves as a broader intersectional text. Focusing on only one intersection may perpetuate the "tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Crenshaw (1989, p. 158) offers the example of rape:

**"The singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror. [...] When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically: their femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection."**

By inclusively spectacularising, *Lemonade* functions both aesthetically and politically as a Black feminist cultural text (Joshi, 2021, p. 19) to confront structural forms of oppression and systemic GBV faced by both men and women. *Lemonade* addresses a "collective sense of crisis" concerning the politics of race, class, and gender (Hearn, 2019, p. 156).

### **Beyoncé's Lemonade: Spectacular Defiance**

*Lemonade* employs the strategy of spectacle to assert Black women's agency, featuring female participants whose bodies are positioned in spectacular defiance. The work constitutes a countervisual intervention that demands the right to look and appear (Butler, n.d.; Mirzoeff, 2011). This strategy is leveraged for political outcomes, such as fostering awareness and behavioural change. By centring Black women's struggles, *Lemonade* transforms victimhood narratives into an assertion of collective agency, connecting personal narratives of pain to the broader explorations of Black history and culture (Joshi, 2021, p. 12). The attitude of assertion is evident in the video participants' clear, defiant gaze at the camera, particularly in scenes that portray their anger.

### **Artivism and the Redirection of the Spectacle**

Violence against Black bodies is structurally and systemically entrenched (Shabalala & Wessenaar, 2023, p. 71). Spectacularising is a strategy that centres the issues the artists want to address, and the oppositional gaze within that spectacle redirects the spectacle to the viewer. Therefore, the importance of artivism cannot be overstated because it redirects the gaze away from the victim and towards the perpetrator. Visual artivism serves as a potent vehicle for social change by presenting the spectacle as a deliberate political instrument. Making protest art is inherently about making a spectacle of an issue to politicise the commentary of both the artist and the viewer. Both Muholi and Beyoncé move beyond mere aesthetic production, employing the strategy of the spectacle to disrupt the normative gaze and assert a collective agency. Central to this strategy is the active role of participants, whom both artists position as co-creators and active narrators rather than passive subjects. In Muholi's *Faces and Phases*, these participants claim their "right to appear" in the political sphere, while in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Black female bodies are positioned in spectacular defiance of the white, patriarchal gaze. By utilising the oppositional gaze, participants intentionally interact with the camera to seek eye contact with the audience. This gaze functions as a countervisuality that challenges the historical objectification of Black bodies and aims to decolonise the canon of representation. Crucially, this strategy redirects the spectacle away from the traditional narrative of victimhood and focuses it directly on the viewer. This redirection denies perpetrators the anonymity that often shields them, compelling them instead to occupy the position of the scrutinised. Furthermore, the oppositional gaze addresses the broader audience by offering victims collective support, by accusing perpetrators, and by challenging complicit bystanders to act. By destabilising passive forms of looking, the work acts as a moral mirror for perpetrators and bystanders. The mirror demands that bystanders interrogate their own hesitation to act or speak out and demands accountability and behaviour change from perpetrators. This visual activism is not merely for "show" or "play", rather, it is reparative, resistant, and seeks concrete political outcomes. Artmaking that creates a spectacle and redirects the spectacle transforms vulnerability into visible strength, fosters community, and creates a shared visual language that asserts the worthiness and existence of marginalised groups.

### **Conclusion**

Nevertheless, the critique provided by Black feminist theory and the author's positionality within the ambivalence of whiteness, the interpretive interventions here acknowledge the scepticism of Black scholars as quoted by Matthews, 2021, p. 1115. They are designed to be reflexive, continually interrogated, and strictly subordinated to Black, queer-led, and indigenous knowledge production. The findings portray the strategic use of spectacle in visual artivism, informed by Black feminist and decolonial theory, that challenge

pervasive gendered power relations and structural violence. Both case studies operate in the highly contested space of the art world, which serves as a battleground for key struggles over politics, race, gender, and class as evinced by Pauwels, 2022, p. 131. The visual defiance demonstrated by Muholi and Beyoncé is fundamental to challenging GBV. Although the following comment was in the context of trans lives, it is equally true of all gendered violence. Violence has been structurally entrenched by systems of cisgendered power that "regulate who has the right to live and be free," as quoted by Shabalala & Wessenaar, 2023, p. 71. By redirecting the gaze and documenting existence, these visual artists challenge this basic structural foundation of violence. Finally, activism fosters unity and strength in these cases. Both Muholi and Beyoncé use visual media to transform vulnerability into visible strength and employ spectacle strategy to disrupt the normative gaze and assert collective agency to liberate. The spectacular nature of these two case studies builds community cohesion by creating a shared visual language and a point of reference for marginalised groups. This strategy of spectacle is particularly powerful in activism, where the work deliberately seeks political outcomes, such as fostering awareness, policy engagement, and behavioural change.

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**Author Contribution Statement:** NIL

**Author Acknowledgement:** Thanks to TUT Arts Campus.

**Author Declaration:** I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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