

## PREFACE

*[The preface below was read aloud to all attending the public meeting that was held at the South African National Gallery on 15 December, with the exception of the section marked in blue. There was a tremendous sense of urgency in the room. I felt the need to abbreviate my introductory comments, and as such did not end up reading the final section, though I stand by the content of that section.]*

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I am about to read you a letter that communicates the collective views of all of the women artists whose work has been included in *Our Lady*, with the exception of the deceased artist Constance Stuart Larrabee. It has not been an impossible task to collaborate with ALL OF THE WOMEN whose work is represented on this exhibition. For all the grand feminist claims that are made for the exhibition by the curators (and in the press material that has been released around the exhibition), only 7 of the artists in the exhibition are not men, out of a total of 27 artists.

For the historical record, it must also be said that most of the artists who have been given voice in this exhibition are dead white men. Of the 20 men whose work appears on this exhibition—and keeping in mind that the context of this exhibition is contemporary South Africa (a reality that it is perhaps too easily ignored in the city of Cape Town)—only ONE BLACK MAN is represented. That black man—Zwelethu Mthethwa—is currently on trial for violently murdering a woman. The fact that a group exhibition consisting of 27 artists and taking place in the context of contemporary South Africa features the work of only one black man, and the fact that this particular black man is currently on trial for murder, is beyond tragedy or farce. Given the demographics of this country, I leave it for others to elaborate on the implications:

What is implied about our broader culture and about the common prejudices that still pertain to black men in our culture, when, in a group show of this scale, hosted by the South African NATIONAL Gallery, not only are all black men represented by a single black man.... Even more egregiously, all black men are represented by a single black man who is currently in court facing charges of violent murder.

The letter that I am about to read to you draws together the shared opinions of Bridget Baker, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Khanyisile Mbongwa, Deborah Poynton, Tracey Rose and Penny Siopis.

For complex reasons, pertaining mostly (but not only) to the various specificities and experiences of being a woman in our world today, none of the women who have signed the letter that I will shortly read to you can be physically present in this room. They want it to be known that their physical absence is unavoidable and that they would be here if they could:

Njideka Akunyili Crosby gave birth a couple of days ago via caesarean section.

Penny Siopis has just undergone surgery to rule out the possibility that she might have breast cancer.

Tracey Rose is in Buenos Aires trying to balance preparation for the first major solo exhibition of her work in Argentina—which opens tonight at the *Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires*—with taking care of her four-year-old son.

Khanyisile Mbongwa is in Barrydale working on a puppetry production as the executive director of the Handspring Trust.

Bridget Baker is at work on the set of a shoot and could not get permission from the production to take leave from her post to be here today.

Deborah Poynton is currently in Germany.

Because none of these artists can be present with us today, they've asked me to read a letter that they have all contributed to extensively and approved, a letter which I've had the privilege of compiling and editing on their behalf.

The aim of the group in submitting this letter is not only to radically reconfigure the exhibition that is under discussion, but also to nurture and broaden a productive and forward-looking debate around the issues that it addresses.

It is important to say that that the signatories of the letter stand in solidarity with SWEAT—the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce—whose excellent advocacy we admire. Many of us have felt, over the last week or two, that we should allow SWEAT to lead the way in protesting *Our Lady*, that we should follow and support their lead rather than attempting to lead ourselves. My own thinking in this regard was shifted as a result of my brief communications with Ishtar Lakhani of SWEAT, who put forward the following challenge when she wrote to me:

*"I think that [Iziko] would have liked us to play a bigger role [in the event at the South African National Gallery today] but with the launch of our #SayHerName Campaign as well as a number of programs we have running we just haven't had the capacity to lead on this in any way [...]."*

*We will be attending, not in large numbers as it is also the last day of the year for our office and there is a lot to wrap up. What I told Ingrid (the woman from the gallery that contacted me) is that the exhibition is problematic for a number of reasons, Mthethwa being just one of them. I think the point of this discussion is to try and address the other issues [...]. I would encourage all those who take issue with the exhibition to mobilise and act. Given the work that we do [as SWEAT], we are most concerned about the voice of Nokuphila, but there are so many other things problematic about this exhibition that we are in no way experts on.”*

We—myself and the signatories of the letter—accept SWEAT’s call for parallel mobilisation and accept it as our responsibility to lead the protest against *Our Lady* from inside the art community, starting with the letter that we have collectively drafted.

It is not comfortable for me to read this particular letter in this particular context and at this particular moment in time. The letter focuses on a strong belief that is shared by all of the women who have signed it, the belief that far more public space and public representation needs to be afforded to the voices of women of Colour. So it is odd and awkward to have a white woman reading the letter to you. In an ideal scenario, this letter would not be read to you by a white voice, and certainly not by one like mine, which exudes privilege. White voices continue to take up too much space in our public sphere.

However, after considerable discussion of the circumstances—between the six women artists and myself—it was agreed that it would be inappropriate to ask an ally from outside the group of signatories to deliver a letter that expresses opinions that belong to us. So, as per the wishes of the women artists who are represented in *Our Lady*, and as a matter of transparency and accountability, I will now read the letter to you:

15 December 2016

Dear Rooksana Omar (CEO of Iziko Museums),

Dear Ernestine White (Acting Director of Iziko South African National Gallery),

Dear Kirsty Cockerill, Candice Allison and Andrea Lewis (co-curators of the exhibition, *Our Lady*, currently on display at Iziko South African National Gallery),

We, the undersigned, write to you today to demand that all remaining works of art by the signatories of this letter be withdrawn immediately from the exhibition titled *Our Lady*, an exhibition curated by Candice Allison and Kirsty Cockerill (of the New Church Museum) and Andrea Lewis (of the National Gallery). We acknowledge that our request may already have been met in relation to some of the relevant works of art, by the time this letter is officially submitted to Iziko. Though we hold nuanced and divergent views as artists and as individuals, we wish to collectively express our insistence on having our work withdrawn from *Our Lady*, in urgent response to the exceptionally problematic nature of the exhibition.

The press material that has been released to the public in support of *Our Lady* claims that the exhibition "celebrate[s] empowered female capacity," "interrupt[s] the typical traditional moral attitudes and male-dominated stereotypes that surround imagery of the female form," and offers "a contemporary narrative demanding that women be viewed as strong, empowered beings." In our shared opinion, the exhibition falls disastrously short of these claims in its current form, for a variety of reasons, the most obvious and pressing of which are addressed below:

Despite three (White) Women curators having co-curated *Our Lady*, it is impossible to overlook the fact that 75% of the artists included in the exhibition are men. This fact alone renders the curatorial claims cited above disingenuous and highly objectionable. While it might be argued that the exhibition seeks to bring a historical perspective to the issues that it sets out to frame, the many historical works by men that are included (the majority of which represent Women through the staid conventional lens of patriarchy), could quite easily have been supplemented by a broader selection of works which, in juxtaposition with these historical works by men, might have challenged the visual language of patriarchy and given voice to alternative narratives. South Africa has no paucity of artists who critically reflect on gender in their practice. In light of the curatorial rhetoric that *Our Lady* puts forward, the perspectives of Women, Trans and Non-Binary artists are heinously under-represented in the exhibition. Of the 27 artists whose works are included, a mere seven are Women. Considerably more shocking—(indeed appalling, considering the demographics of our society)—is the fact that only three Black Women are represented. Given the history and

present of our country, we cannot accept how disastrously short the exhibition falls, particularly in terms of creating space for artistic statements from a wider and richer range of identities, a range that might come closer to reflecting the lived reality of South Africa.

Furthermore, given the curatorial premise of the exhibition, we are outraged by the curators' decision to include the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa. As is well known within the art community, Mthethwa is currently being tried for the violent murder of **Nokuphila Kumalo**. Though he will remain innocent until proven guilty, the worth and memory of **Ms Kumalo** are brutally undermined by the curators' decision to showcase a work by her alleged murderer in the exhibition parallel to his ongoing trial.

Adding insult to what we regard as a severely injurious curatorial decision, the particular work by Mthethwa that appears in *Our Lady* is a portrait of a Black Woman, who the artist chooses to treat as *anonymous*. Given the accusations that have been levelled against Mthethwa, and in light of the curatorial focus of this exhibition, the inclusion of a photograph of an unnamed Black Woman by Mthethwa reiterates a dominant tendency in our culture at large; that is, the propensity to view the most precarious in our society—including Black sex workers such as **Ms Kumalo**—as faceless, nameless and disposable non-entities who are not worthy of individual regard or dignity. We view the inclusion of Mthethwa's work in this particular exhibition, at this particular moment in time, and in this particular context (the National Gallery of South Africa) as basely insensitive and publicity mongering at best. At worst—again, in light of the charges that Mthethwa is currently facing—we read the curatorial inclusion of this particular artist's photograph of an *anonymous* and as such non-particularised Black Woman, as tacitly participating in the broader erasure of the voices of Black Women from our national narrative.

We cannot accept this callous curatorial practice. Nor can we accept the callous public statement that has been made by one of the curators, Kirsty Cockerill, in defence of the exhibition. In response to widespread public criticism, Cockerill has argued that, “the decision to show the work [by Mthethwa] was a carefully considered plan to open up dialogue, rather than pretend these problems in society don't exist” (*Mail & Guardian*, 1 December 2016). We view this argument as deeply cynical and blithely tone deaf. It is highly inappropriate and crassly opportunist to treat the violent, lonely death of a Woman—whose alleged murderer is still on trial—as casual curatorial fodder, a mere “opportunity for dialogue.” We sincerely doubt that a similar curatorial move would have been considered or given official sanction by the National Gallery, had the murdered Woman been a White and/or middle-class Woman, rather than a Black Woman who lived and died at the margins of our society, servicing its needs. The impassive attitude that this exhibition expresses towards **Ms Kumalo** (as well as towards those who loved her and continue to mourn her), mirrors the tragically low esteem in which Black Women have been—and continue to be held—in South Africa today. Whether intentionally or not, the inclusion of only three Women of Colour in a survey exhibition setting out to “celebrate empowered female capacity” in the context of contemporary South Africa, can only serve to

perpetuate attitudes of this nature. The press material for *Our Lady* rightly observes that throughout the history of representation, “Women’s bodies have been used as symbolic objects, representing political, erotic or aesthetic ideals, rather than representing individual female subjects,” only to go right ahead and perpetuate such injustice via the blunt inclusion of Mthethwa’s work in the exhibition.

In the press material for *Our Lady*, the curators also claim to have specifically and strategically organised this exhibition to coincide with ‘16 Days of Activism,’ a campaign aimed at raising awareness around the high rate of violent crimes against Women and Children in South Africa. The disproportionately few works by Women that this exhibition includes—hung alongside a relative plethora of works by dead white men (as well as one work by a black man who is suspected of violently murdering a Woman)—completely undermines the integrity of this strategy, making it impossible not to read the scheduling of the exhibition in relation to ‘16 Days of Activism’ as expedient and insincere. For all of these reasons, we stand in solidarity with SWEAT—the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce—who have strongly condemned the Iziko South African National Gallery for its decision to include Mthethwa’s artwork in *Our Lady*. As Ishtar Lakhani of SWEAT has said, “The irony of promoting the work of a man accused of murdering a woman as part of an exhibition aimed at empowering women, is not wasted on us.” (*The Citizen*, 28 November 2016)

We wish the anger that this letter expresses regarding the inclusion of our works in this exhibition to be understood in relation to the fact that the exhibition is hung at the most prestigious art institution in this country—the South African National Gallery. It would be hard to overlook the problematic nature of *Our Lady* in any context. It is all the more impossible for us to accept the curatorial conceits underlying the exhibition in view of the fact that it has been endorsed by an institution that has an official mandate to be representative of our society, as well as a special duty to redress—especially at the level of representation—the radical social inequity that continues to characterise South African society. Oscar Pistorius was denied the honour of competing athletically under the South African flag while he was on trial for having violently murdered Reeva Steenkamp, an affluent White Woman. We neither understand nor accept the National Gallery’s extension of the prestige of representation at a national level to Mthethwa as he stands trial for the murder of **Ms Kumalo**, an impoverished Black Woman who ought certainly to be afforded the same degree of posthumous dignity as Ms Steenkamp.

For all of the above reasons, we demand that you remove our works from this exhibition without delay. We cannot and will not accept the inclusion of our works alongside Mthethwa’s work, in an exhibition that is supposedly intended to celebrate Women and disrupt patriarchal violence. We cannot and will not allow our works to be framed by curatorial assertions that the exhibition itself reveals as hollow, cynical and insensitive in the extreme, not only to the memory of **Ms Kumalo** (and by extension to the many who face the same prejudices that are directed against Women of her social status), but also to all who believe that the

lives of Women are valuable, regardless of their race, class, social status or profession.

The presence of our works in *Our Lady*—and in the publicity materials that have been distributed to accompany the exhibition—can only be read as supportive of both, which is all the less acceptable to us in light of the fact that we were not consulted before our works were incorporated into the exhibition, nor—for the most part—informed that our works had been included after the fact. We are not *your ladies*. We refuse to endorse this shameful exhibition in its current form. In memory of **Nokuphila Kumalo**, for Women artists, and for all Women who have been and continue to be nonchalantly erased from taking a rightful seat at the table, we demand that you remove our works from this exhibition immediately.

Yours urgently,

**Bridget Baker**  
**Njideka Akunyili Crosby**  
**Khanyisile Mbongwa**  
**Deborah Poynton**  
**Tracey Rose**  
**Penny Siopis**

**Note:** This open letter compiles extensive content and commentary contributed by all of the Women whose works were curated into *Our Lady* (with the exception of the deceased artist Constance Stuart Larrabee). It communicates the collective opinions of the six artists (listed above). Candice Breitz contributed to, formulated and edited the letter in active collaboration with the artists, and with the kind support of Farzanah Badsha and M. Neelika Jayawardane.