

Dear Rooksana Omar (CEO of Iziko Museums),

Dear Andrea Lewis and Ernestine White (and the curatorial team of the South African National Gallery),

WAYS OF SEEING, WAYS OF HEARING

Many strong voices resonated during the intense public meeting that was hosted at the South African National Gallery on 15 December 2016. The purpose of the meeting was to create a public platform for productive discussion of the exhibition formerly titled *Our Lady*, to a large extent—but not only—in response to the inclusion of the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa on the exhibition. The public meeting was charged with a sense of heightened political urgency, manifesting as a series of voices that would not be silenced.

In addition to public statements made by representatives of the National Gallery (including Ernestine White and Andrea Lewis) and the New Church Museum (Kirsty Cockerill and Candice Allison), an open letter that was signed by all of the (living) Womxn artists represented on ~~Our~~ *Lady* was read aloud to those attending the meeting. This collective letter demanded that all works made by its signatories be immediately withdrawn from ~~Our~~ *Lady*, as a gesture of protest against the exhibition (the letter elaborated the principles of this protest in some depth).

At the same meeting, a range of other participants put forward a series of related demands, proposals and potential points of action. Constructive opinions were offered first and foremost via the voices of activists (in particular, members of SWEAT and Sisonke), but also via the voices of artists, writers, curators and other members of the public. Diverse voices merged to articulate a collective call to the National Gallery, urging the responsible curators to discursively transform ~~Our~~ *Lady* in such a manner that the exhibition might serve as a site for reflection and productive public debate around the various critical questions that ~~Our~~ *Lady* has thus far failed to sufficiently engage.

A follow-up e-mail that was sent to the National Gallery after the public meeting (on 19 December 2016), sought to summarise the demands, proposals and potential points of action that had been voiced at the meeting, in the spirit of taking up a valuable opportunity to engage in critical dialogue with a national institution.

We were heartened by the hasty response of the National Gallery, a response that came in the form of a media statement, issued on 21 December 2016. In the statement, the National Gallery acknowledges that it is crucial for public institutions to

remain flexible and responsive to their constituencies. In addition to expressing a general commitment to building a national culture in which museums might serve as “vehicles of engagement,” “catalysts for social change,” providers of “safe platforms of discourse” and instruments of an “inclusive society,” the statement articulates the National Gallery’s commitment to continuing the important conversation around *Our Lady*, and its sincere intention to reconfigure the exhibition in the early days of January 2017.

We embrace this positive momentum and continue to believe that it is possible to radically transform *Our Lady* in such a manner that the critical need to address the rampant violence that is directed against Womxn and others who are marginalised in our culture can be compellingly communicated within the reconfigured exhibition; in such a manner that the voices of SWEAT and Sisonke can be meaningfully amplified within the existing framework of the exhibition (rather than being swept under the skirts of *Our Lady*); and in such a manner that the ongoing debate that the exhibition has prompted can be extended and rendered transparent for a wider public. While the National Gallery has yet to respond adequately to the various urgent questions that have been raised around *Our Lady*, it has indicated a willingness to listen and to respond when members of the community raise their voices, as we must from time to time if we care about our national institutions.

The National Gallery’s media statement provides a description of the current condition of *Our Lady*. It explains that: “Currently, only works from the Iziko Art Collections are showcased in the exhibition halls.”

1. It confirms that all works of art by the signatories of the collective letter (in other words, the works of all living Womxn artists on *Our Lady*) have been removed from the exhibition (some of these works had already been taken down by the National Gallery prior to the public meeting on 15 December 2016, in response to requests made by individual artists).

2. It also confirms that The New Church Museum—the private collection with which the National Gallery partnered to curate *Our Lady*, and also the source of virtually all of the contemporary works on the exhibition—elected, without warning, on the morning leading up to the public meeting on 15 December 2016, to withdraw all works that were on loan to the National Gallery for the duration of *Our Lady* (although the exhibition is not scheduled to close until 11 June 2017). During the public meeting held later that day, neither the National Gallery nor The New Church Museum were willing to clarify why all works belonging to the private collection had suddenly disappeared from the walls of the museum, nor by whose agency. As of the date of this letter, The New Church Museum has neither explained the dramatic timing of this withdrawal, nor offered any explanation as to why it unilaterally retracted all of the works that it had loaned to the National Gallery until June 2017 (including a number of works by artists who had not requested that their works be removed from *Our Lady*).

As a result of the two parallel gestures of withdrawal described above (on the one hand, a principled and politically-motivated withdrawal of works by artists represented on the exhibition; on the other, the mysterious withdrawal of works by a private collection), there is little about ~~Our~~ *Lady* that is 'ladylike' at this point in time. Although the visiting public still has access to the exhibition, the current condition of ~~Our~~ *Lady* might best be described as 'lady-less.' We value the National Gallery's decision to refrain from censoring the empty wall space that has emerged as a result of the two parallel gestures of withdrawal. We nevertheless feel that the remnants of the exhibition—a handful of sparsely installed representations of Womxn (as viewed almost exclusively through the eyes of dead white men)—are inadequate to the institutional challenge that lies ahead. The challenge, as we see it, is for the National Gallery to discursively reconfigure the exhibition such that museum visitors can be invited to reflect on—and develop a position in relation to—the urgent critical and political questions that the public protests against ~~Our~~ *Lady* have forced into voice:

THE VOICES OF ACTIVISTS MUST BE HEARD!!!

The National Gallery's media statement (21 December 2016) acknowledges that the public dialogue around ~~Our~~ *Lady* has "brought into collective consciousness a very real, current social issue," and that, "the pain, hurt and anger expressed must be acknowledged." It mentions that the National Gallery is grateful to have been able to "support the work done by SWEAT and Sisonke in making visible the voiceless and silenced." If there is one hope that has been shared unanimously by all who have contributed to the ongoing debate thus far, it is the fervent hope that meaningful space might be created within the exhibition for the voices of the activists who have come forward to protest the inclusion of the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa in ~~Our~~ *Lady*. Activists from SWEAT and Sisonke have given moral direction to the current debate. Their voices must be afforded platform within the framework of the transformed exhibition, as a matter of priority. The principled arguments that they have put forward in defence of the dignity of sex workers such as Ms Nokuphila Kumalo must be made present such that they can be available to all visitors for the remainder of the exhibition. In the follow-up letter sent to the National Gallery on 19 December 2016, we put forward a request that would be effective in this regard, as well as easy to honour:

The most obvious way to make the voices of SWEAT and Sisonke resonate in an accessible and transparent way in the space of Our Lady, would be to make use of the documentation of the public meeting held on 15 December 2016. The meeting was documented in full by a videographer employed by the South African National Gallery. The footage filmed to document the meeting could be projected in the space that was previously dedicated to Ed Young's work. This space has the advantage of occupying an introductory position within the geography of the exhibition. What better way to make the voices of SWEAT and Sisonke heard within the exhibition for its remaining duration, than to literally make the voices of SWEAT and Sisonke heard?

To embed the footage recorded on the 15 December 2016 in the exhibition space would be to offer the visiting public unmediated access to the voices of SWEAT and

Sisonke, as well as to the voices of a broad range of other individuals who have participated in the debate precipitated by the exhibition. To continue to absent the voices of sex workers and other activists from this urgent debate is to continue to silence individuals who are perpetually and violently silenced by our society. The National Gallery is in a position to break that silence. We ask you to do so without further delay.

THE VOICES OF THE PROTESTING ARTISTS MUST BE HEARD!!!

The letter put forward collectively by all of the Womxn artists represented on ~~Our~~ *Lady*—to request withdrawal of all works by these artists from the exhibition—was a discursive intervention that sought to render an urgent debate accessible to the general public for the remaining six months of the exhibition. The gesture of withdrawal of works by The New Church Museum, on the other hand, can only be described as opaque. At the public meeting held on 15 December 2016, it was made clear by Kirsty Cockerill (the director of The New Church Museum), that The New Church Museum has no regrets in relation to the curatorial structure of ~~Our~~ *Lady*, nor in relation to the inclusion of the work of Zwelethu Mthethwa on the exhibition. In the absence of any subsequent statement from The New Church Museum to explain the collection's withdrawal of works that had been promised to the National Gallery on loan for the full duration of the exhibition, we can only assume that this particular withdrawal was motivated by a desire to protect private assets, rather than as a conciliatory gesture or matter of principle.

The visiting public has a right to be granted access to an understanding of the forces and agents that have shaped and disrupted the exhibition thus far. We ask the National Gallery to take the necessary curatorial measures to distinguish between the two gestures of withdrawal that have stripped ~~Our~~ *Lady* bare. Although these gestures of withdrawal have produced the same formal result (empty wall space), they could not be more distinct in their motivation. We are concerned that the exhibition—in its current form—withholds the necessary information that would make it possible for the visiting public to distinguish between empty spaces that have been carved out by private interests, as opposed to empty spaces that are the result of a public protest that was staged collectively by artists to the ends of bringing a debate that is of broad political relevance to the public at large.

During the public meeting (and again in the follow-up letter subsequently sent to the National Gallery on 19 December 2016), the artists who signed the collective letter of withdrawal proposed a simple strategy by means of which to give visual presence to their protest within the space of the exhibition:

In the place of each work of art that is taken down, the artists demand the permission to hang the collective letter of withdrawal, so that each artist remains present where they were previously intended to be present. We very much hope that this demand can be respectfully met. Again, it is very much in the interest of transparency, and of extending the debate to a larger public. The museum has indicated a wish to hear the voices of these artists (inasmuch as it included their works in the show). Now these same artists are asking that

you allow their voices to be heard, but via the collective letter rather than via their works. No expense is involved. The collective letter could be simply attached to each vacant space, without any fanfare.

Thus far, a single copy of the collective letter has been made available to the public within the space of ~~Our~~ *Lady*. We are utterly perplexed by the National Gallery's clumsy contextualisation of this document of protest. Rather than honouring the request that multiple copies of the letter be hung in the spaces left vacant by works withdrawn by Womxn artists (the signatories of the collective letter), the National Gallery has chosen to place a single copy of the letter in a lot left vacant by The New Church Museum's withdrawal of a work by a male artist (Cameron Platter). This curatorial move collapses and conflates two gestures of withdrawal that we strongly urge the National Gallery to understand and frame as distinct.

WITH PUBLIC SPACE, COMES PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY!!!

We believe that the public has a right to understand why a private collection has elected to silently withdraw a series of loaned works that had been committed to an exhibition in a national institution until June 2017. Public institutions should not be playgrounds for private interests. Ideally, The New Church Museum should step forward to offer a statement explaining why it has defaulted on its promised loan of several works for the full duration of the exhibition. Such a statement could be hung in the gaps left by each of the works that the collection has withdrawn. For the time being—and until The New Church Museum decides to be accountable—may we suggest that the National Gallery consider providing its visitors with a simple explanation in each empty space left by the withdrawal of a work by The New Church Museum, a label that could offer visitors to the exhibition a modicum of transparency:

A work titled *She was the most Beautiful Woman he had ever seen* (2005)—by the artist Cameron Platter—previously hung in this space. The work was loaned to the South African National Gallery by The New Church Museum (a private collection) for the full duration of this exhibition, which was formerly titled *Our Lady*. The New Church Museum decided to withdraw the work from the National Gallery on 15 December 2016, hours before a public meeting was held to discuss protests that had erupted in response to the exhibition. The New Church Museum has not offered a public statement to explain its premature withdrawal of this loan from the exhibition. The exhibition is scheduled to close on 11 June 2017.

MUSEUM VISITORS MUST BE GIVEN ACCESS TO THE DEBATE!!!

A powerful debate languishes at the skirts of ~~Our~~ *Lady*. Due to the current state of the exhibition, this debate remains inaccessible to most museum visitors. As the National Gallery decides on the curatorial steps that it will take in order to render the ongoing debate accessible to the broader public for the next six months, we ask the institution to make bold decisions that will allow the voices of the protesting artists and activists to resonate accessibly and meaningfully in the public space that the exhibition occupies. The critical voices that have stripped the walls of ~~Our~~ *Lady* bare

must be allowed to sound in the exhibition such that the public at large can hear them.

We view the South African National Gallery as an ally and a partner, but also as an institution that is charged with the weighty responsibility of attending to and redressing—especially (but not only) at the level of representation—the radical social inequity that continues to characterise South African society. In memory of Nokuphila Kumalo, for Womxn artists, and for all Womxn who have been and continue to be nonchalantly erased from taking a rightful seat at the table, we ask the National Gallery to move swiftly to radically reconfigure ~~Our~~ *Lady* so as to bring the ongoing debate that it has unleashed to voice.

This letter was formulated by Candice Breitz, with the support and consent of the following signatories, each of whom have read and approved the contents of the letter:

SWEAT (The Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce)

The following artists formerly represented on the exhibition titled ~~Our~~ *Lady*:

Bridget Baker
Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Khanyisile Mbongwa
Tracey Rose
Penny Siopis
Ed Young

And:

Emma Bedford
Belinda Blignaut
Charl Blignaut
Phoebe Boswell
Candice Breitz
Lisa Brice
Anthea Holly Buys
Steven Cohen
Annemi Conradie
Imraan Coovadia
Waleed Leigh Davids
Germaine de Larch
Robyn Denny
Pierre de Vos
Elvira Dyangani Ose
Leora Farber
Bronwen Findlay
Brenden Grey
Julia Grosse
Simon Gush
Dean Hutton

M. Neelika Jayawardane
Pulane Kingston
Terry Kurgan
Bronwyn Lace
Ishtar Lakhani
Andrew Lamprecht
Fritha Langerman
Tim Gareth Leibbrandt
Simone Leigh
Brenton Maart
Virginia MacKenny
Ismail Mahomed
Marilyn Martin
Khanya Mashabela
Sisonke Msimang
Yvette Mutumba
Andre Naude
Marcus Neustetter
Sean O'Toole
Chad Rossouw
Athi-Patra Ruga
Zina Saro-Wiwa
Brenda Schmahmann
Usha Seejarim
Sally-Jean Shackleton
Buhlebezwe Siwani
Pippa Skotnes
Zandi Tisani
Claire van Blerck
Lize van Robbroeck
Minnette Vári
Mary Wafer
Astrid Warren
Zoe Whitley
Sue Williamson
Laura Windvogel
Koulla Xinisteris
Gavin Younge
Roger Young
Adéle Adendorff
Matt Alexandre
Arlene Amaler-Raviv
Linda Ambor
David Andrew
Glenda Andrew
Melanie Anthony
Mary Armour
Ingrid Askew
Bianca Baines
Sheila Barsel

Asanda Benya
Kim Berman
Vincent Bezuidenhout
Robbie Blake
Camilla Boemio
Barbara Boswell
Nomzamo Bothma
Jody Brand
Lisa Brittan
Yolanda Busbee Methvin
Ben Caesar
Ian Calder
Banamallika Choudhury
Alistair Coakley
Taryn Claire Cohn
Kevin Collins
Sonia Corrêa
Fiona Couldridge
Chris Courtelis
Julie Crenn
Liz Crossley
Vicki Cruywagen
Mary-Jane Darroll
Adam Davies
Jacqui Davies
Brenda Day
Deborah de Boer
Erica de Greef
Ronél de Jager
Borg de Nobel
Annina de Swardt
Jacqui Dichabe
Alexandra Dodd
Jessica Dorrington
Saskia Druyan
Paul Emmanuel
Elsbeth Engelbrecht
Deirdra Etienne
Lorna Ferguson
Thomson Fontaine
Lesley Ann Foster
Daniel Fourie
Julie Francoeur
Arlette Franks
Shanna Freedman
Hazel Friedman
Gordon Froud
Ana Fugareu
Phyllis Galembo
Genna Gardini

John Generalis
Wendy Gers
Hayley Gewer
Irene Grobbelaar-Lenoble
Isabelle Grobler
Asta Gröting
Sylvie Groschatau-Philips
Laurence Hamburger
Corlia Harmsen
Heather Harris
Jeleze Hattingh
Elize Jacobs Hawes
Katarina Hedrén
Odette Herbert
Elizabeth Cortiñas Hidalgo
Sarah Higginson
Kate Highman
Noel Hodnett
Roneill Hunter
Regina Isaacs
Ashley Johnson
Carl Johnson
Tanya Pixie Johnson
Cheryl Kahla
Alexandra Karakashian
Rachel Kelly
Atalanta Kernick
Leratho Khathi
Kyoko Kimura Morgan
Cornelia Knoll
Isobel Knox
Lara Koseff
Ulrike Kuschke
Stephen Langtry
Mark Law
Grace Lawrence-Weeks
Carol Lennon
Gabrielle Le Roux
Leora Lewis
Michaela Limberis
Michael Linders
Kilmany-Jo Liversage
Rosemary Lombard
Lynne Lomofsky
Fran Luke
Lesego Magosi
Anna Majavu
Kenny Mann
Estelle Marais
Laura Victoria Martes

Catherine Martin
Nomthandazo Ayisha Matola
Ed McCaughan
Maria McCloy
Megan McNamara
Rosanna McNamara
Laura Kate Meads
Tommaso Milani
Bronwyn Millar
Sensi Miller
Melvyn Minnaar
Mawande Mkhonto
Sofie Møller
Lesley-Ann Moon
Marguerite Moon
Tapuwa Moore
Gareth Morris-Davies
Segomotso Palesa Motsumi
Phumi Mtetwa
Victor J. Mukasa
Catherine Muller
Dion Muller
Danai Mupotsa
Lionel Murcott
Tracey Murinik
Luan Nel
Tjaantjies Nku
Abeyamí Ortega
Bhavisha Panchia
Shailja Patel
Malcolm Payne
Katrin Peters-Klaphake
Alessandr  Petzer
Franciolemtru Pretorius
Karen Pretorius
Koleka Putuma
Jennifer Rabinowitz
Alexander Richards
Jill Richards
Khadija Richards
Maria Fidel Regueros
Annie Robb
Ann Roberts
Emily Robertson
Alexandra Rodriguez de Ruiz
Jo Rogge
Alice Maria Roodt
Matty Roodt
rosenclaire
Julia Rosenfeld

Nadine Rubin Nathan
Elgin Rust
Nadia Sanger
Marko Schiefelbein
Estelle Scholtz
Meena Seshu
Naren Sewpaul
Kumkani Siwisa
Porai Blessings Siziba
Juliana Irene Smith
Sydelle Willow Smith
Silvia Eiseb Soderstrand
Melissa Jade Sparrow
Kim Stern
Joel Stevens
Marion Stevens
Xanny Stevens
Paul Stopforth
Alexis Strimenos
Esti Strydom
Peter Stuckey
Linda Stupart
Myer Taub
Dominic Thorburn
Nomcebo Thungo
Murray James Turpin
Greer Valley
Anne-Marie van der Eerden
Kali van der Merwe
Maghiel-Jock van Dorssen
Chris van Eeden
David van Wyk
Gary van Wyk
Roelof van Wyk
Sara-Aimee Verity
Liane Visser
Karen von Veh
Andrea Walters
Amy Watson
Debra Watson
Paul Weinberg
Donna White
Graeme Williams
Weaam Williams
Amy Louise Wilson
Derek Zietsman