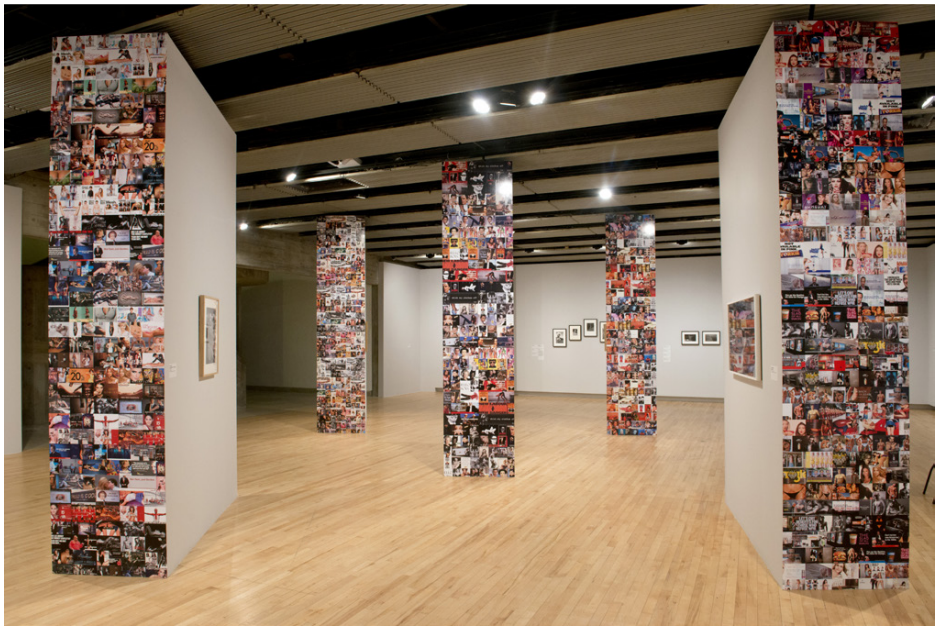
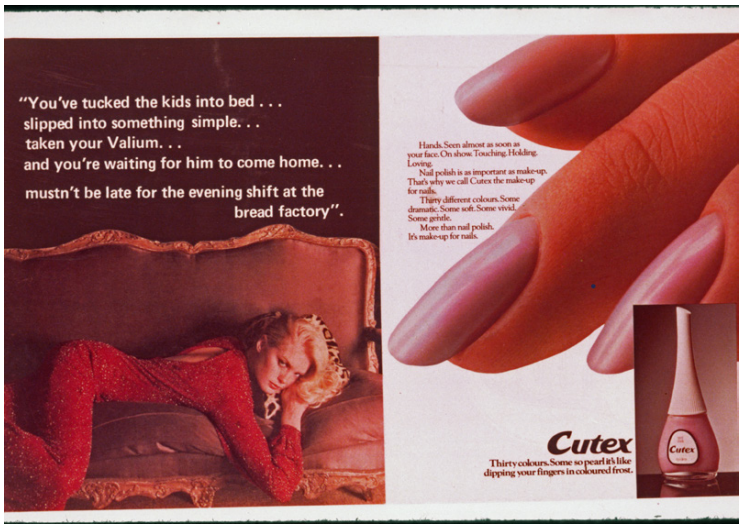
FEMINISM LIVES! (again)

Text by
Catherine Grant

Catherine Grant introduces feminist theories and photography as ways of rethinking our world, and imagines what the results would be.





Page 197: Sara Davidmann, *Dress*, 2013, from *Ken. To be destroyed*. The book *Ken. To be destroyed* by Sara Davidmann and edited by Val Williams will be published in 2016 by Schilt Publishing. The exhibition *Ken. To be destroyed*, co-curated by Robin Christian and Val Williams, will be exhibited at Schwules Museum Berlin, 2016

Opposite, top: Installation view of Hannah Starkey's photo collages, part of her curated section in the exhibition *History is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain*, Hayward Gallery, London, 2015. Photograph by Linda Nylind
Opposite, bottom: Hackney Flashers, 'You've tucked your kids into bed...', from the series *Who's Holding the Baby?*, 1978. © Hackney Flashers Collective

Being a feminist is no longer embarrassing or outmoded (most of the time). What it means to be a feminist, however, is not necessarily clear. Many people agree with feminist ideas without feeling that being a feminist describes who they are. For many self-identified feminists, their politics are not a simple, stand-alone case but are woven alongside concerns with queer, antiracist and/or anti-capitalist politics. We have gone through mainstream notions of individual empowerment that have drawn on feminism, only to find ourselves in the ruins of neoliberalism (for the 99% at least). This has meant that many people have circled back to earlier radical feminist projects that go beyond demanding equality in society as it exists today, and instead conceptualise feminism as a way of rethinking what our world, identities and relationships could look like if current power structures were reimagined.

In this article I will look at some feminist theorists who are taking part in this reimagining. I haven't drawn exclusively on 'new' feminist ideas as I want to suggest that part of feminism's usefulness to us now is that it provides us with a history of ideas that have not been fully realised, and have potential for our present and our future. Most writing on feminism's histories challenge the idea of progress and ask us to pay attention to what might seem unthinkable today, and why that might be. I will frame the discussion around the themes of the archive, work, community and perfection. Ranging from 'the archival turn' in art and theory to the cyborg-inspired imaginaries of networked culture, what follows are some notes on feminist theory in relation to photography. Running through this text is an argument for the interweaving of feminist legacies in contemporary practice, whether that be as a large-format print in an art gallery or a digitally manipulated file posted online. My focus is on photography thought through an art world context, with examples drawn primarily from my own experience as a London-based art historian.

THE ARCHIVE

Kate Eichhorn's book *The Archival Turn in Feminism* explores how the archive has been theorised and utilised by artists, writers and activists over recent decades. She argues that the attraction of the archive is that it 'opens up the possibility of being in time and in history differently'.[1] Like myself, she sees a feminist engagement with archives as particularly useful in the present: 'The archival turn under neoliberalism should not be primarily read as a desire to escape the present but rather as an attempt to regain agency in an era when the ability to collectively imagine and enact other ways of being in the world has become deeply eroded.'[2]

This archival turn has been present in curating as well as art practice of recent decades. As I was trying to map out which artworks to include in this article, I kept returning to the experience of seeing the Hackney Flashers' 1978 slide show *Who's Holding the Baby?* in three different exhibitions across a relatively short space of time (as well as appearing in an artwork discussed later). This slide show, accompanied by a series of notes, was intended as an educational tool, a way of raising political awareness about the experiences of motherhood and the need to campaign for childcare, touring community centres and libraries in the UK, as well as being shown at the Hayward Gallery in 1979 as part of *Three Perspectives on Photography*.[3] My most recent experience of seeing the slideshow was when it returned to the Hayward Gallery as part of *History is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain*, 2015. Photographer Hannah Starkey curated one room by drawing on a rich tradition of documentary photography in Britain, with the Hackney Flashers' call to arms still being depressingly relevant. Starkey had also contributed to the room through a series of large photo-collages that brought together political campaign posters and glossy advertising images. As in the slideshow from nearly 40 years earlier, the disconnect between the world and identities seen in the collage and the lived experience of the exhibition visitors was stark. Each collaged panel documented a different political campaign, stretching from Thatcher to the election that took place during the exhibition run. As well as the similarities between the imagery across the decades, what become clear was the way in which the politicians themselves became as spectacularised and vapid as the parade of sultry models. By presenting this archive of images, Starkey invited the viewer t o begin their own process of analysis and critique.

As well as literally presenting archives, many artists have transformed archival material to reveal what might have been missing or obscured within them. Sara Davidmann's project *Ken. To be destroyed* (2013) begins with letters, photographs and documents kept by her mother. The title transcribes the words her mother wrote on the envelope in which part of this

small, personal archive was kept—ambivalently so, as the title demonstrates. The ambivalence towards this archive was due to what it revealed, that Davidmann's uncle was trans, whilst living in an outwardly heteronormative marriage. This experience is recounted through the letters sent to Davidmann's mother by her aunt, as well as through reworkings of the couple's marriage certificate and photographs. Davidmann conducts what she calls 'a "conversation" with the family album, queering it, and returning a new version of the story to the family history'.[4]

Davidmann's project points to the ways in which feminist and queer theorists have explored notions of disrupted temporalities to allow the potential of the past to be activated now. Writers such as Elizabeth Freeman and Ann Cvetkovich have been central to re-orientating a sense of history, with Cvetkovich proposing that lesbian and gay cultures engage with an 'archive of feelings'. She explores how '[i]n the absence of institutionalised documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge'.[5] Cvetkovich explores archives of trauma, which is one way to define the material that Davidmann works with. She says, 'Trauma puts pressure on the institutionalising force of museums and monuments as well as on the notion of an archive, demanding collections and installations that can do emotional justice to the experiences they remember.'[6] In Davidmann's hands, her aunt's and uncle's lives are visualised in ways that were not possible in the original archive, through digital manipulation, cutting and painting. The project also pays attention to the labour that is involved in becoming or identifying as a woman, and the relationships that are reformulated by Ken's trans identity.

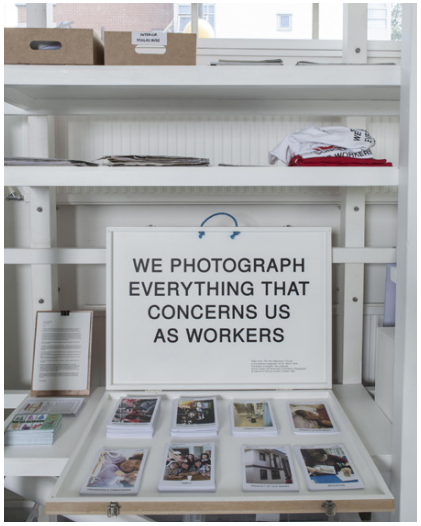
WORK

For many feminist writers, particularly those engaged in socialist theories, work is a key area of struggle. In her book *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks explores how socialist feminists troubled Marxist definitions of work by including reproductive, unwaged labour. Weeks also explores various strategies around the refusal of work, including what she calls 'antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries'.[7] She calls for an analysis of work and its relationship to the rest of our lives, rather than an acceptance that feminism should strive for integration in the existing workplace. This movement—from demands in relation to existing working conditions to radical reimaginings of work—draws on the discussion of work in second-wave feminism. The analysis of women's work—both at home and in the workplace—led to campaigns such as Wages for Housework and writing on the emotional labour required in many jobs, with the service industries being the most obvious example.[8] In Silvia Federici's 1975 article 'Wages Against Housework', she begins with a series of provocations:

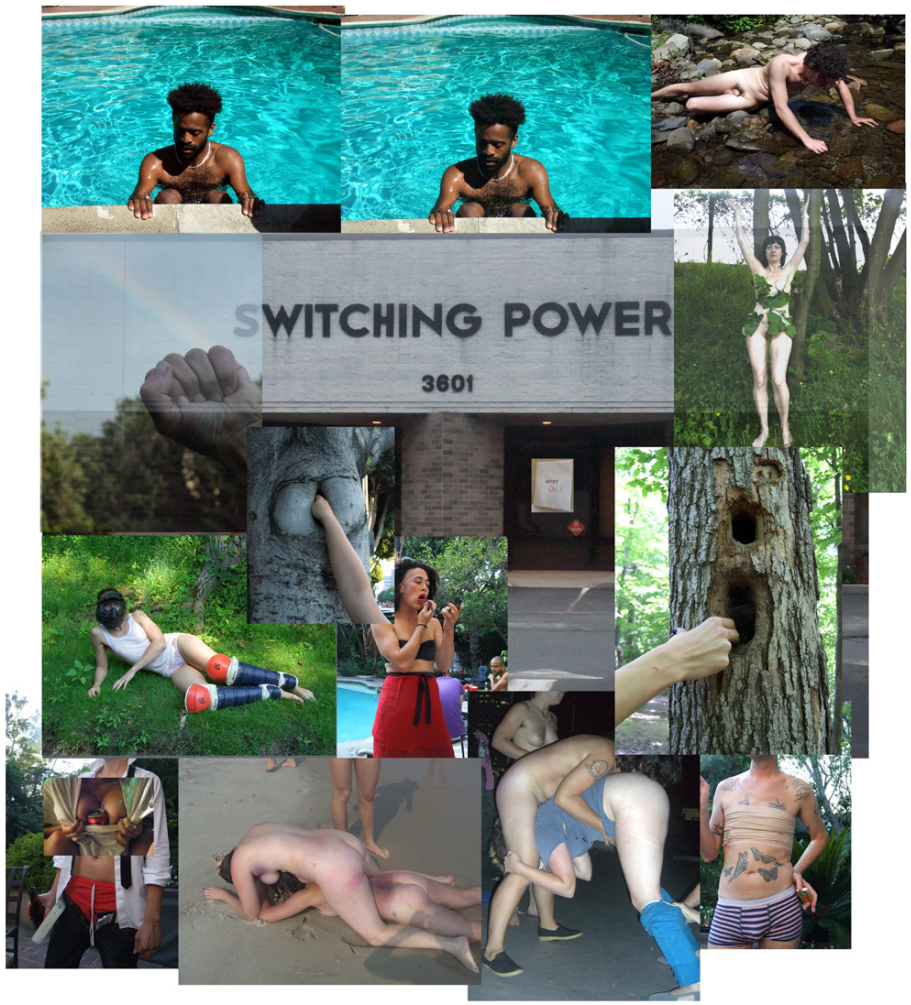
> They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.
> They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism.
> Every miscarriage is a work accident.
> Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both
> working conditions... but homosexuality is workers'
> control of production, not the end of work.
> More smiles? More money. Nothing will be so
> powerful in destroying the healing virtues of a smile.
> Neuroses, suicides, desexualization: occupational
> diseases of the housewife.[9]

In the article she argues for the necessity of the demand 'Wages for housework' as a way of making visible the labour undertaken by so many women. But she also argues that this is only the first step in de-naturalising the roles of women, and of capitalism itself. Federici's article goes on to argue for the refusal of (house)work as a step towards revolution. Since the writing of this article, 40 years ago, Federici has continued to address the relationship between women, capital and global politics, with her current work focusing on the need to create new communities through a feminist politics of the commons. Her ideas are utilised by many activists and scholars to think of strategies in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy movement, and anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation politics.[10]

One London-based activist group, Justice 4 Domestic Workers (J4DW), agitates on behalf of the thousands of migrant domestic workers in the UK who are employed in private households under conditions that are often abusive,



Top: *Justice for Domestic Workers Living Archive*, produced as part of Werker 10: Community Darkroom, The Showroom, London, 2014. Photograph by Daniel Brooke
Bottom: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Landscape of the Body (Epilepsy Test)*, 2011, from the series *Notion of Family*. Gelatin silver print mounted on archival museum cardboard, wooden frame. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels



A. L. Steiner, *Positive Reinforcement*, from the exhibition *Ecstatic Resistance*, 2009

with pay under the minimum wage, and visa restrictions tying them to their employer. As an invisible workforce that is outside of regulatory frameworks for employment, migrant domestic workers are often vulnerable, working in the UK to provide for their own families and unable to gain legal status if they want to leave their employers. J4DW is an organisation run by and for domestic workers, who are primarily women, with goals to educate and mobilise the group to secure their rights. As part of this mobilisation, the group has worked with the London art space The Showroom, coordinated by Louise Shelley. Shelley has an ongoing collaboration with J4DW, using the platform of The Showroom as one channel to disseminate information about the group: this was how I heard about its work. In 2014, J4DW took part in a workshop with *Werker Magazine* (Marc Roig Blesa and Rogier Delfos) to develop a series of photo-collages. These depict the working conditions, feelings and home lives of domestic workers, as well as investigating a history of workers' activism. In one striking image, women's fists are seen clenched over a grid of four posters, including one from the Hackney Flashers' *Who's Holding the Baby?* series. The group has also developed a photographic series to depict elements of their lives, an archive that counters the invisibility and negativity that is associated with migrant workers. Some of these images have been filtered into the collages, which themselves can be used as posters or talking points when the group does talks, meetings or workshops.

COMMUNITY

J4DW organises to make visible a community that is rarely seen in the UK. Representing and connecting communities through photography has been a topic in the art world recently, and picks up on feminist theorising around communities that go beyond the traditional nuclear family. The South African 'visual activist' Zanele Muholi, whose portraits of lesbian and trans men of colour from South Africa were nominated this year for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, is one example of how photography can be thought of as a means of communication and collaboration, as well as a fine art practice. Working through a very different visual aesthetic, but equally committed to utilising the possibilities of photography as a communication device, rather than a singular image, is the American artist A. L. Steiner. She creates large-scale montages of queer lives and bodies that evoke the erotic landscapes of lesbian artists such as Barbara Hammer and Tee Corinne, whose work in the 1970s was central in creating alternative visions of female sexuality. Rather than depicting a sexual idyll, however, Steiner constructs punk proliferations of bodies and things that go beyond any easily defined notions of homo- or heterosexuality. When asked about her relationship to feminism, she replied, 'Feminism is really useful because, rather than a historical movement, it is more about the idea of lived practices. I am not a scholar, but I am living feminism.'[11]

Steiner's concept of 'living feminism' echoes the title of a forthcoming book by the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*.[12] Ahmed has been at the forefront of theorising affect in relation to the embodied experiences of gender, sexuality, class and race. She explores how bodies and lives that are seen to be disruptive also require more energy to move through the world as it is currently constructed, with her figures of the feminist killjoy, the melancholy migrant and the unhappy queer populating her book *The Promise of Happiness*.[13] Ahmed takes stereotypes and thinks about how feelings are projected onto them, as well as arguing for the need to be wilful, angry, passionate. Her work takes part in intersectional feminist theorising that does not separate out the experiences of race, class, sexuality and gender, but instead argues for the necessity of their specific combinations to be analysed and articulated.

This intersectional approach can be seen in the portraits of the American artist LaToya Ruby Frazier, taken in collaboration with her mother and grandmother in her hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Begun when Frazier was a teenager, the series draws on the documentary poetry of Farm Security Administration photographs, but rather than being taken by a photographer sent into communities, Frazier embarked on a series that depicts her family and local environment, a historic steel mill town that has suffered economic deprivation and environmental pollution. Frazier describes how the experiences of living in the town were literally felt in the bodies of her and her family: 'Between our three generations we not only witnessed, we experienced and internalized the end of industrialization and rise of deindustrialization.'[14] Frazier's photographs contribute to a tradition of black feminist theorising that sees the family as a key area of strength in the face of racism, whilst refusing to sentimentalise or objectify herself, her family or her history.

PERFECTION

The problem of objectification is one that has been central to much feminist writing on representation. In a recent article, Angela McRobbie has reframed this through an internalised imperative to be perfect—felt not only in terms of outward appearance but also to replicate what McRobbie calls 'the good life'.[15] McRobbie argues that this impossible ideal creates an internal experience of alienation, citing the contrast between the troubled life of Peaches Geldof and her outward presentation as a perfect wife, mother and writer. McRobbie's work on 'the perfect' echoes a text that has

been debated as either misogynist or an acute presentation of a symptomatic condition: Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. First published in 1999 in French, and translated in 2012 into English, Tiqqun's theory of the Young-Girl proposes that under neoliberalism we are all Young-Girls, where the qualities of youth and femininity are deemed desirable by all, and is the position of 'the *model citizen* as redefined by consumer society since World War I'.[16] The book is a deliberately provocative collection of fragments, including quotes from women's magazines such as 'New breasts for my 18th birthday' as well as statements such as 'The Young-Girl resembles her photo' and 'The "self" of the Young-Girl is as thick as a magazine'.[17] Here, the objectification of the female body under the male gaze has morphed into the objecthood of all bodies when thought through the ideals of consumer culture. The logic of the Young-Girl may seem hard to undo, but has been used as a way of theorising the work of our online and offline identities to present ourselves as 'perfect'.

The importance of photography in the creation of perfect selves is something that is increasingly internalised in online forms of communication, and, as McRobbie states, 'a key issue for feminism would be to attempt to understand the consequences for girls and young women of this heightened visibility which they themselves so actively promulgate'.[18] One way of undoing or revealing this logic has been in recent returns to Donna Haraway's 1985 'A Cyborg Manifesto'. Particularly for artists engaging in online networks and digital technologies—both on the internet and in the gallery—the cyborg has become one way of reimaging the relationship of identities to bodies. As the artist Jesse Darling describes it: 'There is something of the cyborg about the camwhore, reply girl, Tumblr femme—as Haraway puts it "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction ... The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century".'[19] Artists such as Darling, or those in the 2015 online exhibition *Body Anxiety*, are starting to create new representations of gendered bodies thought through the current conditions where visualising the body through photography has become a key part of identity formation.[20]

From the second-wave to the cyborg, from the archive to perfection: this article has indicated some of the ways in which feminist theory and photographic practice can think through the work of being a woman and the communities that can give strength and definition to being a feminist, however notions of 'woman' and 'feminist' are constructed. A brief note on my title: in the radical feminist journal *Notes from the Second Year* (1970) a photo-collage shows a suffragette being arrested alongside women protesting in an early Women's Liberation Movement action; the slogan 'Feminism Lives' joins these historical moments, to suggest a flow of energy, a continuing need for feminism to be used to fight for better ways of living. In what I've sketched here, I hope to show how that energy is strong in our present moment, drawing on the histories of feminism whilst looking to our possible futures.

Thanks to Tom Clark, Althea Greenan, Laura Guy and Francis Summers for conversations and ideas found within this article.

1 Kate Eichhorn, 'Introduction', in *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), p. 8.
2 Ibid., p. 9.
3 See the Hackney Flashers' website for more details: 'Slideshow: Who's Holding the Baby? 1978', http://hackneyflashers.com/slideshow-whos-holding-the-baby-1978/ (08 July 2015); Angela Stapleford, 'Who's Holding the Baby?' The Question—and the Exhibition—is Back at the Hayward Gallery after 36 Years', http://hackneyflashers.com/2015/02/06/whos-holding-the-baby-back-at-the-hayward/ 08 July 2015
4 Sara Davidmann, *'Ken. To be destroyed'*, http://saradavidmann.com/ken.html/ 08 July 2015.
5 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 8.
6 Ibid. p. 269.
7 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
8 Selma James set up the International Wages for Housework campaign in 1972: see Selma James, *Sex, Race and Class—the Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952–2011* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012). For the first definition of emotional labour, see Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).
9 Silvia Federici, 'Wages against Housework', *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), p. 15.
10 Federici comes out of the Italian Marxist Autonomist movement, with other figures such as Antonio Negri and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi being central to the current discussion around ways to resist neoliberal structures.
11 A. L. Steiner, quoted in Anthea Black, 'Switching Power: An Interview with A. L. Steiner', *Nomorepotlucks* (January/February 2012), http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/switching-power-an-interview-with-a-l-steiner/ (04 June 2015).
12 See her discussion of the forthcoming project on her blog: Sara Ahmed, 'Living a Feminist Life', http://feministkilljoys.com/2015/03/19/living-a-feminist-life/ (08 June 2015).
13 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
14 LaToya Ruby Frazier, 'Statement', http://www.latoyarubyfrazier.com/statement/ (02 June 2015).
15 Angela McRobbie, 'Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times', *Australian Feminist Studies* (2015), vol. 30, No. 83, pp. 3–20.
16 Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2012), p. 15.
17 Ibid., pp. 52, 33, 43.
18 McRobbie, op. cit., p. 6.
19 Jesse Darling, in Tom Clark and Rózsa Farkas, 'Self-Compression: An Interview with Jesse Darling', *Mute* (20 June 2012), http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/self-compression-interview-jesse-darling (10 June 2015).
20 See co-curator (and artist) Jennifer Chan's essay 'How We Become Objects', http://bodyanxiety.com/jen/ (01 June 2015).

Installation of the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2015, Zanele Muholi's series *Faces and Phases*, on display at The Photographers' Gallery, 2015. © Kate Elliott. Courtesy of The Photographers' Gallery, London