

'Chapter Y: Is Survival not Archival?' (2017)

Donna Kukama

'Chapter Y: Is Survival not Archival?' (2017) was presented at the Institute of Creative Art's (ICA) Live Art Festival in 2017, at the Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) in Cape Town. In this durational performance, Kukama explores the function and nature of museums, archives and collections, allowing for a reconfiguring of the museum collection, whilst locating the trauma of gendered violence within the context of the Western Cape, and further, within the context of the highly contested ISANG exhibition 'Our Lady' (curated by Kirsty Cockerill, Andrea Lewis and Candice Allison).

Kukama's performance was in conversation with responses by to the presence of a work by photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa in 'Our Lady', and his trial for the murder of Nokuphila Kumalo in 2013. 'Chapter Y: Is Survival not Archival?' was a re-articulation of protest action, following that of The Sex Workers Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), as well as boycotting artists, who opposed Mthethwa's presence in the exhibition. Mthethwa has since been found guilty of murder, and on 16 March 2017 was sentenced to 18 years in prison. It furthered the conversation by also speaking to other violences experienced by black and gender non-conforming women, whether referring to institutional, physical, or psychological violence. The performance summoned the spirits of those who had passed on, as much as it did survivors. It is not an erasure of Nokuphila Kumalo's story, but rather an echoing, through other stories, of those often ignored or soon forgotten.

'Chapter Y: Is Survival not Archival?' comprised a number of 'stations' within the gallery space, each of which was interacted with by Kukama. In a subversive reworking of the 'exhibition walkabout', audience members were brought into the predominantly dark gallery space, and led to each site of interaction. At one station, the artist inscribes the names of individuals fatally victimised by gendered violence in soil on an overhead projector. In a repeated action, each name is written with her finger on the glass, and shortly afterwards blown away.

Dressed in a suit with a headlamp, Kukama illuminated the space as she moved. Revealing, inscribing, and projecting "necessary presences" in a culture in which the victims of gendered and sexual violence are often forgotten or remain unnamed in the rhetoric of the general public, she re-inscribes the names of those affected by gendered violence alongside black women artists who have been systematically underrepresented in the historically colonial space of ISANG. Within this re-curated reality, audience members are forced to not only confront the reality of violence, but to also see its particular perpetuation through forms of representation – and in this case, curation.