The aesthetics of these images, in particular that of Branded Chest, call upon the tradition of nudes as well as references to semiotic systems such as archives and advertising, draw viewers in and implore them to interrogate what they see. The works exhibited in Crafting Cultural Hybridity exemplify various “dynamics of displacement” through an assortment of communicative methods that engage the viewer and call for an analysis of the photograph. It is through this examination that a connection is established between the subject and the viewer with limited input from the photographer. In this way, the photographer’s relationship to their subjects is immaterial to the viewer’s understanding of the images, allowing the artist to be either insider or outsider of the communities that they photograph. More importantly, however, this connection allows for a space of cultural hybridity wherein, as Solomon-Godeau suggests, a truth about the subject is revealed.

As we have seen in the work of Zanele Muholi, Gay Block, and Hank Willis Thomas, deadpan style as well as references to semiotic systems such as archives and advertising, draw viewers in and implore them to interrogate what they see. The works exhibited in Crafting Cultural Hybridity exemplify various “dynamics of displacement” through an assortment of communicative methods that engage the viewer and call for an analysis of the photograph. It is through this examination that a connection is established between the subject and the viewer with limited input from the photographer. In this way, the photographer’s relationship to their subjects is immaterial to the viewer’s understanding of the images, allowing the artist to be either insider or outsider of the communities that they photograph. More importantly, however, this connection allows for a space of cultural hybridity wherein, as Solomon-Godeau suggests, a truth about the subject is revealed.

The aesthetics of these images, in particular that of Branded Chest, call upon the tradition of nudes seen throughout the history of art, which has surfaced and been further sexualized in contemporary advertising campaigns. The word “brand” plays a dual role in Thomas’s series, referencing both advertising brands and the historic practice of branding African American bodies during slavery. A clear connection can be made between ideas of ownership of black bodies and the corporations that advertise on and through these bodies. In this series, Thomas is not only drawing on historical knowledge of slavery in the United States but is mixing the vernacular of classical art nudes with that of advertising. Advertising Thomas’s appropriation of various signifiers and codes, the viewer is invited to challenge not only the photograph itself, but the validity of these linguistics. We question whether or not the brand is real, which leads to an interrogation of the problematic relationship between companies and or not the brand is real, which leads to an interrogation of the problematic relationship between companies and capitalism. Despite Thomas’s vastly different lexicon from that of Muholi and Block, it is clear that his Branded series is nevertheless highly effective.

References
3. The deadpan aesthetic is characterized by highly detailed images, often on a monumental scale, that lack sentimental or subjective framing by the photographer. See Charlotte Cotton, “Deadpan,” chap. 3 in The Photograph as Contemporary Art, 3rd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 60. “Deadpan photography may be highly specific in its description of its subjects, but its seeming neutrality and totality of vision is of epic proportions.”
6. Homi Bhabha, “Beyond Photography.”
A photographer’s relationship to the subject depicted in their work is often discussed in scholarship as binary, with the photographer positioned as either insider or outsider of the community they portray. An insider is defined as a photographer who relates to their subject through shared cultural experiences or shared intimacy as a friend, family member, or lover. Conversely, an outsider is generally a stranger with no direct associations to the subject’s community. This fraught relationship is explored by art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau in “Inside/Out,” chapter one of her book Photography After Photography: Gender, Genre, History. In this article, Solomon-Godeau suggests that the position of photographer in relation to their subject is irrelevant because “it is inevitably the case with photography, especially photography that attempts to negate these boundaries all together. Solomon-Godeau points out that the technique of deadpan as a style that successfully suggests the detached style of Muholi’s portrait offers the viewer a glimpse at Lerato Dumse that reveals a truth about her. An important question that Solomon-Godeau leaves unanswered, however, is whether a photographer can work outside the binary of insider/outside without the use of deadpan.

Crafting Cultural Hybridity addresses this question by using an important theory from scholar Homi Bhabha’s “Beyond Photography,” in which photographs can create a bridge between the subject of a photograph and the community of which she is a member, could comfortably be associated with the subjective insider style of artists like Nan Goldin, this photograph provides a dispassionate and relatively banal view of Dumse often seen in deadpan style. The neutral background, the detail rendered by the photograph, the tight framing around Dumse’s face and her ambiguous gender provide little insight into Muholi’s view of and relationship with her subject. Yet these attributes also entice the viewer to engage with the photograph and question Muholi’s image. We are intrigued by Dumse’s depiction, drawn in by her gaze that meets our own, and connect with her. As Solomon-Godeau suggests, the detached style of Muholi’s portrait offers the viewer a glimpse at Lerato Dumse that reveals a truth about her. An important question that Solomon-Godeau leaves unanswered, however, is whether a photographer can work outside the binary of insider/outside without the use of deadpan.

For Bhabha, these blind spots lead to what he calls a photographer’s “dynamic of displacement” which can be equated with Roland Barthes’ term “punctum” coined in his influential book Camera Lucida. Regardless of what it is labeled, a photograph’s “dynamic of displacement” or “punctum” reaches out to the viewer and piques their interest. This visual element not only causes the viewer to question the photograph but also links the viewer with the photograph’s subject by creating curiosity and ultimately empathy. Through this process the viewer and the subject are able to enter an arena of cultural hybridity in which insights about the subject are revealed to the viewer.

As previously illustrated with Muholi’s portrait of Lerato Dumse, deadpan style accomplishes cultural hybridity through the photograph’s impartial perspective. Another means through which to connect the viewer and subject is the use of an archival style that documents subjects through a combination of text and image. This approach can be seen in the work of Gay Block, whose book Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust series documents individuals that helped Jews escape and evade the Nazis during World War II. Block created this project in collaboration with writer Malika Drucker, the culmination of which is a book containing 105 portraits and interviews as well as a traveling exhibition that has been displayed at the Museum of Modern Art. Block photographed these individuals in environments that might be seen in a professional sporting arena. With this gesture, Thomas is clearly alluding to his subjects as professional athletes, yet their actual status is unknown. Thomas provides no indication as to who is depicted, and each photograph is centered around unidentifiable body parts such as a torso or the back of a head. By obscuring the identity of the subject, Thomas is creating an archetype of professional athletes, ultimately allowing the viewer to more readily connect and empathize with the subject. This archetype not only creates a framework for cultural hybridity but negates the significance of Thomas’s gaze and his position as either insider or outsider in relation to the community.