

Ms Shipnosirle Bernque

Library
Residency

“Strangers stare, and the stares are a form of surveillance or policing: to find something that confirms that this is a woman, or this is a man. I think this is so harmful. I wish we would just allow people to be people.”

Dressing the self in tradition: Exploring the experiences of dress and embodiment in Amasiko nemfundiso zesiXhosa for Xhosa gender non-conforming individuals living in Cape Town, by Siphosihle Benge.

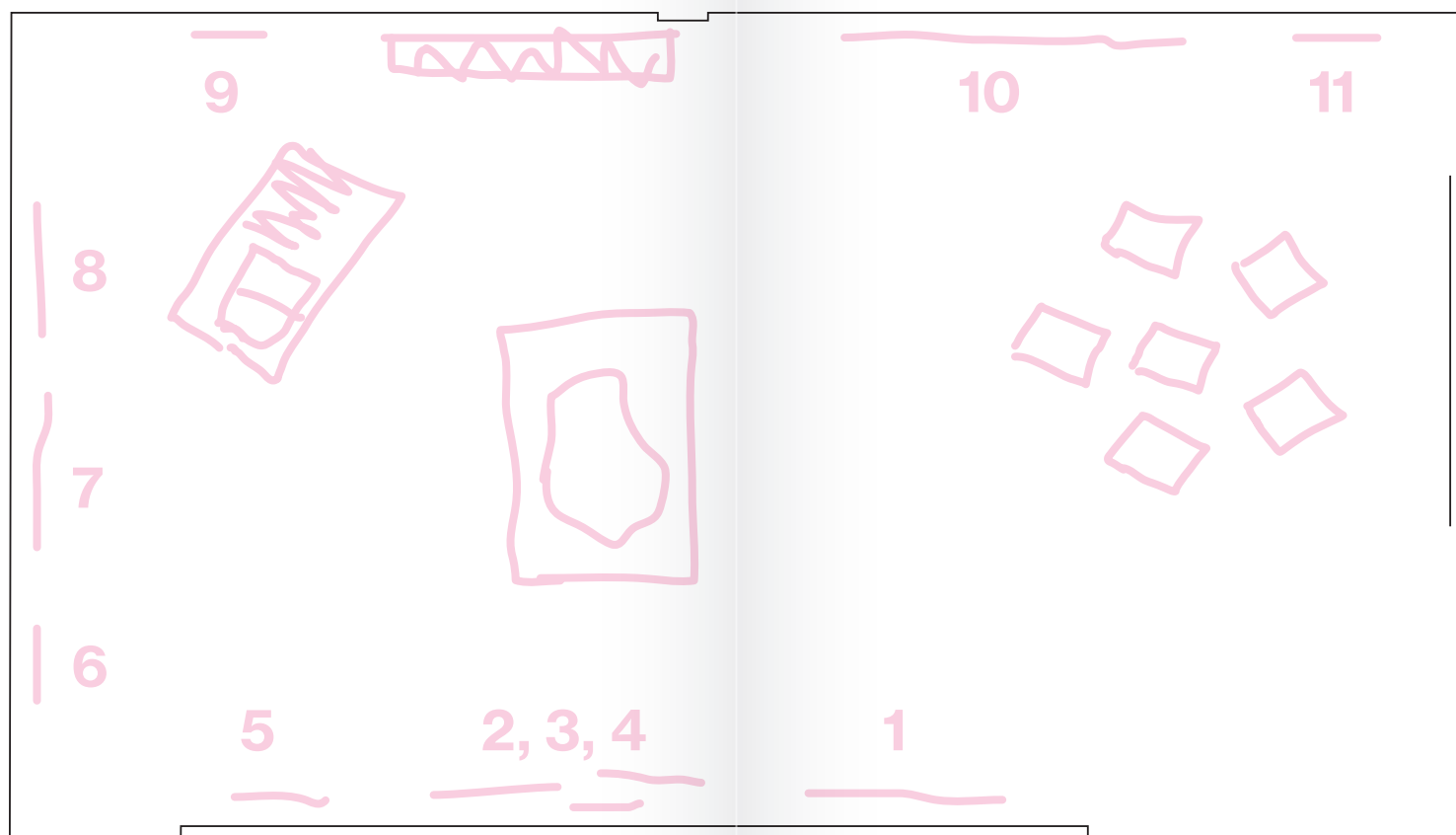
Benge’s project is engaged through embodied research, where they address Xhosa gender non-conforming female subjectivities experiencing, navigating, and making sense of culture, identity, gender performance, and belonging. A research installation in A4 Arts Foundation’s Reading Room is comprised of artworks together with objects of ceremonial and personal significance from their grandmother’s home.

“At its heart,” says Benge, “the project is an invitation to listen, reflect, and re-imagine expansive possibilities for being, becoming, and belonging within Xhosa cultural life, especially as a gender non-conforming subject.”

The installation is also an open studio, in which Benge facilitates zine making workshops throughout the course of their residency with students, Spesihle Moses and Liyabona Mnapu, both of whom are in Grade 11.







1 Gladys Mgudlandlu
Houses in the Township

1970
Gouache on card
52 × 83 cm



7 Zanele Muholi
Martin Machapa

2006
Lambda print
100 × 76.5 cm



2 David Goldblatt
Woman going to the trading store holding money under her blanket, near Flagstaff, Transkei

1975
Silver gelatin print on fibre paper
27 × 27 cm



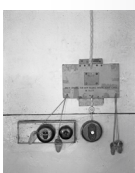
8 Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo
Slaghuis (I)

2018
Archival pigment ink on fibre paper
42 × 28 cm



3 David Goldblatt
Call system used by officials at a mine office when they wanted the services of 'the boy'. Consolidated Main Reef Gold Mine, October 1967

1967
Silver gelatin print on fibre paper
50 × 39.5 cm



9 Zanele Muholi
Mfana, Philadelphia

2019
Silver gelatin print
21 × 18 cm



4 David Goldblatt
Circumcision initiate in the hut of the abakwetha, Transkei, 1975

1975
Silver gelatin print on fibre paper
32.9 × 32.9 cm



10 Asemahle Ntlonti
Emaphandleni

2022
Acrylic, acrylic gel medium, paper, and polypropylene thread
178 × 200 cm



5 Zanele Muholi
MaID VIII, SunSquare, Cape Town

2017
Silver gelatin print
70 × 46.5 cm



11 Lindokuhle Sobekwa
My mother visiting our ancestors' graveyard

2019
Archival pigment ink on Photo Rag
66.67 × 100 cm



6 Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo
Ziveze VI (40)

2019
Archival pigment ink on fibre paper
30 × 20 cm



Siphosihle Benge: zines and conversations



“Time is not linear for queer people. For a straight man, you go through a linear way of being: child, initiation, husband, father. Queer people have to create new temporalities for themselves. They might refuse to go to the mountain, they may not get married. Queer temporalities do not comply with the heteronormative form of everyday life.”



“Giving the child the father’s surname when they don’t belong to the father’s family has ancestry implications. It places the child in relation to a realm that is not there to protect them – if the child belongs to the mother’s family, giving the father’s name places them with a realm of ancestors who do not belong to them.”

Dialogue: Encounter in a Taxi

(Walks in the morning taxi to work, with a cap on, person is coming out)

Random person: uXolo bhuti, ndiyaphuma

uSihle: Andingobhuti

Random person: Yoh, sorry sisi

uSihle: Andinguye kwa usisi lowo

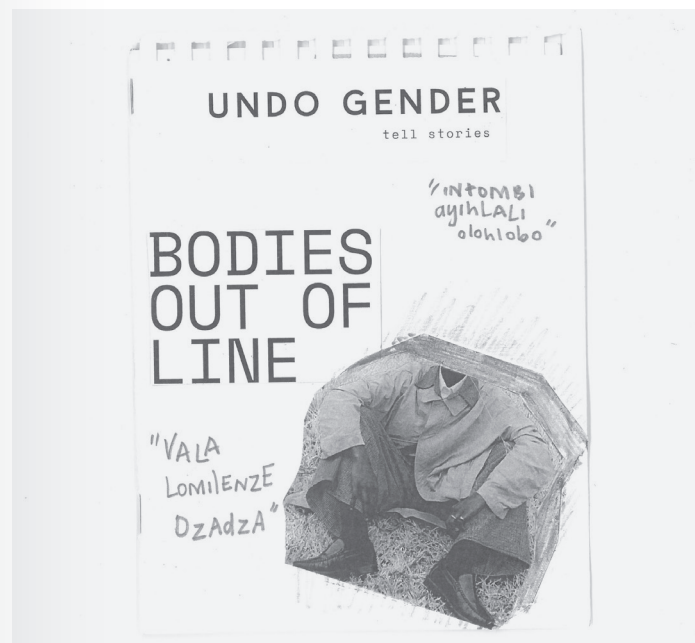
Random person: Yoh, hayi uxolo, uyintoni ke?

uSihle: Ndingumntu

Random person: Yoh hayi sorry, ayomini yam namhlanje...

(people in the taxi start to feel sorry for him, affirming him that it is not his day today, as though he had just been told off)

Now the narrative is as though the world is against the person who misgendered me, and I told to refer to me as ‘umntu’ – I wonder what the person’s thinking was – with and without the stories told to him by fellow passengers.



“Performance is a big part of gender. In different spaces we perform our genders differently.”

“I am grappling with a space that is being produced for me and for the person who is perceiving me.”

Dialogue: Ayabulela walks into the space as a man who has undergone ulwaluko ritual into manhood

Ayabulela: Uyayazi ukuba akufunelanga iyabonwa lento?

uSihle: Utsho? And for wena, what does that mean?

Ayabulela: It means ukuba andizazi ndiziva njani ngobona lomkhwetha kulendawo akuyo, ingathi ngoku yonke into ibhentsisiwe

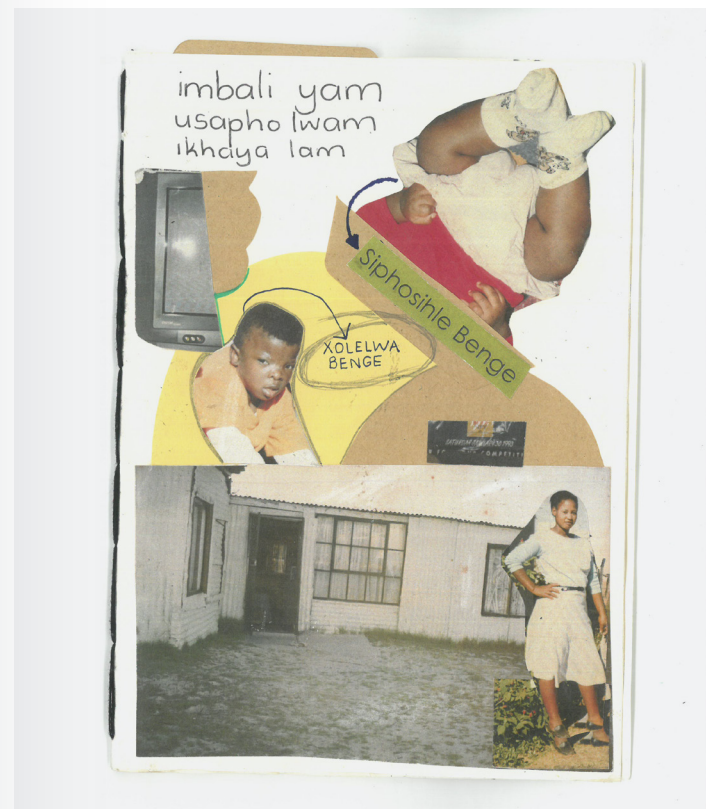
uSihle: Kodwa ke, ukubona akufani nokwazi

Ayabulela: Ewe, ke kwaye ingathi lomkhwetha uyafuna ubonwa, ngoba nanku amehlo weather ntsho kwi camera



"For these secret processes, the mothers used to build the huts for the initiates. They would take such care, creating these temporary homes from straw that were strong, beautiful structures – not like the black plastic that the men use to make them today. The men know to keep everything secret. Female bodies are excluded. (Speaking in reference to David Goldblatt's photograph of the secret ceremony.)

"For me to be comfortable, people need to be uncomfortable, we all need to be uncomfortable, my navigation of myself, my identity, my gender – it's unexpected. You are not expecting me to do something I do not want to do, because I am not asking for you to love me."



Dialogue: Khwezi and I, sitting kwaLanga eJordan, waiting for our meals

Khwezi: ... but we are both girls

uSihle: I am not a girl, Khwezi

Khwezi: (looks at me frantically) But...

uSihle: What made you think that? Because it's not something I have told you?

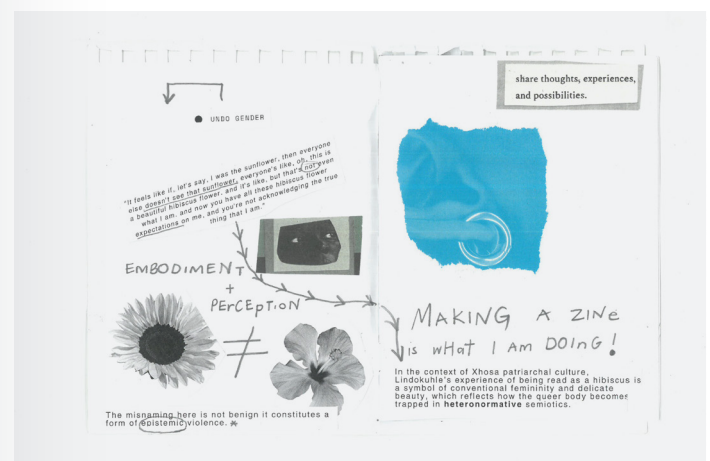
Khwezi: But like, you sound like a girl

uSihle: There is no such thing as sounding like a girl; you cannot tell someone's gender; they must tell you. Especially from a voice... but I am non-binary, ndingumntu Khwezi

Khwezi: Oh, I am sorry for offending you

uSihle: Thank you for apologising.

"In this work, Muholi is embodying their culture, boldly so. They stand by the fact that they are Zulu, it isn't diluted by their queerness. This undoes the thing of 'queerness is unAfrican.' They look straight into the camera, 'see me, this is me'."



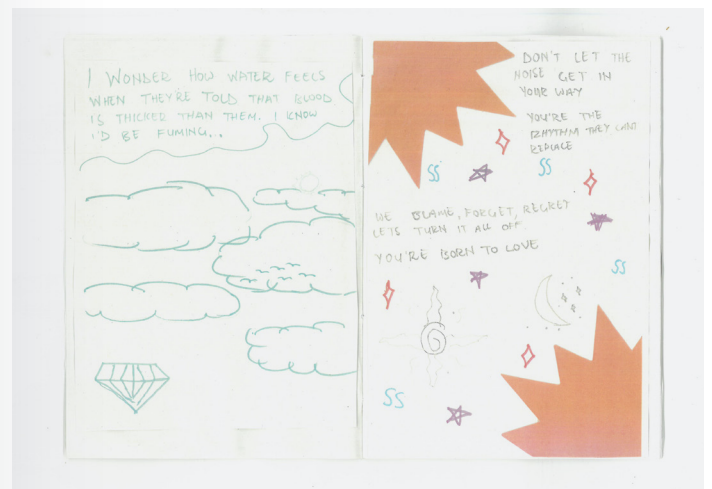
Spesihle Moses: zines and conversations



"My friends' parents own a tavern – he is a totally different person in the tavern to what he is in their home. One wall separates the tavern from home. In the tavern, he is needing to be a strong person. When in their home, they change: that violent version of themselves doesn't exist. An environment can really shape you – how you experience things and perceive them – a place can change how you are." (Speaking about Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo's artworks.)

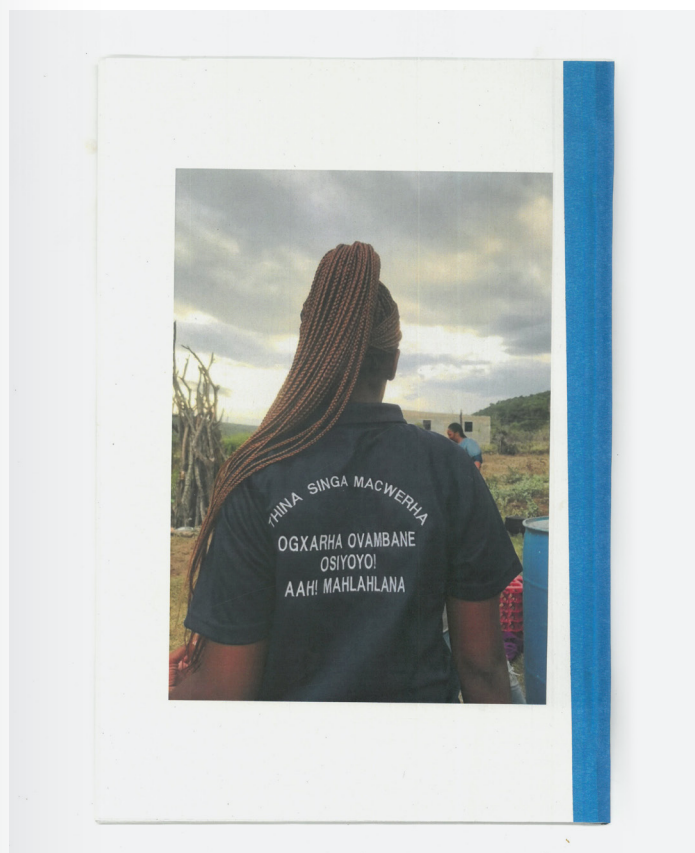
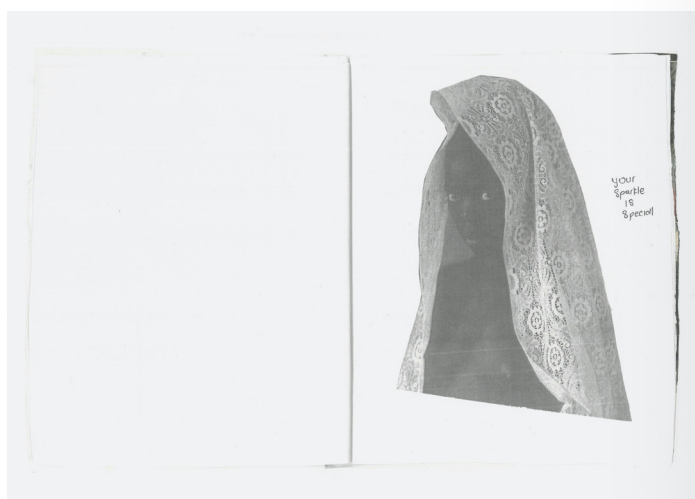
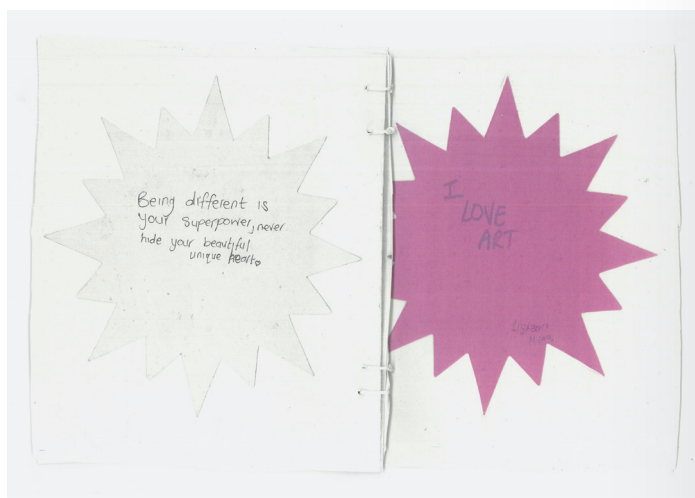


"I don't want everyone to love me because I don't love everyone. I feel like if everyone does love me, I am doing something wrong. It means I'm not being myself, for myself."



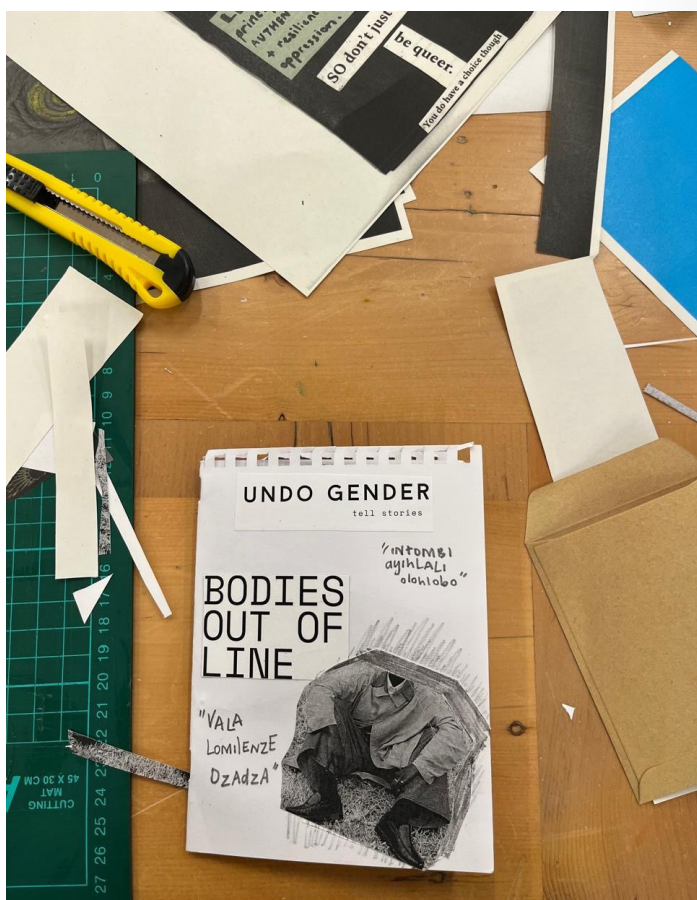
Liyabona Mnapu: zines and conversations

"Being bold, they are so beautiful,
they are divine." (Speaking about
Zanele Muholi's artworks.)









Research installation and zine workshop

Facilitation: Siphosihle Bengé
Participants: Liyabona Mnapu
Spesihle Moses

With the support of the Charlyze Theron Africa Outreach Project

Wayfinder

Design: Ben Johnson
Editor: Sara de Beer

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A4 Reading Room

22 June —
1 August '26