

WHY! ZINES?

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WHY ZINES?

In the Department of Graphic Design, at the University of Johannesburg we maintain several priorities regarding teaching and learning. The main, rather practical, priority is that it is essential that exit-level students are suitably prepared for the rigours of industry. In short, our undergraduate programme functions as follows: first year prioritises that students learn the fundamental theoretical and technical skills of design; second year expands on this and includes more experimental and conceptual processes, while third-year prioritises portfolio development and the necessary skills that students will need to transition into the professional environment as graphic designers. The practical modules in our third-year programme demonstrate this, with perhaps one exception: the zine unit. On one hand, zines have the potential of being a valuable addition to a graduate's portfolio: prospective employers can look at this project and gauge a candidate's technical skills regarding layout, image-making and print. In less practical, but potentially still very meaningful considerations, graduates

can present some indication of personal (or professional) interests, and a sense of identity, which isn't necessarily the case within an advertising or branding brief. As an educator within a department that prioritises students' chances of succeeding in securing employment, what is the real purpose of the zine unit in a commercial field or tertiary programme?

As indicated, the zine project requires students to execute work that demonstrates skill and knowledge in regard to design craft and image making, layout, print and conceptual thinking. However, these skills are not exclusively grappled with or present within the zine unit. After the first year Adobe InDesign unit, Publication Design, and the Children's Book Illustration projects in second year; students enter third-year with sufficient experience when it comes to both print and books. Creating imagery is dealt with in all practical modules, across all years, so why do we still include a zine unit in our third-year programme when it does not serve as clear a practical purpose as that demanded by the other learning units?

Graphic Design remains a commercial field and industry. The commercial nature of the field can result in either the increase or the decrease of creativity and innovative thinking.



The zine unit is the only unit in third-year that has no real commercial purpose, and I would argue that this is the true value of the unit. As mentioned during our portion of the roundtable panel discussion of the exhibition lo-fi street cred: artists' zines, DIY and alternative publications at the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, 'commercial' is not a dirty word for us, as we are a Design Department. However, the zine unit provides an opportunity for final-year students to apply the technical and conceptual skills that they have gained and exercised throughout their earlier undergraduate years and apply them to a design artefact centring on themes and subject matter of their choosing.

Treating a project that is more personal, with the same rigour as a project within an advertising unit gives students an opportunity to reflect on creative processes that they enjoy, and grapple with personal themes that they are passionate about or interested in. It is rare that graphic designers get to do this in industry after completing their studies. The hope is that the ideas and thoughts sparked by students within this unit could potentially lead students to reflect on what they find interesting, hopefully sparking further ideas that can manifest in postgraduate creative projects/research, passion projects/self-driven creative initiatives, or side-hustles.

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshegofatso Maoto

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR STUDENTS

Despite not being a commercial artefact, zines are clearly important graphic design and historical artefacts. Zines refuse to die out and persist in being relevant. Even in a time when digital media continues to dominate analogue media and the future of books are called into question, it seems that zines somehow endure (Piepmeier 2008:214-216). The link between theory and practice is not always clear for students and, as a practical unit, this project serves as a bridge between theory and practice as zines are an important part of design history. The third-year students learn about design history extensively within their Design Studies unit which runs parallel to the zine project. The students learn about design protest praxis, the history of South African graphic design, gender, and politics within a design context. Although it was not initially intended for these units to run simultaneously, by happy accident, the students ended up implementing what they had learned in theory, into

the zine project. This correlation between the units is something I will intentionally approach during 2025, so that the students' practical projects respond to their history the theory units more formally. The lectures I present to the students early in the unit - before they started working on their practical projects - include the history of zines and fanzines, by looking at many references of both online and tangibly, in class. The early classes also include discussions where I ask students why they think zines could still be relevant today, both in the context of design, and to their intended audiences. My intuitive arguments for the value of the zine unit within the third-year curriculum, as both an educator and creative practitioner, is supported by my research on the subject when preparing for the classes. According to Teal Triggs (2010:6-7) zines, although particularly popular within the 1980s, clearly continue to fascinate audiences and scholars, as seen in the increase of zine fairs and academic conferences dedicated to the topic in recent decades. Triggs (2010) states that it is the uncommercial and DIY nature of zines that allow for them to prioritise authenticity

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshegofatso Maoto

and individuality, giving the makers a tactile, intimate connection to their work in a way that digital design does not always allow. The making of zines is thus an empowering act (Triggs 2010). These sentiments are also held by scholar Stephen Duncombe (1997:5) who elaborates that in “an era marked by rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are independent and localized”. Duncombe (1997:5) states that the value of zines lies with “everyday oddballs” having the agency to insert themselves, their lives and the things they value into a publication, dictating the way in which they are represented.

THE BRIEF

Upon starting my full-time position in the Department of Graphic Design this year, I knew I wanted to teach the zine unit as I am interested in the history of zines, am an avid collector, and have experience in their production.¹ For this unit I teamed-up with Panga Zine (formerly IdioZine) which is published by Frederika Fourie and Tana Pistorius. The zine began as a passion project, as both founders

expressed enthusiastic interest in zines, collaboration, culture and language. IdioZine Issue 1 was released in 2022, and Issue 2 was released in 2023. Initially the zine was specifically concerned with language; Issue 1 responded to various idioms in indigenous South African languages, whereas Issue 2 was concerned with gossip, secrets, and overhearing things that perhaps you were not meant to. The idea for Issue 1 of Panga Zine was that it would be a compilation of the best work from the students, responding to the theme, as it appears in the students’ brief:

PANGA broadens the scope to encompass the lived experiences of individuals through diverse interpretations and cultural manifestations that extend beyond what can or has been captured through the time capsule of idioms. Unlike the passive and polite connotations associated with idioms (and Idiozine), PANGA embodies a sense of boldness and defiance. It reflects the spirit of rebellion and calls out what is wrong about the world. A panga is not merely a tool; it is the embodiment of resilience, the manifestation of freedom, and the symbol of unyielding determination to cut through the bullshit. But most importantly, it does not take itself too seriously. The panga is not

¹ My initial exposure to zines was as a third-year student at Open Window, after which I have contributed artworks to the following zines: Juvenile Zine Issue 1 (2018), IdioZine Issue 1 (2022). I have also made two (untitled) single edition zines as part of my Masters exhibition: *between worlds* (2021, Gallery 2), and made a zine titled *veldgids* (2023, Javett) as part of the *Worldplay* exhibition.

polite. The panga is not comfortable. The panga doesn't plan, it takes action.

IdioZine’s first and second issues both had limited colour palettes to pay homage to zine history, the DIY nature of self-publishing and Risograph printing. But since Riso printing is no longer as accessible or affordable a solution as it once was, the students would print digitally and need to complete their zines in three weeks. Similarly, the first issue of Panga Zine provided some limitations for the students; chiefly to create an A5 portrait zine with 12 pages in which the provided colour limitations are to be strictly adhered to on at least six of the pages. The students were also required to produce social media collateral² for the rebrand of IdioZine to Panga Zine.



FIG. 1. The colour palette provided by Panga Zine.

Although we did not want to specify themes or subject matter beyond the thematic ‘panga’, after meeting with my collaborators from Panga Zine, we agreed on some further limitations to be included in the brief. In addition to the colour scheme, students were required to collaborate with a writer. The writer did not need to have professional writing experience of any kind, but it needed to be someone with whom the student’s themes resonated, as they would provide all the text for the zine which needed to speak to the same concept as the visuals. The second limitation was that students were required to incorporate some form of analogue media, while the zine must still be produced in such a way that it could feasibly be mass produced. The analogue media could be generated by the students themselves, or students could work with found objects (while remaining mindful of intellectual property), and use this in their digital design processes by either scanning physical media in, using it as digital textures, or any other solution that is deemed suitable.

² Three square designs for the feed, as well as three story designs. The posts had to promote the issue, and incorporate imagery developed for the zine. At least one of these needed to include animated or video content

THE PROJECT

As the unit was only three weeks long, the basic breakdown was as follows: lectures regarding the history and contemporary relevance of zines were covered early in the first week. I also showed many references to the students including digital copies of historic zines and DIY self-publications, and many physical copies of zines and ‘lo-fi’ artists’ books from my personal collection.³ The remainder of the first week would be dedicated to the selection of text collaborators, and concept development. The remainder of the unit consisted of studio time and crits, in which

most of the digital work needed to be completed during the second week so that feedback could be implemented in the third week, and the final projects presented and printed before submission. Although it was not explicitly required by the brief, the themes engaged with by the students either responded to deeply personal experience, social issues or both. These themes included issues relating to queer experience and identity, navigating race and ethics in the professional and learning environments of graphic design, the genocide on Gaza, gender-based violence in South Africa, cultural hybridity, and family lineages.

FIG. 2.

Ai-mee Ding (designer and illustrator) & Eve Cuyler (writer), cover of [Dis] Embody (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst



My community of queer friends has helped me realise these things over the years. I realised that the isolation I felt growing up amongst cisgendered people was because I both felt and was perceived as a failed woman, while simultaneously being emasculated for my attempts at performing masculinity. Amongst queer folk I perform both femme and masc elements of myself differently, freely, without being boxed in or held down. I can say “that’s so gender” and be understood. There is no need to ask for accommodations, to remind others of my pronouns. I don’t have to explain myself or beg to be seen as I am, I am simply accepted without preamble. Seen.



FIG. 3.

Ai-mee Ding (designer and illustrator) and Eve Cuyler (writer), spread from [Dis] Embody (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

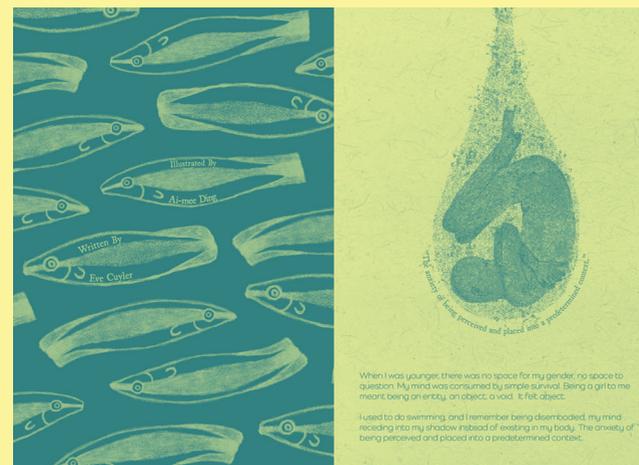


FIG. 4.

Ai-mee Ding (designer and illustrator) and Eve Cuyler (writer), first page and inside cover of [Dis] Embody (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

³ These include *Antenna* by Jean de Wet (Dream Press), *Sketches for Urns for The Ashes of my Lost Lovers* by Pierre le Riche (Dream Press), *Juvenile Zine Issues 1 and 2*, several issues of *Bat Butt Zine*, several zines from the *Worldplay* exhibition (Softserve and Wêreld), several issues of *Klyntj*, and, of course, issues 1 and 2 of *IdioZine*.

Figures two - four depict select pages from student Ai-mee Ding's zine in which they consider arguments against queer, specifically nonbinary gender identities and expressions. Ding and their collaborator Eve Cuyler look at the natural world and highlight instances of nonbinary biological sex in plants and animals, to counter notions such as binary human genders and sex being viewed as 'unnatural'. The creators do not attempt to justify their identities and experiences by comparing them to that of the natural world but rather provide a form of 'stepping stone' to counter cisnormative beliefs about the validity of nonbinary gender and open a space for conversation about experiences of identity.

Student Ditshegofatso Maoto's zine Journey of Unseeing (Figures 5-7) reflects on navigating briefs that, as a designer, might not align to one's values. The concept for the project was sparked after completing work for an institution which has an all-white / European leadership but has a Sepedi name and presents itself as an African Francophone institution.



FIG. 5. Ditshegofatso Maoto (designer and photographer) and Jozi Artist (writer), page layout of Journey of Unseeing (2024). Photographs: Neil Badenhorst



...with the
of being out
and inwardly.
I could not express
how tiring this
performative way
of living was
because I was
simply expected
to survive
through it.

"'Abo-ngamla" "ubloma
kanjani nabo-ngam-
la?".

I mean sorry to repeat
myself here, but I
went to a multi-racial
school where I got to
learn German, French
and Afrikaans.

I felt so liberated
having had this op-
portunity but hey I
had to mould myself
into these differ-
ent versions so that I
could survive.

FIG. 6.
Ditshegofatso Maoto (designer and
photographer) and Jozi Artist (writer),
spread in *Journey of Unseeing* (2024).
Photograph: Neil Badenhorst



FIG. 7.

Ditshogofatso Maoto demonstrating her zine *Journey of Unseeing* at the What value do printed zines and DIY publications offer in a digital age? Roundtable (JGCBA, 10 August 2024). Photograph: Leela Stein

Maoto reflected on the experience of working on this project, after the fact, finding that this experience did not sit right with her. These initial thoughts led to further speculation of an anticipated future in an industry in which designers might often have to communicate messages that they do not believe in, or work with companies with which they may not morally align. In this zine, the creators do not argue for any absolute approaches to this issue but attempt to figure out when one should dismiss these thoughts and do the work to ‘pay the bills’, and when should one speak up and challenge the

normative practices of an industry within which one is working. Maoto (2024) states that the unit was “exploratory and reflective” and continues by saying:

The zine unit was the majority of the class’s favourite unit. It gave us full creative freedom whilst still including elements such a colour restriction that challenged us. The fact that we were working with a real company made us see how important our work is in shaping current conversations. We all tried our best to do something that matters, something that’s relevant and that’s true to us collectively and individually.

WHY ZINES?

Student Musa Malobola’s zine (see Figures 8-9) engages with his family history, specifically the life of his father. Malobola (2024) writes:

Before I was even made aware of the brief, my father and I had a conversation that, looking back, had quite the auspicious timing. He and I were once again talking about family, particularly when it comes to legacy and inheritance. This conversation, I told myself, I had to keep in my back pocket for inspiration later. When I received the brief, I thought it was a great opportunity to take a stab at the idea of legacy. I wanted to thread together a timeline of my father’s life into something tangible and long lasting.

Zines, I realised, have a degree of tangibility and ‘realness’ that most of my digital designs unfortunately lack. This characteristic, with my father being who he is, allowed him to best appreciate this memorialisation of him. The journey of going back in time to his old albums and other family photos gave me deeper appreciation of him and his characteristics which I now inherit and grew us closer through a piece of design crafted more so by time, than by myself.



FIG. 8.

Musa Malobola (designer) and Father (writer), cover and page in *Mr. Nice Guy* (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshogofatso Maoto



FIG. 9.
Musa Malobola demonstrating his zine Mr. Nice Guy at the What value do printed zines and DIY publications offer in a digital age? Roundtable (JGCBA, 10 August 2024). Photograph: Leela Stein



FIG. 11.
Solathise Richard (designer) and sister (writer), spread in Panga (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst



FIG. 10.
Kagiso Modisane (designer and illustrator) and Curtley Ricardo Halsey (writer), spread in Chaos Theory (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

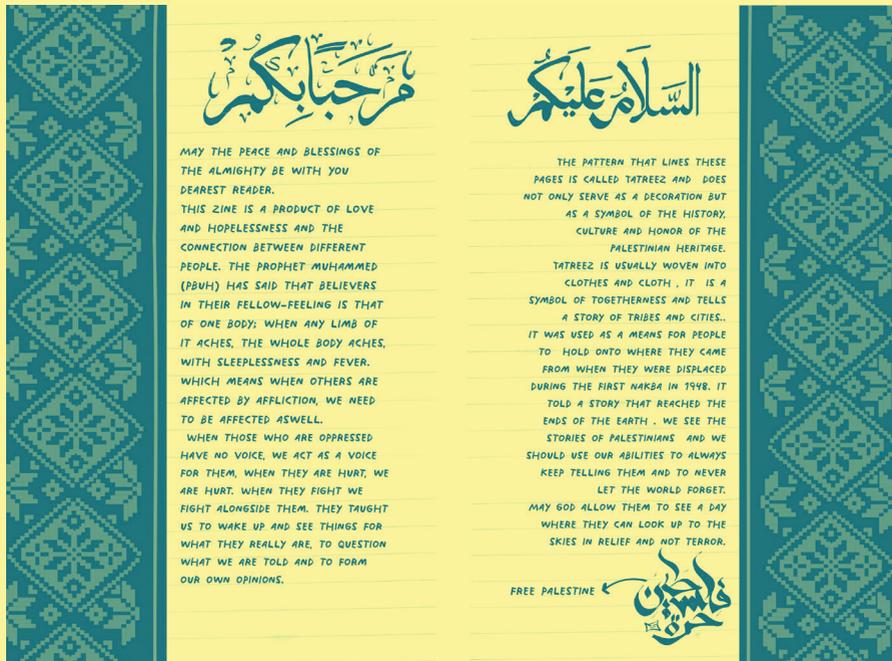


FIG. 12. Musabbiha Fakier (designer) and several anonymous responders (writer), spread in united we stand, together we fall (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

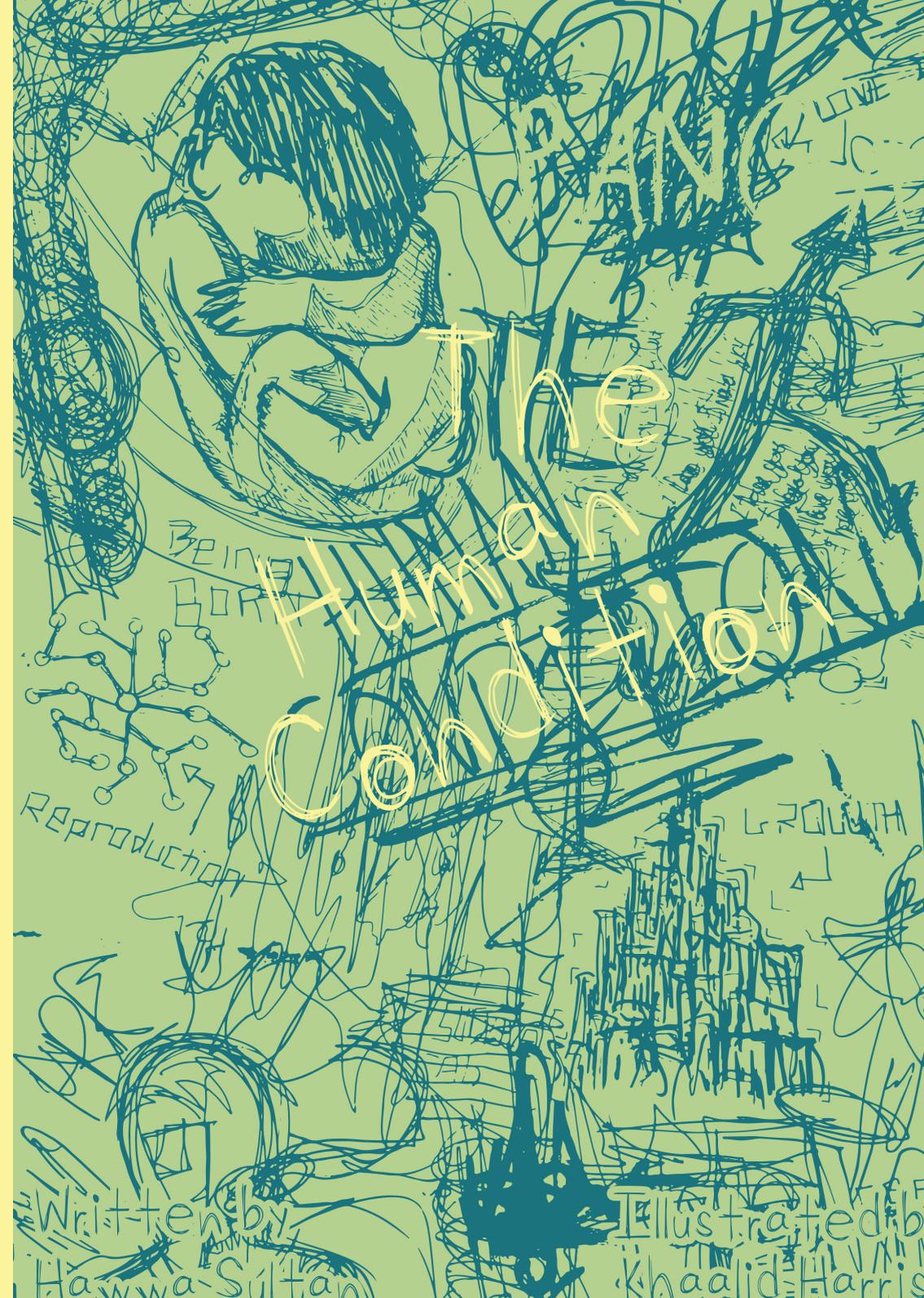


FIG. 13. Khaalid Harris (designer) and Hawwa Sultan (writer), front cover of The Human Condition (2024). Photograph: Neil Badenhorst

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshegofatso Maoto

Student Khaalid Harris (see Fig. 13) writes that working on his zine

...was a fulfilling and therapeutic experience that helped me explore personal and universal themes. I used hand-drawn, expressive illustrations to capture the raw emotions and complexities of life's cycles, employing bold, chaotic lines and rough, organic textures to reflect the unpredictable ebb and flow of humanity. From life and death to happiness and melancholy, this zine was an emotional rollercoaster that made me reluctant to depart. I poured myself onto the page, sharing my ups and downs in hopes that I could connect with at least one person. Life may not always be a peach dream; it can be difficult to cope at times but knowing that you are not alone makes the struggle slightly less overbearing. It was a great chance to face my internal issues head-on and express them productively and healthily. Working with Hawwa Sultan, a promising writer and good friend whom I could share the experience with was incredible.

WHAT'S NEXT

We are currently compiling Panga Zine Issue 1, which will be released in early 2025. The zine will be a compilation of the students' work into a single 24-page zine. As mentioned above, the zine project does not perhaps have the same kind of status as a project from an advertising or branding unit, regarding the graduates' securing employment, however beyond it remaining a portfolio piece that demonstrates their creative, technical and conceptual thinking skills, the real-life application of the unit, I argue, is a valuable experience for students.

Our students engage with real-world stakeholders during several units within their undergraduate years, but this zine project has, so far, resulted in ten of the students exhibiting at the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, two students participating in the roundtable panel discussion that took place in tandem with the exhibition exhibition lo-fi street cred: artists' zines, DIY and alternative publications, several of the students work being included at the launch of Panga Zine Issue 1 (as well as on its social media

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshegofatso Maoto

platforms), four Loeries finalists, and one Pendering Awards finalist. As the lecturer for this zine unit, it is my intention for it to remain one with real-world application and collaboration between the Department and external stakeholders where possible. In this way, the students will continue to be exposed to the interesting, creative platforms, events, and collaborations happening in industry in addition to the needs of commercial clients and stakeholders.

In conclusion, I believe the zine project remains a valuable experience for students in which they are able to apply their professional skills to a committed personal project, allowing for the exploration of personal experiences, identities and creative passions within a structured academic framework. The project's emphasis on self-expression, collaboration, and thematic exploration equips students with a broader perspective on their creative practice.



By engaging with real-world stakeholders and confronting critical social issues, the unit bridges the gap between academic learning and industry experience, hopefully sparking ideas for future passion projects, collaborations and side-hustles.

by Neil Badenhorst, Musa Malobola and Ditshegofatso Maoto

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WHY ZINES?

Neil Badenhorst is a lecturer in the Graphic Design Department at the University of Johannesburg teaching across the undergraduate program including units in drawing, illustration, direct marketing, zine-making and more. Badenhorst has been recognised for his creative practice at the Loeries (2019), Design Indaba and Between10&5. He is currently studying towards a PhD in Art and Design where he is concerned with collaborative queer worldbuilding in illustration.

Musa Malobola graduated with a BA in Graphic Design at the University of Johannesburg (2025) during which time he was also an Intern at SimplyBlack Media assisting with designs from concept to execution in publication design, motion design and concept generation.

Ditshegofatso Maoto graduated with a BA in Graphic Design at the University of Johannesburg (2025) and is a graphic designer by profession. She also enjoys expressing herself through playing with different mediums such as air-drying clay and acrylic paint. Maoto has exhibited her work at the Bag Factory Artists' Studios, Newtown, Johannesburg (2023) and with Latitudes Online.