

ALPHABET

ZOO

■ A PLATFORM
■ FOR CREATIVITY,
COLLABORATION,
AND ZINE CULTURE
IN JOHANNESBURG

Minenkulu Ngoyi

- co-founder of Alphabet Zoo, Johannesburg



ALPHABET ZOO: A PLATFORM FOR CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION, AND ZINE CULTURE IN JOHANNESBURG

Founded in 2010, Alphabet Zoo has become a cornerstone of Johannesburg's artistic landscape, fostering creativity and collaboration through its innovative approach to zine culture. Co-founded by artists Minenkulu Ngoyi and Issac Zavale, Alphabet Zoo began as a modest project with a bold vision: to create a platform where artists from diverse disciplines could collaborate, experiment, and express themselves freely. Over



FIG. 1. Issac Zavale (left) and Minenkulu Ngoyi (right) of Alphabet Zoo. Photograph: Alphabet Zoo

by Minenkulu Ngoyi

the years, this vision has grown into a vibrant hub for creative exchange, elevating zine culture in South Africa and beyond. At its core, Alphabet Zoo is a street-culture zine platform. Through printmaking, workshops, and the production and distribution of zines, it has created opportunities for artists, illustrators, photographers, designers, and publishers to engage with new audiences. The platform's mission is not just to produce art but to democratize it, making creative expression accessible to communities that might otherwise lack such opportunities.

This collaborative approach has allowed Alphabet Zoo to transcend the traditional boundaries of artmaking, embracing public spaces as venues for both the production and exhibition of work. Through this, it has established itself as a vital bridge between Johannesburg's creative community and a broader international audience. Workshops are a cornerstone of Alphabet Zoo's engagement strategy.



A defining feature of Alphabet Zoo is its collaborative ethos. The initiative thrives on partnerships, inviting contributors from varied artistic and cultural backgrounds to co-create and explore the possibilities of zine-making.

FIG. 2&3.

Workshops at Goethe on Main (left) and Artist Proof Studio (right). Photographs: Alphabet Zoo

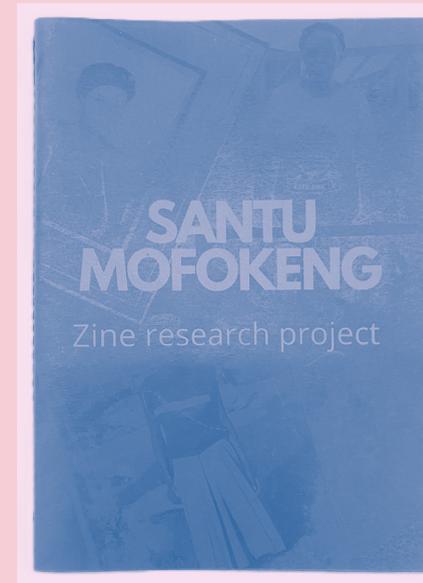
These sessions not only teach the technical aspects of printmaking and zine creation but also emphasise the importance of storytelling and cultural preservation. Participants are encouraged to explore personal and collective narratives, turning their experiences into tangible, shareable works of art. The growing zine library curated by Alphabet Zoo is a testament to this process, showcasing a diverse array of voices and stories while serving as a resource for future creators. Alphabet Zoo's impact extends beyond South Africa, as it has consistently worked to promote Johannesburg's zine culture on a global stage.

Through exhibitions, art fairs, and collaborations, the platform has introduced international audiences to the unique vibrancy of South African art and design. This global reach underscores the universal appeal of zine culture – a medium that combines accessibility with profound creative potential. Over the past decade, Alphabet Zoo has become more than a zine platform; it is a movement that champions inclusivity, experimentation, and the transformative power of collaboration. By redefining how art interacts with society, Alphabet

Zoo continues to inspire and empower creators, ensuring that zine culture remains a dynamic and integral part of Johannesburg's artistic identity.

What follows is an edited transcription of Ngoyi's presentation at the lo-fi street cred roundtable on 10 August 2024 in conjunction with other supplied material.

So, I am going to address collectivity as I don't want to be the front person by myself. Normally when I start zine workshops, I would ask participants to first make pocket-sized (A7) zines. I would then photocopy them and share them amongst each other so everyone would have a copy of everyone's zine. Then everyone would know that they are working as a group. I will discuss some zines that were done with other communities. The first was done with the Market Photo Workshop (MPW) based on Santu Mofokeng's *The Black Photo Album/ Look at me: 1890 - 1950* (1997) in which he archived existing images and made a book from them.



FIGS. 4A&B.

Minenkulu Ngoyi and Issac Zavale, Santu Mofokeng Zine Research Project. Covers (l) and internal spread (r). Photographs: David Paton



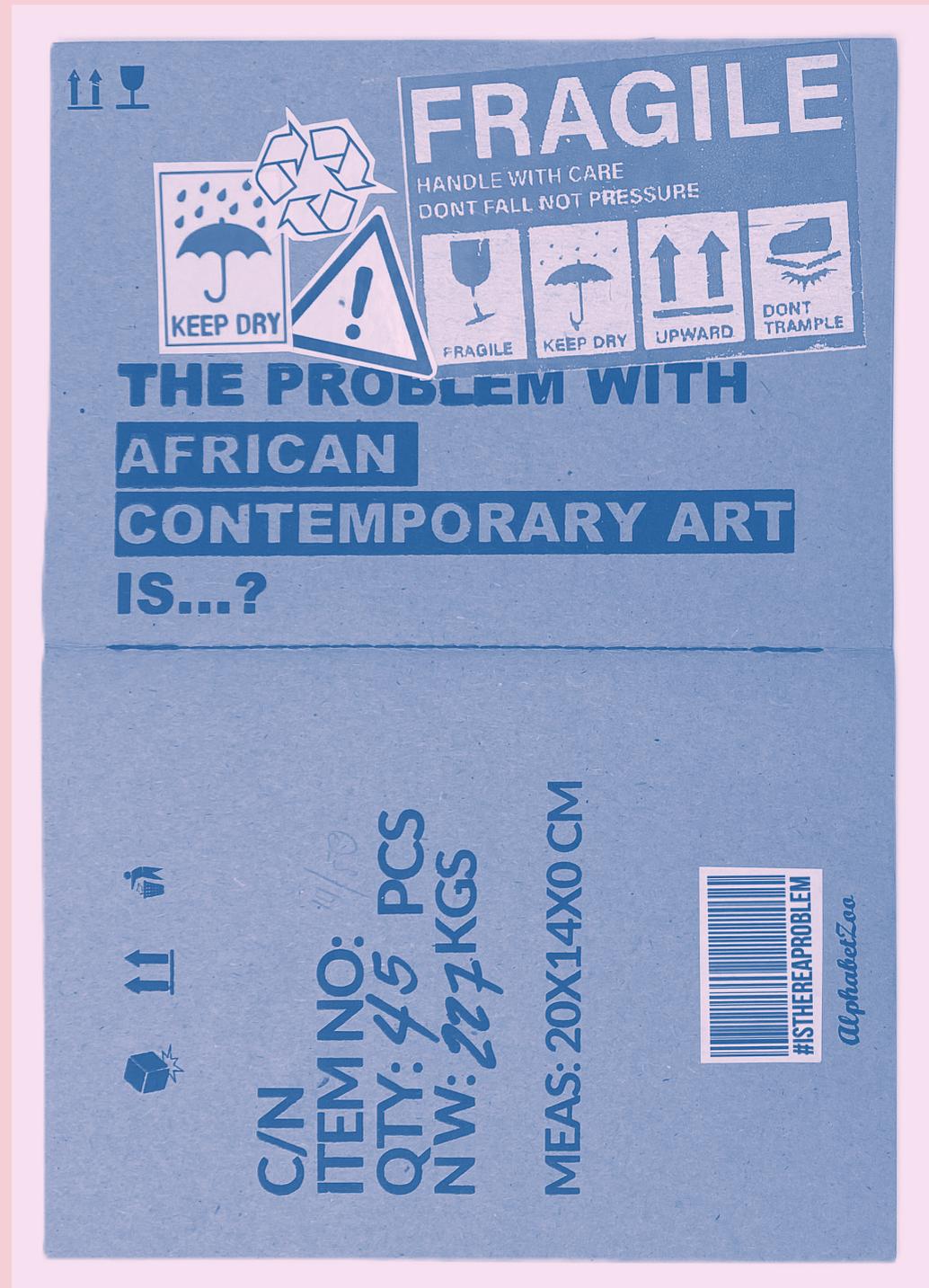
by Minenkulu Ngoyi

So, in the workshop with about ten students, we had to speak to Mofokeng's publication by bringing personal photographs (such as of their grandmothers) and write about these images in relation to themselves. I asked them to use handwriting so that it was quite personal. I found it very interesting as one person used a copy of their grandmother's ID and a photograph of her now. I don't usually use Risograph because of the expense but, because I am a printmaker, I used silkscreen for the cover and what I found interesting was when you print black on black - what comes out of this, and this often boosts the image - it was made ghost-like.

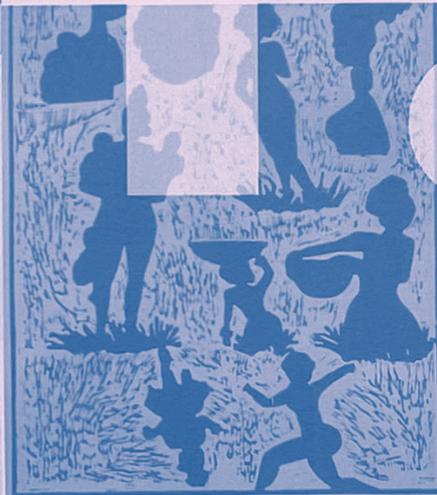
When I am doing zine workshops, people often ask me: 'Can I make a career out of this ... do people commission you?' I do get commissions that are interesting and a privilege for me. During Covid I made the zine *Fragile* (2021) for the META Foundation and August House exhibition, with a silkscreened cover which looks like a cardboard box and on the back the numbers of the zine's edition also look like the numbers on boxes.

FIGS. 5A&B.

Minenkulu Ngoyi and Issac Zavale, *Fragile* (2021). Covers (l) and internal spread (r). Photographs: David Paton



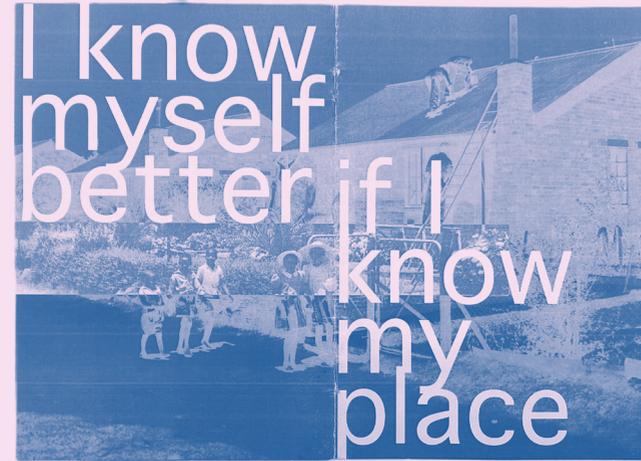
by *Minenkulu Ngoyi*



The theme of the exhibition was 'The Problem with Contemporary Art is ...?' The work addresses the problem of our work mainly going to overseas museums, but we don't get to see those museums or our work, and they own them. Because of Covid, we could not touch anything, so the zine consisted of Zoom meeting conversations, and explored pictures of fragility from the exhibition. This zine is a play on the idea of shipment of artworks from the continent to the western world or vice versa. An art shipping guide; designed to advise on the import and export of art to museums and galleries across the globe in a simple zine format made up of dialogue and statements of conversations taken from the online panel discussions which formed part of the build-up of the exhibition. The packaging stickers and symbols on the cover of the publication, which has been designed to look like a box, is a commentary on how the African contemporary art scene seems to have been over the years. Furthermore, the use of stitch binding, which gives the publication a handmade feel / aesthetic, emphasises the misconception that art from

Africa is more craft than fine art. The publication also seeks to highlight some of the trendy fetishes we currently see within the African art industry by our artists, such as 'blackface' [the token inclusion of a black artist on a predominantly white show as an attempt at 'inclusivity']. Not only do we see this trend becoming popular amongst our artists, but it continues to gain 'recognition' by galleries that show black artists yet seek to accommodate the mainstream consumer. Another zine which was part of the Landedness project in collaboration with the Johannesburg-based interdisciplinary artist collaborative @madeyoulook is *if I know my place* (2022) in which we worked with the community from Lawley - south of Lenasia.

by Minenkulu Ngoyi



FIGS. 6A&B. Minenkulu Ngoyi, Issac Zavale & @madeyoulook, *if I know my place* (2022). Covers (l) and internal spread (r). Photographs: David Paton



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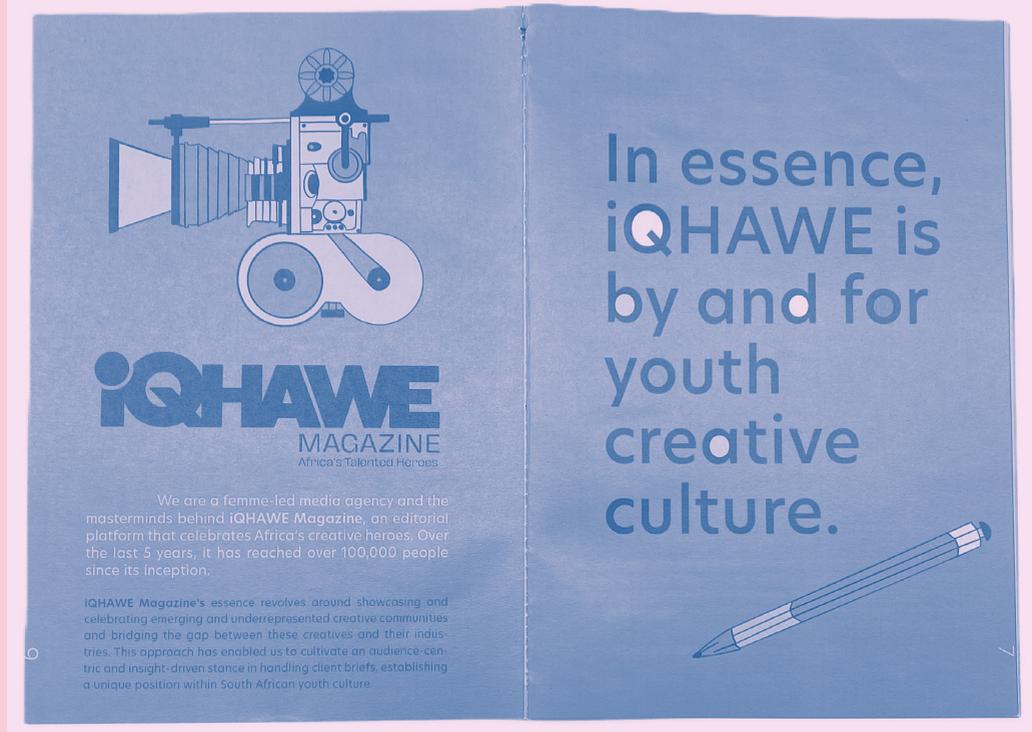
The zine explores the aftermath of a Julius Malema-inspired landgrab. Now the community has this land that they live on but don't know what to do with it. As the community started growing vegetables, @madeyoulook asked how they could show what these people are doing as they are not visual artists. So, we did the zine using the process of photovoice, giving the community disposable cameras and they took pictures around their neighborhood and paired images and their makers in a way that they collaborated but not really noticed that they were actually working together. Each disposable camera gave us about 25 images, and we would share them. From those images we would select and scan the most interesting ones, and we made this collaborative zine in that way.

On Saturday 6 July 2024, at Hallmark House Johannesburg, we hosted our first Culture Zine workshop – a unique event that united the creative worlds of iQhawe Magazine, led by Renaè Mangena and Anastatia Nkhuna, and Alphabet Zoo.

FIGS. 7A&B.

Minenkulu Ngoyi, Issac Zavale, Renaè Mangena & Anastatia Nkhuna, iQhawe Magazine: Basha Uhuru (2024).

Covers (l) and internal spread (r). Photographs: David Paton



Curated by PR agency Huemxn, this workshop was a collaborative effort to celebrate the impact of Kasi Flavour on our culture, bridging the gap between our past and present while preserving our football legacy. iQhawe Magazine bring out an edition every four months or so, celebrating African creative heroes. Going back to the issue of the tangibility of the hardcopy magazine, one of the Culture Zines was done in collaboration with Kabelo Kungwane of Kasi Flavour10 in which the rich traditions of fashion, football and photography are combined. Workshop members

worked with fashion and football magazines making collages from which we selected the best for full double pages, to make a 'good zine' without defining what that might be. Another zine was done in collaboration with the District Six Museum in Cape Town. We were privileged to be invited to be part of the 30 Years of Democracy exhibition (27 April - 29 May 2024) for which we produced the zine titled Freedomation (2024).

by Minenkulu Ngoyi

FIRST EDITION



ALPHABET ZOO: A PLATFORM FOR CREATIVITY, COLLABORATION, AND ZINE CULTURE IN JOHANNESBURG



FIGS. 8A&B.

Minenkulu Ngoyi, Issac Zavale & District Six Museum, Freedomation (2024). Covers (l) and internal spread (r). Photographs: David Paton

This zine served as a commemoration of 30 years of democracy in South Africa on Freedom Day (27 April). In the zine, we reflect on the era preceding democracy when Hendrik Verwoerd, also known as the 'Architect of Apartheid,' held the position of Prime Minister of South Africa (1958 - 1966). On 6 September 1966, Verwoerd was stabbed several times by parliamentary aide Dimitri

Tsafendas. He died shortly after, and Tsafendas was jailed until his death in 1999. The title is an anagram of sorts in which there is a play on words and the concepts of freedom and domination, and the pages comprise an illustrated 'mind map' of how Tsafendas planned and executed the assassination. The publication also looks at four different years: 1964, 1966, 1992 and 1994 - till the present day, and also unpacks

by Minenkulu Ngoyi

the concept of Land and 'the Rand' with the pun 'Peace in our Rand' which also refers to the song 'Peace in our Land'.

Through the production of these publications, Alphabet Zoo has fostered creative collaborations with a diverse array of artists, illustrators, photographers, publishers, and designers. These partnerships have allowed us to interact with various public spaces, contributing to both the production and exhibition of innovative works.

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Through these collaborative efforts, Alphabet Zoo continues to be a vital force in Johannesburg's street culture and zine scene.

by *Minenkulu Ngoyi*



Minenkulu Ngoyi lives and works in Johannesburg. He graduated from Artist Proof Studio (2011) and practices printmaking at DGI (Danger Gevaar Ingozi) studio at Arts on Main, Maboneng, Johannesburg. He has been on several group exhibitions both locally and internationally and was invited to be a seasonal lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand for the second year Fine Art division (2015) where he ran a printmaking, bookbinding and publication making program. With collective partner artist Issac Zavale, he co-founded Alphabet Zoo, a Johannesburg based street-culture zine that invites collaboration with artists from across all disciplines.

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