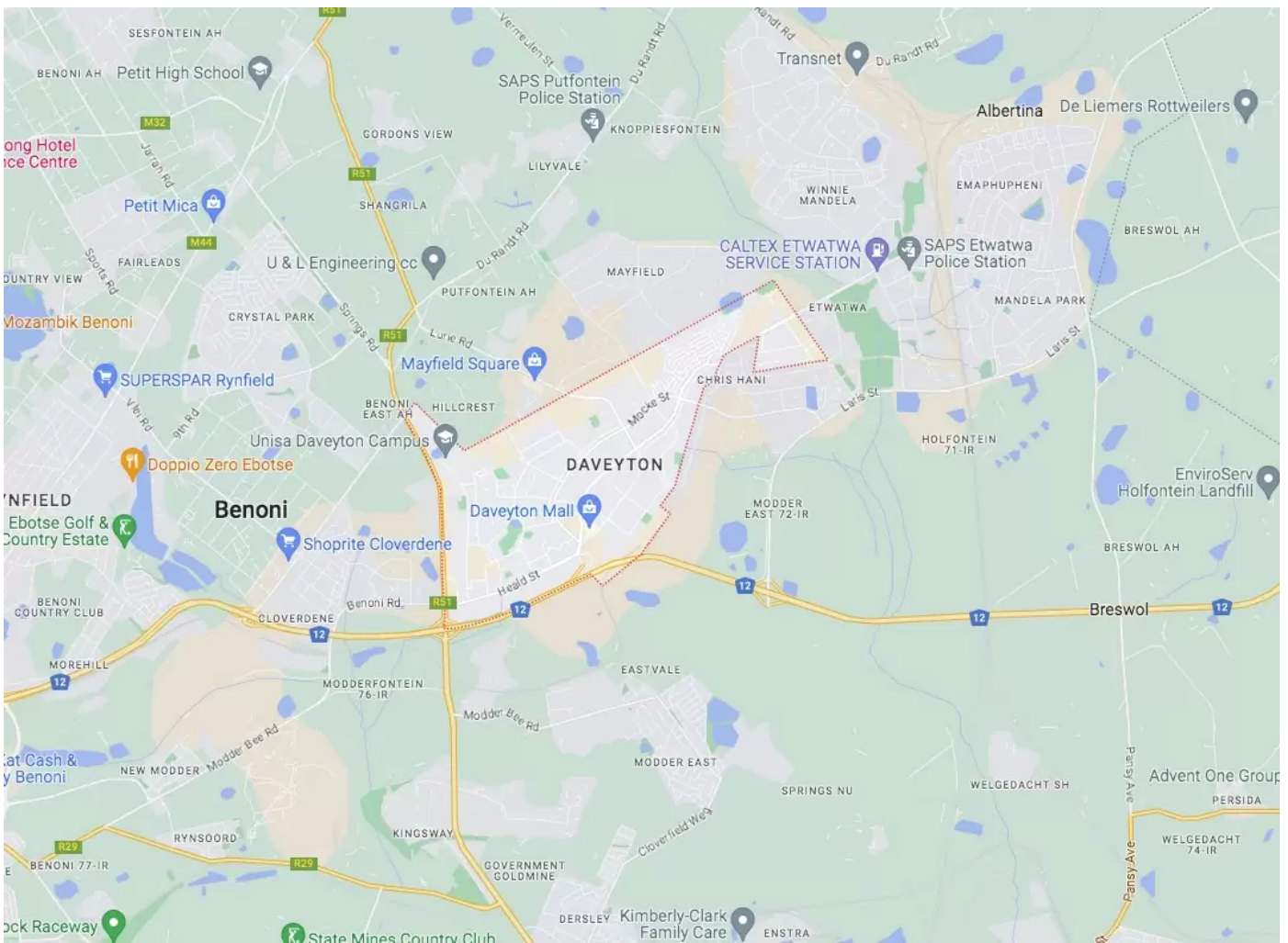


BONGANI TAU

Can I get a witness: sense-less obsessions, brandism, and boundaries by design

“Fix your eyes on this sick design.
Yves Saint Laurent briefcase in arm.
These major thugs predate the drugs.
Sold a country for a Swiss bank account.
Not a mathematician can even them odds”

Tracing the evolution of design, as disciplines of living from a township perspective, offers me an entry point to witness the patterns of erasure, alienation, division and colonial hierarchy as persistent characteristics that inform multiple design disciplines, including that of fashion. I write this / reflect on the creative praxis of others from a place I call home, from an apartheid-era designed-for-us township, Daveyton. Situated 51 kilometres from the self-proclaimed centre of fashion, Sandton in Johannesburg, South Africa.



Molekane's critique of forms of government – both the organisations that lead, as well as their leaders – confronts those tasked with (re)imagining society; those situated deep within the legacies of ideas, images, concepts, and tenets that slyly govern expressions of self, identity and place. Qualities decided through logos, labels, categorizations and assigned meanings subordinate township citizens to global others. Wearing designer style from Paris, or organising society within colonial schemas and frameworks, separate those who have (achieved something, could this be style?) from those who have not.

“If we consume the product as a product, we consume its meaning

through advertising”.

These are the words of [Jean Baudrillard <https://herri.org.za/1/the-back-page/>](https://herri.org.za/1/the-back-page/), the radical French cultural theorist who inspired *The Matrix*. Baudrillard writes at length, how objects are the material reflection of a certain social structure; that objects are the way in which a particular form of society continually reproduces itself. Fashion in particular, offers a collection of ideas that uphold or reflect certain culture(s).

These are my thoughts as I reflect on Dutch-Japanese pianist, visual artist and director Tomoko Mukaiyama's *La Mode* which I experienced via YouTube.

Listening to the [CD catalogue of the music](#) that accompanied the installation that premiered in October 2016, at the National Taichung Theater in Taiwan, I am swept up in contemplations.

I play the role of a train surfer of a wave created elsewhere using a phenomenon called

‘is’thanana’ from ‘Existenzminimum’ and respecting Tomoko’s work. To me, Tomoko’s work reflects a deviation from labels. *La Mode* breaks down the boundaries between creator and audience. It seems that Tomoko invites collective wonder. This important form of critique – because WE are ALL society – in part, informs my text, behaving as a mirror for all, instead of a judgement to some.



WhatsApp conversation as critical text: looking at *La Mode*.

(Bonga Nazo is a scholar and medical student. He is in conversation with me) [17:08:12] Bonga: Is she diverting the male gaze or the commercial gaze ? [17:08:55] Bonga: "Not all who wander are lost?" [17:17:43] Me: More commerce. [17:20:03] Bonga: So she's using fashion as a critique of consumption (like Baudrillard) or a way of life (religion) ? [17:21:45] Me: I think a bit of both... the ideas have no intrinsic value outside the system of objects yet people will die for them. [17:23:11] Bonga: So like how niggas in the hood fight over who is wearing "fake" and who isn't? And fight and die ? [17:23:28] Bonga: That's why Yeezy s1 -3 and her have no logos? [17:24:02] Me: Damn!!!! [17:24:08] Bonga: Also who is she making the clothes for ? High society or average human? [17:24:46] Me: High society. [17:25:08] Me: Which is mischievous [17:25:27] Me: No person from high society would wear this, unless they are post-luxury... [17:25:38] Me: because they have been taught to worship labels. [17:25:50] Bonga: Yes...it's a fetishised view of poverty and how fast fashion is consumed. [17:26:29] Bonga: Except that fast fashion must have logos because of its function to aid consumption itself.

[17:26:41] Bonga: As a function of marketing.

How do we design ourselves away from discord, alienation and displacement? That is not an easy question to answer. Perhaps provocations may be useful:

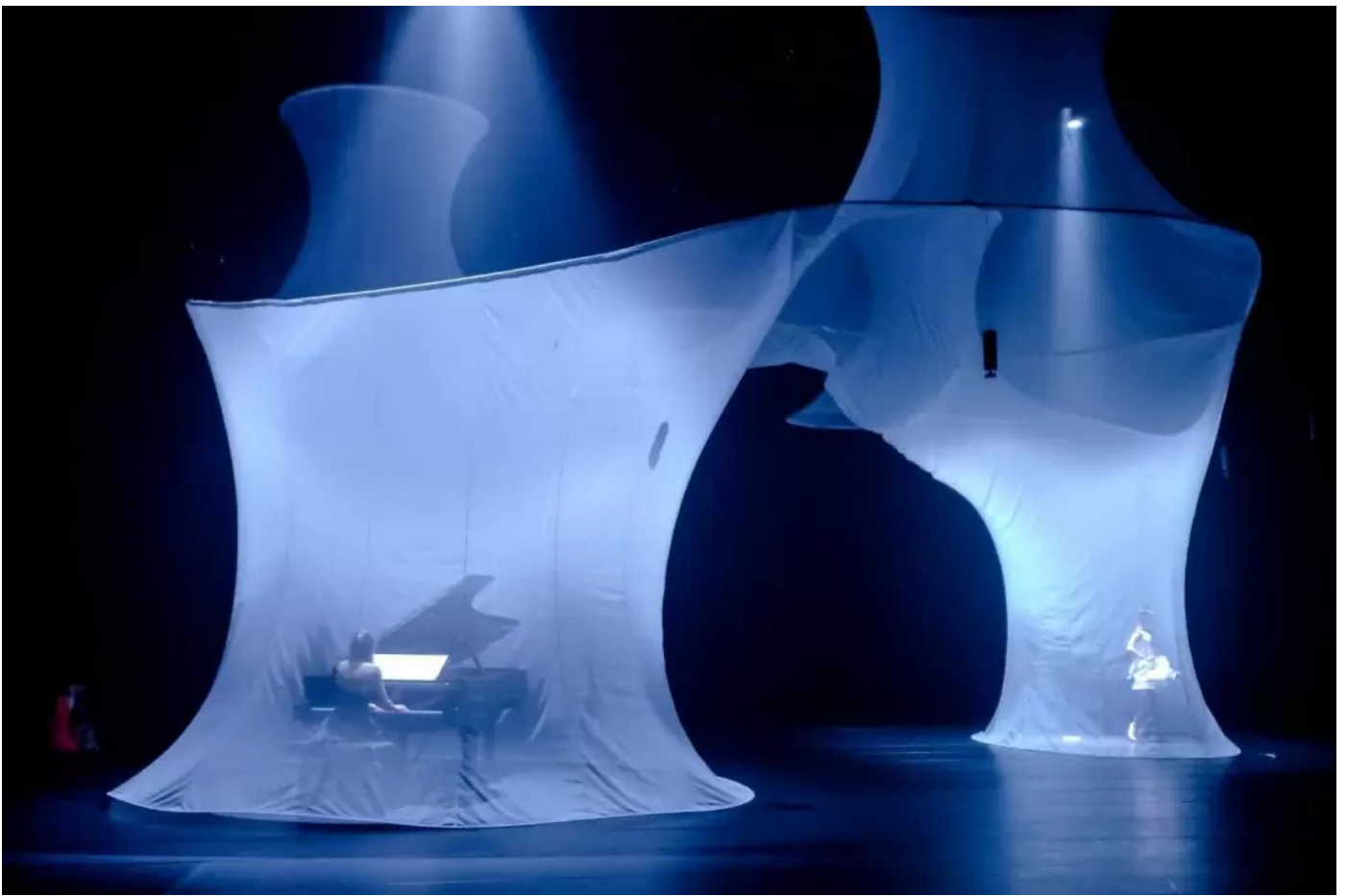
In *La Mode* Tomoko Mukaiyama blurs the lines of experiencing and being a creator. We need inclusivity. The mechanisation of processes of production has displaced us as humans. Can we invite intersectional collaborations that can influence where designs emerge from and travel to? Can we begin to (re)imagine the academy (as a purveyor of knowledges) and the street (as the purveyor of branded strategies) to be more inclusive?

There is an alienation between where fashion garments are made and where they are consumed. People producing these fashion garments mostly cannot afford them. Then there is an erasure of cultures, practices, and people whose ideas are not credited or acknowledged.

Tomoko Mukaiyama commanded the stage with her piano playing, accompanied by 10 dancers from Spellbound Contemporary Ballet, skillfully choreographed by Dunja Jovic. The stage was adorned with architecturally shaped gauze fabric, a collaborative creation by Toyo Ito and Yoko Ando, blurring the boundaries between performer and spectator. The audience was immersed in the scene, becoming an integral part of the captivating performance. Much of the ostentation reflected on the catwalk helps us think about the commercial gaze through fashion.



The fact is that meaning is assigned to fashioned objects that underpins ideas, images and concepts of western culture, constructing the notion of heritage, via the language of a heritage brand. This heritage though is one-dimensional, promoting hegemony, promoting hierarchies, promoting one identity over others. We stumble across “G-Unit knock-off jerseys in the villages” (and townships) where other forms/ways of fashioning are denied. We forget what we should remember.



Fashion functions as this pernicious idea that we tend to value 'things' more than people (or the planet). We value property and ownership. We value boundaries created through class. Here fashion is the signifier. And yet, is it possible for ideas of fashion to craft alternative allegories and rhythms. For *Izikhothane* – a township(s) material culture that emerged in the early 2010's – fashion became the means to build communities of practice and camaraderie; a means to fashion belonging through a radical disruption of class barriers. The practice of burning fashion is an act that cannot be used to define the overall *Izikhothane* culture, but despite being problematic, it does present a protest in the form of a yearning for freedom and self-actualization outside of the imposed constraints of the oppressed.



How do we think about value in a manner that refuses colonial hierarchies? How do we think about value in ways that welcome other genealogies of style or more afrocentric principles? Fashion practitioner, Lesiba Mabitsela identifies his work as “souvenirs of conflict” – as loosely translated – we are those contested bodies and minds affected by the lingering violence of our long past, haunting us in the design of the world to think critically about fashioning ideas of re-existence and resistance. I think about the African Fashion Research Institute’s ‘African Fashion (?)’ course – which shifts the idea of inspiration from the global north towards seeking and activating knowledges from Africa.

The wonder of Barkcloth

My journey with the African Fashion Research Institute (co-founded by Lesiba Mabitsela and Dr Erica de Greef) led me to documenting a recent research residency held in Durban (June 2023), that explored the research story of bark cloth and other applications of folds, drapery and pleats. The Pan-African Research Residency threaded questions tracing the fold’s aesthetic and conceptual forms, where folds fall and how folds re-emerge in contemporary design, artistic practice and archival research.

“In an effort to change perceptions of knowledge makers and knowledge making in fashion, the project brings the performative act of folding that which is folded away, into focus.”

Ugandan born and internationally renowned artist, [Sheila Nakitende](#) shared the process of making bark cloth as part of a workshop with fine arts and fashion students from the Durban University of Technology. During the process of working with barkcloth, Nakitende describes her way of working, as working with nature as her collaborator. Here we witness a practice, a knowledge, a cultural exchange un-folding in order to revive ways of making fashion that can help us think about issues of sustainability, about an afrocentric avant-garde, about fashion that is circular. Truly enriching. We are cut from the same cloth of humanity. Beautiful and rare.



Sheila Nakitende, Mother Cloud, 150X192cm, Barkcloth paper

Part of the process of working with bark cloth is to remove the bark from the tree – a *Ficus natalensis* tree, found along the eastern parts of Africa. After stripping the tree, it is wrapped with banana leaves in order for it to regenerate, a process taking up to three weeks. What is taken from the tree – its bark – is processed to create the bark-cloth. After the cloth is made and used, it can be shredded again, re-purposed, or fed back into nature.

Ultimately, we need to place value in communities as well as value in taking care of our environments. How is fashion as we have come to know it – brands, logos and labels – creating problems affecting people globally? Can this ongoing demand be met without the peril of people and the environment? Can the machine of fashion stop **dumping second hand clothes** in places that do not consume the clothes in the first place?



Collected Mitumba pieced with [@lazarovocha](https://www.instagram.com/lazarovocha/?hl=en) created top and skirt of what was left as finally discarded and modelled by [@muda_africa](https://www.instagram.com/muda_africa/?hl=en) dancers before moving with artist Jan van Esch to Amsterdam.

Can we rather develop afrocentric industries growing in and for our own

communities? Can *La Mode* look to sustainable practices that facilitate symbiotic relationships between humans and the environment – as well as between humans? Can fashion serve as an instrument to unite us, to encourage cultures to meet and exchange ideas/knowledge(s) – to prevent erasure, alienation, division and colonial hierarchy?

If we take away the habitability of our environment, then we are designing our own end? This world is the only one we have.